

# Vernon Sewell (film director) 4/7/1903-21/6/2001

by [admin](#) — last modified Aug 12, 2008 02:08 PM

**BIOGRAPHY:** Vernon Sewell began his career in 1929 as a camera assistant at Nettlefold Studios before gaining experience as a camera operator, sound recordist, art director and editor. He also became adept in the use of special effects, and these featured prominently in his directorial debut, *The Medium* (1934), written by Michael Powell. He directed several short films in the 1930s and in 1943 he achieved some prominence with the wartime drama *The Silver Fleet*, produced by Archers. Despite other successes in the 1940s, he worked in B-feature production, particularly horror films, for much of the 1950s and 1960s. **SUMMARY:** In this entertaining and very frank interview, a 91 year old Sewell dicusses his long and varied career with Roy Fowler. He gives an account of his early career at Nettlefold Studios, explaining that he was motivated to learn as many film industry trades as possible in order to advance to film direction. Pressed by Fowler, he provides a great deal of detail about the working culture at the studio and about its owner, Archibald Nettlefold, who Sewell claims never went anywhere near the studio. He describes his experiences of quota film production as 'fantastic', although he claims it was common to work from 8am to 1am in order to meet the schedules. He has much to say about his work with Michael Powell on *The Edge of the World*, and also discusses his various inventions, including a 'baby crane' and a gyroscope for stabilising cameras. There are also entertaining accounts of his experiences directing films for Hammer.

## **BECTU History Project - Interview No. 329**

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Interviewer: Roy Fowler

Interviewee: Vernon Sewell

Tape 1, Side 1

**Roy Fowler:** I know Vernon, that you celebrated your 91st birthday on Monday last, so that makes your date of birth 4 July ...

**Vernon Sewell:** 1903.

**Roy Fowler:** Nineteen hundred and three right, OK. We're going to concentrate mostly on the film industry, but it would be interesting to know family background to some extent, where and when you entered this life, your parentage and such like - education...

**Vernon Sewell:** I went to Marlborough.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes?

**Vernon Sewell:** I was educated at Marlborough and France.

**Roy Fowler:** Ah! How about your parents though, what sort of background are you from?

**Vernon Sewell:** My parents - my father retired very early in life, very early. And there was a big family law suite and they bought him out of the family business. He didn't do anything after about forty.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh, what a lucky man!

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, he was. [Chuckling]

**Roy Fowler:** What was the family business? Out of curiosity.

**Vernon Sewell:** They were furniture manufacturers.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, so you come from a rather grand bourgeois background, I get the impression - is that the idea?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well I'm middle class, I suppose. What you might call upper middle class.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. And Marlborough was an interesting school in your time, or not?

**Vernon Sewell:** It was one of the principle public schools, it still is.

**Roy Fowler:** It still is, yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** But I didn't enjoy school, I must say. I can't talk about school as a wonderful period of my life. Because I would hate to - I'm no good at sports, in fact I was no good at anything, I was no good at anything.

**Roy Fowler:** So you didn't shine at all?

**Vernon Sewell:** Nope, I'm no good at anything. I met some very valuable friends there who became friends all my life and it was through a Marlborough friend that I got into the film business at all, anyway!

**Roy Fowler:** Right.

**Vernon Sewell:** Because my friend [David Mottern?] had an uncle called Archibald Nettlefold...

**Roy Fowler:** Yes...

**Vernon Sewell:** ...who owned Nettlefold studios, and Kay's Laboratory, and he owned the Comedy Theatre as well.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** And it was through him I got into the movies. I started as a sound recording engineer.

**Roy Fowler:** What - is there anything in between? I've got that you went to Nettlefold in 1929 as a camera assistant, what had you done...?

**Vernon Sewell:** I was an engineer!

**Roy Fowler:** An engineer, that's what you'd studied?

**Vernon Sewell:** I was in America. I was in the Packard's...

**Roy Fowler:** Packard automobiles?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, as an engineer.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. In Detroit, presumably?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, and I married a Detroit girl. Then I came back to England and got into - with some other men - manufacturing a prototype outboard motor. And I was promised by my uncles in the Stock Exchange that if I could produce a prototype and get a good press, they would float a company and buy me out, and put me - which was a very good thing. We did it! We did finish the machine, and we gave a very good press to the [?] paper indeed. The next day, the 1929 Stock Exchange crash came and everybody backed out, and I was out of a job and very hard up. So, I'd always been very interested in amateur movies. I was one of the first people to

have a 16 mm camera and I was always interested in theatricals and the movies. And talkies had just started and I got a job there, and that's how I started in the film industry.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Tell us about the Martineau family and Nettlefold and how all that came about.

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** You mention that you came into Nettlefold's because of the connection to the owner, I wondered if you could just fill out on that?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, you see, when I got to Nettlefold, I started off as assistant on the camera, on the silent movie, then when talkies started I did a course with RCA and I became a boom swinger to start with, you see? And then I realised, the only job in movies to have was the director, he had all the fun!

**Roy Fowler:** Right.

**Vernon Sewell:** So I set out to be a director and I set out to learn the business, and I became everything! I was assistant to Laurence Irving in the art department, I was a camera assistant, I did all the special effects. I made the first cobweb machine in England and er - as I say, I'm almost a sort of one-man unit.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Vernon, all that's very interesting, can we go into it now in detail, bit by bit?

**Vernon Sewell:** What's that?

**Roy Fowler:** Well, first of all Nettlefold's, when you worked there in 1929. Can you remember - it's a lost studio - I wonder if you could remember about the studio itself?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh, it was one of the first in England, I think it was THE first, it was originally called Hepworth's,

**Roy Fowler:** Ah hmm...at Walton?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, and it was one of the very early studios. We had two stages I think, then they were converted to sound and er, we were... See, the films being made in those days, they were all quota pictures, a pound a foot - how the hell they did it, I can't know! They contracted with an American company and they had to produce a finished film - combined print - with everything for a pound a foot, it's unbelievable!

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm.

**Vernon Sewell:** And they made a profit out of it!

**Roy Fowler:** Six thousand feet, right?

**Vernon Sewell:** And they made a profit out of it! It's unbelievable. What they did do of course, they worked the studio staff, because they were paying the studio by the day, you see, so they couldn't possibly do it in that. So the overtime was used a hell of a lot, but the technicians, we got no overtime. The 'sparks' did, the workmen, but the technicians got nothing! We could work every night until one o'clock in the morning! If you were lucky you got a bottle of ginger beer and a sandwich. A lot of films - I remember - quite a well-known picture - '77 Park Lane' was made there. A host of stuff. That's where I met Mickey Powell you see. Because he was editor I think, to start with, and then he 'shacked up' with a man called Jerry Jackson who had some American connections and they made quota films together, a lot of them.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. That's a little later thought, isn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** I remember one picture, Larry Olivier played a waiter.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. Can we get your memories of Nettlefold? There were how many stages there?

**Vernon Sewell:** I think there were two, I'm not quite - might have only have been one, I don't remember.

**Roy Fowler:** Was it still silent when you went there?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well of course! Of course!

**Roy Fowler:** It was in 1929, they hadn't converted?

**Vernon Sewell:** It was the silent movie!

**Roy Fowler:** Right. So your first work was on the last of the silents?

**Vernon Sewell:** Silent movies. 'Kissing Cups Race', which was later converted to sound.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. Who were some of the technicians, then, in the senior positions? Heads of departments?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well Geoffrey Faithfull was a cameraman and his assistant was Arthur Grant, who became quite a good cameraman in later years in his own right. In fact, he lit one of my movies, in after years, Arthur Grant. Laurence Irving, who was a grandson of Henry Irving, he was the chief Art Director and very - I learnt a lot from him. The sound department I don't remember, he was a man in the BBC called Rex Howarth, I think he died, I don't know what happened to him.

**Roy Fowler:** What was the sound system that they installed?

**Vernon Sewell:** RCA.

**Roy Fowler:** It was RCA? Ah ha.

**Vernon Sewell:** RCA. A very primitive machine it was too, looking at it from modern standards.

**Roy Fowler:** Do you have any particular recollections of those early 'talkies'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Hmm?

**Roy Fowler:** Those early 'talkies', do you have any particular memories of how they were made - the problems?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well the problems were very largely the - the transistor hadn't been invented and all machines were quite big. The microphone was a square box of about eight inches square and quite heavy, and that was on the end of the 'boom', which was a very primitive thing. In fact I invented the first 'boom' that steered, otherwise it was just fixed on the floor. And the soundman had quite a lot of say in the thing, he could condemn the things, which he often did, unnecessarily. But you see, the microphone, to be effective, it had to be not more than five or six feet from the person speaking, and it was that square!

**Roy Fowler:** Ah hmm.

**Vernon Sewell:** And we had great trouble with shadows of the microphone, you see. I remember we had a film that was directed by Albert De Courville, who was a well known theatrical producer - knew nothing about movies of course! And they said, "I'm sorry Mr De Courville, but we can't use that shot, there was a microphone shadow." He said, "Oh that's all right, dissolve it out!"

**Roy Fowler:** Yes?

**Vernon Sewell:** See, most people know nothing about movies at all. They were - some were actors and some were just - nothing, but became directors. George King, he had no experience of anything but he became a quota film director. They were really entrepreneurs.

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm. It's difficult for us to imagine now how the transition to sound happened. I mean, was it cataclysmic that suddenly there is this new device that...?

**Vernon Sewell:** More or less, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** How did people adjust to it? Were they frightened of it, or...?

**Vernon Sewell:** No!

**Roy Fowler:** No? Were they excited by it?

**Vernon Sewell:** A lot of people, of course couldn't - whose voices were so awful they couldn't get any jobs. For example, I had a very great deal to do with 'The Crimson Pirate' [NB 1952] and Nick Cravat who played opposite Bert had this appalling Brooklyn accent, he ought to have only played dumb parts.

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm. And those with a Cockney accent had a great problem? People like Mabel Poulton for example?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes, yes. Mabel Poulton was one of the Nettlefold stars. I don't remember her at all, she never appeared, I never saw her, because she never appeared in any pictures. Christ, you're going back a long way.

**Roy Fowler:** Well I'm trying to because that's a very interesting period anyway. Again, it's the beginning, more or less, of the quota operation. You said these were quota quickies?

**Vernon Sewell:** They were fantastic! How they were done for the money, I cannot imagine.

**Roy Fowler:** How long did you shoot, each one?

**Vernon Sewell:** Quota pictures, you took about a fortnight.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Six days a week?

**Vernon Sewell:** Er, yes. Well overtime was - a lot of overtime was used.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Until what time at night, would you say?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh, one o'clock in the morning.

**Roy Fowler:** Really? And back when, the next day?

**Vernon Sewell:** Back in the morning, on the floor at eight.

**Roy Fowler:** Good God!

**Vernon Sewell:** Eight, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** And in the meantime you had to get home and sleep and then it's back to the studio again?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** How did you do that?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well I had a car, of course.

**Roy Fowler:** You had a car, yes, because a lot of people didn't in those days.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well most of the staff had - although, well the workmen didn't have a car, but they got paid overtime, but what they did I don't ... You see they all lived locally, you see

Nettlefold studios, the whole staff lived in Walton, nobody came from outside the, only people like myself who had motor cars.

**Roy Fowler:** Well as you say, it was a very old established studio. Did they have to, were there glass stages when you first arrived? Did they have to build sound stages, or were they the silent stages converted?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, no! No glass stages there...

**Roy Fowler:** No, they'd gone?

**Vernon Sewell:** ...just boxes. And they put non [memory?/reverb?] stuff on the walls. Of course that's all found to be unnecessary today, you see, they had all this - You could shoot a movie in this room today.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh really? Oh yeah, yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** without any bother at all. But they'd think there was [VS claps three times] "Oh you can't shoot in here", you see? And that was all nonsense. But the sound department pulled peoples' legs a lot, because they were looked upon as wizards! And if they got fed-up they'd say, "Exciter lamp blown!" and they then had a cup of tea.

**Roy Fowler:** Or the mirror was always coming off the galvanometer I suppose.

**Vernon Sewell:** [Chuckling]. Yes, something like that, yes that did come off - but not very often. We had to do everything ourselves, the little mirror was about (that size), you had to stick it on with glue, but the exciter lamp often blew. In fact you could - I used to blow it on purpose, given the tip of an [?] you used to blow it. [Chuckling].

**Roy Fowler:** You began on the camera side; how quickly did you move over to sound?

**Vernon Sewell:** Almost at once.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. So you were one of the very early recordists?

**Vernon Sewell:** The very earliest. I was never the chief recorder, never. I packed it up long before then.

**Roy Fowler:** You were doing what? Swinging the boom? Or on the...

**Vernon Sewell:** I started off swinging the boon, then I became the sound camera operator, which was quite a big job in those days because he actually - he controlled himself. The sound recorder was outside and there was a link between - he didn't control the camera direct. The camera was controlled by the camera operator and he watched the overshooting. It was a mirror galvanometer (cathode ray...). [VS corrects himself] No, not a galvanometer, a mirror... (cathode ray?)...? Anyhow, whatever it was, a little mirror shot a beam of light that went across the film

and shot through a slit and gave the jagged sound track. Well if you spoke too loud, you overshoot this thing and all the sound blacked out. Well the camera operator was watching this reflector - physically, not a meter - the actual beam itself, and he could control that as well you see. It was a dreary job. At the same time I was doing other jobs as well. I was a special effects man and I was all sorts of funny things.

**Roy Fowler:** One final question about sound - well two actually. The cameras in those days were, what, in booths?

**Vernon Sewell:** To start off with they were in booths, but we had - at Nettlefold's - we had the Debries, almost the first self blimped things, they were very good. And other people, you see, Bell and Howell was all put in bags, horrible things. But originally, (I don't think in England) in America, the camera itself, the movie camera was in a glass box on wheels, it was a dreadful - the heat! They were unbelievable.

**Roy Fowler:** The sound camera, you say, was not on the stage, it was somewhere off the stage in a special room, or a caravan or...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Just off the set.

**Roy Fowler:** The set or the stage?

**Vernon Sewell:** It's off the stage, and then later on we brought the camera into a glass box on the stage and the sound recorder, he actually took over from - he could physically see the beam himself - he could see the big beam himself. But it was a very primitive affair.

**Roy Fowler:** Did they have any mobile sound trucks at the beginning? Did they put them into trucks, or was it all - could you go on location with sound?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't think, I think we could hire one. We never had one. Later on I built one of my own, but that was years afterwards. [Pause] See, everything was done - we hardly did any exteriors at all, it was all done in the studio.

**Roy Fowler:** Not even on the studio grounds?

**Vernon Sewell:** At times perhaps, but hardly ever. It cost more money, you see. To go out was wasted time and you had to wait for the weather and that sort of thing, which they couldn't do.

**Roy Fowler:** Did you know Mr Nettlefold himself?

**Vernon Sewell:** Very well.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Tell us about him, because he is again, a rather 'lost' character isn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well Mr Nettlefold was blind, he was a blind man and he lived at [???] when I knew him. And I used to have dinner with him once a month and tell him what was going on in

the studio. We became very good friends and he said, "Look here, Vernon, if you will agree to spend a year in a laboratory, we're always having rows with laboratory, the camera department blames the laboratory and vice versa. If you're prepared to spend a year in the laboratory going through - a really lonely business - you go back, and I'll put you back as technical manager of the whole caboodle." Which I did. But when I finished the sound in Kay's Laboratory, I went back to the studio and found someone else had got my job and I couldn't find out why, and Nettlefold wouldn't see me even, I couldn't see him. And I thought, "Well I'll have to get out, I'm not staying here, I'm leaving!" And I left!

**Roy Fowler:** So you never found out why suddenly you were frozen out?

**Vernon Sewell:** Never found out! I couldn't get his nephew to find out for me. But the man who took my job was a boyfriend of Nettlefold's mistress... That would that be libel stuff, you don't want to tape that!

**Roy Fowler:** No - long gone

**Vernon Sewell:** You can say it, yes, yes?

**Roy Fowler:** So you were subverted, obviously?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes!

**Roy Fowler:** What was Nettlefold's interest? Did he have anything other than money as an interest?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes! Yes! Musical instruments, wind instruments. He had a room about four times as big as a billiard room, full of brass instruments. He didn't know what they were, he wasn't interested in the history, but they were just a mass of brass instruments, there were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds! And there was one particular one, on a little pedestal by itself (about that height). You weren't allowed to blow it - anyone else wasn't to blow it - but he used to come sometimes and blow this thing, this horn. [chuckles]

**Roy Fowler:** What was his motivation with films? Was it an interest in film or was it purely a commercial activity?

**Vernon Sewell:** Purely commercial. I think they took over the studio and Kay's Laboratory as a bad debt or something, I don't know. Anyhow, Nettlefold could have told you nothing about making pictures or anything.

**Roy Fowler:** Well Hepworth had gone broke, hadn't it? So...

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, I don't know how they got the studio, why they took it over I don't know. But Kay's was taken over, I think, for a debt!

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, well it could be as a saviour, if Hepworth was over-extended and...

**Vernon Sewell:** You see, developing it was very, very simple. The only sensitive control was, it was continuous - past the frame stage, it went continuous, but all open baths, you were in the dark, with an electric torch with a very, very dim blue light on it, you could just see the floor. And if the picture didn't begin to appear on the third roller, you slowed down the bath. If it appeared before the third roller, you quickened the bath up, the speed of the thing. That was the only control there was! Now we have - God! It's such a complicated thing now. But that was the control of the negative control.

**Roy Fowler:** This was the studio lab?

**Vernon Sewell:** It was Kay's Laboratory. Kay's did work for other people as well.

**Roy Fowler:** Where were Kay's situated? Where they then on Soho Square?

**Vernon Sewell:** In London, Finsbury?

**Roy Fowler:** Finsbury, that's right, yes Finsbury Square. So you had to come into see your rushes? Or were they brought back to the...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh no, we had a theatre.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. At the studio?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Is there anything more about Nettlefold himself? Because I can't imagine much information has survived. He inherited his money, yes?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh yes, yes, yes, yes. Nettlefold screws, of course. See the Nettlefold's and the Chamberlains and the Martineaus were all inter-related, and they were the wealthiest family trust in England.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, yes, I knew Dennis Martineau many years later...

**Vernon Sewell:** Dennis yes, he's dead you know.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, on Montpelliar Square.

**Vernon Sewell:** He's dead. In fact, there are no live Martineaus any more, except the sons. Because Alan Martineau died about a year or so ago, but he had nothing to do - nobody had anything to do with the studio, the family had nothing to do with the studio, didn't want to know.

**Roy Fowler:** Well they were very grand by that time, weren't they?

**Vernon Sewell:** They didn't want to know.

**Roy Fowler:** ...very grand and very rich. Right, well as I say, it's up to you, if you have any particular memories of those times to tell us. You're the one who was there...

**Vernon Sewell:** Of those particular days, no. I do remember, there was a film made called '77 Park Lane' which was a very successful play. It was being made in three languages, English, French and Spanish, and it was a story about a night-club. Which really was a trick one, in this room it all converted, all the stuff folded back on the walls and roulette tables all went back on the walls and things converted into things. And I made all this stuff myself, I designed all the fixed stuff for it. And they wanted some cobwebs, and they didn't know how to make cobwebs. The prop man used to go and get cobwebs on the end of a stick and try and hook them on. But Laurence suddenly said to me, "Vernon, in Hollywood they make these cobwebs, but they lock the stage when it's done and nobody's allowed to go in. But I'll give you a clue, there's a very strong smell of naphtha afterwards, that's all I can tell you." Well I had the run of the electrician's workshop and there were layers of everything, and I was a pretty good practical mechanic myself. And I messed about at night until I discovered the secret and I made a cobweb-making machine. And I sprayed all the offices with cobwebs, everything. When everybody arrived in the morning they found everything covered "Who's done this?" they said, "Oh it was Vernon!" And I got my picture in the 'Illustrated London News' as a human spider.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh really? Is it the same principle they use today?

**Vernon Sewell:** Exactly the same!

**Roy Fowler:** Is it? And it's naphtha based?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes it's a rubber solution.

**Roy Fowler:** Ah ha, still? yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** There may be some other solution now, I don't know, some - probably plastic - but it's a rubber solution. And a lot of the stuff I see, it's not half as good as mine either! The stuff I see today!

**Roy Fowler:** You said you were close to Nettlefold. Did he give you the run of the studio, in that respect? If you had an idea, you could develop it?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well he never came near the studio!

**Roy Fowler:** He never did? No?

**Vernon Sewell:** See, he had nothing to do with it, I just told him. He didn't know what was going on. But switch the camera off now, I'll tell you something rather funny!

**Roy Fowler:** Well, if it's funny why not put it on tape?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well it's libellous!

**Roy Fowler:** Oh but it can't be! It's sixty years ago, it can't libel anyone now. Oh no, I mean this is the sort of thing that makes history interesting!

**Vernon Sewell:** Well we made a film called, 'Night Shadows' and the studio manager was a man called Lott. And 'Night Shadows' had a scene in it with a sailor dancing with a dead whore, which was not very popular with the censor. And that film was banned completely. So I was having dinner with Mr Nettlefold one night and I said to him, "It's a pity about that film being banned." He said, "What film?" I said, "'Night Shadows.'" (And these were made in a fortnight, remember.) He said, "But Vernon, the studio has been shut for the last two weeks." I said, "Well no it hasn't, Mr Nettlefold, no..." He said, "You are mistaken..." I said, "But Mr Nettlefold, I recorded the picture!" He said, "Oh!" Now, that day I'd had the sack from the studio, because I'd made wheels onto the boom to steer it and somebody had fallen over. Lott, a bit tight, came into the studio, said, "You stupid arse! You're fired!" I knew I wasn't fired, but you see, he was drunk. So he said - Mr Nettlefold said, "Vernon, when you go back to the studio tomorrow, tell Lott I'll see him in the Comedy Theatre at eleven." I said, "But Mr Nettlefold, I'm fired!" He said, "Well, you're unfired!" So, back I went and Lott just had to apologise to me, you see, said, "I'm terribly sorry, I was a bit tight. I know how enthusiastic you are at making all these things." And I said, "Oh by the way, Mr Nettlefold wants to see you at eleven." We never saw him again!

**Roy Fowler:** How interesting.

**Vernon Sewell:** Never saw him again!

**Roy Fowler:** He was moonlighting or flogging off the studio?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, making - yes! But I don't think you should publish that in any form, because...

**Roy Fowler:** OK, well, we won't publish it...

**Vernon Sewell:** Because it would be very unpleasant for me!

**Roy Fowler:** But it is a long time ago...

**Vernon Sewell:** Very long time ago, yes...

**Roy Fowler:** ...sixty five years. Was it a crooked business in your recollection?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't think so, there was nothing to be crooked in!

**Roy Fowler:** Well, that was an instance...

**Vernon Sewell:** But it's very unusual, Lott had to charge the studio. You see Lott knew nothing about movies at all, you see - nothing - he was just a manager.

**Roy Fowler:** Right well, is there anything more to say about the transition to sound?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't know anything.

**Roy Fowler:** How quickly did you go into editing?

**Vernon Sewell:** Er, I didn't go to editing until I left the studios.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, so these were talkies?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, I used to assist a bit but I never did much. Because the directors edited their own movies, you see, always. That's what annoys me in the present credit title, the credit title of casting - it has nothing to do with - they get the same title as an editor or a cameraman, it's absurd! They do nothing! They have no contribution to the picture, a casting director; they just suggest the extras to the director and that's all, because the picture's cast before the film's even written very often! The film is all set up before with the stars, before the script's written - is on the books.

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm. Were you involved in the early days of sound editing? I was curious, the complications suddenly of editing sound, at the very beginning. Do you remember that?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh I knew all the gear of course, but you see, all the equipment that was necessary to edit the film was a movieola and a four-way synchroniser and a pair of scissors.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes...

**Vernon Sewell:** You see, now you get a credit title of (about that) length.

**Roy Fowler:** Yah, but suddenly a synchroniser was needed, someone had to invent it, someone had to design it and build it...

**Vernon Sewell:** Well they all came from RCA you see...

**Roy Fowler:** They did? I see.

**Vernon Sewell:** That was all part of the gear.

**Roy Fowler:** I see, right. And editors could be latched onto editing, cutting sound?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh yes, there was no complication, no difficulty. But now! Good Heavens! You look at the present editing machinery today, unbelievable!

**Roy Fowler:** Well it's mostly electronic now.

**Vernon Sewell:** Unbelievable mass of stuff, and the sound is not as good as it was. The sound is not as good as it was with original and the old movies, I think if you played them today you would hear every word! And, I can't hear - most American movies I can't understand.

**Roy Fowler:** I think a lot of that has to do with performance...

**Vernon Sewell:** A certain amount.

**Roy Fowler:** ...actors in the old days had to be understandable, hmm.

**Vernon Sewell:** A certain amount, but there is another thing that comes into it, the amount of times the picture is dubbed. Well every time you dub something, the quality goes.

**Roy Fowler:** Well not anymore, because it's all digital.

**Vernon Sewell:** It must do!

**Roy Fowler:** No, it's digital now, so it's first generation quality.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well it doesn't sound like it! Because you look at the credit titles and you get all these people in the edit department, a special effects man, the music man, every these are all having a bang at it, so it's dubbed and it's dubbed and it's dubbed and it's dubbed. Why is it that American films, I can't understand them but I can understand my old films, or other people's old films?

**Roy Fowler:** Well, I know the problem because I have it too, I find it very difficult to understand speech now, especially in American movies.

**Vernon Sewell:** It's bugged up in the cutting room, that's the answer!

**Roy Fowler:** Well back to, whenever it was 1929, 1930 or so. Lead us through your development. You had experience in several departments. Did you have an ambition already to be a director?

**Vernon Sewell:** Of course, yes, it was an obvious job.

**Roy Fowler:** From the start?

**Vernon Sewell:** Obvious job.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, OK. Was it a considered plan on your part to acquire this diversity of experience?

**Vernon Sewell:** More or less

**Roy Fowler:** ...or did it just happen? [VS continues to talk over: 'more or less, yes, more or less...'] OK. Tell us then about your career as you came forward in time. Any particular films that you worked on that you enjoyed, or people that you enjoyed working with?

**Vernon Sewell:** When I left Nettlefold's I hadn't a job of any sort at all, you see. But I was never entirely broke which had been a pity in a way. I always had a little money of my own. I never had to worry about where the rent was coming from, so I could afford to be choosy. Whereas, if I hadn't been in that position, my career would have changed completely because I would have stayed with the big money, which I walked out of on purpose. The first job after I came out of the Navy - mind you I got a lot of credit with 'Silver Fleet', that gave me a lot of standing. And after 'Silver Fleet' I had offers from all the American companies of a long-term contract, but I couldn't take it, I had to go back to the Navy, you see.

**Roy Fowler:** You've jumped forward quite a lot haven't you? We've skipped the thirties, in effect. Your service in the Navy...?

**Vernon Sewell:** There's not much of interest in it, not much interest. It was a meagrely sea-life, it's not very important really.

**Roy Fowler:** Well I have you down as directing. Your debut as a director was in 1934 with a film called, 'The Medium', right?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** 'The Medium'?

**Vernon Sewell:** A yes! 'The Medium', that was interesting. I was very interested in trick photography and stuff, you see, and I'd built a little studio in Knightsbridge, experimenting with foreground mattes, and we made all the equipment ourselves. I even made the sound camera myself. And we were messing about with this, you see, and one day Jerry Jackson and Mickey came to the studio and they saw what I was doing, they said, "Christ! We could make a whole film in Vernon's studio here, with his process." And they did. A man called Walter Tennyson photographed it, Mickey wrote the script, I directed the picture and I believe it was shown at the Empire, Leicester Square, I think it was. It was called 'The Medium'. With Barbara Gott, who was a famous character actress and an actor called Richard Littledale and another well known big character actor, a German...not Frederick Valp[?] but someone like him...

**Roy Fowler:** Werner Kraus[?] or someone like that? Well, we'd have to look that up, I can't...  
[NB in fact, Shayle Gardner]

**Vernon Sewell:** Well anyhow, that's how that film was made. And then...

**Roy Fowler:** It was Grande Guingol[?] I believe.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes.

[Long Pause]

**Roy Fowler:** How did you spend the thirties? In films? Were you in films throughout the thirties?

**Vernon Sewell:** Er...

**Roy Fowler:** Or did you do other things?

**Vernon Sewell:** No I didn't do anything else but films, because I went into movies at the beginning of the thirties you see...

**Roy Fowler:** Yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** That was when the 1929 Stock Exchange crashed, caused me to into the movies.

**Roy Fowler:** I understand that, but I'm saying, having done that, after you left Nettlefold's, did you work consistently in films or...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes! All the time!

**Roy Fowler:** Right, all throughout the thirties?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well, I wasn't always making films, I was experimenting working in my little studio.

**Roy Fowler:** I see, right.

**Vernon Sewell:** ...making things. I used to do a lot of [long pause - loses thread of conversation?] Also, everybody in those days, when 'talkies' started, they all thought they could be film stars. And people wanted to make films - they then would have tests made. So my little studio, I opened it in Knightsbridge in a basement, and we made tests. A lot of the American talent scouts used my little studio and we made tests. Also I used to make tests for individual people, five pounds, five pounds for a minute, 'talkie.' And we did that for a year, then I got fed-up with that and I - I can't - well that's jump from there. I've forgotten what I did when they closed the studio down. Oh yes, Walter Tennyson and I, we built an exterior equipment, a complete mobile truck with a generator, sound recording, camera crane and everything! And we made a picture on the river for Oscar Deutsch called 'Old Father Thames.' Very far advanced, technically, in those days, because I had the thing towed by an electric launch, and it was technically very far advanced. With a well know star who was in a group called 'The Co-optimists', I forget his name now, a big fat man. And he'd been giving personal appearances at Oscar Deutsch's openings of theatres.

**Roy Fowler:** Fred Emery?

**Vernon Sewell:** No.

**Roy Fowler:** Stanley Holloway?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, no.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh well, again, we'd have to look it up.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes. Anyway, he - as a present to this man, he gave him some money to make this movie. He gave... I knew Oscar Deutsch because Stanley Bates, who's wife put up the original money for Odeon, he was at Marlborough with me, and I had a very good looking wife, and we used to go to openings of Oscar Deutsch's theatres and stand on the stage, you see - decorative. And that's why Deutsch gave me a thousand quid, I think it was, to make this movie, which was very funny, it was very advanced. There was a punt that got caught up in the loch and there was quite advanced technical stuff. And we had a private viewing one night in one of the theatres and one - a man behind me, made a lot of rude remarks about it. Mind you, it wasn't very good, of course, but it wasn't bad in its day, and it was never shown again, never shown again.

**Roy Fowler:** Has it survived, do you know?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh I shouldn't think so.

**Roy Fowler:** Is there a print or...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh, I'm sure it hasn't survived, I'm sure it hasn't survived.

**Roy Fowler:** No? Oh that's a shame. I'm fascinated that you had that rig, because that was, indeed, advanced in its time.

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh quite right, advanced in its time!

**Roy Fowler:** So we can see you were an innovator, in technical matters?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh yes, yes, quite advanced for its time. You see, my camera crane, little baby camera crane, was before the crab oscillator. And in the end I sold it to Warner Brothers - mind you, only I could work it, they didn't realise that! You had to be an acrobat to work it and I demonstrated it, you see. And one man did everything, you operated the whole thing yourself. The cameraman operated the whole thing, up and down, he did the whole thing himself.., it was very ingenious. Anyway, see, no-one could work it, the cameramen refused to use it, so in the end it appeared in the sale at Stoll studios, but it was, again, advanced fast of its time.

**Roy Fowler:** What other devices have you invented - pioneered?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well, I invented a gyro stabiliser, because in 'The Edge of the World' which I did with Mickey there was a lot of sea stuff, you see. And I made a gyro stabiliser out of an airship automatic pilot, but the gyros were about as big as cricket balls, you see. And the thing was quite heavy, but it worked and no-one's were they developed any more. I don't think, there is a little, I believe, a silly video camera that call themselves gyro stabilisers, but you've got to have it about as big as a cricket ball before it would do any good. You want to, you must lock the horizon, you see.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. Did Mickey use it on 'Edge of the World'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes we did.

**Roy Fowler:** Were you on Foula with it?

**Vernon Sewell:** I was on the boat, of course, I was captain of the ship!

**Roy Fowler:** Were you? What, you played it, or...?

**Vernon Sewell:** I was the physical captain. Because you see, what happened with 'Edge of the World', it was going to be made on St Kilda, and the man wanted four hundred quid for it - we hadn't got four hundred 'quid'. So the whole thing was off. Then Mickey found another island called Foula right out into the Atlantic but there was no service to it, we had to have a boat. Well my yacht wasn't big enough, (I had about a forty foot yacht in those days) and I found, in Sunderland, a boat which was a Sunderland Pilot Cutter and it had been too expensive to run and they wanted to sell it. She was about three hundred tons, steam, and I bought her for six hundred quid, and that made the film possible to make, without that there would never have been 'The Edge of the World'. And I was the captain of it. So 'The Edge of the World' I'd looked after all the technical side of the thing and I was the captain of the ship, which was very important because he had to go backwards and forwards to the island and...

**Roy Fowler:** Positioning yes, and it was the camera boat too?

**Vernon Sewell:** Camera boat too! Yes of course! It was a big thing, about four hundred tons and a crew of thirteen I think.

**Roy Fowler:** How long did you keep her?

**Vernon Sewell:** After the film - it had to be registered in my name, I was the owner of it. Because I was a known yachtsman in those days and it was registered as a yacht, which put you outside all Board of Trade rules you see. I'm doing terrible things. Had anything happened, I would have gone to prison of course, had there have been disaster or misfortune. There were no disasters, but I had no right to be the captain at all. But there you are, we never had any disasters, it was sold. After the film I sold it for, again, six hundred quid, and the man who bought it thought I was just the ordinary master. He said, "Look here, would you like to stay with the ship?" I said, "What do you want to do?" He said, "We've got to go to Spain." I said, "What for?" He said, "don't be silly!" Because they wanted to run guns to Spain you see, for this Spanish War.

**Roy Fowler:** Which side?

**Vernon Sewell:** And I never heard any more on the boat.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah. So which side would you have run guns for had you done it?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't know, I never went into it.

**Roy Fowler:** [Vernon, hold it there.]

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

[Tape 1, Side 2]

**Vernon Sewell:** What rubbish this is.

**Roy Fowler:** No it isn't at all. Now, I do think it's very important we hear from you about Mickey Powell and the making of 'Edge of the World' because that's one of his landmark films isn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh yes. Well I was very much involved, without 'The Edge of the World' - well if you read his book, 'Four Hundred Thousand Feet on Film' you'll see my part of the movie. We set it up together. And my camera crane went up there, my camera crane was used on 'The Edge of the World' and at the beginning, my sound equipment was used. But the sound department didn't want to use my machine you see. They made some excuses and they wanted something other than what we had. Anyhow, we began to shoot on my machine, the sound, and anyhow, they took out a new - my machine was stopped. But it was originally all my equipment.

**Roy Fowler:** What had you invented in the way of a sound system? Tell us about that.

**Vernon Sewell:** Nothing invented, I mean we used an oscillograph.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh, you'd built one rather than devised a new kind of system?

**Vernon Sewell:** It was - no, the system had already been, the system was not patented. Instead of a oscillograph, we used a glow tube.

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm.

**Vernon Sewell:** See at Fox Movietone was originally a glow tube. And my camera operated with a glow tube, but the difficulty was to get a constant speed, because without a constant speed you got 'wowing', you see. But I invented the mechanism to give constant speed.

**Roy Fowler:** How did you do that?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well just mechanically, as made sense. I believe, in some machines it's used now, but the principle's the same.

**Roy Fowler:** So you, that was the one film it was used on, was it? And not even completely on that?

**Vernon Sewell:** It was, of course it was used on the, all the tests, of course! And it was used on this film on the river. Barnaby his name was, somebody Barnaby. David Barnaby!

**Roy Fowler:** David Barnaby[?], that's right!

**Vernon Sewell:** That was him! It was him! David Barnaby[?] was in the movie, 'Old Father Thames' I think it was called.

**Roy Fowler:** See it's all still there. (My God, I can see a cat chasing birds up the tree.) Vernon, tell us about Mickey Powell, at that, reasonably early stage in his career. Was he...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well he was originally a young man, it's all in his own book. I can't give you anything he hasn't said already.

**Roy Fowler:** Well indeed, but you have personal memories of him, whether he was difficult...?

**Vernon Sewell:** We became very close friends.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Was he a difficult man to work with?

**Vernon Sewell:** A lot of artistes didn't like him. See he hadn't got really the technical knowledge that I had, really. Because I knew more about the mechanics of movies than he did. But, a lot of people found him rude, but he was very funny. He would never do anything himself. Esmond Knight became a great friend of mine - he was a friend of Mickey too, and Esmond Knight, he would say, "Mickey, show me how to do it." He'd say, "You're the actor, I'm only the director." He'd say, "Well Mickey, but show me!" But Mickey never would, Mickey would never have a go. Now I would always have a go. If I didn't like the tone or way the thing was being said, I would say, "Well I'm no actor but this is my idea, if it was me I would say it like this..." And they'd say, "Well OK." But Mickey would never do that, ever.

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm. Was that an indication of insecurity, where actors were concerned?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't think so! I think he was very secure.

**Roy Fowler:** Where actors were a concern. Because he'd never been an actor had he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes he had.

**Roy Fowler:** Had he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes! He'd been a comedian. He was a very young man in France with quite a well-known man, it's in his book anyway. And that's why he'd lost his hair, he shaved all his head off for a part, it never grew back again. He was a plain slapstick comedian.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes? I'd completely forgotten that.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, it's in his book.

**Roy Fowler:** Um, so what? There's nothing much more to say about the adventures on Foula and er...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Now between the - between my leaving Nettlefold's I made a movie on my own called 'Men Against the Sea', a documentary film, and it's a classic today.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes...

**Vernon Sewell:** And Mickey was coming too, Mickey was gonna come too, just Mickey and I were gonna make this film. It was made on a trawler in the North Sea, in the worst possible weather that I could find. And of course a man called - he was a Post Office Film Unit, considered the king man of documentaries, but absolutely bogus

**Roy Fowler:** Grierson?

**Vernon Sewell:** Grierson! He'd never looked at a camera in his life! He was sat in the office! It was, the thing was photographed by er - the man who became my photographer, I believe, later on [NB Basil Emmott]. Well, I made this picture, 'Men Against the Sea' and it became rather a documentary of its time, a rather - a classic. Then, that was done on the - a lot of this stuff I made myself - that was done on the cameras I partly made myself, an Eymo. And I made mechanisms for keeping the spray off. But Mickey at the last moment didn't come, he was very wise too. He didn't come, he backed out, he said he had a [?]. But anyhow, I took a man called Buddy Farr who was so ill, poor chap, he never came out of his bunk the whole fortnight. He had to be carried ashore, almost unconscious. But that, 'Men Against the Sea' was often played. 'Men Against the Sea' was often played. It was shortly after 'Men Against the Sea' that Mickey got the - when the 'quotas' packed up, and Jerry Jackson packed up. Mickey had always had this idea of 'Men against the Sea' and he and I together had very largely floated this damn thing. Well then, of course 'Edge of the World' lost a lot of money, of course, it lost badly - the man who'd put up the money, he went broke. Because Mickey - I believe the schedule, I believe the budget was something like fifty [fifteen?] thousand pounds - and Mickey went up to over thirty thousand pounds for the film.

**Roy Fowler:** Who did finance it?

**Vernon Sewell:** I remember, I've forgotten his name, but he ran a - he was quite a rich man - he had a big fun fair, he owned a big fun fair. I think he was something to do with Rock Studio where Gerry Blattner was the manager. And then, shortly after that, Mickey got a job after 'The Edge of the World' - I'd had a job again - and Mickey got a job with Korda to do 'The Spy in Black' which had a big location series in Scotland, which I did. And Korda then gave me a job of any bits to do with the sea, I had to supervise.

**Roy Fowler:** When you say you did, you were second unit director in effect?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well it was more than that, I was working with the principles as well, you see. The second unit director doesn't work with actors. I took the whole team on, Veidt, the lot. And I know there was a scene where a ferry boat, a big ferry boat had to be sunk and I'd arranged - I had to buy a boat and physically sink it - and I'd arranged to do this. I came back and Korda said, "You can't!" I said, "But..." He said, "You can't do it!" I said, "But Mr Korda it's all set, I've arranged to do it like this." He said, "No, it will be a model." I said, "Well, a model will be awful! I'm not going to do a model" and I went out. And Cunningham who was Korda's right-hand man said, "Vernon...Alec knows what you say is perfectly right. We have a special effects department here, costing us a thousand a week, we've got to use it!" I said, "Well I'm not going to shoot it! And I didn't. Somebody else did. It was awful!"

**Roy Fowler:** It is the model shot in the picture, is it?

**Vernon Sewell:** It was awful, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** It was dreadful.

**Roy Fowler:** I remember the sequence...

**Vernon Sewell:** It could have been so good! But all the Scotland stuff, I shot you see. And then, very shortly after that, Mickey - I stayed with Korda then, as a special director. Then they made a very big propaganda film called 'The Lion has Wings' for which there were three directors: Mickey Powell did the fighter section, I did the bomber section and Carol Reed did the romantic stuff with Merle Oberon in the studio, they were the three directors of the movie. And it was after that movie that I went into the Navy.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. So you were based at Denham then, in the late thirties?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** You were based at Denham in the late thirties?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes, yeah.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, inevitably I must ask you about Alexander Korda who...

**Vernon Sewell:** I had very little to do with him, only on this occasion when he wouldn't let me do this thing. And then it was - in that film, 'The Lion has Wings' I got the first shots of the bomb bay doors opening and the bombs falling down, and I wanted to get this shot. So I'd got to tie myself onto the under carriage and all sorts of dreadful things that I was going to do. So the head of the piece said, "Look here, Vernon, there's a Wellington coming down tomorrow with a new retractable gun position. It's never been tried out with bombs but if you'd like to come, you can get into this damn thing and get your shot." I said, "Of course I'll come!" Well we did. It took off all right. [???] I think it was about - not quite as big round as this table, a bit smaller than that.

**Roy Fowler:** So we're talking what, about three feet in diameter?

**Vernon Sewell:** I'm talking about a little bit smaller, like a dustbin.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, we're on audio- tape, so...

**Vernon Sewell:** I sat inside!

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, but it means nothing to say, "this table" because we're on audio-tape, so what would you say, three feet in diameter?

**Vernon Sewell:** Three feet perhaps, you could just get in, just get in to work the gun.

**Roy Fowler:** Right.

**Vernon Sewell:** The gun wasn't in, of course, so I had to put the camera where the gun would have been. Well I got this shot, the first ever! And when I had finished I thought "Well I'll have a look round" and I controlled this thing, and it wouldn't move! Suddenly, it started to revolve. It was getting faster, faster, faster, faster, faster! Then it stopped and I couldn't see anything. I thought Christ almighty! I've out-screwed myself, I'm on the way down! But what had actually happened, the thing had stopped, and I was looking between the main plane and the tail plane, you couldn't see anything, you see. But it was a nasty moment, a nasty moment.

**Roy Fowler:** Well that's one of the great classic shots now, isn't it, the bomb bays opening and the bombs going down?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** I say, that's one of the great classic shots now...

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes! I was the first person to make it.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Now, 'The Lion has Wings' was made in a great, great hurry, was it not?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, it was, it was.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes? In something like six weeks to the release, something like that?

**Vernon Sewell:** Something, I know I was a fortnight on the job and Mickey was a fortnight on the job and Carol a fortnight on the job.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah. Um, Alex Korda, was he the charming phoney that so many people think he was? Or did you...?

**Vernon Sewell:** I'm not in a position to say, I had so little to do with him.

**Roy Fowler:** What was the feeling about him at Denham then? Was he liked and respected?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes he was, yes he was liked yes. As a matter of fact [???] he had a lot of brothers in the industry, you know there. He had Vincent Korda...

**Roy Fowler:** But Vincent was enormously talented, was he not?

**Vernon Sewell:** Vincent Korda. He, of course, was my art director on 'The Silver Fleet'.

**Roy Fowler:** Umm, but a great art director?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, wonderful.

**Roy Fowler:** And Zoltan was the other one.

**Vernon Sewell:** He did the most ingenious things. I mean, in the war when you couldn't get drapes, he made plaster drapes - the drapes were made of plaster. And in Mickey's film 'Colonel Blimp', which he was making while I was making 'The Silver Fleet', there were crowd scenes that we had to have and, it was more than three quarters, about eighty per cent of the extras were models, plaster cast models and things. As long as you had a little movement, so every ten casts there was perhaps one live man, who just moved about, you see, and you could do that. These scenes in big theatres, where you see a big theatre scene, a lot of them are 'cut-outs', a lot of the people are dummies and you have one or two extras. But I - it was in 'The Lion has Wings' when I joined the Navy, you see. And I didn't make 'The Silver Fleet' until years afterwards, I was taken out of my ship in fact.

**Roy Fowler:** Before we go on to your Naval career and well, we'll say the outbreak of war, let me ask you about Emeric Pressburger. Presumably you met him on 'The Spy in Black'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh yes, yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Tell us about Emeric at that stage in his career, 1939 or so.

**Vernon Sewell:** He had a very, very big - he was a very erudite man and very well read, but I did also recognise, I found one of the key words in 'The Silver Fleet', I found it in a book afterwards [chuckles] - the sentence he'd used.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes...

**Vernon Sewell:** But he was a very nice chap, I got on all right with him.

**Roy Fowler:** Uh hmm. The collaboration between him and Powell, was it fruitful right from the very beginning?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, very important. In fact, when his best buddy left, Mickey didn't do any good at all. His Australian pictures were disgraceful, disgraceful!

**Roy Fowler:** Well, several after that.

**Vernon Sewell:** I couldn't believe they were so awful, because they were technically bad as well.

**Roy Fowler:** What was the - can you describe that balance between them? That collaboration, the catharsis, I suppose, the - what?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well, Pressburger had the idea for the story and had all the ideas of the characterisation, and he wrote all the dialogue.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, in English?

**Vernon Sewell:** In English, yes. He wrote some of 'The Silver Fleet' of course.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah. And Mickey was purely, in effect, a technical person? Was he also an ideas person?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, well, he dealt with the artistes, he dealt with the artistes.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. Was he also what we might describe as a creative person? Or did that impetus come from Pressburger? Because the Archers...

**Vernon Sewell:** I wouldn't know, all I know is when the association with Pressburger split up he never did anything else that was any good.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, we'll come onto 'The Silver Fleet' then in a moment. Tell me about going into the Navy, when war broke out you were on 'The Lion Has Wings' and then what?

**Vernon Sewell:** The assistant director came to me and said, "Telephone for you, Mr Sewell... Vernon. They say it's the Admiralty." I said, "I don't believe it. Go away!" And yet he insists it's the Admiralty, so I go back and I say, "Sewell here." "Admiralty," he said, "have you finished the film?" I said, "Yes." "Would you be free next week?" I said, "Yes." "Would you be interested in taking command of one of HM ships?" I thought, "Well this is a lot of balls," you see, I thought, "This is nonsense!" I said, "Oh yes? Why?" He said, "Could you come to the Admiralty on Thursday at four o'clock in the afternoon to gate B and say this number?" And I said, "Yes, I can." Well I arrived and to my surprise I was ushered in. And I was ushered in to a room full of Admirals and very high ranking people, amongst whom was Admiral Gordon Campbell who was, if you remember, was a mystery ship, a "Q" ship, a mystery ship man in the 1914 War, who built - had this ship design you know, this ship's design with hidden armour, that sort of thing and he was one of the people. And they said, "Now Mr Sewell, what we are going to talk about is of the utmost secrecy - utmost secrecy. Whatever you hear is absolutely deadly secret." And they told me something which is still under the secrets list, I can't tell you what it is now even! And they said, "Yes, well Churchill and the first seaman want to see what this is all about, would you go to...." I said, "Have you got a typist?" "Typist?" he said, "Of course you can't have a typist! You write it yourself! We sent to your house and your housekeeper has sent your pyjamas and you'll spend the night here, locked in this room." And I typed it all out and it was approved, and I

was immediately made Lieutenant RN[?] I had no training of any sort whatsoever, and found myself captain of a ship! Well in the event, what I was going to do never came off. Thank God it didn't because they had the whole - I'll tell you what it is - we were going to Ireland, disguised as a film company making a film, and I was the only film director, known film director, who could command a ship you see. So I was the only man who could do it and that's how it happened. But, in the end we never went. Thank God we didn't because there'd be an awful 'cock-up', they 'cocked up' everything in the Navy...

**Roy Fowler:** What were they going to do in Ireland? Invade Ireland? Or...

**Vernon Sewell:** No, no, I was going there to try and find out where the German submarines - the German submarines were re-fuelling in Ireland.

**Roy Fowler:** Ah ha, I see.

**Vernon Sewell:** Which was very bad for us because instead of having to go round to Heligoland they were right there. And as Ireland was a neutral country and very friendly with America, we didn't dare do anything unpleasant. So this mystery trip was going to be sent there to try and find out where the German submarines were coming in and radio to destroyers, to outside and tell them, that was what I was supposed to be doing. But of course, they didn't understand us. I said, "If you're going to do this, it's got to be a proper movie, it's got to be advertised and publicised, you've got to have proper contracts with some American company to do it. It's got to be real! Otherwise we'll be sunk at once." And they didn't understand that. And after a time they realised I was right and we cancelled the whole - In fact I never sailed you see. But, I was there! Captain of a ship! What were they going to do? Because I was given all sorts of jobs and I was anti-submarine vessel and all sorts of things I did. And during this very [?], on patrol out in the channel, when Mickey said - well Mickey had made 'One of our Aircraft is Missing' a propaganda film for the Dutch. And it was really very good, with Googie Withers - first part. And the Dutch wanted to make - go to Surabaya and make a film about the Dutch Navy. Well Mickey didn't want to go to Surabaya, and he said to Prince Bernhard "Look here, I've got the very director for you, a man called Vernon Sewell, just the man for the job, but he's in the Navy." So they said, "Well, we'll transfer him to our Navy, do you think he'd do it?" He said, "I don't know, I'll go and see." So he came to the Isle of Wight, he came aboard my ship, I was based on the Isle of Wight. "Of course I'll do it, rather! So I can get out of this bloody ship!" And I was transferred to the Dutch Navy, and I had an office in the [CNA] building at Marble Arch. I was promoted to Lieutenant Commander, which I didn't know about at the time, I didn't discover that until a year afterwards. I didn't know, I was dressed as a Lieutenant when I was really a Lieutenant Commander. Well anyway, no sooner had I got there than Surabaya fell to the Dutch, so there was no film. So Prince Bernhard said, "Look here, Captain, we've gone to a lot of trouble to get you into our Navy, do you think you could think of something else?" I said, "I don't know, have you got any writers here?" And he said, "Yes, [Johann ?] can do that." And I said, "Well can you put all you know about the Dutch resistance at my disposal", which they did. And then I discovered that just before the invasion of Holland the Dutch yard had had a submarine nearly finished and they towed it across to England just before the Germans arrived, and on the base of that I wrote the story of 'The Silver Fleet'. And Gordon Wellesley - I'm not a script- writer, so they employed Gordon Wellesley to write the script and that was how it

happened. And then Emeric re-wrote a lot of the end, a lot of the script he re-wrote at the end himself.

**Roy Fowler:** How did the Archers come into this?

**Vernon Sewell:** It was their production.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes...

**Vernon Sewell:** 'The Silver Fleet' was an Archers production, Mickey Powell was producer.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Did you take it to them though? Or, how did they get involved in...?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** How did they get involved, Mickey and Emeric?

**Vernon Sewell:** Because they had made 'One of our Aircraft is Missing'.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, I see, right...

**Vernon Sewell:** And on the strength of that, the Dutch said, "Would they make us a Naval film?" That's how it was made.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, I'm sorry, I missed that, yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** All I got out of that film was my Naval Officer's pay. It made a fortune too, it made a bomb. Frankie, Mickey's wife said, "Do you know Vernon, Mickey and I were living off that for a very long time, that movie." But it did me a lot of good you see, it was the first major picture I made, you see.

**Roy Fowler:** That was British National, was it not? The production, did they finance it, British National?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, it was an Alexander Korda film.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh was it Korda? Oh.

**Vernon Sewell:** It was either Korda or Del Giudice, it might have been Del Giudice, but it was certainly nothing to do with British National.

**Roy Fowler:** Not yet, because you did quite a lot for them subsequently, didn't you?

**Vernon Sewell:** Afterwards when I came out of the Navy, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. I have to ask you about Gordon Wellesley - Gordon Wong Wellesley - because he was very active as a writer in those days, wasn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes, yes. Well, he wanted to be a director and I said "No, co-director out! I won't have it. Only one director." So anyway, he had his name put on with me as 'written and directed by' but he wrote the script, he had nothing to do with doing direction in the movie at all.

**Roy Fowler:** And you say Emeric Pressburger also contributed quite a lot to the script, yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** He contributed to the final sequences, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Did Mickey get involved at all? Was he breathing over your shoulder?

**Vernon Sewell:** He looked at the rushes, but I never saw him during the film.

**Roy Fowler:** He didn't cause you any interference?

**Vernon Sewell:** Never saw him at all!

**Roy Fowler:** No, no, right. OK. Well it was a very successful picture wasn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** Wonderfully successful picture yes. And I say that I should have - I could have gone to Hollywood without any trouble at all, because when the - before I'd gone back to the Navy Del Giudice wanted to make a film called 'The Atlantic Front' and he'd promised, apparently, Leslie Howard he'd make this movie, anyhow. I said, "The script is stupid, it's no good at all! It's a lot of nonsense." He said, "Well, Vernon, take it back, write on it. You do it, and when you say you want to, we'll make it." I said, "No." He said, "You still in involved?" I said "No I've just tried this." He said, "Rubbish! It's wrongly written, it's stupid!" And he said, "Well if ever you change your mind, whatever I'm doing, I will do it." But I didn't, of course. And then - but what I should have said - I'm a bloody fool, I should have said, "Yes" and got my Naval leave extended. Because you see, the picture took place half in America and half in England, I should have said, "Yes, but I must go to America first of all to see that side of the thing." And on the strength of 'Silver Fleet' I could have got a job at once. Because I had telegrams, after the premier of 'The Silver Fleet' I had telegrams from MGM and Warner and Columbia, all offering me a contract, so that I couldn't do anything about it.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, well you've become a 'hot' director, but you're still in the Navy, so how did that work out?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, well I didn't! I went back in the Navy.

**Roy Fowler:** Into service?

**Vernon Sewell:** ...and finally I came out, because - it was stupid! In June '40 I was injured on this ship. A cable broke and I nearly had my face smashed in, and I went to Haslow Naval Hospital, where I was in for a fortnight. When I was due to come out, the hospital was very badly

bombed that night, it was on fire, and nobody was bothered about kicking me out you see, so I just walked out and went back to my ship again. Years go by and now I come, I'm now Lieutenant Commander, qualified Officer [???] Unrestricted, it was a very senior rank. I would at least have got a corvette, at least! A corvette would have been the smallest command I could have got, because they were desperate for sea-going captains. Well I was going to get this job, I would probably have been killed, because I would probably have been on the Murmansk run, which would have been terrible, that's what they wanted me for. But they said "Wait a minute!" They said, "The MDG, (Medical Director General) has been chasing you for years! What happened? You never had a medical board after Haslow! You've got to have one now!" So I had a medical board and they said, "Eyesight is not good enough!" I said, "Well this is ridiculous!" He said, "No, Naval is very high standard, they're pretty well ninety per cent", Otherwise you couldn't be a sea-going officer, which was absurd. They lost a lot of very good men who went into the Army, should have gone into the Navy. So they said, "No, you can't have a sea going command. Go on leave, we'll find something for you to do." Then they said would I like to be a Press Officer? I said, "No, I wouldn't." Would I like to be a harbour master at Sierra Leone? "No, I wouldn't." And all sorts, you see. They said, "Well you'd better go on leave again." I went on leave again! Then Admiral Commander in Reserve said, "Look here, could you get a job ashore?" I said, "I don't know, I expect so. I don't know at all." They said, "Well, we suggest, we can't find you a job to suit your qualifications. You don't want to be a dressed up Naval Film Unit...?" I said, "No, I certainly don't!" So he said, "Resign your commission and get a job ashore." I said, "No I don't want to resign my commission, why should I? I was one of the first Naval Officers to command a ship in the War, RNVI. I'm not going to resign my commission!" So then, the Admiral - I saw the Admiral in charge of the reserves and he said, "Well you'll either do this, you've got to take one of these jobs," which was a dreadful office job, you see, it was dreadful. No contribution to the War. I said, "Look here, I'm a very, very good small ship captain. Why can't I be an instructor? Instructing the ships in the invasion, which is just about to start?" He said, "No you can't, because your rank is too senior." I said, "Well I'll drop the rank! That's what I should be doing, I should be doing this." "No you can't do that." So I thought, "Well I'm not going to do it." So they said, "Well listen Captain, if you resign your commission and take a job ashore, I'll give you this letter" which said: "In the event of you not finding suitable employment you can return to Naval with your existing rank plus time-out." So I took it. I came out of the Navy just before the invasion, which was silly really. And then I got a job with Gaumont. Now, it was very highly paid and I had - the programme was arranged, the films - the three films I was going to make in the first year. 'House of One's Own' with James Mason, that was going to be the first film. Now, they'd signed the contract but I hadn't signed mine, because I went to hospital, I had my - something done in the War. Anyway, I hadn't signed the contract, they had. It was for ten thousand a year, which was then one of the highest paid directors in England, ten thousand a year. What would it be worth now, a quarter of a million a year?

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well anyway, Ostrer's car arrived at the hospital with a book that said: "Dear Vernon, change of plan, you're not going to make 'The Place of One's Own', we're going to do this, and this is the book. The script's being written by (so-and-so and so-and so)." I read the book, it was called 'Madonna of the Seven Moons'. I said, 'I'm not going to make this. It's not my cup of tea at all! Ridiculous. I can't make this rubbish, it's not my - I don't understand this sort of

rubbish! In fact, I'm not going to make it Maurice.' He said, "But Vernon you've got to make it, you're under contract rights." I said, "Are you sure?" He said, "What do you mean, am I sure?" I said, "Well you look at your bloody contract, is my signature on it?" He said, "My God, no it isn't!" I said, "Well, is it conditional that I make 'Madonna of the Seven Moons'?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well you can stick your contract!" And I went straight from there to Lou Jackson - to Lady Yule's - to his studio, where I signed a three year contract for a quarter of the money, but I had fun!

**Roy Fowler:** Ah hmm.

**Vernon Sewell:** I had fun! I made just the films I wanted to make.

**Roy Fowler:** We'll come onto your British National period, but one person you mentioned a moment ago and that's Fillipo Del Giudice who is, again, a rather forgotten, lost character...

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes, yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Any memories you have of him I think would be useful.

**Vernon Sewell:** Only that I [pause]

**Roy Fowler:** Two Cities had become a very important company, had it not?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, Two Cities, yes it was, yes. He was a very - he took my hand and said, "Vernon", and I won't go on to this, but anyhow, he wanted me to make this movie.

**Roy Fowler:** What were you going to say?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well he was very, he made a lot of very flattering remarks about me.

**Roy Fowler:** Well that's good to hear!

**Vernon Sewell:** And he said, "I want you to make this movie." And I said, "But it wouldn't be any good! It's a waste of time, it's a stupid thing. Anyhow, I wouldn't do, anyway, so that was that."

**Roy Fowler:** So that was as close as you came to working for Two Cities?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes. Very close, if I'd said "Yes" he would have gone into production at once. Oh, with a very big cost, too.

**Roy Fowler:** What did you know about him as an individual?

**Vernon Sewell:** I had so little contact with him, it happened just once.

**Roy Fowler:** I wondered if you knew him socially?

**Vernon Sewell:** It was the only time I had any contact with him at all.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, OK. Because it's always interesting to talk about the people who were the 'movers and chasers' in those days.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, they were important people then.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh they were indeed, yes, they ran the industry. How about Rank himself? Did you...?

**Vernon Sewell:** I just - Rank did me some very dirty tricks. Rank did me some very dirty tricks.

**Roy Fowler:** As a man, as an individual?

**Vernon Sewell:** Nasty man!

**Roy Fowler:** Or John Davis? Who was the nasty one then?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well, both of them! But I knew Rank in the early days of Odeon. Anyway, he was making religious films at a little studio in London somewhere. Terrible! I remember one of Ostrer's daughters played The Virgin Mary, I mean, they were so awful! I said, "Mr Rank, this is ridiculous!" So Mickey said to me, "Look here, Vernon, why don't you talk him out of this funny Bible rubbish and make some good stories? Why not go to the great writers?" He said, "For example, why not go to Tolstoy Get one of Tolstoy's short stories!" And Rank agreed, and I made 'What They Live By' [NB 'What Men Live By'] with Esmond Knight, Olga Lindo. Oh, a lot of very good people, a wonderful story, you couldn't go wrong with it - wonderful story! And it got a lot of notice when it - it was originally not made for cinemas at all, you see. So one day, Oscar Deutsch rang me up and said, "Vernon, they tell me you've made a very interesting little movie. Would you like me to show it at the opening of my new cinema in Leicester Square?" I said, "Well Christ! Of course I would! That would make me!" Because I knew it would get wonderful reviews, because you couldn't possibly damn it! Because the story was so good, the actors were so good, that you couldn't possibly - it could only get wonderful reviews, as it finally did of course. But anyway, Oscar Deutsch said, "Look here, bring it to my theatre tonight, we'll look at it Vernon." So I arrived at the theatre with it under my arm. And Oscar Deutsch arrived with a lot of Jewish ladies, friends. They're going to see another big Warner's film. I didn't know that, and he said, "Vernon, we're gonna see (so-and-so). By the way, I've just seen Rank. He said he knows nothing about the picture or you either." I thought, "Well, the bloody Judas Iscariot!" So anyhow, I sat there, stunned! At the end of the film he said, "Oh Vernon, you still there? I'll see a couple of reels of your film." I said, "No you won't Mr Deutsch, you'll see the whole thing or nothing! And now I think, nothing!" I went down to Rank - rang up Rank on the telephone, but he wasn't there but his religious advisor was, and I said, "You can take your religious films and stick 'em up your arse!" Or words to that effect. It was a very dirty trick that, a very dirty trick.

**Roy Fowler:** Do you have any understanding why he would do such a thing?

**Vernon Sewell:** No! No, he just didn't care. I know he didn't. Then I'd written - found another story by Arthur Morrison, a lovely story called 'The Cellar of Hate' and Rank said to me, "We want to make the movie." I said, "I can't, Mr Rank, I'm still in the Navy." He said, "As soon as you come out of the Navy, come to me and we'll make this movie," and it was called 'The Cellar of Hate'. Then of course, when I did, he said, "Oh no, it's no good, we aren't interested any more." No, I had very unsatisfactory associations with Rank. I used to go to his house to discuss these things, these religious films [humph], damn funny!

**Roy Fowler:** Apparently, he was supposed to have been motivated to an almost total extent by his religious beliefs, convictions. John Davis was not the power then that he subsequently became? Did you have any dealings with him at all?

**Vernon Sewell:** He got rid of [sid? Oscar]. Stanley Bates, who was my Marlborough friend, was co-director with Davis and finally Davis got in because Bates knew nothing about the cinemas, he ran a garage, his wife bought him the shares. And John Davis hated him, all he wanted to do was get rid of him, which he finally did. But I've now read somewhere that John Davis knocked 'The Silver Fleet', said, "It wasn't any good." I don't know, he was a very nasty man, no one liked him.

**Roy Fowler:** Evil man.

**Vernon Sewell:** No one liked him. No, no one liked him at all. They're all dead anyway.

**Roy Fowler:** They've all gone, indeed.

**Vernon Sewell:** And I'm talking to you!

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** I've got the last laugh!

**Roy Fowler:** You certainly have, you certainly have.

**Vernon Sewell:** [Laughs].

**Roy Fowler:** Well then, I guess that brings us to, you're out of the Navy and you're going to work for British National.

**Vernon Sewell:** British National, yeah.

**Roy Fowler:** British National, that's right. So tell us then about British National in those days.

**Vernon Sewell:** 'The World Owes You A Living' with David Farrar, who lives very near me in South Africa. I saw him last week. And then I made a remake of 'The Medium' and called it 'Latin Quarter', because I could do what I liked with Lady Yule, I could have - if I'd been a different guy I could have run the studio, she would have given me the whole lot. She would

have given me a Rolls Royce if I'd wanted it, she ate out of my hand for some unknown reason. But anyway, 'The Medium' as I say, was a remake and a very, very artistic movie. I had a cameraman called Gunther Krampf who I think is the finest cameraman that ever lived - wonderful. You could take a still of any of his pictures and frame them, then stick them on the walls as still, wonderful. We made 'The Latin Quarter' which had two hit reviews. Then we made 'The Ghosts of Berkeley Square', which I liked very much, I thought it was very funny. I had a terrific cast, terrific cast! All the best actors there were in England in it, and it had five periods of changes of costume. I wanted to make it in colour and I wanted to make it on exterior. And Bob Morley said, "Look here, no one would..." he'd made 'The First Gentleman' but he wouldn't make the film. 'The First Gentleman' was a play, he wouldn't make the film. He would sell the rights but he wouldn't make the film. Without Bob the thing was worth nothing. Bob said to me, "Vernon, I'll sell you, personally, the rights of 'The First Gentleman' for ten thousand 'quid', and we make that now. Then we make 'The Ghosts of Berkeley Square' next year on location." But they wouldn't agree, they wouldn't agree. Well the studio roof had to be raised twenty feet to build the faade of Berkeley Square at the studio. We made the film and of course, the terrible storms in the middle of it, the scene wall blew down and, oh, all that sort of trouble! But anyhow, I thought it was a very funny film and all the critics did, but you had to know a bit about English history to understand it. You had to know there was a Boer War, there was a Queen Anne and there was a Prince Regent, you had to know they - you had to have the very, very basic knowledge, which people apparently didn't have, and people didn't understand it. I saw it running somewhere when Joan and I were out, we saw it at a local cinema. I said to my wife, "go and look at that and see how it's going down here." She came back to me and said, "Too little [pipers?] I had in front of me during the film, at the end they said, "silly, 'ain't I?"" [Chuckles]

**Roy Fowler:** That's the audience.

**Vernon Sewell:** "Silly, 'ain't it!"

**Roy Fowler:** They watch television now, but it hasn't changed.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes. I was then going to make 'No Room at the Inn' which was a very successful play running, we were gonna shoot next week, and they said to me, "Vernon, off that! We've just done a deal with Peter Chayney." Now Peter Chayney was the best selling author of his time...

**Roy Fowler:** I'm going to stop you.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

[Tape 2, Side 3]

**Roy Fowler:** It's Vernon Sewell and it's the second tape. Yes, er, Peter Chayney?

**Vernon Sewell:** Right. Are you getting it down or not?

**Roy Fowler:** Ah hmm, yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well everybody knew Peter Chayney, he was the bestseller. He only was beaten by the Bible! His books went into America, worldwide. They were pretty good rubbish, but, he did invent 'James Bond'. It was nothing to do with Fleming. The character, 'Licensed to Kill, 007' was invented by Peter Chayney in his 'Dark' series, 'Dark Duet', I've got the draft of it here, matter of fact. 'Dark Duet, they're all series of a man employed by the government to kill undesirable persons, which is 'James Bond'. Now, if Peter Chayney hadn't have died, 'James Bond' wouldn't have existed. But anyway, they just said, "We've done a deal with Peter Chayney, we have him under contract for (so-and-so, so-and-so, so-and-so)." Now, if he likes you, you're made for life, you'll never stop working - like 'James Bond'. Peter Chayney and I got on very well indeed, I said, "I don't like this first film you've chosen. We should have chosen a 'James Bond' one." He said, "Vernon, they're going to make dozens, don't worry. You do this thing, don't worry." And we made the film called 'Uneasy Terms'. Now, he had complete charge of casting and costumes, and script of course. He had choice of the world's stars. He said, "My character Slim Callaghan, I've always seen Michael Rennie. I'd already made a film with Michael Rennie I think. Anyhow, he and I were friends. He wasn't right for it, I didn't think. I wouldn't have cast him for the part, but anyhow - he had control. We make the film. He's supposed to write the script - he doesn't. I'm left on the, sometimes on the set with no script at all! Michael Rennie and I had to sit down and write the very next day's work! The film was pretty awful. Anyhow, it opens at Warner Brothers and Peter Chayney says to me, "Vernon, whatever happens, this film will have a good press, because the press daren't knock me!" I said, "OK, I hope you're right, I hope you're right, Peter." Well, the film first comes out. I go to see him on the Sunday morning and there he is, lying in bed with all the papers. I said [???] He said, "Vernon, pooh...pooh! Don't forget this...today's papers light tomorrow's fires!" And then he died! So we never made any more. That was the one Peter Chayney film ever made. No one has made one since. Poor old Peter...

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. 'No Orchids for Miss Blandish' was his too, wasn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** 'No Orchids for Miss Blandish'?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, that wasn't Peter Chayney, no, no, no, no. That wasn't Peter Chayney.

**Roy Fowler:** Wasn't it Peter Chayney?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, no, no, no, that wasn't.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh, sorry...I'm mis-speaking myself.

**Vernon Sewell:** That was by... [NB James Hadley Chase]

**Roy Fowler:** Well it isn't relevant.

**Vernon Sewell:** I remember I was at sea one day and a destroyer went by and they flashed a light, and the signal was, "I understand the Captain has got a copy of 'No Orchids for Miss Blandish' [chuckles]. Will he lend it to me when I come in next?" [Chuckles].

**Roy Fowler:** It was a great cause at the time I remember, but anyway, it's not relevant to your career. While we're talking about British National, can we cover a couple of individuals? You mentioned Gunther Krampf and, indeed, he was one of the very greatest lighting cameramen.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yeah. He moved to me and he went to British National, then went to ABC and they broke his heart. He rang me up and said, "Vernon, I'm so unhappy here, I'm so unhappy, they're crucifying me," and he died.

**Roy Fowler:** You know last year there was a retrospective in Vienna and I was trying to find out when Gunther Krampf died and I couldn't find it anywhere. So little is known about him.

**Vernon Sewell:** I can tell you when he died, he died about a couple of years after...er...

**Roy Fowler:** Well it was around '51, '51, '52, something like that.

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Latin Quarter', yes, yes. Wonderful man.

**Roy Fowler:** He was the great master of the German 'expressionismos' wasn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** We got on so well together.

**Roy Fowler:** Great light and dark, contrast.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, because to appreciate Gunther you have to be a bit of a cameraman yourself, which I had been you see, and I knew exactly what he was doing. He would take an hour to set a picture up and he would say, "I'm ready now Vernon," having seen my rehearsals, and then he'd shoot and the results were fantastic. But, if I'd said, "Gunther, I've changed my mind, you're not coming in at that door, you've got to come in at that door," then the whole lighting fabric collapsed. It took another hour to light it, and other people said, "Well we can't get Gunther because he takes such a long time to light." It was entirely the fault of the director, not Gunther. But he said to me, "I'm so unhappy, I'm so sad. They're crucifying me here," and he died. Quite young.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, he was in his fifties I think wasn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Quite young.

**Roy Fowler:** Lou Jackson?

**Vernon Sewell:** Lou...very funny. Lou had been a barrow-boy, I think, or something very - I got on very well with Lou, he was very funny, very funny. Lady Yule would hardly go to luncheon without his permission. Then she suddenly reversed and he became out of favour, altogether, completely. And I could have taken over that studio, I could have taken over without any trouble at all, because she was very anxious, she said, "Why didn't you tell me?" I said, "Lady Yule, Lou Jackson employed me, he was your [???]. Do you think if I'd come behind his back [indecipherable]?" She said, "Well you should have done, you're my friend."

**Roy Fowler:** Give us thumbnail sketches of them both, first of all Lady Yule.

**Vernon Sewell:** Lady Yule. Well, her daughter got mixed up - admired a Canadian singer and she bought the rights of the thing and Hans May wrote a scenario and she booked the Palace Theatre for one year and gave the actors a contract for one year, irrespective of what it was [that] happened. And she was going to give a very, very big opening party for this thing at The Savoy. So, by this time we were very close together, she said, "Vernon, I want you to be my host at the party. Have lunch with me at The Connaught tomorrow, we'll discuss the menu." So I looked, I said, "I don't think the menu's good enough Lady Yule, I think it's a very third class menu, I suggest this..." and I suggested a menu. She said, "Right then." Then The Savoy said, "No we can't do this, we haven't got enough eggs," or something. So anyhow, we finally went back to the other thing. But now it came to the question of, should there be a toast-master? Five pounds. "I don't know" Lady Yule said. "What do you think?" I said, "Well, there are going to be a few important people, why not? Yes, we'll have a toast-master." Then, "I'm worried about that toast-master, do you really need it?" I said, "Well it's up to you, Lady Yule. If you think you're going to, well why not?" "I don't think we need him, scratch him out." "Right - out." Back again, "I'm still worried about that toast-master." We finally did have the toast-master and he got drunk and fell down in the middle of his speech! [Laughing] But here you have one of the richest women in the world, we're having lunch together, Gladys and Lady Yule and me, and Lady Yule starts gathering up the plates, you see. Gladys says, "Mother! We're not at home now!" [Laughs] Very funny, very funny, Lady Yule, poor Lady Yule.

**Roy Fowler:** How involved did she get in the filming in the studio?

**Vernon Sewell:** Sometimes she used to come and script, she was very funny. She would play a part and Gladys would play a part and Lou Jackson would play a part, it was hilarious! You can imagine what it was like, this script piece with Lady Yule and Gladys and Lou Jackson and the secretary, all playing parts. We ran through 'Latin Quarter' with them playing the parts! Hysterical! Well anyway, she said that she owned the biggest yacht ever built, called The Nahlin, which in 1930, when the shipyards were doing very badly, she went to John Brown's yard and said, "Look, would it help you if I built a yacht?" They said, "Yes it would." She said, "Well I want the finest yacht ever built. I only have one condition. The engine room must be a replica of the 'Queen Mary'." They built this yacht with thirteen hundred tons, she had a crew of sixty, I think. And she leased it to the Prince of Wales and he and Mrs Simpson had their honeymoon on Lady Yule's yacht. She then sold it to the King of Bulgaria and that was that. We were making a film for her called 'Uneasy Terms' on location in Shoreham, night time location. Ernie Palmer, the cameraman gets very pissed and there's a lot of trouble. Arrived at 12 o'clock at night, Lady Yule's Rolls Royce with a big parcel to be delivered personally to me. What could it be,

Christmas puddings for the crew or something? Well when I opened it up there were four large copper ashtrays with 'Steam Yacht Nahlin' across it all, very nice thing. It said: "Dear Vernon, this is all that is left of 'The Nahlin', I want you to have them and when you look at them I want you to think of somebody who loves the sea." I've got one, I gave the rest away, I've still got one. But that's what sort of woman she was.

**Roy Fowler:** It would be interesting to have your opinion of Lou Jackson, any contribution that he made to films.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes! He was a very common man of course, but I don't think he was the crook people said he was, I don't think he was a crook at all, I don't think he was at all, he had no need to be. But anyhow, Lady Yule got the idea that he was 'doing her in', and that I knew about it, and she said that I should have told her about Lou Jackson, but I said, "No, of course I wouldn't dream of doing that." I got on fine with Lou, we had great fun together.

**Roy Fowler:** How did he operate as a producer? He always took producer credit didn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh yes. He came on the set! Some very well known actress - He said, [VS imitates northern accent] "You're too 'cut glass', too 'cut glass'." - Who was it? A very well known actress, very well known stage actress who was in a film. "You're too 'cut glass' Miss Stick-in-the Mud!" No, we had no trouble at all. I liked him, he let me do what I liked you see, which was very nice.

**Roy Fowler:** Indeed!

**Vernon Sewell:** To be in a position with a studio where you could do what you like, it was very fine!

**Roy Fowler:** Absolutely, yeah, have your own Lot, in effect.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes. I had more fun in that studio than I've ever had in my life, that studio, more fun there.

**Roy Fowler:** You were there...?

**Vernon Sewell:** For three years I think.

**Roy Fowler:** Three years. Well 1944 to 1948 it says here.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. 'Uneasy Terms' seems to have been the last picture you made for them?

**Vernon Sewell:** That was the last picture, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** You had some - I was looking at the lists last night - you had some astonishing casts.

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** Some astonishing casts?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh yes, rather, yeah, wonderful casts.

**Roy Fowler:** The 'crime de-la crime' of the west- end stage.

**Vernon Sewell:** I did! I did! I always - because I was very keen on that, you see. I always had the 'crime de-la crime'. And look at what we had in 'Berkeley Square'...

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yvonne Arnaud. She was charming, Yvonne Arnaud. I must tell you a very funny story about Yvonne, which she told me against herself. She was playing in a film called 'Brother...' (something or other) in a play, in London. She lived in a farm in Effingham. She used to go back by train at night time. She told me (I must say, off stage she looked rather a bit of a 'bag' [chuckling] and I can quite see her going home with her bags of things), there were two people in the carriage who had obviously just seen her play, they were discussing it, and she leaned over and said, "I'm so glad you liked the play, I am Miss Arnaud." And the man said, "Take no notice dear, the old girl's pissed!" [Laughs]

**Roy Fowler:** That's lovely, that's very sweet.

**Vernon Sewell:** She told me that story herself, very funny, "Don't take no notice dear, the old girl's pissed!"

**Roy Fowler:** Why did you not stay at British National?

**Vernon Sewell:** We packed it up, she closed the studio.

**Roy Fowler:** That's when the studio closed? Right, that's a shame.

**Vernon Sewell:** They gave everybody a fortnight's notice, because I was under contract of course, but all the staff had a fortnight's notice and out! As simple as that! It was sold to the BBC. Yes that's how that - she got fed-up with it! Annoyed with Lou Jackson, annoyed with me, for not telling her the stories.

**Roy Fowler:** So it all ended really rather nastily?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes it did.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh, that's a great pity.

**Vernon Sewell:** She died shortly afterwards and so did her daughter, her daughter died quite young.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. So it was 1948 which was, again, one of the great production crises in the British Film Industry I guess, when the Rank Organisation came close to collapse?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, really.

**Roy Fowler:** So what happened to you then? British National is closing...

**Vernon Sewell:** Well pretty well, I became an independent producer I think. I went to two young people starting off called Cohen and Levy. Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy and they - well they let me do what I liked more or less! And I made half a dozen films for them, using very much my steam yacht. It was the most extraordinary, they wanted me to make a film on motor car racing. Dreadful stuff, I wouldn't do it! And they said, "Vernon, we've got William Lundigan we've engaged him for this picture." I said, "Well it's rubbish!" So they said, "Well look here Vernon, if we get a really first class American script writer, if he says it's good will you do it?" I said, "It depends who he is." "We'll get Morrie Buchman" [NB sounds like Morrie Buchman, RF thinks possibly a nickname for Sidney or Harold Buchman] "Alright, Morrie Buchman." Morrie Buchman came to a meeting you see, and Morrie Buchman read it and he said, "Nat, this is absolute rubbish, it's piffle, un-makeable piffle" he said. "But, if you want a motor car racing story, I'll write you one." "How long will it take?" "A month." "But will the Willy Lundigan is arriving next week!" So, what were they going to do? So they said, "Can we get out of it?" "Well we could really, it's only a gentleman's agreement." This actually happened, it's one of those things that has happened. But anyway, they said, "Vernon, have you got anything up your sleeve?" "Yes I have" I said. ] "I bet it means your bloody steam yacht doesn't it?" I said, "Yes it does!" you see [chuckling]. So Buchman said, "What is this story Vernon?" I said, "I have it here" he took it away and he came back to Lou the next day and said, "This is a very good story indeed. It wants a bit, I'll do a week's work on it, polish it up, it's a very good script." So we're gonna make this film - forgotten what it's called now, sea film, dangerous film - was it called 'Dangerous Voyage'? Yes, 'Dangerous Voyage' [NB aka 'Terror Ship'].

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, that was in 1954.

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Dangerous Voyage' and William Lundigan arrives and he's got to be put up at the Dorchester. We have dinner at the Dorchester - mind you, on Monday we're starting the movie, on location. On location in Deauville. And Lundigan says, "Why have I only got a reservation at the hotel for the weekend? I reckoned, I thought I was gonna be here for three weeks!" And I couldn't but laugh that off. Anyhow, I said "Come with me," and he came [round the corner] and there is the yacht, all ready with steam up, and he arrived with hockey sticks and all you could think of! Some of his luggage was unbelievable! Anyhow, he was a bit drunk, and he says, "What am I doing on this fucking ship? What's this got to do with motor car racing?" [Laughing] I said, "Mr Lundigan, what film have you come to make?" He said, "I've come to make (so-and-so and so-and-so) about racing cars." I said, "Well you're not, you know." He said, "Let me off this fucking ship!" I said, "Can you swim?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Well come on deck" Because I'd given my crew the tip that - steam engines make no noise, you

see - we were two or three miles out to sea! And anyhow, in the end we got - he was a very nice chap and we got very friendly - It was a very amusing movie! Bill Lundigan...

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah. This is the period of the blacklist in the States, isn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** That's right, that's right.

**Roy Fowler:** Was there a connection? Presumably with...

**Vernon Sewell:** No, I'd left Blattner then. Blattner had then gone to Warner Brothers. When the Blattner Studios packed up, Gerry got a job with Warner's.

**Roy Fowler:** Ah no, no, no. Well, then do continue, I'll come back to my question, yes. I didn't know you'd, when you say Gerry Blattner, was he part of the Lou Jackson era?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, he was a studio manager. It was originally his father's studio, originally the Blattner Studio, he was studio manager.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, with Ludwig Blattner?

**Vernon Sewell:** And of course when the studio closed he was out of a job, and he got a job with Warner Brothers, as the - Warner Brothers were making a lot of films over here and he was the liaison between the two things.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** And I worked with them, then I was on 'The Crimson Pirate' which took me a year.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, well, were his films the 'Hammer' films? Did Warner's release those? I've got 'Black Window' and 'The Dark Light'.

**Vernon Sewell:** Ah no, they were made - 'The Dark Light' was again a sea film.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, with your yacht?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, that was. 'The Dark Light' was made for Jimmy Carreras.

**Roy Fowler:** Hammer, that's right, yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** Jimmy Carreras and er...

**Roy Fowler:** You know Michael died quite recently, Michael Carreras?

**Vernon Sewell:** Michael Carreras, that was it, he was...

**Roy Fowler:** He died just a month or so ago.

**Vernon Sewell:** Is Sir Carreras dead?

**Roy Fowler:** Oh yes, long ago.

**Vernon Sewell:** Is he?

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, Sir James. Right, so, anything to say about um...

**Vernon Sewell:** Because they let me do what I liked, you see. [chuckles]

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, right, well, I mean, is there anything in particular that you'd like to say about those two? I've also got 'Trek to Mashomba'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh that was a very small thing, that was a children's film.

**Roy Fowler:** Well Hammer is more-or-less starting out now isn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** I'll tell you a story about that. Jimmy Carreras wanted me to sign a big contract, wanted me to join him.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** He wanted me to join him, but I didn't think I would get on very well with him all the time. So much of the same sort of stuff - I didn't want a go at making a whole lot of Hammer rubbish you see.

**Roy Fowler:** This is the time they're making lots of radio serials into films, isn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** That's right. I didn't want to get mixed up in anything like that, so I didn't. I only made for them, I made 'The Black Widow'.

**Roy Fowler:** ...And 'The Dark Light.'

**Vernon Sewell:** That's all, I think.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, well that seems to be, and then you went on to 'The Crimson Pirate.'

**Vernon Sewell:** 'The Crimson Pirate', yes, I was a year on that, I built the ships. And then, after, I was also doing a dreadful - with Errol Flynn - a ghastly film called 'The Master of Ballantrae.'

**Roy Fowler:** Oh yes?

**Vernon Sewell:** And I went to Scotland and - oh, an unbelievable disaster the whole thing was - I never had such a real 'cock up', the whole thing, unbelievable.

**Roy Fowler:** He was misbehaving, was he?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, no, I never had any truck with him, because he wanted to ride in the kilt, but I didn't have him, I had all the rest of the cast, but I didn't have Flynn. But, you've no idea what a complete 'cock up' the whole thing was, with ABC, and they were awful! ABC was a dreadful concern. I said to the ABC props department, "Now look here," I said, "I want you to get me at least six horse pistols that would fire 3.2 cartridges." "Yes Mr Sewell, they will have them." Well I arrived and of course, all they had was a horse pistol with a bell push tied onto the butt with Sellotape and a battery also tied on, and a wire went up the long side and down the barrel which detonated it. It was unbelievable, and it took you half an hour to reload this damn thing. And then, oh there was a strike or something, because I wanted to reload the thing, they said, "The prop man has to do it." Well it ended up with - it rained and it rained and it rained and it rained! And we finally - because with location you have to go, you have to go whatever happens, you go in case it gets right. We got a bit of sunshine, we were doing the gathering of the clan, the big scene and most of the extras got fed up and had gone home, so that instead of having about five hundred extras I only had about a hundred, two hundred. Anyway we were all set up, we start to roll - a Technicolor camera, and if you don't know, a Technicolor camera has three separate negatives...

**Roy Fowler:** It was still three strip?

**Vernon Sewell:** And it had a quarter of a horsepower motor to run it, because you have to grind all these things through, and it's run by a hundred volt battery. Well, we're starting and I say to the cameraman, "Look out, you're slowing up, you're going to have a jam." And if you're going to jam, in those days with all flam[mable] film a jam could blow up the camera, the friction would set the film alight. I said, "Stop it, stop it!" He opens the blimp, he says, "There's nothing wrong Mr Sewell." I say, "Well I can't - back again, back again, start again!" We start again and the camera slows up, stops. I had - there were two men who came from England just to charge the batteries, their whole sole job was to charge the batteries, that's all they had to do! I said to these people, "When did you charge the batteries?" "On charge this morning, Sir." I said, "Well, give me a meter," and the batteries were flat! So I said, "Right boys! We'll get all the batteries out of all the cars, series all the batteries up and get me a hundred volts!" Well they're very frightened now, they did it and of course there was a blinding flash, they'd cut them all up wrong, they'd cut them all up in parallel instead of series and blew the lot of them up! I said, "Both you chaps, you're fired, now! Out of my sight, you're fired!" And we couldn't make the movie, the whole thing - we had to wait until the next day, it was awful. Anyhow that night, I'm in the hotel, the studio rings up, "What have you done? The studio's on strike!" I said, "What have I done?" I said, "I only gave two bastards the sack who cost us a lot of money!" "Well apparently you were rude to them and you've got to take them back again." "I won't take them back again, I'm sorry. I'm not apologising to them, they've cost us thousands, these two bastards!" So anyhow "You've got to take them back!" I said, "All right, I'll take them back", and then the strike came off. Then I said to them, "Now look here you two, if I see you, I'm gonna kick you up the arse, so don't come anywhere near me, that's all!" [Chuckling] That was what 'The Master of Ballantrae' was like!

**Roy Fowler:** Did you encounter much industrial strife at that time in British films? I mean, people walking...?

**Vernon Sewell:** There were a few, there were a few. Two ACT strikes.

**Roy Fowler:** What were they over usually, do you remember?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't know.

**Roy Fowler:** No, jurisdiction?

**Vernon Sewell:** See, what happened was this, when the directors had to be unionised, I would never remember, I wouldn't - they said to me, "Mr Sewell, we invite you to join the union." I said, "Thank you very much, I don't need to." "Oh. Well we must advise you, the time will come when our members will not work with non-union directors." I said, "Well when that time comes, you come and tell me." They came the next day, said, "The time has come!" They wanted their subscription. But nobody went to the meetings! See, no skilled technician went to the bloody meetings, only the clapper boys went, and they passed all these ridiculous things! And then we couldn't stop them!

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, well that's... [clearly doesn't agree!] Were you a political creature in those days at all?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** Were you a political creature?

**Vernon Sewell:** I have no interest in politics whatsoever.

**Roy Fowler:** No, oh right.

**Vernon Sewell:** That's why I didn't want any truck with the unions in the beginning!

**Roy Fowler:** But you became a member of ACT did you?

**Vernon Sewell:** Had to!

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** Had to, if I didn't I was blacklisted.

**Roy Fowler:** It would be interesting - I mean, this is just a sidelight - Mickey Powell swore that he'd been a member of the union, I couldn't find any trace of him whatsoever in records, because I was curious...

**Vernon Sewell:** Well he'd have to.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, I don't know, you know. Some directors got away with it, I think. I think he did, I don't think he joined, you know. They made Charlie Chaplin join when he was over here doing his pictures. [laughing]

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, I think he had to, I think.

**Roy Fowler:** Anyway, you began to talk about 'The Master of Ballantrae' but actually 'The Crimson Pirate' is also around that time, or a little later...

**Vernon Sewell:** That was before that...

**Roy Fowler:** Was it?

**Vernon Sewell:** Before that!

**Roy Fowler:** Ah hmm.

**Vernon Sewell:** And I should say that was a - I was a year on that. I was responsible for the building of the ships and I was in charge of all sea arrangements, I was the Admiral of the Warner's Fleet! [Chuckles] But, in the event of any emergency, I was a standby director in case anything happened. Well, Bert [Lancaster] and [Robert] Siodmak had a terrible row and the whole script was re-written, and Siodmak went back to England and shot in the studio and I was left on the Island of Ischia with Bert and the main unit. And we worked altogether, for about two or three weeks, I suppose. And then, everything got so over-schedule they said, "Vernon, you've got to finish the picture by this date. We've got to be finished. Whatever you're doing, do it. If you can't get the shots, get back projection plates for it. Whatever happens, at this date, the picture stops!" And I was right in the middle of that very, very big scene with the balloon. We had a lot of very elaborate contraptions for this thing and I was very doubtful. I didn't know what to do with it, and the special effects man said, "For Christ sake, don't stop, let us do it!" So, we just did it in time, as the last shot came in, the sun went down behind the mountain, and that was the end of that! Oh, I had a lot of fun, I got on very with Bert. A lot of fun with him on that movie. See the key note is fun!

**Roy Fowler:** Indeed! Was that primarily an English crew, or did you have Hollywood people?

**Vernon Sewell:** Three crews! I had three crews, I had an English crew, an Italian crew and an American crew. Unbelievable! And the row between them! I could tell you all sorts of very, very funny things that happened on there, but I could go on forever.

**Roy Fowler:** Well it's a pity. You think we should move on?

**Vernon Sewell:** Special effects that all went wrong and...

**Roy Fowler:** Oh well, yes. Special 'defects' as we used to call them!

**Vernon Sewell:** Very funny, yes. Bert and I got on very well.

**Roy Fowler:** You seem then to have done pictures at Merton Park?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, Merton Park. See Merton Park was all to do with Nat Cohen and...

**Roy Fowler:** Cohen and Levy. They were releasing the pictures, were they?

**Vernon Sewell:** They took over, I think they almost took over Merton Park.

**Roy Fowler:** Umm, anything particular to say? Well, you say they were starting out then, tell us about Nat Cohen and Stuart Levy at the time they were beginning.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well I say we made a lot of - they were all either - they were made as second features but [indecipherable???

**Roy Fowler:** Were they a couple of 'smart cookies', Cohen and Levy?

**Vernon Sewell:** I suppose so.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah? Did you have any...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Of course they nothing to do with - Nat Cohen - I think they had a couple of butchers shops I think. I think so, or dress shops. They came into the business with no knowledge about anything, you see.

**Roy Fowler:** Just the money.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, they were just a couple of 'smart Alecs.'

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well, Nat did jolly well, he became head of ABC.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, EMI.

**Vernon Sewell:** Became head of ABC. That was a ghastly place, oh! That was awful!

**Roy Fowler:** Did you work there, or...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Once, I did work there.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, which one was that?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well I'd finished...I did some scenes...I did some scenes for 'The Crimson Pirate' there and also for 'Master of Ballantrae'. I was under contract to them. I'd just come back from Africa, where I'd made this children's film, and I'd wanted to stay in Africa, I was rather enjoying myself. But my agent said, "Come back at once, I've just signed a deal with you at ABC and

you've got to start a picture immediately." I said, "I don't want to." But I did come back and I'd invited a lot of people on my yacht at Deauville and I said, "I'm terribly sorry, I've got to" - I had a telegraph, "Go to Cannes at once! There's unit waiting for you at Cannes." So I left all these people on my yacht at Deauville and I went down. And they said - there was a man called [James Maynard?], an assistant or production manager or something, you see, and the whole crew! And, he said, "Have you got any money?" I said, "No, why should I?" He said, "We haven't got any money! We can't buy any bloody food! [indecipherable?] has been going to the casino and gambling, only money we've had!" Well we finally got money and I thought the story was piffle - rubbish, the whole thing is based on a stupid premise, the film. But having a go we went to a town of [A's...Asuperior?] which is a little village where the cameraman lived - little village on top of a mountain, with only one way in, it was all walled. And I thought, "Well, wait a minute. If we altered this story and make the whole place happen in this walled village, then we know the murderer is somewhere in there and we know he can't get out, that's not a bad basic thing. And anyway I lined up studio space at the Victory Studios, we did some casting in Paris, came back. They said: "Hello! Where have you been?" I said, "What do you bloody well mean, where have I been?" "Oh that? Oh that's all cancelled, that film!" I said, "What?" "Oh yes, that's all cancelled because somebody thought there was an homosexual angle on it." Well I couldn't see one. So that was off! I'm on a contract, mind you, I can't do anything else. So then, various things happened and nothing happened! Then I bought a story of Norah Lofts' called 'The Silver Nutmeg'. I think I bought an option on the book. They were going to make that, it was a very big production, very big production. Dutch, East Indies, period ships, what have you. And they began to write the script, and you could never get a conference with them, with Robert Clark, a disgraceful man, he would never appear, you see. He was a dreadful, horrible man! We would call a conference, they'd say, "There'll be a script conference on 'Silver Nutmeg' at the studio at 4 o'clock on Wednesday." On Tuesday they'd say "No, it isn't in the studio on Wednesday, it's on Friday at Golden Square." It would never happen! Finally we would get to a meeting and Robert Clark would be there and he would say, "Excuse me," and go out, and he walks to the lavatory. "Now then" he'd sit back again. So nothing was decided, ever, ever. Well then my contract was coming to an end and they'd taken some stuff out of my office, bit by bit, and the last day I was there they pulled the carpet up! Ghastly firm! And then they wouldn't pay. And in the end they wouldn't pay. But fortunately I had a very - my lawyer had married one of Maxwell's daughters, you see...

**Roy Fowler:** Oh really? Oh, very smart.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well I only got there through Maxwell you see. They didn't like me because I was Maxwell's friend. That's why I started off on the wrong foot there, because they thought, a spy in the camp!

**Roy Fowler:** How long had you known Maxwell?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh I'd known them for years!

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah?

**Vernon Sewell:** My friend, Philip Water married one of the daughters and another friend of mine married another of the daughters.

**Roy Fowler:** You were well in then!

**Vernon Sewell:** So I used to go up and stay in Scotland with them.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Tell us about John Maxwell, I had no idea you knew him - Interesting.

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh yes, he had nothing to do with movies, he wasn't interested in movies, just a money thing.

**Roy Fowler:** No, he was a Scots lawyer, wasn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** There was a little man called Mycroft, who was a dwarf. He was a reporter and he was put in charge of Welwyn studio, before they took over the big studio Welwyn studios. And the daughter kept saying to her father, "Give Vernon a job, give Vernon a job." So Maxwell wrote to Mycroft and said, "Give Mr Sewell a job to direct a movie." So, I go to see him, of course the last thing they want is me who was a friend of the family, it's the last thing they want! So they gave me a script by some quite well know but rather outr foreign writer, I've forgotten what it was called.

**Roy Fowler:** What time was this, what period?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't know...

**Roy Fowler:** Thirties? Forties? Are we talking, before the War?

**Vernon Sewell:** I think it - Oh no, long after.

**Roy Fowler:** This is after the War? Right, right.

**Vernon Sewell:** Long after the War. Now, when was that period I went? It was after - it was after - no, it wasn't, it was before 'The Crimson Pirates'. Somewhere where I was freelance. Anyway, he gave me the script and I took it away. Came back, I said, "Mr Mycroft, this is not my cup of tea..." "Thank you very much!" I said, "Haven't you got anything else?" "Thank you very much, goodbye!" And then he said to Maxwell, "This stupid young pompous arse. He just came down and wouldn't do this. I gave him a wonderful chance and he turned it down." and that was that! Then Maxwell died.

**Roy Fowler:** What sort of person was Maxwell? Was he as dour as the Scots...?

**Vernon Sewell:** Not very nice.

**Roy Fowler:** No, that's the reputation, isn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** Not a very nice man. I went up and stayed with them in Scotland once, they had a big house in Scotland and I stayed with them in Scotland. And he used to sit in his braces reading his paper, and we had very little in common. But he was, again, he was an entrepreneur you see, all these chaps were. They were not movie-makers.

**Roy Fowler:** No, no, no. They were either accountants or solicitors, weren't they?

**Vernon Sewell:** The only real movie-makers were the Kordas, they were the only real movie makers, and, perhaps the Ostrers to a certain extent. Because Gaumont had been running for a long time, they did have a say, they did control what was going to happen. There was a woman called May Murray who very much controlled Gaumont. She had been the girlfriend of Ostrer's and also of the man who ran, what was the big distributing firm?

**Roy Fowler:** C. M. Woolf?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, not that one.

**Roy Fowler:** Not G. F. D.?

**Vernon Sewell:** The biggest distributing firm?

**Roy Fowler:** Well, either Associated British or General Film Distributors?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well, this girl had been the girlfriend of the boss of that too, you see. And she really ran Gaumont.

**Roy Fowler:** Are you sure it wasn't Woolf. C. M. Woolf? General film distributors?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, it was a different thing. She had nothing to do with C. M. Woolf. Independent Distributors!

**Roy Fowler:** Ah ha!

**Vernon Sewell:** Independent Distributors it was called. It was the next biggest after Gaumont. And anyhow, she had been the mistress of both these men and I met her on 'The Silver Fleet' because she was my person publicity for 'Silver Fleet'. And when I got the job with Gaumont they offered me five thousand a year to start with and May said to me, "What are they paying you?" I said, "five thousand..." "What?" she said. "Come in..." She went into Maurice's office and said, "What's this nonsense, Vernon on five thousand a year? Ridiculous! Give him ten thousand a year!" Maurice said, "Oh, oh...all right then." [Chuckles].

**Roy Fowler:** It was a lot of money in those days.

**Vernon Sewell:** A lot of money, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** I tell you one person we haven't mentioned at all, that's Mickey Balcon, did you ever have dealings with him?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, never had anything, I never had any truck with Ealing at all. I wish I had, because he, again, was one of the few filmmakers.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes. Well he was very big at Gaumont in the thirties, wasn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** I wondered if you'd done any work out there?

**Vernon Sewell:** No. No, most of the people who were in charge of the film had nothing to do with the film whatever! They were just entrepreneurs.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, that's right. Well, we're in then to - what - early, middle fifties. Um, you have an enormous number of credits thereafter. Is there any one that you - shall I run down the list and see if there's any that you want, particularly, to talk about?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, run down the list, yes. Anything funny about any of them.

**Roy Fowler:** There are other Merton Park pictures like, 'Counterspy', 'Floating Dutchman'...

**Vernon Sewell:** They're good stories! 'Floating Dutchman', 'Counter Spy' - all good stories and good casts. But you see a low budget director has got to be a cleverer man than a big budget director.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh absolutely.

**Vernon Sewell:** The biggest pictures, people look at them!

**Roy Fowler:** What were your budgets on, say 'Floating Dutchman'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh they were ridiculous! Twenty or thirty thousand, that type of thing. I mean, how I managed to keep people in the studio. I mean, bloody good pictures like 'Where There's a Will', Delderfield's play, he and I wrote the script. A charming movie, with Dandy Nichols and George Cole. They made a lot of money. But the budgets were very, very small.

**Roy Fowler:** Right.

**Vernon Sewell:** Because I knew how to do it.

**Roy Fowler:** What sort of schedule? Still two weeks, three weeks?

**Vernon Sewell:** About a month to five weeks. Never much less than that. I wouldn't make a picture in less than five weeks.

**Roy Fowler:** You had Basil Emmott a lot, as cameraman at that time.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, Basil Emmott

**Roy Fowler:** Was that your choice or was he under contract?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, he was very good, he was very good! He would get on with me well. He was very quick, he didn't mess about. And you know Basil Emmott - he did all the work that Grierson got the credit for. He was the camera, he shot 'Drifters' and all those things, and he was a cameraman on - when that man did the round the world flight, what was that...?

**Roy Fowler:** Around the world? Oh I don't know.

**Vernon Sewell:** Some terrific flight he did, one of these things, he was cameraman on that too.

**Roy Fowler:** Tell me Vernon, did you consider this 'small potatoes' or you were still having fun, or did you hanker for the really big time? What was your attitude toward these pictures? Were you just happy to do five week pictures?

**Vernon Sewell:** I was quite happy to. I was making enough money to live on and I didn't have to worry about anything, and I liked the stories, that was the main thing, I liked the story, and I thought I could make it entertainment. And I always thought, "I must be a cleverer guy if I keep people in their seats for fifty thousand quid," and you see, only certain pictures got publicised. Now there was a wonderful film out, just recently out, called 'The Mountains of the Moon'.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** It was a wonderful movie, it should have had all the Oscars in the world, but nobody ever heard of it. See, in America, they've got to make the thing pay, they publicise a picture, they force them to go in!

**Roy Fowler:** Well, I mean, taking that one, I don't know what the story was, but it wasn't a bad picture at all, 'Mountains of the Moon'.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, lovely picture.

**Roy Fowler:** An interesting story, but, for some reason, money was not put behind it.

**Vernon Sewell:** I know, it wasn't, that's it!

**Roy Fowler:** But it's very curious to know why.

**Vernon Sewell:** But that's what happened to me, you see? The money was not put behind me at any time.

**Roy Fowler:** But did you have any desire to go and work for Pinewood, for Rank, or ?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, I wouldn't!

**Roy Fowler:** Because what? Again, company politics, presumably?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, I wouldn't.

**Roy Fowler:** I'll go down the list then. There are more, and if there's anything you want to say about any one of these, obviously do so.

**Vernon Sewell:** I tell you something, 'Where there's a Will'...

**Roy Fowler:** Well let me just say the two before that, 'Dangerous Voyage', 'Radio Cab Murder'.

**Vernon Sewell:** They were to keep my yacht going, you see. 'Radio Cab Murder' I don't remember that one at all.

**Roy Fowler:** No, OK. 'Where there's a Will'...

**Vernon Sewell:** Now, 'Where there's a Will' is the only picture in my life I've ever seen the audience applaud in the middle of a film.

**Roy Fowler:** Really?

**Vernon Sewell:** And they applauded in the middle of 'Where there's a Will', and I saw this and I thought, "I wonder if it's because it's in the country?" Then I saw it again in a town and still the audience applauded. This was the scene - there was a scene of a very officious government official...

[End of Tape 2, Side 3]

[Tape 2, Side 4]

**Roy Fowler:** Vernon, I was listening rather than watching the tape, so let's back-track on that. Take it up a little earlier...

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, well I heard them applauding in this particular scene.

**Roy Fowler:** Right.

**Vernon Sewell:** And the scene was this: There was a minister of agriculture, a very officious government man and he was laying down the law about the new regulations for farming. And an old farm hand, played by a wonderful actor, gets up and he says, "When I worked for the old

maister, thirty bob a week I got, the cottage I lived in free..." and he goes on to a long, long description. He says, "Now what do I get?" (Blah-blah-blah-blah...) "Don't you talk to me about progress, Mister" and the audience applauded! I've never seen it done before in any movie. But it was such a typified thing, people were fed-up with all these wretched officials, you see.

**Roy Fowler:** Umm.

**Vernon Sewell:** "Don't you talk to me about progress, Mister!" [Claps] I was very pleased with that. Now, you see, mind you a lot of the sea pictures were made to run my yacht. It was a big boat, you see.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, tell us about the boat.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well, she was steam and she was a hundred and twelve feet long, I think.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, from a British yard, or where did you buy her?

**Vernon Sewell:** I bought it - originally belonged to my uncle and actually, it was quite funny. I commanded her during the war, because that was the ship chosen to make this Irish trip. See it was one of those things, the boat happened to be my uncle's boat which had been commandeered. And, at the end of the war, there was a small ships pool, you could buy ships from the Navy, very cheap. The owner's had the right to. My uncle said to me, "Would you like the Gelert?" I said, "Yes, I would like it." So he bought it for me and I bought it, converted it back again into a yacht, you see. You had gallons of things on it and everything, you see, and I converted it back again into a yacht and I ran her for nine or ten years. Then they wouldn't take any more of my bloody yacht films, they said, "Vernon, your yacht...Out! Out! No more!" [Chuckles]

**Roy Fowler:** Had this been a component part of your life, sailing?

**Vernon Sewell:** People used to meet me in the middle of Wardour Street, no-one would say, "How was your last film, Vernon?" They said, "Vernon, how's your yacht?"

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, you were known for it.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes I was known for that, yes, very funny. Oh I had some really funny movies. I would like to have my life over again and I'd do exactly the same thing! I'm quite sure.

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm. A reasonable commendation then.

**Vernon Sewell:** I'm quite sure I would make exactly the same decisions.

**Roy Fowler:** We're in 1955, with 'Where there's a Will'. You also made 'Johnny, You're Wanted' around that time... \*

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, that was for Nat and Stu. 'Johnny, You're Wanted' was for Nat and Stu. They wanted to do something with a man called Slater.

**Roy Fowler:** John Slater?

**Vernon Sewell:** ...who was a very popular star of the moment. And he was quite all right, but of course, he wasn't film actor. It was a silly story really, anyway, stupid story.

**Roy Fowler:** So you had quite a long run there with Cohen and Levy didn't you?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes I did.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, 'Soho Incident'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Now that was for Mike Francovich.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, for Colombia?

**Vernon Sewell:** Colombia. Nasty man!

**Roy Fowler:** [Chuckling]. Yes, well nothing unusual about that!

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes. But I had my revenge on him, though.

**Roy Fowler:** Umm, how so?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh, a wonderful revenge.

**Roy Fowler:** How did you do that?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** How did you do that?

**Vernon Sewell:** [Chuckles]. Well I was the first big yacht to go into Deauville after the war. I was making a film called 'Jack of Diamonds' and I wanted a film of the race track, but the man who owned the casino, the most famous man in gambling in the world, who owned everything. He owned the casino at Deauville, the casino at Cannes, the du Golf at Deauville, the Caf de Paris at Monte Carlo, he was a very, very big shot indeed. And he said, "Mr Sewell, as you are the first yacht to come into Deauville after the war, you can shoot on my racecourse. If you want to shoot in the casino, you can. I'll provide all the staff if you provide the extras." I said, "I don't want to." And he became very friendly with Joan and I, and he gave us both the gold medal to take you to any of the casinos, into the highest part the 'salon privee'. The only people who had them were people like the Aga Khan and people like that - but I had them! And I could go now to Deauville or to Cannes and say, "I'm Vernon Sewell," and I should be whisked in as quite an important guy.

**Roy Fowler:** Are you a gambler?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** Are you a gambler?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, no. But the casinos were - they were scenes of glamour, you went there for fun. But anyhow, I'm in Cannes, with my yacht and Mike Francovich is there. And I go to the casino and there's Mike Francovich who's shouting and yelling. He hasn't got his passport and they won't let him in, you see. And he is a nasty man, he's pompous about - and they won't let him in. So I saw him and I said, "Hello Mike." And the [chef] of the casino there said, "Monsieur Sewell, you know this gentleman?" I said, "Yes, let him in." Of course that must have made him so livid with rage. Well then we go into the casino and he's there, someone has taken his bet and I come up, I stand behind and they're shouting near him, I said, "What's the matter?" "Monsieur Sewell, you know this gentleman?" I said, "Yes, pay them both!" He must have been so furious, because he'd treated me with utter contempt, he'd treated me like a little shit, and this must have made him so utterly - I'm sure he must wake up and think about it.

**Roy Fowler:** Although he's dead too.

**Vernon Sewell:** He's dead. He was a nasty man.

**Roy Fowler:** But as you say, there were so many from Hollywood who were nasty.

**Vernon Sewell:** But he was - you see, the only qualification he had was he was an All-American footballer, and that means everything in America, you can do what you like.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, Gerald Ford was another such, wasn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, damn funny. He must have been so livid, in front of all these people, you see, too.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, he lost face.

**Vernon Sewell:** He certainly lost face there all right.

**Roy Fowler:** Umm, that was 'Soho Incident' wasn't it, that one?

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Soho Incident', that's right. Girl called Faith Domergue in it, a minor American star.

**Roy Fowler:** 'Home and Away'?

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Home and Away', oh, that was a thing! I'd been and seen the play. Oh - the Hyams, I was with the Hyams. Of course, I'm now with Eros now, they're old buddies of course. I'm with Eros and they'd seen the play and they liked it. They sent me to see it and said, "Would

you make it?" I said, "Yes I'll make it, with this cast." Then they said, "No, we can't do it, we've had an offer from somebody to put it on at the West End as a play." So very foolishly the Hyams said, "Very well, if they'll put it on as a play, so will we!" I said, "But you know nothing about play production, nor do I." "Never mind, we'll find someone who does." and they find somebody who is supposed to be a producer. Anyhow, the thing was an utter disaster of course, an utter disaster. It ran for about a week, disaster. But we made the movie and that's how it came to be made, with Jack Warner - good cast, Jack Warner, Kath Harrison and a little girl who became quite a big star today, now is quite a big star, her name is... Oh, think of the principle sort of horror film star today.

**Roy Fowler:** Sorry, can't do it.

**Vernon Sewell:** What is her name? Well anyway, she's very well known indeed, and she was the daughter of a friend of my wife's and I wanted a little girl of twelve in the film and they said, "Would I give her the job?" and she played Jack Warner's daughter, or something, very small part. Now she's a very big star.

**Roy Fowler:** Right. Um, Rogue's Yarn?

**Vernon Sewell:** Rogue's Yarn? I've forgotten what that was. Oh yes, that was, again, a yacht film.

**Roy Fowler:** Another yacht one?

**Vernon Sewell:** Another yacht film, that was made entirely for the yachts.

**Roy Fowler:** All at sea, right. Then I've got you down in 1958 as 'Battle of the V.1'.

**Vernon Sewell:** Very good movie, that was a terrific movie. Made a fortune, made a fortune.

**Roy Fowler:** For you or for the distributor?

**Vernon Sewell:** I tell you what they did, it was a most disgraceful thing. I made the movie and had a terrific press and the accountants said to me, "Look here, Vernon, you cannot make" - I had sixteen per cent of the profit - they said, "You cannot make less than fifty thousand pounds. With the deal we've already done, you can't do less than fifty thousand pounds." So I went away on my yacht for six months. When I came back I said, "Where's the money?" "Well unfortunately there isn't any Vernon, because people got - we got scared, because some people said the story wasn't true, and there was some adverse criticism in the press about the story not being true, it should have been a V.2 and not a V.1, so we had an offer of our production costs back for cash, so we took it." You see, but my contract was with them - they went and released it under another name. Now what can I do, what can I do? Say you do proceed against them and win. Well they immediately appeal and you can't afford to go on. That's what happens you see, so what can you do? So I let it go. And also, if you sue them and you cut out another job, someone says, "Wait a moment, wait a moment. Vernon, he's the chap who sued, we don't want him!"

**Roy Fowler:** Of course, yeah, causes trouble.

**Vernon Sewell:** It causes trouble, so you can't. That bloody thing. I should have got at least fifty thousand out of it. Because I met one of the accountants afterwards who'd got the sack. He said to me, "Vernon, you must have made a bomb out of that film." I said, ["No"], and of course then he told me where it went - it went world-wide. My wife saw it in Johannesburg twice. It was dubbed into all languages, it was the only film ever made about the flying bomb, you see. Yes, there we are. Eros, I'd already made, I'd made two films with Eros which I'd enjoyed. I did very much enjoy 'Where there's a Will' and then when I got this, everybody wanted to make this film, because nobody had thought about a flying bomb film. But I'd bought Bernard Newman's book 'They Saved London'. They said, "Christ! Vernon's going to make a film on it," and I could have made it with anybody! But Eros said, "Vernon, you must, you're one of us, you're one of the family. You must make it with us! How much money do you want?" I said, "I don't want any money, now." I said, "All right, I'll make it with you." And then George Maynard who'd been my producer several times, who rather let me down as a matter of fact, and a young man called John Dark, who I'd found as an assistant in some film I went into. A little film was being made at some other studio here and they were going to pull the breakers on them and they said, "If we give you so much money, do you think you could finish the thing in a week?" So I said, "Well let me see," and I did finish in a week.

**Roy Fowler:** [I'm a bit worried about the cord, Vernon.]

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes I did finish within a week, and John Dark was assistant director, he was quite efficient, so I gave him a job as next film assistant director. And then, he and Maynard were in the V.1 film and I was let down very much by them and I stuffed in work and various things. But it was a bloody fine film, wonderful story. Because it gave the Poles the credit they should have had, you see. I'm quite sure, if they hadn't have given the information they did, which led to the raid on Peenemunde we should have lost the war. Because Hitler's plans for the V.1 were a thousand a day the first day - week - coming to ten thousand a day at the second week. Well of course, London would have been - we would have given in, I'm quite sure - just like the atomic bomb did. But, you see, the destruction of Peenemunde, all their stuff was broken up, all their plans were smashed up because some of their technicians were killed, and it put the programme back six months, and that saved the war. I'm quite sure of that. But we treated the Poles so badly, we treated the Poles so badly. We went to war to help the Poles, we never set one man, one aeroplane, one boat.

**Roy Fowler:** Don't you think we treat everyone badly? [Chuckling] We're the nastiest nation I know of.

**Vernon Sewell:** I'm afraid so. Look at the Boer War, what we did in the Boer War.

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm, it really is a matter of perfidious Albion, I think.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yeah I think so, disgraceful.

**Roy Fowler:** Running down the list, because I don't want to tire you out, you're doing well.

**Vernon Sewell:** I'm tiring you out, old boy!

**Roy Fowler:** No, no, no, you're doing marvellously well and I'm holding out, so don't worry. But I don't want to, you know, as I say, cause you tiredness or anything. Right, in '59 'Wrong Number' I've got.

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Wrong Number'? I don't remember that at all.

**Roy Fowler:** 1960, 'Urge to Kill'? No?

**Vernon Sewell:** Don't remember 'em at all.

**Roy Fowler:** '61 'Man in the Back'. Maybe we should make these...

**Vernon Sewell:** Ah, 'Man in the Back Seat' - good picture! Julian Wintle.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** Maybe these are earlier, I think these are maybe Julian Wintle films. I don't remember 'Urge to Kill' at all. 'Sorry, Wrong Number'? I don't...

**Roy Fowler:** Well it wasn't 'Sorry Wrong Number', it's just listed as 'Wrong Number'. 'Sorry, Wrong Number' was a Hollywood film, wasn't it?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Anyway, don't. If it doesn't stick in your memory, presumably it isn't important.

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't remember 'Urge to Kill' either. But I do remember 'The Man in the Backseat', was a very, very good movie, terrific story. And it was there that I met Derren Nesbitt.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh yes, and you worked with him a lot in television, didn't you?

**Vernon Sewell:** He came - 'Man in the Backseat' - there were two good pictures that I made, 'Man in the Backseat' and 'Strongroom' - that was a terrific movie.

**Roy Fowler:** Don't have that.

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Strong Room' for Shipman, and that opened up - it was a co-feature with an expensive film and it opened up at the Leicester Square theatre and the Sunday's press was so terrific, they tore down and re-dressed the front of the house and put 'Strongroom' as the main film. Again, a story - you couldn't go wrong with it, you see. I bought it from Julian Whittle. Because he'd just packed up, he said, "Look here, I was going to make this picture, but if you'd like to buy it, you can have it."

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, he got very ill didn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, poor chap, yes. But I don't remember other pictures.

**Roy Fowler:** Umm, 'House of Mystery'?

**Vernon Sewell:** That was a good movie, that was a re-hash of 'The Medium'.

**Roy Fowler:** Ah yes! So you...

**Vernon Sewell:** That did very well.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, did you make - re-make 'The Medium', was it twice, or just the once?

**Vernon Sewell:** Well the basic plot, only the basic plot.

**Roy Fowler:** Well that's what I mean, yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** The basic plot was, 'The Ghost Ship' was the basic plot.

**Roy Fowler:** Ah yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Latin Quarter' was the basic plot, 'House of Mystery' was the basic plot.

**Roy Fowler:** [Chuckling]. So it's been very serviceable, by the sounds of it!

**Vernon Sewell:** It's very serviceable. Well it's a good plot you see, a good plot.

**Roy Fowler:** 'Wind of Change'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, that was a very nice movie. That was made for - I think, I don't know who it was made for, but it was a very good movie indeed.

**Roy Fowler:** Anything particularly about it that you recall?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't. Good people in it.

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** There was Kath Harrison again and, oh a very fine actor - he's very well known. Who played in those plays - 'The Caretaker'?

**Roy Fowler:** Donald Pleasance?

**Vernon Sewell:** Donald Pleasance. He was in 'The Winds of Change'. That was a very good topical story, you can imagine what it was. It was a question of 'blacks'.

**Roy Fowler:** About Africa.

**Vernon Sewell:** It wasn't, it was made in England.

**Roy Fowler:** Ah, was it not about Africa?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, no, not at all, but it was about 'blacks'.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, but the title from Macmillan's speech, presumably?

**Vernon Sewell:** There was a black gang of boys, a white gang of boys, who attacked 'blacks'. There were, at that time, anti-'blacks' who attacked 'blacks'. And a girl, one of the sisters, marries a black man and they raid, and they attack - he's a tram conductor or something, and he dies. And in the end the father - the mother wants to conceal the whole thing but the father - the daughter... No, I can't tell you, it's too involved, the story, too involved.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, the movie will speak for itself, Vernon.

**Vernon Sewell:** It's too involved, the story, but it's a very good movie.

**Roy Fowler:** OK.

**Vernon Sewell:** Not because of me, but because it was a bloody good story.

**Roy Fowler:** You're working consistently at this time, two or three pictures a year?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, 1963 'Strictly for the Birds'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes that was a funny - Ah, now that was with Julian Wintle.

**Roy Fowler:** Was it?

**Vernon Sewell:** And that was made - they had a - it was, the studio was gonna close, but they had a free six weeks, and they had this young man who they thought would be a star. And this very funny comedy was written and they said, "Could I direct now and get it finished within the time?" I said, "Of course I can." And it was made, and there was a very funny thing happened, there was a very funny scene about a firework shop. A boy dropped some matches in a firework shop and this all blows up, there were some very, very funny sequences in it. And we got all the fireworks free from a big firework firm and everything. I showed them stills and they were delighted. Then I said, "Would you like to come and see the movie?" And they saw it, and next day I had a writ. I had a writ, Mr Rank had a writ to stop the film. Because they said the firework trade is fighting to keep alive and you're showing in the film just what we say can't happen, you'll do it a lot of damage. I said, "Tell them to go and jump in the sea!" But the Rank lawyers apparently said, "No" and I had to cut the scene out, which is rather stupid because somebody then appeared in black face with no excuse at all! [Chucking]

**Roy Fowler:** Hmm.

**Vernon Sewell:** It was very fine, a lot of very amusing scenes. I had rockets going up, wired to peoples' bottoms, all sorts of funny things!

**Roy Fowler:** What a shame we never saw it.

**Vernon Sewell:** It was a very funny picture and another very funny comedy actor was in it.

**Roy Fowler:** And typical of the cowardice of the Rank Organisation.

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** I say typical of the cowardice of the Rank Organisation.

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** Because if the BBFC had passed it then, er, why not?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, yes, yes.

**Roy Fowler:** You made that one at Pinewood, presumably?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, Beaconsfield.

**Roy Fowler:** Really?

**Vernon Sewell:** Beaconsfield. How do you get all these, where do you find all this stuff?

**Roy Fowler:** Well I've got a fair collection of reference works. This came from - actually, I've forgotten the name of the book - but it's a long list of credits. It's very useful for triggering recall. Right, 'A Matter of Choice' was the next one on the list.

**Vernon Sewell:** Now that was a disaster.

**Roy Fowler:** Was it?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh, I tell you, that was very, very embarrassing to me, very embarrassing to me.

**Roy Fowler:** What happened?

**Vernon Sewell:** Now, there was a man, I had been working with this man and, I had said, "I won't work with you again." And he writes to me, he says, "Look here, I've got a contract, I can make your story, 'Matter of Choice.'" I said, "No, absolutely out, absolutely out!" He said, "Well, would you sell me the script?" I said, "That, I will do," and I sold him the script. Then his wife rings me up and says, "Vernon, I'm in a desperate position. George can't get the film floated

without you, and if he doesn't do it, this is our last chance, he's going to kill himself." I should have said, "Well let him do it" but I didn't. I said, "Well now, OK, if I do this, is it going to be, (this, this, this and this?)" She said, "Yes, it's all wonderful." Of course when I got to it, the sets were terrible, the whole thing was a disaster, disaster. I don't think it appeared at all, I don't think it was ever shown. The idea of the story was good, but, you see, it had to be - he said he had a find, a wonderful new star, and I gave her the sack the first day, couldn't work. Tony Steel was in it and was pissed all the time. Oh it was a disaster. Yes, but what would you do in a position like that? If you don't do it, I'd know this man for years, if you don't do it, he's gonna kill himself. Well, what would you do, go and do it?

**Roy Fowler:** Difficult to say, I - yeah - depending on the circumstances I might well have said, like you - let him.

**Vernon Sewell:** Well that was the only thing I know is that it was a disaster, it was a bloody awful movie, because the thing was buggered up.

**Roy Fowler:** Is he still alive, is he still working?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, no.

**Roy Fowler:** It's a long time ago '67.

**Vernon Sewell:** All dead.

**Roy Fowler:** 'The Blood Beast Terror'?

**Vernon Sewell:** That was very funny. That was a man called Toby Tenser.

**Roy Fowler:** Oh yes!

**Vernon Sewell:** And the idea amused me, and Peter Cushing was a great friend of mine, who I liked very, very much. And, again, I was in complete control, nobody has any - you see I could do what exactly what I damn well liked! Well, I write the opening scene in Africa. Of course I can't go to Africa for this scene, so I [chuckles] have a boat built, I got some black men and I found a part of the Hamble river, an off shoot, an abandoned creek. Well a river with mud and reeds and trees could be anywhere. There were houses there, but you don't show those, you just show this, you see. And I shot this scene 'in Africa', with Peter Cushing or something. Anyway, people said to me, "Vernon, how the hell did you get on location in Africa for that picture? We know the budget. How did you do it?" And you'd be surprised! You see, what you do, you see the main shot is of the rower and he pulls into the bank and he gets out. Then he walks ashore, then you hear a 'plop' in the background and you cut to a library film of crocodiles, flopping into the water, you see. Then you hear, 'chup, chup, chup, chup' [VS imitates a monkey's 'chatter'], and you cut to the monkeys in the tree, from the library. Well no-one could have told the difference? But people certainly thought I'd been to Africa on location for the film.

**Roy Fowler:** It worked, yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** See another thing - See, you have to do things like that now. I remember in one film called 'The Man in the Backseat', nearly all night location. We had rear projection in a car. Well rear projection - we hadn't got rear projection in Beaconsfield. It meant going to Rank and doing it in their tunnel, which would have put the budget up and taken time, so I said, "What do you see at night time in the back of a car? Flashes." So I said, "Bugger rear projection, we'll have that." And I got the prop man to make me two big cylinders, about a little bit bigger than this, black with two holes punched in them, lined with silver paper and a bulb inside. We put this at the back of the car which were shooting at against a black background of these two things, and we start them spinning. Well, that looked exactly like the same thing and everybody thought that was, all you see is a spot of light go by. You see, but they let me do these things. Other studios - if it had been a big film, I wouldn't have been allowed to do it, they'd have said, "No, you've got to have back projection."

**Roy Fowler:** Yeah, yeah, well nowadays it would be...

**Vernon Sewell:** That's why I had fun! I had fun because I was allowed to do pretty well what I liked, which was a big help.

**Roy Fowler:** Well there's no better way than that. I've got two more on the list...'68, 'Curse of the Crimson Alter'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes that was another, that was very funny. Boris Karloff, Boris Karloff. Now, they'd given me the book, the book was by Lovecraft, a famous American writer...

**Roy Fowler:** Oh yes.

**Vernon Sewell:** ...of horror stories and this book was called 'Tale from the Witches' Room'. [NB Actually 'The Dreams in the Witch House'] I said, "Yes, that's fun, I'll do that." We were going to shoot the whole thing in Gilbert (of Gilbert and Sullivan)'s old house called Grim's Dyke Hall. No studio, it wall all done there.

**Roy Fowler:** That was Gilbert's house?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, he died there, he drowned.

**Roy Fowler:** In the pond, yeah.

**Vernon Sewell:** He drowned in the pond. But we altered the inside, we put up new - built new rooms and things. But I enjoyed that, very funny. But, never mind. Here we are, Boris Karloff. The script's all written, all ready, it was funny, I'd put naked ladies in at the beginning, it was quite funny, I had a lot of fun with it. Anyhow, a week before shooting they say, "We can't pay Boris Karloff, because he's uninsurable." He was dying, poor chap. "We will re-cast Christopher Lee." "Right, OK, we'll use Christopher Lee." The next day they say, "Vernon, we've got to have Boris Karloff, we've got to pay whether we had him or not, so we've got to put him in." So here we were now, I've got Boris Karloff, who was a star so we had to re-write the entire script and Boris Karloff is the good man [laughs] and Christopher Lee is the bad man! But I enjoyed it, I

got a lot of fun with that. My production manager was a man called Levy who became the production manager of very big films indeed Louis Levy? [NB Actually Gerry Levy] I can't remember, anyway, I've seen his credits on some recent films, on some very big films indeed.

**Roy Fowler:** The last feature I've got listed for you is 'Burke and Hare'?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes. Well, that would be. Well, I'd had the script written of 'Burke and Hare' by Ernie Bradford, a very good writer. And I could have taken it to anybody more or less, "Because it was a good script and, anyway, [Kenneth] Shipman said, "You do it with me." I said, "OK." I shouldn't have done, but anyway, I did. And the film is written and we're gonna start, and there is a sequence, a big sequence in a knocking shop - only a very fashionable one, a very fashionable, high class, only for very rich people. And I cast Dora - some well known blonde star, comedienne. A very well known - a common girl, who couldn't play anything else but common girls. And I said, "No, we won't hire, I can't have that it's all completely wrong." And Ken says to me, "You know, Joan would be marvellous in it, wouldn't she?" That's my wife! I said, "Of course she would, but I can't, I don't dare suggest her." "Well of course, have her!" I said, "OK, right." Then he says that Dee, his girlfriend wants to play Mrs Hare. I said, "Well, I think it would be disastrous." He says, "Well, so do I." I said, "All right, I'll re-cast." Then he says, "I've had a terrible row with Dee, she insists on being in the film." I said, "All right, you're the producer, it's your money." He said, "Vernon, I promise you, I promise you after the first days' rushes, if she's no good - out!" I said, "OK." First days' rushes come. I say to Ken, "What do you think?" He says, "I was embarrassed, I was embarrassed." I said, "Well so was I - out!" "Yes, re-cast." That night, "I had a terrible row with Dee," he says. "She insists on being in the film, you've got to have her." So there you are, I'm saddled with that for a start! She wants to get into the pants of Derren Nesbitt and she hangs around the set all the time and Derren says, "Get that woman off the set, I cannot stand her looking at me!" So I say to the studio manager, "Miss Dee must not come onto the set while shooting." But no, she does. Derren says to me, "Christ, she is looking at me all the time!" Anyhow, the film is made and I cut it and cut a lot of her out you see, of course. I cut it myself. And I put on a guide track and of music by Shostakovich and, music that suited the movie. We have a private showing to the big members of the trade. And Columbia said, "Look here Vernon, we like the picture very much. Can you get a combined print for us within the month? Because if you can, we've got a six week West End spot we can put you in and it will give you world wide distribution ex-television." Wonderful deal! So we're all very pleased. Then Ken Shipman says, "Look here Vernon, my cousin, Mick Shipman (who was in the business at one time) says it's absurd! He's got us a deal that will give us production costs back plus one hundred per cent in cash within the week!" I said, "Well of course, we've got to take it, haven't we?" Of course, I agree. Nothing happens. Nothing happens. To make a long story short, a year goes by and nothing happens. In the meantime they have re-cut the picture and put back all her scenes and cut out all my wife's scenes, put her back in, and got a pop group to do the music! You couldn't have had anything more unsuitable! There is an historical film of rather morbid - and you have pop music! It couldn't have been more unsuitable. Well then they take it - after a year, they take it back to Columbia and Columbia said, "Well, it's not Vernon's movie any more." They said, "We'll take it," but on ridiculous terms, "We'll take it and give you a two week's West End run." And it opens up at the Pavilion, Piccadilly, and the power cuts come and nobody goes to the cinema! The result is, of course, I got nothing out of the movie at all. Nothing!

**Roy Fowler:** Was that your last?

**Vernon Sewell:** And that, I say, "I'm fed up now" I wouldn't make any more. I said, "That's a kick in the pants, I won't have any more of this." I could afford to pack it in and I said, "finish!" Otherwise I would have gone on, because I had already written a very good script, made a good script to do 'The Brides in the Bath' I had a script all ready, but I didn't. See, why should I do all this work and have myself chucked down the drain? So I gave it in. Now you know it all!

**Roy Fowler:** Well, the only thing, possibly, we've left out is, you did some series television, didn't you, a little?

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh one! Yes! Now Julian Wintle did have a deal with - to do with this psychiatry thing, and he said, "Would I like to be the principle director on it?" And I said, "Yes," because I liked Herbert Lom, he was an old pal of mine and I did a lot of those, 'The Human Jungle'. But again, see Julian Wintle let me do what I wanted to do. See, he would say - there was a sequence - I found an old house in Elstree, which was wrecked, which would have made a wonderful location. I didn't ask any questions, I just did it! They said, "Vernon, why have you done this on location?" I said, "Because it's very much better!" "Well why didn't you tell us?" I said, "Why should I tell you? What would I gain by telling you?" "Well we don't like the idea." I said, "Listen Julian, was it better?" "Yes it was." "Did it cost any more?" "No, it didn't." I said, "Well why are you making a fuss?" You see [chuckles].

**Roy Fowler:** You say you liked Julian Wintle didn't you? Because some people absolutely hated him.

**Vernon Sewell:** I liked Julian, yes. I liked Julian Wintle. He was an honest man, he was a filmmaker and he had ideas. He wasn't just an office wallah.

**Roy Fowler:** I've forgotten who it was that was - can't remember - but they absolutely loathed him, hated him, disgusted him, thought he was the crook and a son of a bitch.

**Vernon Sewell:** Wonder who it was?

**Roy Fowler:** I don't know, it maybe will come back. Someone who worked with him. No, for the moment it's gone.

**Vernon Sewell:** There was another director who worked with me on that series was - [I've] forgotten - but I did most of them anyway. That was my one and only television.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, the time has - you obviously felt no restraints, working for television, budget or schedule?

**Vernon Sewell:** No! Couldn't see what difference it would make.

**Roy Fowler:** Well, you'd always worked fast and efficiently, so I suppose it was the same?

**Vernon Sewell:** See, all you do, you push in more close-ups.

**Roy Fowler:** I suppose the time now has come for a retrospective, looking back.

**Vernon Sewell:** Oh no!

**Roy Fowler:** A short trot down memory lane. What are your salient memories of your time in the business?

**Vernon Sewell:** How do you mean?

**Roy Fowler:** Well, anything that just occurs to you. Major disasters or major successes, or happinesses, or anything.

**Vernon Sewell:** No, well on the whole, I had damn good fun!

**Roy Fowler:** Favourite people?

**Vernon Sewell:** As far as I know, I didn't lose anybody any money, I don't think I ever lost anybody any money, except on that last disaster. It was only a very, very cheap picture. As far as I know, I never lost anybody any money.

**Roy Fowler:** Who were your favourite associates?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't know, I liked Willie Williams[?] was a very nice guy. And I liked all my actors, I liked David Niven and I liked David Farrar and I liked Robert Morley and I liked Ralph Richardson, I liked everybody. I made a lot of friends. Although, Ralph Richardson, he said to me, "Vernon, you've ruined my career. You wouldn't let me do what I wanted, I shall never work again and nor will you." He said, "You wait until the press get at this picture. Vernon, you wait, you'll never get another job and you've ruined my career." He was a bit drunk, I must say. He got the best press he's ever had, and he came to me and said, "Vernon, I apologise about what I said, you were right."

**Roy Fowler:** Which title was that?

**Vernon Sewell:** What?

**Roy Fowler:** Which title?

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Silver Fleet'!

**Roy Fowler:** Oh that one? Yes. He was always a bit difficult though, wasn't he?

**Vernon Sewell:** No, I never found him difficult!

**Roy Fowler:** Well, you know, in that respect. I mean an actor's insecurity.

**Vernon Sewell:** He wanted to change the character, he wanted to be more ebullient and I said, "Well, that's not the character. This is the manager of a shipyard, he's not that sort of character, he doesn't even own a pub, he owns a shipyard."

**Roy Fowler:** A marvellous actor.

**Vernon Sewell:** Anyhow, we were great friends for the rest of his life. I never worked with him again, but he helped me a hell of a lot because of the - I was saying, 'The Silver Fleet' - people remember me, if they do at all, mostly for 'The Silver Fleet'. But as I say, the main thing, I've had terrific fun. I haven't made a lot of money, but I have managed to eat and I've had enormous fun. And if I did it again, I should probably do exactly the same thing.

**Roy Fowler:** And you've achieved a ripe old age!

**Vernon Sewell:** And I've achieved a fantastic age!

**Roy Fowler:** Um, Anything we've left out? Anyone we've left out?

**Vernon Sewell:** I don't think so. You've dug up a lot of memories I'd forgotten about.

**Roy Fowler:** Well that's interesting that you've forgotten some of those titles.

**Vernon Sewell:** I can't...

**Roy Fowler:** Maybe that list is inaccurate. I'll ask the BFI to check those titles out.

**Vernon Sewell:** But it must be - I seem to remember - 'Wrong Number'.

**Roy Fowler:** Which - there were two of them, I will check on those to see if they are mistakes...

**Vernon Sewell:** 'Wrong Number' and 'Urge to Kill'.

**Roy Fowler:** 'Urge to Kill', right.

**Vernon Sewell:** Have you got 'What Men Lived By' on it? Because that's an important one.

**Roy Fowler:** No.

**Vernon Sewell:** 'What Men Lived By', that was a religious film.

**Roy Fowler:** No, that wasn't on any of the lists that...

**Vernon Sewell:** Put that on, because it should have been.

**Roy Fowler:** What year was that?

**Vernon Sewell:** On somebody's list I saw it directed by somebody else, they must have made a mistake.

**Roy Fowler:** What year was that, roughly, in the thirties?

**Vernon Sewell:** Early thirties.

**Roy Fowler:** Early thirties. Before 'The Medium' or after 'The Medium'?

**Vernon Sewell:** After 'The Medium'.

**Roy Fowler:** Where was that, at the...um...Rank religious place?

**Vernon Sewell:** That was shot at G-BI before they went 'whoosh'. No, that was shot at Shepherd's Bush. 'What Men Live By' was shot at Shepherd's Bush.

**Roy Fowler:** And that was, what? A feature?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes, it was a religious. This is the one I told you about.

**Roy Fowler:** Yes, but I didn't know if it were a feature or a shorter?

**Vernon Sewell:** Feature. It was shot as a religious film, it wasn't meant to go in the cinemas at all.

**Roy Fowler:** That's what Rank was doing for his Sunday schools wasn't it. "There's Methodism in his madness", they used to say!

**Vernon Sewell:** That's it, that's it.

**Roy Fowler:** Right, well, I must say, it's been a fascinating tour. Um, I don't know if there's anything - I always worry that I've left something out.

**Vernon Sewell:** You most certainly haven't!

**Roy Fowler:** I hope not.

**Vernon Sewell:** You've certainly left nothing out at all!

**Roy Fowler:** Well, we're almost to the end of the second tape, all I can do is thank you immensely for a rewarding interview and also for - and to wish you, what - at least a century!

**Vernon Sewell:** Now, what are you going to do with this stuff?

**Roy Fowler:** It goes - well I'll end the tape now, so you know, my best thanks on the tape, right?

**Vernon Sewell:** Yes.

[Tape Ends]

Vernon Sewell

Film Director

1930s - Sound Engineer, Nettlefold Studios

Work with Michael Powell & various independents - "The Edge of the World"

1940's - Korda

"The Silver Fleet"

British National

1950's - Hammer

Various "B" productions & Horror films

Vernon Sewell - queries

David Mottern (Nephew Archibald Nettlefold)

Frederick Valp (German Actor)

Werner Kraus (German Actor)

Grande Guingnol (?)

David Barnaby (Actor in 'Old Father Thames')

Morrie Buchman (American Screenwriter)

James Maynard (Assistant Production Manager)

A? Asuperiour (French walled town)

**Document Actions**

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