

For many years Sir David Attenborough has been creating a unique and precious record of natural history around the world. He also helped to launch television archaeology

Archaeology becomes a sensation



ALEX PRYOR/PERSONAL HISTORIES PROJECT, POPPERFOTO/GETTY IMAGES

My father Frederick Attenborough established a chair in local history at University College, Leicester, which I believe was the first in a British university, and WG Hoskins was its first holder. As well as being an Anglo-Saxon scholar, my father was also an extremely enthusiastic photographer. Hoskins and he travelled around the countryside, taking photographs of churches, talking about building stone, counting species of plants in hedgerows and so on. My father would say, "There is a nice 14th century church there, but you see it's a very empty foreground, isn't it? Now there is a herd of cows over there – just drive them in". Being a 12-year-old, I simply did what he told me, and got myself into frightful trouble with farmers all over the midlands.

I joined BBC television in 1952, and it was there I met Paul Johnstone. The programme I was to assist him on was called *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?* The BBC was avowedly and unashamedly interested in spreading information in those days, and to do so in a way which would attract people who were not sure they wanted to imbibe any information. The head of our department, Mary Adams, had cooked up this programme which was a copy of something that had been going on in the United States, in which you assembled three experts, primarily archaeologists, and presented them with objects. They then went through the processes which would enable them

to identify what the objects were, a process of logical thought not familiar to a great number of the audience.

The chairman was Glyn Daniel, who played it marvellously, and he had a varying group of experts. Prominent among them was Sir Mortimer Wheeler. He was extrovert and he played the game absolutely to perfection. He was presented with an object and he'd say, "My goodness, what on earth can that be?" And then he'd go through the whole process, and it would turn out, of course, that he actually had excavated it. And Glyn and Mortimer did this double act with supporting cast: other people appeared – Jacquetta Hawkes was brilliant and beautiful and perceptive – forgive me for saying that, but they were, by and large, the supporting cast.

Margaret Mead's agent got in touch and said that she would consent to appear in our programmes on BBC – she was anthropology writ large in the United States in the 50s. So they said, "Okay, we'll invite her to appear on *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?*" We used to have a dinner in order that the members of the panel would get to know one another, and there would be mutual warmth before we got into the studio – you could get a bottle of the '46 mutual warmth.

When she turned up for one of these warming dinners, the Beaujolais didn't do what it should have done, and Glyn didn't get on with her very well. And, I have to say, she got very grumpy. When

we got to the Lime Grove studio, Glyn gave her the first object. And she said, "I think this is a stupid programme. I have no idea what this object is, and it is quite absurd to suppose that anybody would, and silly bits of unconnected information isn't something that I am in the least interested in". But, what she didn't know was that we always gave one object before the programme started transmission, in order that people should get into the mood of things, and that her statement had not been seen by anybody at all. She was sitting on the end of the bench, looking away from the camera, and although she was introduced, she never said anything; her image was never seen. And she went back to America. And, what is more, nobody actually noticed.

Animal, Vegetable, Mineral? went from success to success. In fact, in 1954, just think about this, Sir Mortimer Wheeler became the Television Personality of the Year. And he deserved it. Librarians around the country wrote to us at the BBC, and said the shelves on which archaeological books had sat for decades untouched, were suddenly empty. Archaeology became a huge success. Archaeology became a matter of interest to anybody with any intellectual curiosity at all. It was a sensation.

Edited by Mike Pitts from a talk to the Personal Histories Project on October 12 (transcribed by Pj Smith and Owen Vince)

Above: Sir David Attenborough in front of the Personal Histories Project audience in Cambridge University in October 2009 (left) and with the BBC in 1956 (right). The Personal Histories Project was founded by Pamela Jane Smith; see www.arch.cam.ac.uk/personal-histories