

AV 5: Charles Swithinbank oral history summary

Recorded at Charles' home, 7 Holme End, Fulbourn, 16.11.1996.

[01.26.21] [00.00.55] Introduction by Peter Clarkson [PC]. [00.01.40] Description of Charles Swithinbank's [CS] family background, early years in Burma and education in England at Bryanston School and rowing at Oxford. [00.05.40] Description of his time in the Navy during World War II where he became a Navigator on a Mine Sweeper aged 19. [00.08.00] Description of time at Pembroke College Oxford after the war to study Geography. [00.08.32 interruption] [00.10.20] Continuation of description of time at Oxford [00.13.00] Description of University undergraduate expeditions including an Icelandic sub-glacial volcano, Gambian land-use map and joint expedition with Stockholm University training for Norwegian-British-Swedish expedition [NBSE]. [00.17.00] Story of how he got the opportunity to go to the Antarctic. Mention of Scott Russell, Oxford Exploration Club treasurer, and Lancelot Fleming, Director of the Scott Polar Research Institute [SPRI]. [00.18.30] Description of travelling to Antarctica in 1949 for the NBSE on a Norwegian whaling factory ship with 60 dogs. Mention of accident in which three expedition members died. Mention of geologist Alan Reece and the accident which led to the loss of his eye. [00.23.00] Story about dog sledging [00.24.00] Description of returning to Oxford to write up expedition for his DPhil and trip to Greenland with John Giaever. [00.25.35] Brief mention of move to SPRI under Colin Bertram who recommended him to the Canadian Government. Description of studying ice in the North West passage over a four-year contract [maps at spri] resulting in Ice atlas of Arctic Canada, published 1960. [00.28.20] Mention of return to England and search for employment. Anecdote about Jim [James] Zumberge offering work in Antarctica for 3 field seasons on the Ross Ice Shelf. [00.29.30 interruption] [00.30.15] Description of work on the Ross Ice shelf for the Americans. [00.31.25] Description of how he met his wife, Mary Fellows, at Dartmouth college library whilst working on his Ice atlas. [00.32.35] Description of returning to England in 1963 to take up post of Chief Glaciologist at SPRI under Gordon Robin. Funding for the post was from the British Antarctic Survey [BAS] which lead to tensions. [00.33.55] Description of efforts to go to Antarctica with the Russians and subsequent 18-month expedition; learning the language; mention of ongoing relationship with the Russians and their mental isolation from the world. [00.37.08] Description of involvement with the SPRI Radio Echo Sounding [RES] programme in the mid-late 1960s. Mention of Gordon Robin, Stan Evans and David Peachey; relationship with the Americans who used SPRI technology in US Air Force planes to survey large areas of Antarctica. Mention of [Burt Query?]. PC anecdote about using cocoa on the Brunt ice shelf for navigational markers. [00.40.15] Description of travelling through the North West passage on board SS Manhattan in 1969 employed by BP as an observer. Comments on rivalry between Esso and BP; SS Manhattan; Trans-Alaskan oil pipeline project. [00.45.35] Description of expedition on board HMS Dreadnaught under the Arctic ocean to the North Pole. Anecdote about sleeping between torpedoes as there were no extra bunks. [00.45.50] Discussion of employment arrangements between SPRI and BAS changing in 1974 when he left SPRI to become head of the Earth Sciences Division at BAS. Description of the challenges posed by taking on four times more staff researching in various disciplines. Comments on the amount of paperwork involved; research work confined to Saturdays working on the Satellite Image Atlas of Glaciers, Antarctic volume. [00.51.25] Description of summer Antarctic trips including RES flights with Giles Kershaw in 1975. Mention of changes to Antarctic coastline not making it onto commercial maps. [00.53.25] Description of using Satellite imagery for mapping Antarctica including its ability to improve the accuracy of RES work; conflict with a geologist who didn't think it accurate enough; conflict with NERC over funding mapping projects; acceptance of image maps in mapping community. [00.58.00] Description of work on the Antarctic Digital Database with the World

Conservation Monitoring Centre, BAS and BP. [00.59.40] Description of interest in poetry. [01.01.11] Description of last trip with the Americans to Bird and Darwin Glacier, Antarctica, 1978-79. Mention of Terry Hughes from Maine. [01.02.45] Description of differing budgets of American and British Antarctic programmes and value for money of their outputs. [01.03.48] Description of work post retirement in November 1986 including Antarctic Digital Database; lecturing on Cruise ships; irritation at being called a tour guide and conflict with colleagues who did not agree with Antarctic tourism; work with US Geological Survey on Antarctic satellite image interpretation; Research on blue ice fields published by US Army; Autobiography. Comments on taking wife and daughters as guests whilst lecturing on cruise ships. [01.10.15] Brief comments on membership of Professional Associations. [01.11.26] Comments on honours and awards. CS considers his Royal Geographical Society Patrons medal the greatest honour. [01.12.10] Description of interest in flying including qualifying as a pilot in 1960 in America; flights in the Antarctic. [01.14.05] Description of his work on the feasibility of blue ice fields in Antarctica as runways. Mention of Giles Kershaw and his company Adventure Network International; working with the Americans to find Blue Ice near the South Pole Station; comments on the logistics of constructing a new American base. [01.20.55] Description of his interest in photography which was mainly documentary rather than artistic. Mention of National Geographic picture of the year second prize for Icebreaker in pack ice. [01.22.23] Comments on unfulfilled ambitions including going to the moon. Comments on his autobiography and thoughts on future books on the Russians and the NBSE. [End]