

A Little Digging at the BBC

After almost a century of public radio broadcasting the BBC has built up an immense archive of past programmes, probably unequalled anywhere else in the world. There are fairly primitive recordings from the earliest days, but it was the introduction of tape recording after World War 2 which led to the massive increase which we take for granted today. The digital revolution makes the archiving process even easier. Aware of its responsibility to the licence payer, who after all is footing the bill, the BBC is using the internet to make as much of this historical material available to the general public as possible. (Its digital radio channel **BBC 4 Extra** also draws on this rich legacy).

Accessing the material is straightforward. Just enter **BBC Podcasts** into Google and choose the radio channel that interests you, - BBC Radio 4 (the former Home Service), Radio 3 (the former Third programme) etc. The archive can also be reached via the **iTunes App**. The programmes can be heard “live” via the **iPlayer App**, or downloaded as a podcast to listen to at your convenience. The problem will be choosing from the huge range of programmes on offer.

To give you a flavour here are just a few of the offerings:

Virtually all “**Letters from America**” by **Alistair Cooke** from the 1940s onwards.

All of “**In Our Time**” with **Melvyn Bragg**, (this series is still running.)

All of the **Reith Lectures** from 1948.

Front Row the long running arts and culture programme.

To satisfy my own addiction and need for a steady flow of nostalgia I have been dipping into the longest running programme on the BBC, (and the second longest running radio programme in the world), **Desert Island Discs**. This was the brainchild in 1942 of **Roy Plomley**, who probably envisaged a short run of programmes to divert the public from the war news. By the time of his death in 1985 he had banished some 1791 castaways over 43 years to his famous desert island. The programmes continued with Michael Parkinson, Sue Lawley and continue today with Kirsty Young. I have been looking in the archive at castaways from the 1960s and 70s, since these were programmes I first heard “live”, when I, too, was “young and easy under the apple boughs”. Then as now the castaways were drawn from an eclectic bunch of movers and shakers, from politicians to painters, actors to scientists, athletes to musicians. And alas, most of them are now consigned to that great desert island from which no-one escapes.

Liberace was a castaway in May 1960 and in his conversation with Roy Plomley comes over as a much more serious persona and musician than his public image and television shows suggested. A child prodigy on the piano he gave his debut concert at the age of 16 playing the Liszt piano concerto no.1. There is a hint of regret in his voice that his flamboyant, diamond studied costumes were forced on him as a way of distinguishing himself from other pianists and of creating his own very lucrative career as a public entertainer. He died of AIDS in 1987.

Roy Plomley was admired and much respected for the courtesy, deference even, with which he treated all his castaways. Discretion was the hallmark of his interviewing technique. Not for him any brash intrusion into the castaway’s sex life (unlike unfortunately some of the more recent programmes.) The singer **Peter Pears** was a castaway in July 1969 and his relationship with

Benjamin Britten was explored solely in terms of the collaboration between two professional musicians. No hint-hint that there might have been more to this relationship than music.

Other programmes from this decade provide several examples of the transient nature of fame. I remember **Peter Ustinov** (November 1977) from this period as a well-known playwright, actor, comedian and raconteur, - a household name, instantly recognisable. Now he seems totally forgotten, although this programme survives to give a rich flavour of his talent.

Dr Jacob Bronowski (January 1974) was the leading TV intellectual at this time. He had arrived in England at the age of eight as a Polish/German refugee, speaking no English. By the age of 18 he had won a scholarship to read mathematics at Cambridge. His day-time job was as director of research at the National Coal Board, but he is now better known for his documentary films on the BBC *The Ascent of Man*. (1973). In 13 episodes he sought to trace the development of human society through science, a complement to the slightly earlier series by **Kenneth Clark** called *Civilisation* (1969). His conversation with Roy Plomley, in the year of his death in the USA, demonstrates his formidable brain power and intelligence. His equally brilliant, polymath elder daughter, **Professor Lisa Jardine**, was a castaway with Kirsty Young in June 2015 just a few short months before her own untimely death from breast cancer.

So we have here a most valuable legacy and source of information for future generations of historians, - time capsules on tap, you might say. I can only hope that Roy Plomley is still hard at work on that desert island beyond the stars. **Cue Seagull Music:**

Roy Plomley: On our desert island this week, ladies and gentlemen, is that well-known monarch, King Henry VIII. Your Majesty, what will you be most glad to escape from on this desert island?

King Henry: Wives!

Roy Plomley: Indeed! Your somewhat tangled marital arrangements have been well-documented, as have the cutting-edge ways in which you dealt with two of the problems. What is your first piece of music?

King Henry: “*Can’t Get No Satisfaction*” Says it all really. My reign in a nutshell.

Roy Plomley: Indeed. Is there one single item which you will most miss on the island?

King Henry: A very sharp axe.

Roy Plomley: Indeed. Let’s move quickly on to your next record.

King Henry: I’m an old softy really, although few believe it, so I will take “*I’ve Grown Accustomed to her Face*.” It will remind me of the early days with Ann Boleyn before it all went pear-shaped.

Roy Plomley: Indeed. A very painful experience for you, and an even more painful one for Ann. Another piece of music, please.

King Henry: “*Je ne regrette rien*” Two fingers to the lot of you, really! The Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the King of France, the King of Spain. You name it.

Roy Plomley: And apart from the Bible and Shakespeare you can take one book. What will it be?

King Henry: Forget the Bible! That’s caused me enough trouble already. And my daughter Elizabeth can have the Shakespeare. More her glass of sack. One of my courtiers, before he lost his head, kept urging me to read Mrs Beeton’s “*Household Management*.” Said it would sort me out. Fat chance, but I’ll take it.

Roy Plomley: And you may take one luxury with you. What do you fancy?

King Henry: Liz Hurley in a bikini.

Roy Plomley: Not allowed, I'm afraid.

King Henry: Careful, Plomley! Divine right of Kings. I'm allowed to do whatever I like.

Roy Plomley: Liz Hurley it is then, although judging by your previous experiences it is unlikely to be a bed of roses. Would you try and escape?

King Henry: I've ordered the *Mary Rose* to come and pick me up after one month, or else.

Roy Plomley: And thank you, King Henry, for letting us hear your choice of desert island discs.

My castaway next week will be the pioneer inventor of the motorway, Mr. Adolf Hitler. I hope you can join me.

Cue seagull music.