

Ewan Vinnicombe **Editor, Blue Peter**

Media Masters – January 3, 2019

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Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one-to-one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today I'm joined by Ewan Vinnicombe, editor of Blue Peter, the world's longest-running children's TV programme. A lifelong fan of the show, and a proud recipient of one of its sought-after badges when he was six years old, he starting working as a runner on spin-off show Re-Peter in 1998. He has recently overseen the programme's 60th birthday celebrations. An advocate for children's literacy, he is also a judge on the Blue Peter Book Awards and his favourite book is Danny, the Champion of the World.

Ewan, thank you for joining me.

Thank you for asking me.

So tell us, let's start with the Blue Peter 60th anniversary in October. That must have felt like an incredible moment.

It was amazing, and I say this to lots of people, but I wrote on the back of an envelope what I wanted the show to be like in my dream scenario, one night in my kitchen at home. A couple of years later, it all happened – but it was even better than the envelope! And all the plans that we had, and the team, were just brilliant, and just everything seemed to come together in a brilliant way. So we had past presenters, we had great films, we had HMS Queen Elizabeth, the aircraft carrier, spelling out Blue Peter, which was brilliant because we asked the MOD to do that and they agreed to it. It was quite an interesting set of films because the weather was bad, it could have gone so wrong but just that brief moment happened and we've got it on film. Then we had Lindsey in the birthday balloon going over the Arctic Circle, that had a kid had designed, and that was probably one of the most emotional pieces of filming that we did because just so many things went right. So many things went wrong, but in the end it went so right. When you actually saw it, saw the pictures, it was just amazing to see one of our competition winners' designs floating over the Arctic Circle in Finland, piloted by a Blue Peter presenter who didn't know how to fly a balloon four months before that point.

Incredible.

So it's one of those kind of shows. Then we had children apply for their diamond badges for the special diamond year and they had to design these little diamonds, which we then put all over the studio. One of my big things is I always say you've got to really respect kids. So if a kid sends in something to Blue Peter, I say, "Every diamond had to be on the show." So 24,000 diamonds were actually on the set of our 60th show because I thought then if I was a kid at home watching it, and because I was a badge winner when I was six, it's just those details that then you can say to every child watching and all the parents, "We've put every diamond up." Then we had Sophie Ellis-Bextor performing, which was great for Janet Ellis, because she obviously is her mum. Then we had Harvey and Jonas Blue performing with the Philharmonic, and all those collaborations, and The Vamps did an amazing performance, dancing from one studio with the Philharmonic and then running into the Blue Peter studio with just so many things. Ed Sheeran got a gold badge, so all these plans just all seemed to come together, and then the explosion... I'd say the Monday and Tuesday night were just brilliant, because Monday night we had *The One Show*, and Matt Baker presented a special with past presenters, and suddenly we were on Radio 1, Radio 2, Radio 4, Radio 5 Live. In the morning we were on BBC Breakfast, Good Morning Britain, Lorraine, everything. Every local radio station, everything. It was just one of those days where you do have to... and I said to the team, "This is why working in media is brilliant, and these are the days to mentally note things down, because actually these will be your memories for the rest of your media career." The day could not have gone better for me. When I woke up on Wednesday morning, the day after, I was like, "Yes, the team, we've done it. Well done."

And Blue Peter is so beloved by so many people, it's such an integral part of everyone's childhood in Britain, including mine. I always remember Simon Groom and Janet Ellis and Goldie and all of these kind of things, it's just incredible.

See, I think we must be a quite similar age, because I'm 41 and that was my... Sarah Greene, Simon Groom, Peter Duncan and Janet Ellis were my presenters. Obviously I watched everyone after that, but that was my first experience of Blue Peter, and it was just... the show, it evolves, and as I said to the team, everyone's going to have their version of Blue Peter. Tony Walsh, the poet from Manchester, did a lovely poem about Blue Peter, and he said, "Everyone's got their own version of Blue Peter." We were trying to, with the 60th, to pay homage to the past, but not to be stuck in the past, and bring the show still to its current audience but with moments of reflection. So if you're watching it and you've not watched it for years, you can be like, "Oh yes, they've still got that, they still do that," but actually it's in a digital world, it's still relevant to the children, and things like that. So yes, it's one of those jobs where you go... when I got the job, it suddenly dawns on you that you're in charge of this amazing, amazing show that has lasted so long, and to do it in the 60th year as well, it's humbling to think that I and the team are running that show at the moment, but it's just brilliant. It's the best job I've ever had in telly.

Did you always want to be editor of Blue Peter? Because I know you wrote to the show – you’ve brought the letters into the studio actually, it’s incredible to see them – and you’ve clearly been a lifelong fan of the show. Is it almost a cliché to ask if it’s a dream come true to edit the show that you’ve been such a lifelong fan of?

So I was always a fan of Blue Peter, but I think the fundamentals of Blue Peter is I love live TV, and so Blue Peter in children’s is one of the last live TV shows that we’ve got. We’ve got some lovely Saturday morning stuff as well, Saturday Mash-Up at the moment on CBBC, but just that live choreography of bringing... you’ve not got a show at the start of the day and then by the end of the day when you go live, you’ve brought contributors in, you’ve got the films ready, you’ve got children in the studio, you’ve got the pets, you’ve got everything together, and that choreography is brilliant because then, at six o’clock when we finish the show on a Thursday, everyone’s like, “Yes, brilliant, we’ve done another show.” It’s like that celebration moment. So I’ve always loved those moments. So actually early on in my career, I was obviously the runner on Re-Peter, which was a behind the scenes show for the 40th. Then I went off and did Saturday mornings and did Live and Kicking, I always loved Live and Kicking, always loved Noel’s House Party, it was anything live, because I just thought, “That is the thing.”

Noel’s House Party was one of the best shows on TV ever, I used to love it.

Because it was like you were watching it as a viewer going, “Anything could happen.” NTV, you’d be sitting there going, “Who are we going to have this week?”

About five minutes before every NTV, I’d furtively scan my own walls to see whether it was about to do me, never was unfortunately.

It’s just those live moments, I think should be cherished. So with the Blue Peter editor job, I never thought I’d be the Blue Peter editor because I’d worked on Record Breakers, I’d worked on Springwatch, I worked on loads of different shows, and then in 2007, I just finished Springwatch and then the Blue Peter studio producer came up and my boss said, “Would you consider applying for it?” I thought, “Actually this is the first time I’ve ever been thinking of doing Blue Peter.” I thought, “It’s live TV, of course I want to do it.” So I got that job, and I did that for two years, and it was a brilliant time, quite a transitional time for the show because Konnie Huq left after... she was the longest serving presenter. So she decided to move on after 10 years, so she’d done a really good job, beaten Val Singleton to the longest female presenter of the show.

Ten years is a long time.

So she left, then Gethin and Zoe left so then actually at that time, then Helen Skelton, who’s... Helen Skelton, one of the brilliant Blue Peter presenters that started, and doing all those challenges, she’s gone to the South Pole, she tightrope walked across Battersea Power Station, she’s done ultra-marathons, three marathons in 72 hours, such a brilliant Blue Peter presenter. So it was her, Andy and Joel, that was my second year of Blue Peter. Then I went off to run... be the head of presentation, which is the running the presentation segment, so the bits between the

shows for CBBC and CBeebies. Then one day, my boss said, “The editor of Blue Peter’s got an attachment in the BBC, where you can go and try different other jobs and stuff like that.” So he went off to go and do 5 Live, because he’d always worked in news. So he went back to news for three months and they said, “Would you babysit it for three months?” I was like, “Yes, I’ll do that.” Then three months turned into six months, turned into nine months, turned into a year.

You were acting editor at that point?

Yes, so I was doing the presentation job and Blue Peter all at the same time. Then two and a half years later, after doing those two jobs and looking after loads of live TV, because obviously presentation is live, with Hacker the Dog and the CBeebies Bedtime Stories, and so then I decided just to focus on Blue Peter. Then we suddenly thought, “In a couple of years it’s the 60th birthday. Wow.” Then it suddenly dawns on you and only on... actually on the birthday day it suddenly dawned on me that, “Oh I’m the editor on the 60th birthday.” I had a moment when a kid talked to me about something, which really just blew my mind, made me get... not too emotional, but really just made me think, “Wow, this job.” Then the live show happened.

Do the viewers have multiple touch points in a sense throughout their life? Because you could watch it as a child and then when you become a parent, watch it with your own children and after 60 years, dare I say grandparents as well with their grandchildren?

Yes, what was lovely about this 60th year, so we started a year before the actual birthday because I wanted to do every month something big for Blue Peter. So we gave Mary Berry a gold badge in October, then November we had Children in Need and Big Bring and Buy Sales and we did Strictly Blue Peter, and because of that, by doing all those individual moments of reminding people of the past, and the present, and the future, we suddenly got all these letters from grandparents and parents saying, “We still watch the show and we love it.” The diamond badges, children had to do a memory mission where they had to find out something about Blue Peter from somebody who used to watch Blue Peter, and so we had loads of stories coming through, which was lovely because then you’d be like, “Yes, I can actually remember the Romanian orphans appeal, or when the team raised money for Lepira.” All the different bits were coming through. So I won my badge when I was in the Liverpool Garden Festival Competition 1984, and we had other top runners-up contact us to say they’d won their badge then. So I was like, “Give me their number, I want to phone them and just say I was one of those kids then as well.” So it really did bring everyone together and we had people in the studio on the live show with their grandparents or their parents going, “I’m a badge holder, they’re a badge holder and now my grandchild’s a badge holder.” So I think it’s just that cross-generational moment, which is just lovely because it just, I think, brings families together, and everyone remembers their Blue Peter.

Actually talking of Blue Peter badges, I know that cheaters can buy them on eBay and of course they’re meaningless, but if I wanted to genuinely earn one, how would one go about acquiring a Blue Peter badge?

So, Paul, I'm not commenting on your age, but if you are over 15, then you can't apply for a Blue Peter badge. So you have to be between six and 15 to apply for one. If you're above that age, then what you can do is if you appear on the show as a contributor, or you do something important for Blue Peter, or help us out with something, then often we award people badges.

Like an honorary badge?

So it's onscreen contributors that get it when we start filming. So the team, they're very prized possessions, and the team, we check them out and we check them back in so we know exactly how many badges are being awarded on location shoots, or in studios and things like that, because I always say to the team...

It's like armed police then when they have to check out their Glock and hand it back in, I've seen the Bodyguard.

Yes, Blue Peter badge is just that... I always think that it's such a core element. It's probably the biggest element of the show, because presenters can change and evolve and things like that, and the studio can evolve, and the films can evolve, but actually that badge is the main connector that we've got with our audience. I always say to Blue Peter, "We are the biggest club for children in the UK." Because we've got, at the moment, there's just under 200,000 children who've got at least one Blue Peter badge between six and 15. That has grown from about 40-50,000 in my time to 200,000. That is amazing growth, and it's just... you don't want a child to go, "You're de-valuing my badge," because actually they're so proud of their badges. When you see, on social media, parents taking photos or schools taking photos and going, "Oh we've got another two green badges today in assembly." I've been to assemblies to surprise children, to award them their badges in case they get... if people get in touch with me I'm always loving to meet to audience. You just have those moments where you just go, yes, it's still that opening the letter. Every child who writes to us gets a personalised letter from me, so no two letters are the same. We've stuck to all the principles that Biddy Baxter and Edward Barnes and Rosemary Gill created back in the day, just because we value that, because that's why it's been successful and that's why you've got memories of Blue Peter and everyone wants badges, because actually, they are still that prize possession and the care and attention. We've got kids who've got multiple badges now, because you can get a blue, a silver, a green, a purple, an orange and things like that, but they collect them all. Now they just want to collect them all. We do have a flurry of 15-year-olds who are just on the cusp trying to get them all before they can't get them.

When they're no longer eligible.

Yes.

So the Blue Peter that I remember growing up and think very fondly of, compared to the Blue Peter of today, what's still the same and what's different?

It's the same show, just in different times. So for us, or for my generation when I was watching Blue Peter, maybe pop stars were the biggest celebrity or the biggest contributor you might have into the show. We might have vloggers, because children today love vloggers.

It's another world, you are making me feel old now.

They are their celebrities.

Isn't that amazing?

Children still love animals, so we still cover animals. We still cover making, and people think... there's so many stories where they go, "Oh Blue Peter's got rid of makes and bakes." We haven't got rid of makes and bakes, we still make stuff, we just make things that are more applicable to children nowadays, that is the one toy that they all want, or whatever, we're just reflecting children's lives of today like in our day when it was Janet and Sarah Greene and Peter Duncan, they were reflecting our lives at that point. So the life in the '80s was reflected in 1984, just like I'm reflecting in 2018 what children are interested in. So the core pillars of the show don't really change, so we still do location films, we still do big challenges. My presenter Lindsey, at the moment, for Children in Need, has just taken part in a swim run, where she's had to run over 30 miles and swim over 10 miles. So they're still doing these amazing big challenges. Radzi skydived with the RAF Falcons which was, for me, I can remember as a kid in my town at home where I grew up, seeing the Falcons jumping out of a plane at an RAF display and just being mesmerised by them. So then when I could get them involved in Blue Peter, and get Radzi to do a Blue Peter challenge that Janet Ellis did and John Noakes did, and different people did, it's just like we're doing it but actually the way the show happens now is you can film it in such a different way. I would say the quality of the cameras, you've got a quality of a camera that is about two inches big compared to years ago, when it'd be a full-on camera person having to be in the plane and jumping out with them. So it's just different techniques of filming, of access. So children still hand-write their letters, so we're still getting handwritten letters into the show, and that's increased from in 2011, 40,000 letters we were getting. This year, or so far, 118,000 letters and we haven't even finished.

Wow, you need an admin team to deal with that.

Yes, so we still haven't finished the year, but they're handwritten letters from children, so kids are still handwriting something, sending us the pictures, putting a stamp on it and sending it to us, so we've got all of that going on, but now we've got a website, an all-singing, all-dancing website, which is very popular with kids, and we're normally the number one website, outside of Newsround, because Newsround's news. On CBBC, we're still generally speaking the top website for CBBC, and we've got a great... like apps, the CBBC Buzz app. So we can get kids to take photos, upload them to an app, send them to us, so then we can reflect them within the live show. So it's almost like technology's helping us to deliver a more up-to-date Blue Peter, but it's still the core elements of childhood. Because I still think, when I read all the kids' letters, and I try and read as many as I... I get a selection

every week and I try and read them and always talk to the team who are answering all the letters, the way children talk and what they're interested in, what they're still interested in, the things that we're interested in, it's just a different, sometimes a more modern, take on things.

How's the move to Salford changed things? I mean, I know the Blue Peter garden is a lot bigger now than that little thing that used to be the back of Television Centre.

Yes, so Petra's moved up, so we moved the statue of Petra up and what's great about the garden in Salford is that, unlike TV Centre, and I think the redevelopment of TV Centre is lovely, I've gone there and I've seen what they've done to it and I think it's brilliant because they've kind of opened it out and got rid of a lot of the walls. In Salford, there's no walls. So children, grandchildren, grandparents, anyone can just walk to our garden.

It's open to the public, isn't it?

So literally you can get off the tram and they're in the Blue Peter garden. If they go through the right gate, because there's a tiny little gate, they can be in the Italian sunken garden that was taken piece by piece from London and re-put in Manchester.

Incredible.

And we've got a new veg plot, and we've got a gold badge walk, so children and parents, you can spot your famous person that has got a gold badge and take a photo by their gold badge path stone and I think it just gives us a new dynamic, because then when we're filming out in the Blue Peter garden, we can have anyone, any member of the public can just turn up and watch us do a live show. You have kids turning up, if it's summer holidays and we're filming, and they know we're filming, some children turn up with their parents at 10 o'clock in the morning, we're not live till half five, just because they want to experience Blue Peter and see it all in operation. I think it just means that we've got better access, and our audience can just be part of Blue Peter whenever they want, which is lovely. We grow vegetables, and it's just lovely to see. And if you're there, and myself and the production manager Claudia, we often do a bit of weeding on the garden if we've got a bit of spare time. Our production secretary, she feeds the fish. People will then come up to you and go, "Are you working on Blue Peter?" You can just say, "Yes, what do you like about the show?" Then you're talking to members of the public, which is what... We're all there to service our licence fee-payers, so it's great to just be able to talk to people who look after our content. We've got a massive bee. So in Manchester, they did this brilliant bee tour, you've seen those bees where you can do like a treasure hunt almost. We've got a Blue Peter bee in the middle of our garden, and you see kids going up, taking selfies, because obviously children love taking selfies now, and you just spot what they're interested in, then it's a nice bit of audience research as well.

What's the competition for Blue Peter? Because back in my day it used to be either stay in and watch Blue Peter or play out, whereas now, kids these days – I'm starting to sound like an old person – there's so many more things that compete for your attention, Netflix, YouTube, all of these kind of things. Ofcom recently did a study that said kids are more aware of YouTube than they are of the BBC and ITV brands, how do you compete there and rise to that challenge?

So I'd say with our all competitors, back in the day it would always be BBC versus ITV, or as you said, staying in, going out and things like that, and I would say with children nowadays, they've got more ways of watching us, so with the iPlayer, with catch up TV and things like that, so often they have delayed viewing, which is fine, but actually Blue Peter, we've increased our live audience by, roughly speaking, about 25%, so we've got more children watching as live than we did last year, which is great. They're watching us more on iPlayer as well, so actually we've got more children watching Blue Peter overall, which is great because actually sometimes the audience... and I know this, because on a lot of our letters, children might say, "I can't watch Blue Peter live, but I watch on a Friday morning with my parents," or, "We save it for Friday night," or, "We watch on Saturday mornings." It's lovely because we get all that feedback. So I know when kids watch it. And our competitors with like Netflix or YouTube, it's just... what we have to do is we've got to, like with our competitions, I like to think our competitions are an advert for Blue Peter, so if we do something big with an outside organisation, which then gets headlines, which then gets children going, "Wow, I could meet Steven Spielberg if I enter your Dream Big competition," or, "I could design the London 2017 mascot, which will be seen by millions of people at the sporting events," or, "I would love to go and see the Red Arrows. I'm going to apply for your Red Arrows competition." If we can do those things where kids then go, "Oh!" then that's Blue Peter. Then the parents obviously recommended Blue Peter, but then the kids, I want kids to want to ask for it as well. So the competition... there's so much competition, but we still get through to a good core audience, I'd say. But it is a whole host of things that children, if they don't, and with all our extra investment which the BBC has got for children's programmes, we're working on loads of different ways to then get that audience to go from CBeebies into CBBC and then stay with us all the way until 16 and which is very exciting actually because it's our kind of core mission to then pass them on to the likes of BBC Three and BBC One and things like that. The competition is out there, but will... I always think it's always good to have competition, because it makes you always really raise your game and really think differently about things.

And how do you connect with your audience? Because they're young kids. How do you know what's working, and what's not? In terms of the ingredients of the mix of the programme?

I would say so if you get a purple badge, that means you review the show. And so they have to answer like 10 questions about Blue Peter, and what they'd want in the show, what they found the most boring. So we literally ask them what the best thing was, they have to review one show, and then they have to go on our website and look at our website and then give us feedback. So we say what is the most interesting thing you learned? What's the takeout? What's the thing that you would not have in the show?

So if you build up a critical mass of kids that are saying, “That bit’s boring,” you’ll cut it.

Yes. And so it’s literally like that. And then I use the gut instinct that myself and the team, because I’ve obviously been working for the BBC and Children’s for 20 years, so you’ve got a bit of a gut instinct, but then you kind of, with all our competitions, I’m always going, “Is it going to be as good as the previous competition?” And I was “Just trust it, just trust it.” And then when the entries are coming in, you go, “It’s a bit slow today.” And then you suddenly go, “Please don’t let us down, children.” And then suddenly you get like 10 mailbags like, “We were right,” or “Yes the competition’s hit that.” Hit our kids and things. And also we’ve got a lovely thing called Stepping Out in BBC Children’s where we get to go and spend time with children in schools, and we just literally market test all our content. So we will go and say, we can’t obviously tell them about competition because these children might want to apply for it, but we say, “Do you like the BFG?” and we tease out things. Then we go, “What do you really like about it?” And then we spot and then we watch... we play them a film, which blew my mind the other day, because they wanted more facts in it, and it was about CERN, the Hadron collider. So we were going, “Maybe we should pair back a few of the facts,” because to talk to children when they’re having their tea about dark matter and things that they can’t see, and particle physics, that could be a bit too deep for the moment when they’re sitting down and having their fish fingers or whatever they’re eating and stuff.

And when we actually showed it to some children, they were like, “We want more facts.” And that blew our minds because we were going, “Okay, so that means that we’ll tweak it.” So the next time you do something big about science or engineering or whatever, we will maybe do a few more facts because we know that those children wanted them.

So what’s a typical week for you then? How do you put an episode together?

So I’ll start on Friday. So let’s pretend the show’s just happened on a Thursday. So Friday is our day where we have a team meeting and we review the show and we say what are people’s highlights, lowlights, and what can we do better? And then we do team updates. And it’s a really good, in a way I like to think of the theatre of live TV. So you always want a celebration point at the end of the week because then I want everyone to go away, the weekend going, “We did a good job, well done team.” Then there could be location filming over the weekends, depending on the events and things. So the film team just work seven days a week, and they could be anywhere, and the presenters could be anywhere. Then on a Monday we do a pitching meeting.

How big is the team?

The team is about 25, and then it increases on the studio day. It could increase like 40, 50, depending on the size of the studio and what we want to do with it.

Back to Monday, sorry for interrupting.

And so then any member of the team can come and pitch to us ideas. So Monday afternoon we have the pleasure of just sitting in a room and different members of the team come in and go, "Right, we're thinking of doing this idea, are you interested?" And then they might... some ideas might be really in detail, some might just be top lines where they just go, "Do you want to do something about this building?" or, "There's this race, are you interested in it?" And then we decide if we are going to do it. And then the team get feedback. And then the rest of the week is, Tuesday is the scripting day for the studio team. Wednesday is a changes edit where all our films, the film producer Andy, he spends time crafting the fine cuts of all the VTs. And then Thursday morning is the voice over sessions. We do a read through, and that's studio day, and then we do the live show. And then we go back to Friday, and it happens like that. And then myself and the series producer, Matt, we spend time across our weeks, I could be meeting contributors, meeting organisations, thinking of the... I try and plan the show. I always think I'm in charge of 12 to 24 months ahead, because big things only happen on Blue Peter because we plan so far ahead. Then my series producer looks after from like 12 to six months away. And then the producers are like probably three months away. They get the content and then turn it around. And that's kind of how the cycle happens. So it's like spinning plates because you always have to think ahead. So even on the 60th birthday day, I was still thinking, "Right, we've got Children in Need, we've got Christmas, we've still got to think of things for 2019."

Also a Thursday show to prepare for.

And Thursday's show. So you're really thinking ahead, and then you suddenly come back to reality, and then you're doing the day's show, and then on a Thursday we do... so the studio days are really cool because a) I'm a live TV producer at heart, so I do that job, I love it. So we do the read through, then the presenters arrive. Then you rehearse, things might go right, things might go wrong. New things might come up where you go, "We didn't know about that. Let's focus on that, because actually that's really more interesting than what we thought might be interesting." So we do all those rehearsals, and then at four o'clock they do a dress run of the show, and we still do the thing where I watch the show with the series producer, film producer, production manager and the digital producer, and then we all comment on how it's looking, and then the studio producer runs in with the team. We then give them all the feedback and then they've got about normally 15 to 20 minutes to turn around all my changes, and then the show goes live. I stand in the gallery because I never liked to sit in the gallery, always stand the gallery walking about.

Pacing around.

Until the show goes out.

And is it exhilarating to be on air or is it actually quite stressful, because at that point you can't undo if it's live.

I just love it. I've had 20 years of doing live TV, on and off, and I'm the calmest... there was one show recently that I said that that was my most nervous moment, and that was when we were doing the world record show. And for some reason I just felt

what... because normally I'm quite calm, because I always think I've got to be like a swan. You've got to be really calm, because if you start panicking that shows the team you're nervous, or you're worried about something. And when we were doing a live, we were doing live three world records trying to break them, and obviously if it is world records, you always want to break them live. You want to break them live and you want that, like celebration, cannons going off and things like that. And for some reason I just, that was the most nervous I've been. And I then afterwards they're like, "How was the show?" And I was like, "Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant." And then I just went, "I just had a really nervous feeling. I've never had that for years." The 60th birthday, I was not nervous because I trust my team so much that I just know that every member of the team, so on that day we had a such a big team because obviously it was like two studios with so many presenters. And I just said to everyone, "If every member of the team does their job really well on that day and just focus on your job as a group, we'll achieve this. So just focus on what you're doing, don't worry about anything else, just focus on what you're doing, and we will make it happen." And so at that point I was in the gallery and I just was like, brilliant. You know, in my head I was just going, "Yes, that's exactly what I wanted. That's exactly what I wanted." And with live TV if something goes wrong, that's the beauty of live TV.

Did Biddy Baxter come in for the 60th?

Yes. We had quite a few past presenters... we had most of the past presenters, so we had the first ever presenter of Blue Peter, Leila Williams. She made it up, and she was there on the first ever show.

I don't remember her.

So we had her.

That's before my time.

She was before you were born.

She is.

But she was so supportive. So we had all the past presenters in the studio, as many as could make it, and such an eclectic mix.

Yes, I saw the pictures that were released. It was incredible.

So Lindsey and Radzi, our current presenters, had all those eyes looking at them. But what's lovely about Blue Peter presenters, because they've all done it and been there, they're very supportive of the current lot because they know how they're probably feeling.

Like a continuum of Blue Peter presenters.

When you put them all in a room, they talk away and they get, “So you did the Falcons,” or, “You did skydiving,” or, “You did that story,” and it’s just lovely because they’ve all got some common ground to talk about. And then we had, yes, Biddy, Edward Barnes came up. We had every editor of Blue Peter in the room as well. So I had that pressure of going, “We’ve got practically every person who’s ever edited the show.”

I’d have been nervous that week, not the record breaking week. All eyes on you.

I suddenly just had a sense of calm, because I just thought, “Actually, whatever happens now is happening.” We had loads of people that were on the one o’clock news, the six o’clock news, and I was on the six o’clock news straight after the show, so if we had a bad show that’s not going to be great. But actually it was just like... we had the director general there. So we had all these people in the room watching the Philharmonic, and it just... but I just had this sense of calm after a while. I had a moment when... two kids made me just really think about my job that day. And then I was fine, because one just showed me all this stuff that he was so keen to show me about trying to get a Blue Peter Badge and things like that, and I just was like, this is amazing because this kid, I gave him some feedback years ago about, “Maybe you could think of this, you can think of this.” And he just did everything that I’d asked for. And I was like, “Wow, you’re definitely going to earn a badge for that.” And then another child in the studio audience, I walked in the studio just before live and I was getting on the mic, “Thank you so much for coming and it’s brilliant you’re in the studio, and I’m so excited it’s going to be the best show ever,” and things like that. And this one kid came up, and he was from an inner city school in Manchester, and just came up and said, “Excuse me, sir,” and he was like, “Are you the boss?” and I was like, “Yes, I look after Blue Peter,” Because it’s not something I say, that I’m the boss.

Not very BBC thing to say.

I said, “I look after Blue Peter. Yes, I’m in charge.” And he just went, “Thank you so much for the invite to come. I really appreciate it, and you do such a great job and just keep doing Blue Peter.” And that, Paul, I was like that... I was like, “Right.” And then my researcher, Jack, was with the mic, and I said, “Can you give him the mic?” It just was really touching.

Where are you going to take the show over the next few years?

I think kind of 19/20. So we did the 60th, and I think with all the new investment coming into Children’s, we’ve got some really exciting things like digital, as I said to you, tech can really help with Blue Peter. We can do amazing things. And so I think with all the developments in tech, I would say that’s going to be the exciting part where we can bring in new ways of communicating with our audience. So I want to focus on digital, definitely. And also I think it’ll probably be time to bring in... it could be bringing in new pets into the show, because we, I think children, we’ve had Iggy our guide dog and Iggy is now with a guy that has now gone to uni because of our guide dog, which is brilliant. And we’ve got a tortoise called Shelley. But I do think

I'm missing the pitter-patter of maybe pets, so I think maybe we might bring that back in. And then, presenters...

Are they in the office when you're off air, how does it work? You don't put them in a cage, do you?!

People look after them! So either it's the presenters. Helen Skelton, she had Bonnie the dog, and it was her dog.

It was literally her dog.

Her dog. And so she'd walk around with it, and it would be in the office when it needs to be, and it had its own ID and things like that.

That's amazing.

The Blue Peter dogs normally can get through security, which is great. So I think kind of that area, I think challenges... we still want to do challenges. I might think of how we can supersize appeals and support Children in Need and Sport Relief and Comic Relief, but just thinking of different ways of doing it. Because I said to the team... I'm currently planning 1920 and I've got a big list of things that I want to shake up and go, "Okay, what else can we do with this?" Because I always say to the teams, every item of Blue Peter we've got to have a go, have a laugh. Because actually if you don't laugh about stuff then it's not entertaining. You don't want to watch it or you don't know even work on it. And then think big. And so that's our key thing. And we're going to do that with the book awards, but everything just think, "Okay, we've gone past 60 but what else could we do?" Because I think actually this is the exciting time, because we've kind of reached that milestone now that the show can go on and we've got an audience that is increasing, and we've got more kids wanting their badges and stuff. So it's like trying to think of the next big thing, and we've got... I have had some really good meetings recently that I can't share with you, but those will take the show into the next level again.

And what are the trends in terms of how kids access the programme? Because you mentioned there the growth of catch up on iPlayer, you mentioned that you're the second best-performing website after Newsround, will there come a time when there won't be a live show 10, 20 years from now and then people watch it online and it will be recorded? Where do you think it will be 20 years from now?

I think that's an interesting point, because years ago I loved Saturday night TV, and in my head it was like, that was the big night, and you always wanted live TV, and it went through a period where it was all pre-recorded shows and there wasn't that live element. And then suddenly Strictly comes back and boom, it's Strictly, X-Factor, and suddenly live TV is...

Ant and Dec.

It has to be Ant and Dec. It's those kind of moments. And so I think there is a certain energy from a show when you do it live. And I think our audience, what's lovely is you can go, "This is live right now. And then we get letters by Tuesday talking about the live show that we had on Thursday. So if we say we need lots of people to send us in a picture of Shelley the tortoise by Tuesday because we need this and the other, we will get it by Tuesday. And so I think that live moment would be a loss to Blue Peter, I would say. But there's other ways of doing it. So it could be like live radio, podcasts, things like that. I think there could be different ways of us accessing and making that live feeling, but I think under my tenure I'd like to try and keep the live as much as possible, just because I think that audience interaction, it just makes it that bit more special compared to the sea of content they can access if suddenly we go, "This is live and you can get in touch with us now," that makes us set apart from our competition. It's almost like a USP in a marketing way.

And is there a strong educational element to the show? I mean, do kids these days still want to be shown how to make things? The old sticky-backed plastic type thing, or is it much more, as you said, vlogger-oriented celebrities, you know, pop culture, that kind of thing? Or is it the kind of mix I would recognise from my own childhood?

Yes. I'd say it's still the mix from your own childhood, and what's great is that yes, we might have a vlogger in doing a make, or we had Anne Marie, a pop star, coming in to do our Christmas cards, and she made our Christmas cards, and she just loved doing that.

I don't even know who she is. That's just really how old I am. I genuinely don't know who she is.

And so it's that kind of thing. They still access our content in a way, and they still want to know how to, like the Christmas card is still an iconic bit of Blue Peter's year that children are waiting to give their teachers Christmas cards, but they want to use the Blue Peter one. And so those moments still happen. I think it's just... as I said before, children are still children and they still love to make, bake. You know, like for Children in Need, we've done some like Pudsey cakes, and kids are loving that because we've seen it. The interaction when they're writing back to us, and taking photos and things like that. So I think it is, yes, it's a good... it's just a mix. And that's the beauty of it. Biddy Baxter always says to me, "A magazine show can cover anything." So we can do educational content. So with CERN, as I said with the hadron collider, it's like that is a very heavy scientific film, and when we showed it to children they wanted even more facts. And we've done a recent competition called Lights, Camera, Action, where our winner is going to engineer a pop music video. So that is showing engineering skills like sound engineers, lighting engineers, cam engineers. So we're not saying this is an engineering film, but we're actually showing it in a way that it's almost like you're learning just by being entertained. And that's the best way I think children learn, because then they go, "Did you see that? I might want that job in the future." Or our Design a Dragon competition, that was taking a historic building, where a child then designed a gargoyle dragon to be put on place, the first time Historic England have allowed it, to go on like the Great Pagoda at Kew Gardens, so that's teaching kids about history, architecture and if they want to be an

architect, and the actual chief architect of Historical Palaces was a Blue Peter viewer who loved York Minster Boss competition many years ago, and when I met him, that inspired him to go and do his career. So it's almost like education, but without realising it.

And you're a well-known advocate for children's literacy. I mean you've been a judge on the Blue Peter Book Awards, tell us about that.

The Book Awards are a highlight of my year. Although it's the most intensive time, and actually in the lead up to the 60th. So if you think it's October time, I got 20 books sent to me to read from the end of August all the way through September, to then judge the first week of October, just before the 60th.

As well as putting on the programme.

Yes. So I read all the books, because then I feel like...

A lot of coffee was drunk during that period, I imagine.

Normally what I do, Paul, is normally get up very early in the morning and then have a coffee or a tea, and then just try and read a children's book before I go to work. That's how I do it.

Wow. Must be a quick reader then.

I am. I've got the art of fast reading down to a tee! I do think that our Book Awards are so important to children and parents. It is that stamp of approval of like, "This is a good book." Our judges this year were brilliant. We actually brought in a vlogger like Louise Pentland, who is a big vlogger with a massive audience on YouTube and social media and things like that. It's brilliant because she's a mum. She's reading it from that perspective. We had Alex D. Smith, who is an author. We always try and have someone who is a parent, someone who is an author, someone from the industry. It just then works in a judging panel and it's really good. We work with BookTrust on it, so they're an independent charity that help us manage the Book Awards. And when we announce the winners on World Book Day, it's just really exciting. The best thing, I think, about the Book Awards is we've got 12 schools that then we give... so when we do the shortlist of our top three in each category for Best Book of Facts and Best Story, we then give it to children to decide the winners. Children who are from wide-ranging schools across the UK, they all apply for it. This year, we had, I think, it was over 600 schools apply and only 12 actually get the gig. Then all the children get books. They get to take them home, they get to read them. They get to keep them, and then they get to judge them. I think that, and they get a Blue Peter badge for doing it as well, and I think that, to children that may not have that chance in life to do it, that gives them real ownership and pride in what they've done, and they're judging our Book Awards. Then they all get to vote. Then I don't know who wins until February time, and we announce it on World Book Day, which is one of the most exciting days for books. Every child loves World Book Day. It's another part of Blue Peter where you just think, "This is great." When I go into a

bookshop, I do love seeing the little sticker of Blue Peter Book Awards Shortlist. You just think, "That's great." It's good advertising as well for the show.

Absolutely, and great for the book as well, frankly, to have that sticker on it.

Yes. I think publishers are quite happy when the kids vote for them, because actually then it gives them a real sense of achievement. They think, "This is voted by the audience," which is brilliant.

How do you find your presenters? I mean if I wanted to be the next presenter of Blue Peter, how do you do that? In a sense, it's quite a special talent to be able to present Blue Peter. It's much different from merely, I say, presenting to adults.

Yes. You have to have lots of aspects to your character to present on Blue Peter. You've got to be really up for a challenge and be generally interested in everything. You've got to say, "Okay. I might be jumping out of a plane one day. The next day, I might be judging the Book Awards or reading books. Then, I might be going to CERN and talking particle physics. Or then, I might be doing this." You have to have an interest, a genuine interest, in everything.

This sounds like the best job in the world so far.

Which is brilliant. Then, you have to be good at live TV, which is an art. Actually, live broadcasting, we don't have autocue. The script is written. They read it, they kind of memorise it, then, obviously, live TV, they have to be flexible with it. They never have autocue, which I think is brilliant. Then, it means they're talking in their own authentic voice. Then, you also... so you have to be live TV, and then the film content, you just have to then be physically strong enough to do the challenges.

The actual stamina needed.

Yes. When Radzi did jumping out the plane with the RAF Falcons, he had to be physically strong enough and have the muscle memory of how to jump out of the plane, how to really memorise it. So he just had to have that strength and that core ability. Then he did a gymnastic challenge. He was actually training with people who train Olympic athletes to do this training. He had to re-train his body in different ways to make that happen. That was four months' work. A lot of it is not filmed, so he's just going to a place to learn... like Lindsey's done a swim-run challenge. She's been swimming for literally months and months and months. That's what you don't see, but you still have to do it. You have to have that real commitment. Then, also, whenever you're anywhere in the country, you just have to always think, you're representing Blue Peter. You have kids coming up. What's lovely is when you are with a Blue Peter presenter, our production team, we always spot children going, "That's Radzi," or, "That's Lindsey." Then, you have to be that nice person to go, "I think there's someone over there that wants your autograph, or wants to talk to you about it." We always engage with our audience wherever we are. They're brilliant ambassadors. Lindsey and Radzi just amazing, because they just genuinely love kids. Lindsey got her job entering a competition where we did a search for a Blue

Peter presenter called You Decide. Kids voted in their tens of thousands for Lindsey to get her job out of three top finalists. Lindsey had that boost, I'd say, that I said to her, "Look, you've been picked by children, so that's brilliant." Then, Radzi got his job because I got his show reel many, many years ago when I was working as head of presentation. I dealt with loads of show reels then, but there was something about him that I just... and it is just that. Dare I say, like Simon Cowell, that X-Factor, there's just something, when you watch something, you just go, "That person's interesting."

There's a spark.

It just makes you sit forward and go, "Oh what is it about him that I'm interested in?" Then I look after the Edinburgh International TV Festival, a thing called The Network which is a talent scheme for people who want to break into the industry. So I look after the live TV side of that. He was actually one of the delegates, so I'd seen his show reel. Then, a couple of months later, I'd sent him an email going, "I'll pass it onto the Blue Peter editor," at the time. Then I met him in Edinburgh. Again, thought, "There's just something." Because I've dealt with so many presenters in my life that it was just like, "Yes. He's interesting." Then, through The Network, you get to do a work placement. Out of all the thousands of people that applied for it, he got it. I wasn't on the judging panel at that point. He then joined my team in presentation. Then, from that, he got... the Natural History Unit did a show called Wild. They asked me to recommend anyone they thought... because they were having trouble finding a third person. They described this person. I went, "I've got someone for you." I took them to meet Radzi in our Birthday Card Room. At CBeebies, we have loads of birthday cards and he was sorting out the birthdays. Took these producers in, said to Radzi, "Oh I've got some people I want to introduce you to." He went, "Do you want tea, coffee?" He just thought I was introducing, because he was a runner at the time, to give them tea and coffee. I was like, "No. They want to meet you." Then, they were so impressed with him, they gave him a job on Wild. Then he did that for the summer, then, Helen Skelton left Blue Peter so I was waiting... Helen Skelton left and Lindsey joined. I was waiting to find out from the competition, was it going to be a guy or a girl that got that job? Lindsey got the job. Then, I just went, "There's one guy on my hit list that I want to join." Then, one Monday afternoon, I invited Radzi in. He thought it was just for a casual chat, talking about general life and things like that. Then, I just said to him, with the controller, Cheryl Taylor, "We want you to be the 37th Blue Peter presenter." His face literally just went, like dropped. He was like, "Is that real?" I went, "Yes." He goes, "I just can't... I can't," and he just was so... because he'd always wanted to do it. I knew that he'd be good at it. He's proved me right. He's proved me right and some. Actually, Lindsey and Radzi, they're just amazing. They are kind of that... every generation, I just think, there will be some children in 20 years' time who have probably got my job, or the next editor who is out there somewhere, will be like, "I remember Lindsey and Radzi," and things like that. It's great. It's a very good... I'd say, it's a brilliant job to cut your teeth on. When all the past presenters, they've all said it was their best job. I know they'd obviously flatter me in that way but, genuinely, they just went, their life experience... Helen Skelton always goes, "It's almost like you've had your life times five in the short period of time you have, just because you are doing all these amazing things."

You mentioned there that before Blue Peter, you were head of presentation at BBC Children's. What did that job involve?

It involved looking after the channel. Basically any gap between the shows, it's filled with trails.

That's CBBC and CBeebies?

CBBC, CBeebies, and then all the red button content. I was in charge of Bedtime Stories, for CBeebies, the CBeebies House where they do makes and link between the shows. They are the faces of the channel. Then, there was CBBC. It was looking after the Hacker the Dog and Iain Stirling, who is now on Love Island, and bringing new presenters in and just basically making sure the channel's always TX'ed, or transmitted. Then, looking after red button content. It was a brilliant... it really cut my teeth on being... it was the first executive producer kind of role I got of senior managers. It really did cut my teeth. I was actually in charge of the move of presentation from London to Manchester. It taught me a lot about how to run a team and what to do and what not to do. You learn a lot. Then, also, what makes people tick because that move to Manchester, it was like literally turn the lights out on a Friday, we turn the lights on on a Monday in a new studio. All of us are working on the transition. All of us have either moved houses, so you're dealing with all the personal stuff together with your team's personal stuff together with actually on-screen, getting things happening. It was a really interesting time. I'd say you just learnt so much and actually thought, actually I'm quite resilient at times. You were just dealing with so many different things.

Did you always want to work in telly?

Yes. I can tell you that because my grandma always said that all the grandchildren played with Lego in different ways – because I'm talking in your podcast, I can mention brands, which is lovely because on the BBC, you never can mention brands – and I used to build TV studios and do TV shows.

That's pretty TV-centric.

It is just... they just always, as a young kid, I just was obsessed with telly. I just think that coloured box in the corner of the room was my kind of, wow, there's a whole world out there. Isn't it exciting? Then, I said this recently when I was giving a talk to some students, that BBC, at that time, you could only do work experience when you were 16. I'd found out, well, my dad had found out, that... because none of my family are in TV, no one in my school... there's only one other person who went into TV in my school. We are all from completely different backgrounds. On my 16th birthday, I spent an afternoon, as soon as I got in from school, phoning the BBC switchboard, working my way around everyone going, "No. We haven't got any work experience, haven't got any work experience." I got through to one person called Thelma Jursa. I don't know if she's out there, don't even know if she listens to this podcast. She gave me work experience on BBC News. She went, "Oh someone's just pulled out. Do you want work experience next week?" I went, "Yes. I'll take it," and just said that, as a 16-year-old. Went to school the next day and went to my form tutor, "I got work experience at the BBC next week in London. Can I go?" She, bless her, was very

supportive, Mrs Beasley. She just went, "Right. I've got to go to the headteacher." Took me to the headteacher. They signed it off and then, as a 16-year-old, I just was going to Central London, into TV Centre. Then, at the end of that week, I remember walking out and going, "I'm coming back to this place," just in my head. It was just such a magical... Like TV Centre was a magical building. I'd seen it on Saturday mornings and on Blue Peter and Noel's House Party and all those shows.

Iconic.

Then I went to uni.

You knew TV was for you at that point?

Yes. Just loved it and just the thought of working on it, you just walked into TV studio and it was like, "Wow. Look at this." You just felt natural. Then I went to uni. Did a media studies course. Then, in-between, in the summer holiday, did a placement at BBC Children's that I got after writing a letter. Then, I left uni early because I was offered a job as a runner on ChuckleVision.

ChuckleVision, wow!

To tell my university lecturer, "I'm going to go and work on ChuckleVision as a tea boy. Is that all right?" They were like... I said, "I'll still do my finals. I'll still do all my projects. I just need to... this is my break." Then, that is where it started.

Was Children's the way forward even then, at that point?

Yes.

Because you've done it for 20-odd years, haven't you?

I've worked in entertainment development. I've worked in different... I've worked in marketing and things like that. I think there must be something about my brain. I still think like a child. Most people in children's TV have still got that awe about the world where you ask... I just ask so many questions all the time. I just want to find out like, "How does that work?" or, "What does that do?" I think it's just... and the magic of children is that when you say to them, "Is this any good?" They go, "No." All my godchildren and my niece and nephew, when they used to watch Blue Peter, would go, "We didn't like that, but we liked that." I'll be like, "Why?" Then, you just interrogate it. You just have to work harder, because you're not the audience. That's what's great. Otherwise, you could be... if you're working for other things, you could sit back and go, "Yes. I know what it's like, because I actually watch this show." Whereas actually, we have to work that bit harder so it just keeps your brain ticking over. It is just... when you've got children in the audience coming in or you read a letter or you see a bit of feedback from a child, you just think, that's why we do our job.

If it's not too personal a question, what would you do next? You've been in children's telly for 20 years. Being the editor of Blue Peter is, presumably, the best job there is in children's telly. If I were you, I would fight off any oncomers that would want to prise you out of the editor's chair. Do you have any designs on what might be next? What does the editor of Blue Peter do next?

Well, it's funny, I've spoken to all the past editors and what they do. The previous one to me, he went to go and work at 5 Live to go back to his journalistic roots. Other ones set up companies, other ones were consultants for different people. In my job at the moment, I meet such an eclectic mix of different people from different organisations, different backgrounds, different everything. In a way, it's like a chocolate box of, "Oh, that job might be quite interesting. That might be, that might be." Who knows where I might end up? Currently, I don't want to leave my job. Everyone thought, 60th birthday, literally the next day, I'd be like, "Right. I'm off." But I want to stay there because straightaway, there's some other projects which are for 2019, end of 2019, that are too exciting. Suddenly, my hunger's there again, where I'm going, "Oh. I want to stay there just for that little bit." I do know that I've got to leave at some point, so I can hand over to someone else to give this lovely job. I think Bidy did a great job. I don't think I could do this job for 26 years that she did.

She did it for 26 years? No wonder her name's so recognisable and iconic.

Most editors do about five years, four years. I've done, it'll be my sixth, going into my sixth year in January. I think it's that kind of thing that... but I just fundamentally love it. Unless there's another opportunity where I go, "Oh I've never..." Because, in a way, I think to myself, "Right, I've reached this peak in children's broadcasting. Maybe I should just start at the bottom again and work in a completely different career, and work my way up again just for something that's interesting, that will use my skills from this job, but in a completely different way." Who knows?

Do you consult with Bidy Baxter? I don't know why, but imagery was conjured up then of the Godfather where Marlon Brando would show Al Pacino... Don Corleone would show his son how to run the Mafia empire as the elder statesman, as it were. Do you go to Bidy and say... I mean 26 years is a long time, a lot of experience there.

Yes. All the past editors, I respect them big time. Actually, until you've done the job, people can say, "Oh well. They did it this way, they did it this way." They haven't done it, but the editors have done it. They've been in my position. What's interesting when you talk to all of them is all of them have experienced the same things that I experience today, that happened to Bidy, that happened to Oliver MacFarlane, that happened to Lewis Bronze, that happened to Steve Hocking or Richard Marson. Everyone has experienced the same things that I've experienced. It's quite good in a way because then you think, "Oh it's not just me," when you're really pushing for something and a door might be just shutting. You still have to work really hard on Blue Peter to get through doors of things. People always go, "You just phone them up and you're in." You phone them up and they'll listen to you, but you're not in.

You've got to earn it.

You've got to work to get into... like when I got the first ever TV cameras into MI5, that took a lot of effort and a lot of planning and a lot of checking in with them for them to give us permission. You're still having to work hard and things like that. Whenever I see Bidy and Edward Barnes, what's lovely is they never tell me what to do. They go, "You're in charge of the show." Everyone has always said, "You're in charge of the show. We're not going to..." But you hear their stories and you go, "Ah. That's how they dealt with that type of thing." Then, you go, "Oh that could be useful." It's like those nuggets of information that you just can go, "Oh yes. I'll take that, just because that's a good way of managing that scenario." What's great is when they watch the show and their feedback at the 60th, it was just lovely. I was sitting next to Bidy later on that evening. They were just talking to me. It just sort of was brilliant. It's just like we're a good family. Once you're in the Blue Peter family, you might have your disagreements, you might have your moments, but deep down, you're still the family that sticks together which is lovely.

Have you ever fancied going airside, as it were? I mean, you'd make a great presenter.

I think I've got the most boring voice in the world! I said this to someone this weekend. I was like, "Oh I'm doing this podcast on Tuesday. I've got such a boring voice. How am I going to go for it?"

I'm not sure I agree!

When I used to go on talk back to the presenters in their ears, so I was in Helen Skelton's ear and in loads of presenters' ears over the time, they always used to say, "Ewan. If nuclear war broke out, we'd love you to tell us. You've just got that kind of..."

That calming...

That calming voice. I've never, ever thought about being a presenter. When you're junior, you do have to stand in for guests and chat and do all that kind of thing. But I just think I'm just not that... I just don't like presenting. I don't mind talking about passionate topics. I don't mind talking to a crowd and things like that. That's all fine. I don't know if I could ever deal with the looking at a camera and going, "That's a bit weird." I'm just talking to you now. It's like I'm talking to a person.

I literally am a person.

I tell all my presenters, "It's easy. Just talk like it's a person. You're there, you do all that."

It's difficult when it's just a lens.

It is just that cold lens, but who knows? I might suddenly just find my presenting skills. You never know.

It's been a hugely enjoyable podcast. Thank you ever so much for your time.
Thank you Paul. It's been a pleasure.