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opening extract from

Dear Blue Peter

written by

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By Lorna and Heather, 1972

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A note on the letters:
All the letters included in this book have been rendered as accurately as possible. In some cases, they have been slightly cut to fit the available space, but never so as to change the meaning. The original spellings and punctuation have been kept throughout.

Royalties from this book will be donated to the John Hosier Music Trust, supporting impoverished young musicians in the UK and Hong Kong.

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Introduction

IN A WAY, it all began with a letter. When I was very small, the Jacqueline Wilson of the day was Enid Blyton. This was long before her Noddy years, and when I was five and had graduated from the comic *Chicks Own*, the treat of the week was *Sunny Stories* – a magazine packed with tales of adventure, animals, boarding schools, the circus and Brer Rabbit.

At the beginning of each edition was a letter from Enid Blyton herself, written at her home – Green Hedges in Beaconsfield. It was full of chit-chat and news about her two daughters, Gillian and Imogen, who must have been about my age, and each letter ended with Enid's facsimile signature. I was totally hooked – and such an avid fan it wasn't long before I wrote to Enid telling her about our black cocker spaniel Bess who obligingly let me bandage her paws when I was playing nurse and how I'd tried to brighten up the garden by painting all the cream hollyhocks pink and orange. When Enid replied, it was probably the best moment of my life. She was my friend – so a few days later I wrote again. But imagine the shock when another Enid Blyton letter arrived, word for word identical to her first one! "She doesn't remember me," I sobbed as I ran to my mother.

It was a tough lesson for a six-year-old and one I never forgot. And when Edward Barnes, Rosemary Gill and I were planning the "new" *Blue Peter* in 1962, deciding we'd award badges to children who sent us good ideas for the programme and interesting letters, I knew we must never,

ever fall into the Enid Blyton trap.

This was how the *Blue Peter* Correspondence Unit was born. All viewers who'd won badges were entered into a card – later an electronic – index, against which all incoming, badge-worthy letters were checked. It was time-consuming but infinitely worthwhile. "It was nice to hear from you again…" reply number two would begin. "When you wrote to us last time, your hamster had a bad paw, we do hope it's quite better now…"

The badges were blue, silver and gold. As well as good ideas for the programme and interesting letters, stories, poems, drawings, paintings and models were considered badge-worthy too. To earn a silver badge, viewers were expected to do something different from their first badge-winning attempt. Gold badges were awarded for really outstanding achievements such as saving someone's life or extreme bravery. The winners and runners-up of *Blue Peter* competitions were awarded competition badges and in 1988, green badges could be won by children who were concerned about the environment. In the 1990s it was decided that emails would qualify for a badge if they were read out on the programme or if they contained really good programme ideas. And in 2006 the purple badge was launched via the website for *Blue Peter* Team Players. These are viewers chosen to help the programme by testing new ideas. The great bonus for badge winners is the entitlement to free admission to what are now over 200 places of interest in the UK and abroad.

What began as an act of keeping faith with our viewers (whose parents were paying our salaries via the licence fee) became a rich source of programme material. By the early 1980s, approximately 75 per cent of each programme stemmed from suggestions provided by our audience. It was the most remarkable and rewarding piece of research. The letters – often more than 7,000 per week, including competition entries – came from all corners of the British Isles, and from abroad. They were from every type of home, thoroughly confounding any media studies academics who mis-

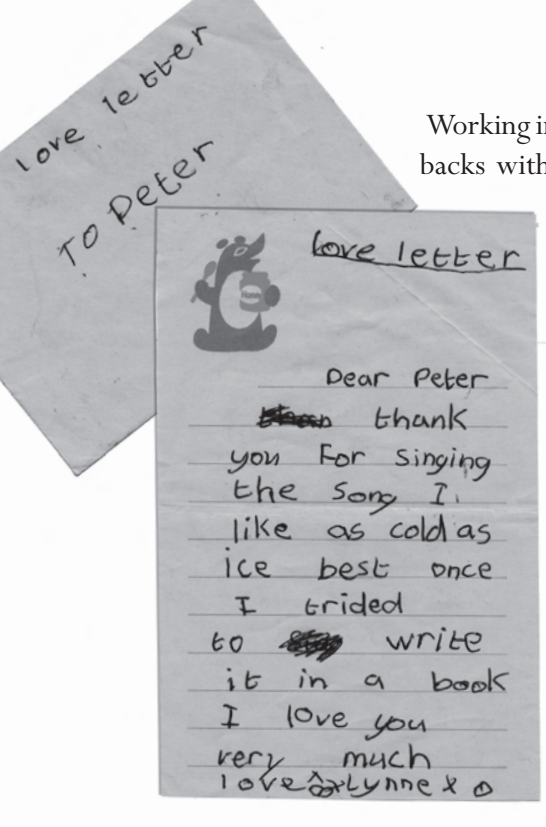
guidedly pigeon-holed the programme as "middle class".

It was refreshing for all of us to have this direct finger on the pulse of the children who were watching *Blue Peter* in their millions. The branding, as it would be called nowadays, was a masterstroke and the fact that the badges were not giveaways but had to be won, and that they were attainable by every child, whatever their background or ability, resulted in colossal loyalty to the programme. Audiences peaked at seven or eight million in the winter months, falling to four or five when the clocks went forward and there was more scope for playing out of doors.

It is inconceivable that Independent Television would have agreed to the capital outlay required to set up and maintain the *Blue Peter* Correspondence Unit. The results were long term, not instant. That the BBC was prepared to cover the costs was public service broadcasting at its very best.

John Noakes, Valerie Singleton and Peter Purves with Shep and Jason looking at viewers' suggestions for naming Shep





Working in a one-way medium has obvious drawbacks with none of the instant contact children have with their families and friends. It is a great tribute to the presenters that so many viewers have felt that they not only know them but trust them, too. On behalf of our viewers we fought constant battles to get programme material ahead of our rivals and there were plenty of internal battles, too. We wanted the biggest studios, the best filming and editing facilities, and the best camera crews. And once I was reprimanded by a senior administrator at Bush House, the BBC's overseas broadcasting headquarters. Ringing with an urgent programme-related query on a Friday aternoon, I was told by an irate voice: "Don't you realise it is only half an hour before the official end of the working week?"

But when things roughed up, being told we couldn't use studio TC1 at Television Centre (at that time the largest TV studio in Europe) when we'd scooped the first UK appearance of the Chinese acrobats, or we'd had a breakdown in the middle of one of our "live" transmissions and lost a film, it was always heartwarming to look at the latest letters from children who thought of the presenters as their friends and who loved the unpredictability of the programme. "I like *Blue Peter* because I never know what's going to happen next" was a constant refrain.

There were letters from adults, too, of course. It was a compliment to hear from Edward Sieff, Chairman of Marks & Spencer, after Valerie had

told Dorothy Smith's story of the birth of the famous store, vividly illustrated by Bob Broomfield:

Dear Miss Singleton, I have just seen a transcript of your talk on my brother Lord Sieff. It was most kind and sympathetic, and beautifully told. I should like to thank you.

It was through the letters that we began to realise the extraordinary rapport *Blue Peter* was establishing with children. A woman employed as a companion to a seven-year-old girl wrote to say they were regular *Blue Peter* viewers. The child had suffered a traumatic experience when she was three that had resulted in her becoming a voluntary mute – incapable of speech. On a recent programme there had been a film shot at Chessington Zoo that had included a baby seal and we had announced a competition to name it. At the end of the programme, the child turned to the companion and said "Her name is Brenda". These were the first words she had spoken for four years.

There were many other touching letters telling of the pleasure children had gained from watching *Blue Peter* on Mondays and Thursdays; how they'd been stimulated to follow up an item or how thrilled they had been to receive a badge or have had their letter read out on the programme. Sometimes children wrote directly to me. I kept up a long series of letters to an eight-year-old boy suffering from leukaemia. When the boy died, his father wrote: "You may not know it, but your letters meant everything to my son. He looked forward to them right to the end and he was never disappointed. He truly loved the programme and felt part of it. Thank you for bringing some light and joy into his last few months."

Blue Peter is a challenge – children vote with their fingers far more readily than adults. If they're not entertained they switch off or switch over. It has always been geared to the pre-pubescent child and I'm glad to say the BBC has no intention of changing this target audience. The programme is

aimed at the twelves and under and that is where it will stay. It's an audience that is lively, enquiring and compassionate, and when the material is well presented, one that is keen for information which it absorbs like blotting paper. It's a compliment to the programme and the presenters that children don't consider presenting *Blue Peter* as work. "Why were your hands shaking?" was the theme of hundreds of letter to Sarah Greene after she joined the programme and attempted her first "make".

There is sometimes a gleam of sympathy. "Were you nervous yesterday?" wrote a nine-year-old after Lesley Judd had made a series of disastrous fluffs. "I know just how you feel. I felt very nervous indeed when I had to read Psalm 23 in Chapel last Sunday." And one gentle rebuke from a ten-year-old that's stuck in my mind over the years was addressed to John Noakes: "Dear John, you are good at climbing and kind to dogs and you help old ladies across the road, but please would you comb your hair."

Of course, there is criticism as well as praise – on the whole more from adults or teenagers than the children for whom the programme is intended. Sometimes deserved and sometimes betraying deep-seated preju -dices, as for example the letters talking of the "myth" of the six million people murdered by the Nazis following Otto Frank's appearance when he brought Anne's diaries to the studio.

Will it ever be possible to carry out such sustained and in-depth research into the impact of a television programme in the future? Probably not. Letters are fast becoming an endangered species. This is particularly true of the last ten years of *Blue Peter,* as communication by email has become the rule rather than the exception. Electronic communication is fast but ephemeral. Hard copies are often not taken and all have to be junked after three months, making life much more difficult for archivists, biographers and historians. There is also something clinical about an email; in many ways, handwriting is a clue to the personality of the writer, especially when the letters are from the very young.

Sadly, this problem was compounded in the 1990s when what can only be described as a BBC paper purge was ordered. A great many files were destroyed indiscriminately and valuable documents like *Blue Peter's* correspondence with Otto Frank were lost for ever, as well as countless letters and emails from children.

Yes, the 50th anniversary of *Blue Peter* is a milestone in BBC history. It's a tribute to the presenters, the technicians, the production teams and the talented editors who followed Edward, Rosemary and me – Lewis Bronze, Oliver MacFarlane, Steve Hocking and Richard Marson – who so cleverly brought the programme bang into the 21st century. But, above all, it is a tribute to the children who wrote in their millions supporting the Appeals and giving us so many of the brilliant ideas that have kept *Blue Peter* afloat for the last five decades.

Here is just a small selection of the letters, and later the emails, that have inspired successive production teams, kept our feet on the ground and *Blue Peter* on the air. A huge thank you to you all!

Biddy Baxter, June 2008



Lesley Judd with Otto Frank who brought Anne's Diary to the studio