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Alumni profile: BBC Weatherman John Hammond

John Hammond, BBC Weatherman and University of Birmingham graduate, talks about his time at the School of Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences and his work as a meteorologist.

Title: **John Hammond - BBC Weatherman and University of Birmingham graduate - view video (/schools/gees/our-students/postgraduate/john-hammond.aspx)**

Duration: 8.06 mins

Speaker Names (if given): **S1** John Hammond

S1 Unbelievably it's 21 years since I was last here. I was an MSc student here in 1988-89 just for one year. It's a bit like going back to your old school really, everything seems a little bit smaller. I remember looking at the Muirhead Tower and thinking that it used to be twice the size. It is a bizarre feeling because you recognise bits of the campus and then you turn a corner there's a brand new building slap bang in your face. It's a regret that it has been that long since I've been back, so I'm delighted to be here and I feel very privileged to be asked to perform the exercise of opening these weather stations.

I always had an ambition to be a weatherman and in those days in order to join the Met Office you had to have a science degree; maths or physics usually. I embarked on a physics degree at Salford University but within the first year I'd failed all my exams and I was facing the prospect of getting kicked off the course. So I had a quick rethink and joined the geography faculty and did a geography degree but of course that meant I wouldn't be able to join the Met Office. So I saw that Birmingham had an MSc in Meteorology and if I did that after my geography degree that enabled me to join the Met Office so that was my motivation for coming here. It's also a nice city and it's not too far away from my parents who live down near Evesham, so it ticked all the boxes for me.

There were two of us on the masters course in Meteorology - Eddie and me - and it was very chilled out and the style of lecturing in those days was very relaxed. I also met my future wife here, she was training to be a physio in the city, so I've got fond memories of that - even though we're now divorced (laughs). We still get on very well and we've got a son to prove it. So I met Lucy here. It seemed a very villagey atmosphere to me. I lived up in Harborne which is a great place to live and I could just wander down to University every day – it was a 20 minute walk through the QE [Queen Elizabeth hospital]. It was just very relaxing. It was an environment surrounded by other weather enthusiasts and we had our own little weather station up on the top of the Muirhead Tower – called Birmingham University weather services in those days and some of the people, some of the faces that are here today who I remember way back when have been inspirational in my career. So it's great to be back it brings back very fond memories for me.

Weather broadcasting has changed an awful lot and I think that the public's demand for accuracy is far greater than it used to be. You used to be able to get away with banal phrases like "sunshine and showers" but such is the demand now, and such has technology leaped on, that you can't get away with phrases like that now. You have to be much more specific and one of the reasons I am here today is to endorse this new project for launching a weather station in the middle of the city because that's going to give us tremendous insight into the urban climate; things like the urban heat island effect that you may have heard of. Because traditionally a lot of our weather stations are built on airfields or out in the countryside which is all very well and good but these days most people live and experience the weather in urban areas. So it's incredibly important for us to get a greater insight into urban effects on the weather. All of our computer models now are very high resolution, whereas in the old days when I first started broadcasting typical resolution of a model was probably 50 kilometres. It's now down to one and a half kilometres, which is great but in order to input observations into that computer model you also need an observation network which is of similar resolution which picks up urban effects. So we have to get good data in to get good data out. So that's another great reason why we're launching this weather station in the middle of the city centre as well as one in Edgbaston.

I did once famously while I was working on ITV... we used to have to do the national weather on the right hand side of the map and the regional weather for some reason on the left hand side of the map and one day I forgot which one I was doing and, of course, I turned the wrong way. I think that still regularly appears on Auntie's Bloomers or TV Nightmares or something like that. So that's one good one. The highlight though for me was having the chance when I was in the same studio as my rock legends, my rock heroes Status Quo, because we did the weather at the same studio that they were performing a single in. I managed to befriend Francis Rossi and he asked me if I wanted to play with them at Wembley for their concert. Which I did and that is the greatest moment of my career. It's nothing to do with the weather but for me as a Quo fan it was just immense.

I've never had a Michael Fish moment yet, although I am working on it because it didn't do his career any harm did it, let's face it! So the more I get it wrong the better really. No, I don't think we'll ever probably make the mistake that was made on that particular night way back in October '87 purely because our computer models are that much better than they used to be. On that particular occasion, I would say this, but we were very unlucky in as much as the direction of that storm changed critically by just a few miles and it made all the difference in terms of the windspeed across southern England. Obviously, in terms of the public if their tree fell over their car and their house was ruined by that hurricane then they've got no sympathy with the Met Office and I completely understand that. From a completely scientific point of view, we only got it wrong slightly but I don't think that we would make that kind of mistake again. So I guess in terms of those Michael Fish moments there's less scope these days because we are better at what we do.

We are now in an environment where we've got news and we've got pictures of weather all around the world and that does tend to skew how we see these weather events and how unusual they are. However, I do think that underlying that is a trend for more extreme weather events and it does certainly tie in with our global climate models which do predict that we're not only just going to get hotter events but on occasion, such as last winter, more extremes in the other direction. It's part of this shift. It is very difficult to see the wood for the trees in terms of a pattern and in any one year the weather will do its thing and the difference between weather and climate is something very difficult to communicate to the public. It's very difficult to get society on board with the message of climate change because of the variability of weather from month-to-month and from year-to-year. But if you look from decade-to-decade, there are clear signals; the weather is getting more extreme. The temperature is rising.

Because I am such a nerd and my favourite weather type is snow I always choose a house that is a certain elevation above sea level in order to get as much snow in any one winter. So, before I buy a house, and I am in the process of looking for a new house, I always get the Ordnance Survey map and shade in the areas that are above 150 metres and I only look for houses in those areas so that I can get as much snow as I possibly can in any one winter. So, at the moment, when I go home this evening that's what I'll be doing, getting the Ordnance Survey map out and shading in the areas around North West London which are above 150 meters above sea level. Sad but true.

END OF RECORDING

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