

Temporary Success

Title 88

While Anthony Smith was imitating Jules Verne in Africa with some considerable success, I too as Temporary Acting Science Correspondent was getting used to newspaper writing and had success in getting a good number of science stories into print. Here I can only mention a few to give the flavour of science in the period of 1962 and 1963.

Those were optimistic days for science, with the first halting steps towards the Moon in the USA. Although an unmanned American spacecraft to photograph the Moon, the third *Ranger*, had failed again at the end of January 1962, Col. John Glenn at the age of 40, then considered old, could successfully orbit the Earth three times in his spacecraft *Friendship 7* on 20 February 1962. I was able to forecast six days before the event with five pictures on a whole page of the *Daily Telegraph*, his orbits, the tracking stations and the then biggest use of computers. This was encouraging in deed, both for the American space effort and also for me in getting prominence for science in the paper. Admittedly the Russian cosmonauts Gagarin and Titov had preceded Glenn, and the American astronauts Shepard and Grisom had already made suborbital flights, but this story confirmed Glenn as a real American hero.

My first 'Science and the Citizen' column dealt with the "Little Ice Age" when the Thames froze over in London, and I could announce in January 1962 that the centigrade temperature scale would be used in public forecasts by the British Meteorological Office. My second column dealt with the search for signals from other worlds, and another long article in February 1962 reported the results of the International Geophysical Year, then being published for the first time, three years after its conclusion. Also the eighth nuclear power station in Britain, at Oldbury, Gloucestershire, had been officially cleared to go ahead for design and construction.

Most interesting item in March 1962, was a large picture and my report that in the US Antarctic Base of McMurdo, a small atomic power station was producing 300 kW electricity. At the time, little did I imagine that seven years later, I would be visiting this very atomic station during my stay in the Antarctic. [See Title 199] It was then still working and even producing distilled water, but was shut down in 1970. The most expensive aspect of this whole operation was its transportation to the Antarctic, as every item had to be cut down in size for air transport. The operation of the station itself was considered cheaper than an equivalent diesel electric station, as Admiral Welch, the commander of the base told me during a briefing. The reactor was of the pressurised water type with 93 % enriched uranium 235 as fuel. Excess heat generated was wasted by air cooling.