



An interview with John Tulip, by Charlotte Nixon

CN: What was the path that led you to where you are today?

JT: I qualified as an accountant in 1984 and worked in a number of jobs around the North East in different roles. I worked at Newcastle Racecourse and left there in 1998, started working for a care charity in Cramlington until 2003, and then I happened to see an advert in The Chronicle for the Director of Finance & Administration job at NFM. I quite liked the idea of it, I thought it'd be a glamorous job! So I put in for the job and got it, surprising myself. Tom Harvey, who gave me the job, always used to tell me that the reason he gave me the job was because in the interview I wore a navy pinstripe suit, but with a navy tie with white spots on it. And he thought that was quite brave – contrasting the stripes and the spots – so he said that was what swung it!

CN: So, we know you worked at the Racecourse, and that you also like a bit of a flutter... did you consider NFM to be a gamble?

JT: When I first joined NFM, it was when Newcastle and Gateshead were bidding to be City of Culture. While I was working my notice at my old job, they were turned down. I remember ringing up Tom and asking if there was still a job for me! So NFM's always been a bit of a gamble. It keeps you on your toes. We've always been flexible and adaptable though, there's been peaks and troughs.

When I first started, *Byker Grove* was still filming in the region. When that show was cancelled by the BBC, the company that owned it basically went bust overnight. I hadn't realised how much things teetered on the brink in this industry, and particularly in this region. It's all so precarious. And I didn't know a lot about the industry going into the job. I definitely hadn't realised how much production was filmed in London, and how little of it our region saw. So yeah, I guess it was a gamble!

CN: When did you become Managing Director of NFM and how did that happen?

JT: In 2012, we hit a funding crisis and it meant I stepped up from Director of Finance to Managing Director. It all started in 2010 really. When Labour lost the election, and the coalition government came in, they really didn't like a lot of the quangos Labour had set up. They disliked the UK Film Council in particular, so as soon as they came into office, they said they were going to disband them. They also said they were going to disband the regional development agencies – One North East being one of them. They were our two biggest funders. The government didn't pull the funding overnight, but they set in a path whereby they would withdraw it over a period of time. By 2012, it got to the point where our

options were so narrow, and our finances were so constricted that Tom decided to step down and I was promoted.

CN: Was that a tough time?

JT: It was very tough. It was difficult for everyone. We really didn't know if we would survive. We were faced with the prospect of not having enough money to carry on in any meaningful way.

CN: So how did NFM get out of that sticky spot?

JT: We managed to get enough money promised for two years from the Local Authorities to keep us afloat. We were then able to match that with European Regional Development Fund money. So that got us over the hump! We then got bits of funding from what was Creative Skillset, then Arts Council England... but if we hadn't had that local council support, we would have been dead in the water.

CN: Was that the biggest challenge NFM had to overcome?

JT: Definitely. We had to downsize too – we had had a pretty big office in Hoults Yard. We had about 20-odd staff, and so sadly had to make a number of redundancies. We moved to the BALTIC. It was really good of them to let us come.

CN: Moving onto the good times, what have been your NFM highlights over the years?

JT: One of the highlights was before One North East hit the buffers, we got a finance for business contract with them for £1 million for North East content! We were able to invest in a number of projects with that money. We invested £150,000 into *Inspector George Gently*, which had filmed the first three series in Ireland. The writer, Peter Flannery, always thought it should have been based in Durham. We gave them money and they moved into Durham, where they filmed a further five series, which was great! Gayle worked really hard to find them production bases to work from, so we did a lot of work with them, as well as giving them money. It was a great time for everyone involved.

We were also able to invest in the pilot of *Vera*. I'm not saying *Vera* wouldn't have happened if we hadn't invested, but they managed to shoot the pilot, and then it helped to establish a relationship with that production. And now we're on series 11!

The money from One North East also led us to getting a contract for content fund from ERDF for £2.4 million. With all of these combined funds, we managed to shoot a lot of films including *One Night in Turin* and tv drama *United*.

We've had some other successes to do with our production service. *Atonement* shot a famous scene on Redcar Beach, and they used 1000 local extras. It really did excite people in Tees Valley and ignited filmmaking culture down there. It probably put the seeds in the Tees Valley Combined Authority's mind about what they could do. So, when they had the money, they were able to help fund our Tees Valley Screen project, which led to shooting things like *1917* down there.

CN: Do you have a stand-out or favourite memory from your time at NFM?

JT: One of my most memorable moments was the premiere of *Atonement* in 2007, which was in the Regent Cinema in Redcar. The director, Joe Wright, came up for that, and I think Mark Kermode did the introduction. It was great to see that film being shown in Redcar, and a lot of people in the audience were people who'd been extras in it or were connected to the

production in some way. Something like that is very rare in Redcar, so that was definitely a highlight.

CN: What about a proudest moment?

JT: This would probably be when we got the ERDF £2.4 million fund I mentioned, which brought in another £2.4 million from private sources. That was the biggest funding win we've ever had, so it's pretty high on my list.

CN: So, what's been your favourite film or TV project NFM have been involved in?

JT: We've been involved in some good stuff over the years! I liked *Frozen* (2005), about a frozen fish factory in Grimsby with Shirley Henderson.

We did *School for Seduction* (2004), which starred Kelly Brook. We did the premiere of that one in The Gate in Newcastle, which Kelly Brook came up for – so that was another exciting one!

Then there was *Song for Marion* (2012), *The Liability* (2013) with Tim Roth, and *Soulboy* (2010) with Martin Compston. He was a bloody awful dancer! I went to watch some of it being filmed in Stoke-on-Trent, and he couldn't dance for toffee! Terrible.

My all-time-favourite film we ever did was in 2009, a film called *The Tournament*. That was directed by Scott Mann, from Newton Aycliffe, and written by Gary Young, who lives in Whitley Bay. It was about the world's top 30 assassins having a big fight out in Middlesbrough, to see who could be the last one standing. It showed Robert Carlyle dressed like a priest getting drunk on Gateshead High Street, and it had Ving Rhames driving a double-decker London red bus up the A1 past Birtley. You've got to see that film.

CN: What did you like most about your job as Managing Director?

JT: I've worked with some great staff. We've got great staff now and we've had great staff over the years. We work hard. It's not an easy job, especially if the money dries up. The team are dedicated to developing the talent in the region, using whatever resources we've got at the time.

I must say I've worked for two excellent chairmen in my time. When I was appointed in 2012, Sir Les Elton was the chair of our Board of Directors. He used to be Gateshead Council's chief executive, so he was very instrumental in things like getting the BALTIC converted from the old flour mill, building the Sage, the Angel of the North, the Millennium Bridge. He was a really good and interesting chairman, and I learned a lot from him. He sadly passed away in 2014.

We were still under financial pressure in 2014, and Tom Gutteridge, who was on our board, agreed to take over as chairman. Tom has been a superb chair. Tom has a fantastic CV – he's worked on *Panorama*, *Nationwide*, he set up *The Russell Harty Show*. He did *Challenge Anneka* with Anneka Rice, went on to produce *Question Time* with the company he worked for, *Robot Wars*, and then he moved to America where he worked on *American Idol*. He's got a fantastic track record, and he's tried to bring that experience to NFM.

So, I've been really pleased to work with fantastic staff, and for a good, strong Board of Directors.

CN: So, what has changed the most since you started this role?

JT: The finances have changed the most, without a doubt – the reduction in funding. It just means we can't do as much as we'd like to do. We haven't been able to develop as many SMEs and companies as we'd like, so that's been the biggest change over the years.

Technology has also moved on massively, and it's left me way behind!

Also, while we've had funding crises, the industry has never seen anything like the COVID-19 pandemic. It's been another big challenge.

CN: You've worked for NFM for over 17 years. What do you hope will change in the next 17 years?

JT: I'd love to see the region build back up. We have no studio facilities, in particular. We have places where things are filmed, but they're not purpose-built studios. So, studio facilities would be great to see. We also don't have as many production facilities as we'd like – things like edit suites, suppliers of equipment.

We've got great talent, but so many of them have to go away to places like London and Manchester to find work. They have to leave the region, which becomes a vicious cycle. I'd like to see that kind of infrastructure brought to the North East and then we can develop the talent, so they don't have to leave.

We've got good knowledge and good connections, so if we can bring that all together, we could get back to where we were. When NFM first started, we covered the whole of the North East, because we had the money to do so. Over the years we've had times where we've had to neglect the Tees Valley a little bit, whereas now we're in the position where we can support the Tees Valley because of our money from the Tees Valley Combined Authority. I'd like to see funding from each area of the North East, so we can give an even spread of support across the region.

We also need to support and lobby the screen industries to be much more inclusive in terms of gender, ethnicity, disability, and other diversity factors. We have improved massively, but I'd still like to see much more inclusivity. Being in the North East, we've always been pretty good at ensuring that people from disadvantaged social, economic, and political areas are represented, but there are other areas of diversity we still need to work on.

CN: If you could speak to yourself 17 years ago, what would you tell yourself? Is there anything you wish you'd have known back then?

JT: I wouldn't really change a thing. Well, I wish we had more money and I wish I hadn't had to have written so many funding bids over the years, but never mind.

If I'd told myself 17 years ago the things I know now, I wouldn't have listened to myself.

CN: Moving on to NFM itself, what do you feel is the biggest strength of the company?

JT: The staff that it has. They're our biggest asset. We have very talented staff, staff that are good at coming up with ideas. They can look at a funding stream and work out how we can fit the criteria. We have a pretty good record when it comes to funding actually. We do get turned down, of course, but we have a pretty good strike record of securing money. We've also got staff who've worked in the industry itself before which helps.

Even with the COVID-19 pandemic, lots of organisations ground to a complete halt. NFM has carried on and moved its activity online quite quickly. During this period, we've actually

had some of the best events we've ever had. I'm thinking of the comedy event with Daisy May Cooper – it was great to see someone so high-profile and current do an event for us, and to see it be so well received by our audience. So, our staff are very adaptable, hard-working, and smart.

CN: What do you think NFM brings to the region and its screen industries?

JT: We have fantastic knowledge of the region, we know the talent well – who exactly is on the cusp of doing great things, we have good relationships with production companies, good connections to broadcasters. We're also great with new starters, people trying to get their foot in the door, and we really help them to find opportunities with our NFM Crew Academy. I've always thought of NFM as there to bring it all together, join the dots, and be a real bridge to industry.

CN: What direction would you like to see the company take?

JT: As I said earlier, I want to see us work across the whole of the North East. And we can only do that with support from North of Tyne Combined Authority, whatever that ends up looking like. They need to recognise the work that we do, the value of it, and that the screen industries can create and sustain good jobs in the region. This is a sector that's worth investing in, which the Tees Valley Combined Authority now understand.

CN: So, what's next for you? What are your plans for the future?

JT: It's my hope that I still work for NFM in some capacity, doing the finances. I won't be disappearing totally, but I'll be going back to what I used to do, which is the numbers and the accounts! We'll see how it pans out.

To be honest, I fancy being a postman. As I'm working from home, I look at my postman and see him walking around in his shorts on a lovely, sunny day. And I think to myself, 'I could do that'.

CN: But would you do that on a not-so-sunny day?

JT: No. I must admit it doesn't appeal to me on those days.

I plan to dabble in different things really. I might do something new, or I might do nothing! I'll be watching plenty of football, I know that.

CN: What legacy do you feel you're leaving the organisation?

JT: The organisation still exists, so that's one thing! Back when we first moved into the BALTIC in 2012, and things weren't fantastic financially, I remember buying a huge multipack of teabags from a wholesaler. I can distinctly remember thinking 'We might not even be here long enough to get through all these teabags!'. So, I think we're an adaptable organisation who have gotten used to the financial situation changing, and perhaps that's partly down to me. It's certainly not all down to me, it's always been a team effort.

CN: What do you think you've been like to work for? How would your team describe you?

JT: Now that's a question. I hope people have enjoyed working with me!

My golden rule is: Never accept a coffee from anybody else, and that way you never have to make anyone else one. Never offer, and don't accept either.

CN: I remember making the mistake of offering you a coffee when I first started.

JT: Yep! Even if I'm desperate, even if I really want one, I never accept. Some people may think that's antisocial, but it's always worked for me.

But I like to think I've had a good working relationship with everyone. Over the years we've employed a lot of staff, you forget quite how many, and there's never really been a cross word spoken.

CN: So, we know that Alison Gwynn will be stepping up from Programme and Partnerships Director to become NFM's Chief Executive. What are your thoughts on that?

JT: I think Alison is fantastic. When I look at the people I've appointed over my whole career, not just the people I've employed at NFM, I would say that Alison is the best appointment I've ever made. And I'm not just saying that because she might read this! I really do mean it. When we got Alison back in 2017, there was no question that we wanted her. She's been great. Alison is very dedicated to NFM. As soon as she joined us, she really bought into it, and she's made it her business to learn about the different aspects of the industry – she didn't come with a film and TV background. She's very talented, she's a great fundraiser, she's a good manager, she's a great ideas person. I think NFM will thrive under her.

CN: Is there any advice you'd give Alison?

JT: I don't think she needs it. If she does, she knows she can ask me. I hope we can work together in some capacity. And I'm always there if she wants to get a coffee and chat through something. I'll offer my advice – whether she wants it or not!

CN: Obviously, you're not going to disappear, and you may work with NFM in some capacity. But in general, are you going to miss us?

JT: Definitely. We've had a lot of challenges, but I've definitely enjoyed it. I never, ever thought I'd work anywhere 17 years. Ever. Especially when you're an account – you start your career and do two years here, two years there, five years here, and so on. You chop and change and jump around. I'd always done that until I worked at NFM. But I've never regretted staying at NFM. It's always been different, it reinvents itself, it's never boring. So yes, I will miss it.

CN: Well that's a wrap! Thanks John.

JT: Thanks Charlotte! I quite enjoyed that.