



British rocket puts its own satellite into orbit

Clip taken from 'Timeshift: British Space Race', BBC Four.

FRANCIS SPUFFORD:

Heath's Minister for Aerospace stood up in the House of Commons and announced that the Black Arrow programme was cancelled. But the engineers were given the chance to try to prove their system just once more, since the rocket was already on its way, everything was already in place. So they knew before they tried to launch that, succeed or fail, the programme was already over. That success was not actually going to accomplish anything.

NARRATOR:

The satellite due to be launched into orbit underwent a name change. Instead of Puck, the Shakespearean sprite who flies around the world with ease, the engineers renamed it Prospero, after the tired magician who lays down his books. Could they pull off one last magic trick, to prove that Britain could get into orbit?

FRANCIS SPUFFORD:

Man years of their work, and their dedication, and their passion, and their very serious professional design skills, were invested in this thing. So, with the most loving caution imaginable, the team set it up on its launch site at Woomera and began the countdown, stopping for anything that looked as if it could conceivably go wrong, because this was their last chance.

NARRATOR:

But nothing did go wrong. The last flight of Black Arrow was successful, and the satellite Prospero was launched over 550km into orbit.

JOHN SCOTT-SCOTT:

Great elation all-round the department. The little ministry man turned up at the office and we got together in the office to listen to words because we thought he'd come to say how well we'd done and what the next phase would be, and all the little so-and-so had come to tell us was "It was a good job, wasn't it? Please wrap it up and send the bill in." And it's resented even to this day. You would talk to people and they would say, "It was a bad day, wasn't it?" Any mention of Prospero and they'll almost start to weep, if you see what I mean.

FRANCIS SPUFFORD:

The British Government thought it had learned by experience, in the 1960s, that space was a waste of money. The irony here is that the last ride of the Black Arrow happens only a very few years

before the great age of the commercial satellite begins, when all of the money which had been fired up in orbit started raining down.

[Images of Puck and Prospero courtesy of Mary Evans Picture Library]