



Speaking for Ourselves: *An Oral History of People With Cerebral Palsy*

Michael Wilkinson
Interviewed by Richard Smith

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Interview Summary Sheet

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[The interviewer and interviewee both use the same facilitator, who helps voice their words]

Tape 1 Side A [Track 1]

It's Monday 7 February and I'm going to do my first interview. Can I welcome Michael for the interview and thank you for volunteering for the interview? Are you sat here comfy?

Yeah.

And are you ready to do it?

Yes.

If there's anything you want to be confidential just say so.

Yes.

I'd like to ask you when and where you were born?

I was born in Derby, I'll get there, I was born [struggling to speak].

In Derby?

In Derby, in 1953.

1953?

Yes, which is only a couple of years ago. [Laughter.]

And how old were your parents when you were born?

My mum was 42 and me dad 41.

And do you know why they chose yer name?

No, I've got no idea.

What was yer earliest memories of yer mum and dad?

A picnic in a great big park in some woods, in me dad's great big Morris Standard car.
A family picnic somewhere near Burton-on-Trent, which is where I come from.

And how old were you at this picnic?

I would be somewhere between one and three. They didn't know what was wrong with me until I was 18 months old.

Can you remember what your dad used to do for a living?

He used to drive a truck delivering gravel and sand for a local pit.

How long did he do that for?

Until I was five or six I think.

And then what did he do?

And then he was working in a local power station. He was there for the rest of his life.
He was a fitter's mate.

And did your mum used to work?

No, not when I was very young. Before I was born she had a fish shop.

OK, thank you. Can I go on to your birth?

Yes.

Have you got any memories about your birth that you would like to share?

I was a bit busy at the time. [Laughter.] A few things. When I was born they didn't think I would survive, so I was christened in hospital. When I was discharged to home all the delivery staff at the hospital said to Mum, 'Don't be too worried he's just had a rough start.'

And how did your parents discover that you had cerebral palsy?

So I was diagnosed with cerebral palsy when I was going, taking trips to the hospital and back because they discovered I couldn't sit up by myself and I could only walk on my knees.

And what sort of language was used to describe your disability by the hospital?

Spastic, severe spastic.

How did your parents take that? How did they react?

OK. I was a bit too young to be aware. I knew things weren't quite right when my brother was born, when I was about 18 months old. I don't remember him being around at all until I was school age. Apart from when I was three years old I had six months back in hospital for operations to help me stop my saliva but it wasn't very successful. Over the years I've had a lot of physiotherapy and stuff and I learnt how to control it myself.

When you went in hospital what was your experience of the doctors and nurses?

I was only three years old, all I can remember is me dad coming every day after work and when I came out of hospital they complained because me dad took me home in his truck.

When you were younger how did your cerebral palsy affect you? In what way, can you remember?

I used to crawl everywhere. I couldn't hold my head up at all. I had to wear a great big rubber pad on me forehead because as I crawled along I kept banging my head on the floor.

When did you first realise that you had cerebral palsy or that you were different from other people?

When me mum and dad took me for an interview to the Spastics Society boarding school – along with other kids and their parents – with a view to me start there later the same year. A few months after the interview I went back to boarding school but when they took me to see that place and to be interviewed I didn't realise it was a school at all.

What did you think it was?

Just a place for parents to get help and advice for their handicapped kids.

And when you were younger, how did yer parents and other relations react to your disability.

That was a good bit; I was treated as an equal along with all the other kids in the street.

Very good.

Even down to getting regular good hidings.

[Inaudible.]

How did your neighbours react and friends of your mum and dad?

They were all very supportive but there again they didn't treat me any different. The neighbours they didn't like it when you kept going back to boarding school, especially my younger brother, he's almost two years younger than me but I'm better looking.

[Laughter.]

OK, thank you. Now I'd like to start discussing yer relationship with yer mum and dad. What sort of memories have you got about the way your mum and dad looked after you?

It was all good; I couldn't have had a better upbringing if I tried. Just like the other kids I was always trouble, we even had a bit of a street gang – I was the leader [laughter] – called the *Go-Cart Gang*. We used to build go-carts out of anything, old pram wheels and things. And when me dad came home from work he'd always get roped in to fix this or put that together or help us build go-carts.

What was your discipline like at home? And what happened if you were a naughty lad, which I'm sure you never were as a lad.

I got a crack across the back of the head. The worse was my younger brother wanted to go without me sometimes and I used to get a bit jealous.

Did that make you feel any other way?

Me dad used to take me off with him to help work on his car or me and my dad used to build bicycles and things from scrap. We spent hours and hours going round the scrap yards, which I loved.

Is that how you got into cars?

Yes.

He can recall coming to your house years ago; you'd got cars everywhere.

I always had Corgis and Dinky cars. I've been collecting all me life. I've been collecting ever since.

Can I move on to celebrations? Like Christmas or birthdays or any special achievements. How did you used to celebrate 'em?

Birthdays I was usually at boarding school and the school always made sure we got some sort of presents.

[End of Track 1]

Tape 1 Side B [Track 2]

Have you got any more you'd like to add to birthday questions?

It always felt special. It always felt like it was a special day, bit like Christmas Day.

[Facilitator speaks, 'Right we're going to continue with the interview now and Richard's going to say a number of one of the questions that I'm going to ask to Michael, so I can concentrate on Michael's answers. Number two.']

How did you get on with your mother and father when you were young?

Just like anyone else would say, I had the best mum and dad in the whole world. There wasn't anything they wouldn't do for me; in fact they would go without themselves to provide for me.

[Facilitator, 'Number three.']

What memories do you have of spending time playing or other free time with your parents?

Spent a lot of time with me dad getting into mischief. I was me dad's lad. [Laughs.]

What about your mum? What sort of time did you spend with your mum?

She provided all the comfort that I needed. I can remember me dad getting kicked out of bed in the morning, so I could get in. [Laughs.]

[Facilitator, 'Number four.']

How did you share your worries with them?

I didn't have any worries until I was 13 or 14.

And what sort of worries were those?

When I was 11 I was stuck in hospital for a big operation on me legs, four operations altogether. Before that I used to crawl everywhere. After these operations – because my feet and legs were different – I couldn't crawl again for ages. It was autumn and I was getting very agitated because I thought I wouldn't get out before Christmas. I had both legs in pots from the hips down, with a big metal bar in between to keep me legs apart. One of the operations was to cut my tendons, so I could part my legs. Before that my legs were forced together. I used to walk on my toes.

What about when you got older? What were your worries?

When I was 14 I was taken to the head office, which is quite normal for me – the headmaster's office – he was looked up to as some sort of god. Anyway, I was taken to the head's office just to be told I'd only got two more years left at school and I'd got a hell of a lot of work to do. I didn't really understand what he meant or why it was so important, as usual.

[Facilitator, 'Number five.']

Would you say you were closer to your father or to your mother?

To me dad, up until my dad died.

What was his age when he died? What was your age, sorry?

I was 21 and it was just after my 21st birthday. He died on the 21st of the same month.

So when your father died, do you think your mum and yourself came closer?

It was the point I moved from Hampshire up here to be a bit nearer to her and see more of her. Sheffield is only 50 miles from Burton but when I was in Hampshire I was a 140 miles away from her.

[Facilitator, 'Can we move on to number six?']

What memories do you have of family discussions or of big decisions being made?

Hardly any, except always my mum and dad wanted to have me back home after boarding school.

And how did that make you feel?

And I knew it was not to be 'cos it was too difficult because I been away for about 11 or 12 years and I'd lived a busy independent life and stuck up for myself.

[Facilitator, 'Number nine.']

What people influenced you most in your early years?

Me dad 'cos he was a bugger like me. Only joking. And I'm very proud to be turning out to be like me dad. [Laughter.] Because my dad was in the War I had much higher education than ever he did. I was the only person in the whole family to go to university.

Very good. And what did you study at university?

I got into it because of a girlfriend that I had at the time. I did psychology. I've bin a head case ever since. [Laughter.] I did psychology and sociology.

Did you enjoy uni life? Did you get any support to help on yer course and in yer accommodation?

I didn't need accommodation because I owned a house with my girlfriend and it was only a five-minute ride away by car, taxi. The local education authority paid for my taxis backwards and forwards. I had my own room in the department to work in and I didn't attend lectures or some of them, the tutors would come to me instead. I had a big old electric typewriter. I did most of the schoolwork on my electric typewriter, so I was already *au fait* with keyboards and things.

So in that situation, did it make you more segregated from other students and lectures?

Yes, it did but I liked it. I hated to be in a big crowd. I liked the individuality. I used to take Thursdays off to study at home but very rarely studied.

Have you got any more you'd like to add to that?

When I got to my finals, I couldn't wait to put all me books in a pile and set fire to them. I would never have done it if it hadn't been for my girlfriend. In fact, I wouldn't have been driving a car now if it wasn't for her but that's another long story.

So are you OK to move on to brothers and sisters?

Yes.

[Facilitator, 'Number one.']

If you had any, could you tell me about your brothers and sisters, starting with their names?

One brother called David who's younger and an older sister called Pauline; she's quite a bit older. I did have another older brother called Ken but he got drowned when I was a baby – I was only about two and a half. He had his own canoe and he turned it over. He was only 17.

[Facilitator, 'Number four.']

How did you get on with all your brothers and sisters?

I've always had two separate lives – one at home with the family and one at boarding school. When I was at home I only had one brother and a few mates but when I was at boarding school there was loads and loads of so-called people of me own age who were like brothers and sisters. I was always in trouble for picking up lasses, [laughter] especially the teachers. [Laughter.]

[Facilitator, 'Number five.']

What do you especially remember about your brothers and sisters when you were young?

I don't remember me sister being around, she'd already started at work when I was born. Me brother hated me going away.

Right I'd like to go on to the next session: grandparents and relations.

[Facilitator, 'Number one.']

Where did your grandparents live?

In Pocklington in York but I didn't know them until I was about eight or nine because of an apparent family 'bust up'.

How often did you see them?

About once a year during the summer holidays. We travelled from Burton to Pocklington. We made a whole day of it; it was exactly 100 miles. I was already a 'petrol head', even at that age. [Laughter.]

Can I just ask you why did you only see them once a year?

I suppose because it was 100 miles away and the family was never really close anyway.

What memories do you have of chores being done at home?

I remember asking me mum, 'Do you ever stop wiping, washing or cleaning?'

And what did she say?

It was funny what she said, 'A woman's work is never done.'

What other relations of your father do you remember?

He had eight brothers and sisters and we only saw them when we went up to Pocklington. Some of them lived down south and some of them I didn't know at all.

[End of Track 2]

Tape 2 Side A [Track 2]

What memories do you have of your parents' friends?

They were just next-door neighbours and people who lived around the village. Me dad was always more outgoing than me mum. Me mum was quite happy to stop at home and potter about. Me dad wanted to be out all the time and that was usually with me.

Where did they live?

Just outside Burton-on-Trent. We never moved once.

Who was the oldest person you remember as a child?

Me grandad, he was the caretaker, choirmaster of the local church at Pocklington. He was still riding his bike at the age of 88.

Michael, I'd like to go on to discuss your early memory highlights.

[Facilitator, 'Number one.']

How would you describe your early childhood before you were five or so?

All I can remember of it is that long period in hospital and all the preparations for me going to boarding school at the age of four. For the first two years they were working out what was wrong with me. For the third year I was in hospital for half of it and the fourth year I was away.

How would you describe your family home at this time, atmosphere, appearance?

Me mum and dad's?

Yeah or even your boarding school. Or even your home, the place you lived the most.

Me mum and dad's house, it was like a place that was always there no matter what I did. It was my base and me mum was always there. But of course it isn't now, it's all gone. Whatever my troubles I always had a base, somebody to come back to. Of course it isn't there now, unfortunately. It was like a backbone or a little sanctuary. I still miss it.

[Facilitator, 'Number four.']

What were some of the rooms like, including the furniture?

It was a semi-detached council house with a big grass verge before the road that you weren't supposed to park on but of course everybody did. Again it isn't there now; it's all tarmacked with parking meters.

[Facilitator, 'Number six.']

What were your favourite foods?

They was nobody in the world that could beat me mum's fish and chips because she used to work in a chippy. And her Sunday dinners, that was always a big occasion.

[Facilitator, 'Number eight.']

What was your favourite toy?

Cars. I had my first pedal car when I was three years old. I've still got a picture of me and the girl next door sat in my car. [Laughs.]

That's another story. What were some of your favourite stories?

I liked all the usual kids' stories, especially *Hansel and Gretel*.

[Facilitator. 'Number 11.']

What kind of books did you like to read?

I've never been much of a one for books but at Christmas – every Christmas, among other things – Mum and Dad always bought us a book each. Although obviously I could read perfectly well. For my brother it was always trains; for me it was cars and for me dad it was aircraft.

What are your feelings when thinking of home when you were young?

I wish I could turn back. Except the worst year at school when I was 14, I had really bad houseparents. They eventually got sacked because how they treated us.

In what way? Do you want to go into more detail?

They used to get away with doing as little as possible, even to the point of the more able kids had to help the less able to get dressed and stuff. And the able kids would wash up, so they didn't have to. I could tell you some right stories.

You carry on.

The place I lived in Basingstoke, it was a hostel for 25 people with cerebral palsy. The couple ran it like an army camp. One day I was forced to change me own bed on me hands and knees, it took me eight and a half hours – all day Saturday – and all I wanted to do was to get out on me bike.

And how did that make you feel?

Angry and I've been in many situations like that and I'm always the one that speaks out, causing a stink. I've always been the one to kick up and complain and cause a stink.

Is there any more situations that you'd like to share?

When you're adolescent you discover things about your own body. I was made to feel dirty by the couple that were sacked, which obviously is wrong.

Yes definitely. Any more?

Since school I've lived in quite a few places for disabled people, hated every minute of it, hated every one.

Do you want to go into any more detail?

The whole ethos of being lumped together in one place just because they're disabled is wrong. In one place there were people with a lot of mental disability. That was agony because you all got tarred with the same brush. In any institution you lose your identity.

Yeah.

I made a point of giving them hell.

[End of Track 3]

Tape 3 Side A [Track 4]

Right, it's Monday 21 February and I'm going to interview Michael Wilkinson. Are you ready to start Michael?

Yes.

I'm going to do like we did last time. I'm going to ask you questions and Leona's going to repeat them. Right, can I go on to your early school days?

[Facilitator, 'Number one.']

I didn't go to school; I went to boarding school.

Where did you first go to school and what was the school's name?

It was called the Wilfred Pickles School for Spastics. He was a famous presenter on the radio back in the Fifties and the Sixties. I went there from the age of four to 16.

What kind of school was it?

It was a boarding school for kids with cerebral palsy, of average or above average intelligence. So I don't know how I got in. [Laughs.]

What memories do you have of your first teacher?

I don't remember much of the school but I do remember after dinner we were put on beds for an hour in the schoolroom to rest before start of the afternoon school. They were foldaway, made out of canvas. They used to put them out for an hour in the early afternoon. They used to force an hour's rest, which was a bit boring 'cos I'd rather be out on me bike. [Laughs.]

What strong memories do you have of your early school years?

I remember I had my pedal car with me from home. It was really hard because I cried and cried and cried for the whole term. I was always in trouble for crying. What they didn't take into account was the fact that I was only four years old and I'd been wrenched away from me mum and dad.

Have you got any more memories of early school years?

Sitting outside the head's office.

You were always in trouble. Do you want to say why?

First of all, I hated school lessons and I figured that if I got myself into trouble enough I'd spend my time sat outside the head's office instead of in the lesson.

What sort of things did you do and what sort of excuses did you use?

If you didn't eat your dinner you couldn't have any pudding and if you didn't eat it at dinner time it were put by until teatime. It was a crazy regime.

Any more?

Most of us had three-wheeler bikes. If you could ride somehow it didn't matter what your degree of physical disability, they would adapt a bike for you. For me, all I had was to have me feet fastened to the pedals and off I'd go. At weekends everybody in the dorm would be put on bikes. If you couldn't ride a bike you were pushed in a wheelchair. It was half a mile to the school gates down to the main road – the 47 – and back, which when you're only seven or eight years old is a long way. And when I first started riding I couldn't push the pedals right round, so I used to half pedal and one of the teachers, one of the houseparents used to walk behind me with a pin and if I

didn't push the pedals right round I got a pin in me bum, which I thought was a bit unkind. This was a Saturday afternoon activity. [Laughs.]

If you did something well at school, what would happen?

You got points for your house; there were four houses. They were called Stuart, Windsor, Tudor and Norman. In other words the houses were named after four periods of history and occasionally you got changed to another house but I never did work out why. All the houses were in competition on sports day. I was entered in the cycle race; there was only one other guy faster than me.

Was you a boy racer?

I used to come off quite a lot.

What were some of the best moments at school?

Speech day in the summer term, when parents came and prizes were awarded for different things. But the best part of the school day was after assembly in the morning. We all used to disperse to our separate classrooms and the post was handed out. I used to get letters and parcels from home about twice a week, from Mum and Dad or both. We had a separate lesson in the school week to be able to write back to thank them. I used a typewriter for my schoolwork.

What were some of the worst moments at school?

When I was in my adolescence that was terrible because although I knew about the 'birds and the bees' it was never taught to us until I was about 14. Because of that you experiment with yourselves and through the houseparents were made to feel dirty, ashamed, which is wrong.

Yeah, very wrong.

But I put that right by having a very strong crush on the PE teacher. [Laughter.]

I knew that would come in. What were some of the worst moments at school?

When I was 14, you were in rooms of six and you lived in what were called cottages. These particular houseparents really had it in for me. Unbeknown to them, when it came to half term me parents came to fetch me home, they came early to come and see the head and when I came back to school after the holiday, those particular people had been sacked because of how they treated some of us. I could tell quite a few stories of that.

Do you want to go into any detail?

It became more apparent after school. I was in a worse situation after school. I remember during that period some of us being caught because we were discovering things about our bodies and we were kept away from other kids for a week. Hence they got the sack.

What memories do you have of friends at school?

There was only 70 of us in the school. It was like one great big family of brothers and sisters with the usual kids fighting, falling out. The only difference is some of us were in wheelchairs or on bicycles and we used to smash into each other with wheelchairs or bicycles. [Laughter.] And we had a circuit round the school and we used to race and woe betide anybody that got in the way, especially staff. [Laughs.]

What events do you particularly remember from school?

When I was 11, Mum and Dad came to speech day, open day or whatever and the head physiotherapist took me and them to one side to talk about a possible big

operation on me legs. It was four operations to part the legs and to get me feet to bend or point down.

[End of Track 4]

Tape 3 Side B [Track 5]

What do you remember about clubs and societies at school?

There was only the one; it was the school youth club. It was called the Grangers because the main house of the school was called Tixover Grange. We used to meet in a great big concrete bicycle shed, which incorporates a little tuck shop and a little bar where you could buy soft drinks with your own pennies – in those days your pocket money for the whole three-month term was three shillings – which today is 15p.

That just goes to show how much money's changed.

In those days 15p would go a long way.

Which attitudes to you and disability did you encounter in outside school?

Only life at that time outside school was back at home with me family. Like three holidays a year or half-term weekends, which was only Friday afternoon to Sunday or if you're lucky, Friday to Monday. But when I was at home I was out with the rest of the kids, up to no good. We were known as the Go-Cart Gang because me dad had a go-cart, a pedal go-cart specially built for me. It would go all the places we wanted to go-cart, so we used to go to all the local junk yards, tips, picking up planks of wood to build go-carts with. Picking up old pram wheels, planks, bicycles, anything. At one time we had six go-carts in the back garden on me mum's back lawn, it made a right mess of it. [Laughs.]

OK. Now we're going to go on to the next section: Out and About. When not at school, what memories do you have of being outside or playing outside? Garden, local parks, woods or fields?

I was brought up with me mum and dad, especially Dad, encouraged me to go out with the other kids. I wasn't taken out; I'd just go. I was on me bike or in me pedal car

or go with me dad to work in his car. He was always so car crazy, which is obviously where I've inherited it. [Laughs.] I remember once when they were building a new motorway, at the back of the house, me and me dad used to go for a walk round almost every day. One night we were getting ready to set off on me bike, pedal car, go-cart or whatever and Mum played hell with Dad because taking me out in the pouring rain. I couldn't see anything wrong with it, if I get wet I can always get dry again, so what?

What about going out to the shops?

That was usually with Mum and Dad to the local town, usually on a Saturday. But over the years when I was at school we never got out locally unless you were accompanied. Even then the local town was about eight miles away. I never did get to go to the local town. In other words it was like two separate worlds: in school and out of school. But when I was home – whenever me dad was going anywhere, in town or to work – he'd always take me with him. One time he had a part-time job on Friday or Saturday delivering groceries for the local supermarket in his van with only one seat in it. So I used to go and my seat was a box made of wood with a bit of blanket over the top. And it was my job to sit in a van and tick the orders off, as he took them to the appropriate houses. He used to give me all the coins out of his wages, which was for three days at work. There was no seatbelts or safety regulations; you would just go for it. I used to like that. When we got back to the depot we would drop the van off and get in Dad's car to go home. I felt like I'd been at work all day.

What early memories do you have of travel?

Travel? Family holidays we used to go on loads and loads of caravan holidays. I loved caravans ever since. In fact I've owned five meself over the years; I used to pull behind the car. Me and Dad used to go all over the place, visiting places. We used to go to the car museum and train-spotting, and local airports to look at aircraft 'cos me dad had loads of aircraft. Me dad was all aircraft, I was all cars and me younger brother he's into trains in a big way. My poor mother never got a look in.

What are your early memories of weekends or time when your family were together?

Half-term weekends it was two and a half hours drive from school to home, even though it was only 62 miles. I used to love to get home to see what was different or what was new. I can remember me dad being overjoyed when he came to fetch me 'cos on the way home I was able to read the number of the car in front as he was driving. I never thought that I was to one day drive meself.

How would you describe your family car, your dad's car?

He always had Vauxhalls; he was Vauxhall mad. Over the years I've tried to collect models of all the Vauxhalls he had. That's another big passion of mine. I collect model vehicles. I've only got – I emphasise - I've only got upward of 7,500.

[Laughter.]

Only? Wow! What about family or other trips out, including day trips?

Sometimes me dad took me and me brother and the rest of the street – a few members of the gang – on an outing to Truro or the local boating lake or the local big train stations. We used to go train-spotting, fishing and all sorts. Me dad didn't like fishing but I did because it was something I could do myself. I've still got me tackle.

[Laughs.] I've not been fishing for yonks.

Any more to say about that?

[End of Track 5]

Tape 4 Side A [Track 6]

It's 7 March and I'm going to interview Michael Wilkinson. How are you today?

OK.

Are you ready to...?

Yes.

Just let us know if you want to stop at any time. Could I go on to the leisure?

[Facilitator, 'Number one.']

How did you spend your spare time? Reading, activities, outings, entertainment?

[Laughter from people in the background.]

Do you mean at school or home?

Anything at all that you used to do as leisure when you were young. Or what do you do now?

When I was a kid I was always out on me bike, in all weathers. Especially snow, it was more fun.

What did you do in the snow?

Fall off me bike. Knock bits off me. Go home and get patched up and do it again.

Did you do anything else?

I've always been crazy about cars, so I've always collected Dinky and Corgi cars. When I was small Mum and Dad used to quite regularly send me a new Corgi or Dinky car. Whenever I wrote home on my typewriter I always told them which one I wanted. I've still got some of the ones I had when I was a little kid; they're still in perfect condition with the boxes.

What memories do you have of holidays away or school holidays?

The family holiday was always [coughs] sometime during my long holidays [clears throat]. Mum and Dad would hire a static caravan at some seaside resort. We used to go to somewhere different every year but my favourite place was up at Bridlington or Scarborough. After a few years Mum and Dad actually bought a static caravan outside of Bridlington. We didn't get much use of it; we only went two or three times a year.

What sort of things did you do on holiday?

Me dad usually took me for long walks along the prom or round the harbour. I didn't like to stay on the beach too long 'cos it got boring. I used to love to fish off the end of the harbour wall.

Did you used to catch anything?

Only a cold! [Laughter.]

You've got a good sense of humour.

You haven't heard anything yet. [Laughter.]

What television [laughter] or radio programmes or films do you remember as a child?

At boarding school on Sunday mornings all the kids used to go down and sit round a great big old radiogram. We used to listen to *Family Favourites* at boarding school, hoping that our mums and dads may have sent requests in.

Any more TV programmes?

We were only allowed to watch TV at weekends. All I can remember was Saturday, the *Black and White Minstrel Show* on a Saturday night.

How would you summarise your earliest childhood?

Difficult one. I used to spend all term time looking forward to going home again to see what was different and to have a bit of freedom. I never ever took any homework home with me; I refused to. If we could, we did our homework within the working day. If it was reading, we'd just pretend to read it.

And your end of school years, what options were available to you on leaving school?

None, absolutely none. From the age of 12 until 16 yes, I did a lot of schoolwork but I was never entered into exams and I had no idea what was to become of me. Although I did learn that most disabled people spent the rest of their lives in day centres or work centres and I did not want that to happen to me. I wanted to experience as much of life as I could – and I have. I didn't want to be put into a home after school.

That's good.

Further education was not an option, it wasn't offered as an option. I knew the existence of exams or GSEs or O'Levels or A'Levels or anything but much later, when I got an opportunity to go on a foundation course in Sheffield at the age of

24 to discover I had the academic potential. I remember other kids taking exams, it was never offered to me. Before that I just went along with whatever was put in front of me and that was usually in the form of a day centre making things like stools or chairs and doing light assembly work. I'd spend every working day – six hours – with a big saw cutting all the firewood, which was then chopped, put into bundles, sold to raise money for the day centre, which was more boring than watching paint dry.

And did you just say that was an experience like doing a prison life sentence?

It was like you were being punished because you were disabled. I got very depressed and fed up to a point that I refused to work. I was told if I didn't do it I wouldn't get me £2.50 at the end of the week. I told them what they could do with it. [Laughter.]

Good for you, that's what I used to do.

It was slave labour.

When you were growing up how would you describe your contact with members of the opposite sex?

Wicked! [Laughter.] Quite frequent. Adolescence was quite normal. If you got caught kissing or canoodling at school it was a sin. [Laughter.] Until I discovered I had a crush on the PE teacher. I didn't care what anyone said. [Laughter.] I did have a couple of girlfriends at school but it was never any more than a kiss and a cuddle behind the bike sheds. Until my body started doing things that I didn't understand. [Laughter.] I didn't really have a proper girlfriend until I was 18. I went away to a residential centre in Buxton and a lot of the younger disabled people sort of paired off. And I wanted to pair off and I had a girlfriend obviously. We were together for three years after that and then we moved to a different residential centre down in Hampshire. We got engaged but [coughs] we had a big engagement party but we were only engaged two weeks because I buggered off with somebody else.

You were naughty. What experience have you had of further education or higher education?

I left school with nothing at all. No opportunity was put in front of me until I joined an organisation called PHAB, physical handicapped and able-bodied and it was like a youth club and used to go on outings. One of the staff happened to be a college lecturer and she set up a course in a local further education college for disabled people to discover....

[End of Track 6]

Tape 4 Side B [Track 7]

It was designed to see if disabled people got any academic potential and I did. I did a few O'Levels and a few A'Levels and a few pubs. Eventually by pulling a few strings they got me into university. I was offered a place at Sheffield University to do psychology and sociology. And I only got into that because a girlfriend at that time was able-bodied and she was a psychologist. She was doing research into cerebral palsy and I decided to research her. After only a few months I ended up going to live with her. She gave me the best six years of me life. We were going to marry back in '79 but as usual I was too good for her. I've been on me own ever since. [Laughter.]

What opportunities have been available for learning in adulthood, including community courses?

I've just described that. I didn't really do anything after college or university. I was not very socially competent or whatever the hell that is?

What memories do you have of your father's paid work in later childhood or adolescence?

Me dad had two or three jobs to make ends meet but his main job, he was an electrician at a local power station. When he wasn't doing that he was working on a chicken/poultry farm as a gardener. I used to go in the poultry farm in me little pedal car or on me bike, chasing chickens to pinch the eggs. He also had a job driving a van for the local supermarket company. If I was at home I would go with him on that as well. But in 1972 he had to pack up work because of ill health. He got emphysema and then he died two years later. Despite the severity of my cp I used to be quite fit. When I turned 50 I noticed that everything was becoming more difficult very fast. [Coughs.] I've always tried to be as active as I can despite the degree of cerebral palsy but the past seven years I've noticed things become more difficult or not possible any more. For instance, I never used to have to use a straw. Even now I can pick up a cup with two hands but it got ever so difficult. I used to be able to dress meself; I used to

be able to put a coat on and take it off and undo buttons and things. And feeding, I can still feed meself but it's become more difficult. I've noticed as I've become older even though I've been active, my body's become tighter, even to the point of pain. And I do take anti-spasm drugs; I have done for 22 years now to a greater or a lesser degree.

What's it called?

I've taken Baclofen and another one is called Dantrolfins [ph] [Dantrolene?]

That's what I get.

They're both anti-spasm drugs. If I get really bad, like now, I have to take a bit of Valium or failing that, half a crate of whisky. [Laughs.]

Have you got anything else you'd like to add? Anything else you'd like to get across to people?

I'm becoming a bit less active, not as agile as I used to be. I like to get out on my knees on the floor as often as I can but I find now getting up off my knees is more

difficult. Even getting on and off the bed is more difficult. You develop your own ways of doing things, when it becomes more difficult you can't work out why, you start to worry. It puts your independence at risk, you feel a bit more vulnerable, especially if you live on your own as I do. The future becomes a big worry every day but I've still got a lot I want to do, all I want is the opportunity and support to do it before I get really old and knackered.

Is that it?

Is that all you want to say?

The rest of it will be in the book, which is already been censored.

*Right I'd like to say thank you for being interviewed, it's been very, very interesting.
And if you think of anything else you want to ask just send me a letter or put it on
email and I'll send it to Philip. OK, thank you. Thanks Michael. Thanks Leona.*

[End of Track 7]

[End of recording]