



Unheard Voices: interviews with deafened people

Gerry Leeper
Interviewed by Ann Thallon

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IMPORTANT

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Interview Summary Sheet

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Interviewee's surname: Leeper

Title:

Interviewee's forename: Gerald Arthur

Sex: Male

Occupation:

Date and place of birth: 1937, Glasgow

Date(s) of recording: 23rd September 2009

Location of interview: Hearing Link Scotland Office, The Eric Liddell Centre, Edinburgh

Name of interviewer: Ann Thallon

Speech to Text reporter: Karen Schober

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[Track 1]

This is Ann Thallon interviewing Gerry Leeper on Wednesday 23 September 2009 in Edinburgh. The speech to text reporter is Karen Schober. Well Gerry thanks very much for coming along this morning. Could you just for the recording could you give me your full name please and your date of birth if that's okay and where you were born.

My full name is Gerald Arthur LEEPER.

So that's Gerald Arthur Leeper.

Yes.

Where and when were you born?

I was born in Glasgow and I was born in 1937.

1937, So let's see that will make you what are you now?

72 years of age.

Okay. Now you were born in Glasgow back in 1937 can you tell me a bit about your background there? Why Glasgow? Were your parents from Glasgow?

My parents were both English actually. My father was a Londoner - a cockney - and my mother came from Hereford and they met there before the war and my father went off to serve his country. This was the 1st World War and they decided to stay in Glasgow and settled there. We lived in Bridgeton in Glasgow and I had 3 brothers and a sister so there were 7 of us altogether counting my parent and we lived in a 4th floor tenement room and kitchen flat so it was a bit tight, but I did have a good childhood.

So you had a good childhood Gerry. What are your memories of your childhood in that tenement flat in Glasgow?

Well I can remember a lot of pleasure in playing games mainly in the street playing football. I had a friend across the road who had a brother in America and he used to bring back American comics and that was a big treat having a batch of comics arrive. We'd both sit and read the comics because it was something you didn't get at that time in Scotland. Also we spent a lot of time playing in the street in what we call a tanner ball named after a sixpence of course but it was a little football and we used to have teams and we'd play up and down the street and the goal was basically between a lamp post and the near wall and just anybody joined in and it was very enjoyable but also dangerous because the roads were quite busy but we just ignored the traffic.

What age would you have been out there playing?

Probably anything from I don't know 7 to 10 those sorts of years. Went to primary school - to Strathclyde Primary School - which was within walking distance of where I lived in Glasgow and it was just on the River Clyde and it was very good. Of course we saw the war years in there. I can remember going down to the shelters, I can remember the close being, having a brick wall put in front of it. If a bomb landed in the street the reverberation wouldn't be felt up to the flats and the close. I remember the rationing with the food. We had a little shop immediately across the road from us and I can remember a batch of fruit coming in and there was almost riots in the streets because people were queuing up to get fruit. I think the big thing was a batch of bananas had actually come in. At that time I do not think I knew what a banana was and people were scrambling to get this fruit so it was quite an interesting time. But fortunately we didn't get anything like the blitz they got in Clydebank and we were reasonably safe. And the other thing at that time was certainly during the war years we were split up as a family. I was sent with my mother and two of my brothers I think to live in Moffat for a period of time and my sister stayed at home looking after my dad I think ostensibly because he was still working in Glasgow. So that's a little bit of the background there. I left Glasgow when I was about 10 and we moved to Corkerhill in Glasgow. It was our first move in to a council house.

So that would have been towards the end of your time in primary school?

Yes indeed I spent the rest of my primary school education in Mossspark School and I left there and went to Shawlands Senior Secondary so I had to travel by bus which was quite a journey but it was interesting, enjoyable.

[06:25]

*You said you enjoyed your primary school years particularly in your early years.
What was your secondary school like?*

It was busy and large and quite a fragmented school. There were blocks all over the place for students to go to and I have to say I wasn't very good at secondary school. My hobby if you like and my full time seemed to be taken up playing football. I really enjoyed football and I was playing it every minute of the day I wanted to be a professional footballer and that kind of impacted on my studies. I wasn't very good at education. I think I was poor in maths, I can remember an English exam getting 26 per cent that was really shocking. I was actually very good at geography and I was actually very good at technical drawing and there's a little story associated with the technical drawing which is quite interesting. Probably not long after I started secondary school we went on holiday to Arbroath and I remember looking in a toy shop window and seeing the big Meccano set and being filled with wonder. I asked my dad if I could have this and lo and behold it turned up at Christmas. I got this big Meccano set and I think that pointed me in a both an educational and career direction because I suddenly became interested in how things were built and made and probably it's funny to say it now but probably it laid the foundation of me being interested in technical things and ultimately becoming an engineer so that's a quirky thing to happen but it's something that always sticks in my mind.

So you became good with the Meccano and construction?

Yes the other thing was that you made whatever came in to your mind you started with a plan and made something that the parts were provided for but then you would

go away and make your own thing and it was really a quite interesting - I spent hours and hours playing with Meccano.

Did you have particular friends at secondary school who you played football with?

Yes they were friend and they stayed friends right into my late teens and we always used to go 2 or 3 of us go up when we played at 'kicking in' which was one of us would become goal keeper between two bundles of clothes as it were and we'd play in the park and play shooting in to goal and these guys became mates afterwards if you like and I lost them over a period of time but they were certainly there during my teens.

[09:38]

What about your family at that time Gerry you had quite a big family there were 5 of you you said. Did they play a big part in your life?

A wee bit of tragedy and other things were associated with that. When we still lived in Bridgeton my eldest brother actually went off to the navy and he went to Japan and all sorts of places with the Royal Navy and I didn't see him for a number of years. My second eldest brother unfortunately was in hospital for quite a long time. He got kicked in the knee when he was playing football as it happens and he ultimately lost his knee, they amputated his leg and that had a big effect on the family of course, he actually got out of hospital when we were still in Bridgton and I can remember huge reunion with all the neighbours at everything because people were very close then. After the war it actually seemed to bring people very close together and I can remember lots of neighbours coming to greet him when he came out of hospital so quite an emotional time. And I also remember my eldest brother coming back from the Navy and we being quite small and me running up to jump in to his arms. Quite a moment of happiness after not seeing him for so long but when we moved to Corkerhill then my next brother Eric he met a lass in the same scheme and they ultimately got married and they still live together in Glasgow. They are in fact in Bishopbriggs. My other two brothers Stanley, who was in the navy and Walter, who lost his leg, have since died unfortunately, so there are three of us left. There is my

sister who - May - her name is May - who still lives in Glasgow. She's 84 and just starting to use the internet for email and my other brother as I say Eric, he's in Bishopbriggs and they have a family also in Glasgow.

So you're the baby Gerry?

I was the baby of the family yes

Did that have an effect on you as you grew up?

Yes I think my sister really was my surrogate mother. I think she did a lot of my early bringing up looking after me.

[12:36]

Tell me Gerry, at that time as you were going through your schooling, how was your hearing then?

I think I visited hospital probably when I was about 10 just before we were moving houses and I had a problem. I went up to ENT in Glasgow and when I think about it now it was quite archaic because the bad experience I had was, they used to have a little spill - a little wooden stick - and they put cotton wool in the end of it and put a funnel into your ear and then push it down and twirl it and clear your ear before they looked in your ear and it was very painful and I often wonder if that was instrumental in causing some of my problems later on. But I did have health problems I had hearing problems and I used to take bilious attacks when I was quite young. But it didn't stop me playing and enjoying football!

So you had the usual childhood illnesses but were you aware of having sort of problem with your hearing?

Not really. I didn't have a hearing loss which was of concern to anyone; it wasn't until I was older when I had my hearing problems.

[14:05]

So now we're up to you at secondary school. How old were you when you left secondary school?

I was 15. And I left, ashamed to say, without sitting my examination, because I felt so embarrassed about my previous exam results. I spoke to my dad at the time and I had the opportunity of doing an apprenticeship and one of the things about doing apprenticeship then is that you had to sign the dotted line to go to evening classes and further education so I didn't think the third year certificate was so important to me at that time and I made the promise that I would follow up studies later on. I was fortunate in getting an apprenticeship with the G and J Weir Limited in Cathcart which is a big engineering company who made pumps and all sorts of things for ships and power stations all over the world and they were fortunately within quarter of a mile from where I lived so I was able to walk quite easily to and from work from where we lived in Merrylee.

What happened to your ambitions to be a professional footballer?

They continued because Weirs had an amateur football team and one of the lads from school - actually he wasn't with a company but he joined them as a goal keeper as an external member of the team - and we kept up a relationship and we played very well. We had a good position in the league and I enjoyed playing. I played probably amateur for about 3 years then I went to play junior football and unfortunately sustained an injury that brought my career to an end.

So you're doing your apprenticeship and did you enjoy that?

Yes it was a very good and many apprenticeship I served my apprenticeship as a marine engineer fitter which meant I did a lot of hand fitting initially but I also worked in machinery so it was very good foundation for what I was to do later. When I finished my apprenticeship with Wiers I went on to be a jig and tool draughtsman with them which I enjoyed very much. It was something that was new to me and the whole thing about drafting at that time with jigging and tools was that it led me in to

making things, how to make them and how to do the tooling for making them which I have always been involved with ever since, it's something that's always fascinated me how you actually make things and it's led me from one industry to another since.

So let me see Gerry. We must be in to the late fifties now are we, 1950's?

I left school in '52 so yes.

[17:59]

So what was your social life like at that point? Did you have anything else you got up to which you can share with us apart from the football?

I think probably what happens is that when you get to your teens you start to look around and see what the young ladies are doing round about and we started going dancing at that time which was the big thing; ball room dancing in particular, and I can remember going to dance halls and not being able to dance then ending up going to dancing lessons and really enjoying it and ending up getting a bronze certificate for dancing. So I was quite pleased and chuffed with myself and I can remember also going away on a boat with a friend, it was actually a life boat and the two of us were on at we went from Gourock down to Millport. He got the boat from a friend and we stayed over the weekend and that was the weekend I met what was ultimately to become my wife, Ann, whom we didn't exactly click it off immediately but we met later in Shawlands on the pavement, just by chance and we made a date and ended up getting married basically two and a half years later.

[19:40]

How old were you then? How old when you got married?

I was 22 when I got married the first time and I had a good marriage which lasted 25 years and we had 2 children, 2 boys who are now quite adults and we adopted a daughter later on. One of the boys the elder one and my daughter still live in Glasgow

and the younger boy lives in Carnoustie and has a family there. So that's how things progressed socially.

Alright they certainly did progress socially. So were you living in Glasgow when you were married for the first time?

I was staying in Glasgow in fact I moved jobs a few times staying drafting and probably

[Break in recording]

just before I applied for a job with Ford down in Basildon in Essex in the same line of business in fact I was designing special purpose machines and I was in their tractor division and worked there for 2 years then came back up again and picked up the pieces in Glasgow again and it was subsequent to that and that actually my bad health began to come in and I had problems with my hearing. We were living in Giffnock by now and...

[21:52]

What was that word again, where were you living - GIFFNOCK?

Giffnock and I was sitting in a house with the youngest boy he was 3 at the time and I got up to walk across the room and I adjust the television set and the next thing I knew I was lying on the floor and the room was spinning round and I was really very, very ill and sick and the worst you can imagine but I was able to speak to my son and he actually ran across the road at 3 years old and got a neighbour to come across. We knew the neighbour and in fact he happened to be a consultant in one of the hospitals which was fortuitous. He put me to bed and organised getting me to hospital and I was in hospital for a week and they didn't know what had occurred but after 3 months of going back and forward to the GP I was sent to hospital outside Glasgow and they put me on a big table and put water in my ears and I was very ill and they surmised from that I had Menieres disease.

That's how they diagnosed you?

That's how they diagnosed at that time.

What do you remember about it?

I can remember coming home and getting all sorts of different medication. I think they were experimenting with different medication at the time. It took probably about six months to get settled in too medication that stabilized my condition. I was still working but I was having to come home without my bosses knowing, through the back door as it were, because I was scared I'd lose my job and it went on for a couple of years. Gradually I was getting better. The medication was clicking in but I was still having quite bad attacks. My employers found out and I had to accept a demotion to a lesser job.

Gerry can I take you back to where you were, what, in your late 20's by then. Your son was 3, so you're in your late 20's? - and you had this episode where you fell down. You were so dizzy you fell down. You were very ill. Do you remember that incident? Do you remember your feelings around that incident?

I suppose I thought I was going to die, it was quite severe and I didn't know what had happened.

Did the doctors then, when you got to the hospital, were they good at explaining things?

The first thing they did was put me to sleep of course so I think I slept for, I do not know how long, and that's the one thing about Menieres disease it does make you very tired and sleeping is probably one of the best things for it. Having said that I was really surprised that they didn't analyse sooner what the problem was, they didn't give me a clue as to what they thought it might be, they just seemed confused about the whole thing and with Menieres you get things which I know now are called drops where you can be walking along and it's happened to me. You just suddenly drop and you're dizzy and lying on the ground and you do not know how you got there. Several

times I know when I lived in Edinburgh I ended up in people's gardens lying down and I know I did that because I felt it coming and just threw myself away from the pavement into the garden rather than the road and the other aspects of Menieres is that people avoid you because acting dizzy is the same as looking drunk and I have had occasions when I've really wanted help and people have just walked past me thinking I've been drunk. I've tried to catch a taxi and taxi driver wouldn't take me because he thought I was drunk so I ended up with a card with an explanation of my condition which, if it happened on the street, I could hand to someone and they were able to help me and had only ever actually really happened once where I had to use a card. Fortunately the mobile phone came along and I was able to contact my wife by phone if I was stuck anywhere and that happened a couple of times so life can be difficult.

Life can be difficult indeed. How did you feel when this condition came back every now and then? How did it affect your - I have to say your confidence?

It shatters your confidence because there is no warning initially when attack is going to come it just comes but what happens over the years, certainly happened to me, was with the medication was a slight pre-warning comes, it's like a masking of the brain, it's a strange feeling, and you know that you're going to have an attack and therefore you put yourself in a position to accept it. It doesn't always come but sometimes it comes and if you're sitting and if you're able to hold on to something it can make a huge difference because the stability of where you are is of huge importance to how you control your body when you're dizzy.

[28:53]

Gerry I wonder if you could tell me how your wife and family helped you at this point or coped with this change to the family life because you had developed this Menieres condition?

Well I think it was a bit bewildering to everybody. My first wife bore the brunt if you like of my Menieres condition. I do not honestly know whether it changed me or her or whether it contributed to our eventual divorce but they weren't happy times when I had these attacks and I guess it does change the way you behave, both partners, and

we just lived with it, I suppose is the answer, because you can't get away from it, so you live with it and you do your very best. Fortunately, I was still able to drive, strangely enough, because they said the medication would control that but I had to be very careful. As far as my family were concerned my brothers and sisters they didn't know much about it because they were removed by that time to their own lives. My children would have seen a bit of it but I do not think they got a lot of exposure to it. But yes it would have affected my life and the people about me at that time. It certainly it affected people at work because I had colleagues who had to if you like 'cover for me' if I went away from work with an attack but that was only in the very early days and for not too long a period but still that must have caused them problems and concern.

You were saying that you kind of hid it from your employers. Can you tell me a bit more about that? What made you decide to hide it from your employers?

That's a difficult one because I was actually in a very senior job with a large company. I was responsible for 3,000 people through three sub-managers and various departments and I had a secretary and I was getting paid quite well and having got to that sort of position I didn't want to lose what I was earning and the responsibility and everything that came with it and I suppose fear of that and suddenly becoming possibly unemployed would be the reason.

[Break in recording]

[32:24]

Everything's fine, so here we go. So there was the possibility of becoming unemployed you felt and that was why - and I think you said that your employers eventually found out. Can you remember how you felt about that and what happened then?

I was extremely upset of course because it was a reduction in money and a much lesser job. In fact it was a kind of sinecure position that they put me in to. I think they respected my health problem and put me in to a position where I would, embarrassingly probably, leave at my own speed which was I suppose very

considerate of them but it was a large company and I thought probably they felt they could afford to do it. So I did ultimately leave and my health was actually taking a better turn, medication seemed to be having more control. I was still having attacks but much less. I could sort of camouflage them so I applied for other jobs and moved to another company.

When you moved to the other company you said that you could camouflage your condition. Did you camouflage it when you applied to the other company or what happened there?

Well Menieres disease is one of these things if you were going for a job, I don't think you would tell the employer because I think there is 100 per cent chance you wouldn't get the job, so I took the job as a risk but wanted out and wanted to change my circumstances. Medication certainly was helping and I probably felt much more confident but probably spurred on too by an underlying unhappiness in my misfortune, if you like, of career. So yes I camouflaged it by not mentioning it. And fortunately it didn't present any great problems after that. It only stayed with me for about 12 years then it burnt out for a while before coming back much later on. So by the end of that 12 years I had lost the hearing in my left ear.

[35:39]

Right Gerry so by the end of that period you lost the hearing in your left ear. Did it happen overnight or happen gradually? What are the memories of hearing loss?

What happens with Menieres it seems to be that you have an attack and lose a bit of hearing so all the attacks add up to ultimately losing your hearing basically, because you lose a bit each time so you lose your hearing gradually over a period of time and it wasn't too bad the first time because it was one ear and of course one survives with the other ear, plenty of people do - you just turn your head to listen. It has an affect with you at home and with your friends and you have to say 'I'm deaf on that side' and position yourself on the good side but lots of people do that.

Yes they do. What sort of support were you getting from the medical profession at that point?

Really nothing, nothing at all. That's not totally true because when my hearing got bad in my left ear I went to the GP and asked if I could get a hearing-aid and of course didn't like it and discarded it like most people, first time I tried wearing it on and off but I never found a hearing-aid in one ear the deaf ear was very successful, it was easier to turn my head and use the other ear

Was it a specialist audiologist who tested you for your first hearing-aid?

Hospital audiologist. I didn't go to private people. I went to the hospital and they checked me over and gave me an NHS aid.

So you didn't really find it worked for you and you managed with the one ear?

Yes and of course there were no digital aids at that time this is before the digital aids came along it was an analogue aid and probably quite poor quality at that time.

[38:12]

And what about support form home? Was your wife able to support you because you say there was a big changing your circumstances really. How was that working at that point?

My wife was supporting me quite well at that time and I do not suppose it was until later that we did have marital problems and ended up having a divorce which was difficult with having three children but it's always a difficult position to face and overcome and life goes on.

So life went on and then you were just feeling more confident then you had another attack?

What happened was I was in remission. I can't remember the exact year I was in. 8 to 10 years I was in complete remission and thought Menieres was away and forgotten but it did come back with an awful bang quite frighteningly and I knew immediately what it was and went to the hospital via the GP who were, I think, more organised in Edinburgh than they were in Glasgow and they were able quite quickly to put me onto medication that seemed to almost instantly help my situation. It didn't stop the attacks because I think what happens with Menieres is that it makes itself known and it has quite a strong effect on your balance and it takes the medication a time to kick in and work. It doesn't work straight away it takes something like six months or a year to really get in to your system and start sort of controlling the fluid in your hearing system.

[40:52]

Now by this point you were working in Edinburgh and you must have been in your 40's by then. How was your hearing at that time?

Well by this time I was working in a large electrical engineering company in Edinburgh. I started to have attacks and Menieres was really beginning to affect my second ear and then I had to go and seriously look at getting a hearing-aid and I went from one hearing-aid to another to another to another over the years while I was in Edinburgh and ended up with a very strong private, what they call a cross aid with a mic on both sides and a wire across the back of your head and it was supplied by the NHS, although it was private, because it was the most powerful aid they could supply for me to hear and still continue business but that finally failed because there were colleagues attending meetings that I was having as a manager, who were complaining, without me realising, that they had been asking questions at the meeting and I was ignoring them and this led to discussions with senior management who felt it was time for me to step down and take a lesser job because of the effect my hearing was having on the team.

That's interesting.

Difficult times

At that time in history if you like, what protection was there for somebody in your position?

It was quite funny in a way because I wasn't aware that you could get protection. It wasn't until some time later I could have perhaps pushed my case a bit. I mean I know now when we meet people as volunteers we recommend various things they can do in a situation like that but I didn't seem to have access to that. I was unaware that anybody could help me and therefore you take it on the chin. The company were very good about it. They made a position for me by consolidating two or three different functions within the company and gave me an office on my own so that if anything happened I wouldn't be disturbing anyone else if I had an attack, and I became what was called 'technical writer' which I did for the following 13 years with the company and worked purely which was suitable for me because of my condition. I was able to go and see people when I wanted and just take notes and get them to write things down for me and use that. And joking now, the first aid room was cross the yard from my office and if I had an attack I would stagger across and I had an arrangement with the nurse - she would open the door to the back room and I would go and lie on a stretcher table at the back of the room until I recovered and that would usually - that could be anything from 10 minutes to a couple of hours until I got my composure back, then I go back and work on doing my manuals

So they were supportive? There were things that were there to help you?

The company were supportive but there is actually a funny story that comes out of that - sort of funny. Some time later the company started an occupational nurse who replaced the nurse that I had this arrangement with. This was a male nurse and he had the audacity to contact my Doctor and ask if my condition was real or if I was putting it on and I'm pleased to say that the Doctor sent him off with a flea in his ear and said that if anyone knew about my condition it was me and I knew more about my condition than he would ever know. So it was quite funny and the Doctor told me this afterwards. The therapist didn't mention it.

Gerry you've obviously kept your sense of humour. How was your job satisfaction at that point?

The job was very rewarding because it's funny to say but isolation with that kind of illness is very useful. It's less stressful and stress is one of the things that does bring Menieres attacks on and it's very useful to sit and contemplate while you're working about various things. I was quite happy with the job; in fact it was a good way to finish my career doing something that I did really enjoy. The down-side of that was of course that I had to accept less money and ultimately of course it affected my pension and that has always been a bit of a disappointment that's been handed on, if you like, from the illness.

[47:45]

So things at work were going pretty well really. What about socially. By this point you were really struggling with your hearing you were saying?

Yes what I didn't say was that when I started with this company I had actually started a fresh relationship with my present wife Alison who we met on the Island of Arran. She came to live with me in Falkirk and then Linlithgow then into Edinburgh where we worked from a home in Inverleith Row in Edinburgh.

[Break in recording]

All systems go, here we go. So you were in Inverleith Row in Edinburgh with Alison ?

Yes and working in this big electrical company. The sad bit of the story is that I retired early because the company had a huge fire and it was burned virtually to the ground and 300 of us were made redundant

What age were you then Gerry?

I was 58 I think - no sorry I was actually 62 and it was quite funny. My wife phoned me. I was in the house during the day on this occasion and the phone went and it was Alison to tell me to look out the window of the house where I would see a big plume of black smoke and I said 'yes I see the smoke what is it?' She said, 'That's your factory burning down. I think you're going to be without a job.' and I just couldn't

believe it and I jumped in to the car and went down and met her outside the factory where there was a huge crowd all watching the firemen pouring water in to the roof and all sorts. Anyway in the end we did actually get paid off but the company again were exceptionally good with me about it. They gave me contract work for 2 years on writing manuals, which I was able to do, which gave me an income for the next 2 years until I retired. The nice thing about it was I was earning the same money I was earning before and only working half the hours so it was quite a fortunate way to retire.

And tell me at this point then you met Alison and you married Alison, how did the two of you cope with the fact that you - how deaf were you at that point would you say?

Yes, well, with difficulty but I have to say Alison was exceptionally good about it. She accepted the fact that I was going to go to lipreading classes to try to help me and we also went to signing classes together for two years and although we do not sign now we do on occasions sign if we're in a restaurant or a busy place and we want to talk about someone and we don't want them to know we're talking we will sign, so it's something we have held on to in a very small way but it's significant because it does remind us of how things were difficult in the past. One of the nice things that happened was the hospital, was that, before I got my implant, which I presume you'll now move on to, it was suggested by the hearing therapist that we make a visit to LINK, as it was then, in Eastbourne and the big joke was that I was going to go down there and learn about implants and deafness and Alison was going to have a week's holiday, as she thought but what she hadn't appreciated until she got to LINK, was that she'd meet other people who were doing what she was doing and suddenly became [aware], as I did, that she was doing the job of a carer for me as a deafened person and it had a remarkable effect on both of us: the sudden realisation it wasn't just all about me because I think what happens is that the deaf person does become selfish about their illness and tends to think that everything is about them and the good thing about that week in LINK was seeing these other people and the understanding of their partners - just how much help and input they were putting into the relationship and I do believe that has stayed with us both, even now, and in a way has helped through a lot of difficult times, primarily caused by my hearing loss.

[54:17]

LINK, which is now Hearing Concern LINK, the intensive course that you went on - that was in Eastbourne was it?

Yes

You went all the way down to Eastbourne with Alison for a week's residential course, a life-changing course - is that too strong a thing to say?

No I think it was life changing in a way but not immediate because it took me 11 years before I decided I wanted to be a volunteer. It opened up all sorts of thoughts and ideas and things that stayed with me - it didn't just go out of my mind - and the realisation of the help that we got from that week, I think, really was what caused us to go back to LINK again and offer our services. But I suppose really you probably want to know what happened about my implant.

I certainly do

[55:23]

And what occurred there. When I left work and my hearing was really very, very bad - in fact I was profoundly deaf for 7 years and that was the time when we went to lipreading classes and signing and it was a struggle but the hospital were very good - I can remember in the early days going up when I was losing my hearing and there was a Mr. Kerr, a consultant, an exceptionally pleasant man, who said, 'I'm going to mark you on my list and keep my eye on you because I think some time in the future you'll need an implant.' And over the years I was going back and getting various things done to my hearing-aid and my regular hearing tests and I can remember going back this particular occasion and being told the hearing therapist wants to see you and I went to see the hearing therapist Ann Kennedy, as it was, for the first time and she said, 'Mr. Kerr decided you want an implant but he's not sure how much you are actually hearing and how much you're lipreading so he wants to see you.' So an appointment was made and I came back to see Mr. Kerr and I was sent off for tests

again with the Ann Kennedy, who did various tests and it was decided I was doing a lot more lipreading than I realised, in fact I was hearing very little. So, although I thought I was bad at the lipreading classes at lipreading, it turns out I was very good and enough to disguise the fact that I couldn't hear so that was how I finally went on to get an implant.

Were you given a lot of information before you had your operation?

Yes. I actually declined the operation initially because I was very frightened of having my skull drilled. I used to joke with people there was a thing on television at the time where they talked about Black and Decker, Black and Decker, Black and Decker, drilling machine. I used to kid I didn't want it in my head. I also had a bad experience in my home. My father had had a goitre operation in his eye and he had never had of the operation completely. That's a separate story but basically the consultant who was going to do the operation died and my father didn't trust anybody else with operation so he went through the rest of his life with his eye partly stitched up and the hole just above his eye which was always pulsing, it seemed, when you looked at him and it wasn't ugly but when he took his glasses off it certainly wasn't pleasant and the thought of somebody drilling in to my head was this memory of my father, was quite frightening. Also at that time there was a talk of damage to the hearing nerve which could cause facial damage and I was a bit frightened of that. So finally I had a meeting with Mr. Kerr and he explained to me that the hearing nerve situation was no longer a problem. They had got over that by electronic equipment that told them when they were near the nerve and that I could expect to have a good implant from the scan that they had done. So I opted to have the operation but we did have a funny little incident the day I went to hospital. Doctor Kerr met Alison and I in reception and one of the things he asked me was, 'Which ear would you like me to do?' because I had actually had both my ears sealed by a prior operation because my ear drums were so bad. My ear drums had been sealed off with the skin from the back of one of my ears so I was not just profoundly deaf, I was totally deaf and he said, 'Which ear do you want me to do?' and I said, 'Well the right ear was the last ear I heard in so I suppose that might be the best one to do.' 'Oh,' he said, 'that's good!' and I asked him why and he said, 'Because I am right-handed!' and I felt that was

quite a funny thing to happen that suited him. If I said my left ear, he might have been in difficulty.

Right - so that really made you feel more confident about the whole thing then Gerry?

Yes but the interesting thing is that when you get the operation and you waken up with the large turban on your head it is quite frightening and of course you've got the stitches down the side of the back of your ear, kind of three to four inch scar, so I went back after a week and I got the stitches out and then after another five weeks I went back to get what they call 'switch on' and that was probably one of the most dramatic things that ever happened to me. I can remember Ann Kennedy sort of giving me the equipment to put on and they put you through a test first of all, where you hear all these little beeps and they test all the electrodes to see if they are working, so that was successful. Then she said without any warning at all, 'Can you hear me Gerry?' And I just started crying. I couldn't believe it and it was like somebody had turned the clock back and it was so remarkable. Then Alison spoke and I heard her voice and it was all just quite remarkable. But the funny thing is that after that she said to me, 'Now I know you've had - you've been very lucky, you've had instant hearing but I want you to go away to the canteen for an hour and then come back and we'll adjust everything.' And when I went in to the canteen the sound of the crockery and people moving - it was just horrendous. I thought, 'I can't live with this - the noise is incredible - it's just too much.' Then we went back and she adjusted it and things just got better after that.

[01:03:51]

What a story. What a story. Can you tell me a bit more about the changes in your life after - how many years ago was it you got your cochlear implant? How old were you when you got your cochlear? How many years ago?

2004 I got the implant, so that's five years ago.

Five years ago. Take yourself back to 5 years ago when you were switched on, how did your life change after that?

Well dramatically at home I think because I was able to hear. We didn't have to sign and write things down. We used to have a white board we wrote things on, when I couldn't hear Alison - she'd write on the white board - so once you were in to talking to one another, it's quite different. We had an article -

[Break in recording]

the RNID contacted me and asked if they could do an article on me about my implant and one of the things that was associated with the article was a little bit of my granddaughter and the bit I always remember is that they asked her what she remembered most about my implant and she said it was wonderful to be able to tell me a joke on the telephone and hear me laugh. That was her big moment.

That's a lovely story. So there is one change and I think it's a good example to choose actually. What about - what else were you doing in your life at that time? You had some more hearing. Did it change anything else in what you were doing?

When I retired I'm still not hearing but Alison suggested I went to college and find something to do with my spare time so off I toddle to college on one of the open days and I actually had this thought I was going to make big wind mobiles to go out in the garden. I had this thought of starting a business of making things that moved in the wind but when I came to college they gave me the impression they wasn't a great deal they could do for me. The lady who interviewed me on the open day was herself a silversmith and she suggested I came in to college the following day and she would give me a piece of silver to work with and she would just let me play with it and do what I wanted and answer any questions. Cut a long story short: by the end of the next day I was fully hooked on working with silver. I had always been, if you like, a hands on person. Even as a manager in industry I was always more interested in making things than working with people. So I suppose in a way [I] fulfilled a long lost desire to work with my hands and construct things - perhaps go back to my early days but it's something I took to very readily and since then I've been making silver

jewellery and silver artifacts and I really do enjoy doing it. I have a decent workshop at home which I've gradually built and I now take people and train them

Train them?

on any aspects of silversmithing or jewellery making that they would like to learn. I have 5 people coming to train over the next couple of months.

My goodness what a marvellous development Gerry. It must give you great satisfaction by the sound of things.

Yes I do enjoy it.

[01:08:45]

Now I'd like to take you back finally to LINK, which is now Hearing Concern LINK. You mentioned after a while you took up volunteering with them. What does that mean to you? What are you involved with?

What happened was when I got my implant and realised then that I could communicate with people and we'd had the experience of lipreading and signing and the experience of being down in Eastbourne, we had actually kept contact with one couple who lived in Dover and we visited them and I think it was shortly after that , that we felt that we could contribute something to people who were going through the same experience as us and so we, initially I volunteered, and later on Alison volunteered and we basically we go out as a couple to visit couples, whether it be a husband and wife or whether it be a daughter and mother or father. Basically we tend to see a family situation where I would speak to the deafened person and Alison, with her experience of being a carer, would speak to the rest of the family and we have adopted that practice visiting people and we think we have been able to help a few people over the last couple of years and sometimes it can be a bit draining but it is certainly rewarding and long may it continue that we're able to help people.

And you had to manage without that when that started happening to you because you didn't get in touch with LINK until...

Of course that's right. LINK did train us. You're not just left to get on with it. They did give us good training and adequate training and I moved on in some aspects with LINK to help with some of the courses, which I hope are turning out to be satisfactory.

[01:11:23]

Okay. Now here we are in the present. You've got your cochlear implant. You can communicate. Do you still have any problems that you deal with because of your hearing and your balance?

Well yes unfortunately Menieres has come back. I thought it had died. The Doctor seemed to think after my implant it would disappear but in fact it's still with me. I had a bad attack a few weeks ago and I put myself back on full medication and the hope is that everything will settle down again. With regards to the implant there are some situations where it just doesn't work. 90 per cent of situations I'm happy with. If you're in a large crowd and there is a background noise, you have to be very careful how you situate yourself and what programme you use to make the best advantage of hearing a 1 to 1 conversation or in a group for that matter. I'm not frightened now of being in a group. For one period of my life I couldn't tolerate being with a crowd of people. I'd go to a funeral or wedding and end up standing in the corner because I just couldn't communicate - I didn't want to get involved in talking to people. It's strange to say that, but when I was truly deaf, I had this character that I imagined I was, which was the Walter Mitty character. I used to go away and just dream to myself in a corner and that would be my existence and that's, I think, part of keeping ones sanity and keeping ones mind working and not letting the problems of listening to people get to you.

When you look back over your life and how it's changed because of what happened to you, how do you feel about your life now Gerry?

My life is far better than it ever was: I'm retired, I'm doing a hobby I enjoy, we're getting about, I'm helping people. We're off to America next month for a two week break. Mind you that will be our last big holiday but if we're going out we're going out with a bang!

Gerry, is there anything else you'd like to add? It's been such an interesting interview - I've really enjoyed to hear about your life and feel privileged to have you share it with me. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview?

Off the top of my head I do not know. I think if anyone has a problem then they should approach an organisation who already have experience of that problem. With LINK or Hearing Concern LINK it happens to be the deafened issue or APHL as it's known but I would think that anyone who suffers any kind of traumatic illness they need help, they should search for an organisation with volunteers who may not solve their problem but will give them some peace of mind and help to guide them for the future.

That's a really good way to round this off Gerry. Thank you very much indeed.

Thank you, it's a pleasure.

[End of recording]