NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

AN ORAL HISTORY OF BRITISH SCIENCE

Dame Stephanie Shirley

Interviewed by Dr Thomas Lean

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<td>Forename:</td>
<td>Stephanie “Steve” (formerly Vera)</td>
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<td>Occupation:</td>
<td>Software house founder, computer programmer, scientific civil servant, entrepreneur, philanthropist.</td>
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<td>Date and place of birth:</td>
<td>16th September 1933, Dortmund, Germany.</td>
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This is an interview with Dame Stephanie Shirley, 9th of August 2010.

Dame Stephanie, I was wondering if you could start by telling me when you were born, and where.

Well I was born with a different name. My name was Vera Buchthal, b-u-c-h-t-h-a-l, and I spell it because, throughout my early life nobody could pronounce this properly, and it was, it was Bootle or Butchthal, all sorts of things. But actually it’s Buchthal [Germanic ch and t] meaning valley of beaches, and I used to delude myself that it was valley of books. I was born in Dortmund, north Germany, on the 16th of September 1933, and, that makes me a Virgo, and although I don’t believe in a bit of this at all, I am a perfectionist and I realise that that’s one of the characteristics that goes with this stupid characterisation.

My father was a very young judge, and I’ve seen his courtroom, and, he was only in his early thirties, and, people said, ‘Well he can’t have been a judge at that age,’ but apparently in Germany you can take, qualify as a judge by examination as well as experience, and this is what he had done. And, so I was told he was one of, if not the youngest judges in Germany. He was Jewish. My mother, who had been I think a tailor’s assistant before she had married, but had not worked since marriage, she was not Jewish, and that comes into the story, because, she told me things about occasionally wearing a swastika, and why she did, and all things like that. Shortly after my birth my father was fired by edict of the so-called Third Reich, and, he was not alone in that. Two things of, I suppose, interest. The State, or the city of Dortmund, had a, an event some few years ago where the Justice Department had tried to make restitution, or to record in a proper manner, the injustices that they themselves carried out during that period. And, when that happened, they invited whoever they could there, and, most people of course had either been killed or had died off. There was two members of the family, one of whom that they located, who turned up, and, I was one of them. They had found me from this unusual, rather unusual name, and they knew things about my father’s history that I didn’t know, so, there we are. And certainly I turned up there absolutely waving the Union Jack,
because, what happened to Jewish families was really rather awful, and although we were terribly terribly lucky, it has formed my own life and culture. When I say Jewish, there hasn’t been anybody religious in the family for two or three generations back as far as I know. My grandmother, paternal grandmother, had been, again one of, or the, first women mayors in London... in Germany, so sorry. And, so that there was this sort of aura of feminism, because, you know, we were very forceful and had learnt to stick up for ourselves. [pause] Again they tried to do some history of her, because they were doing a history of Dortmund, and, and they contacted me for photographs of her as a young person, which I had got, and as an old person.

[04:18]
So... But you know, there’s a sort of rich background there. And, I never really got to know my father very well, because, that’s the sort of thing that happened in life then. I can tell you a bit about him. [pause] What I did notice, with interest, was that when this retrospective was going on, I contacted my half-sister in Australia, and she had a copy of the notice that had been given to our father in 1933, and this was, probably this century already. So, in all the things that had happened to him, which were also considerable, he had still to carry this notice period, notice letter round, and it was literally two or three lines, quoting some edict that had come out, and, ‘You are hereby fired,’ full stop. And, it told me a lot about him, and, again it characterised I think some of the Germanic efficiency. It was all done properly, no, there were no notice periods, but you know, there were proper letters, and, great big stamp on them and so on. Very, very important. And, there’s a bit of me that I think is still Germanic. I do value efficiency, and have learnt to be more focused on effectiveness. But you know, I do like things right, and, at the Coronation of Her Majesty the Queen, I was stirred for the first time by marching troops. My goodness me. Excuse me, I can hear something going on. [pause] No. OK. How, how strange, you know, the music of marching and sort of by the militaristic music, and jubilant and, and rhythmic and so on. I think it’s interesting that my father was a judge, because I am told that there’s a correlation between the law and music and mathematics. And certainly mathematics was something that I loved and focused on for many years.

[06:55]
So what happened to me in the Thirties, well as a child, a lot of it is what I’ve been told, and, I was told that we lived in seven countries of Europe, and only one or two of them can I remember, even having been told the names. We’d finished up in Vienna,
and basically we were moving round trying to find a safe place. And, it was the Dortmund people who told me that my father had worked in a coffee house in Vienna in 1939, which I didn’t know, and I thought, how strange, because his parents used to run a coffee importers, and you sort of think, well yes, maybe he did actually know something about coffee. It can’t just be chance, of all the sort of mechanical jobs that he could have done at that time, that he focused on coffee. Because he was not a practical man at all. He was very, very, self-centred... Not... Focused and self-centred, and looking back as my late son was profoundly autistic, I sort of think, did he have autistic qualities? He had enormously high intellect, he spoke seven languages, he played the violin well, I mean not concert level but, he played it in little groups and things. And... [pause] I’ve lost the thread. What was I talking about?

[08:39]
You were talking about your father. Talking about looking at autism.

Yes. Yes. My mother told stories, two stories that I remember. Firstly that when she was boiling some milk and the doorbell went and she said to my father, ‘Watch the milk, I’m going to the door.’ And he actually watched the milk rise in the saucepan and boil over, and he... [laughs] Extraordinary. And, the other one was, when he wanted, again it was something to do with cooking, he wanted to find out if water was boiling, he put his finger it. And you sort of think, how impractical can you get? Very theoretical, very cultured. He read in French, he read in German, he talked music, he was, later on he became a friend of the conductor Satie. So he was quite a, a remarkable, high performing, early performing man, who, because of the Jewish heritage, his life turned rather different. So what happened to him, after moving round Europe, we were in Vienna, and he, like the family von Trapp, walked over the mountains from Vienna into neutral Switzerland, and thence, I know not how, got to England.

[10:05]
And, we, my sister and I, were put on a Kindertransport, one of ten trains leaving Germany and, and Austria. I don’t know where they all left from, but, ours left from Vienna and there were other starting points. And came to England with, a very traumatic journey, because it was 1,000 children up to the age of sixteen, two adults on the train, plus some young girls, of whom I have only really been told, I can’t
remember this, who, I think with enormous bravery, which is why I always mention it, had volunteered to bring out babes in arms, on the assumption, arrangement, that they would bring the children out and then return to Germany and to almost certain death. And, I, I always think for a young girl it’s absolutely fantastic.

[11:17]

So the journey was fairly traumatic. Some things that I remember have been, disproved or disputed perhaps by some of the films that I’ve seen, or other, what I’ve read about other people’s experiences. The three things I suppose that I remember is that I lost my doll, you know, very important to a child; that there was a little boy called Peter, who kept being sick; and, the train was stopping and starting all the time. And years afterwards I sort of said to my eldest sister, she is four years older than I am, ‘Wasn’t it extraordinary that the train used to stop for Peter to get out and be sick on the side.’ She said, ‘Don’t be silly, it didn’t stop for that. The train stopped and he took the opportunity of stepping off and being sick,’ you know. So, the sort of memories that as a child you have are sort of very garbled. I can remember having, somebody having rolls of corrugated paper, cardboard, corrugated cardboard, which were brought out so that we slept on the floor, and I think, in the luggage rack, which sounds very unlikely, but that was my memory, and my memory of the compartment is not what I’ve seen in the pictures. So it’s obviously got garbled with stuff that, English trains are quite different, and so on. So, how much of that is true, I don’t know. All I do know is that it was fairly chaotic.

[13:04]

We came out without nationality, because Hitler had taken nationality away from all Jewish. No, you were classed as Jewish, I think if you were up to one-sixteenth Jewish. So-called Nürnberg Laws. And, we had no money, because, all the money had been removed from us. And we had only what we could carry at the time, which, five years old, and at the time I had a poisoned foot, don’t ask me how I got it, wasn’t very much. [pause] Perhaps I could guess how I got that foot, because, for some time I was in a children’s home in Vienna, and I, I wish I’d asked my mother more details, but one of the things I did ask her was, what was I doing in a children’s home? And she explained that, getting a child on to a Kindertransport, which obviously was a tremendous, drive for all the Jewish families, you know, if they could get their kids on it, was made so difficult that... I said, ‘What do you mean, difficult?’ She said, ‘Well you had to be in one part of Vienna between two and three o’clock in the afternoon,
and you had to be somewhere else after that, not before, doing something else.’ And she said, ‘I just could not do it while looking after children.’ And... Or with, taking children with me. And so she put us in the children’s home and she scurried around getting all the papers done. The organisation of that Kindertransport was done by the Quaker Society of Friends, and, they... I’ve gone to see some of their papers in, Friends House or whatever it is in Euston Road, and, they basically organised sponsors for each child, I think always couples but it might have been singles as well, who not only agreed to take children in, but... particular children that they’d sort of signed up for, but also to underwrite their costs to the State of £50 per child. So, £50 in those days was quite a lot of money, and obviously that was, you know, some things, that we were not going to be a drain on, on the country.

[15:50]

There was a reunion twenty or twenty-five years after that period, and, I didn’t really want to go to it, by that time I’d become very English, but my sister was over here from Australia, where she eventually went, and I’ll tell that story afterwards, and she did want to go. So we went together. And, a very Jewish gathering. I was probably among the youngest that was there, because the babes in arms had, you know, probably totally acclimatised, integrated is the word I want, sorry. What I noticed was that the children who had been ten or over when they arrived still spoke with foreign accents, and, Renate was nine, my sister Renate, and I had been five, and, basically, we, we spoke pretty good English. [pause] There was, the Prince of Wales had some reunion for Kindertransportees, Kindertransportees, some few years back, ten years, something like that, and again, should I accept, should I...? Anyway, I went along. And I felt totally out of place. I just, my culture is totally Christian upbringing, and I’ll talk about our foster parents later. But, it’s not just that I didn’t have their religion, because, it seems to me that the religion is Old Testament, and we all studied the Old Testament, but just the whole approach to life, approach to duty, though some of that I’ve got, just seemed very alien, and I was not terribly comfortable. At the moment I’m meeting a lot of Jewish families for different reasons, and again, and coming across a group that I feel much more comfortable with, and, I said to a good friend recently, I feel more Jewish as I get older. And I think, I wonder what’s happening there, you know? [laughs] But, I, most of my life was really trying to be more English than the English, and, I was incredibly, incredibly lucky.
Had religion actually been a major part of your upbringing when you were still in Germany?

Not at all, there hadn’t been religion for several generations. But it’s a racial thing. [pause] When... I could... Yes, there are various things I can... In, in Vienna, sort of pre-five, I can remember we went and sat in the lovely cathedral, St Stephen’s in the middle of Vienna, and I said to my mother when I was growing up, ‘What were doing there?’ Because I can sort of remember that. And she said, well there were so many places that one wasn’t allowed to sit, because you couldn’t sit on the park benches, and... I, I don’t know if you’ve read about this, but you know, gradually, the world closed in on people, you know, first of all you couldn’t keep a pet, and then you couldn’t do this, and you couldn’t go on a tram, and you couldn’t sit on a park bench, and you couldn’t go into a swimming pool. Gradually it sort of closed in on you, and of course obviously finished up with the Final Solution. And we were resting there, resting, Mother and small child, out of the heat. You know, and you sort of think, strange sort of...

[19:48]
I did go back to Vienna once, and it’s still pretty anti-Semitic, and, that’s when I feel very Jewish again. Because I, I realise I do look quite Jewish, and I have this drive and high energy that is partly the result of my childhood, but is partly my nature. And all this argument about nature/nurture, I’m a wonderful example of that. Because I’m mainly nurture, but there’s a goodly chunk [laughs] that’s also nature, that is, genetically comes from my father who was a workaholic, he was focused, he was very upright, very correct, and, taught me the first, you know, as a child, pre-five, or pre-six when I left, taught me ethics, what is right and what is wrong. And one instance that I remember about ethics, which have become very important to me throughout my life, is that, we were out on some walk in the Vienna Woods or something, in the country-ish, and, there was a little beetle or something, and, this five-year-old, I stamped on it. And, he hit the roof. He shouted, which for a quiet-spoken intellectual was quite unusual for him. What did I think I was doing? How would I feel if a great big foot came down and squashed me?’ and so on. And, quite disproportionate to a child-ish thing. But it, it sort of started a, a sort of understanding of, it is ethics, is the only word. And since then I have been committed to ethics in computing, ethics in
autism, and I realise, yes, that is a stream of my life, and is one of the ways as a scientist where I have made a little bit of difference.

[21:58]

_Can you talk a bit about your father at this point? It’s..._

He...

_What was his name?_

Arnold, Arnold Buchthal. He came to England, and then in, I think it was ’39, all adult refugees were interned. Churchill famously sort of said, ‘Collar the lot.’ Because there wasn’t time to sort out who were the Nazis and who were spies and who were the genuine refugees, so he said, ‘Collar the lot.’ And, he, he was sent to Australia, and, the date is going to come out of this, isn’t it, because, he went on a ship manned by people who had been at Dunkirk, and that’s relevant because, you’d got all these men, the women weren’t interned, sixteen-plus, so a lot of what I consider to be elderly children, going out to Australia in perfectly organised but modest arrangements. But the guards, and I suppose they were guards, went berserk. They shut them all underneath, underneath the, whatever it’s called in a boat. So it was black hole of Calcutta there. Threw all their belongings, such as they had, overboard. And that was called, the sailing ship, _Dunera_, d-u-n-e-r-a. And various films have been made about this sort of, rather, you know, untypically English reactions. But when you think that those are people who had been, been at Dunkirk and had been sent there because they were shell-shocked themselves and things like that. What is extraordinary about the British life is that, here we, by that time we were obvious at war still, and yet questions were asked in the House of Commons about the treatment of these people being shipped, in turn, to Australia. Which I think is wonderful, that anybody had time for that. When he got to Australia, the newspaper cuttings of the time talked about English, or German, German, German prisoners. They were not prisoners, of course, they kept saying. But they were interned in a place fairly close to Sydney, close in Australian terms, called Hay. And in fact at Canberra there’s an exhibition about it at the moment. Hay was literally in the middle of nowhere. It didn’t even have a barbed wire fence around it, because, it
was just surrounded by nothing. And so, if you wanted to get out, you could, but there was nowhere to go to. And, it was quite, it was quite well organised by, the Brits or the Australians, whoever did it. I mean there was enough food, there was enough of everything and so on. But what was quite unusual, and I don’t know how many internees there were at Hay, but they formed their own little society, that they sat on chairs at eleven o’clock in the morning, drinking ersatz coffee or something like that, but it was the café society that they had been used to. They started, not a school but a university, and each of these mainly intellectuals taught in the subjects that they were skilled in. They printed their own money, which are now quite historic currency. And, my father again became a judge for, in whatever sort of discipline was, was required there. And, although not a lot has been written about it, it’s quite an interesting, I don’t even know how long they were there, what happens to people under stress and how that lot did recover and become, create their own society. And you have similar stories in concentration camps as well, which, obviously more, even more remarkable.

[26:48]
After some time, and I don’t know whether I’m talking about a year or years, the men... Well maybe it was all of them, because the youngsters were classed as men, were offered the opportunity of coming back to England to serve in the Pioneer Corps. So they were not allowed on active service, but they were in the English Army, British Army. And, I remember my father being terribly worried about his hands, ‘How can I play the violin if I’ve been digging ditches and so on?’ But anyway, he like many other people volunteered to come back, and joined the Pioneer Corps, and was stationed at Bicester, and I don’t know how long he spend there, but somebody spotted that perhaps he could do rather better, more difficult work, than digging ditches, and so they sent him to manage a mental hospital in Talgarth in South Wales, which was a mental hospital for German prisoners of war, maybe Italians as well actually, but a mental hospital for prisoners of war. And, I don’t know whether he started as in charge but he finished up in charge. He changed his name, because, with a name like Buchthal he thought the prisoners of war might sort of, be difficult with him, so, what name did he choose? He chose the name White. And so he was Staff Sergeant White, staff sergeant being the highest rank that a non-Brit could, could hold. But he was running this hospital, and he used to tell us about some of the things that he observed, because he wasn’t really in charge of the patients or anything but he
observed, and managed. And, he told the story about how he had some VIP visitors come round, and had been amazed that the director of this hospital should be a staff sergeant, which is, you know, pretty lowly. And, you know, and so, ‘Who are you?’ And he, he replied with great glee, ‘I am a friendly enemy alien,’ was the term that was used, friendly enemy alien, which is lovely. So we were all friendly enemy aliens, but the children had a much better time than, than the adults.

*Did you see him at all during the war?*

[pause] He came on leave once in uniform, I can remember that. He wasn’t a stranger, but I mean he was a strange man, and so he wasn’t good with children or anything like that. He was very proud of how we were getting on. Don’t really remember much about that visit. It would be, you know, a soldier’s leave, three or four days or whatever it was.

[30:07].

*What sort of background was he from originally? You mentioned the coffee connection. I was....*

They were sort of coffee importers. What else do I know about them? Ah. No that was my mother’s mother. [pause] No, I really don’t know very much about them. I’ve got lovely pictures of the house that they had in Dortmund, and of them. I would say that they were sort of, fairly middle-class, commercialised intellectuals. As I say, she, she had been a mayor very early on. [pause] I got to know her, so it’s my father’s mother, much better after the war. Do you want to hear about her? [pause] So we’re talking about my paternal grandmother. She had two children, her son Arnold who I think was the older, and a daughter Alice, who again was a very emancipated woman, had fallen... She was teaching sport I think in a school, had fallen in love, disastrously, and had then gone into a terrible, terrible decline, as is women’s wont at times, and, I think today she would have been given a few tablets of lithium and would have been back at work in three months, but she had a breakdown and never really recovered. And she was hidden during the war in a Catholic convent where she, I suppose she made herself useful, but, she lived there for the rest of her life, they sheltered her at the time. [coughs]
My grandmother whom I called Omma, o-m-m-a, was... which I think is a sort of childish version of Oma, she was apprehended at one time and was imprisoned for two or three days, and then somebody paid some money for her or something like that, but anyway she got out. And, she sort of had a sort of philosophy about her, so that, she told me herself that when she was arrested, she quickly picked up some knitting, because they weren’t allowed to take anything, and she said during those forty-eight hours or whatever it was she knitted and then she undid it and then she knitted it again and so on. So she was very, she was very practical and, again, very alive. I knew her in her eighties, she came to England after the war, only for a visit. And, she was interested in fashion, she was interested in young people. She had a group of very very good friends whom she had made in a long life, including the people who had hidden her during the war. And, she had spent some time, I, I don’t know how long, I don’t think it was years but significant, maybe months, hidden in the cellar of the farmhouse of, by total strangers, not Jewish but just humanitarian people who, and I should remember their name and I’ve forgotten, if... yeah, I must have known it once, who had hidden her for that length of time, shared their food with her, risked their lives by protecting her, and she’d only come out at night. So, that had, given her again a philosophy, I think this happens to people if they live, not by themselves but on their own for large periods of time. And, you can see that with other instances. She came to England post-war, and I was at school then, and I’m just thinking, I must have been fourteen, fifteen, so that would date it. [pause] And of all things, she had the most terrible, terrible journey, and we had told her how lovely England was, and all this sort of thing, and... She had had a body search coming in to England. This little old lady who was wearing black and a little sort of lace around her neck, and you know, she was wizened, and, and you know, this really wrinkled old face, she’d had a body search. And what had happened, apparently somebody had tipped off the Customs people that a little old lady was going through carrying drugs or whatever it would be in those days, and she had got caught up in this and had this very bad introduction to England. But she was very generous in her personality. She brought with her a most beautiful piece of lace, six foot long or something, to give me, which she had herself crocheted as a gift for my foster parents, which was her sort of thank you. And, during the war, I don’t think we knew where she was, but the Red Cross had a system of telegraphic type of messages between people, including those
in the camps, and, I have and have put into the Red Cross museum the sort of messages we got from her which in German basically sort of said, ‘How are you? Be good. Omma.’ That’s all. I... You know, I think it probably was five letters or five words or something like that. And again, people forget that the Red Cross do that sort of service. And, so we knew for a long time that, that she was around.

[37:00]

My mother, we had a letter from my father, to my foster parents actually, not direct to us, saying that he thought she had gone, because he had lost all contact, couldn’t find her, nobody knew where she had gone. But she did get to England, and to my shame I don’t know how she did it. Certainly didn’t swim. So somebody must have helped her out. And she went into domestic service with a family related to the people who had organised the Quaker relief activity, so, it was, we knew where she was, she knew where we were, and she certainly visited us as children on, several I suppose occasions over the years. I mean during the war nobody had any money, you couldn’t travel. You know, it wasn’t particularly that we were refugee children; it was just, everything was very tight and, people didn’t, didn’t move around in the same sort of way. Did we have telephones? Yes, we did. Did I ever speak to her on the telephone? I can’t remember ever doing that. Long-distance phone calls were, unusual things. They were expensive; you usually told somebody, ‘I’m going to ring at ten o’clock on Thursday,’ that sort of thing. And, I can’t remember phone calls. I mean Aunty and Uncle certainly, yes, they certainly had a telephone.

[38:56]

*Your grandmother, how much did she feature in your life when you were still in Germany?*

She had been in Vienna with my mother when they saw me off on the Kindertransport. And you had this scene of weeping people seeing their children off, and, probably thinking, never to see them again. And so it was, you know... And of course we didn’t really know, my sister and I didn’t really know much what was going on, and my mother had made up two little parcels of, you know, little packets of, of a little present that we were not allowed to open until the train had started, so that we were really raring to go because we were dying to find out what it was. And I had the contents for many years, I sort of think, what happened to them? But anyway.
Mine was two little dogs joined, one black, one white, Scotties or something like that, joined together with a red plastic band which you somehow wore round your neck, and you’d got these lovely, two little... An absolutely suitable present for a little girl. [pause] What else was in my little suitcase that I could carry? Well my doll, who was a sort of, they’re not really known here, was called a Kathe Kruse doll. Kathe Kruse was a sculptor who had got involved in toy making in Germany, and so her, the dolls made by her all with her name were sculpturally very correct. And, I, my doll was called Ruth, and, I managed to lose her on the journey. She turned up later, I don’t know how. And, she now resides in the Bethnal Green Toy Museum, because, I wasn’t going to let anybody else play with her, because she was, she was filled with straw and it was beginning to come out, and she had, she’d been on that journey with me, and, I thought she needed a safe home. When I lost her on the journey and arrived with Aunty and Uncle, I was very focused on the lost doll. We came into a, we arrived at Liverpool Street station, having gone over the Channel in, at night, on a boat, which was the first time I’d ever seen the sea, so this sort of smell of the sea and, and the sort of black inkiness of the water as one walked across the gangplank, I can remember that. And I was in a, what are they called, cabin, with one of the two female staff, because I was the youngest but one on my train, so, one of the staff had the youngest, this one, I don’t know who she was, had me, and I slept like a log in a proper bunk. When we were, when we disembarked in Harwich, we went Harwich, Hook of Holland, we then got on an English train, and maybe that’s how I get muddled about what the trains were like. And anyway, we eventually came to Liverpool Street station, rather dirty and tired and grumpy and, not particularly excited, we were just tired. [pause] There was a cavernous hall there, at Liverpool Street station, where were all went, and I can remember sitting on some palliasses at the back of the hall. We all had numbers round our necks so that people knew who we were, and, they would call out names and numbers and sort of, ferry us off to wherever, various places that they were going. And eventually our numbers were called, and, off we went with what we now know to be Uncle Guy, Guy Smith, a very reassuring name, Smith. But I was fairly traumatised by that time, and... [pause] [43:44]

My sister remembers that my father was there as part of that handover, but I can’t remember. He, he might well have got permission from whatever he was doing to come and, just see us through and hand us over, because it certainly was all that. And,
Uncle was a, oh he was lovely, I mean, I’ll say more about him later, but I mean, he, he, he liked children, he loved children, they hadn’t had any of their own, and, Aunty it was who had spotted in the local paper, and you still see them today for children up for adoption, little tiny postage stamp type pictures of us with names and ages, sort of saying, ‘Homes wanted for two little Jewish sisters, well brought up,’ and all that sort of thing. And she had, much to I think everybody’s surprise including her own, said that she wanted to do this. And, she was quite different to Uncle, as often happens with couples I suppose. [pause]

[45:09] But, I can talk about how I sort of settled in there if you like, because that’s the beginning of the war. But, we arrived in July 1939; by September I had got enough English to go to school. But what I think I wanted to say was that that traumatic childhood has impacted my life and is as important, and its effects are as important to me today as they were seventy years ago. What did it actually do for me? Well it made me realise that, tomorrow is nothing like today, and certainly nothing like yesterday, and that, that helped me to welcome change and start to, well, first of all, it allowed me to cope with change and then eventually welcome change, and now I really like innovation, I like new things for the sake that they’re new, and that has I think come out in the fact that I’ve always worked in some aspect of research and done new things. I think the, it’s given me a sort of patriotism, I mean I love this country with, with a passion that perhaps only someone who has lost their human rights can feel. [pause] And that is... And the feeling that my life was saved, and for a lot of my childhood I was kept being reminded that my life had been saved, not by Aunty and Uncle but by others, ‘Aren’t you lucky not to have gone up in smoke,’ and all that sort of thing, and the confusion between refugees and German and, and this was the enemy, and, dreadful things, that, [pause] has made me really convinced that my life has to be, I have to make my life worth saving, and that, each day you spend as if it would be your last. And that’s still with me today, you know, I sort of, I like to live sort of in the present, because I don’t know about tomorrow, and it’s not a question of age, it’s just, I never know what’s going to happen. And, for many, many years I had nightmares and God knows what. [pause] Can we have a break?

_Certainly._
You mentioned that your father was musical as well.

Mhm.

Did music play much of a part in your childhood?

[pause] Well Aunty was musical, and she introduced me to Grieg as a composer that she was passionate about. So there was music in that home. Not so much on the radio, but, they had a gramophone, and, a symphony would be about eight records, you know, and you’d sort of, put them on, and you’re just, just getting into the music and then it would stop and you had to get another record and put it on. So it was fairly clumsy. But, yes, I mean, I think music is quite important to me. [pause] When, later on, yes, no you asked when my father visited, I can remember the time that he visited as a soldier in uniform, that, we would listen to concerts, because he wanted to listen to a concert, and it was marked in the Radio Times which still, already existed in those days, and we would be sitting there ready for seven o’clock in the evening or whatever it was, and we would sit still as mice, because we all lived in one room you see. So, if he wanted to listen to the concert, we really had to be quiet. So it was pretty important to him. And I suppose, yes, it’s part of, part of life for me I think.

Do you remember your father playing at all?

Yes, I can remember, he played the violin, and, there were four of them, all refugees, all playing some quartet. And it was beautiful, really lovely, and sort of live music is something very special. And it would be in a small room no bigger than this, and the four of them would be crammed in a corner and get going. [pause] Quite rare.

[02:16]
Where was this?
That was in a place called Oswestry that, I haven’t got to yet. [pause] My mother somehow, how did she get there? Anyway, she... Oswestry is a small market town that’s geographically really in Wales and politically in Shropshire, and, there was a handful of refugees there, and I think what always happens is that, one goes for whatever reason, and then tells the others, you know, ‘They’re quite civilised here and it’s nice, and there’s work,’ and, you know. And, she somehow, I don’t know how she supported herself, but, she was in a house in, what was the name of the road? I’ve forgotten the name of the road now. But she had a room in the house of a Dr Huchenberg[ph], and I don’t know how to spell it but I know how to pronounce it. And he was an early refugee who had, and it was the first time I’d ever seen this, a book-lined study, top to ceiling, three sides of the room, just all books. And he had a beard. He was just like you expect a professor to be. So that’s how she got there. What was the question?

[03:50]
You were talking about music, but that actually brings me on to your mother, which was something else I wondered about.

Yah.

You’ve talked quite a bit about your father so far, not so much about your mother, and I was wondering, what can you tell me about her, what sort of person was she?

[pause] I think it’s significant that I talk more about my father because I’m more like him, and although I hardly saw him, I felt, and feel, felt, closer to him than I ever did to my mother. I think, part of the lack of bonding with my mother was because of course as a young child you don’t appreciate quite what’s going on, but also, after two or three years in this country, probably more like two, she had, and I’m trying to think where she was settled then, I think she was already in Oswestry, she was able to provide a home for one child. And I had settled in very well with Aunty and Uncle; my sister being older had not settled in so well. She rebelled against the changes of culture, and I mean little things, about which hairbrush to use or, all of this sort of thing. So she was not so happy. She had remained in contact with my mother, probably father also, because she could read and write, which I couldn’t. And so, she
had remained closer. And so my mother arranged for Renate to join her in Oswestry. Yes it was Oswestry. And there was a sort of nasty little part of my sister’s life where the school was grooming her to take a scholarship, and said, ‘Don’t tell your mother, it’ll be a wonderful surprise if you get a scholarship.’ And my mother had said, ‘I think I’m going to be able to get you here with me in a few months’ time. Don’t tell anybody else, because they’ll all be upset.’ So this ten-, eleven-year-old had this sort of duel secrecy going on. And this sort of put pressures on her in an odd sort of, sort of way.

[06:30]
Mum had worked with a tailor, and she’d, I think she’d been trained in tailoring as a young person. Her father was an engineer. Her mother I think just looked... you know, I, I don’t know... [pause] He apparently had been involved with the building of the Sydney Bridge; how it had happened, I don’t know. But so he was a civil engineer, wasn’t he. She and her sister led, I think sort of upper-middle-class type lives, where, she made the family clothes, she made our clothes for many years, because in those days you didn’t buy ready-made clothes. You didn’t go to the hairdresser’s, you know, the family cut your hair. And all that sort of thing. Very hard-working, had learnt to be extremely frugal, you know, we could live on nothing really. Because she had had to, to be. And, I think became, maybe she always was, embittered about life, because her marriage was not happy. My father said once when I was grown up already, obviously, ‘I could never satisfy her,’ and he meant in, you know, no matter how many awards he got and how much he earned and all that sort of thing, she was never satisfied. And I found the same as well, you know, she was just always critical and never satisfied with anything that I did. And for many many years I really tried extremely hard to satisfy her by my behaviour, by how I ran my home, how I brought up my child, how I dealt with her. It was a real drive. And of course it would drive me scatty because I’m a different sort of person, and it made me pretty unhappy, and eventually I thought, I’m not going to let her upset me any more, and, just switched over, she is as she is, if she wants me to do that, I want to do this, pt! you know. So it was not a good relationship. However, she was, as I say, very hard-working, she got a job teaching or, teaching assistant, then went to teacher’s training, immediately after the war there was a sort of compacted teacher’s training for only I think ten months, at a place called... Near Liverpool anyway. And she went there, and came back and then was a qualified teacher. And she taught of all things
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geography and needlework. And, I don’t... I’m sure she was a competent teacher, but basically I don’t think she liked children, and, so I, I think she shouldn’t have been like that.

[09:48]

Anyway, she learnt to love England, she did, she didn’t look back too much. Got... But she was, still remained sort of much more continental, and she used to actually say things like, you know, ‘It used to be better.’ And there were lots of aspects of German life, and, there probably were better, certainly more efficient than Britain. But she somehow got hung up on some of the things, all the things that she had lost, and later on, post-war, my father did go back to Germany and she refused to go back with him. Now, the marriage was probably pretty dicey at the time, she said, ‘I had young children here, I didn’t go back,’ but the fact is she, I, I don’t think she could face going back. She, it had become very tough for her. And she just didn’t want to go back. And that sort of broke, broke the marriage.

[11:09]

One of the things that happened post-war that is very creditable I think for Germany is that they tried, seriously, to make restitution for the actions of the Nazi party, who were, people tend to forget, a democratically elected party, and so, they went through a process of paying money to people to go back, and paying money for, so much for a lost father, so much for a lost sister, so much for a lost friend, so much for a lost education, and, and so on. And she, she got a bit involved in this, which probably again wasn’t terribly healthy for her. I started to do similarly, and, the discussion there was lost opportunities and lost education, because, I was not able to go to university here and, and so on. But after a bit I found the meetings with the solicitor who was handling all these things and providing documents for who I was, well I hadn’t got a birth certificate any more, it had all got lost, and you had to write to Germany and get some sort of bit of paper that was the equivalent of a birth certificate. And eventually for, for reasons that might become clearer later on I decided I just wasn’t going to have anything to do with it. I was so lucky, I was settled in here and to hell with them, I wasn’t going to... I refused to go to the German Embassy, I refused to go back to Germany. You know, I wouldn’t set foot in the thing. Which I had to then review when my father went back. But Mum I think was much more, damaged. I mean she had the responsibility for us, she lost everything too. But I always think that restitution is, is an odd sort of thing to have,
because here when we have a new party in government, you know, they always sort of say, ‘Oh it wasn’t us. Move on, we’re starting with a clean slate.’ And, and Germany did actually try to make restitution. The sort of money that they offered to people to go back was, as I remember, something like £2,000, which in those days would buy a house. And it... Or was it £20,000? It was certainly sufficient, because we, we did, people did talk about it, to actually buy a house and get yourself set up once and for all. Of course in Germany people don’t buy houses, they rent. Very different sort of culture. So it was, it was a very serious effect. I really had such ambivalence about my split family and split nations, I had nightmares for many many years. I still, if I see a film or read a book, which I try not to, about those times, I, I’m asking for trouble, so, I sort of, I need to protect myself to a certain extent. And, the survivor’s guilt that people have at having survived, whether that be a football disaster or something like the Holocaust, really became a driving aspect of my life.

[15:07]

In my first job, and I’ve come back to me and perhaps I’ll go back to my mother, somebody introduced... somebody realised I think how mentally sick I was, very unstable and so on, and just, I suppose unhappy and unsettled, and they introduced me to the Tavistock Clinic in Baker Street, and, interestingly, when I went there, it was all, all free, I never paid a bean, and I had treatment there for about six years, starting... I know when they first took, you know, history and what was wrong with me, this terrible guilt and confusion and, tension, they asked for my date of birth, and I said 1939, and they said, ‘God! what a Freudian slip,’ because I was obviously not 1939 era. Because really I felt my life had started in 1939. And memory does that sort of trick on you, it happened later in another context when I actually was asked, do I know anyone called Buchthal, and I said, ‘No.’ I thought, my God! that’s me. You know, because you had moved on so much that you, you wouldn’t have thought the brain could do that on you, but it, it certainly did.

[16:33]

Tavistock started with three sessions a week, which is quite a lot, which I did after work Monday, Wednesday, Friday, went into town, because I was working at Dollis Hill, to a Dr Ezriel, e-z-r-i-e-l, H Ezriel I think his name was, who I never really got to know, because it was one of these, I think Jungian things in that he actually said very very little, but he listened in a very very positive way. And, I talked, or didn’t talk, for, I think it was three-quarters of an hour, at the end of which, sharp on the dot, that
was it. And, gradually I suppose... It started at three times a week, then dropped, after a couple of years dropped to two times a week, then, and then a couple of years perhaps once a week, and then eventually became once a month, once every three months, once every six months, and then I discharged myself, you know, this sort of... But that’s a heck of a lot of therapy. And, basically I’m so, so grateful for that, which again I didn’t pay for, but got me on my feet once and for all, and until that was through I didn’t feel that I was fit to marry or really able to make proper relationships.

[18:18]

One of the interesting things about therapy is that, first of all, there was an enormous shortage of therapists then, probably now as well, and so they thought that I might be able to join a group therapy session, and I sort of said, ‘Ooh, I’m not so sure about that.’ And they sort of said, well surprisingly, one of the contradictory things that they had found was that for some people group therapy was more effective than one-to-one. And, although group therapy had been started because of the shortage of therapists, it did in fact prove to be valuable in itself and is still used today. But anyway, they decided I wasn’t suitable, and anyway, so I went one-to-one. And, that gave an aspect to my life. I didn’t talk about it at the time; I do talk occasionally that I had these terrible depressions and suicidal and all this sort of thing, but I don’t usually talk about that, because certainly at the time it was, the difference between mental illness and some sort of madness was quite blurred, and people would be very nervous if you said that you were having treatment, and, there’s elements of that later on, I was sort of in hospital and I was sort of, very clear to point out to people, it wasn’t a mental hospital. Because there’s a lot of social pressure there.

Who did you talk to about it at the time, if anyone?

Well the, the man who had introduced me, did I talk about it with him? No, I think not. You know, I just sort of said, ‘Thank you very much, it’s going well,’ or whatever. [pause] I don’t think I did talk about it. [pause] No. Who might it have been, but, certainly my family didn’t and don’t know. Derek knew, my husband Derek, on the basis that I wasn’t fit to marry until I had got all that behind me and sort of felt as if I was a sane human being again. [pause] I think the bad vibes about mental health are softening these days. They’re still confused with learning disability, as I know with my learning disabled son, but, it’s not quite the stigma that it used to
be, and certainly you would never to an employer say you had had this sort of problem, even if it was well in the past.

[21:23]

How did you actually feel about starting at the Tavistock Clinic?

I knew I was lucky to get in, because it’s, you know, world-renown. [pause] Somehow that therapy made me realise that my problems were basically all of my self-making. They were not because I was a Kindertransportee, they were not because my mother was a bit this. You know, I had made them myself, and I was master of my own fate, and I really sort of slowly learnt that I was putting myself in a situation always where I would be rejected. And, Jewish people, whether it’s faith or, or racial, we’re very conscious of having, of anti-Semitism, and, to be rejected in whatever context is, somehow worse because it’s happened before, and, I’ve recently learnt that grief is like that as well. You would think the second, the third, the fourth time you’ve lost somebody close to you, that it would get easier, but it doesn’t, it actually gets worse. And, I’m not a psychologist but, that would make sense to someone, and... So that sort of sense of rejection by my father, by my mother, by my country, all that sort of thing, took a lot of getting over.

Mhm.

And, you sort of try and pass on that, the knowledge and so-called wisdom that you have got from that to a younger generation. You try not yourself to reject anybody or anything, but to accept things as they are, whether you like them or not. My sister reacted in a totally different way. She started working with children who were dis... what’s the word? Dislocated. So she became quite a specialist in child adoptions and fostering and, sort of I think, sublimated her problems in, in that sort of way. I don’t think she ever had any therapy. Again, we wouldn’t have mentioned it. We just didn’t. It was a different world. Next question.

[24:05]

You mentioned several things in passing there that I’d like to pick up on. The first actually goes back to this, what we were talking about earlier, about this idea of
change in your life. And I’m just wondering, as a small child, you mentioned you lived in several countries.

Mm.

_How much were you aware of all that happening around you when you’re just growing up, you know, under five?_

Not at all, I don’t even know which, which the countries were. It was just, we always seemed to be on the move. And, the only one that I really remember is one time living near a lake, which I was later told was Lake Balaton, and, then living in Vienna. I went... [coughs] I went back to Vienna with my sister to scatter my mother’s ashes in the Vienna Woods, not a nice thing to ask your children to do I think, but anyway we did it, and, so we went back to the area, and the steep hill down which I used to toboggan, and I can remember tobogganing round, down there. It was just a mild slope about one in 100 or something like that. And I did recognise the garden of the house that we used to live in, which is, how much of that is imagination. It must have changed. But I thought, that had a sort of, surprisingly familiar feel to it. And the six-foot wall that we used to walk along, my mother and I, to collect my sister from her school, turned out to be about two and a half feet high; it had just seemed very high when we walked there. And, the walk was significant because we were always there absolutely on time, because the reason for meeting her was that the other pupils used to throw stones at her, and so she was running away pretty fast, and, so we met her and whipped her away as fast as we could. My sister talked about the nice teacher who would let her out early. Yeah. But obviously she, she suffered far more than I did.

_Why did they throw stones?_

Because we’re Jewish. As simple as that. I mean, you know, it was just such a different world, and when you’ve... It does something to you. [laughs] Keep a low profile, yup.

[26:42]
You talked earlier about this, this closing in of options for Jews in Thirties Germany. I'm just wondering, talking about things you've learnt since...

Mm.

...and things you felt at the time, is that some...

Oh at the time I was under five, it was just, you know, I was being, why should I go into a children’s home, why should I... where was my mother, why couldn’t I do this? You know, absolutely, things happened to me, and, I try to use that in my work by making sure that I don’t do things to people, particularly to learning disabled people. I don’t have much to do with children per se. But I think, life does a lot of things to people, and I try to avoid that.

Mm. [pause] When does that consciousness of not doing things to people develop, do you think, in your life?

Oh much later. I mean not as a child.

Mm.

Um... ba-ba-ba-ba [pause] Maybe when I had my own son, maybe at thirty. So it would be a mature matronly sort of thing. Maybe my sister had it earlier, because she worked with children, she chose to work with children, she chose to work with damaged children. She worked for Dr Barnardo’s and things like that.

[28:35]

You mentioned as well survivor’s guilt. When did you start feeling that?

My teens. [pause] Maybe earlier, I don’t know. I think in my teens. My late teens I was already working, I started working at eighteen, and, that brought a whole lot of things to the fore, but at least I was independent, I was earning my own money, I was not dependent on the Quakers or anybody else to support me and others. Because I can remember... I’m very careful not to patronise people in my philanthropy, and, I
think it’s because I can remember being patronised. In the nicest possible, well-meaning way. Because basically we were destitute and dependent on other people. [pause] The Lloyds Bank had the contract for paying the Quaker funds that were directed to the family per individual through their local bank branch, and, somebody had obviously done some very good training there because they did it week after week, ‘Good morning Mrs Brook,’ you know, ‘Yes, let’s have a thing.’ [ph] And we could have been cashing a, a cheque for a million pounds or something rather than receiving £3.50 or something, whatever it would be, probably not as much as that. And all the refugees at that time sort of swore a solemn swear that we would bank with Lloyds when we got ourselves off our feet. And I always quote that, because that’s corporate social responsibility and, you know, it’s a two-way street, things do come back to you. But being patronised and being dependent as a child, I mean most children are dependent on their parents, and, just if they’re brutalised, you know, there’s so little they can do about it. Children are children. And I was certainly a rather silly but in other ways mature child.

[31:17]

*Could you characterise both those aspects for me please? The silliness and the maturity.*

Well I had a stage through my childhood when I would be lots of fun. I don’t know how artificial this was, but, I was nicknamed Pickles because I was always in a pickle, so that tells you something about the child. [pause] I can remember being fascinated by riddles and sort of, childish things like that. I had a little dog which was quite important to me. So, when I look at the pictures of myself with Aunty and Uncle in those years they were of a slightly spoilt, pretty little girl with curled hair and, really, they did an enormous amount to sort of stabilise me. And somewhere I suppose in my teens that turned into the need to, the need to earn money I suppose. I was sick to the back teeth of being poor. Never want to be poor again. And, people ask whether the motivation for my business success was to make money, and I don’t think it was, but it was certainly to avoid poverty. And that was quite important to me. I never want to be poor again. And… But generally, I had a very nice childhood with Aunty and Uncle. Aunty was there all the time. She couldn’t cook very well but you know, she did look after us, and the house was immaculate, and I learnt how to clean rooms and
things like that. Uncle dug up the lawn and planted vegetables, so, we ate pretty well. And, my memories of food in those days was, we ate a tremendous amount of beetroot, because Uncle... You know, beetroot, I don’t know, all kinds... And, it’s those root vegetables that are I suppose easy to grow. But we had a lot of home-grown food, and, they were sufficiently wealthy to go out once a week and we would have a meal out, and that wasn’t on points, it was about the one thing that wasn’t on points, so you’d go out and have a steak and chip... not steak and chips, steak and kidney pie or something like that. God knows what was in it, probably whale meat. [pause] Food was difficult. There[??] was a lot of time Aunty spent going to the shops and trying to get food. It, it was pretty important, and it was really only the, the very good managers that, that sort of lived well. But we were all disgustingly healthy because we lived well and didn’t eat a lot of sugar. We still drank a lot of tea and we would re-use the leaves, obviously loose tea in the teapot. [pause] [34:40]

One was conscious of the war. Uncle had been an apprentice, he had started work at the age of fourteen, and he had gone to a small engineering company and finished up as managing director. And he was very innovative, and I, people often sort of say, did he talk about business? And no, he didn’t, he kept business and home absolutely separate. Nevertheless, I was conscious that he was running a business, once or twice I actually went there. It was a small engineering company called Weathershields, and it was facing a group of fairly slum, small houses where, the children would be sitting on the front doorstep with their feet on the, in the road, you know, it was... And, and that was probably the first time I had really seen slums like that. [pause] What was surprising, that Aunty and Uncle took us in I suppose, was that they, I found, as soon as I had, old enough to have an opinion, that he was actually quite racist, because he employed some Jamaican workers I think much later, and the way he spoke of them and to them, I found quite disappointing, because I was already I think growing into some sort of humanist that tried to see the whole of things and the whole of people. But I also saw how very innovative he was. He was actually an inventor, the sort of things he invented were, this was during the war of course, something called a hip ring. Every now and again I just see one. An army vehicle, say an army lorry, has a hip ring which is about, six inches high that, you know, diameter, that a person can stand up in it. So you take the, the lid off so that you can stand up on the seat of the lorry and fire at people from a gun without getting out of the, the car. And they were
called hip rings, and they were put on to a lot of military vehicles. And he sort of invented the concept. And they made a lot of these things. They also made a lot of what are called Bailey bridges, which I’m sure Uncle didn’t, no I know Uncle didn’t invent, because Mr Bailey would have done that. Bailey bridges were sort of portable bridges that the Army used to take, and somehow in a sort of Meccano-like way be able to get across a river, strong enough to, for tanks and so on to go across. The one that made quite a bit of money for Uncle, and this was post-war, was that one of the first folding golf, what are they called, golf caddies, and it was called, he called it the Robot, and he sold, tens of thousands of those. And, because he had a deal that, I think he got £1 for every one that the, Weathershields sold, he made a lot of money then. He also invented something called a sun visor, which was for military and other vehicles in the Far East, where there was a little sort of shade, like a visor, to stop the sun from getting into the driver’s eyes. And, there was quite a close association with motorcars in Birmingham, then as now, and, he first started making the handles of motorcar doors, indented so that they didn’t stick out, so that when you hit people you weren’t sort of actually gouged by the handle, but the side was absolutely smooth. And I think he, he thought of that himself, and, and did it himself. So he was extremely inventive, and... I think I’d describe him more as an inventor. Oh I don’t know. He was a manager as well, he, his company did well. One of the things he did, invented, for us at home, was to provide an air-raid shelter, and, there were several sorts which were pretty standard, one of which was a sort of corrugated archway with bricks and something underneath and so on that you had in the garden that sort of protected you. And the other one was underneath the dining-room table, which I’ve been to in another house, where you had the very solid table, and then the side is closed in so that you can’t get shrapnel, debris coming in through the side. You’re basically protected by this table. And apparently that sort of worked if the table was solid enough. But Uncle dug a great big hole at the top of the garden, and it was a big, big hole, ten, twelve foot deep. It was clay, and, you know, he worked on it, I don’t know how long, but you know, that’s what he was doing. And it turned into an underground shelter that you couldn’t really see on the top, because it had an entrance, an exit made of metal, and, this was like a lid that sat in a, ridged pool, or... sat in, in two or three inches of, of water all the way round, so that it was gas-proof basically. And when you open the lid, which you could do either by pushing or lifting it outside, there was a sort of, basically stepladder going down, that sort of steepness,
not taking a lot of space. And that took you into a, a room with two bunk beds, a bench, and, might have been a cupboard or something like that. I’m just trying to think what happened at the other side. And an emergency exit, so that, there was a tiny little emergency exit, smaller than the entrance, again protected against gas, and without steps. It was some sort of slide but you know, you could have got out of there in emergency. And this was used during air raids for Aunty and Uncle, the two neighbours, Len... Les and Olive, that’s right, and Renate and I. So there were four adults and the two children.

[41:46]

And when there was an air raid, and we were on the route to Birmingham, I mean nobody chose to drop bombs on where we were living, but it was on the route so you would always get these warnings, Uncle would pick us up from bed and carry us down to this thing. It was all, you know, quite fun I suppose in a way. There was some decoy that was used to intentionally... sorry, intended to draw enemy aircraft away from Birmingham and get... And, we used to play in the fields then, and, we came across this. And it looked like some wooden chicken huts with bits of glass in and so on, on their side, and, it was supposed to light up at night, and I think we could, did, see it. And it was supposed to look like a factory or something like that. The fact is, all the other factories were blacked-out and that this thing... We, we, everybody used to laugh and sort of say they used it to guide them properly into Birmingham, because they’d come over this thing, turn it, ah yes, there it is, and go on there. Uncle was a member of the ARP, what did that stand for? Arm... ARP, ARP...

_Air Raid Precautions?_

Air Raid Precautions, yes. And he had a tin hat, and he took his turn fire-watching, and, he had a baton which I now have. But that was about all that they had to... But mainly it was to look out for incendiaries and stuff like that. I don’t think Aunty did anything like that. [pause]

[43:45]

So, the war was quite, relatively safe and serene. That was just how life was, you know, one ate vegetables from the garden and so on. It wasn’t in any way deplete of the sort of things that little girls want to do and so on. [pause] After we arrived, somehow, and I don’t know how, we were followed by trunkfuls of clothes that
somehow, our clothes that somehow had been sent out to us, which contained things like, a winter coat that fitted me, and one that would fit me in two years’ time, and a winter coat for my sister Renate, and one that would fit her in two years’ time. So I had this vision of having to wear four winter coats, all the same, and...

[Microphone dislodged]

One sec.

Hold on.

Just...

[Pause – repositioning microphone]

OK?

Yup.

[44:55]

When all these clothes arrived, Uncle was quite surprised, because we, we had actually come with nothing, and suddenly here were all these clothes. So he actually built a cupboard, which would be, six, eight feet wide, normal height, for all our clothes to hang, and there was quite a lot there. I didn’t like the clothes that had been sent for us, because they were then very German in style and I was learning to be a little English lady. And, that, Aunty was, you know, a lady doesn’t do this, and, you know, I certainly wanted to be, and have in fact become, more English than the English, and that was sort of deliberate over those years. And these tweed, green coats with grey astrakhan collars, were absolutely nothing like what anybody wore here. And, I must say Aunty and Uncle were very good, I didn’t wear it for very long, because they then found me some rather more practical and English-looking clothes.

[Pause] Something just went through my mind. [Pause]

[46:05]

Yes, Aunty and Uncle didn’t really know very much about, about children, and, although they spoilt us in some ways, the fact that they hadn’t had children previously
certainly showed. For my first birthday there they gave me... Well let me backtrack a little bit. When I had lost my doll, Ruth, on the journey, and arrived in Sutton Coldfield, which is a sort of fairly upper-middle-class town close to Birmingham, I had really been very upset at the loss of my doll, as I always say, I was more worried about the lost doll than the lost family or any lost home or anything like that, I wanted my doll, and was probably fairly hysterical by the time I got into the car. Uncle had picked me up from that great big hall and had taken me out to the car when Aunty was waiting, so she was greeted by this very weepy child, and hadn’t a clue how to deal with a weeping child. But when she had got home, she made me a ragdoll called Kate, a nice plain name for a very, it was the most awful doll I ever had. But I loved her, because she was my, you know, took me through that period. And she was made out of dusters with, you know, very few stitches and so on. Quite a, Aunty couldn’t sew, so it was a mammoth exercise for her. And that was Kate. So that was in July, and... My mother came across her when I was about thirteen. ‘Oh this disgusting thing,’ and she threw it out. And, of course I was pretty upset then, because although I hadn’t played with Kate for, five years perhaps, it was still my Kate.

[48:03]
Well Aunty and Uncle gave me a doll that was the best doll, the biggest doll they could possibly think of. It was probably, nearly as big as I was. And she was called Sally. And there wasn’t a thing you could do with her. You couldn’t take her clothes off, she didn’t move her head, she just sat there. And there’s an example of, you know, the expensive gift, well thought out, because of all this problem of dolls and so on. But it was just, I mean, I forget what happened to her in the end, but, I notice the same sort of thing now, people give great big teddy bears to Great Ormond Street, you know, six foot tall and so on, and I mean they’re absolutely, almost obscene, sort of, animal, sort of, attention.

[48:55]
*How old were your Aunty and Uncle?*

Oh, yah. [pause] Old to have young children. I’m only guessing, forties? [pause] I mean I’ve got their dates of birth somewhere and so on, because... Aunty had, and it’s probably why she didn’t have children, she had heart problems, and, she died relatively... no, not really relatively young, but she died in her, I think, late sixties,
which nowadays is... And... [pause] Uncle came and lived near us, and he came and lived with us for, while he found somewhere to live. But you know, he was very much part, well they both were very much part of our lives. Uncle gave me away when I married and so on. I mean he, they, I’m their child really.

Mm. What was your aunty’s name? You mentioned your uncle was Guy Smith.

She was called Ruby. Ruby. Ruby Irene. And, Guy was Hubert Albert Guy Smith, and when our son was born I was sort of very tempted to use the Guy, but of course my father-in-law had been a George and so you couldn’t do one without upsetting the other, so we chose Giles. At least it had the G, and nobody was upset. It was a new name for the family.

[50:35]

One of the things that came of historic interest in my life was via Uncle, whose parents lived in the depths of the country in a place called Bromley Wood, which is outside Abbots Bromley, the place where they have these Morris dancers or something. And, his parents and his sister lived there in a rented small cottage, because, Uncle was really a country boy made good, and, we used to go there for Christmas, for Easter, perhaps one more time, that was about all, maybe for a birthday some time. Petrol was very very short, but Uncle, because of his job, did have an allowance for petrol and it used to be conserved very carefully. And he used it to go to, go to work. But, his parents were archetypically a little old lady and lit... And, and, she was quite small, so I called her Little Aunty, and he was quite eerie and bristly and, moustachioed and so on, and so we called him Large Uncle. So Little Aunty and Large Uncle. And, there were things about their life and how they lived that I’m very glad to have experienced. The cottage had no water, no electricity, no sanitation. So, the lighting was by oil lamps, and candles. The food storage was a very large larder, in presumably the north side of the house. Outside toilet. They kept a few hens. And there was a pump in the yard outside the kitchen which was used for water, so you’d go out and pump and get a couple of buckets of water and take them into the kitchen for both cooking and washing. It wasn’t very nice water, it was clean water of course but it didn’t taste very nice. So, the drinking water was brought by Large Uncle from a well two or three fields away. Half, three-quarters of a mile. And he would do this with a yoke across his shoulders with the two buckets there. And,
because they were so remote, and because they were so relatively poor and so on, I
must have been the last person in the world to see people actually with a yoke and two
buckets. The sort of thing you see in a nursery rhyme nowadays, a little milkmaid or
something. But it was a very simple life. I loved it there, because, Uncle’s sister
knew a lot about children and she had maintained the village school during the whole
of the war, one member of staff, whole, all the village children from four up to
eighteen. You know, can you imagine doing that? And she had done that very... She
loved children, she was very good with them, and... I think what was traditional in
those days was that the, the daughter had stayed at home to look after the parents, and
the son, especially a successful son, had gone away and made his fortune in the big
city. So... But I, I used to love going there.

_How often did you visit?_

Three, perhaps four times a year. But you know, we stayed there for a couple of
ights. Lovely, we slept in a four-poster bed with a feather mattress, sharing it with
Aunty Tris, you know, sort of, quite a different world. Potty under the bed. Really...
But it was very cosy and it was very loving, and it was... The radio had some battery,
an acid battery that every now and again somebody had to take for miles and miles
away to get it recharged or a new battery or something. When we were there, and it
was usually at the weekend, we would go to church, and that church was called Hoar
Cross, h-o-a-r, and it had been... It was like a, a miniature cathedral in the quality of
its furnishing, in that the Lady Meynell had been widowed early in her life, very early
I think in her marriage, and had spent her, the rest of her life really commemorating
her husband through this tiny little church, which I think he had built but I’m not sure
about that. And the church even had an entrance direct, a special little entrance direct
for the people from the hall to be able to come in to the... But it was a lovely church.
And, they were genuinely religious, which Aunty and Uncle weren’t, they were sort
of nominally Church of England. And, they had lovely, sort of Christmas Nativity
scenes. The Stations of the Cross were the most beautiful Italianate sculptures, so,
every time I went we would go around and look at these Stations of the Cross, and,
they were nice. Aunty and Uncle really, I don’t think ever went to church outside
that.
[57:05]
I started off at a little village school which was boys and girls, two classes, I mean two rooms, I think four classes, so that... and we sat in those fixed desks, very uncomfortable because they were never quite the right size for you, and you were sort of, rigid, they may have been fixed to the floor, but the distance between the chair and the desk was rigid. And... I probably wasn’t there more than one term. Two things happened. Firstly there was a God almighty bust-up with my sister and Aunty, who had been looking at us playing in the playground through, a telescope or binoculars or something, and, really not a very nice thing to do, because she could then sort of say, you know, ‘Why were you playing with that little boy? Yah, I was watching you.’ So that was a great big hoo-ha. We would walk over the fields, and so we did walk by ourselves, and in those days in the country children did play by themselves, I mean we were, you know, Aunty and Uncle just knew we were out, maybe that way or that way, or we were going to the stream, or... But you know, absolutely vague, you know, we were safe, and, I think, yes I’m sure we were safe.

[58:35]
But what happened at that school was that, I began to speak with a Birmingham accent, and the Birmingham accent, people say, ‘I can still just hear it,’ in my voice. But it’s not a nice accent. And Aunty and Uncle were quite snobbish, and, ‘Oh we’re not having a child talking like that.’ And, so they took me away, and, it was interesting, it defines when Renate left, because she didn’t move with me, and sent me to a little convent in Sutton Coldfield. And that was lovely. It was private so they paid for my education. I was taught there by nuns in their black habits in those days. There was an element of Roman Catholicism obviously, but they didn’t push it on me at all. As you came into the school there was a little grotto, and, all the children stopped and said a little prayer in front of the statue of Virgin Mary I think. And, of course after it you went along and did much the same sort of thing.

[59:55]
I made a good friend called Christina and I used to go and stay with her from time to time, just overnight, and would go to her church, which is a very different sort of ceremony, which I liked because it was very, lots of incense and, and rather beautiful, and... And when I was there, you know, you went to church, and when she came and stayed with us, you know, she left in time to go to church. And, I think those sorts of experiences led me to, for many years, be really looking for a religion. I was looking for a god or gods, and it became really, I read about religions, I, I was seeking
something that was stable and safe and good. And later on I, I’d never been baptised of course, but I went to Confirmation classes, the objective being that, I would be baptised and confirmed in the Christian faith. But halfway through those Christian classes they were, good sense prevailed and I realised that I, I didn’t really believe, I just wanted to belong to this wonderful, wonderful church. And I pulled out and... But I went on looking for various faiths. I still find some of them very interesting, because I’ve been out in Saudi Arabia, found a little bit more about the Muslim faith. But it suddenly, it stopped, and, I think it was round about the same time as my depression stopped, which was early Sixties, that suddenly, I was no longer looking any more. I found it interesting, yes, but I’m no longer on that scientific search to understand what’s there. And... But that, for most of my life that was pretty, pretty important. Now I describe myself as having no faith, but I am spiritual, and, people sort of say, ‘Well what do you mean by spiritual?’ And I do mean the non-material aspects of life, and, anything in the sense that is life-affirming, and that remains with me loud and clear, strong. [pause] Yes, of course I like nice food, or my nice clothes, or my nice flat, but, you know, basically I’m not interested in the material things. And when I find myself getting over-enthusiastic about a painting or a piece of jewellery or something, I really haul myself back and sort of say, ‘This is really nothing to do with what I am.’

[01:03:24]

*Do you think there’s a, a meeting there of two different things, which is the sort of, this moral aspect of religion...*

Mm.

*I was struck earlier about what you were saying about your father...*

Mm.

*...and this idea of ethics and things.*

Mm.
Do you think they somehow match up?

Oh yes of course. Yes. But it is possible to have ethics without the religion. And in a sense it may be more difficult because you haven’t got the nice Ten Commandments and things, you know, that if you stick to these, you’re OK. You’ve actually got to puzzle it out for yourself. Yeah I’m sure it’s related.

Do you remember exactly what you were looking for? [pause] I got a hint of it, but I was just wondering if you would mind breaking it down a little bit more.

A god. A god. A miracle, a, an eternal father, I don’t know. [pause] Because I mean I had, at school you had religious instruction, fairly consistently throughout all your childhood. And most people were proper Church of England. [pause] The sort of, school, oh what do they call them? The... Where you’d start each school with, all together in the hall, singing hymns and having notices and making prayers and so on. And you didn’t have to go to that, you could stay out. Well I chose to go to that, it’s fine. I love my hymns, I love Christmas carols, and oh, you know, absolutely, takes me back to Abbots Bromley, it takes me back to all those searches for little Jesus meek and mild. It’s just lovely. They’re pretty. But, it’s not the real world.

[01:05:31]
I was interested as well that you said that the Roman Catholic, that appealed more than the C of E at the time. Have I got that right?

It’s the florid, the smells, the ritual, the robes, the, the drama. Yes.

I was sort of thinking, it was interesting, you talk about being more English than English.

Mm.

You know, trying to become that. But it’s interesting you didn’t go for the C of E, which is, so very English in many respects, it’s...
I think it’s also quite plain and... Well I mean I suppose I did go to the C of E and decide to go through Confirmation classes, but, pulled out. And I was quite right to do so. So, you know, if I fill in a form now, ‘What religion?’, I can say, ‘None.’ People used to ask me whether I was a feminist, and I would say quite categorically, ‘No, but I am a humanist.’ I really believe in people, I believe that people can make a difference, I believe that people can make a difference to themselves and to other, to others. And, yeah, I’m definitely a humanist, it suits me down to the ground.

Does that humanism come later, or, can you see the roots of it at this time as well?

I would think later, when I started my business, there was, I was thirty then, I was maturing. I’d been watching what happened, not with women’s development, but with the Black Power movement in the States. And so, yes, I do care about people and... I mean I’ve just been to Barbados for the first time in my life, in the Caribbean, and, it brought home to me, which I wasn’t expecting at all, how close slavery is. To me slavery is something in the past, it’s, it’s, you know, Britain, you know, the first to break away from slavery, wonderful, wonderful. But actually when you go to somewhere like the Caribbean, and you see the impact of slavery and the colonialism on that environment, a) you’re ashamed, b) you realise how very close it is. It’s not within living memory, but it’s very, very close. And, I think much the same happened when I went to Moscow many years ago, just at the beginning of perestroika, and, it was fairly, it was a bit like wartime Britain, very plain, very much a regulated society, you were told what to do, what job to do, where to live and so on. And we had a guide to make sure we didn’t do anything that we shouldn’t have done. But when we sort of said, ‘Don’t you find it very difficult to,’ do or, whatever, whatever it was, and she invariably answered, ‘My granddad who lives with us,’ because they all used to live in one room as well, ‘would always remind me it was worse before the Revolution.’ And to me, the Russian Revolution was something that I had read about, and it was something that, yes, it was in the history books; but to her, she still had a granddad who still referred to it, ‘Before the Revolution it was worse.’ And, history has really quite, it moved very fast I think, and one says a generation’s twenty years, and it’s not a long time. You know, I’ve been retired seventeen years or something...
like that. I’ve been retired seventeen years. Unbelievable. But, it passes very quickly if you have a full life. [pause] How are we doing?

We are one hour ten minutes. If you’d like a short break?

Let’s have a break.

[End of Part 2]
I spoke earlier about my grandmother who lived in Amsterdam, and, she had been in Holland all the war, during the whole of the war, and her daughter had been sheltered by a Roman Catholic convent. But, at some stage she had forged identity papers, because, all the identity papers had a great big ‘J’, about two inches, on them, to make sure that everybody knew that this person was Jewish, and she had some with a false name and without the ‘J’ made. And, I got those papers, and they are, both variants, and the real one’s in the Imperial War Museum. And also there is the silk yellow star that comes from her. So, I do think these memoirs and collections of old things are important, and, although I haven’t been to the Holocaust Museum there for a long time, the last time I went I, I, I got panics, panic attacks, and, really had to come out very very fast. And it’s very hard to get out, because it’s been beautifully designed so that you have this feeling of claustrophobia that things are closing in on you. And, I was in quite a state by the time I came out. So, although the stuff is there, I don’t go and see it very often.

You asked about dear Aunty. Let me tell you a bit about where we lived. The house was called Northways, presumably because it faced North, and it was in one of a row of about, six similar houses facing the fields, and at the back of the houses were also fields. They were all much the same houses, small, detached, and by detached I mean on one side, it was about two feet away from the next. Nice gardens. And, had a sort of porch that was an open porch that you could put a chair on and sit on, though nobody ever did. And it had two living rooms, a fairly sizeable hall, a dog-leg staircase. One, two, three bedrooms, bathroom, separate toilet. And it must... I think they bought it when it was new. Uncle had made the garden, I know that, and, at some stage they knocked the two rooms downstairs together, with some French doors, so that it seemed very much bigger because you could see the light coming through. But they certainly worked as two rooms. There was no central heating of course, so in winter we had coal fires, and got terrible chilblains because you would stand by the fire desperately trying to get warm, and the front of your legs would become all mottled and the backs would still be freezing. But, the front room was hardly ever used at all. It had a three-piece suite, a sort of gas fire type fireplace, not a coal fire anyway, a bay window to the front, a trolley of, of highly polished, dark wood that
had been a sort of, wedding present, that sort of thing, and a piano, Aunty played the piano, a small upright. But it was very much for best and the piano wasn’t very much played. Upstairs there were two double bedrooms and Renate and I, my sister and I, shared a room, and, the bed, and, we had to have a bolster, which is a sort of double-length pillow, put down between us, because we fought so much and impinged on each other’s space and so on. But we had the back bedroom that looked out onto the garden, or was it the other way round? [pause] No, Aunty and Uncle had the back bedroom, that looked out onto the garden. And we had the front bedroom. And a bedroom in those days had a bed, double bed in this case, a chair to put your clothes on, probably one each side, bedside table, a wardrobe, a dressing table, perhaps a tallboy, and that was it. I mean there was, you know, it was places to keep clothes, and, we did not play in the bedrooms at all, our clothes were there. [pause] And what did we do to play? Firstly we were not allowed out to play until we had done little, helped with the housework. So I learnt how to clean a room, and, obviously do the things like washing-up and, and so on. The house was desperately cold in winter I found. There was a big boiler in the kitchen, which was red tiled floored, and the boiler went on once a week, and, we all had baths that Friday night. And we kept perfectly clean, we had strip washes in between. But somehow, today’s young people don’t realise how easy it is to keep clean when it’s, you know, showers and hot water and all these sort of facilities. There, a bath was a, the event of the week, and in between you just had to manage. We did not have deodorants in those days, when I think about it, but people did not smell, we washed frequently. Children don’t, don’t sweat in the same way anyway. But I can’t remember. [06:37]

Uncle used to smoke a pipe, and he did sometimes I think smell very manly. And he’d sit with that pipe between his teeth, and, you can smoke a pipe even when there’s no tobacco in it, because you can suck it and make some nice noises. And he would sit in a very relaxed sort of way. When we had done our chores, we would go out to play. One side of the house had a wall with kitchen door and no windows, as far as I can remember, and, one of the things I used to do there was play ball. You would have a simple ball, and you would go through, throwing the ball ten times and catching it, and then nine times throwing it to the wall, bouncing it on the floor and then catching it. And so it went down until... And then, the difficult one was, you threw the ball at the wall, turned round 360 degrees, and caught it again. And that,
you know, you tried to get through the end of that without dropping the ball. So, fairly simple games. We helped quite a bit in the garden. The front garden had two weeping willows, which were lovely to play under, because you could sort of play dolls’ houses and things underneath them, because it was very sort of, quiet. And a lot of spring bulbs, and it was my job to tie up the spring bulbs when they had finished flowering. So we sort of did help a bit in the garden, so I learnt a little bit about gardening from Uncle. Aunty really I suppose was a lot of show, I mean the furniture was beautifully polished, the flowers were beautifully arranged. But if you opened a drawer, it would be a pig’s mess inside, you know, that sort of... And after a bit of course I realised that that was part of her personality, and she had a tremendous sense of humour, and she and I used to giggle away in a female sort of way quite happily. Uncle would then get very cross and, you know, sort of, ‘What are you laughing about?’ And you, you can’t really explain a joke to somebody who... But... [pause] I think Aunty was quite snobbish, and we, there was always a question when we went out, we had to look, do her proud sort of thing. Even small little girls, we wore gloves. We would never be allowed to eat in the street. We never wore... did I wear...? I can remember once having shorts, but in general we wore skirts. And in fact I was twenty-six years old before I ever wore slacks as they were called then. And once you realise how comfortable trousers are, you never really want to go back to skirts.

[09:45]
But, we had a sort of fairly serene time there. I had a friend three doors up with whom I played. She was a little bit older than I was, and I was her bridesmaid years later on when she married. So it was a, you know, a proper friendship.

What was her name?

Anne, Anne Redoubt. Her son called, had a brother called Mark. [pause] After... One of the things that happened at the convent was that I got a lovely set of values, I mean they were really quiet and peaceful and loving and, and everything, and although they were not professional teachers, they were religious nuns, they did have enough professionalism to realise that I had got some aptitude for mathematics, and said to Aunty and Uncle, ‘Look, this child should be learning mathematics. We cannot teach her. We’re going to put her in for a scholarship.’ And, so it happened
that I did get a scholarship. Because in those days, there must have been state schools, but basically, I went to a school called the Friary in Lichfield, which was just over the county border in Staffordshire, as we lived in Warwickshire, I think that’s right. And I had a year there on a scholarship which paid for my fares going to and from school, because it was two stops on the, on the local railway. So every school day I had quite a long walk down to the station. We’d be down the lane, turn left and then go through some fields. And, you know, it was quite a nice routine. My books were paid for, my transport was paid for, and when I got to the station the other end the school was pretty well opposite. And that school was quite a nice start. I don’t remember a lot about it. There was a local repertory theatre in Lichfield at the time, and probably about once a month, it may have been more frequently, depends how often, Aunty and Uncle, I can’t remember him, but they would come for the evening and we’d go to the rep. And, it was very nice because there was a small group of actors, and you got to see them in different roles. And you got to see all sorts of things, George Bernard Shaw, Shakespeare, tripey stuff that I can’t even remember, but it was a lovely introduction to drama.

[12:40]
The other thing that was special about Lichfield, it has this magnificent cathedral, really, really beautiful with, I think three spires, and some wonderful statuary in it of some sleeping children. And I do usually try and visit cathedrals in a new town, because they, they are such lovely collections of, of history, and, past and present culture. But Lichfield Cathedral, I got to know quite well.

[13:22]
*When did it become clear that you were actually quite good at maths, that started you off on this route?*

Oh yes. [pause] I mean I... Well I still sort of love maths. I was still a, well I don’t know any more. But once I started working, I realised that it’s one thing to love a subject, quite another to contribute to it. And, I’ve always been on the fringes of research, and certainly the aim is to sort of use the mathematics in, solve Fermat’s Last Theorem, was literally, you know, that was what I was going to do. And, I hadn’t got a hope of anywhere like that sort of academic capability. But I do love mathematics, I love the beauty of pure mathematics, and, I struggled with the applied
mathematics. [pause] Later on, when I was in Oswestry, a comparable thing happened, because, I wanted to go on studying mathematics, and the school did not have staff that could take me up to what was then called A-levels, sort of exams you take at eighteen, and, there was quite a hoo-ha about it, because that’s what I wanted to do. And I know I was sent to a, the school psychologist, who did some tests on me, and, went back to the school and said, ‘Yes, she has got an aptitude, you’ve somehow got to find some teaching for her somewhere.’ And what happened was that I went to the boys’ school for the maths lessons, which was within walking distance, and it was, probably started me off on some of the women’s things, because, one had separate education in those days, I was so used to a women’s environment, a women’s school. You know, a lot of the men were in the Army and away. So there a lot of women around. And suddenly you would have to walk in to a boys’ school, which, however well behaved, they’d all be cat-calling and God knows what.

[15:46]

For the maths lesson, at times they were quite different to my own lessons, so I’d always seem to be sort of, having to leave in the middle of a lesson, so, or walking into their lessons late, and, so it was... But it, it worked all right, and, I did eventually get my School Certificate in maths. At that time, science for girls meant biology. Most girls were expected to read English, as my sister did. There wasn’t much social work in those days. There was English, French, English literature. Those are the sort of things that people studied. And a school like ours which would have a sixth form of about, six people in perhaps, in a good year, nearly all of those would be on the arts side. [pause]

[16:56]

So when I got, left school and came to London, I wanted to go on... Well I wanted to go to university but I really couldn’t stand being short of money any more, so decided to start working. And, so I started my first job at the age of eighteen, and I had two interviews, and, both I think by introductions from some friends of my sister, that sort of introduction, one with the General Electric Company in Wembley, and one with the Post Office Research, and chose the latter because they were more interested in my continuing with my studies than GEC which sort of said, ‘Well this job just needs School Certificate, it doesn’t need any more,’ and that’s it. So I joined Dollis Hill as what is called a scientific assistant in 1951.
Just so I’ve got, just so I’ve got the flow of the sort of education, just to work right in my head, was the grammar school you went to different to the one at Oswestry?

It was Lichfield for a year.

Right, yup.

And then the one at Oswestry.

Right.

Yah. And going back, I... Are we on?

Yes, yes.

Yes. I mean going back, because of, my mother was working, or she wasn’t there or she was in teacher’s training or whatever it was, again I boarded there, and it’s not a happy compromise to be in the boarding annex of a day school, it’s really not very nice. However, I have certain memories there, and I have one friend from that era that I’m still friendly with now, and, proper friends. The boarding part, we would have meals sitting at long tables, very nasty food really. You know, the meat wasn’t nice, and, and, there was lots of sort of, chunks of bread with marge on it that had been cut and buttered three days ago. And there was an attempt to sort of teach us good manners, so that you were never allowed to ask for another slice of bread, but you had to say to one of the other girls, ‘Would you like another slice of bread?’ And she would say, ‘No thank you. Would you like a slice of bread?’ And then, so you’d get what you wanted. But it was pretty basic. Again no central heating. By this time we were sort of adolescent girls, so, the one bath a week was, which was the norm, wasn’t particularly adequate, and you know, I can remember these strip washes in a joint bedroom with, you know, icy cold, and, oh! But...

Sorry, joint bedroom?
Dormitory. A dormitory with about, four, six people in it. [pause] Then that expanded, and got so full up that I was farmed out from the boarding annex to a neighbour who had just let out a room, and I ate at the, the annex, but I actually slept elsewhere, and that was civilised, so for the first time I had a nice little room to myself, I felt very grown up. I don’t think I had a key. But there was just a very nice couple there who, who let the room, and, made me feel good. [coughing] It’s gone again.

[mic noises - dislodged]

*Pause for a second. It’s quite a lucky fall-off really.*

[pause in recording]

[21:14]
There was another boarding school that I was in later called Oakhurst, which was quite different. This was a sort of minor stately home outside the town, so it would be about, two miles out on the top of a hill, which had been converted. It had previously been used as, for industrial premises by Coventry Climax, and, the school used it, I think it was just requisitioned. It had some nice flat period... sorry, flat space which had once been the tennis court. It had the remnants of what had been the rose garden. It had the remnants of a sort of nasty little swamp full of midges that had once been an ornamental pond. It had fruit trees, largely gone to, whatever fruit trees go to, but not providing a lot of fruit. And among those fruit trees we found some full-scale gravestones, made for the family pets who had been buried there, which I thought was absolutely lovely. But, it had lots and lots of space, a big, wide staircase. An associated walled garden where there was somebody who, who actually grew lots of vegetables, and, there was a cat there called Dinah who had gone wild and started sort of nesting in a tree and things like that, and her kitten unfortunately had to be put down because she was a very, very odd kitten by the time she made it to the earth. But it was a very... We had space there. We had, again, shared bedrooms, there were three of us in together, including this Valentine friend that I mentioned. And, it gave you a feeling for what life might have been like at one time there, the sheer size of the place, the, the size of the windows, the sort of double length curtains coming down,
they were sort of remnants of this grandeur. And, although I think to be living in a hostel associated with a day school is again not pleasant, we used to have these long crocodiles going down, well not long, because there’d only be about thirty of us, going down to the town for the Sunday services.

[24:13]
We, what did we do there? We studied, and we studied quite hard, because it was getting close to important exams. I was desperate to get good exam results, and now I do know with any children to really, you know, say, you know, ‘Do the best you can, we hope you’ll do well; I’m sure you’ll do well, but, you know, don’t...’ Because I got it totally and utterly out of, you know, perspective, and, you know, I just had to do well, which I did, but, sadly it wasn’t in quite the right subjects, because, I did it in, maths, English. What was the third one? Might have been history. Fat lot of good it did me, because I, I’ve even forgotten what the third subject was, but I know that there were three. And, when I got into the real world outside, and I was desperate to get away from this very parochial little town, I realised that I needed to have more science and have applied mathematics as well as pure maths, and also physics, because in those days you couldn’t start a degree course without having a certain combination of science subjects.

[25:42]
And, so I spent a year... I started going to evening classes, because, the Post Office were interested in supporting in the sense of... I think originally I started with evening classes, but then I had a day release which made a lot of difference. But they were interested in supporting my, my studies. And... [pause] I’ve lost, lost the track.

Talking about broadening up from maths, English and history to applied maths and physics.

Yah. So, I had to, basically it was a two-year course in maths, applied maths and physics, and I took them concurrently. So I had a rather funny sort of training, because, what would normally come in to term four, I was also doing in term one, so, some of it only made sense at the end of the year. But I did get through the things in the end, and, took my degree on a part-time basis from London University, and I sat the degree in sort of, Chelsea Town Hall or something like that, because we were part-time students. And, I was, it took me six years, which was at Sir John Cass College in
the City of London, to do, catch up on the applied maths and physics that I was lacking, do a three-year maths course part-time in four years, and then I started I think an MSc course or something like that, which I never finished. But that was a period of really sort of intense studying, because I was doing some interesting work that was, not too mechanical and actually used my brain during the day, and then going, I think three nights a week to evening classes, six till nine. Coming home to Colindale. So I’d be home at about half-past ten or something like that, including rather, rather late walking through from the station to the home, and getting nervous about my safety. And I can remember I got somebody to teach me a little bit of, self, what’s the word I want?

_Self-defence?_

Self-defence. And, I’d like if I may to come back to, to the relationship that women had in those days. The course was very well taught. A small group. When it came to the degree course I think we started with eight and two of us finished. I mean you know, it’s very hard studying part-time, I, I’d never encourage anybody to do it, because, you, you turn up there and you’re tired, and I can remember one friend, he used to fall asleep in the lessons. I’d be trying to take notes for him as well. It was just... [pause]

[29:10]

But I made a couple of good friends there, and, and did a little bit outside the course as well. In particular one colleague introduced me to the Interplanetary Society, which, I’m very proud to have been a member of the Interplanetary Society. Which I could not have understood, surely, at all in those days. But we, we had serious debates about multi-stage rockets and things like that. Because this was before it happened. How could you get out of the Earth’s gravitational field and so on? This was student stuff. But it was interesting. And, another student introduced me to classic films, and we used to go, you know, and see _Battleship Potemkin_ and all sorts of films that I wouldn’t have seen otherwise. So it was a rich time with, a lot of stress, but, but sort of nice stress really. It had a, it did the sciences, and then Art with a capital A, so there were people painting and potting. And then it had a navigation school. So quite a sort of funny mixture. And, it was quite close to the Tower of London. So on the day release you have the question of, you could eat in the canteen,
or you could bring sandwiches and go down and sit by the river and have them there, which is, during the summer, what I used to do. No they were quite a good time. You were going to say.

[30:49]
*I was just thinking that is sort of, I got the impression here of there being sort of three parallel tracks almost, the sort of, there’s the work at Dollis Hill.*

Mhm.

*There’s the work... Actually there’s the studying part of this.*

Yes.

*And there’s also sort of, life outside these two things. And I was thinking it might be interesting if you’d like to take them sort of in turn, one by one.*

Yup.

*So as we started off on the studying side of it, I was just wondering, what was the name of the college again?*

Sir John Cass. It’s now a part of Metropolitan College. It was really in the City of London, next door to Aldgate station, quite a rough part, but it was close to the station. And, it was in, part of the building was listed, it had a listed staircase. It was good. But I mean it was just evening classes really.

*Who else was in your evening class?*

Well the guy that finished up with me was a young man called Bill Cameron, Scottish, as you might guess, and I did become friendly with him and his wife. No longer so. And then there was somebody who joined later called Derrick Richell, r-i-c-h-e-l-l. He worked at Dollis Hill as well. And I kept in contact with him for a bit. But, when you’re working part-time, you don’t make the sort of special friends as you do I think
if you’re at a, especially an Oxbridge university and you can live and eat with them. It’s so intense and, you know, you’re just so tired by the time you get there. Not easy.

What sort of time are you typically actually arriving there after work?

Six o’clock. So it was, we got there for, the lectures started at six, and we finished at nine. So you got three hours. What I think I gained from that is, skills and knowledge, but in no sense any history. I had no idea whether I was learning about something that had been discovered fifty years ago or 500. And, I never really have got that history of science. Because when you’re eighteen, nineteen, twenty, everything is new to you. It all seems like research. And it’s only afterwards that you can look back and sort of say, ‘Well yes, actually I was at the forefront of that.’ I didn’t know, it was all new to me. And... [pause]

Sounds like a very, talking about the historical aspect there, it sounds like it’s very much a sort of practical course. Would that be correct, or...?

Oh yes. I mean you know, there wasn’t time to do any of the niceties, the course was to get you through the exams, which they did, they did.

[33:51]

The degree course, after that, I went to Birkbeck College, which specialised in part-time working, and I started... I had done a course in logic design there, which was just a course, no particular qualification, and then I started an MSc. And, I think I’d had six years of part-time study, and, I realised that an MSc wasn’t going to give me what I wanted. I needed a PhD, and I just had not got the energy and the guts to go for that, so I, I dropped after one year. What was significant about that period was that I worked for a guy called Andrew Booth, who became quite, you know, kept, had a very positive part in the computer industry, and he finished up in Canada I think. But a boyfriend of mine was doing his, I think his was a PhD, also with Andrew Booth.

[break in recording - telephone]

Sorry, I’ll tell you...
Let me just pop it back on.

What I remember about Andrew Booth was partly his personality, but also that he was working on logic design and speech recognition. And, my boyfriend was involved with him on the speech recognition time, side. So I was spending a lot of time going into a tape recorder for my boyfriend, saying, ‘One, one, one, one, one.’ Because at that time he was trying to distinguish waveforms between the figures nought and nine. So it was very very early on.

[telephone ringing]

[end of session]

[End of Part 3]
Right. I’d like to start if I may with a couple of amendments from yesterday’s, from the last session. I know at some stage I talked about Morris dancers in Abbotts Bromley, and realised afterwards they were not Morris dancers, they were something much more interesting, they were called Horn dancers, very very mediaeval, and the dance is carried out nowhere else in England, or anywhere for that matter, except in Abbots Bromley. The dancers came out, with sort of horns strapped to their heads, sort of quite, quite weird, and almost sort of frightening, because it was so mediaeval. And the other thing that was related to that is, I talked about walking to church when I stayed with Uncle’s parents, which was a regular, though not, not terribly frequent occurrence, and it was a two-and-a-half mile walk which for a small child is quite a, a long thing, and, you know, we’d talk and sing songs and take us through. But the road there was very very straight, it had ups and downs but the road itself was very straight, and at the sides there were sort of almost cairn-like piles of, cemented together stones, with a great big iron mast sticking out from the top of them. And I asked, ‘What are those for?’ And was told that it was just, it was a defence against an enemy aircraft coming down and using that road as a landing strip. And, people who are too young to remember what Britain was like when it was expecting invasion, I think they sort of forget some of the little, I came across a pillbox defensive thing on the way to the Prior’s Court School, and it was really, people say, ‘What’s a pillbox?’ Well, you know, knock it down, but it has some place, that there it was on the top of a small rise and in a farm to the defence of protecting that farm from a local place. And, I, I think they’re worth recording.

The other thing I was talking about Uncle and his, how inventive he was, and although we didn’t hear very much about it at home, because he, he left work outside, he was also inventive within the house, sort of building wardrobes and, and making small things. But the things that he did professionally which were in addition to the ones that I mentioned earlier, he was involved in designing a very early prefab, so that it was immediately post-war when there was this terrible housing shortage, and this
was a system of prefabricated door-wall-window, roof I think, I can’t remember, in two layers, which then concrete was poured in between, to provide the actual stability. It didn’t actually take off. The prefabs that really became, I don’t know how many millions, might have been millions, were built, were quite different, and to be honest I don’t know how they were fabricated, but they arrived on the backs of lorries, half a prefab per lorry. And what I remember about them was the excitement of seeing a fitted kitchen for the very first time, because, previously a kitchen was a room in which you had a sink, or a boiler, and a boiler probably, and a, an Ascot heater that sort of, [sound of loud gas ignition], every time you lit it. And, a cooker, and a door to a pantry. I mean there was nothing sort of really there. And a fitted kitchen. It looked so, attractive and luxurious, and efficient and clean and modern and... And the other side of the wall from the kitchen was the fitted bathroom, and we had a bath, I don’t think a shower, a wash basin, toilet, which arrived all ready-made, so that you just had a contractor, because I saw one estate going up, laying concrete paths, you had the supplies, and then these half prefabricated houses arrived, were sort of put into position fairly quickly. I don’t know how they joined them together. And suddenly you had got either a prefab filling a place where the house had been knocked down or something, or a whole army of them, rather like you would get a caravan park, for, you know, outside a little estate that was sort of just a, a greenfield site. I did go inside one, Aunty had a help in the house and she lived in a prefab and I went to see that. And she looked very cosy in there. Her name was Mrs Anson. And, it was about the size of a large mobile home. Very liveable in. She was there with her husband. But certainly big enough for a couple with one or two children. I think they, there were different models for, as regards size. But it was, it was interesting to see that they were intended to be for five years or something like that and they were there for about, twenty or thirty or something.

Anyway, the other thing that he invented and developed was the, or one of the very first step stools, that is a small two-, three-, four-... two-, three-rung stepladder that you could also use as a stool. And his was done in metal. And I had one of his until very very recently. Because that was his discipline. But the whole concept of combining a little stepladder and a stool, you know, it was very...
And the third thing, which didn’t take off at all but I saw the prototypes, was some metal furniture, where he was constructing metal furniture, not with nuts and bolts and joints and things, but he was sort of blowing it, pressing it out, pressing out the whole, and he had a big metal desk himself at Weathershields. And, as always it pretended to be something else, it pretended to be wood. But that, the whole idea of having metal furniture, it has to start somewhere, and partly Uncle started that sort of thing. So those are little amendments to what I said earlier.

I forgot really to tell you much about my sister Renate, who also had an interesting life. She died some, ten years ago or something like that. I’m trying to remember whether she died before or after my son. She was four years older than I was, and, very different in character and in aptitude, so that the relationship with parents was quite different, and, I think we probably both had sibling rivalry. I know that I as a child in Germany, so pre-five, sort of bit her once so seriously in the stomach that my mother, so she tells me, got a psychologist to come and have a look at me, and we were just kids, you know.

So, as children, although we shared a bed with Aunty and Uncle, although I was totally dependent on her during the journey, and she was good, we were not really close until probably we got into our teens. At that time we were both in the same school in Oswestry, and I again, so I thought, suffered from being the younger child, because the staff were always sort of saying, you know, ‘How come that you’re so awful at modern languages? Your sister’s brilliant,’ you know. And, because we were very different, and, that’s hard for children, to always have that sort of contrast. It balanced out though, because she had what turned out to be something like polio during that period, woke up one morning and couldn’t move. And, we were lucky in that we were close to an orthopaedic hospital that was called Park Hall, and, she was whipped in there and was on, in an orthopaedic ward which is sort of these long wards with no wall on one side, so that in winter the snow actually came onto the bedclothes. And she was, had penicillin, early penicillin, which was paid for, which came from the nearby army camp, Park Hall, and was paid for by some insurance that my sensible mother had taken up which was a penny a week, and she was having several doses of penicillin a day, which were costed at £1 per, per thing. So, you know... Anyway she did eventually recover, and was left only with a sort of mild
limp when, when it was about to rain, that sort of weakness. But when she went back to school after that ten-month gap, she suffered the converse, that people were saying, some staff who had, who had come in, and were sort of saying, ‘How come that you,’ you know, ‘you don’t, you’re not good at mathematics, your sister’s brilliant?’ And so, these things balance, and I’m not sure whether it’s good to be... Children I think adapt very quickly. When I think how quickly we adapted to arriving in England, it’s just how life was, and, we soon learnt to do things in a different way, and speak in a different language, and, I think that was probably where she had some difficulty.

[11:41]

How were you different from your sister? You’ve mentioned one or two things in passing, but I was just wondering about, you know, sort of personality of her compared to yourself.

She... [pause] We had different skills, so she was sort of, English and, and on the arts side. I don’t think did any science whatsoever. Schools at that time really didn’t teach science. She had got her scholarship, it was called something else, to Oxford, and read English literature, so... I’ve forgotten the name of her scholarship, but, it’s not St Peter’s Scholarship but it’s a word like... Anyway. Institute... Oh. No, it’ll come back. So she was reading English, and I was on the science side. She was close to my mother. I if anything was closer to my father, but of course he wasn’t there. She looked... Oh we did look alike actually, and when, I could see that in the photos. She was pretty forceful, and I was very much the younger sister. I mean she told very graphic stories, one which is, partly I remember and partly I’ve been told, is that, again, pre, pre-six I suppose, I was a sort of bouncy child, and, I mean we both were, and, then went sort of rather quiet. And, my mother asked what was wrong, and I can sort of vaguely remember. And, what had happened is that Renate had been telling me stories that I had an artificial heart, and had to be very very careful so as not to strain it. Now that’s a weird thing for a nine-year-old to tell a six-year-old or whatever the differences were. But I can sort of remember that sort of time, and the relief when I realised it wasn’t true. Now I have a pacemaker heart, I’m quite happy with it, but that’s neither here nor there.

[14:15]
She looked differently, she was fair-haired, which darkened over the years, and I was always dark. Blue-eyed, whereas I have brown eyes. Fairly similar build. I enjoyed sport and she never did, especially after she had been in hospital, because she put on a lot of, a lot of weight during those months. So we were rather different, and it was only after she had been in hospital that I realised how much I cared about her, and since then, I think we were both important to each other.

She had an unfortunate love affair with a guy, I suppose I can name him because he’s dead now, called Roland, and, he was married in the way that these... Oh, she was, when she finished studying at Oxford, she went and did a year at Exeter University in childcare or social work or something like that, and to support herself she took a domestic job, cooking for a very brilliant family. Oh gosh, I must talk about those. The Harveys, Professor Harvey and his wife Margaret Harvey. Anyway, she helped them in order to support herself while she studied at Exeter, and thereafter became a child, children’s officer I think they were called, in Exeter, and in Devon, so there were various things that happened during the time. The fascinating thing about the Harveys was that he was, they were working in the early days of artificial insemination by donor, and, it was really very experimental, and, she was getting the semen all from her husband. So... Nowadays this would not be allowed at all, but it wasn’t regulated. And, so all over Devon, which is a very rural county, there were these ginger-haired, rather bright children, [laughs] who were clearly the professor’s offspring. And, and you... I think if we hadn’t known the family one might not have guessed, but you know, when you actually see them, you know, it’s lovely. She used to be also involved in sort of, I remember Renate spent time bringing in bucketloads of soil from the garden and boiling it so that it would be free of disease and so on to do things.

Anyway, that’s how she met Roland. And it was a big passionate affair, although he was married, and, had never promised really to leave his wife. And it went on for years and years, and... I think eventually she brought it to a head by sort of saying, ‘Well, I’m going to go to Australia, and if you want me, you’ll, you’ll come after me and we’ll live in Australia away from all the,’ shame really of a divorce or an unmarried couple. Things have happened since then, it wouldn’t be so dreadful now. But his children were then grown up, and, I’ve met, I’ve met one and... yes I’ve met
them both actually. The boy immensely handsome, as Roland was. And, after she went to Australia, she went on one of these £10 assisted passages, where it took six weeks on a, on a boat, an Italian ship, name forgotten, it might come back to me, where, it was pretty rough because, Australia wanted migrants in certain categories, and mainly they were in crafts, mechanical, farming and so on. They were not the French linguists and stuff like that. And, one of the stories that she told was that, the cook had run amuck, was literally sort of rushing through the, the ship with this great big, brandishing his carving knife, and, you know, it was quite a, a thing.

[19:23]

She had never really settled in England, for a variety of reasons. My mother and I had become British citizens in 19... I could look up the date. Yes, ’50... Oh. [pause] Can we stop, and I can just look up the date.

*Mm, sure.*

[pause in recording]

After the war, my mother and I became naturalised British citizens. I was, it was termed a Registration, because I was still under eighteen, so I was sort of lumped in with my, on my mother’s application. Renate was already over eighteen, and so needed to do things on her own account, which she did not do. And the years went on, and she still hadn’t done it. And, a letter would arrive and sort of saying, you know, ‘This is the place to go.’ And, I think they got sort of firmer and firmer, and eventually, a letter sort of came along the lines of, ‘If you’re not going to get naturalised citizens, go back to wherever you came from, because you can’t keep on staying here as a, as a stateless person.’ And, so she took herself off to Australia. So it was all part of that I think. What is noteworthy is that she got to Australia and within six months took out Australian citizenship. And you sort of think, now what was going on there? And I believe it’s because, we had had a lot of things done to us, which is why it’s so important not to do things to children. She had had no choice about coming to England, you know, it just happened. Whereas she had chosen to go to Australia, and she put down roots there very quickly. She had the sort of skills in social work that were very valuable out there, when I went to her funeral she had clearly, the eulogies had acknowledged the improvements that she had made in
fostering and adoptions in Australia which were a bit, well, considerably behind
Britain, so she was able to take out all those skills.

[22:05]
And, I married first, and she sort of married, not Roland but a bit on the rebound,
because he never did go after her, with that rather Jane Austen-ish thing that she was
the older daughter, and she wasn’t going to have a younger daughter married, et cetera
et cetera. And so she married a bit of the rebound a man, he had studied for the
priesthood, I mean he was a good man, but very selfish, and it, it would have been all
right, except that they didn’t manage to have children. And there she was, desperate
for her own family, and, so they adopted. After all, this is what was her skill and
there was no problem in adopting, and she adopted a daughter, Clare, we spoke to her
this morning, who was the son... sorry, who was the daughter, birth child, of someone
who had been a PT, physical training instructor or something like that. When you
have adoptions, one tries to, as the child grows up, and this was adoption from birth,
to give the birth, the story of the birth parents and the story as to why she was
adopted. The children are supposed to know that these days. And Renate would
actually do that for, for, you know, you take a great four-inch file of a child that was
going for adoption and then summarise it into a couple of pages, so that you...
[telephone ringing] Sorry, I thought I had.....

[pause in recording]

[24:06]
So, just to summarise that. Renate when she qualified went down to Exeter to study
social work or something like that, and got a job to support herself with Professor and
Mrs Harvey. When she had done that postgraduate diploma I think it was, she then
got a job in Devon, and met there Roland Bishop, whom she had a long and
passionate affair with, and quite a, I don’t quite know what I’d call it. It was an
unusual relationship, it was unusual, yah.

How so?

[pause] Roland was one of these people who always lived in the present. I can
remember several Christmases where I waited, with Renate and the rest of the family,
for him to turn up for Christmas lunch, and he would be stuck somewhere else. So he lived in the present. If he was having a good time, he would stay there; if he wasn’t, he would remember, ‘Oh God! three hours ago I was supposed to be doing so-and-so.’ So that didn’t help in the relationship. He was very handsome and I think that had spoilt him in some ways.

[Closed between 25:38 – 27:30]

However, going back to Renate. Where had I got to?

[27:33]

_Were your family aware that your sister was having the affair as well? It sounds like you were..._

Oh yes.

...all sort of quite well integrated. [laughs]

Oh yes. Yes. It was, you know, it wasn’t a hole in the corner or anything like that. And the distance of course made it easier that his wife and children were in Exeter and we had moved to London. I moved to London when I left school, basically because there was no work in Oswestry, and the sort of work that I wanted to do was, was clearly a sort of urban job. I did not want to work on a farm. She came to London, oh... I don’t think she ever lived in London when I think about it. My mother lived in London, and I lived with her for some months, which was a disaster, so, I moved out pretty smartish. Roland moved to be close to us, and I mean I can remember packing his trunk in order to ship him and all his worldly possessions out to Australia. So having got to that stage, he still never went. So he’s not... A bit flaky perhaps. Mm.

[29:03]

Renate adopted her daughter Clare from birth, and, the story of Clare really was that, she was the illegitimate child of a couple who were engaged, who did later marry, and there was no earthly reason why they didn’t just bring the marriage forward a few months and, and go on, but it would have rather spoilt a nice wedding. It was that sort of relationship. And, it’s very hard not to be able to say to an adopted child, ‘You know, your mother loved you enormously, enormously, but she just couldn’t look
after you, so she did the really loving thing and, and gave you up.’ And, poor Clare
didn’t have that reassurance, because her parents could have looked after them, a nice
middle-class family. And, after my sister died, interestingly, they quite spontaneously
contacted her, Clare, and it was the children, so her full sister and brother, who had
been born of the marriage, of the same parents, who suddenly realised that, they never
really, they, they knew of Clare’s existence, not her name of course, but, had suddenly
grown up themselves and had thought, ‘Mum, shouldn’t we find out whether she was
all right, you know, see what’s happened to her now?’ So they approached her and
the timing was perfect, because Renate had just died and Clare took that very hard.

Her marriage broke up because, she then went ahead with adopting a second child,
and, again it was from birth, and the child was called Judy, and, was in the house for a
week, two weeks, something like that, when her husband Peter actually spoke up for
the first time and said, ‘Look, I really don’t want to adopt this child,’ and of course
she was whooshed back. And, because Renate was in childcare herself, I’m sure her
colleagues just assumed that all was well. Because it’s quite standard practice to
always interview carefully both adoptive parents, and separately so that the forceful
one, which was Renate, can’t just sort of, steamroller something like that. But... So,
Judy was not adopted, and basically that broke the marriage up, because whatever was
right or wrong with it, you know, by the time that sort of trauma happens in a family,
that’s the end.

Clare, when her marriage broke up, she was in Sydney, and she came with Clare and
lived with us for many years. So, it was quite an interesting part of my life for me,
because although we were very short of money, and Renate had no income at all, and
we had to move house to make it, you know, enough room, she was very domestic
and she cooked very nicely, and she was very very good with children, so she was
very good with Giles and not many people were, and, so we had... And Derek is very
fond of Clare. We lived in a rented house to begin with because we couldn’t
synchronise selling a character cottage with buying another house, so we sold the
cottage as and when we could and moved into a rented house and then found
something, the house that we then lived in for twenty-five years.

When about was that?
When?

_Mm. Just..._

Oh God!

_Just get a rough idea of the..._

Oh. Well Giles would have been six, and he was born in ’63, so, ’69, something like that. [pause] So that extended family, I found very good in one way, in particular that we had another, another child in the house, and a very bright, bouncy, neurotypical child, who was very very positive and good with Giles. [pause] But, we never had any privacy. So... Because, over the years my mother stayed with us, Uncle lived with us, Renate lived with us for years, Roland has lived with us, we had this large house, and, while it’s very nice to have people to stay, it’s not really, [laughs] really how I’d choose to be.

[34:29]

So that’s the story of Renate. She died a few years ago, and, we were living here already, so, that would be in the last, fifteen years. And, our first thought was... And, you know, I’d seen her and there was nothing wrong with the relationship or anything, there wasn’t any unfinished business, and all that sort of thing, because I knew she wasn’t well. And the last time I had been to Australia and said farewell, I sort of knew I wasn’t going to see her again. And she knew as well. But then it suddenly occurred to me, I couldn’t possibly not go to her funeral. It’s ridiculous. I hardly know anybody else in Australia. I’m not so close to the adult Clare that I would have been a support to her, but I needed to go for me. And so I phoned and said I’m going, and they held the funeral up until I got there and so on, which I’m very glad I did.

[35:29]

One of the other things that happened in her life which sort of, integrated into ours, was that, I know, I’ve mentioned that professionally she worked in adoptions and fostering, but she also fostered several times herself. And, in particular, there were three boys, Alvin, Mervin and, oh, it’ll come back in a minute. Anyway, three boys. And she fostered, they were with Dr Barnardo’s, and she had come across them
professionally, and realised that the, Alvin in particular was very bright, and was trying to study for his School Certificate, and, Barnardo’s children’s home is not the sort of place where you can really get down and study. And, so she had fostered Alvin and hence his younger brother Mervin. And, Pe... [pause] Peter, is it? [Interviewee meant John] Lianne is his wife. [laughs] Gone. And so this household with this rather ascetic husband, who had coped with an adopted daughter, also had these three very large, very masculine, foster children around in the house. So it was, you know, bulging at the seams and so on. So I think Peter put up with a great deal for that, and, I really admired him in many many ways. [pause] It’s funny how families go isn’t it.

Was this when she was back out in Australia, or...?

Oh yes. Yes. When the boys grew up, and maybe she was with them, but maybe they were with her for three, four, five years or something, they were English boys who had been sent out to Australia because life was thought perhaps better for children. And Alvin then came and stayed with us. Giles was then very young, and, he was quite a help really. And, in any case as far as I, we were concerned, he was family. Do you really want to go on with all this?

[38:06]

Just wondering, it sounds like you’ve got a very, quite a large extended family through your sister which, you know, comes into your life in places as well.

Absolutely.

This isn’t something I had realised before, and we talked about Giles, but I didn’t know about, you know, these other children, these other people in your life.

Yes. I suppose the important thing about Alvin is that, I got him into the computer industry here, and he did settle down very well. He married an English girl, called Janice, and she is like an honorary sister to me. Their marriage broke up, for reasons that are probably not terribly important. She, Janice came and lived with us, together with her daughter Jenny, and so they are very much extended family, so that Derek
gave Jenny away for her marriage, and all those sorts of things. So, it, it, they’re pretty important to us. Alvin really was a damaged child, I think they all were. They had been removed from their mother for child cruelty so they had a pretty tough start. Then they’d had several years in Barnardo’s, which in, in Australia was pretty tough, and nasty things went on there as well. But he had worked his way through it all.

But when... I mean, yes, they’re very close. I mean I took Jenny out as a child to Australia to make sure that her relationship with her father just didn’t die, because, you know, if you’re a child, as I know myself, if you don’t see your father for five years there’s nothing much left. So I really tried to keep them together. So they were part of the family. However, when Renate died, Alvin didn’t even come to the funeral. And you sort of think, what on earth is going on there? He said he couldn’t face it, because, he referred to her as, emotionally his mother. [pause] But, he was sort of, he is, I’ve seen him in the last few years, a damaged personality really. [pause] So don’t let’s go there. [laughs]

A question that occurs to me in all of this, it sounds like, how you’ve helped out a lot of people in your wider family. And I’m just wondering, you know, what’s driving that, why do it? Because it isn’t something, you know, you have to do, is it? It’s...

Well, there are very few things in the world that you do have to do, and I think it’s fairly early in your personality that you realise that you want to help other people. And it’s part of this wanting to make your life worth saving, and, do worthwhile things. [pause] And yes, if I can see somebody that needs help, I would always help. Always. I mean, at least I think so always. Most things of course you can’t help with, but, somebody in the family needs a home, they can come and stay with us, always.

Do you think the fact you’ve been a, a foster child yourself, did that play a part in this?

I think so, yes. Yes. You know, you, you... Aunty and Uncle always wanted, sort of really expected rather more overt gratitude from us, which, I mean they did get, but, you really repay those gifts, passing it along, you repay it somebody else. And, I did look after Aunty and Uncle as they got old, but, really I suppose I became sensitised
to the vulnerability of children on their own. Apparently today, 2010, there are still 3,000 unaccompanied children who arrive as refugees in Britain every year, and when I was told that figure I could hardly... 3,000! You know, I could imagine it happening, thirty children perhaps a year. But, they come in in, hidden in the backs of lorries, economic migrants, somebody put them in there. Trafficked in, in the worst cases. And when I queried it, and I was with a refugee organisation when I learnt that figure, and, the response was, ‘Oh of course most of these children are, are sort of, growing up, they’re fourteen, fifteen.’ Now, to think of a fourteen- or fifteen-year-old being treated like an adult and just put into digs and with nobody to look after them, I mean it is atrocious. They are still children, and, I think, you know, even higher than sixteens and seventeens, most of them still need looking after. So, yeah, I try to be, I don’t try, I think by nature, I help when, as and when I can. And I also try not to expect people to be grateful. I do expect people to say thank you. In my philanthropy I’m acutely irritated when people hardly acknowledge a cheque, you know. Well, all the cheques I write are quite big ones, and you sort of think, surely somebody can sort of... Anyway. Next question.

[44:30]
I was wondering as well, is there anything you had to give up during that period where you are acting as sort of foster aunt to so many people, that...?

No, it, it was, the richness of my life as well, you know, it’s... You know, I’m somebody that’s with books and music, and I’ve got, I haven’t spoken about my own son, I was absolutely embroiled in his life, so it was just a wonderful relief to have other people around who accepted Giles and, who were an extended family.

[45:14]
Mm. Could you talk a little bit more about your own foster parents? I was wondering when you actually left them to go somewhere else.

I think I got the scholarship to the Lichfield School when I was eleven, and I think I was there one or two years and then went to Oswestry where my mother was living, to live close to her but basically under her aegis. And, still emotionally and practically, Aunty and Uncle’s child, I went there every school holiday, every time I could. They
certainly didn’t support me financially any more, but, always gave me £1 when I left, which in those days, it was a lot of money. And I would think that was the end of my childhood per se, but... [pause] Next question.

[46:31]
You talked about nature and nurture last time, and I was wondering, what do you think that your, your aunty and your uncle, do you think you’ve inherited anything from them on the nurture front?

Oh a great deal. [pause] I hardly know where to start. They were enormously patriotic, and that they transferred to me. So that, Land of Hope and Glory, Trumpet Voluntary, all those sort of, Elgar songs and, and tunes and so on, I will be in tears, and I, and I really, I’m a royalist. I mean I know how ridiculous it is, but you know, but, it was during the war and one became more English than the English, and that comes from Aunty and Uncle. I think the other, they were full of these saws, do as you would be done by, handsome is as handsome does, if a job’s worth doing at all it’s worth doing well. You know, all those were, were a continual part of everyday life with, with them. If I did something that wasn’t really according to their norm it was very much, you know, that’s not a ladylike thing to do, or, ‘That’s not my girl, that’s not how I want you to be.’ Very clear standards. [pause] There was something just going through my mind then. Yes. One of the things that really came out loud and clear from those years was my sense of duty. It’s quite different to compassion. And, where did that come from? During those years Aunty and Uncle, with their friends and acquaintances, seemed to me to be talking very frequently about the abdication, which was before my time, but was obviously still very much to the front of people’s consciousness, because I think in particular, one had George VI who was, you know, my king, who was, probably to the adults looked like a very weak king, he had a speech impediment; his wife, later the Queen Mother, was not expecting to be Queen, she resented it, and I think... So there was a lot of discussion about this. And, as a romantic, I thought it was wonderful that he should give up the throne for the woman that he loved. And, the response was quite consistent, that he didn’t do his duty. OK, so you talk a bit about it all the time, and you always come back to that thing, he didn’t do his duty. And, I think that did make a big impression on me, and, certainly I always do my duty, and I, I just do. You, you couldn’t, I couldn’t face
myself if I did something that was underhand or deceitful or, not as expected of me, you know, there are certain things that you’ve got to do and, you do ’em.

Mm. *Is there something about the duty and the Englishness that starts here as well?*

Mm. Mm. Mm.

[15:20]
*I’m wondering, after arriving from Germany, you talked about getting off the Kindertransport train and meeting the Smiths for the first time. Just wondering, how did you feel at that point?*

Confused, tired, weepy, resentful. Not so much resentful but just... I was complete, completely out of control, that, just, where was I, where was my doll, where was I going, what was this ghastly food I was asked to eat? And, it was all just, chaotic. So, it’s... And I was lucky, I mean, you know, very lucky.

*How did you settle in at first?*

[pause] I think there were a lot of sort of quiet times. It was summer, so I sort of remember, you know, pottering after Uncle in the garden, and things like that. [pause] I think I needed time to, review and assess what had happened to me. But my sister was there, and, she provided a lot of stability for me in a way that I’m sure I wasn’t able to do for her.

*Did you have any trouble adjusting to life in England after life in so many places before?*

[pause] No, it was just another place. It was expected to be permanent, and... I mean when all these clothes arrived in a very sort of Germanic style, I mean Aunty and Uncle also wanted me to be the little English lady, and so they didn’t force me to, to wear them through. But, you know, Uncle was relatively comfortably off, even in those days, and, I was dressed modestly like any other English girls pretty quickly. And, you know, during the war time, clothes, well basically people made clothes and
they were handed down once the other. Later on we received some, I would call them food parcels, but they included a whole lot of things from America, big parcels sent by some remote family, or maybe even strangers, containing appropriate clothes and, tins of food I remember. I remember mostly the clothes, sort of lovely gingham dresses that were just so different from the sort of stuff that was available here, and was beginning to be sort of glamorous and, fresh and lively and very American. But... So I mean I think, everybody lived modestly during the war. Everything was short. You made do and mend. You re-used, you passed things on. I wasn’t conscious of being, of Uncle being comfortably well off, which he obviously was. I wasn’t conscious of being poor or, or in any way deprived. I think, you know, five years old, you just accept things, that’s how things are. Very different to how they had been. And that my sister found much more difficult than I did.

Did you speak English when you arrived at all, or was it all completely new?

No, it was all completely new. My father had taught Renate a few useful, or rather useless phrases, so that, I always jokingly sort of say, she could say things like slow combustion stove, which is a very important part of Germanic life, and, vine screen veep[ph]. But, didn’t know how to ask to go to the bathroom. And... But you pick it up so, so quickly. I don’t... When I talk with refugees today, and I don’t do much with them, and usually it’s about getting into work and so on, I always talk about the, the number of things that don’t need the language, and, working with children and animals for example, it’s, you do not need any language whatsoever. Other, working in a warehouse, I tried to persuade John Lewis Partnership to have, take some refugees without English into the warehouse, because you really only need to know the numbers, and, you know, by the time you’ve got bored of that job you will have learnt enough English to, to go and get a, a different job either within the partnership or elsewhere. And, I think I knew who my friends were there.

[56:00]

There was a girl, Sylvia, who, and also a refugee, who was also on a Kindertransport, not the same one in any way, and she came to a guy who, a guy called Sandy, Sandy, Sandy... I’ve forgotten the name of his wife. Was it Eileen? [pause] How silly, I can’t remember. Kath, Kath and Sandy. They fostered her. She was older than Renate and she must have been about fourteen, fifteen. And a very beautiful young
woman. And, they obviously expected much more of, from Sylvia than Aunty and Uncle did of us, and we had to help round the house and, you know, make ourselves useful, make our own beds and so on, but, I think Sylvia had to do a lot more than that. And as soon as she was able, she left. And looking back, I suspect that she was sexually molested by Sandy. It happened so frequently, and why should she have gone so quickly, and...? Because she hadn’t got any family to go to, I mean she went to America.

[57:25]

So they were difficult times. But I mean, masses of children during the war were evacuated and dumped on families that didn’t, didn’t even want them, whereas Aunty and Uncle had actually applied to have, have us. And you hear horror stories of some of the evacuees who came from, particularly the, the worst slums and went into the country where, country they had never seen. Such ill-nourished children with rickets and so on. And, I think some of that period was the underpinning of the, of the welfare state really, that people were for the first time sensitised to, that you know, down the road, round the corner, there were people living in real poverty. And, the class system in Britain had I think protected many people. Some of it came out of course during National Service, where, that was the making of some boys, and it was boys in those days, where they suddenly had to be alongside people with a completely different background, speaking differently, different aims, different... Just a completely different culture. And I know my father mentioned this when, the people he was working with in Bicester, and, you know, he sort of said, ‘I’m learning to get on with them.’ You know, because you’ve got this highly intellectual man sort of working with people digging ditches. And he learnt to dig a decent ditch as well. Next question.

[59:17]

You just brought up the class system there, I was wondering, you know, was it something you were conscious of, of being in a...?

Yes there was, there was expressions used, ‘A lady doesn’t do this.’ I mean we were not allowed to eat in the street, we were not allowed to go out without gloves on, we certainly didn’t... Well I think I wore shorts, I’ve said this before I think, but I didn’t wear trousers until much, much later, and I was fully grown. So that, there was, ‘We
don’t do that here.’ You don’t play with that person, because they’re not nice. And...
Oh yes, there was a class system all right. The cleaning lady was a quite different, different species really, to Aunty and Uncle. Interesting.

[01:00:20]

How did it feel to actually leave Aunty and Uncle and go back to...?

Oh I was distraught. I was very upset. But of course I didn’t really leave them, because I went back, and, and, the phones were not in use at the time so, did I write? I don’t... I think probably wrote. I left my dog with them as well, which was awful.

What was your dog’s name?

Topsy Mary Buchthal Smith. Full name. And, she was a pedigree spaniel that, of course only have a pedigree, and this, she was bought for the vast sum of four guineas, which at that time was a lot of money, a sort of, pedigree. And Aunty had had a spaniel before who we always heard about. Anyway, as Topsy grew up, her ears sort of began to stand up, which spaniels are not supposed to do, and it was quite clear that somebody had been playing away from home, and, she was not a purebred spaniel. So off we go back to the, what do they call it, pet shop, and, Aunty sort of said, ‘Look, this is...’ you know, and she, she had the long pedigree with, with all the various, grandparents and things of the dog. She was a bitch actually, but... ‘And look at the dog.’ And, I don’t quite know what she expected. I think she wanted her money back. And the pet owner was very clever. ‘Oh! of course Madam, you’re quite right. I’ll take the dog immediately.’ Well of course, ‘Ooooh! I want to keep the dog,’ and so on. [laughs] Very clever. And of course she stayed, and was, was absolutely wonderful. She died, the dog, just before I took my School Certificate, which, I can remember hearing about it by letter, and I was very upset. She had also become, she had started chasing chickens, and in wartime, you know, people kept a few chickens to keep, have some eggs. And, this was a pretty dastardly thing to do. And Uncle sort of, you know, paid up, and, dug even deeper fences down, well like rabbit-proof fencing so that she, she couldn’t burrow her way out of them. But she did I fear get the, what would it have been? Sort of, lust for killing, because she didn’t kill because she was hungry; she’d go next door and kill four chickens and just
leave them there. So. It’s in her nature, you know. So it was pretty awful. Anyway, we managed somehow. I think we’ve explored that enough, haven’t we?

Mm.

OK?

[01:03:27]
Just one or two other questions about activities when you were growing up. Did you read at all?

I read avidly anything I could put my hands on. So it might be the cornflakes packet on the table, which we read with, in a fair amount of detail. Aunty and Uncle didn’t have many books, and, they were rather sort of showy books, some of which I still have. Dickens. I can remember reading things like Mary Webb’s Gone to Earth at the age of about twelve, you know, totally and utterly unsuitable. But I just read what there was there. And, there was a library, Boots chemist had a library that Aunty used, but I don’t think it had children’s books in it. But she would go when she went into town, which would be once a week or once a fortnight, she would change her library books. And, I don’t think I read Aunty’s books then. I can’t think. At school of course you got vast access to, more to learning. Children’s novels, I don’t think... I mean I didn’t like Alice in Wonderland. I don’t like it any more now. It’s supposed to be mathematically-oriented which is rather surprising. But I’ve never quite taken to that. I loved the A A Milne, Winnie the Pooh. There was a Rupert Bear cartoon strip in the Daily Mail which was the paper that they took, that I followed avidly. [pause] I was a fairly... [pause] I mean the school, I, I can just remember studying books for facts, and, and, rather than sheer entertainment. We, girls were taught poetry. We learnt poetry, we’d have to learn a poem before the next lesson and that sort of thing. And some of those phrases come back. But reading, I certainly did it, and I was as focused in reading as I am today on, you know, I’ve got a sort of, tunnel vision and so on, and Aunty would call me, you know, sort of, to a meal, and, ‘Yes Aunty, just coming,’ and I swear I hadn’t heard her. It was absolute reflex. ‘Yes Aunty, just coming.’ And, I’m still much the same [laughs] now you know, when
I’m, when I’m engrossed in something, I’m engrossed. And that is it, a sort of, all or nothing person.

[01:06:32]

Mm. Any other things that engrossed you at that sort of earlier period of your life?

[pause] No, I’m a studious child, I mean I do love to learn, and I think that started fairly early on. I was fascinated by some of the Greek tragedies, which I never understood, never read them, I just knew that whenever I touched them, you know, the names were magic, the... I had the opportunity to learn to play the piano, and, I don’t coordinate hand and eye then or now, so, it didn’t go very far, no. I wish I had had more... One of the nuns taught me, I can even remember her name. She had false teeth, and while I was trying to play, play my scales, she would be messing about with her false teeth in her mouth. It was just awful. And then she had a ruler, if I hit a wrong note you would get a little smack. [pause] So I had all those opportunities. I think music probably was more important to me than most children.

Listening or playing?

Listening. The playing wasn’t very creative, it was just trying to... I mean with, with... I also had the opportunity to learn violin, and, I was fine when I was just playing scales and things like that. But as soon as I started playing beautiful music I could not stand the scrawling caterwauling noise that I was making. So, didn’t get very far there.

[01:08:34]

The other that did occur to me about sort of talking about education really is science. Was this something that interested you when you were growing up?

[pause] Well girls are not taught science as such, so, I had a struggle which I think I told you, talked about, struggle to study mathematics. I did not take, if I had the opportunity, to biology, which is about the only science that was taught. So I think it was just girls’ schools at that time were not exposed, did not expose their pupils to science. It wasn’t that people rejected it, there were no teachers, it just wasn’t, wasn’t
what girls did. And, of course at that, later on, there were big changes in what the
expectations were of the two sexes, but girls didn’t do things like that. We had
domestic science lessons, we had singing lessons. I did enjoy singing very much.
And... The sort of history and geography that we were taught was very factual. I
mean nowadays history is all social history and very very interesting. We used to
learn, kings and queens, you know, and really, pretty sterile stuff.

[01:10:12]
You talked last time as well about the beauty of mathematics. As a non-
mathematician, I always have to paraphrase that question with that [laughs], what
was beautiful about maths?

Well it’s a bit like music, there’s balance and counterpoint, and, variation and speed
and, grace, and, a lot of the things that one might feel about classical music. I don’t
know about pop. Mathematics has, you, you sort of suddenly realise that, you can
take something backwards, instead of A to B you can find out how to go from A to B
by thinking of, how do you go, starting from B. And, and, all those sorts of things, it
just has a real beauty about it, and when you get an understanding of something that is
not obvious, there’s that eureka moment, ‘Oh! I can see now why.’ It’s lovely. Yes, I
enjoy it.

Is that your favourite subject?

Oh yes. Yes. Yeah, very much so.

Mm. But more pure than applied you mentioned. And I was wondering...

Well we didn’t have any applied mathematics. The most exciting period I can
remember is when I sort of nearly got to Pythagoras theorem, you know, we’d been
doing all sorts of things, and, somehow or other I was almost getting to this business
of, you know, the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the square of the two other
sides of a right-angled triangle. And, the excitement of the teacher when she realised,
was I going to get it? You know. But spontaneously. But I, in general I did not have
the capability of doing much new in mathematics, it’s... But I was able to apply it.
You know, use it in the sense of, the hydrodynamics and the hydraulics and all those sorts of things, I never... I learnt to take exams in them but I never understood them.

[01:12:33]
One final question before I think we should move on to talking about... [laughs] Just something that popped up last time. It’s a short question. You mentioned your mother wearing a swastika, talking about it later.

Yes, I think her... I can’t remember how old I was, I mean, grown up, when she mentioned it. And I think she was trying to explain to me how difficult life had been to her, married to a known Jew in a fair bit of public life, I mean he was a judge. And, she said she had got this little badge, and she sometimes wore it. She also told some little stories about how she was trying to get some money out of a, a Swiss bank account or something like that, and, she was the one that was deputed to go and flirt with the soldier while my father sort of got the money out. I mean, I, I don’t know the details. But obviously it was a sort of survival tactic, and, and to me the swastika is pretty horrendous. When we were living in Buckinghamshire some swastikas started appearing, big swastikas on a, on a brick wall, and I mean, I nearly passed out. I went to the local police station and said what had happened, and, you know, and I was in floods of tears, and you know, I’ve lived all my life, I’m not starting... We really can’t be coping with that here, you know, it’s just not, not... And, although they listened, they obviously were not going to do anything at all. And, they said I should go, and, there was, on the wall of a farmhouse, I should tackle the people whose wall it was. So I went, and said could they cover it up, and so on. And they, they weren’t terribly interested, because it was the other side of the wall, they didn’t see it, and, didn’t really mean very much to me, and, just a bit of graffiti. [pause] Anyway, what did I do? I never, I didn’t tell... I’m not even sure whether I’ve ever told Derek now anyway or, or, whether I told him afterwards. But I got up at about five o’clock one morning with a tin of paint and went and painted it over. And, in a sense I was adding to the graffiti. It was not my wall, and I shouldn’t have been doing it, but I really could not bear to see that swastika. It has so many... And some of the music, and, and... The anti-Semitism, you know, when you really feel that people are against you just on principle, nothing you can do will ever make them feel differently. And it’s... You just have to... Doesn’t matter whether you sign up as a Roman Catholic nun,
you’re still Jewish, and, and... I have a secretary who converted to Judaism, which I found very strange, but, she’s happy, her husband doesn’t mind. [laughs] Absolutely crazy, anybody who would choose to put themselves in that position. Anyway.

*Shall we take a short break?*

Yup. Yah.

[End of Part 4]
...

...get to London really, so... I was wondering how you actually came to be in London.

Well as I came to adulthood, I knew I wasn’t going to go to university, because I desperately needed to start earning, and there weren’t any jobs in Oswestry of any interest to me. So, like Dick Wittington before me, I came to London, not to make my fortune but to find work.

Where did you live in London?

My mother had a house in Colindale, NW9, a house mortgaged up to the hilt, which was largely paid for by my sister’s student grant. I mean how they managed, I do not know. And I came and lived with her for a short period, which was the end terrace house of, a sort of a whole area of, almost identical houses, front room at the front, back room at the back, that sort of house. Tiny little garden. And, it had proved to be quite a good base for her and she let rooms in it to help pay for things. We had been a tenant for so long, and, we actually talked about, it was just general family, we, about all the awful things that landlords did to tenants, and we were never ever ever going to be like that. But sadly when you start letting a room, you do find that somebody lets the window open and leaves the electric fire on all day; somebody invites their friends in for baths; somebody does use the phone without making some little contribution to it. And you finish up like everybody else with some few rules and regulations, you know, not going into the kitchen before six and after seven, or whatever it is. So it wasn’t a particularly happy period, though there were a couple of very nice tenants with whom we became friends. That’s how I got to London.

One of the tenants there knew something about the local industry, and, somehow through that I got an interview both at the General Electric Company in Wembley and at the Dollis Hill Research Station in NW2. And I finished up at Dollis Hill, because, quite clearly they were positively interested in my continuing with my studies, whereas GEC said very firmly, no, you know, School Certificate was quite adequate
for the job that they were offering. And it clearly wasn’t a sort of, any career progression.

What was the interview like?

I can’t remember the GEC one really. The Dollis Hill one I can remember, because the guy that interviewed me became my boss. He swore that I interviewed him, rather than he me. I was asking about all sorts of things, like pension schemes. So, I was again trying to join some well-established, stable organisation, and, you know, when you’re an eighteen-year-old, to be asking about pensions, it all seems a bit crazy doesn’t it?

Who was your boss? Or your boss-to-be rather.

My direct boss was a guy called, the late Edrick Thompson, who was a fairly dour Scotsman, and who at the time I probably thought was sort of, you know, fifty-five, and instead he was probably, thirty-eight or something like that. He actually was moustachioed, very, very Scottish. And I learnt a great deal from him and others.

What one was learning at the time were some of the basic disciplines of science. My job involved sitting at one of those desk calculators and doing calculating really; you occasionally used log tables. Doing graphs occasionally. But the emphasis was on methodical working of, we kept, had work books which, I think I’ve still got some of mine, where you actually sort of said, ‘I tried this and it didn’t work. I tried that and that seems hopeful so I’ll do some more of that,’ and you actually put that into... So you were following some sort of simple disciplines of science. They also taught me very clearly to... I had a lot of figure work, I mean really a whole lot. And to write figures neatly, and, not scrawl. And they had to be legible, and, you didn’t want sevens mixed up with ones, so, even though they followed the continental habit of crossing the sevens. And working neatly on squared paper. And although you don’t see it from these scrawls, my handwriting is really very neat and very, you know, that’s my natural handwriting, it’s, you know, quite, quite clear, to avoid ambivalence, to observe things that, if I was starting a whole piece of work, I mean to observe how long it took to do the first, first bit of it, so say, ‘Well I’ve got fifty of those,’ so you
can sort of say, ‘Well I’m going to finish on Thursday afternoon.’ I... There was a group of four of us sitting in a block of desks, facing each other, and, we were all eighteen or thereabouts, and, the formality of the days, of the day, was that, they would refer to me as Miss Brook, and I would sort of say, ‘Mr Hodges, would you mind passing the,’ whatever it was. Because we would share, well not really share equipment, we had our own, but there was a certain amount of passing work...

Usually one worked on one’s own but sometimes it was sort of, my work went to him and he, or... And it was several months before someone suggested, and it wasn’t me, that when we were on our own perhaps we could use first names. And it was this formality that one had then, quite unbelievable now when you sort of think, people have just met me five minutes ago will call me Steve, without a blink, you know. That’s... There was a sort of... We, we signed in in the morning, and, at nine o’clock somebody would come and draw a line across the, the book, so that however late you were, masses of people signed in 8.59, 8.59, 8.59 and so on. But, the emphasis was very much on attendance. We had a significant amount of holiday, because we had six weeks’ holiday in the year which for an eighteen-year-old is fantastic. But, you were expected to use that holiday for minor medical appointments, dentists and all that sort of thing. None of this was included. And, so we worked pretty hard. And I used the holidays very much for studying, or, going to the GEC and playing with computers for a bit.

[08:51]

*Mm. Sounds a very precise sort of place to be working. Is that...?*

Well, it was a, on top of Dollis Hill, and it was a large, brick-built, solid government building with a great big portico at the front with foot-wide columns holding up a flat roof on which the flag was flown on high days and holidays. And carved round the top of this portico was, ‘Research is the Door to Tomorrow’. You walked in this portal every day, ‘Research is the Door to Tomorrow’. And, of course it is. And, I’ve always really worked in research. At one time I thought that market research wasn’t real research; to me research was finding out something that nobody ever knew before. But there’s a lot of research that is just market, market research that just applies to the people of Henley or something like that, rather than of world shaking significance. So it was a good place to start, a very good place to start, and I had lots
of training. There were about 2,000... I beg your pardon, 200 graduates working there, and a total complement on the site of getting on for 2,000. So it was, a lot of things were going on, a lot of laboratories, a lot of, there were aerials up to do things, there was a... and a room where you didn’t get any echoes. It was all to do with the Post Office, and the Post Office then had not only post but also telecommunications, so, they were not separate at that time. So there was a lot... There were also some clerical staff, and the majority of women working on the site were the clerical staff. There were one or two other scientists or would-be scientists, and, it was quite notable really how people viewed them. One was married to another scientist. I’m going to sneeze, excuse me.

[pause in recording]

OK?

[11:30]
Yah. I spoke earlier about class. Well there was also class in Dollis Hill, because there were four different canteens or restaurants, one the main one, and, I’ve forgotten what the fourth is now. One for workmen who were allowed to come in in their work clothes; one for the senior staff. It wasn’t actually set by grade, but by price. The buildings were quite practical and staid, and, you went up some small flights of steps. It was only a two-storey building. But it was categorised, you sort of, we were given towels, cloth towels, the sort of, linen, the stuff that has to be ironed, with a bar of soap, and you exchanged the towel every week, so that you had your own towel. There was none of this unhygienic sharing a towel with anybody else. And of course this was long before the days of, using hot air to, to dry your hands. The... I mean I didn’t wear a lab coat, but my husband did for example, and he was just working in a, a physics laboratory, he wasn’t getting particularly dirty, but you know, certain jobs you, you did that. And it was very, it was very structured. There were salary scales which went by age, and, of the various grades, I started with something called a scientific assistant. And each year you would, your salary would jump, just by having got a year older. And if you were promoted to another grade, that could be even less than what you were earning previously, but of course it would get you on another scale. So, that was quite acceptable, but I was rather horrified that there were
different grades for girls and boys as they referred to us in those days. And, the same wasn’t really true for the senior, because there weren’t any senior women. But... And I thought that was grossly... and began to think more about the role of women, and, if I may I’d like to divert a bit as to what the position of women was in those days.

[14:24]

Maybe it was because of my childhood, but I don’t think it was. But as a young woman of eighteen, I went around in a fairly perpetual atmosphere of fear. Girls were afeared of attack by men, sort of pretty well all the time. You were very sure not to get into a railway compartment with just one other man. You were very sure to be home before it was dark. You were very protective of your own honour. If you got stuck in some way after dark, which after all in winter could be half-past six at night, with a man, it was presumed by everybody that intercourse had taken place, and the man would feel almost honour-bound to try it on. So, the whole atmosphere was of a sort of, that you were pioneering, going into a man’s world. And, that stayed for quite some time. Though people were reasonably nice to pretty young girls, because you were not threatening them. After a few years I, I read the, the New Statesman at the time, and I saw an advertisement in the New Statesman for either Dollis Hill or the Post Office technical division or whatever it was, for something called, not a scientific assistant but an assistant experimental officer, which meant that, you needed two A-levels or something like that. Anyway, qualifications which by that time I had got by studying at evening classes. So I went to Edrick Thompson and sort of showed him the advert and sort of said, ‘Look, I’m eligible for this, can you put me up for promotion?’ And he declined. And, I can’t remember what reason he gave me, maybe they didn’t have a vacancy for an AEO, but in any case, he wasn’t going to do it. And... So I decided to apply anyway, but apply as an outside candidate. So I just answered the advertisement, and when the form came I just sort of said I was working as an assistant scientific, scientific assistant at Dollis Hill. And, of course I had got the, well know of course about it, but I did get that position, and so started on the higher salary grade. And the sort of higher status. Oh! status. And, Edrick and some of the other people were not too pleased about this, because, they could sort of see that I was not just somebody who was going to sit there and do what I was told all the time.

[17:36]
The sort of work that we did on these calculators, well I was doing a little bit of statistics. I can remember one or two jobs. I worked on the transatlantic telephone cable. There was a lot of data on that which had to be done. I, really did... a lot on wave guides, which I never really understood, but you know, as far as I was concerned I just had to do the calculations on it and...

*What is a wave guide?*

Don’t ask me. Don’t ask me. I met my husband on wave guides, and, I’ve never really discovered.

*I always wondered sort of, doing calculations for this sort of scientific work, how much do you actually need to know about the end result, the end product?*

Oh you don’t. No. But I mean it always makes life much more interesting if you actually understand what the purpose of your little bit of work is all about. And, certainly I was interested in that, and was questioning on that. Very very shy. I can remember, you know, you do some work and you’d finish, and you sort of tidy it all up and so on. I always used to put it on somebody’s desk, you know, at lunchtime, so when they came back they found it... I never had enough sort of, nous to, to hand it over and sort of say, ‘Look, I’ve finished this, this is what it looks like.’ It was an odd sort of work, very, I was thinking of myself very much as junior, very much as subservient to the graduate people who were in the next room, and there were also four of them, but sitting rather in a more civilised way, including Edrick’s boss, who was a guy called H J Josephs, who wrote some treaties on something called Heavyside, don’t ask me what he did either, but it was... They were, they were pretty clever people. Different sort of skills. And, for a long time I thought H J Josephs was extraordinarily well educated in the science field, things he talked about were... But as I myself studied, and began to understand a bit about, mathematics and so on, and would sort of challenge him in discussion about this, that and the other, he would always back away, and, because once he realised that I, I knew something about it, it wasn’t quite the same. So, it, it was a funny, funny time.

[20:35]
What did you talk about with him? Could you give me some examples?

[pause] Oh if you had a differential equation of a certain type, what did this imply for the background of so-and-so? I mean, you know, which, was meaningful to me at the time. And it was during those years that I realised I was never going to contribute anything. I could interpret, I could enjoy, but I wasn’t going to contribute anything from the maths point of view. The statistics I found very useful, and more practical, so that, one job I remember was about... A burglar was... Yes, a thief had taken a Post Office parcel, and stolen it, and in his garden shed was string which looked like the string which was round the parcel. And of course in a court of law that wouldn’t quite, anybody can buy that bit of string. So, my boss, not me, devised a project where I took the roll of string from the shed, cut it up into one-inch bits, and carefully counted under a microscope the number of little fronds or whatever they might be called in that string, to show that there is a sort of variation of sort of strands in a piece of string. And then of course you had the string from the actual parcel that was stolen which had two ends, and did, was it statistically significant that one of those ends had exactly matched the ball of string? But, it came up in a court case, very interesting and so on. But, you know, it might have taken me a week to do that.

[22:40]
The work came in to what was called the Maths Group from other parts of the research station. So one or two of the so-called customers I did get to know, and worked directly with them. So it was a good, I think it was a good basic grounding.

Who were the customers you worked with?

[pause] There was a Dr Jarvis, who, whose handwriting was unintelligible, and I would spend ages deciphering it, was the only way to describe it, deciphering his memos saying what it was he wanted me to do. [pause] I remember some of the other names on the station but I didn’t actually work directly for them. No, I can’t, they can’t come. I’ll try and think of them.

[23:54]
While we’re on the subject as well, you mentioned you, so you got memos with the jobs you had to do.
Yes.

*How much sort of instruction do you get? You know, does it tell you exactly the sort of calculations to be running on your calculator, or do you have to make that sort of, ‘This is a problem I’m needing solved.’ Do you have to work out it’s done, or...?*

Oh it was, I was left with the calculations to begin with. And then gradually over the years, I was beginning, you know, if somebody gave me the details how to do it, and I’d sort of, was able to sort of say, ‘Well no, if you do it the other way, it’ll come out much quicker, and I’ll get more accuracy,’ or whatever it was. So, to begin with, you were just told, you take this column and add it to that, and then you take this away... You know, really basic stuff. I was eighteen years old, you know.

[24:35]

*What sort of training did you get at the start when you joined?*

[pause] I can’t remember any training as such. I mean you know, had a meeting of twenty minutes with Edrick and sort of said, ‘This is where you keep your towel,’ and how you make the tea. We had disciplines about tidying your desk every night, partly because in the Scientific Civil Service as it was, some of that was security issues, that papers had to be locked away. I never worked at that time on anything important enough to have to be locked away, but you put it away at night, so that the cleaners could have a clean desk to clean. And, actually it’s a discipline that I’ve, I’ve stuck with, you know, at the end of the day I tidy all the sort of mess. Because I work in a very messy way. And, so that when you start in the morning, you start with, yes, this is this pile of papers that goes with that job; that’s what I want to do in the afternoon, and, and so on. So, it... you learn to be much more structured than at school when you had a lesson on this and a lesson on that, because you had the whole week to sort yourself out.

[25:57]

*Can I ask you as well about, this business of having different restaurants and canteens for different grades of staff, which one did you get to eat in?*
Oh the general one. And, it was quite exciting because... The big one. Because when I first walked in there, about 200, you know, handsome, intelligent men turned round and looked at this new female that had sort of turned up. [laughs] So, and that, you know, took, it was, it was quite, you know, you were... It was almost scary to go into a big place like that, 100, not quite 100 per cent but ninety-nine per cent men. And, as the years have gone on, sort of, got used to it, and, can give as good as I get, but...

From the management point of view, it’s always much better to have a group of women rather than a sole woman trying to break into the board or whatever it is, because, the stress is just so high. And also if you’re the only one, if you fail, you fail for all women, and they say, ‘Well we tried one of those and she was awful.’

Whereas if you succeed, it’s also remembered, but, somehow the presumption is that, ‘We had her and she was good; at least we’ll try another one and see if it works again.’ Ugh! Yeah. Sexism is, is, not quite as bad as anti-Semitism, but it’s pretty tough. And ageism comes in in different ways as well, like being paid by both gender and age. And, if you are below a certain salary you had cheaper meals, you had some little thing that you could hand in in the canteen to get the cheaper food to make sure we ate properly. But now you see, you have, well this ageism about, are you allowed to do something when you’re over seventy or what have you.

[28:09]

One of the things that happened during that period was that I did get my degree, and, therefore really went up for the next bit of promotion, which was to a grade called the Scientific Officer, and that was much more formal, because this was a, a graduate status position, and, the assumption was that you would not stay in it, you would go up from Scientific Officer to Senior Scientific Officer to Principal Scientific Officer to Senior Principal Scien... I mean you know, really that structure of bureaucracy. And, I don’t know how I applied, but, the way in which interviews were done was that people would put together a panel of four, five, six people who would jointly interview you, so that you came in and, and took questions from a, a range of people. And, anyway, I was waiting for my panel to be called, and it didn’t come, and it didn’t come. Isn’t it about time I actually had my interview, and so on. And I discovered that, the panel, which was made up by people all over the station and indeed outside, were refusing to serve on the panel, for the honourable reason really that they did not think any woman could do a scientific officer job. So they were saying, ‘I’d never
appoint her, no matter what,’ and so they were resigning from the panel. So eventually there was a big delay, and I did get a panel and then I did get through.

[30:03]
The sort of questions that a panel would ask were, not management at all, they were slightly, how would I feel if somebody, you know, stole my papers or, that sort of discussion. The big one that I remember, and I remember my reply to it, not very clever, was, this contrast between analogue and digital computing. Because at that time a lot of computing was analogue, and it was the digital computers that were just coming in. And my reply was, ‘Well I’ll argue either way.’ In fact of course digital has taken over completely and you never really hear about analogue equipment. So I remember that one.

[30:50]
When I had got that promotion, I was moved to a totally different division which was headed by Tommy Flowers, who had worked at the Bletchley Park cryptology centre, and he was heading a division that was concerned with telecoms and these very early computery things, such as, he had had Colossus at Bletchley Park, and, which applied very much to things like telephone exchanges. So under his overall aegis, and, you know, by that time I could work a lot on my own, I worked on something called the Joint Electronic... Joint Electronic, Research... JERC. It was the JERC telephone exchange, j-e-r-c. Joint Electronic Research Committee, that’s right. Lots of committees, lots of organisations, the Post Office, GEC, Marconi, that sort of joint, had clubbed together to make the first electronic telephone exchange. What did I do in that? I did the technical writing, I was supposed to describe what was going on in lay terms which I was just about able to do.

[32:27]
The other main project that I worked on during that period, as a, a sort of graduate, not just as a sort of, dogsbody, was on the ERNIE, which is, Electronic Random Number Indicator Equipment, which was a nice pseudonym, deliberately designed, selected, to make this rather robotic device more user-friendly to the general public who were being asked to buy Premium Bonds, and my job there, together with Edrick Thompson, who was still senior to me, because he was a Senior Scientific Officer, was to basically be responsible for checking the validity of ERNIE’s randomness. Now you can’t really prove that something is random, you come up with ghastly
euphemisms. There is no reason not to suppose that it’s random. And, that’s where some of the statistics came in usefully.

[33:40]
And to do some of the actual checking, we used a Ferranti Pegasus computer, which was based in Portland Place, and that was the first real computer that I had used in a commercial way, though as I said, I sort of fiddled around with the HEC4, but that was as a sort of volunteer, and the level of sweeping up the chads. So Pegasus was...

[pause] They again had... I’m just... Inflation has done such funny things. But the cost per minute, I think it was £1 a minute or something like that, but before I went on using Pegasus, my stomach would be churning, because I’d worked for weeks on this program, and you would put it in and you, determined to [ph], get off quickly because other people were waiting to go on, and you’d only got three minutes booked or whatever it was. And half the time you would put in your punch paper tape or whatever it might be, and it wouldn’t even go in, it wouldn’t even start. And...

[pause] It was quite sort of, you know, nerve-racking, because of the sheer cost of the activity I think. Pegasus had an immediate access store of about forty-eight words, so a lot of the things that you were doing were trying to be efficient within this very small space, and, in fact, on the ERNIE work where there’s a vast amount of data, we used to have that on, punched on paper tape, and feed it in and then re-feed it in, and re-feed it in. Because at least that gave us access to, to a great [inaud] going. There were other computers in those days which... I mean, the LEO came later. [pause] Let’s see if it comes back on the computers and so on.

[35:54]
What was Pegasus actually... Where did you say it was again, Portland Place. What sort of place was that?

[pause] A pseudo-Georgian house, I suppose it might have been real Georgian house, but it was furnished in that way, with, in the largest room of what had once been a private residence, there was a, an air-conditioned block of equipment with a console about, six foot, sort of, going round in three dimensions, three, three directions, so you sat in the middle of it. And then a block of six-foot high cabinets full of electronic equipment which for Pegasus at least came out with a bit at a time. So when things went wrong they could pull it out and sort of say, ‘Well is it this one?’ ‘No.’ Put it
back and, is it the next one? And, it was on the first floor, and there were other
rooms where you prepared the data or... It was, you felt very sophisticated. Ooh!

Why very sophisticated?

Well they were fairly new in those days, they really were. You know, if you said you
were working on Pegasus, whoa! And it’s rather like having a Ferrari car or
something, the equivalent, you know. That’s the tops.

[37:45]

How do you build a program?

Well we didn’t have, there were not, there were no programming manuals in those
days. You were given a statement as to the instructions that this computer would
respond to. And basically that was it, you had to find the rest of your way around.
And I suppose that’s why that little bit of experience at HEC4 had sort of broken me
in on to the idea that, I could make it do complicated things that came from my head,
but they did, the computer actually did the donkey work. It may do it very
repetitively, and... I mean later on... I mean that was checking of ERNIE. Later on I
did some other checking, but I was no longer with Dollis Hill then, and, and the
experience sort of stood me in good stead because I’d learnt different things, and, on
the ERNIE work for the first time my name appeared on some of the documents. The
research reports they were called. They were classified according to whatever it was,
and I can remember after finishing one research report I asked to get it out of the
library and was told it was classified, I wasn’t able to see it. And I sort of said, ‘I
wrote it.’ [laughs] ‘I just want to look something up,’ you know. Those sort of crazy
nonsenses like that. Security was very important. It was disciplined, it was
interesting, it was stimulating, surrounded by really, pretty bright people. And, I
learnt not only a lot about the maths that I couldn’t do, but also the sort of manager
that I didn’t want to become, because... I mean one of the, just... People are always
touching you and, and it was just horrible. And people were pretty awful to women
once they got over the stage of, you know, this is a pretty girl, just, you know, isn't it
fun to have her around, you know, ‘Shall we go and have coffee?’ But once she was
viewed as, as serious and perhaps threatening, or perhaps taking one of their jobs, or
the job that they might have wanted, it was a generally uncomfortable position, unless your boss was really first-class, which mine wasn’t. And, I think I learnt from him the sort of boss that I was never ever going to be. So, I think what I’ve learnt about managing people is really a simple variant, as, do as you would be done by.

[41:03]

*Were you the only actual woman working in the ERNIE group?*

[pause] Yes.

*How did your male colleagues take to you at first?*

[pause] Well they, they were I think quite similar. I don’t remember much trouble there. One of the people in the room that I was working with was a guy called Harry Fensom, and he came from Bletchley Park as well, so a very sort of, forceful engineer. And I think this is the thing. The others were engineers, and I was a mathematician, so I had skills that they needed and they could sort of see fitted in with them. And, I mean engineers have to have an understanding of mathematics, or at least a respect for mathematics. And so, I, I don’t remember that being so awful.

[42:06]

*Who did you get trouble from?*

More in the first job, when I was... [pause] I don’t think those things happen any more, but I guess the equivalent happens to black and Asian people entering the workforce. You look at some of the, lack of diversity in certain organisations, it’s clear that people are being froze out, or after a bit they just move out.

*Is there something that... Yes, the sexism, is it overt, or is it just something that’s in the culture there, you know, a bit more insidious or...?*

I think it’s, it’s culture. It’s, from the social point of view, women were at risk, you know, very much second-class citizens. Domestic violence was quite strong, rape within marriage was not illegal. I mean for example, I married at twenty-six, and had
known my husband, who’s a gentlemanly gentleman, for six years I think, but when we married, I actually spelled out, ‘If you ever hit me, I shall leave you.’ You know, hadn’t, never would and never could. But, that, that you almost expected that sort of thing, you had to actually, because you knew that most wives were hit, or many wives that you knew or had read about or had heard about or just, imagined, I don’t know. But I always sort of think, yeah, I must have been really worried about that to sort of spell that out. ‘If you ever hit me, I shall leave you.’

*Sounds like it was something that was on your mind a lot when you were working there.*

Oh yes, one felt threatened. You know, if you worked late at night, you know, the corridors got a bit dark and so on, and, and, I worked all hours. And... Because I had this day release to go to evening classes, because it started off evening classes and then day release. So I was very often trying to catch up or even doing a bit of study and... I’d quite often go and work in the library, partly because that was quiet, and partly because people wouldn’t know where I was, and so I might have a bit of... And... [pause] I mean one of the things, the tasks that was given to me was, a task, I can hardly define it any more, but it was to do with tensors. Now, if you had asked me then what a tensor is, you can ask me now, I still don’t know. But they insisted that I did this work. And the objective clearly was to break me. So, right, I’m supposed to do something about tensors. Right, well I’m going to have to know something about those differential equations or something like that. And I would go, and I would sort of make up my own little course of study that I thought might one day help me to do this job on, with tensors; never did but I mean... So, they were funny, funny years. In a sense I had a lot of freedom to, to do my own thing. Yes I did. And I hope I made the best of it.

[46:00]

During that time I became a founder member of the British Computer Society, and as another example of ageism, although I had about five years’ experience by that time, I was still under the magic age of twenty-six when you could be a full member. So I started as a student member, which is one of those sort of odd little things of ageism which again wouldn’t be allowed now. People talk about competencies, not qualifications or age. And, for that, there was a computer conference that the BCS
was running which I asked to attend, and was declined. People didn’t go to conferences very much, but, other people went and I didn’t. The second one round I did go. And again, I, I took holiday and took myself off. So, I suppose I became a bit bolshie and, you know, what I wanted to do and what I thought was right was what was going to happen.

[47:15]

*Can I just quickly clarify something you mentioned a little while ago as well?*

Yes.

*I was wondering about HEC4.*

Yup.

*When did you use that?*

It was before I took my degree, and it was before I started the MSc. So... Do you want the real date?

*Just, just a rough approximation would be OK. It’s not important.*

Right. You know we’re never going to finish by next Monday, are we, at the rate we’re going. Part of this lifestyle, and I was eight years with, at Dollis Hill, which meant that when I eventually married my husband whom I had met there, talking about wave guides, because he does understand them, I was able to take out... Let’s start again. There had been in the Scientific Civil Service the, that you had to resign, women had to resign their establishment positions on marriage. In my day we had the option of resigning, and if you had got a certain number of years’ service, you could pull out your pension rights and then go on as a temporary worker, which is what I did. And, we got married on the money that that provided. During that period I was looking for, and again it’s part of this sexism thing, I was seeking birth control, and, I went to the Marie Stopes clinic in central London, which as far as I know was then the only place where you could, and had to lie myself silly, because I was a single girl and
they only sorted out, they only served women either married or in the expectation of marriage. So, I borrowed a wedding ring, not a wedding ring, an engagement ring, and, and got help that way. And, they made life so difficult for women, you know, in a variety of ways. And, I was going to the Tavistock Clinic during much of this period, and it, it wasn’t terribly happy.

[50:00]

*Mm. When did you actually meet your husband?*

At ‘50... Oh God! I’m not going to know... We married in ’59, so it would be about ’53.

*What was he like when you first met him?*

Very shy. A girlfriend had introduced us, because he knew about wave guides and he, she knew I had trouble understanding what wave guides were all about, and so she introduced us. And he was so shy that he could hardly open his eyes, and, very very shy. And, in fact it was not until after we married that I actually sort of said to him, ‘That is rude, you have to give some eye contact.’ And, he’s still not very good at it. He was working in a different laboratory. And he sort of showed me some physical wave guides, as distinct from the theory, and, it wasn’t very helpful but, you know, we got on well. [laughs]

*Mm. What was his name, or is his name?*

What is his name? He’s Derek. Derek Shirley. Shirley is one of the oldest English names. [pause] He took his, he’s a graduate of the Institute of Physics, which is sort of, degree level but actually again took it all at evening classes, he started working at the age of sixteen, and, came up the hard way. I wouldn’t advise any young person to study that way. It’s really not, you know, it’s worth just getting the money to go somehow or other and studying and then starting to work.

*Mm. Was he your first boyfriend, or...?*
Oh no. [laughs] We won’t go there. No no. No.

What did you like about him?

His voice, he’s got a beautiful voice. Gentle. [pause] Clever, reassuring, musical. No, we got on pretty well. But we had an epic courtship of six years, because it was a long time before we married. It was one of those, it was on, it was off, it was on, it was off, you know. I’m sure you’ve been there. [laughs] Yes.

Why was it on and off? What was the catch?

I think because he was so quiet, and it did sort of, he wouldn’t argue about things, and he’d just... he’s still slightly like that today, if he disagreed he’d just walk away or be silent. And, and, you know, it’s absolutely irritating, you know, I’m sort of, quite happy to argue about something, but, there’s actually got to be a debate. And he’s extremely stubborn, even more so than I am, so the two of us aid and abet each other in that way.

[53:38]

Mm. What does courtship actually consist of in this period?

[pause] Well because I was pretty damaged I suppose, I had various, social mores, so that when he invited me out, I said very firmly, ‘No thank you, I don’t have dates.’ And, the whole concept of a date where you dress up and have a restricted social time with somebody, I found alien, and I never liked it. I mean I certainly had one or two in my time, I said, never again. So, really it was more a question of doing things together, and, pretty quickly going into a full-scale love affair. Which in those days was, it was pretty risky and hence the need to have birth control. So we went to pubs, we went... we holidayed together on the River Thames, in a camping punt, which meant that, a) it wasn’t very expensive, because we were all short of money all the time, and secondly, you got a bit of privacy, that you really were on your own, could get to know each other properly. So we camped quite a lot. Well, once a year for four years or something. And you do get to know somebody when you are concerned about drinking water and lugging a camping punt over some rollers and, oh dear, the
lock is going to be closed, and all. You know, it’s a, it’s a real life. And that’s how I like to get to know people.

How did people at the office react?

[pause] Well, we worked in different divisions. We didn’t have lunch together. [pause] I think his colleagues were very surprised, because he was such a quiet one, that he should get somebody like me. Or even want somebody like me. There wasn’t a lot of gossip as far as I know. Well as far as I can remember anyway. I had had previous affairs and, on the, on the site, and, those had been much more visible, because we used to go out to lunch together every day and things like that, so that people could see us. Oh yes, she’s always, you know, they were just friends, you know.

[56:49]
You used an interesting phrase there, someone like you, and I was just wondering if you could just sort of... Draw me a little portrait of yourself as it were.

At that time.

At this time.

Self-willed, undisciplined. I was a beauty. [pause] Not particularly bossy, I had this sort of, you know, very... I was vulnerable, but a high-flyer. I was probably earning more than Derek you see. Things like that. [pause] An odd... Not... Not so much an odd ball, a one-off, one-off. Nobody else quite like me. And that’s true of everybody I know, but I was very conscious of that.

[57:45]
There are some other questions I’d like to ask you about Dollis Hill...

Yah.

...that I, I’ve just jotted down along the way.
Yah.

So, Tommy Flowers was your, your boss.

Yes.

What was he like? I know he did the Colossus work, I don’t know much about him as a person. I was just wondering if you could give me a little portrait.

Well I’ve just written something about Tommy Flowers for the Bletchley Park newsletter or something it is, because somebody realised I’d worked with him. He was a gent, and I think that was the important thing. There was no bottom-pinching from him at all, he was nice, he was respectful, he... And he, he listened to people. And again as an example of a manager, I don’t suppose he had had any management training, but he was a natural. For example, he listened to suggestions from quite junior people, like a lab assistant, who, you know, hadn’t got, GCE or whatever they were called in those days, but who was an unqualified person, but he would listen to a suggestion, and if it was good, he would implement it. And he gave, he acknowledged work, he was a team leader, he worked hard himself, he was quite formal. Never, I can’t remember seeing him in anything but a, I think a three-piece suit, or might have been... Yeah, I liked him, nice man.

Mm.

And, he was not really recognised as were many people working in the early computing world for the contribution that he made, because of security at Bletchley Park, and, after the war, I was not in contact any more there, but he did apparently get an OBE, which is a very very lowly thing for, for somebody who had done that much. And a group of colleagues, not me, organised with the local authority that a small residential close near to Dollis Hill should be called, that was being built, Flowers Close, so that’s a little memento of a very fine man.

[01:00:11]
Can you talk at all about, you know, the Bletchley Park stuff...

No.

...or was that just...

No.

No idea, or...?

Well, people move on, it’s, it’s today’s problem that’s interesting, and if you get stuck on some work that you did in the past, it does all build together and it gives you the capability to cope with today’s problems. But, I mean at my stage of life now, I’m doing quite a lot of retrospective stuff, but, during the course of a vigorous professional career the focus is always on today and tomorrow, and it really has to be, otherwise you’re just sailing along on some good work that you did five years ago.

It’s got a very vivid impression of the sort of, the Brunsviga room.

Mhm.

With the, with the four of you at that little desk. And I, I was wondering if you could sort of take it forward a few years. What’s, what’s your office or your surrounding environment like when you’re a scientific officer?

Oh I sat at a desk with no equipment whatsoever. Very different. These machines, some of them were quite heavy, and, when you walked around with them, taking them to some site where you needed a machine, people used to offer to carry them for me, and I would sort of say, very aggressively really, ‘No thank you, I believe in equal pay and I will carry my own machine.’ And that’s the sort of level I was at, this very aggressive, fighting, fighting for equality, fighting for equity, fighting for, not just me, but women generally.
When we talked about this a little while ago, and talking about, sort of, the sort of risks about being a pioneer...

Yes.

...if I can use that word in that situation, and not succeeding, was that something that you felt pressured by at the time?

Not at that time, no. But later on, you realise that, if I’m going to take on this job, my God! I’ve got to do it well. And that applied for when I went in to, was the President of the British Computer Society, first non, first non-American board member for Tandem Computers, all these sorts of things. I knew that, I must, must, must make a success of it, otherwise it would let the side down. I’m a team player.

Is that the way you worked at Dollis Hill as well? Is it a teamwork environment, or you you’re left...?

It wasn’t a teamwork environment. The engineers worked as a team, but really I was a sort of one-off. Which is probably quite good.

Did you enjoy working there?

Yeah, I, I was conscious that I was privileged to be at a place like that. Because it was, leading-edge work. When you’re eighteen, nineteen, twenty, everything you do is new, so, you don’t realise for a few years that, oh! I’m the first one to have done this. Or, God! we’ve only known that for the last five years. It wasn’t something that 150 years ago was, was some discovery. And so it is exciting, and, had a certain importance to it. And, some of the projects conceptually were interesting, and electronic telephone exchange, ERNIE, transatlantic telephone cable. Monarch was the cable-laying ship which, of course they didn’t have women on, did they. And, you know, these were interesting concepts, and interesting people were working on them.

Somebody, and to my shame I, I do not know who, from the outside customers, the name nearly just came to me then, came one day and sort of said, ‘I’ve got some
tickets for Covent Garden for tomorrow night,’ or something, ‘and my wife and I can’t go. Would you like to go?’ And he was not making a pass, he was just handing on some good tickets. So I went. And that introduced me properly to real live opera. So I saw Covent Garden, you know, something absolutely terrific, and a good seat. The first time ever. Wonderful, absolutely. So who was this man who looked at me and sort of said, ‘Now she would really benefit from that opportunity’? [coughing]

You’ve raised a point there about interesting people as well. Just wondering, who did you work with that you considered interesting? Who did you enjoy talking to?

Well, you know, to be honest, one worked there, you didn’t have a lot of, apart from lunch when you went round with your colleagues and so on. There were some various clubs. I went to a ballroom dancing club, I, the Christmas parties I would serve the coffee and useful things like that. Largely because I, I like to make myself useful. And, you see, you meet everybody if you do that sort of job. Much better than sitting quietly by yourself. But, there was a drama group, which, I attended one two of their shows. And, for example, there was a Dr Coombs, they were nearly all doctors there, who had been in the war, and had got shell shock, and had the most incredibly bad speech impediment that dated from those days. And, you did get used to it, and you waited for the next bit to stutter itself out. But... Dr Lewis, got it. But when he was on the stage, it completely disappeared. He became, he was a good amateur actor, and all his speech problems disappeared and he was fluid and... And I thought that was fascinating, that he could leave himself behind with all his problems, and be... [pause] You know, one of the customers that, I was thinking of the name before, it was Doc Lewis, they’re nearly all doctors, he was extremely nice, and he would always explain what the task was and its significance, and, I try and do the same as well. Right. Yes, go on.

Lunch. Who did you have lunch with? It sounds a relatively minor question to ask, but it’s a most important one.

Working colleagues in the main. And then there was the difficulty of, as I moved up, and many people have this problem in one variant or another, you don’t actually want to be with the people that haven’t been promoted and are now two or three grades
below you, and you want to start making new friends. And so at that time I started going out to lunch where there was a little cafeteria in Dollis Hill Park, which was immediately opposite. So on the basis that I needed a walk, I used to go out and eat by myself until I met a few other people and so on. [pause] Friendships are difficult. One can grow out of them, you, as you will find yourself, you, you won’t be able to keep all the friends that you’ve made to date, they won’t all last with you, you know, if you keep one school friend for life, you’ll be doing well. And, certainly in a work environment where the only thing that really pulls you together is a joint employment, you may have very very different... So. They’re interesting, because this one collects stamps, or that one does so-and-so. [pause] But the work friends are not as good as college friends. I... I certainly haven’t got a friend who dates from those days. Acquaintances, I’m in contact with a lot of people. Whereas from school I have a proper friend. And so it goes on.

*Shall we short break?*

Yah.

[End of Part 5]
Right. When Derek and I married, I had the opportunity of getting out my pension contributions, and that became the money we spent on, on getting married. And, leaving... I’m getting tired aren’t I. Let’s try again. When we married, I had the opportunity of getting out my pension contributions, and I chose at that time to leave Dollis Hill so that we would not be working on the same site, which I did not think was a good idea, for either of us. I then applied to a job with Computer Developments Limited, which was a subsidiary of ICL, the British computer manufacturer, that was in Harrow, and that was purely software. And I was astonished... I got the job. It was a small group of about thirty, I guess all scientists, engineers and, and software people, the odd mathematician, somebody I will remember, his job was strategist, I often wondered what that was. But basically, we worked very much more as a teamwork, and it was for the first time that I had the responsibility for the work of other staff. Because I actually headed a little team with two programmers reporting to me. And that was new to me. The task of Computer Developments Limited was to implement a joint project between ICL and GEC, to build a, a general purpose computer called 1301. And this, the part that I was involved with was the software, and some of the intimate software of the machine, the software that handled other programs, but also the checking of the machine’s correct functioning, and, obviously that’s reminiscent of the checking that I did with, with ERNIE. It was a different thing that we were trying to check, and the sort of techniques that we used were, and I don’t, I don’t even think they were terribly original, I must have got the idea from somebody, to have a leapfrog program whose sole purpose was to move itself around the store, and get itself back to where we started. And that program on that machine took about twenty minutes to, to run through. And that was all it did, it just moved itself around. But of course it checked all the various... So sorry. It checked all the various functions of, of the machine, and so it was a quite a comprehensive check. Another one that took weeks really was thinking how to get the intimate software into the machine, and this was done by something called bootstrapping, where you would actually start with, twelve I think it was, keys, which you would position as noughts and ones, and then when the machine followed that, it would bring in some more things and it would bring in some more, and eventually you finished up with a program there that you could use to, to write other things. And, it, it was a very very
interesting time. The management of that group was excellent, it was so different. For example, we met together, morning and afternoon, it was sort of compulsory, to meet together in the group and have tea or coffee or whatever it was. The thought was that that was all how the interactions were behave... were, were working, because you would sort of say, ‘Guess what happened to me this morning,’ you know, that flip-flop, sort of... And, and it was a real interchange of learning experiences that came from a culture where, not only were you trying to get things right, but there was also a lot of commercial pressure to get it right, and there was a timescale to get it right, and a matter of pride to get it right, because this was really one of the first British computers. But... You could actually... [pause] Lost my thread, sorry. I’m getting tired. [pause] What was it I was trying to say?

Talking about working, or learning from people you were working with over lunch.

Yes. The other thing I suppose that I remember from that is, that I, I was paid so well. I earned about three or four times what I had been earning at Dollis Hill. Admittedly there was no pension associated. I can’t remember how much leave I was allowed, but in any case I didn’t want to take leave from somewhere like that. And to be paid for doing something so, so much fun, was great.
[06:00]
When it came to actually... I think I was there for about eighteen months, but after about, say, six months, the work had to be carried on not at my desk but at GEC in Coventry. So, we, I had access to the prototype 1301 machine in the evenings, by which I mean night, when the other engineers had finished and all, had all gone home. One of the things I noticed about Coventry that I’ve never see elsewhere was that at five o’clock there was a hooter blew, and the vast majority of the hundreds of people working on the site, not on the computer side, would be lined up behind a line painted in the road on their bicycles and so on, and as the hooter went they would all... I mean, weird, I’ve never seen anything like it.
[07:00]
Anyway, I worked there in the evening with, balancing with somebody called George Gibson, who was the engineer and who would hand over and, and, and he would, basically he would go home and he’d done his stuff and I, I would be there with my software testing and, there must have been other people around, but... I know, when I
got really stuck, and I couldn’t get the computer to do something or other, the power failure went or something like that and I couldn’t get going, I can remember ringing George up and he coming in in his pyjamas. And, there was such an intimacy of working in those, in that team, that today if I meet any of the team, it’s just wonderful, you know, sort of, we, because really did that together, and that’s certainly true of George. I’m trying to remember some of the other names. Fred Dearnley, he was somebody who came in to Computer Developments Limited. A brilliant guy. By sort of saying, he was straight from university, ‘I don’t expect you to believe how bright I am, but I’ll come and work for you for a month for free and then you’ll find out.’ Which he did, and they did, and he stayed. But he was very, very difficult to, to manage, because he was, too clever I suppose. And, one of the things I did was team him up with a very people-oriented young woman, I think she was a Judith, so that together, her job really was to get the stuff out of him and get it documented, because he was all over the place, and... But, he was very bright.

[08:59]
So, the 1301 was a success, and it did come out. It had certain characteristics. [pause] It was I think how the peripherals, the inputs and the outputs, were asynchronous to the rest of the machine, so that made a lot of difference to the, to the actual software. Anyway the software was very challenging, and I had a great time there. And it was only about eighteen months.

*Sorry, asynchronous to the rest of the machine?*

Yes, it was, and we had to sort of pick it up. And one had similar things in the early days of computing with mercury delay lines where the stuff was going round in a great big loop, and if you wanted something you had to right as it passed, otherwise it had gone, you’d got to wait another whole cycle before it’s there again. So it’s the sort of thing that, made it interesting I suppose. So, and I feel very, possessive about that machine, because it was the first one on which I had worked, really, really really.

[10:15]
What happened was, we then, we had some rooms in a, I think hotel, but disaster, disaster. Sometimes the room bookings didn’t go properly, and, I had to share a double bed with somebody whose name I still remember because of this instance, his name was Dan Brezinsky. Because we were both so tired, you know, we were
gibbering with tiredness, and, there was one bed and we were going to get into it. And in the morning the chairman of the company, I’ve forgotten his name, came in and sort of, to have a look at us, and I sort of said, ‘Well there was nowhere else for us to go.’ [laughs] Obviously, you know, it’s one of those extraordinary things, poor Dan, yes. But they were intensive, it was an intensive period.

Who was actually your manager? Sort of trying to get an idea of you within this structure as it were.

Yes. Well there was the chairman, Dr Esley[ph]... Ecsley[ph] or Esley[ph] or something like that [Interviewee meant Dr Espley]. Then there was a wonderful man called John, John Wensley, who I became quite close with, and then I reported to him. And there was somebody called Dickie Bird, who we were talking about the other day. And then there was some, accounts and people like that. But it was quite a nice team. We had a lot of fun, a lot of laughter. We also socialised together outside, and ran, I think they’re called car rallies, sort of like a treasure hunt in cars across the countryside, and, I got involved in that. Oh it was lovely, very nice. And I had a lot more confidence, because I was by that time married, so I didn’t have this business of fending off the men. I’d got more confidence. I’d started there at a professional level and not something that had started right at the bottom and sort of scratched my way up. It was a good period.
[12:29]

However, I still felt that there was a glass ceiling there, though we didn’t call it that in the day, at the time. And, at one particular meeting where a whole group of people were discussing something about the pricing of 1301, and I opened my mouth and said something, and I was jumped on, ‘That’s nothing to do with you, you’re software.’ And, it may or may not have been sexist, but I felt that it was, and I really sort of, began to think, I’m, I’m blocked here, I’m not going to get up the management tree or whatever I was aiming for. Went home and thought about it, and the next day came in and resigned. Now, looking back I sort of think, well maybe it wasn’t sexist, it was just engineer versus mathematician, this sort of funny jealousies, and, I then gave, I was only on a month’s notice but I gave three months’ notice, so I then worked through, handed over and so on, in a very very professional way of which I’m very proud. And left to set up my own company. Because I did have the
feeling that the environment that I was looking for had not been there at Dollis Hill; it wasn’t quite there at Computer Developments; and I had some sort of dreams that software was more than something that was just free to support the hardware, that it actually was more strategic. Although when I started people really laughed. You can’t sell software, it’s free. But there was that combination of, personally it would suit me to be my own boss, and secondly, I want to do something on software, not to be just fobbed off into some backroom background support role.

_I always wondered actually, when you were trying to develop a machine like the 301 [Interviewer meant 1301], how did you get on with the hardware people? You know, there are two sides to this, there are the hardware people and the software side, and..._

I think there’s quite a division. Because I didn’t really understand why certain things they would find difficult and certain things were dead easy, and you would sort of... Nor did they understand what I was trying to do.

_Were you actually working in the same place, or in different offices?_

It was a small office, they were all in offices. And then we went up to Coventry, they worked during the day and I worked at night. And that probably gave the, the right balance of the emphasis on the engineering. GEC was an engineering firm and very conscious of that.

_Was it a stimulating environment to be working in then?_

Yes, very very exciting, I liked it very much. Not as stimulating as having my own business, but, much more, I was earning well, we were managing to save money, we’d bought a, a, our first home during all that period, because suddenly we could live quite happily, if carefully, on Derek’s earnings, and we’d just save mine month after month. Two things happened during that. They called me in one day and sort of said they’d been over-paying me. [laughs] And I sort of said, ‘Well, I’m awfully sorry, I haven’t noticed. What, what happened?’ Because, my cheque went straight in the bank, I never saw it. And I explained that, and they very kindly allowed me to keep it.
The other thing is that, I was newly married when I joined CDL, and, after this very short period of time they were talking about doing night work. And everyone assumed I would sort of say, ‘Look, you know, I’ve only been married a few months, I’m not going away at night.’ But I didn’t, you know, because, [laughs] if you’re asked, if you want a senior job, you’ve got to do the senior role, and if you want a, a management job, you’ve got to pay the cost of it, whatever that is. But people did find it a bit surprising.

I was wondering how it compared to Dollis Hill as well. You talked about this, it was a quite hostile environment, was the impression I got from you...

Mm.

...to be a woman in Dollis Hill. Is that, is... would that be correct?

I wouldn’t like to exaggerate. It was that I started off very junior. I was unmarried, I was studying in the evening, which I’d finished by that time. It was large, it was, I mean very large, whereas, a small group of thirty people, a lovely, lovely size unit. It was really great.

Mm.

I think I served as... We went to several people’s weddings there. Because you know, we, we became quite close. How are we doing for time?

Seventeen minutes. I sense the start of your own business is going to be...

Ha ha. Yes.

...something we could, we should start in detail I think.

Right, indeed. Right. Yes. Let me see if this...
So shall we leave that...?

Yes. If there anything here that goes with...

I just had, actually, a couple of clarification questions...

Yes. Yup.

...which I think might be better dealt with now than tomorrow.

Yah, yah.

[18:15]
I was wondering, something we, we talked about briefly before starting the interview we finished off with last time but didn’t pick up on this time, was, was your work at Birkbeck.

Yup. Yup.

I was just wondering, how did that come about in the first place?

When I had got my degree, which was an external degree from London University, for which I had studied for, I think it was six years, both doing the degree and the preceding bits that I was missing from the science background at school, I then wanted to do a PhD. Yup, next stage, right, what next? And actually I started doing an MSc, and, that was a two-year course. And after the first year of that I found I was just so tired, I was tired of studying, I’d just had enough. And I realised an MSc wouldn’t make any difference to me at all. I did need a PhD. Birkbeck was the one place that I knew of that allowed people to study in the evenings, and it was totally evenings there as I remember. I had started off doing a logic design course which was a sort of, discipline that I needed to master, which I think was just one term or twelve weeks or something like that. I made a good friend there, a guy called Peter King, who became quite, I think, seminal in the computer industry, but not as far as we were concerned, we just, we got on well. I can remember him. [pause] With Booth, I
suppose my clearest link with him was through a boyfriend who was working on his PhD, that was a PhD, on speech recognition with Booth as his mentor, professor or whatever it would be. And so I spent a lot of time, for my friend really, intoning ‘one, one, one, one,’ into a machine, and then having, trying to compare... The, the electronics could, could sort of, distinguish between ‘two, two, two, two’, and I mean, God knows how long I did that. But it was a labour of love. And, of course Andrew Booth did actually make some real progress in speech recognition, and, I mean since then you’ve got, typewriters, the IBM typewriter that practically typed itself. I never managed to master it. It was more gobbledegook than me trying to type, but, it, it was a pretty important step forward I think in the computing industry. And, one of the comments I would make about science is that everything takes a lot longer than people believe, much, much longer. The work starts earlier, there’s more time spent on dead ends, the achievements come later, or in, are then... It just takes ages. I’ve got a couple of examples where, I mean I was responsible for doing the first outsourcing to India, outsourcing of software development, and that took me twenty years, or it took us twenty years, not me. I was writing papers about it in 1976, and it actually happened in 1996. Twenty years. You know, and you sort of think, oh we had this brilliant flash of, we can do it.

[22:36]

What was your impression of Booth?

I never really knew him as a person, I really didn’t. I admired him, because I knew the work that he was doing. I wouldn’t say I... I think I was sorry when he left and went to Canada, for reasons that I did not know. But then I’m not all that good on change anyway, and you know, he was the one that was, I was used to and my boyfriend was used to and... But I, I can’t really contribute there.

Mm. I was just wondering if you talked about, you know, the computer work he was doing alongside the voice recognition stuff at all.

I can’t recall. [pause] No.

[23:29]

And who was your boyfriend?
Oh, it was the great love of my life, or a great love. His name was Trevor Atwell, and, we were together for quite a long time. And, eventually when I sort of say, somebody like me, I sort of overtook him from the point of view of personality and, and capability and, and everything. And he was trying to mould me into something that he wanted, and I was trying to mould myself into that same person, and I just couldn’t do it. And eventually sort of said, you know, I don’t... But I mean a very, very very nice man, we were together for six years I think. But these things happen.

*Do you want to stop for today?*

[end of session]

[End of Part 7]
[Part 7]

OK.

_Interview with Dame Stephanie Shirley, 13th of August 2010._

Earlier on we were talking about what I was doing at a company called CDL, and during that period we, two things happened as regards my career. Firstly, we changed residence, this is my husband and I, from a little furnished bedsitter really in Cricklewood to Ley Hill which was outside Chesham in Buckinghamshire. And that became the basis for my company. So I thought I’d start by trying to describe what that set-up was, because it was the beginning of a movement towards home working which we’re still talking about today. It was the beginning of flexible working, it was the beginning of changing of planning regulations, and, and like matters. So we bought this cottage, called Moss Cottage, after the moss rose growing in its front garden. Because, while we could afford it, we had moved so far out away from London, that the prices had started to drop down and we could afford it. It was characterful, which I was very keen on, and whenever I looked at a house like my mother’s or like some of the suburban conurbations that we looked at to buy, I really could not imagine myself living there with equanimity. So this was a characterful home, where we, we actually stayed for eight years, and it was certainly intended to be a long-term home, because I’d moved around enough. Because it was characterful, it had its little foibles. Some of the upstairs floorboards had great big holes in them for example, so it wasn’t just that it was run-down and old. It was two agricultural cottages from the early Rothschild estate, which had long-time previously been joined together into one, it became a little three-bedroomed cottage, where, as you open the front door, you were straight into one of the two living rooms, we used that as the dining room. There was a small kitchen, and the staircase came out of a cupboard in the kitchen with a sort of door on it, so that first of all you weren’t aware of the stairs. And upstairs there were three little bedrooms. Well two of them are reasonable size. And, a bathroom and toilet combined. And it looked out at the front onto a small nine-hole municipal golf course, and was sited adjacent to, not one but two public houses, and partially attached to a brick house next door which served as the village shop. Moss Cottage has itself served as the village shop many years past, so one of its
windows was quite different. But, the other windows were all small panes about, four by six inches, something like that, with wooden window frames, the upstairs windows sliding sideways which caused us a lot of problems, because they had to be handmade. And when we wanted furniture to go in upstairs we had to take the windows out, because the staircase was, as I say, just, in this little cupboard, and, it wasn’t terribly practical.

[03:59]
It was a country life. At the back there were fields, and an unmade lane leading up to the woods. Immediately outside the back door were some unconverted little cottages, there were five of them, which had two up, two down, and ours had been at one time outside toilets. And, very small with very small strip gardens going in right-angles to the cottages. So, it was, quite a different set-up, and, and one of the things about country living, about which I knew absolutely nothing, was this difference between a towns person who... You know, I’m quite urban, I, I’m interested in books and so on and, when, as an example, I said, ‘Isn’t the corn looking marvellous,’ ‘That’s barley.’ So I really didn’t know anything about it.

[05:13]
But, it had no central heating, so there were two fireplaces downstairs, one of them with a big brick edifice with then a, a wooden mantelpiece made out of a solid piece of wood, which I was told had come out of a ship, you know, and, when we moved I took that mantelpiece with me and put it into the next house. The other fireplace was, was ginormous, sort of like an inglenook or a small inglenook fireplace, and we had to have special coal to go into that, because, little bits of coal would just be lost in it. We used a lot of wood as well. And, in fact, when we took the floorboards up from the decrepit bedroom upstairs we burnt the floorboards, you know, we’re not going to waste those, are we? And they were full of woodworm, and so, you know, the spluttering all over the lounge when we did that. The coal used to arrive in, we used what was called engine coal, which came not in bags or sacks but in large, was delivered actually from the back of a lorry obviously, but in large chunks, like the trunk of a, of a person really, which came in a, a wheelbarrow and was put into our coal shed. And, the coal shed was separate from the house, and during the winter months one had, it was quite an effort to keep warm and comfortable.

[07:09]
The atmosphere in the cottage was cosy, which is what I wanted. It was, it had this element of security and so on, and... We, we paid £4,765 for it. The sort of, negotiation to the nearest £5 just shows how, how low, well how much £5 was in those days. And, I can remember we knocked off, another £5 off the price when we discovered that the coal shed didn’t go the full depth of the building and therefore somebody else was sharing that roof, and, sort of, quite trivial things. The garden was around three sides of the cottage, and was a proper cottage garden with old gnarled apple trees trained over the front path, and, a rather sort of overgrown hedge giving privacy from the corner.

[08:19]

So it was very much a townspeople’s idea of country living, which then turned into a business. And, its address was Moss Cottage, Ley Hill, near Chesham, and when the business started I posted a lot of empty envelopes to myself, to drop the name Moss Cottage off the address so that the address looked like Ley Hill, Chesham. Much more businesslike. And, I think looking back over the years, there was quite a lot of dissembling of that sort. I changed my name for business purposes from Stephanie to Steve; I changed from the original company name of Freelance Programmers, basically to F, F International, the FI Group. I dissembled with the address. And I did quite a lot to disguise from the outside world the fact that this was a home working organisation. Later on this came to be known as tele-work, work at a distance. But, we pioneered home working. We pioneered job sharing. We pioneered the sort of flexible working. And that was just on the non-technical side. Whereas on the technical side we were also doing, a little bit of pioneering, but meeting market demands.

[10:07]

I had the idea that I wanted to go on working, and was quite firm about this really, partly because I don’t like being dependent on anybody else, not even my husband, and partly because I did find the computer industry so, so fascinating. Sometimes programmers, we laughed that somebody, we should be paying rent, because we would just not be going home at night. We did work through the night, we got so engrossed with it. And it wasn’t something that I was really prepared to leave behind.

What about it did you find fascinating?
Well it has some of the beauty of mathematics, it has a lot of logic in it. It has a sort of puzzle element to it. In fact the sort of early, what do they call it, aptitude tests that they used for programming were things like, as they had used for Bletchley Park coding, things like, people who played with crossword puzzles, people who play chess. It’s those sorts of, slightly quirky puzzle-solving capabilities. And, programs would take, well, obviously there were different sizes and so on, but, sometimes you would be working on, on a program for months and months and months, so the satisfaction when you did actually complete it and check it, and, most of that time was spent in checking, where you sort of, are nearly there, just got one more bug to get out, made for a very fasc... for a very fulfilling life really, that you, you, you realised that you had actually created something. And, when you learnt from a colleague or from, well not really from books, but mainly with colleague, oh this is a new way of doing things, you then always tried to incorporate that into your own work. There were not books about software in those days, there were no programming manuals. You were presented with a fairly undocumented machine that, you started off very basically which I think I’ve described before, so bootstrapping some stuff in, and getting it to manipulate and process the data that you put in. So, you know, if you like programming, it’s marvellous; if you don’t like it, it’s, it’s just one of those sort of mysteries in life, how on earth... A bit like computers today really.

[13:10]

The software side which I’m talking about was, it was quite laughable to start what we now call a software house, because, software was given away free with the hardware, and, it wasn’t until about 1972 that IBM unbundled its software from the hardware and started charging for it separately. And that made a big impact on us. But when we started, my interest was very much in the scientific programming that I had touched on at Dollis Hill and had been concerned with the testing of equipment and the internals of the machine. But really there was no market there. The market was in data processing, the beginnings of, you know, payroll and stock control and all things like that, where I really had very little personal interest, except in the sheer size of some of the files that, the, the volume of things being handled and dealt with, made for its own technical interest. So in general I didn’t... the market was saying one thing, and, and I was really facing in another direction. And I did eventually find some sort of, of a compromise, which I’ll talk about later.

[15:01]
Let me talk about how I started. I had a little portable typewriter, and I used that for correspondence. I had, I did not make it into a limited liability company, it was just, I registered the name, Freelance Programmers, and, that reminds me that I did expect it to, to grow, and aimed to build up some sort of, little company. I certainly had no idea it was going to be as big as or as important as it was. And I spent £6, which is what I put into the company, designing myself over several days and getting printed, some stationery, which was stylish, it had all lower case, which was partly the fashion of the Sixties, this is 1962, but partly as a sort of little pun, because we had no, no capital at all. And, having got my stationery set up, I let it be known to my previous employers and my computer friends and relations that I was open for business. And absolutely nothing happened. That, I manned the telephone assiduously from nine till five, literally, sort of not going out for a walk with the baby until after five o’clock. I, I wrote a few letters. I did a lot of other things in between. But from the business point of view, I started really with a couple of introductions from earlier colleagues, previous colleagues, one of which turned out to be very strategic in that, I was in the first year paid good money to write, not programs but to provide consultancy in programming techniques by developing standards to which programs can be developed and tested. And these standards were intended for the British arm of an American consultancy called Urwick Orr, u-r-w-i-c-k, new word, o-r-r, who were setting up what became Urwick Diebold, d-i-e-b-o-l-d, in the UK. And they wanted, they were setting up large style, and they wanted the team to come in to an existing structure, because it was a start-up here. So I was paid to actually develop this work, which later on we were able to use in the company as well. And, later on we were paid to update it, and it served, the fact that we had generated it, meant that we became respected for procedures and methodology much earlier really than we deserved.

Who was the colleague who made the introduction, do you remember?

A guy called David Lush, l-u-s-h, whose wedding I had attended so it wasn’t just a casual, we had been quite friends at one time. And he was from CDL. And he had transferred his employment to what became Urwick Diebold. And he took me in. [18:58]
The name Freelance Programmers, while descriptive, and I, you notice that I always talk about ‘we’, but actually it was just an ‘I’ in those days, but one was dissembling all the time that, when my ex-boss visited us once and sort of said how big, ‘How is it?’ and I, I sort of, ‘Oh, one and a bit,’ meaning me and that, you know, I was pregnant at the time. But, it just always sort of tried to be, put a, a branding on it, though I didn’t have those terms there. When we had got one or two sort of projects going, usually which I was doing myself, but later was starting to subcontract, I began to think in terms of all the dreadful, dreadful things that can go wrong with software, where a comma instead of a full stop can, you know, send a rocket rushing to Earth instead of going out to the Moon. And... But the amount of detail involved and the asymmetry of some of the risks, mean that the business is, could be totally at risk from quite a small project. So I got a quotation for professional indemnity insurance, standard thing which, you know, most companies do have. And it was so expensive, it would have sent the company bust immediately. And so, after about ten months from start, or maybe over a year, we took out limited liability, we became a limited liability company, which of course is exactly what limited is all about, and we became Freelance Programmers Limited. And that gave a, a step up to, to me in my ignorance of business, and to the external world that it was a limited liability company, and it had a very nice address, Ley Hill, Chesham.

[21:22]
The industry at the time was changing, so that the term ‘programming’, which used to be all computer consultancy and things like that, was all, all the non-hardware stuff, began to be downgraded to mean the detailed coding of the programs. Whereas what I was and sought to do was also things like consultancy, measurements, and in particular systems and business design, deciding what to do, not just only the doing of it. So the Freelance Programmers Limited began to be not quite what I wanted to project as, and so we abbreviated it as other companies had done to FPL, and for many many years we were known as FPL. Most people thought that the F stood for female, and, although we disillusioned people about this, it was an image that served the company well, because it distinguished us totally from every other company that was around. And in the software world we were not the first, we were about the fifth or sixth software house in, in the UK, and I had gone out of my way to meet the one other woman head of a software house. But I used to claim with great pride that we were the first software company to be a virtual organisation working from home with
staff being home-based. And it was somewhat to my annoyance that many many years later I discovered that in 1957 a woman called Elsie Shutt in the States, Boston, had started a very similar company with very similar structure. She was doing scientific program and managed to make a go of it at that level. And she had lasted for ten, twenty years, but it sort of disappeared from the scene thereafter. And she never got big, she got as far as twelve part-time people, where FPL did eventually of course become a very large organisation.

[23:54]
Who was the other woman you mentioned, who also...?

Elsie Shutt. Sorry, who else?

Oh no, the other woman who was a member of...

Oh, Nina St Johnson, of Vaughn Programming Services. She was very generous in her time, because I just phoned and sort of said, ‘I’m starting up, can I come and have a chat?’ And, so she talked about her attitude to business, and, really, it was a rude awakening, because she talked in terms of money, she talked in terms of figures, profit. Very little mention of the technology, which she had but it was just taken for granted. And no mention at all of the people. And, I came back from that afternoon, she was out in Hertfordshire somewhere, and sort of thought, if that’s what being in business is going to be like, I do not want to know, because I don’t want to turn or develop into a person like that. So, although it was helpful, rather like my first boss who told me the sort of manager I did not want to be, she indicated the sort of business person I didn’t think I wanted to be.

[25:25]
Can I ask another question, just... I just wondered, at the end of last week you sort of mentioned you had this idea you wanted to start your own business.

Mhm.

And I was wondering, where did that first come from?
I think it’s words like freedom and independence are so important to me. And, even with a good employer like CDL, I was not free to do my own thing. And, it was something to do with that. I don’t like being told what to do, I don’t like being restricted; I like to work in my own time, in my own way. Not that the business gave me that, but I thought it would. And, in the early days of course it did. [pause] I think the travelling to a conventional job was also, I found, not debilitating but just boring. I do not like to be bored, and I have a, a low threshold. Because when I was travelling from Moss Cottage to the job at CDL I used to catch the bus outside, and it was the terminus, it was where the bus stopped, so I was sitting there, and as soon as I could see it arrive, I knew I’d got to get on it, because it would only sit there for five minutes and then set off again. And catch an Underground train from Chesham to, I think it was Wembley. It wasn’t Dollis Hill. And I would do so on a special ticket, because I started before seven o’clock, and you used to get a workman’s return at a sort of different sort of pricing structure, which saved a bit of money and we were pretty... And, you know, it was just, a workman’s return, that’s what we got in the early days. Does that answer?

Mm.

[27:35] I mentioned earlier, I suppose, that I’m interested in efficiency, and, throughout the company, small, medium and large, it was, sort of understood that we would always be as efficient as we could possibly be, and, later on we learnt to talk about effectivity. But we started off with things like my little portable typewriter, we started off using a sort of, machine called a Roneo machine that produced some sort of rather purplish copies of, of typescript. We started off with some sort of metal labels that you used for mailing lots of, addressing a whole lot of envelopes. And those little things, they lasted about, six, eight, ten usages. I mean they didn’t last very long. And of course mailing lists are themselves quite volatile, but you know, it was quite a job to keep them going, but it was pretty basic stuff. Later on we, we said we were going to go to fax when that was pretty early on, because, we’d got, we’d got telex then, yes. And we said we were going to be one of the first. So every FI office had fax. So there was always some effort to, to be, and it’s part of this branding that we needed as a
woman’s company to show that we were professional, that we were up amongst the others, that we had standards, that we, we met deadlines, and, and that the sheer professionalism of it may have been more difficult for us, and in particularly for me because I had no commercial training whatsoever, but was very much part of the business. Because we started with the £6, there really was so little cash that, the business was also run on a very un-commercial... well it was commercial I suppose, but, it was run, not for efficient, not for optimising its results, but just to minimise the money that was putting in. So I talked earlier about manning the phone between nine and five; there were already answering machines around at that time but I didn’t afford, chose not to even consider getting such a machine, because the cheapest way of getting that phone answered was for me to be around and not go out before five o’clock.

So it was a business that was funded, really by my own time and skills, and, it was only when the first jobs came... I mean, it never rains but it pours, but, there’d be long gaps between work when I could do a whole lot of other things. But then, jobs started to overlap and I couldn’t do both of them and I wasn’t going to turn one away, and so I really started learning to delegate. And one of the first ones was the Urwick Diebold one, and then we were fortunate in getting a task, and I have never, and I’ve often thought about it, remembered how I got that job, but it was a program evaluation review technique called PERT, in capitals, for a City company called Selection Trust. They no longer exist, certainly not under that name. And I took on somebody to do that work, and, under my supervision, so that basically what I was saying to the client, ‘Yes, of course I’m going to look after this and make sure it’s absolutely all right, the detailed work will be done by...’ And, the costing, which is significant, because it was so wrong and started itself all wrong, I was paying by the hour and charging by the hour. I charged, the important thing, a guinea an hour. I thought guinea sounded much more classy and professional than pounds. And, I was paying for the individual who did the technical work, fifteen shillings an hour. And I thought, that was almost sort of immoral to be making that sort of mark-up. In fact it’s totally inadequate as a mark-up, if you’re going to supervise it, or, pay expenses or do anything. But I didn’t know that at the time. And, the early work was really on that basis, one consultant as we called them, and me as a supervisor.
And then we began to get enquiries from a variety of people, from a variety of routes, and, we had a development of the PERT work with projects such as the Mars confectionery company in Slough, and, we debated very earnestly whether it was ethical to accept the goodie bags of sweets that they gave us, and we decided it was all right. We also had PERT-like projects for Wallasey buses who were scheduling buses, who were scheduling freight trains for British Railways, and that was the first time I ever travelled first class, I still don’t do. And, it developed into a sort of specialism into logistics, which was not the scientific side, not mathematics; it was not the commercial side, but it had that sort of commercial drive, and really led into an area that lasted on, the logistics lasted for decades. But it took us into an area which I then learnt to be called operations research, or operational research.

[34:59]

And, the same David Lush when I think about it, he introduced me to a company, I think he’d changed his employment as well, yes, he had I think. Anyway, I was introduced to a company called Business Operations Research, and this was a small company based in Wimbledon, which concentrated on, not the computer side but the actual operational research side, and had a couple of, three I think, partners, and they began to need computer services, and they began to use my services, and, it was a very good relationship because they gave some sort of an umbrella, I was stimulated and, and challenged to make sure that we didn’t look like the poor relation, because they were established. And, they took me into some projects; I can remember also taking them into something, which was rather satisfying. We worked for customers, didn’t call them clients in those days, like, Hilley, the furniture people in Watford. And, those, you know, I began... Relationships between customers began to be much more reciprocal, so that I bought office furniture from Hilley and I did computer work for Hilley. And it was on that contract I remember that I first subcontracted the preparation of reports, and I produced a report for Hilley on behalf of BOR that, they sort of suddenly realised, wow, we can make it look like that too. So I got quite a kick out of being able to do things better than they could. I, technically I was fairly priggish, and if somebody didn’t like something I was doing I would try and convince them that they were wrong and I was right. And it took some time to learn how to sell. We were just at the beginning of the software industry, nobody else was really out there. We were competing against computer companies who didn’t know much about software. And neither did I really, because, how long had I been working in
software? A few years. The academics had come out with much more knowledge than I ever had. And...

[38:04]

_I wondered actually, how did you recruit staff at the start? You mentioned your first employee. Who was that?_

[pause] Let’s switch it off and I’ll see if... Who...

[pause in recording]

I really can’t remember who the first member of staff was, but at the end of January in 1960... we started in ’62; at the end of January in ’64 or something like that we had a tiny mention in the _Guardian_ newspaper, _Manchester Guardian_ it probably still was then, that mentioned this extraordinary woman, Steve Shirley, writing computer programs in Chesham in between feeding her baby and washing the nappies. And that was really the sort of phraseology that was used. And that brought in a flood of women who liked the idea of working from home, and had computer skills, and had, as I always projected I suppose, the need, or the, or, might be financial need of course, to go on working without being a conventional employee. But I’m trying to think. I don’t know how the very first one came. And I think it was just word of mouth. I had a secretary who came in one afternoon a week, and, I engaged her through an agency called, surprise surprise, Freelance Secretaries. No it wasn’t. No it wasn’t. It was something else. It was called Joan Wilkins Associates, w-i-l-k-i-n-s. And she was running an agency that specialised in part-time work which largely meant women. And, so I got hold of this secretary, who’s still a friend today, called Barbara Edwards, and, she arrived, was at home, in my home. She brought her own little portable typewriter. Later on she brought her own baby in a carrycot. And, she was instructed really to make sure that I looked, that the correspondence and stuff went out looking as if it came out of a chairman’s office. And I know if I had difficult phone calls to make, or senior phone calls to make, I would wait until Barbara was in, so that she could connect me and give the impression of some sort of infrastructure behind me. The phone was pretty well our, how business was done, and, sometimes of course there would be very domestic noises going on in the background. And so, I
took a tape recording, which, we had large tape recording then, tape recorder then, which I was using for dictation and, and other things like that, so that when Barbara came there was a wodge of work that I could do. But I recorded sort of, office type noises, I recorded Barbara at her typewriter, and, so whenever the phone went I would put this on in the background so that I’d got this busy office buzz behind me. Now, I really sort of think, how, how very naïve, but it wasn’t naïve, it actually got, got us going, because, although there was a market there, although I did have skills, it wasn’t developed, and I did not have the commercial skills, but I sort of had some marketing skills. I changed my name from Stephanie to Steve, because I felt that I wasn’t really getting any responses from the letters that I was sending out to people offering services, and, I wasn’t even getting any response let alone any work. And, my husband actually suggested that perhaps it was the good old-fashioned sexism, they saw a letter from Stephanie Shirley, and, it just went in the bin. So I started writing as Steve Shirley. And it seemed to me that I was getting some better response, well I was I was getting some responses, and the work did start slowly to, to flow in as distinct from just all those private introductions.

And I’ve been Steve every since, which is... I, I still, I’ve sort of made a big effort to change to Stephanie, because, Dame Steve, although some people use it, it, it doesn’t really sound very nice. And now the sort of work that I do, it just confuses the issue to talk about the, the emancipation of women, because, I mean I was part of that movement.

How did you feel about the name change at the time? Was it an idea you sort of readily adopted, or, did you need a bit of convincing?

The company changed its name umpteen times. I have changed my name umpteen times, I’ve changed my name on naturalisation, I said how my father changed his name when he worked in a German prisoner-of-war camp, or, prisoner-of-war camp that had German people there, so he changed. You, women change their name on marriage. It, it sort of, it’s part of, not being quite as stable as the men, because the men very seldom change their name, they do occasionally. [pause] Didn’t worry me at all, it was fine. And... Some old family or old friends would still refer to me as Vera, but, I don’t find it offensive, but, I would always write my letters as Steve, and
gradually they sort of, moved over. [pause] I, I... I suppose those labels are important.

*What do you think of yourself, as Stephanie or, or as Steve?*

I think as Steve. I... You know, it’s... I mean when I first married and somebody would refer to me as Mrs Shirley, I would think it was my mother-in-law, you know. You do, you get used to it of course. Just as I’ve got used to Dame Stephanie, which ten years ago was sort of so, oh! but now I’m very used to using it, and Derek’s used to using it, and it’s... I have served on some honours committees, and that sort of thing is, discussed then as to whether these honours that have titles associated with them are really a good thing or not, you know. Sir this, Lady that, Dame this. Yah.

[46:10]
*I’ve got a question I have to ask about the early days as well.*

Yah.

*Where did the £6 come from?*

[pause] I think it was what we had managed to save. I mean it was within a sort of revenue capability then. Maybe it was what we had in the bank at the time. Later on my mother, bless her, lent me, either 100, I think it was £100, and, this was when the bank had started sort of saying I needed to put more money in. So I borrowed that. And then spent it. And then the bank was rather surprised and sort of said, ‘Well, I can’t see this, this... where’s it gone?’ ‘Oh, I didn’t realise that I was expected to put it in as shares,’ [laughs] sort, you know, the sort of... I was very very naïve, you know, I really was. I was lucky in that my first banking relationship had been good when we lived in Crickelwood, and so I transferred a little bit of credit to Chesham. But there was an excellent bank manager there, who, his name was Priddle, p-r-i-d-d-l-e, never got the first name, Mr Priddle, but he was quite important to me, because, when I was about to run out of cash I would go down and sort of say, ‘Well this is the money that’s owed to the company,’ and they were all good names, Tate & Lyle,
Mars, British Railways, GEC. So, he could sort of see that in general, this money was going to come in.

Was money one of the things that worried you at the start?

[pause] Falling flat on my face I think. When it came to the Seventies recession we were sort of, sort of established. The build-up of revenue was quite slow. I had been earning about £2,000 when I left employment, and in the first year the company earned £700; the second year £1700; the third year £7,000; the next year £17,000. They were always these sevens, which is why I remember, seventeen and twenty-seven, and then I can’t remember how it went. But that’s a very, very low start. And, it was, because I didn’t know anything about business, I didn’t know anything about borrowing, I, I ran the thing on a cash basis, I had a little book and I wrote down every bit of money that came in, and, on the, turned the book upside-down and wrote down every bit of money that went out and kept the receipts. And that was the level of my bookkeeping.

[49:33] And, as things turned out, that’s a very safe way of running a business, because you never overdraw, and, it stood me in good stead. But, there came a time when I realised that I did need to be much more commercial about things, and I went back to Urwick Diebold, and the consultant who had previously been my commissioner came out and gave me a bit of time for which the company charged. And, I can remember what they charged, it was £150 a day, which was a vast amount of money. And, his name was Kip Grindley, g-r-i-n-d-l-e-y, and, he became quite important to me and to the business. But I mean, the first time he came out, he charged me for half a day and he was there till five o’clock or something, but, and, we used to meet for lunch and coffee somewhere so that I got a whole lot of free consultancy. And he looked at my little book, and, was both shocked and horrified with what he saw there, and, immediately was able to sort of focus down and sort of say, you now, ‘There isn’t enough cash going through, you’re not going to have enough cash to pay the bills at the end of this month.’ So he did some, something I think is quite extraordinary. This was a guy that I knew only in a commercial relationship and not for very long, over a couple of years I suppose. And, he said, ‘Steve, you’ll never manage this,’ and took out his chequebook and wrote a cheque for £500. Again, a vast amount of money in
those days. And, I had got enough business nous to sort of immediately write down sort of, you know, ‘Received with thanks, £500’ you know, so that it was, you know, recorded properly. So I think I’d got some commercial sense, but no commercial training. And he saw us through that, and then sort of said, ‘Look, it should never be like that again.’ And he did some studies, and, suggested something which he had called gearing, which meant that as the panel members, which was a term borrowed from market research, as the panel members put in their invoices, each would only get paid when the client paid the company’s invoice, which incorporated that particular element of work. And, FPL met the, the invoice after three months, whether or not the client had paid, so they had that sort of guarantee. But it was a tremendous act of faith for the staff to actually work like that, because, most people are used to payment regularly at the end of the month, or even if you are a consultant, you put an invoice in and you do expect to get it in within thirty days. So gearing the payments got rid of ninety per cent of my cash flow problems, because we had very little overheads and so on.

[53:19]
I mentioned that, I really didn’t know how to sell, and, began to realise that there was a lot about business that I needed to know, and started trying to find some books about how to run a business or something like that. And frankly all the books were about production, they were not about service businesses at all. In fact I never found any book on services, I doubt it existed. But they were all talking about, you know, transport costs and production costs and advertising costs and patent costs, and all of which seemed terribly irrelevant. So I had the idea of approaching a local, what did they call it? It was a local, it was a management centre that I had attended in the evenings with something called a T-group, God! I’d forgotten that. And it was there that I met a lecturer in management studies, to whom I suggested that if he could help me get this business structured and off, off the ground really, he would have access to real life first generation business, things that he could use in his teaching. Let me divert a bit and say how it was that I... his name was Jack Bungard, b-u-n-g-a-r-d. And, I had met him at something called a T-group at Watford, technology college or something, where it was like a sort of group therapy but in a commercial environment. So, six, eight, were there more? I don’t know. But that sort of number of business people turned up, nearly all leaders and chief executives of, of, generally small companies, non-competitive companies certainly, and, the lecturer whose name I can’t
remember would greet us like some item in the paper, you know, ‘What do you think about something in the paper?’ Just, just to sort of get us talking. And had a technique of then focusing on one person in the group, we called it the hot seat, and really then sort of saying, ‘Why do you think that, how, how come they... what are you going to do? What do you think would happen then?’ And really doing some... And, the rest of the group, because we had trust and faith in each other, contributed to this in that, yeah, well I’m sure I would do, think much the same, but what about so-and-so? And very often you got as much benefit from the session, which was two hours I think, whether you were in the hot seat, which was extremely uncomfortable, or whether you were actually contributing and listening to this. And, what I got from it was, the usual business that you get from therapy really, is that I was making a lot of these problems myself, that I was expecting people to do things which I had not explained what it was that had needed to be done. I was not communicating well, I was operating on this minimum cost basis, whereas I really had to sort of, get through that barrier. And there are several barriers as you build a business, because you’ve just, somehow got to get through there, otherwise... And most people do it by, borrowing money as in fact sort of happened to us. [pause] So Jack Bungard came and did a lot of helping the business, and he came out with me on several sales calls, most of which were unsuccessful, and he sat quietly, and might have made something. And then afterwards he sort of pulled it all to bits and sort of said, ‘Don’t you realise when you said that you absolutely lost him?’ and, ‘You should look and listen.’ And, ‘He didn’t understand what you were saying then, and that should have been obvious. No wonder you didn’t get the business.’ He really taught me how to sell, I owe him a great deal.

[58:12]

Going back to the business BOR, it was a very good relationship, and, after some time they actually made a takeover approach, that they wanted to employ me, they were going to buy, or rent, I can’t remember, a large house in Henley where we could actually put a rather more conventional office. They were going to, pay I think, you know, for some staff. And they would basically put all their software with us. I could do outside software as well. But, the sort of guarantee for all the software coming from a company that was now about, I don’t know, twenty, thirty consultants, all, each of whom would... And this was, I, I just could not believe it. So I was going to get a salary again, I was going to have some admin support, they would do all the
typing and the, the bookkeeping and the banking and the cash flow, and all these
dreadful things that was absolutely, in a sense getting me down. And, in particular I
wanted to run a crèche, fairly unusual idea in those days, and not the first or anything
like that. And this house that we had, being made available, would have room for a
crèche. And, then as doubtless now, you had to sort of register a crèche to make sure
that all was well. And I happened to mention this to one of the BOR directors, and he
sort of said, ‘Oh you don’t want to do that, you don’t want to register with the local
authority. No no. Just go ahead and do it if you want to.’ I said, ‘But, you know,
crèches have to be registered.’ And, I realised that, with this takeover, would go all
my freedom and flexibility, that there was going to be somebody who had the
authority and the power to tell me what to do. And, up with that I would put. And I
pulled the plug on this takeover, the same day or the next day or something. Yeah, I
wrote, wrote very formally and terminated the...

[01:01:11]

But then I was left in the situation of having said, well, taken on several staff, full-
time employed staff, and what was I going to do with them? And, I can remember
one week when I went out selling and I knew I had to get one of those jobs, because
otherwise I wasn’t going to be able to afford to keep those staff on. And, I did get one
of those three jobs, I can’t remember... [pause] Oh I think, just about remember, a few of
them. [pause] But we had a lot of discussion then about, what are we going to do,
what are we going to do? So what we did was take out a second mortgage on Moss
Cottage, and if you have a child which by that time we already knew to be very
vulnerable, and I can remember explaining to Derek, ‘Look, there’s no guarantee that
this is going to be all right, and if it fails, we will be back in furnished rooms with a
handicapped child. And that is what the risk is, you know, do you understand?’ And
so we took out a second mortgage for the grand sum of £1600. And that took us
through the next stage. So, that failed takeover really forced us into a different
league. We began to be a medium size company. We were still giving an impression
of being much bigger than we were, because we counted the number of staff and we
talked about, we’ve got a panel of seventy, we’ve got a panel of 100, many of whom
would not be even available to work at any particular time, and certainly few of them
would be working. But we did have access to those people, and that gave a, a sort
of... and we were still grossly undercharging for all our fees, and we did for twenty
years.
Why grossly undercharging?

Well as I started off, I just had no commercial experience, and I started off with this fifteen shillings, one guinea mark-up, and you know, we should have had something like eighty, ninety, 100 per cent mark-up rather than twenty-five. And, that was only remedied many, many years later, more than twenty-five years later, so really culture stays very firm for a very long time. And that culture stayed until Hilary Cropper came in and she came in when we had been business for twenty-five years.

[01:03:52]

So there we were, beginning to be a bit more businesslike. We now, we took another little office in Station Road in Chesham, which was above an optician, and as we expanded there we took a room next door. The address of the original one was 16, one six, a very good number in computing, 16 Station Road, and then we had, took a room opposite or something like that which was 9 Station Road, so we changed the letter, 9-16, you know. Again, showing as if we were growing up, it was... And we were in fact getting pretty well structured. We had somebody doing accounts, who was not a qualified person, he had previously run the local cinema, but he was a super guy, Griffiths. And we began to get much more professional about everything that we were doing. We did personality testing, we did checking of progress reports, we did project reviews. Not, not all, all these things didn’t start at once. Which of those would you be interested in? I could go on for, I mean you know, there’s thirty-one years since... [laughter] It’s a wonderful period of my life you know.

I think we should take a little break in a bit.

How long was that talking?

That was an hour. Do you want to stop now, or do you want to go with the...? I’ve got, I’ve got numerous sort of follow-on questions.

Yup, OK. Right.

Do you want to deal with them now or after a cup of tea?
Yeah, let’s deal with, deal with them now. Yah. Good God! But I mean I know that this, this is stuff I love and know and, and I’ve talked about it before you see, so...

[01:05:45]

*I wonder about selling.*

Yah.

*And as someone who despite, you know, since a job in Woolworths when I was about seventeen has never sold anything, how do you do it? Could you sort of talk me through a typical selling pitch or a selling job that you would go through with a client?*

Right. Well for many years I would start a sales process by telephoning them and getting an appointment. It’s much easier to get an appointment for somebody else, so once we had two people, I would make an appointment for her, and she would make appointments for me. And, so that would start things off, to just introduce the company’s services. Most people of course, no way wanted to see you. Some people were intrigued because they were not used to women, and, that caused a lot of problems as well. When you got face to face with the customer, what I used to do is, say how wonderful we were and the sort of work that we were doing that I could talk about, and basically trying to persuade them to sort of say, ‘Well you know we’ve got a little bit of something that would be just right for you.’ And of course this didn’t happen. What I learnt to do was to ask the customer to explain what he was doing in the computer field, what his plans were for the business, how he saw that impacting on the volumes of stuff going through his computer department, and really listening and occasionally being able to, really put in and sort of say, ‘That’s very like what we did for so-and-so.’ To sort of show competence by the by, rather than just pushing how clever we were. And all of selling is a bit like that, what I’m doing today is, is selling and promoting and, to a lesser extent dissembling, because I do know what I’m doing. But, it’s just a question of, meeting people’s needs, it’s as simple as that. Do you understand what it is that they need? And learning to meet it. And sometimes you don’t have the skills and you have to swallow deep and sort of, say, ‘Well I’ll
have a go at that,’ and that takes you into a new area. And that’s slowly how we got into the commercial data processing world, because, there were colleagues there who, who had experience and could do that, and... It was... And the whole of the computer industry was so new that it was... Everything was new, everything was exciting. Everything was difficult, everything was underestimated, everything was always dynamic and changing, and what you did this week was different to... But the fact is that selling is finding out what the customers, what the business needs are, and learning to meet those. Yup.

[01:09:13]
Was there any overt sexism when you were selling?

Yes, quite a lot, I mean it’s quite... [laughs] Yes. You know, it’s quite difficult, even when you’re learning to, have learnt to be professional about selling, to stay at that level when the men are flirting with you and trying to pinch your bottom and all this sort of thing. You sort of get used to it. And, the more professional we became, with proposals, with agendas, with brochures and stuff, the less you were vulnerable to, ‘Oh this is a woman I can...’ Yeah. It was... And basically, if you’ve got a sexist client, you’ve just got to back away, because you couldn’t possibly really cope with that. And later on in the company, I can remember there was an unhappy client, we were quite big then, and, the project manager, she may even have been a managing director by that time, her name was Alison Newell, was a beautiful woman, really lovely. And, she was having terrible trouble with this client, and after a couple of board meetings there I sort of said, ‘Well I’ll come with you next time and see if I can sort out what on earth the problem is.’ And, really as soon, five minutes into the meeting, it was clear that this man was besotted by her, and would do anything just to see her again. [laughs] And so kept complaining. Well, I mean that’s very, very tough. And there was nothing she could do about it, she had not given him any encouragement or anything. But these things happen and relationships happen in, in all sorts of commercial environments, but we just got rather more of them. I think we got more personnel problems, because we were employing women with children in a home working environment, we got masses of women with children who didn’t want them, women with vulnerable children, women who wanted children and couldn’t get them. All these personnel things sort of used to land on my desk, and, and, I used to
really have expressions which I occasionally even enunciated of, ‘Get off my back!’ I just felt they were draining me, these people. And those sorts of people issues became much more important and difficult to me than the technical issue, than by the technology.

[01:12:01]

Mm. How did you sort of get on with the staff, on a sort of... Is there a day-to-day basis, are you sort of sending people away with jobs and not seeing them for a few weeks, or were they in close contact?

In those days, a lot of it was done by telephone and post, because we all of us did not want to leave home, we all of us had young children. And, we used to meet occasionally in Joe Lyons’s cafés, do a progress meeting. But we were so remote that after a bit we wore little distinguishing pins so that we could recognise our colleagues when we turned up in clients’ premises. And again would dissemble, we knew her name, ‘Hello Mary,’ you know. ‘Oh I always thought you were blonde.’ No she’s brunette. You know, anyway, all those sorts of things. We managed, mm, with difficulty.

[01:12:55]

Mm. How does home working actually work? As someone who sort of does it now, I have an idea of how I do home working now, but, what’s the mechanism?

I think everybody works from home in the same, the same sort of range of things, that, everybody’s home is different. Some people worked in their bedrooms, I worked on the dining-room table, and after a bit the dining-room table never got cleared because, we... Well there are other reasons why we didn’t sit down for meals, but... One... I mean we, it was all done very cheap. I can remember going and we’d stay with a colleague when I was going up to Manchester for something, and, I noticed her home was, to my mind, absolutely sterile. There were very few books around, if any. You know, mantelpieces clear of clobber but just a clock and two things. And then... It was all very tidy, it could have been a picture in a magazine. But in her office, which was the sort of side of the kitchen, it was alive, it was vital, there were the equivalent of Post-it notes and piles of things and going-ons and... I mean obviously that was the
centre of the intellectual activity, and the rest of the house was, hardly looked lived in.

One colleague whom I got to know quite well and still working with her now, her neighbours never knew that she worked from home. So it was all so quietly, she was there. And her husband knew that she worked from home, but all evidence of her work was tidied away, meticulously, before he got home at night. And, she and I worked together for quite a long time where she did some technical work and I did the sort of managerial side of it. She became a much better manager than I... That’s how it worked at the time. And, these were proposals for work to be done. And we put them in pink folders, so if you saw a pink folder, it was like a pass the parcel, you do your bit and pass it on to the next person, because there was a, a range of, of people needed to work on it. Whereas in an office one could do it very easily as a group, with home-basing you had to... So I used to deliver to her when I had done my work, and I’d been working in the evening, and so I’d be delivering to her at ten o’clock at night, and, just slip it through her door. I, I can go on for, it was a very exciting part of my life.

I’ve got one final question.

Yah.

[01:15:57]

I promise you a cup of tea in a minute. [laughs] You talked about all these people writing in to join your organisation.

Yes.

How did they react once they were in it?

They thought it was marvellous really. Some of them wanted to be accepted onto the panel, yet whenever we approached them with any work they were not available, they were going on holiday, their baby was sick or whatever reason. And I came to the conclusion that, they really liked to be able to say to people that they had got a little part-time job. Others, and we categorised them into priorities, really needed to work, they were single parents and they, they needed to work and they got priority with
whatever work was going. They’d never really brought in sales enquiries, and you would have thought that they would have done. During the Seventies recession, which, we haven’t really got to yet, but, work was terribly, terribly short, and we had got down to about two projects, but, that panel of women, supported doubtless by their husbands, were out going to conferences and being seen out and about, beautifully dressed and groomed. Because we had a certain sort of house style that we were, not housewives, we were professional women. We had certain house rules or, unwritten of course, about, we did not wear trousers, because, we were trying to enter this man’s world and we didn’t want to be too threatening. So there was a variety of things there. But basically they were wonderful representatives.

[01:18:03]
*The panel? Could you just clarify that part of it? Is this sort of...*

A panel was a, a pseudo legal relationship with a potential employee which post-interview and post-references would agree that when there was work, this was the relationship, there would be weekly reporting or payment at the end of the month or geared payment or expenses paid or, you know, a variety of things like that. And it was a one-page, fairly closely typed thing, which defined things like, your telephone costs will be paid but you need to categorise them because... Or you’ve got to have your own telephone number just for work. And, it changed over the years, and we called them terms of operating, and I think they got up to about version fifteen before we moved on to some other. So the terms of operating. And, people have often analysed how come that the company worked at all, and part of that was, because we were not physically or geographically close to each other, we learnt to communicate very carefully, so that we knew that we had to listen to people, each other over the phone. There was a certain amount of social, you know, ‘How are you doing? How’s the weekend? How’s the baby?’ So-and-so’s got measles. So there was a bit of that. But then once you’d got on to the professional side, there was a communication and a checking that the messages had been properly heard, because people were working in isolation. There were many people who you wouldn’t see for two, three months at a time. We... Because of that sort of thing we attracted people with physical and mental vulnerabilities, somebody who was blind, a couple of people in wheelchairs. And one person that I remember, I’ve forgotten her name, she had agoraphobia at the
time, she couldn’t get out. And, after a few years we used to occasionally sort of, get her out and, go and pick her up and stay with her and all that sort of thing. Very very difficult sort of, disability. Intellectually bright as a button but couldn’t, couldn’t leave the house.

[End of Part 7]
I talked earlier about some of the simple typing, Roneoing, photocopying. Our first photocopier was white on black sheets, which is quite hard to read. But I’d like to record the way in which we did staffing. When we had the go-ahead from a client to do a particular piece of work, we would then start to work out the sort of skills required for that task, which we would have done at the estimating stage, and who was going to do what and when. And, we had, and I’m sure it had some, some name, but the system was, to use edge-punched cards which we kept... This started when the panel list was about 100. You know, after that you could sort of remember who, who does what, it began to get too big. So edge-punch cards are cards, six by eight, something like that, with a series of holes round all four sides I think, and you had a punch that took out the exterior of the hole, so when you punched a hole, it became, there was nothing there. So, you had for, we put for each person the technical skills that they had along one line, COBOL, FORTRAN, Easycoder or whatever the things were, and the business skills that they had, that they understood about library systems or, payroll or sorting routines or something. And then when you had a task, you put a knitting needle, literally, through all the cards of the characteristic that you wanted, you wanted people who could write COBOL and knew something about trains, say. So you put it through the hole that said COBOL, and then juggled it around energetically, and the cards that had been punched would fall out, because, onto the floor. And you’d pick them up and sort of say, ‘Right, well those are the COBOL people. Now let’s push it through railways and see if we’ve got anybody who understands about train systems.’ And, then you, you go along the other side and, you wouldn’t find anything about railways, so let’s think about transport generally, and... So you would find the people that had the skills for your particular job. And that shoe box held us in good stead for a long time, and, it’s an example I think about how quite simple systems preceded the sort of mechanisation and systemetising that happened later. I mean now this sort of thing is done in such a complex way, but in those days we still had to do it professionally and effectively. And that’s the system that we used.

[03:22]

I was also reminded of some of the most interesting work that I personally did in the early days. I had an approach from the Marconi company in Chelmsford, and, I had
several meetings with them, and, I suppose as an example of this showing off that I
used to do, I was fascinated by the problems that they, that they had, and started really
trying to solve them and showing that I could solve them, and in particular that was in
the, using a computer to lay out the, the circuit boards. And, I conceptually thought, I
knew sort of, how it might go, and I can remember going to the very good science
library that was held then at the American Embassy, and, had followed up some
references there and so on, and started putting in some proposals. And I think I did so
much work for them that when I met somebody from Marconi years later he said, ‘Oh
you, you did that work on printed circuit boards, didn’t you?’ I said, ‘Well I’ve never
actually got a contract,’ [laughs] you know, and I didn’t, I never got a bean from
them. Because I was so un-commercial, I was enjoying it, I just did it, I was,
wonderful, ooh, I, I can, I can help Marconi to do printed circuits, you know. Big...
But, they were very advanced systems, and, I think I had learnt at the Post Office
really to use libraries properly, and make sure that I got there.
[05:18]
There were some early work stations that we had, and, I think we did even call them
work stations, but I’m not sure about that. And when I had three people working in
my little Moss Cottage they had work stations so that when they turned, went away
and they, they did not work all hours, I could close up their work and, it would not be
in evidence. Each work station was a, like a tallboy but some people don’t seem to
know what a tallboy is. A cupboard with doors opening vertically, about four foot
high, which when you opened the doors that were half its depth, would show a small
desk, a small reading light, and storage space for, whatever one was doing. It was
nothing particularly to do with computers. And these were quite expensive, they were
made in teak, and we did actually provide them for people.
[06:38]
What sort of work did people do sitting at these work stations? It was not a question
of keying in those days; you wrote programs by, pen or more often good pencil so that
you could amend it, using usually the figures nought to nine, but occasionally you
would write it in binary. And, the program would then be mailed off to a computer
centre, where it would be punched up onto cards or paper tape. It would then be re-
punched equivalently to verify it, and they would, exact format, and unless the verifier
verified each hole, it would, would stop. And then when that data was prepared for
the computer, it would be sent to the computer centre proper, and doubtless would fail
at the first attempt. So it was quite a, a cumbersome process, and the results would in
theory be mailed back to us so that there was a cycle, for many years we sort of said,
‘We do expect two turn-rounds a week.’ Two turn-rounds a week? Now you get a
response in, in milliseconds practically. And, when we were running late on a project,
we would try and turn, turn up at the computer centre, so that we could turn round the,
the output of the first run, immediately spend twenty minutes there sorting out what
had happened then, put it back in again, to sort of accelerate the development. We
had a freelance driver, herself a woman with children, who would take these programs
around if there was urgency because we could get it there half a day earlier than using
the mail. We used to insure against loss of postal services, because we were so
dependent on the post. And... [pause] I cannot imagine anything more clumsy now
when I think about it, but it did work, and we were just as fast as anybody else. And it
also taught us to be very accurate, because the penalty for getting something wrong
was quite high. I can remember interviewing a young programmer who asked for,
this was not in FI at all, must have been CDL, and I, she asked for a very high salary,
and, she was, twenty-three, something like that, and she didn’t have a maths degree
and you sort of... And sort of say, ‘Well, you know, why do you think, you know,
what makes you think you’re worth that sort of salary?’ And she sort of said, ‘I don’t
make mistakes.’ And, it was quite true, because we did employ her and she was very,
very accurate, and that’s a, a feature that’s very valuable in computer work. I mean
I’m still very, I’m a very good proofreader for example, I pick out errors to an
irritating extent, and, I used to have what was called sort of figure sight where, if you
are given masses and masses of figures, you somehow, it’s the same sight that you get
in bell-ringing, you somehow get a feel for, oh, it’s in that area there’s something
wrong. And, it’s unpopular but, I sometimes was, well frequently I was proved right.
[11:02]
It was early days, they were interesting. We used to discuss solemnly how to spell
computer, and if programming was spelt with one or two m’s. But...

Discuss with whom?

With each other, and within the British Computer Society, work study groups that we
had, and branch meetings. I haven’t talked yet about the British Computer Society
but I used to, it was a source of sales enquiries, because you got to know people and
they got to know me. And, you found out what people were doing, and you knew that if you learnt something about a company, that would probably imply that in two years’ time they’d be wanting such and such, and you could sort of track it through. [coughs] I talked earlier about the sort of letterhead, and, we had very very small letterhead, because when Barbara wasn’t there I had to do the typing myself, and I don’t coordinate hand and eye very well, so my typing is pretty awful, the sort of hunting and pecking, and, since I won’t have stuff going out with any errors on it, I had very small paper so that I could get to the bottom of the page without making a mistake.

[12:34] Can I ask you a quick question...

Yup.

...about staffing, and actually you were talking about interviewing this one particular programmer at CDL.

Mhm.

But I was wondering more generally, once you’d got your own business, what did you actually look for in staff?

I think generally in computer work one is looking more for flexibility and ability to adapt, rather than what they have done. Because it’s moving, was and is, moving so rapidly that, the fact that you did a certain something three months ago is interesting but it’s not terribly relevant to doing it today. And, to a certain extent that helped with the employment policy generally, because, if a woman had been out of the field for the traditional seven years to have her young family, everybody is out of date so quickly that they could get back if they chose to, with some sort of probability of success. We chose people really, as always you do in recruitment, the people we understood or would have confidence in. It was very much a sort of white middle class, and that worried me. We went out of our way to try and absorb... A couple of Indian ladies were important. The Indians, I mean I know it’s a stereotype but they
were very strong in mathematics, and an early programmer was a Mrs Bakiya, who, beautifully educated, you know, wonderfully sort of, dressed in saris and things like that, but, cute as a button, and, really she should have been in management, but, she remained technical. And there was also another one who was not so successful but even brighter, a Dr Durga Raye, and she was a maths graduate from Dublin University which you may know is pretty, it’s a good, good place to have got your training. And she took us in an odd sort of way through another step of learning, because we had a job with Castrol, then one of the big petrol companies, and it was to do with the siting of oil depots. And, this was again one of these logistic type problems, and, it’s one person and it was done, Durga Raye went off to do it, and, it was in, headquarters were in Marylebone Road. And after a few weeks the client phoned me and said that we were using an inordinate amount of machine time, and what did I propose to do about it? And the machine time then was expensive, and it was in short supply, and you can’t just have somebody taking up a lot of time, it costs real money. So I went to find out what she was doing, and, she may or may not have understood what she was doing, but she was quite incapable of explaining it to me. There was nothing in the documentation at all. And, I decided I, we really had to start again. And, for the only time in my life I, I left Giles for two weeks, Derek took holiday and he looked after our small son, and, I descended staying at a little hotel just off the Marylebone Road, and, decided to do this myself. By that time of course we were already several weeks late, because we hadn’t started. I was in a programming language called FORTRAN, which stood for something like formula translation or something like that, which I had never used before, although it was a scientific language. So, I found through an agency, I can’t remember what, but it wasn’t a personal introduction, somebody who was available. It might have been moonlighting, I’m not sure, but a guy called John Stevens, s-t-e-v-e-n-s. And he was somehow freelancing, or moonlighting, because he had chosen to go into computing, because he wanted to get into Parliament, an example of the sort of reasons for working flexibly. And, if you’re an MP, and you’re not re-elected, suddenly you’ve got to support yourself, and if you want to stand next time, suddenly you’ve got to be prepared to have a job that will let you go. And, so he had chosen to go into computing. And so he came and coached me in FORTRAN and helped me write the first bit. And, I did something like a fortnight of, sixteen-, eighteen-hour days, weekends as well, and, got the damn thing finished. And, I was really a cot case after
that. But, two things happened. Kit Grindley said, at that time he knew that the company was going to really survive properly long-term, because no other company would be so worried about its reputation and so on, and be able to pull that one out, which was, I only knew that afterwards. But, once I had recovered from the sort of sheer lack of sleep, I really decided that’s never going to happen to us again. It really, it was just too awful. And, we started to put in a whole lot of controls in addition to the ones that we had had from start, they were controls at the end of every phase, they were controls on the estimates of time, they were controls on the, they started doing very simple risk analysis. And all of which, someone bureaucratically, became part of, we’re not going to have that sort of disaster again. So it was good stuff. [pause] Something just went through my mind, sorry.

[20:00]  
*How else had the company changed as it started to grow up?*

I know what it was. Thank you for that prompt. Round about that time it started to get quite bureaucratic, and we started to build up work books of, this is the way we do things around here. Now if you’re working in the same building, you sort of pick that up. If you are working in isolation at home, it really has to be spelt out, and, there was a whole thick manual that was always being updated about, how to respond to enquiries, how to take on a member of staff, how to do progress reports for clients, how to do staff replacements, how to deal with religious holidays, because that caused some problems when the clients wanted people to work over religious holidays and some of the strict people just wouldn’t, or couldn’t. And those work books were really quite a sort of, definitive way in which we worked. There were about at that time eight levels of management between me and the person writing the code, and when I discovered that the Roman Catholic Church had seven layers of management between the individual and God, I thought I’d better sort of flatten it a bit and, really sort of start thinking, well why has it got like this? And it was in fact those work books that were telling people what to do in most circumstances that they were likely to meet. And doubtless it also told people what to do if they came across something that wasn’t covered in the book. So, it sort of moved from a work book mentality to a much more empowering mentality, and we moved, via seven drafts if I remember, to something called, we called it Charter, and I could probably still lay my hands on it.
And this charter set out on one page the way in which the company operated in a cultural form. It talked about trust, openness, transparency, quality, emphasis on the lack of commercialism perhaps, you know, the important thing is to get it done first. And we used to... Because projects are always being changed, somebody asked you to, ‘Oh can you put this in while you’re doing it?’ and, if you’re being bureaucratic you sort of say, ‘Oh well I, I need to estimate how much work that is going to be,’ and then you get the estimate. And when you’ve accepted the estimate, and, then I will put the amendment in. And, I can remember in that charter, it was really to take it the other way round, you first of all do it and then you sort out the, the legalities afterwards. We gave very honest progress reports. At that time most other companies were doing one progress report for the client and one for their internal management. And we told the client everything, warts and all, and in the long run that stood us in good stead because they did actually trust what we were saying. And it forced us perhaps to monitor more closely, because if you’re going to tell somebody, ‘We’re slipping in time,’ if you do it in week one, in week two you can go to the client and sort of say, ‘Well what are you going to do about it?’ and what we are going to do about it. And very often the client could help on this, if he knew that... Because it was in both our interest to run this thing to time. And, the client could help with providing more machine time, providing speedier turn-round, perhaps prioritising, well this bit doesn’t matter, it doesn’t have to be there on the deadline, that could come a week later, or whatever it was. And then openness certainly helped us again build up confidence with the client, and, eventually over the years it moved to be a sort of, partnership. We learnt not to think in terms of them and us, but on this project we are doing this, and that might include people that, other companies that we had subcontracted for various major things, machine time or something like that. And that’s a, a corporate culture that has, I think it was coming in generally. I mean nowadays one doesn’t just have takeovers and mergers and so on, you just take on a partnership, and when the partnership no longer is valuable to either side, it just quietly dissolves without any, any drama. And... [pause] Lost it. Sorry.

[25:33]

I was wondering as well though, how did your staff take to, first the extra bureaucracy, and then the charter coming in?
Well the charter took about eighteen months, and, they had several attempts at writing it and rewriting it, and, eventually it got rewritten professionally too so that it looked nice and had good, precise wording. I was going to sort of say, contracts also have, have moved over the years, and I suppose we were in at the beginning of that, where you don’t have a contract with people that you might have had a contract with earlier. You have a memorandum of understanding, the understanding is, that we’re going to do that, you’re going to do that, together we’re going to do this. And, it has no legal, you don’t finish up when things go wrong pulling a contract out of the drawer, because, at that time it’s too late, so you actually have to... So I think we were good in customer service, and, when after twenty-five years Hilary came in, and she was the third attempt to manage succession as far as I was concerned, the first had been an internal candidate who had served as deputy managing director as we referred to it in those days, when I took a three-month sabbatical, and had managed very well, so when I came back I sort of, you know, we sort of left her in position. And... [pause] The second... Oh and she had gone ill, and, has since died. The second again internal candidate, who was absolutely splendid, name of Alison Newell, she had started off by being sent up to Scotland to set up FI Scotland, and then came back and ran the whole company, and she did it very well indeed. But she was doing it, as I would do it, as a one-man band and kept sort of saying, you know, it needs some structure, we need, you know, sort of, to see what’s happening when you’re not there. And said, ‘Oh well I’ll always be here.’ And indeed her health record was fine. But eventually the board, and I already had a little board by then, said, ‘You must appoint a deputy.’ And, you can’t really do that to somebody, and so within a fortnight of that I think she resigned. So that was, two failures on the succession for quite different reasons. And, the third time I went out to headhunters. And they located from the ICL, computer manufacturer, a, an offshoot of theirs which had used home workers, modelled on us of course, but they had been using it for their own internal work. And so, Hilary Cropper had been a, the direct... not director, they didn’t use that, but she, she had managed that, that unit, and was described as the most senior woman in ICL, and was also described as, had she been a man she would have been on the board. And, that’s always what happens isn’t it. Anyway, I was lucky and I got her. And, she was, as always, you take the first few months finding out what it’s all about, and, oh you do this, and you do this. And then there were some instances, and, pricing was one of them, where she was so horrified as to how we priced, horrified. ‘You do what?’
And this was twenty-five years after the start. Pricing was all wrong. And of course it’s much more difficult to change it, you can change it for new contracts, but then they all say, ‘Well you didn’t...’ Anyway, it was awful. But she got it right eventually, and in particular, she changed it from time spent to work done. And, we had had a bit of that earlier, because that’s how we paid, but, it really did make quite a difference.

Mm.

I found it quite difficult to work with her, simply because, she was undoing a lot of the things that I had done. Which is always irritating, but we did manage. And...

[30:27]

When did she come in again, 1987? Well it’s got to be twenty-five years from ’62.

Yes. I know she was there at the twenty-five years, and I think that was in her first year or something like that. We had a big celebration for twenty-five years, and we pulled everybody together at the NEC in Birmingham and had a big... I talked about how the company had grown up, and we gave presents to people, and, little mementos, and, and had some entertainment, and, and pudding that came in with sparklers in, which in those days was considered height of sophistication, and somebody doing dry ice in the middle of my presentation. You know, very very, good stuff from the point of view of pulling everybody together. And I certainly found there that, there’s something magic about twenty-five years anyway, and I thought, really, I don’t want to take this any further. And, whereas I had started off handing over the UK side and was continuing with the international work, which wasn’t very much, I just asked Hilary to take the whole lot over, and, I mean she, she was marvellous. As I say, she did lots of things which undid prize possessions of mine, but that’s, that’s how it goes.

[31:54]

You’ve talked about, quite a lot about the way that systems come into this, how the company changes. I was just wondering if we could talk for a little bit though about,
just give me an idea of how the company grows in this period. So, we’ve started off in ‘62, and, you know, the...

Yes.

There’s you and the cottage, and the clients sort of grow. So, and then you move to the premises...

Station Road.

Station Road. How does it go from there, how does it grow?

Then we moved to other premises also in Chesham, The Bury, where we had, I think three rooms in the servants’ quarters of a sort of mansion house, which was the second biggest house in, in Chesham. Characterful offices, and nicely self-contained, our own front door, you could see clients there with a reasonable image, and access to some very nice, nice grounds. And those three rooms then grew to five, to seven, then we took another floor, then we took another building in the complex. And it got quite sizeable there. And this was just the, the centre, because everybody was still working from home. We also then took some premises in Chesham that were, half a mile away or something, and we’d put the accounts in there or something that was sort of quite separate, could go away. But I mean it was pretty, cumbersome. And so we started to... It was round about that time that Harvard did its study. We started to look for new premises. And, by that time I had got a reasonable board operational that had started off as advisors, and had gradually taken on proper board responsibilities. And, I’d got a pension scheme in already, of which I was very proud, because it was quite early on. I had started looking at accommodation to buy, because, as a tenant you always have a little bit of... I, I like to own, own premises. And, we looked at several, both in Chesham and outside, and eventually bought a modest new renovated church hall. I mean it... Sorry, it was a renovated church hall, but it was modernised and new and central heating and, and toilets, and, everything that was needed. And we bought it empty. I can’t remember what we bought it for, but I can’t remember we bought it for, but I can remember we sold it for a million. So, you know, it was a sizeable little base there. It was, St George’s Hall I think it
was called, but anyway, it was adjacent to... No, it was St Peter’s Hall, because it was adjacent to St Peter’s Church. And the driveway that accessed the little bit of car parking went past the church and, shared some of the access with the church, so we found to our horror that we’d got VIP clients and there was a funeral going on or something like that. So we had to watch things like that. And, it also went over a little bit of consecrated ground, and I was interested how they had deconsecrated a little bit of ground, only a few square yards, very nicely with screens round, and prayers and people digging up bones and stuff like that.

Up to that time, and I think following, we had had regional offices starting to develop. We were so green really, that, the one that was circling Chesham, where obviously, you know, quite a lot of, centre of gravity there, we called Central, our Central Region. And, something else we called Northern Region was sort of only in the Midlands or something like that. I mean our geography was atrocious. But, we had the same problem there with rented accommodation for the regional offices, which were then very small, like The Bury had been, two, three, five offices, five rooms, and one I remember was over a dentist, was under a dentist actually, it was a three-storey house, we were on the second floor and the... yes, the top floor I think was a dentist. And all was well except that on Fridays he did his dental surgery, and if you were not careful you would meet people [laughs] being practically carried out, down from the dentist with their bloody mouths and so on, sort of groaning and moaning. Because, to, to maintain a professional, this is a consultancy, it’s very different to just running a shop or a dentist where it’s one person working at the...

[35:55]

Sounds very much like image is very important, you know, it’s...

Mm. Perhaps it always should be. It’s sort of part of what we now call branding. But, I think for us in particular, or perhaps me in particular, without that, we would have just been a group of amateur women playing with computers. [pause] The... [pause] They were all character offices up to the stage of Berkhamsted, which is in the adjacent county of Hertfordshire, and, when we outgrew that, and Hilary came in, at that stage we were already, we already had the offices. Because sometimes she was a bit sort of disparaging about this sort of amateur company compared with ICL
where she had been before, and I sort of, for heaven’s sake, you know, we own our own property, we’ve got our pension scheme in, you know, you come in with a great big Porsche as a company car, you know, it was all... It was beginning to get quite... Anyway, the next time we outgrew that, again we started looking, and, there were two that she shortlisted for me, one was a characterful office, which I think she thought I was going to take, and the other one was a modern, sort of rather boring, boring estate, they called it a campus, in Hemel Hempstead. And, I knew which I would prefer to work in, but I also knew what I thought, or I thought I knew what Hilary wanted, and in fact we took the Hemel Hempstead, the modern one, and were there for, quite a few years. And again, that transition into a very conventional company, more and more, more and more people working full-time in the office, we were hot-desking, that was fairly early on to do that, people would just come in and... [pause] Something else just went through my mind about that. [pause] Question.

[39:56]

You mentioned the board a little while ago.

Yup.

Who was on the board, at the start, sort of advisers?

The advisers would be, Derek, not for very long because it’s really not his scene; Kit Grindley for some time; a woman whom I need to go back and talk about whose name was Pamela Woodman, who brought in an ex-boss of hers called Frank Knight, and he was very strong. That was probably it. Me. And, I really used it as a sounding board where there were people whose opinions I respected, though I could sort of say, ‘Look, I’m not sure whether to do this or this.’ Because I had learnt not to do that sort of, ‘Shall we go into Holland?’ ‘What about this?’ and, ‘Shall we do that?’ and... Because people all took it too seriously and then got unsettled when I didn’t do it, and, ‘I thought we were going into Holland,’ and so on. I said, ‘No, I was just talking about it,’ you know. So, I needed a, a sounding board, and they acted like that. But after some, a couple of years I suppose, they did become a proper board with the responsibility for the strategic direction for the company, began to formalise it. I got a new chairman in, who had been the chairman of SEGB, whose name will come back
to me. And he didn’t last very long, but, he made his contribution. He was very formal, he introduced the sort of discipline of, separating management from direction. He would come in only for the board meetings, pretty well only. He would shake our hands as we came in to the board meeting. He taught us some of the corporate governance issues that had become a sort of total muddle, so that in the middle of discussing some cash flow problem, we’d sort of get diverted into, did we need new office desks. And, you know, we just hadn’t got those things separated. And, and he really did help with that. However, he did alienate a large number of people, and, although I learnt a great deal from him, it was clear that he had to go.

How did he alienate them?

Patronising, I think. He’d been chairman of SEGB and he’d come back to this little tin-pot company, with women, you know. I had had warning, because, I knew somebody who worked at the CEGB at the board level, and after I had made an offer to him I phoned up this acquaintance and sort of said, ‘I’ve asked him to come and join.’ ‘Steve, he’ll ruin the company!’ But I had already made the offer. And, oh, the management... But anyway, we learnt...

[43:20]

Can I go back to Pamela Woodman, who was really quite important, who joined the company round about 1965, 6, very early on. Certainly I was still... Was I still in Moss Cottage? I’m not sure. She had previously worked with the Commercial Union, and was a single parent, and, which in those days was considered quite scandalous, and, had commercial experience and a lot of management experience, you know, she really had run large teams there. And, I came across her, I don’t know how, and, realised that here was somebody who I liked very much, and had complementary skills, commercial, not scientific, big style, not little style, professional, not entrepreneurial. And we sort of started working tog... I offered her partnership, that’s right, pretty well early on, ‘Will you come in as a partner?’ Because I... But she declined that, because she needed a salary. So she came in at a salary of £2,000 a year, I can remember it now, vast sums. And, not only that but no sooner had she started than she wanted a secretary, you know, a full-time secretary and that sort of thing. Anyway, it was very successful, and she had bought a house in Great Missenden, which was fairly near, and she had her daughter, Fiona-Jane, and
Derek became the godfather for Fiona. So it was a very close, personal relationship. And we were able to talk about a lot of things, not just the business but also she was one of the few people I talked about about my son. We used to go for walks together with the children in pushchairs, really discussing business issues, but, you know, the kids were having a nice time as well. We went on holiday once when, there’d been a slack period or something like that and off we went. And, it was all set for a long-term development. I’m just trying to remember how it happened, but basically, almost out of the blue as far as I was concerned, and I can’t remember a notice period, but she was employed so she would have had a notice period, she had a breakaway group. And, I was distraught. I found it, a breach of trust and, I was so disappointed. I was so worried, because I was losing my best and probably only manager at that level. I, I couldn’t understand it, what had I done wrong, you know? And how, how could this happen? And of course since then I’ve learnt that most organisations have a breakaway group every, once in every seven years is the statistic. And when I worked out mine, it was much the same as well. But that one was really, really ghastly. And, I think it was the personal issues that was worse than the commercial ones. In particular she set up, not just a rival organisation, but she approached every member of the panel and offered them membership of her panel. And she, it was called Pamela Woodman Associates. And, some of the panel members came to me and said, ‘Can we accept?’ And I said, ‘Well, in terms of operating, yes, you are a freelance, if you want to accept. I hope you won’t, but I, you know...’ And so most of them did. And so, she was selling to, she knew the customers, she knew the, the clients, she knew the prospects, and, was selling on the basis that she had all the freelance staff without any of the baggage, the, you know, job that we were still trying to tie up, and, weren’t getting paid for and all that sort of thing, because we, all our customers were satisfied.

[48:15]
And, it was quite a blow, and I, I really, I’ve never felt the same about colleagues after that. I’m working with one now that I’m getting quite close with, and, I got very close with a company secretary as well, we’re proper friends now. But from the point of view of being dependent on somebody like that, I, I, it really damaged me, and, this was at a time when, it was in, during the Seventies recession, where I think I mentioned we were down to two projects. And, again we were dissembling, I can remember, one of the projects was for Unilever, good name to have, and, somebody
would ring up and there would be some query on, on an invoice or something, and I can remember my wonderful part-time PA sort of saying, you know, ‘Oh could we have the invoice number please? Hold on one minute,’ you know, and I’m saying...

[laughs] There was the pile of... [laughing] Because we, again you, you, you can’t sell when you show that you’re down to two projects. I was down to answering the phone again, I was down to answering, doing some of my own typing, my own filing. It was just, batten... what was the expression we used? Batten, battening down the hatches. And, it was pretty grim. When the Pamela Woodman Associates came up, I can remember actually rocking with fear at home, thinking, what am I going to do? What am I going to do? What on earth can I do? It’s just awful. Because, my pride, I did not want to be categorised as what’s called a fair-weather business, that was fine when the market’s on the up and up, and collapses at the first downturn, quite apart from having a breakaway. And, it did seem that I was going to have enormous difficulty to get out of that, which, sort of did. Again a very slow climb up. There was some industrial espionage going on as well, which again upset me, that people should be looking at papers that were clearly confidential, and feeding it out to Pamela Woodman Associates. So, again we, we stripped, started locking stuff up at night and all that sort of thing. Nasty. We always thought, thought, we never proved, we knew who it was, and I found it hard to go on working with her, and present her with her gold watch on ten years’ service. But, you can’t prove anything like that, and I may have been wrong.

*What sort of industrial espionage?*

In particular looking at proposals that had come in to us, and sort of saying, so-and-so’s looking for something. And quoting just under us every time, using the same team. [laughs] So it’s, [coughs] nasty.

[51:37]

*Well why did she break away?*

Well, looking back, I think there were a lot of jealousies there, a lot of jealousies. [pause] Certainly wasn’t money. Well I don’t think it could have been money. I’m not the best person to work for, I’m pretty forceful and so on, but we had clearly
designated areas, so, we were really picking each other’s brains rather than telling each other what to do. I think it was jealousy, and... [pause] I was very very upset about it. Years afterwards I came across her daughter, Fiona-Jane, then grown up, and, that was in Scotland, because she remarried. And, years after that... [pause] I tell the story wrongly. One of the other seniors, Susette Harold, who eventually finished up as the, the managing director who had gone, sick, she left to work with Pamela Woodman. And that was a blow, because Susette was a very upright, precise, high-quality person, whom I respected enormously, and she worked very professionally, she gave notice, she handed over everything properly. And off she went to work with Pamela. And, to my, I must say, delight, she came back in about, eight, nine weeks, that sort of thing, a short period, and said, ‘I have made a dreadful mistake, can I come back?’ And, to my credit I said, ‘Yes.’ But of course it was also very good for the company to realise that, whatever had gone... I mean I never knew what, what happened, but that, she sort of learnt things weren’t so easy outside, and, you know, was with me for many years afterwards, and I was with her the day before she died, but... She, she got MS. It’s horrid. Questions, get me going.

[54:08]

Did you have to do a lot of travelling at this time? Little offices in different places.

Well, not too bad. I used to still stay with, you know, friends to keep the, the money down and so on.

What is a day’s work like, in...?

What, for me now or then?

I’m trying, I’m just trying to... Pick, pick a year when, sort of, say the end of the Sixties.

A lot of phone calls, a lot of admin. A lot of picking stuff out of files that’s been mis-filed and I’ll never find it there again, so I’d better put it somewhere else. In that I’m very keen on structure, and, I’m keen on records and being able to access and learn from experience. And you can only do that if you work in a sort of, structured way.
So I was teaching a lot of people, well not teaching, I was coaching a lot of people. And I still think I can do that. It’s very satisfying to coach somebody and get them to take the minutes of a meeting better than I can. And, once people do that, they start to fly. One of my first employees, Russell Rogers, he’s now running a company in South Africa; my first secretary, Pat Lovelace, she’s also in South Africa, quite independently, running some sort of, agency. Alison Newell, who was, she ran her own company together with the Scottish manager whom she poached. But, again, people did very very well. The Danish company, which again had a ghastly breakaway group, that’s probably another story...

_Danish company?

Yeah, I haven’t mentioned that, have I? [laughs] We did go international. Let’s talk more about sort of, growing people. I’m, I think of myself as a gardener. I grow people. I, I point people in the right direction. And I think really I am much more of a leader than I am a manager. I do some of the management now, I have learnt the techniques, I’ve been on a few courses. I do it dutifully, but with no flare, and no interest. And so, it’s really the starting of things, the concepts that were there with that company, and with some of the other things that I’ve done.

[57:11] One of the splits between Pamela and I was that it was decided that she would run the existing business. It started off, she would run the existing business and I would do the marketing and sales. And then, she would run, I think because she, probably things were starting to go wrong although I didn’t know, I said that she would run the whole of the UK and I would concentrate on the outside. And we started with a little F International in Denmark. Why Denmark? It’s small, it has a royal family, and it, everybody speaks, or understands, English there. And it seemed a modest little, little start, I mean no, no market surveys, no nothing.

_It has a royal family. I... [laughter] I have to pick up on that, I’m sorry._

It just has got a culture that’s very akin to the British, really. They behaved decently in the war, all those sorts of things. The second one was in Holland, which also included, it was really Benelux, so did a bit of work in, in Belgium as well. Neither of
them were terribly successful. The Danish one had a nasty breakaway group, and, we eventually sold it or gave it to the staff, because the, the size of it, it’s a tiny little country really, the size of it just didn’t merit the sort of management it needed from us, and, so that... I don’t know whether it still exists, they changed its name obviously. The Dutch one we eventually sold for a peppercorn to another Dutch software house. Much the same sort of argument, it didn’t get big enough, it didn’t seem to, you know, without an entrepreneur there, it just didn’t sort of, really work. The American one was a bit different, because that started in 1978, when one of my colleagues met a guy called Bert Grad at a world computer conference in Barcelona, and, the suggestion was that we should start under licence with him. Now how did that work? We were called F International all right. We were somehow linked to them. We sat in his offices. It wasn’t a franchise, it really was working under licence, and we did that with Burt Grad on the East Coast just outside New York, and, he introduced us to somebody else, whose name... the name will come back, on the West Coast. So we had two actual branches in the States. The west one folded within about eighteen months. The east one kept going for a bit longer, and, Susette who by that time had retired for ill health did some, few weeks there as sort of therapeutic earnings, I don’t know if you’ve heard of those.

Mm.

I was there quite a lot. And it was, a very exciting time. I, I love New York itself. But we were outside in a sort of little suburb where, I sort of stayed in the spare bedroom of my travel agent, you know, it was not as sophisticated as people thought. And I got stuck there in very bad snowy weather, and had to learn to drive a car that didn’t have gears, it had, you know, automatic, God knows what. I met up there with the woman who had been the company secretary of business operations research. So that link was re-made. And we became quite... She was also working for Burt Grad on a consultancy basis. So we met there more by chance than anything else, and, when we were both in the States we, we’d meet up. And, I, I found her extremely interesting and stimulating. [pause] What was I talking...?

[01:01:55]

Yeah. I made a note here about a market survey. The relationships between staff. I think... When Hilary first came in, so that would be in, 83, ’84, something, she did for
the first time a market survey of the staff. And, it was the first time we’d ever done that. And you asked, how did the staff feel, and that was a rude, rude awakening. Because, how they viewed me was not very kindly. A lot of misunderstandings. How... And how they wanted to work was not how I had been offering them, and providing for the last twenty years. It turned out that they did not value the home working nearly as much as, either I thought or that the cost of home working warranted. What they valued was flexibility. And they were quite happy to go into an office, as long as the hours were flexible and the offices were secure. So, the little regional offices, from the little characterful places on top of the dentist or underneath the dentist, over the years merged into small, modern, business park type buildings, close to motorway intersections, so that people could get into the office easily, and we, the aim was, I think, that people should be able to get into an office, one and a half hours or something. So I gave quite a big catchment area. And we did it by time rather than distance, because we were following the motorway thing. So that was, the market surveys are amazingly effective, and I did it, I copied that really with something in the British Computer Society. [pause] During this time... You wanted to interrupt.

*Oh sorry. I was just wondering, what was your staff’s opinion of you in these surveys?*

[pause] Various things came out. That I wasn’t dressing appropriately, because I was so bloody poor, you know, I couldn’t afford to. But I, after that I have always made sure I’ve never turned up in an office in less than professional, good clothing. They found my temper very hard to take, and I did have a temper in those days, and very few of them understood what was going on at home. They found the sort of volatility, the dashing around in all directions, all the entrepreneurial side, the sort of simplicity of, if it works we’ll do more of it, and if it doesn’t work we’ll stop it and try something else. That they found quite difficult. Because most people are used to a structured environment, which is what I might aim for in systems but don’t necessarily emulate. I mean, I work in a very messy sort of way. I think in a messy sort of way, because I haven’t had good education. I’m trying to think what else came out of that survey. But surveys are quite useful, because you, you have to take it. If they don’t value home working, what’s the point of providing it?
Mm. This brings me onto another question actually.

Yup.

[01:05:56]
When does money stop being a worry in this story? Starting with £6, and I would have thought by the time the survey came round twenty years later and you’re sort of talking about, still worrying about money on clothes for instance...

Well everyone always assumed that I was the highest paid director in the annual report, but I certainly wasn’t. Very far from it. So I drew a very low salary, part... I don’t know. Partly because I thought it was adequate. And what I had went on supporting Giles, our son. So I was... We ran quite a big house then. My sister was living with us, a niece, I’d got Giles, pretty expensive, I’d got care workers for Giles. It was an expensive lifestyle. But I mean when I left, I was earning £100,000, but that was after thirty years, and I had probably only been earning well for about the last, eight years or something like that. So that when I left I really hadn’t got enough even in my pension scheme to allow me to rely on that as distinct from selling company shares, but you know, there’s a whole section here about selling company shares.

Do you want to take a short break?

[puffs] Once I get going... What is it?

[End of Part 9]
OK. Looking back, there was always an element of trying to be something more than what we currently were, and that of course is how you become a learning organisation, and move on to the next stage. We certainly always tried to disguise the basic domesticity and unusualness of the set-up, and when we were tendering for work, we would talk more about, well we learnt to offer a fixed price and give the career details of typical people that might be on the project, rather than sort of saying, ‘This one’s going to work five hours, this one’s going to work twenty hours, this one’s going to work full-time for three weeks in the middle,’ and confuse people by the unusual nature of the workforce. But... [pause] So that’s why we moved to fixed prices externally. It was crisp, we can do this for £5,000 for, three and a quarter months or something. And then we started to balance that with fixed prices internally, and that was good and healthy because it put a, a ceiling on how much it was going to cost us to actually produce the work, so it wasn’t so much of a question. And... So staff were offered a fixed price for the bit that they were asked to do, and that encouraged them to find their own technical solutions that encouraged them to re-use code, not do everything from scratch all the time; it encouraged them to use tools which were coming into, I think the Seventies and Eighties. There started to be real tools to help you in development. And they also allowed people who were out of date from the technology, because they had had several years out of the industry, to get work by effectively sponsoring their own training, if they had to learn a, a language or a technique before they could even start this job. Fair do’s. as long as they costed their own effort there, because they were offered a fixed price for delivering the end job.

[02:46]
And that concept of self-training and so on eventually became the norm, and led to the sort of sheer empowerment of the staff to which share ownership contributed, but also it was the culture of people being responsible for their own work, being responsible for their own training, being responsible for their own quality control. And, we were a reasonable company, and we, at the end of each project we worked out what the hourly rate, because people still kept timesheets, what the hourly rate was, and if it
fell below an acceptable minimum, we made it up irrespective of the fixed price. But that whole process pulled out the high earners, the ones that were managing on a very small number of hours, earning tremendously well, so that we could systematise their way of working and bring our costs down on the next one, and everybody would, could use that.

[04:04]
We talked about risk analysis, and that followed starting to estimate work before we started it, and, there must be all sorts of theories about quantity surveying and so on, but we’re simple people, and we estimated work by breaking it down into chunks, no chunk being larger than something we had done before successfully. So that in fact we were not taking so much risk because we knew what the work parcels were like. And, the control which used to be just estimating at start and post-mortem at the end, really as the projects got bigger became, re-estimate... sorry, controlling it at the end of every phase, but then re-estimating how much we needed from now to the end, rather than taking the original estimate, subtracting the number of hours that had already been done, and kidding ourselves that that was what was left to do. So, they’re simple concepts, but made a tremendous difference to how we were working and how we became successful in always delivering to time and cost, and that is simply by agreeing changes with the client. So if you agree, you got a three-year contract, and, and, or a three-year project, and, three months into the job you sort of say, ‘Oh well actually it’s going to be three years two months, is that all right?’ Everybody said, ‘That’s fine.’ It’s when you get right to the end and sort of say, ‘Sorry, we’re not going to deliver on time.’ So we were able to renegotiate all the time with clients, and, there isn’t a person in the computer industry that I’m, need to avoid because in any way we did a poor job for them.

[06:15]
That wasn’t to say that jobs didn’t go wrong. A dramatic one was for Sheffield Regional Hospital Board, and we always had difficulty with local authorities and, and their ilk, because somehow they did not even... they were not capable of dealing with change control, and, you know, you would add a great big contingency at the beginning because you knew they weren’t going to do it, and, you knew it was no point in sort of saying, I won’t incorporate the amendments when the tax laws have changed or whatever it is. And, that took all our profits for I think three years. And
that’s the sort of things that can happen on fixed price. And, we don’t want many of
those because you’d go out of business.

[07:03]
What other sorts of problems would come up in the course of jobs?

[pause] Well there were personnel problems between staff and clients. Mismatches.
I mentioned the client who was madly in love with Alison. Well you can’t really
work with that. It did become a problem. I, I... [pause] Yah. There were technical
problems when we had, when the technology changed. When IBM introduced PL/1,
which was a programming language, I think it stood for PL/1, programming language
1, we really thought that that would be it, the end of our work, that it was just going to
be all automated. When new languages came in, there was this balance between the
terrible, terrible risk we took, once by training 100 programmers in COBOL without
the first COBOL job at all, and, you know, maybe we were just training them for
somebody else to, to employ them, but without training we couldn’t undertake this
work, and there was a whole... It was very dynamic.

[08:35]
How else does changing technology actually impact on the work that you were doing?

[pause] Well work started, sometimes in binary; occasionally, I can only think of one
job, doing a bit of optimum coding, stuff on mercury delay lines. And finished up,
not merely writing the internals of a machine but writing in very high level languages,
till it becomes more and more remote from the machine, because there are sort of
levels in between. [pause] It’s a fairly gradual process really. I was never very
conscious of how it moved from second-generation to third-generation, whatever it
was called. Various things came in from Japan on, so-called expert systems, and they
had got, again a very mechanistic approach to all their science, and at one stage
looked as if they were really overtaking Britain in its research and development.

Fourth-generation.
Fourth-generation, was it called? I can’t remember what it was called. Fourth-generation? Fifth-generation? Fifth...

*Fifth-generation. Fifth-generation, yes.*

I think it was fifth. Yes. And it was exciting. [pause] And you certainly... I, I think when the, when the minis came in, or when the desktops came in, you would have on your desktop something as powerful as the London University’s Atlas computing had been earlier on, and, the way in which you did things, and then the idea of doing two turn-rounds is the equivalent of pressing five keys a week, it just all became, very difficult and, different. And, the thing about intellectual property rights, which software houses used to debate earnestly, we eventually got round it by sort of saying, we were not going to spend the time taking out patents on anything that we had got that was special, because it was so costly and it was moving so fast that by the time we had got the patents we had actually moved on, were not using that at all. So we just kept sort of trying to keep in front of other people. I would say that we were not leading-edge software in any way; other companies fulfilled that. But, very reliable, quality, middle-of-the-road stuff, and, eventually just commercial, hardly any scientific. In fact I think we, we closed the scientific division once, yes, Hilary closed it. Ah! [laughs] You actually have to... But we put paid to some running projects and gave notice on them, you know, just, we closed the division. It just takes too much management effort.

[12:15]

While we’re on the subject of change, I was wondering, could you give me an overview of how what you’re doing in FI actually changes over your time there?

Well it started off doing the technical work, and then the supervision, and then the, basically sales, and then the strategy stuff, and then the international. And then starting in the Seventies, on the empowerment side, put a lot of effort into that, getting the shares scheme going, that started in the Seventies. I was also for most of that period the company’s figurehead, and I was outing and abouting in the industry, as much as ever I could, representing the company, not only at the BCS but also at the various industry organisations or industry-related organisations. We became early
members of the Percent Club, which committed one per cent of pre-tax profits to a charity, and, I came back and said to the board I wanted to join this, and they asked the obvious question, and how much are we spending at the moment? And it turned out when we did the arithmetic we were already spending well over one per cent. And, this business of actually counting and learning and knowing what the hell you’re talking about, I think is quite important. But the thing was that the Percent Club, it wasn’t just the money we were nominally passing to other people, but it took us, we were the founder members of that, but it took what was then a medium size company into a club of people who were mainly the large ones, and they were our prospective clients. And so I got to know a lot of, generally chairmen, sometimes just the managing directors, at that equality level in that club. And so it had a real marketing... It wasn’t why I joined, because I’ve always been interested in, in sharing whatever wealth there is going around, but it had its marketing impact as well. So representing the company outside was something that I had done for most of the period in my life, until Hilary came in and then we had a year when we sort of did it together, every interview I gave we did together and so on, and gradually handed over to her. And, then she sort of, I must say, gave the impression that, she would talk about ‘my company’ and, as if she had done it all. And I sort of, kept very quiet, you know. Anyway. Yah. Does that answer your question?

[15:45]
Yes. I was wondering there, how did you feel to actually hand it over, you know, something you’ve grown yourself over that period?

I think every parent does that with their adolescent children anyway, you actually have to let go. And if you love something, you do set it free, and it was all part of that. It, it had to be... I wish I could have taken the co-ownership further, but it seemed to be as far as the professional managers wanted it to go, and, they were really not willing to take it further. Professional managers are quite, not to generalise, but one time we were going through quite a difficult period, I can’t remember when, and we were going to suggest to the staff reduced fee structures and so on, and, I suggested to the board that we all took a ten per cent cut, as a symbol. Oh no, they wouldn’t have it. You know, and you sort of think, well, that was a good board, how come that they would.... And of course we were not paying them very well or
anything. But as a symbol, a board member, I think... Anyway, I, I was... These things happen. People are pretty self-centred. And the bigger the company got, the less emotionally charged it became. And that’s helping.

[17:12]
When the company was finally acquired by Steria in 1990... sorry, 19... [pause] 2000... My God! 1998? Something like that. Seems a long time ago now. I can look that up. But, it sort of goes with the co-ownership, so maybe I’ll leave that to go with another story, OK? I think I’m getting tired.

*Can I ask one final question and maybe call it quits?*

Mhm.

[17:55]
*There was just a little word you brought up a little while ago which was success, and I was wondering, when did you start thinking of this as a success?*

[pause] I think it’s in my nature to always want the next thing. So, success means changing one’s targets and ambitions for the next thing. I went through a stage of being much honoured, by the Institute of Electrical Engineers, by the BCS, by various honorary doctorates and honorary fellowships, and, a woman of... You know...

[pause] As if that was, the finish, and to me it was just always a journey. So, the lack of taking money out, which I suppose was a bit silly, but it did mean that I didn’t have any of the trappings of success for a very very long time. And I’m happy with that.

[end of session]

[End of Part 9]
...speak the date. This is an interview with Dame Stephanie Shirley, 16th of August 2010.

I’d like if I may to go back to the period at Dollis Hill, because I forgot several factual items that I think are appropriate for history. I started working there in 1951, and my salary, and this was considered to be a professional salary paid monthly rather than weekly, was £215 per annum. It was, it was classed as low, because I got subsidised lunches for about six months until I went up about... It went by age, as I think I’ve explained. But of course inflation has made a lot of these things look, look quite ridiculous. But it was a level at which you had to live very carefully. I haven’t spoken about the sort of clothes we wore, but I know for work I had two skirts and two cotton pullovery sort of type tops, and I just played the variations on that clothing. Both the skirts were black, one top was grey and the other one was black, and, I had a couple of very nice little, small silk scarves which I used to knot in a jaunty way around my neck. And somehow you sort of, kept going with, with a wardrobe like that as far as, as work’s concerned. The other thing that was very different is that we worked a five-and-a-half-day week. So on Saturday, I think we finished at one o’clock, but of course there was, the weekend was therefore much shorter, because by the time you had got home, had lunch, you know, it was two, three o’clock or something like that, and if you wanted to go out on Saturday night, which then as now it’s sort of, the time when a young woman wants to be out and about, that was pretty well the rest of Saturday. The way in which one lived frugally... I mean in no way were we poor then, or I was poor, but, the buses used to have fare stages, so that, the cost of the ticket would go up if you went on to another stage. And so, somebody like me would always get off at a fare stage and then walk the last little bit. So one really had to live very, very economically. And, the sort of, glam parts of, of make-up or clothes for parties or hair dos and things like that, just, were just irrelevant really. By the time I was living in Walm Lane I used to buy flowers every week, every Friday on my way home, because by that time we had dropped to five days a week, and, what did I buy? A single rose. And so I had a specimen vase and you would put something living and lovely into it. Because, you know, buying a, sort of, I, I have, nowadays I have flowers done for me every, again still Friday, and, they’re beautifully arranged
and selected, blah blah blah, but of course I got just as much pleasure out of the, the small bouquets and still do.

*When did you move to Walm Lane?*

Age of about, nineteen, something like that. I didn’t really get on with my mother, and, so, I was looking for a bedsitter, and, found this one which was at the top of a Victorian villa where the landlady and landlord, Mr and Mrs Coen, lived on the ground floor, and, I lived in the attic where there was nobody else on that floor, so I had my own little staircase with a door at the bottom, and, I felt very, grown-up and sophisticated. It was only a bedsitter, I had to go downstairs for bathroom and toilet, but I had a tiny little kitchen, and a door that was open at the bottom of the stairs and a door that was locked at the top of the stairs. And, I had, I know not whence, a small nameplate which I put on that door, and I felt very sophisticated. But I think I digress. [04:49]

The other thing was that during the FI days, which started in ’62, it was very much a woman’s company with positive discrimination going on there, but there was legislation going through and, with much discussion, and by 1975 there were, equal opportunities legislation was, was passed, and it became illegal to do the sort of positive discrimination that we were doing, and we actually had to employ men, because, if equal opportunities goes one way, it goes both ways. The women grouping remained though pretty important. When two... I mean when I used to go to conferences and things like that, the chairman would say, ‘Good morning gentlemen, Mrs Shirley.’ Because I’d be the only woman there. But that improved after a bit, and, one was careful not to associate only with women, because, if you were actually doing a woman’s role, there was no point in making one’s own little ghetto. I was invited to join a quite important women’s group which was, a thing called Forum, which was actually an international thing, and I once attended a Forum meeting in the States, which had basically the... I’m trying to think how, how this was funded, because I don’t think we paid for attendance. But we would have a meal together. Maybe we, yes, I think we just acted as, as hosts from time to time. But the invitations went out to the top women in the Civil Service, that was Ann Muller; in computing, that was me; in restaurateur, that was Prue Leith; in journalism, that was Katharine Whitehorn; in law, Elizabeth Butler-Sloss. And, it was quite a, each of us
in our own way was either pre-eminent or aiming to be pre-eminent, and we started off talking about women’s issues, but after two or three meetings began to be used to the, the confidentiality and the intimacy of the group. And I can remember talking for the first time in public the fact that I had a learning disabled child, and indicated the sort of pressures that this gave to the family and to my work. I can remember somebody else talking about the problems that she had with her geriatric mother. So it wasn’t all sort of professional talk, but we were very much supportive, and as always when you’ve got a group like that, even today I think I could ring up, Katy Whitehorn or, or... and just sort of say, ‘Who should be doing this?’[ph]. It was just a good, good network. And, women sort of, we group well together, and, I think as far as the company was concerned, it was clear that women achieved more in a female oriented culture company, just as girls learn better in a single-sex school, which is always very difficult but there it is, those are the facts.

**What sort of things would you talk about at these Forum meetings?**

Well we might talk about our work, so I would talk about IT; somebody else would talk about legislation going through; somebody else would talk about, how they set up their company, people like Prue Leith was an entrepreneur. It certainly started talking about women’s issues and then broadened out much more generally. Eventually I handed over my position so to speak to, to Hilary Cropper, which was part of a lot of that sort of handover, that I was ceasing to be, or wished to cease being the figurehead, and needed her to have that sort of prominence.

[09:25]

Part of that being a figurehead was an involvement in several outside activities, professional activities, and, in the main they were people that approached me, and they usually approached me because somebody at some committee had sort of said, ‘Well we need a woman here,’ and there weren’t many of us around, or, with any visibility, and so I got lots and lots of invitations, many of which I picked up because they were interesting, they extended my network, and at times I was getting quite bored with what I was doing in the company, because you do get into a, a state where, it’s reasonably stable and you’re just struggling to get to the next stage, and, it’s not sort of intellectually terribly stimulating. One of the first ones was an approach by the BBC to serve on their industry committee, and I think I only did it for one or two
years, and it only met every three months or so. And I can’t remember very much about it except that, it was clear that the BBC really didn’t know anything at all about industry, and we did debate that with the creative people present, because there was this balance between BBC staff and the outsiders, and, I had the feeling it did actually lead to programmes, not like today’s *Apprentice* but, Harvey Smith’s consultancy projects that were, were done, and to sort of, have a broader presentation of what industry was about, and what was nice about it.

*Why do you say the BBC had no, or seemed to have no idea of what industry was about?*

Oh, it was all Art with a capital A, and, you know, opera and literature and, wonderful things like that, but not the actual wealth creation process. It was about spending money. And, there are a lot of parallels today when you talk about charities and philanthropists. It is actually the philanthropists who make it happen; the charities spend it. And, the BBC was in that state. [pause] I’m trying to think of the various different periods, what came next, because, there was an International Year of Disabled People, which I put a lot of effort into, where I mounted in the House of Commons, where there’s an upper waiting room for small exhibitions, and I mounted a small exhibition about high tech aids for people without sight, without hearing and so on. So this was not the development of robotics for people to power wheelchairs, but literally, you know, the blind to see, the deaf to hear and so on. And, I gave a speech in one of the committee rooms there that I, I can remember preparing for for, for months, because, I had to get the information about the various equipment that was available and where it was going.

*How did the speech go?*

Well I think it did make some difference. I look at it now and I think, yes, I was talking about most of the things that, some of the equipment is still in use. Some of the equipment I see in use in hospitals, things like the Kurzweil, which was a sort of reading of text. That was terribly important, and, now, what used to be a piece of equipment that was, the size of two fridges, is now some mobile thing that David Blunkett can use on his iPhone probably. I mean you know, it just has moved on so
marvellously. And this is of course the sheer speed of, of development in IT.
Whenever one tries to predict where IT is going, one over-estimates the difficulties
and thinks it will only take... I’ve got that wrong haven’t I. But it always takes longer
than you think, and at the same time things move faster because there are new things
coming in. And, I know in the Fifties, there was a lot of discussion as to whether
there would be books still in the year 2000, and we quite seriously thought, well there
might not be books then. You’re sort of trying to look ahead, and it was not, not very
successful, in looking, you know.
[14:48]
The big committee group that I joined was the British Computer Society, which I
joined when I was still at Dollis Hill, and then became quite active in it during the FI,
the F International days, and, it really was a most wonderful computing network.
There were geographic branches, thirty of them perhaps across the country, and the
first branch was, surprise surprise, London, and it met every month. And so I can
remember attending those meetings on a monthly basis, and learning about all sorts of
things about computing that other people were doing. So somebody I can remember
talking about a thesaurus. I didn’t even know what a thesaurus was. And this was
Thesaurus computing. And somebody else talking about logic design. Somebody
else talking about, artificial translations and things. So the London group was very
special, and, we really had some leading people there giving the talks. I sat there
silently, I never had enough confidence to ask a question, even if I thought I
understood it well enough to be able to answer meaningful questions.

*What sort of people did you meet?*

They were all academics, they were... It really was a, an academic environment. And
later on as I began to contribute more to the British Computer Society, one of the
things that I did was to move it very slightly from that academic environment to
something much more commercial, much more down to earth. And I can remember
when I was President, which was 19... oh God! ’79 I think, the lecture that I had, that I
gave to all the branches, that, you know, the president goes round to, was on the
strategic use of computing in, in commerce, and people using computing for, stock
control and logistics and all those sorts of things, but it was not a question of solving
yet another set of differential equations. I was active in the society when it moved to
chartered status, and at that time I was called the Vice-President, Professional.
Because there were several vice-presidents, so there would be a Vice-President,
Technical, and Vice-President, Professional. I think there was another one. So, the
BCS was a good network, very relevant to my interests. Pretty masculine. And it
spun off a variety of things including a Computer Conservation Society, which now
exists in its own right, but I launched that at the Science Museum at some stage in my
presidential year.

[18:40]
The business of women being the first this and the first that, and I was, a big fuss that
I was the first woman president, means that really you are motivated to do something
as well as you possibly can, and as well as anybody could do, because if you make a
mess of it, you put back the cause of women having these opportunities and being
able to develop by several years, because people sort of say, ‘Well we tried one of
those and she was awful, we’re not doing that again.’ And, so there was a lot of
pressure on women in business, not only to actually do one’s work to the satisfaction,
more than satisfaction of one’s employer, whoever that might be, but also to represent
our sex in, in a way that’s really quite unfair. The same thing happens of course today
with black people, that they have... I mean one or two of the Asian people I know,
and somebody said, ‘How did you get to know him?’ And I realised that he was the,
what’s the word? Not stereotypical, but he was the token non-white, as I was the
token woman, and so we, [laughs] we served on a lot of committees together, because
there weren’t very many of us around either.

[20:17]
One of the things that spun off from the British Computer Society was the Worshipful
Company of Information Technologists, which was much, much later to a certain
extent, and, I was approached by the secretary-general, the paid employee of the
British Computer Society, as to whether I would be on the founding court of the new
proposed livery company for the City of London. And, at that time there were I think
ninety-eight existing livery companies, including the big twelve who were, grounded
in, 600 years old Mercers’ Company as number one, and, there’s quite a clear pecking
order, not only going by date but also on size. And, the group that, the founders were
a competitor, Barney Gibbons, I’ve just written to him this weekend, who had
founded or had been a co-founder of a competitive software house, together with the
Lord Chamberlain of the City of London, Bernard Harty, and the third person was a
colleague of Barney’s called... Oh God! [pause] Can we turn it off? What was his name?

[pause in recording]

[22:08]
His name was Alan Benjamin. And... So those were the three founders, but they put together a group, and I was obviously the token woman, and, we met first of all in the, a small office, part of the Guildhall. And, we eventually developed a, what’s called a guild company, which was a company without livery, which still served, was in and for and of the City of London. Round that table was again a new network for me as far as I was concerned, including some people that I’ve come across in the, in the BCS, and some I’ve never come across at all. And... [pause] Switch it off. What am I trying to say?

[pause in recording]

OK?

[23:17]
Yup. A wise decision was made not to go ahead for livery status immediately, because that would have made us number ninety-nine, but to let somebody else go through in front of us, and therefore become the 100th livery company of the City of London with the appropriate figures, 1-0-0, which is very appropriate for a computer company. And that is relevant to my story, because I did eventually become its master, and that was, I was the, only the fifth woman master ever of a livery company, and three of those had been royals. And, one had, a woman called Sylvia Tutt, had been the Master of the Company of Secretaries, but I was the second therefore and, a common master. And again it was very high visibility, that suddenly in the City I could, I was, I knew what I was... people knew what I was doing. And of course I wasn’t working in the, I wasn’t living in the City, and I wasn’t working in the City, so it was all stuff that I had to do, really remotely and going in and, and so on.

[24:52]
So what do you do? It’s the same sort of thing as, how do you set up a company, how do you get it going, how do you make it stable, how do you professionalise it, how do you look ahead? And, one was, at that stage I was about the, third or fourth master of the company; it changes generally every year. And, one was looking for things that were along one of its three threads, which was, social, there is a social side to a livery company, charitable, and educational. And that hasn’t changed for 600 years. And, doing it pretty well on a shoestring, because, the membership was very young, there weren’t very many members, there were, an initial 100 were invited in, and I can remember working quite hard to get Hilary Cropper in as the second woman in the livery company, but included in that initial 100. And one of the things I came across was to, the idea of having a lecture to the captains of industry in the City, and inviting Bill Gates, who was by that time not known in the city, but technically was clearly making enormous strides. And, we set up a, an inaugural lecture, people sort of said, let’s make it yearly, but I was wise by that time, no point in saying it’s yearly, we’ve never had the second one. Anyway, that was the inaugural lecture for the livery company. And, it was a black tie event, in the City, and the invitations were literally to the Chairman, Governor of the Bank of England, this sort of thing. And, the livery company hosted it, and, we turned up all in our robes and paraphernalia, which, was quite laughable in a way. Some of the, the, the culture of a livery company is very old, and not terribly relevant to today’s business, but, we had taken a policy decision to have this modern young company, and I think we were the first of the really modern chartered companies, to build on and enjoy the traditions of the City of London, and then move it forward to, the current sort of style of doing business in the City. I was going to say twenty-first century but that was a bit far ahead. Anyway this big lecture was one of the highlights of my presidential year, and it was being held at the, in Barclays Bank, who had a large reception area, lecture theatre I suppose it was, at the bottom of a very large skyscraper building in the City. But, that was the day of the bomb scare, and, there was a bomb went off in that building, and, there was no question that we could use the building. And, that happened on Saturday night/Sunday, and our lecture was supposed to be there on Tuesday. And, there’s a group of us who still have bonded over the years, because we sat down and we phoned every single person and got it all moved. Because in no way was I going to cancel it, I was never going to get Bill Gates here again. And, also I’m very stubborn and so on, you know, I really am not going to let some terrorist decide what I do and
what I don’t do. So it was going to have to be moved. And the networks in the City are quite powerful, and we got another location by, of all people, the Catering Company, who sort of said, ‘Well I gather, you know, that’s off at Barclays; we have another event on on the same day, and something that I think would be big enough for you, and, I think we can persuade the customer who has booked us to go to somewhere smaller that would be sufficient for his needs.’ Because I think we had about 200 people, which is a fairly sizeable event Anyway, it took place and was, was a big success. That’s the sort of thing that put the company on the map.

[30:07]

What does sort of, livery company status mean for the British information technology industry do you think?

I suppose it puts it on par with other professional disciplines, that have standards, not necessarily qualifications but have standards of behaviour. It’s part of a network in the City, so that if I’m doing something in the City I will say I’m a Past Master. And the expression past master of course in the English language refers to the fact that somebody who’s been a master of a livery company is supposed to have got to the top of, whatever that little career stream was. Since then it has become a chartered body, which means that the charter has come from Her Majesty the Queen, and, it also removes the financial risk from its members, because, it’s expected that you’ll be there forever. I got pretty involved with it, and the year that I was Master, I was still with FI, and, I remember I had two full-time secretaries, one doing the stuff for the Master and one doing the stuff for the Company. Because, it was just so, so busy. And, began to sort of see how, again how under-capitalised it was, that it was held back simply by the need to keep cash flow positive, to look, you know, a month, a quarter ahead, you know, to really do any strategic planning. And of course quite difficult because of the lack of funding. So, it became, which is probably part of a different story, one of the things that I supported from the Shirley Foundation, and, I tackled it anonymously in that I employed a retired solicitor to approach the Company from outside, of which I was still one of the Court, that’s what the committee is called, it’s call the Court, and say that on behalf of an anonymous potential donor, what would the Company do if it was given £1 million, £2 million or £5 million? And this sort of, flurried round the Court, ‘What on earth... Do we really believe it?’
Blah blah blah. And I was sitting there sort of trying to make the same sort of responses that I would if I didn’t know anything at all about it. And, eventually of course I, I put up £5 million, and it was very very important to the Company to get it established. £1 million was spent on finding some proper accommodation, because up to then we had been camping in other people’s premises, and £4 million was put into a charitable trust, which already existed, in order to actually become one of the biggest and now very much, very much the biggest charity in the IT field. So WCIT, which I’m still, I’m not terribly active, I probably go to something once every couple of years, in particular I like to go to the January dinner, it is always a dinner, where new members are inducted and make their solemn swear to the Master of the Company, which is always very nice to see the young people coming in. And, so I feel I’ve been quite important for that, and, and, for the City. That Company is now one of the most active in the City. It’s not the biggest but it’s the most, trailblazing, it’s doing new things. The Mercers’ Company, which I mentioned before, which is number one, they had held out the hand of friendship to us, and they have made a partnership over all the years, and, I thought at the time they were doing the right thing, this was the number one establishment grouping, holding out the hand of friendship to the new boys on the block. But actually it was much more balanced than that, because we knew about the use of computing, we knew about the use of communications and having networks. Sorry, having newsletters for the membership. And, they were absolutely thrilled for example when I had Buzz Aldrin from the Moon come to an event which was held in the Mercers’ Hall, and that was to commemorate my big gift to the Company. And of course, they got all the spin-off of, Buzz Aldrin! Ah! And he was a lovely man.

[35:33]
This big gift, why did you give it anonymously?

I didn’t give it anonymously. I did all the research anonymously. Because otherwise it would be too... When you are discussing a gift with somebody, not all of them go ahead, and I learnt that it was worthwhile not getting the aggro of having to sort of say to people, ‘We’re not going ahead for this,’ for whatever reason, you don’t have to give a reason. And people are then very disappointed. So, I have learnt to do the
research on an anonymous basis. But then came clear and it was, it was super. Yes, I’m very very pleased with that as a gift.

When did you come clean about it?

[pause] I mean, the Company meets every... Oh it must have been just some particular Court meeting. I know I turned up... The arrangements had been made for the anonymous donor to turn up, and it was me. Yes. And, the Clerk, as the chief executive of a livery company is called, it was a woman, still in my life, who, her face beamed, and this big smile, and she said, ‘I knew it was you, I knew it was you,’ but nobody said, you know. So it was very, very... Oh it was great fun. And I think, donors have to give in a, in a civilised professional way, not just chucking money at things.

[37:18]
Another big committee that I worked on was the British North American Committee, and this I joined in 1991, and had been going for some time, and it was Britain, Canada and the United States commerce, public service and academic, but not government. Because one of the objectives was occasionally to put the three countries together and gave a report to our Governments. And that was all chairmen of leading companies which made it extremely valuable for me to be alongside them, and in fact contribute a sort of rather, a rather entrepreneurial knowledge and experience to the other members who were the big corporates. I can remember sitting next to a big trade unionist who is now in the House of Lords, the, people there from the big banks, the insurance companies. And the understanding was that they should be actively involved in business. It was not supposed to be something that you went on in retirement to. And, when I retired, which was in ’93, I went on for the sort of usual statutory eighteen months or something, and then I was, I pulled out, as was the sort of norm, but was invited then to chair the British contingent, which I declined because I said, ‘Look, I’m just pulling out of this.’ You know, you, you can’t have people who are no longer responsible for their organisation.

[39:35]
So that was I think probably the best network I’ve ever belonged to, and again, there were... Was I the first woman? I think there was another woman there. I also met Brenda Dean there. Yes, so there must have been several women. And, and, a
woman called Maureen Farrow. All these I suppose are people that I’m still linked with in, in some way or the other.

Are there any other people you remember in particular from the British North American Committee?

I’ve got a list of course, but, the ones... [pause] Barbara Judge, who, the Honorary Barbara Judge who then, she was then Barbara something else, and married Sir Paul Judge, and I have become, sort of friends with her. Yes, so there was a sprinkling of women. Or, was it that they were the accompanying wives of people? [pause] No I’m obviously not going to come up with a list of names there am I? I can look them up if you want though.

Well, no, no.

No.

[41:05]

That’s fine, we can sort out some other time. I was wondering though, what sort of topics did you discuss?

They were all strategic topics were discussed. Immigration, invention, patents, export legislation, corporate governance, a lot on corporate governance. These sorts of national issues where there was common ground and there were different approaches. So, I learnt a great deal there, the presentations were absolutely superb. I can remember somebody came and talked about the American Civil War, and he was, I mean, we sat there like children, like mice, listening to his particular dramatic presentation on that war and how absolutely ghastly it was. But they were all pretty, well they were all professional, and, I mean every now and again I would make some summary as to what had been happening in England since the last meeting, and, even that took me a lot of time to make sure that I could talk at the correct strategic level, I mean I wasn’t just talking from computing, what was happening politically, what was happening socially, what was happening economically.
What does it mean for you to actually be part of these networks?

Well I like to belong to things. And in fact, I spent far too much time, or have spent far too much time in my life, on my own, where I soon learnt within my company, and I was thirty-one years in there, that you could not talk with your staff about things in an open way, and so it was only when we began to have a corporate board that there were people that I could even sort of sound off against. And relationships such as with Pamela Woodman had not endured. So to me it’s quite important to have a peer group, partly that I’m accepted at that level, and partly, that I just find it interesting and stimulating. I mean, I hate to be bored, and even with the company and all the other things I was doing, I just like to do new things, and I like to do things on a global scale, and I like to deploy my widened experiences to a sensible purpose. So, things like having been a refugee, having been through naturalisation, having travelled, having set up different companies, and having traded with most countries of the world, I can remember one very significant presentation from China, and again, China was only just beginning to sort of emerge as a, a wealth creator, and it, I mean it was just fascinating to actually sort of start thinking on a long-term scale. And I can remember with that Chinese, I think he was the Chinese ambassador or something, asking him about the problems of intellectual property rights of software, which were being totally and totally, being abused in China, and, his reply has always stuck with me: ‘Mrs Shirley, when you’ve got fifty million people starving in your country, you are not terribly interested in IPR.’

[45:18]
And, you know, you have to remember what is going on, and, some of the sort of colonial issues equally are very relevant to whole chunks of the world today. I’ve just been to the Caribbean for the first time and, and never have I felt so close to the slavery movement. The world is moving very fast and always we presume that the way in which we do things is the right way and the only way and everybody else does it our way. And that’s just not true, there’s just so much variation.

[46:00]
One of the guys there was Michael Betts, who later invited me to serve on one or two selection processes for the first level Civil Service commission, has some slightly different name, like, but it was the first level, so it was looking for people who were going to be permanent secretaries of the Civil Service. And they have a format of, a
panel of three, a long list where you get all the CVs, and whittle it down against a job
definition, which you’re supposed to be able to understand, to a shortlist, and then you
would have about five or six people coming up for an interview, at the end of which
you would decide whether somebody was not appointable, whether they were
appointable, or whether they were the preferred candidate. And, what I, I think I only
did it three times. It was very good for my network, because it meant that I had been
party to the appointment of somebody very senior, sort of permanent sec level. And
so they knew me and, and, that’s always quite useful. [pause] But the way in which
the other two members of the panel, both being public servants, the way they
approached it, the sort of questions that they asked, the sort of discussion that came
out from them, was so very very different to mine, and I was aware of that. And yet
when it came to the conclusion, by quite different routes, we on all three occasions
focused on the same preferred candidate. And, one or two of them commented on it,
sort of said, ‘Interesting, we learnt more about him,’ because I, I was asking about his
values and so on. All women. Sorry, all men. So I, I like working with the Civil
Service, it’s part of being patriotic, and, when you work and make a contribution to
public service, you do feel as if you are making a contribution to your country.

*How were you asked to join in the first place?*

Michael Betts phoned me up. Well I think he wrote me. It was a sort of formal letter,
giving me the dates and the meetings and so on.

*Michael Betts was someone you knew through, which committee, sorry?*

The British North American Committee. And he was at that time I think Chairman of
British Telecom.

[48:53]
The other government committee that I have given a great deal of time to was the
honours subcommittee for industry, which is concerned with deciding who to put
forward to the Queen who signs it all off, in the sector, in the commercial sector;
there’s a comparable sector for art and, and there’s a comparable sector for science
and engineering, but I was on the commercial, industry subcommittee. And I served
on that for eight years, which gave me again access to the permanent secs who were
present, because most of the recommendations came up through the Department of Industry or the Scottish Parliament or the Welsh Office, and were debated round the table, the debate concentrating on the senior honours, and when it came to the MBEs and OBEs and so on it went through pretty well on the nod, you sort of notice, ‘Well I don’t think this person’s right,’ but, you, basically all the discussion was about the senior ones. And, there were I think two, maybe three outside independent members of that. So we had quite a, a responsibility to make sure that those civil servants just didn’t push their own favourite candidates through, and we were representing I suppose, members of the public, because, if a name came up, and as a private individual I just thought that was quite inappropriate, I was able to say that, ‘Well I don’t think people would like that. I don’t like the idea of him being knighted.’ And, so one was giving a, a different approach to things. That committee then changed to have the majority of its members independent, and only a few people from the Government, and again I helped to make that change. And, I helped to sort of get a whole lot of women being considered, because, the Cabinet Office, who run this, didn’t seem to know the routes to get to where these women were who might have been MBEs, OBEs, CBEs, might even be a Dame, you know. By that time of course I had got my Dame, so...

*How does one actually make those changes in the sort of Civil Service environment?*

Oh, somebody had been lobbying, not me, and there was a general under the Labour Government that it was going to be much more egalitarian, and far less, classy I suppose.

*So you, when, when abouts were you serving?*

[pause] Well I only served after I got my own Dameship, because otherwise... And I got that in 2000, so it was probably 2001 to 2009 when I started the Ambassador for Philanthropy, and I came out and sort of said, I really am not going to be able to give time to this. Most people did it for about three years, but they didn’t seem to be able to replace somebody who was able to sort of push the women through and so on, and pull the women in, and sort of said, you know, ‘There’s somebody very interesting doing that. And what about the chief executives of some of the big charities? You
know, they’re running an organisation with 1,000 people. That, that’s commerce, they’re major employers.’ And, so I think I made quite a change there.

_When you’re sort of selecting someone for, a knighthood or something, what are you actually looking for in them, or not looking for as well for that matter?_

[pause] Well I suppose, a knighthood, and a knight is just a male dame, is, some... to recognise that somebody has made a real difference at a national level. It could be a single invention; mainly it’s running large organisations, innovation, getting vast export orders or... There are a whole variety of things. So that’s the sort of criteria. The hygiene factors are that they do need to be of good repute, that one doesn’t want somebody coming up who everybody knows is on the make or, not paying his tax and so on. So that there is a sort of hygiene there, both from the legal point of view and mainly tax, but also from the sexual point of view, because at one time homosexual candidates were sort of fairly routinely declined, and that has now changed. But people thought that that was going to bring the honour into disrepute. So it seems to work quite well. And it goes through several processes, and the public servants have massive great big files of tracking people through. So I, I found that quite enjoyable. And again I was working with those permanent secretaries. And, I want to, like most people, work with people from whom I can learn, who are not trained by me, who are, have some different views and different experiences, and different viewpoints. And so I found that quite interesting. And, the current Cabinet Secretary I met on that committee. Oh it’s just nice to have served on a committee together, because you’re...

[coughs] Sorry.

[55:15]

But earlier on in my career of course the committees had been much more technical. The first one was called the CSERB, Computer Systems and Electronics Research Board, and this was a board of about twelve, twenty sort of size, which determined how government funding should be used to fund research. And obviously with Computer Systems and Electronics, you could sort of see where my software experience sort of, was vaguely relevant. So, the first meeting I went to, I had decided, which is always a good idea, to not speak at all but to listen and see what on earth was going on there. A requirements board, I didn’t really know. It all went out through government departments, sort of, Harwell, Aldermaston, these sorts of places.
Research, I like new things. I am involved in research, I’ve done, broken new ground. But I thought I’ll listen and see what happens. The chairman was Sir Robert Clayton, who was one of the few people, I mean he was really not sexist. The first time I said something rather foolish he actually bit my head off, but then I realised that he bit anybody’s head off if you talk in a woolly way and were not clear in a sort of, strategic way. And we became reasonably friendly, I mean he’s a very very interesting and nice guy. But in the discussion, it came out of giving so many hundreds of thousands of pounds, maybe we even were in millions, to a particular person on a particular project, and in that sort of work you were very largely backing people rather than concepts, and, I was listening to what was going on, and, I don’t agree with this, I don’t agree with this, I’m sure this is wrong. And of course I, I then spoke out. And I spoke out that his funding was too little for what was required. And there was a sort of, moment of complete silence, and the chairman, ‘Really?’ And I sort of said, ‘I don’t see how at that level you can expect anybody to do it.’ So that’s the sort of contributions I made, were not really on knowing what the next lot of software was going to be, because the, the applicants knew this, but on the actual management of research. So I did three years on that. And that was followed by another invitation, on the Electronic and Aviation Requirements Board, the same requirements board, same terms of reference, but this time for electronics and aviation, about which I knew absolutely nothing. And that forces you into a sort of management position where you are making decisions without actually understanding the technology. And, so I found that more stimulating, and I did three years on that. And then I had a year on a committee, government committee to the Cabinet Office, called ACARD, a-c-a-r-d, which was... The R is for Research, the C is for Computing. What on earth’s...

I think it’s the Advisory Committee for Applied Research and Development.

Oh wonderful. [laughs] Got it. But again, it was a very good level, and I found my contribution. I was beginning at that time to learn not to try and be a professional manager, and emulate other people who were, however much I admired their skills, but to hone my own capability of thinking laterally and thinking conceptually and thinking long-term, well perhaps if we did that then that would happen, and, yah, it might work. And it’s that sort of concept that I really think I’m quite good at. My,
one of my early bosses was irritated enormously by my ability to sort of jump to a conclusion that he was slowly plodding his way through, a sort of seven-stage thing, and coming to the same conclusion. And he was always irritated that I could get there faster than he could. But there we go. So I applied that, and that was to the Cabinet Office. This was in Maggie Thatcher’s day. And so I came across her fairly frequently. And, I sort of interested her in women in management, but she had been very careful not to associate herself with women, and while for many years she did seem to listen, and I could hear some of my phrases coming out in her speeches...

[pause] And when I was, I knew I was going to meet her, I would always sort of think, now what am I going to sort of say to Maggie? And sort of make sure I had something interesting to say. And... But after a bit, to my disappointment, she stopped really listening. And, it was quite noticeable, she just wasn’t listening any more. So, but I admired her tremendously, and I came across her also because she was the, what do they call it? Chancellor of Buckingham University, and Buckingham University was the first one that ever gave me an honorary degree, a doctorate, and, I served three years on their council.

[01:01:04]
So when I look back, there was a lot of networking which was, really reactive to approaches, selected as to whether it would give me access to people that were congenial and stimulating, and that fitted in with...

What was your... This, this access to people, what benefit is it to you?

Well, rather like in philanthropy, you really only give to people with whom you have a relationship, similarly in selling, you really only listen to people with whom you have a relationship, and you only give projects to people in whom you have trust, and the leaders of those projects are quite important. I came across a phrase recently that, decisions are not about what to do, but about who you are, and, I think the sort of, my ethical approach to business and the fact that although we had started off a bit laughable woman’s company, we eventually built up a very good reputation for both quality work and our ethics. And ethics in business is all about taking the, quote, ‘right’ unquote, actions, even if it’s not in your interest to do so. And, there are some examples of that from business. We were working with the Department of Health and Social Services in its early days on some big database project called CUBITH, c-u-b-

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I-t-h, I can’t remember what it stands for, and, this was a major work. And, we blew the whistle in fact on our client. I won’t go into the detail as to what he was about, I don’t think we really knew, but we blew the whistle on him, and sadly that put an end to our work for the DHSS for a long time before everybody had changed [laughs] and so on. And there was another one with the Computer Telecommunications… CCTA, Computer Communications and Telecoms… CCTA. What does that stand for? Agency. Agency. Where we had been asked to quote for a piece of work, and we had done so together with a hardware supplier, which was required, and we had chosen, for reasons that I don’t know, to go with IBM. And, so this would be the sort of quote that you worked three or four months on, with a team of two or three, just putting in the quote. And when we had submitted it, and there’s always a sort of timescale that it has to be in by, the message came back, was that they liked our quote, blah blah blah, but they wanted, being a government department, to give the work to the computer manufacturer ICT, or maybe ICL in those days, because that was the British manufacturer, rather than the American IBM. Would we re-quote on that basis? And basically we said no. And, so we lost that piece of work; whether we would have eventually got it, I don’t know. The fact is, we really made friends with IBM, because, it got up to the chairman that we had been, just good old-fashioned loyalty, we’d worked together on this project and we were not going to take our little bit unless we did it together. And, it’s those sorts of things that actually I think help to build a business up. It is not just how clever you are, but how you behave in society and how you make your skills contribute to the greater good.

I’ve mentioned some of the larger projects that we did over the years. By the time I left, which was in 1993 at the age of sixty, the largest project going through then was for British Telecom which had changed its name to BT, and was for a half a billion, a single project. So it had gradually gone up and up. That wasn’t all done in, over the weekend; that lasted over three years. But those were the sorts of, of the growth of… And, somehow it tied up with our earlier move to fixed price, because, when you stop charging on a time spent basis and you go to fixed price, the reason being to disguise the domestic nature of your, of your supply system, but once you go to fixed price, certain sorts of projects become very attractive and you become more competitive than other people. And those in particular started off as being conversion projects. So you’ve got the system running on, on XYZ computer, and you wanted it on the ABC
computer, and so there was a conversion somewhat updating. And they were major... they were major jobs, but they were very rigidly defined, and you didn’t have all this change control, because, it was a conversion. And, that led to a sort of very long-term, having made a conversion, you would then take on a maintenance contract, and that led to very long-term contracts which built up an ongoing relationship with the client, clientele. So that at one time I can remember the decision was to try and really only bid for non-competitive tenders, and you think, how can that possibly be? But this was, the aim was to get it into such a relationship that we were the only people that the client asked us to bid for. Oh and there were some other things that we learnt over the years, and of course I’m encapsulating many many years, in that when you start, say, working with British Telecom, you know, it’s a major, major client, and, there’s a temptation to just get a little bit of work so we can actually say we’re working for British Telecom. But the trouble is, if you do that, it’s not that you’re able to develop the size and complexity of the work over the years, because, the client then views you as somebody who’s good on small projects, and will use you on more good projects, lots of small projects, but they will not ask you to tender for the big stuff. And so we learnt those the hard way, to actually, build relationships with our clients in the same way as we learnt to modify the relationships with our staff. I think I mentioned earlier that we were one of the first to job shares, we were one of the first to do flexible working. But later on that developed into other firsts, which were not necessarily original, we’d sort of pick them up from all over the world. I’m trying to remember the names. Zero-hour contracts. You think, what on earth is that? That is a contract with a, an individual where you were... You had the relationship sorted out, you had sorted out things like intellectual property, you had sorted out things like payment scales or whatever it was, but in no way were you committed to give any work. So that gives you a sort of flexibility. And then there were, a variation on that, more sophisticated, like min-max contracts, where the company would commit to providing the minimum amount of work, and the staff member would commit conversely to providing work up to so much, and within that very flexible arrangement, everybody got what they wanted, and, and was able to move forward. So we were... [pause] Yeah, I think we were always at the forefront of, of what we were doing there.
What’s the sum total for your company’s operations with all these little innovations of working methods?

I think we were just, our innovations were just part of a development. As soon as we did something and everybody else knew, they’d be doing it as well, and if I found somebody else who was going something that I thought, yeah, that’s sensible, we’ll do it. This is how you, you grow and...

[01:10:55]

At one time I thought, every time we had to recruit from outside for a management position, that I had somehow failed, or the company had failed to train young people up to that position, but after many years I realised that, it was quite healthy to have people feeding in at the top, in the topmost levels of the company, because they brought in fresh ideas, and, very very easy to just go on doing what you’re always doing, you know, try and find, do it a bit quicker, a bit cheaper or something. But that’s not where progress comes. Progress does come from the innovation, and, I think we were always, and I believe still are, a learning organisation that is always ready to learn and listen, and see if we can do it better next time.

Would you mind if I asked a couple more questions?

No.

About ACARD [pr. arcard] actually, or ACARD.

ACARD [pr. aycard], yes.

[01:12:07]

ACARD. So this is during the 1980s then.

[pause] I’d have to look it up.

I was sort of dating from Mrs Thatcher really.

Yes.
I was just wondering, what was your particular view on the way that the Government should be taking their computer development initiatives at this time?

They seemed to be listening at that time. The actual public servants were brilliant in a secretarial role, it was wonderful, I could sort of put in reports in all my gobbledygook and say, ‘Perhaps this and perhaps that.’ I didn’t have to spend time making it all formal and acceptable. And they, they were able to get the ideas out of this and crystallise it into a, an excellent report in the end. So I was very impressed by the secretariat support, high level people doing it.

I also wondered, how does a committee like this actually work? Do you have home work to do outside the committee meetings as well, or...?

Oh yes. Well not home work, but I mean you know, you, you turn up, you know, having got the agenda, having thought about the issues that were being debated, having considered the contribution that you can make to a particular agenda item, and sometimes you know you can’t contribute and you just keep quiet. But there’s a fair convention about a group of basically strangers coming together to some hopefully worthy purpose, and with a good chair it works very well, with a poor chair it’s a disaster, because it just doesn’t get anywhere. And, I’ve served under both.

What was your own particular message to the committee in the 1980s?

I think the importance of software, going on and on and on about that flexibility of software, the fact that it could, was not just for payroll and things like that, it really was for, beginning to think in terms of expert systems, that it was beginning to impinge together with other things, that the software was going to be embedded in other equipment. You couldn’t see the software any more because it was all integrated with other things. Those were the sorts of messages.

[01:14:52]
The other thing I was going to ask you about in relation to this was about Mrs Thatcher actually.
Mhm.

_I was wondering as one woman who had risen high in a male-dominated industry to another in a, I guess a similar sort of situation, what was your impression of her?

[ pause-pouring water ] She was quite strident. [ pause ] One could see the power of her brain. She had always, always done her research. She had read the papers properly, better than I had; she had picked up the errors, she... I’ve seen her arrive jetlagged from some long journey from the States or something and turn up at a nine o’clock meeting and she was sharp as a button. Very impressive. Didn’t ever see any sense of humour. We had some meetings at Number 10, and I can remember afterwards there were drinks or something like that, and, we were wearing the power badges, because on those committees we don’t know each other so you have your name in front of you and your lapel badges so that you can gradually start to find out who the other people are. And I went up to one person and, a man, and said, ‘You haven’t got a lapel badge on, who are you?’ sort of thing. And he said, ‘My name is Thatcher.’ That was Dennis, who was, quite a card. Now he was very very sociable, lots of laughs and things like that. She in her own home became a sort of fussy housewife and was going round twitching curtains and things like that, which I found very amusing. So, I, I think she was, we were very lucky to have such a remarkable woman as the first one, and... Previously, I had thought that Shirley Williams had the makings of leadership and wouldn’t it have been marvellous if she had been the first woman Prime Minister. In fact I’m quite sure it would have been a disaster. We needed somebody like Maggie and she made the best of it.

There’s an argument, or an academic argument, which is, Mrs Thatcher made some currency out of the fact that she had a scientific training, and as someone who was working with her in that scientific field, you know, sort of scientific technology area, I was wondering if that was something you noticed at all yourself.

I thought her understanding of the technical issues was very good. As I say, she always did her homework. And she had good briefing obviously, if she didn’t understand some issue, get somebody in to brief her and explain it. If she still didn’t
understand it, she’d get them to do it again. And, I thought that was fine. I mean you know, yes, of course from the outside, I mean she was a chemist which is not one of the more creative disciplines; nevertheless, it’s, very creditable that she got to that level, and, she used that ability to synthesize... [pause]

Yeah, I mean that, the things that we learn in research and, and so on, are not peculiar to physics or this and that and the other, and, and, what I’ve found in, actually more recent activities, was that research is no longer about learning more and more about less and less, but about examining the overlaps and the interfaces between known disciplines, and that’s where it seems possible to really make some progress. And the other thing about research was that I think at one time, some, Rutherford I think, talked about standing on the shoulders of great men or something. And that was sort of implying a sort of serial approach to, to research, and I don’t think it’s like that any more. It’s much more teamworking. And it’s getting a chemist to talk with a geneticist, or a geneticist to talk with a sociologist, and, it’s, it’s in those sorts of discussions and hybrid disciplines that, it seems to me that the breakthroughs are coming.

So you think, do you think that science is more integrated now than when you were starting your own scientific career?

Yes, I think so. It’s got bigger, it’s got... I mean the Post Office, the Dollis Hill, there was no management whatsoever, you just had a technical problem and you, bashed your head against it. I mean now there’s much more planning, there’s much more discipline about, publishing your results, even if they’re negative, to stop other people going down that route, to make sure that results are peer reviewed, that, you know, a one-off fluke or a mistake doesn’t get into the public arena. It’s generally I would have thought much more heavyweight. Maybe that’s because I’m doing different things.

[01:20:54]

One other quick question and I thought we might take a break actually. Just sort of slots in with talking about Mrs Thatcher and the government angle.
Yes.

*Actually we haven’t talked about your politics at all in this. I was wondering, where we should put yourself on the political spectrum?*

Well I’m aggressively independent. I have voted both Labour and Conservative. I’ve never voted Liberal. So I’m a floating voter. I would think, my leaning is towards Labour, in particular when I took my company into co-ownership, which I think is what we were starting to talk about today, share schemes. That is a response in a way to the them-us employer-trade union lack of parity. And, so perhaps after we’ve had a break we could start talking about share schemes. [pause] I haven’t... You know, we said there were three things, share schemes, and all I’ve done is talked about the itsy bitsies.

*There’s a lot of itsy bitsies though.*

Yeah.

*I’ll just pop.....*

[End of Part 10]
OK?

OK. When I started the business, everything seemed to be oriented towards production and big investments and so on. Whereas with a service company, it really started with my skills and a few other people, and it is purely people that really matter. And so we had profit sharing pretty well from the start, like, we opened in '62; by about '64 we had probably got profit sharing. And that was that, twice a year in the, before the summer holidays, and before Christmas, one would look to see if there was any excess, and pay out a profit share to the staff who had been working during those six months in proportion to their earnings on the basis that if our earnings systems were equitable, then that would give a reasonable bonus. And all went well, except that of course I was giving away far too much in that, you can’t really run an organisation if you sort of break even every year and at the end of a good six months you give away the excess. But, it was all part of that learning process, and it was all quite small stuff, though it seemed significant to me. But then we got into the Seventies where there was a Seventies recession, and for several years I had to do a six-monthly letter, because I was committed to doing it, to all the staff, saying the bonus this time was zilch. And, that I found quite difficult to do, but, maybe they would have forgotten that one was due, but any case, I wrote to say that there wasn’t one this year. And... So, I started to really think with a consultant how one could replace that in some other way, and that tied up with this man I’ve mentioned before, John Stevens, whom I had met on the Castrol projects. He had come in, and he, he eventually came and worked for the company. And he was a Liberal by politics. He could talk the hind leg off a donkey, and he went on and on and on about share ownership. And, basically I suppose he convinced me that perhaps share ownership was something that was relevant and would replace profit sharing in a much more significant way. And, I really came to the idea that since the company was being built by all the staff, they should really share in its success. And the model that I took was the John Lewis Partnership, and, I really spent the Seventies I suppose looking at the various forms of common ownership, reading about them, in a couple of cases actually visiting them. The names that, I can still remember, was Kalamazoo in Birmingham, and the Mondragon steel works in Spain. And they all of them when
you looked at them, including John Lewis, seemed to rely on a rich benefactor, which I wasn’t. So, because one was looking at divesting of one’s own shareholding, it was a personal thing, not a company expense, so not only... So I really had to pay for all the legal and consultancy things myself. Maybe I could have pushed it through the company but I don’t do things like that. And, so it was really quite difficult at a time of stress to provide the money and the time, and to locate people who could help me do this.

[04:21]

One of the people that, network that was very valuable in the early days, was run at the London School of Economics, which was a Professor Keith Bradley, and he was basically facilitating a network of people interested in co-ownership. [coughs] Excuse me. And, there were a number of people there, including Peter Lewis, the nephew of the founder of the John Lewis Partnership; a guy called Stanislav Yakocovitch, who introduced me to the financials of all employee share ownership plans which were then operational in the States, we didn’t have them in this country; Sir Peter Thompson, who had taken the N... NFC, what would that stand for? National Freight Corporation, he took that into co-ownership. And, David Urdle, who was, I think the founder or he may have inherited a printing company up in Scotland which I remember going to see which is called Tullis Russell. And, he later became one of Xansa's trustees. And he, Keith Bradley also introduced me, outside the meeting, which took place, I don’t know, twice a year, something like that, to a lady called Phyllis... Phyllis Pearsall, that’s right, who was the lady who inherited the Geographers’ A-Z map people. And she was a bit, [coughs] a bit like an older version of me, full of energy, full of, wiry thing, and... And, she had inherited it with her brother, had bought out her brother, and had then moved the whole company into the hands of the staff. And, I met her two or three times I suppose. She was still working in the business. She, although she hadn’t founded it, she had been with it since it was very very small, and, seemed to be a sort of model of what I was trying to do. And, I can remember asking her, you know, you talk about this, that and the other, ‘Would you do it again?’ And there was a very long significant pause, and then she said, ‘Yes I would.’ And, I think I finished up feeling frankly much the same. Because it was a painful process, and not all co-ownership schemes work. I mean quite a few of them have, have failed or... [pause]

[07:32]
The settler seems to be the last person to really judge everything, because you’ve, you know, if you’ve given it away, if you love something you’ve got to set it free and you, you’ve given it away, and then when it doesn’t work, it must be absolutely ghastly. So, I had a lot of ups and downs, but, you know, I, I would do it again, and it suited me down to the ground. And, we started off with various stages, firstly to set up a trust fund, a trust rather, to hold shares on behalf of the workforce, so it wasn’t going directly into individuals. And that started in 1981, and I suppose I had put six, eight years during the Seventies, in between doing a lot of other things, finding out about this, and it started with four per cent with grants from the company, and we topped up the holding each year from the company of which I was the sole shareholder, until it reached, seventeen per cent of the shares were held for the staff. And I had been very conscious of this, I can even remember some of the figures, you know, four, five, seven, nine, seventeen, you know, it was a sort of slow build-up over the years. But frankly, it made no difference whatsoever. The staff really had, pf! not terribly interested anyway, Steve still held the majority of the shares, Steve was still running it, and it was a family company, Steve’s company, which wasn’t really what I was aiming for.

[09:12]

And then in 1987 we, we did a big celebration for our silver jubilee, and to mark that I donated a further seven per cent, to take the trust holdings up to twenty-four per cent. I think for the first time the staff really realised, a quarter, yeah, you know. They began to realise that they might seriously, eventually, control the company, which is what I was really after. So, having got it up to twenty-four per cent, ideally it would have gone on and on and on, but, I always sort of say, trend is not destiny, and, I had to make a distress sale of my own shares, and, so the dream of 100 per cent staff ownership disappeared overnight. And this is what happens in a business, you’ve got a dream and then something else happens. And, no use weeping about it. It’s not going to be 100 per cent. So what else can I do?

[10:13]

I sold the shares of course to institutional investors, and they thoroughly disliked the trust, which they felt, rightly, and intentionally as far as I was concerned, devalued all the shares to save, to, to put off any outside investor. And there was also, which I didn’t realise, that having got them to buy the shares, there was an immediate presumption that the company would float. [laughs] And that hadn’t really been in
my... I mean I was very naïve I suppose. So... Now, at the time, the trading conditions really made a float sort of not really feasible, so, the corporate progress continued with a lot of small things. We put in shares as you earn; we put in stock options for senior management. And, at intervals, shares were sold, sold, to the staff, management, employees, and, unusually, we actually considered that the associated consultants, of whom there were still many, your erstwhile panel, they also had shares. And by the beginning of the Nineties one in three of the workforce actually held shares. There were a lot of other people who just held a singleton share, because I had given single... When you’ve, when you’ve got a, a family company that you control, you are able to do a few things, and, in order to allow staff to qualify for share offers, I had given a single share to all the members of the staff, and so they qualified for share offers. And so when we became a public limited company all that smoothed out of the way. But, it all sounded very grand, a lot of corporate governance stuff, a lot of legal costs, some of which are mine, some of them were now beginning to be the company’s costs. And frankly it didn’t make any difference at all, again it was, ran as a family company, it ran as Steve’s company, because Steve still had the majority of the shares. So, we really had to think more boldly because, quite a lot of time and effort had gone in over the years to, to get it apparently nowhere, and... And by that time Hilary Cropper had joined, and, she began to bring in new ideas, really determined on staff ownership, and after a lot of discussion we decided, or it was decided, that I should offer thirty per cent of my shares to an internal market, not to the individuals but to an internal market, and the aim was to have negotiable paper to make acquisitions, which at that time we were thinking of, to focus people’s energy thoroughly, clearly on the bottom line, you know, forgetting all this nice, soft, friendly teamwork, women’s mission and so on; it was now growing into a business, and really some people had to concentrate on making the right margins, rather than just all having a lovely time. And thirdly, it was intended to give me enough cash, and I’d got family calls on my money by that time, to, to make me financially independent of the company, because, I was just drawing a, a reasonably modest salary. And I was absolutely locked in to the business, even though it was mine, it was all sort of paper money, and, I really didn’t have any money to do any of the things privately that I was beginning to want and need to do.

[14:36]
And, the initial plan was, and I think, it’s clear that that’s in my nature, was to sell gradually, we’d got it up to twenty-four per cent, another thirty now going in, so, let’s have, you know, three lots of ten. But Sir Peter Thompson, who was then chairing the company, said, ‘No no no, if we want to change the culture, you have to do it in one fell swoop, not in another series of barely noticed steps. And... So it was agreed. My only stipulation was that between them, the staff had to be keen enough to raise £1 million, which, when we did the arithmetic, turned out to be about six months’ salary each on average. So, we mounted a roadshow and Hilary and I went out. We changed the memorandum of, articles of association, to give double voting to current workforce shareholders, and so by 1991, ten years after the trust had started, the statistics were that the staff directly owned nineteen per cent of the shares, so that twice nineteen, plus the twenty-four per cent in the trust, gave sixty-two per cent control to the staff. Now that’s quite remarkable. And that time it really did make a difference. There was a distinct sense of excitement, there was a change of attitude to me, and I, as I relinquished the personal control and, I stayed on for eighteen months later and retired at sixty, and eighteen months after that I sold some more shares into a qualifying employee share trust that qualified for rollover tax relief, which means I’ve only just paid the tax on that now, literally last year.

[16:51]

What was the change in company atmosphere? Can you characterise it for me?

Oh it was empowerment basically. They began to realise it was their company, [inaud]. Up till then they weren’t going to ask, they weren’t going to follow, do it themselves. No, it was very good, very good, you know.

What were the staff reactions when you were on this roadshow?

A lot of sensible questions. The average of six months’ salary each seemed to be quite out of some people’s reach, so one was talking about, well maybe your bank will give you a second mortgage, or lend you against these shares, which you can then put into the bank. Oh! And, one or two people had had a little nest egg from Aunty Annie who had died, that sort of thing, and it went in. And, they did just about make it. It was scratching through frankly. And, I said very firmly, you know, it, if they
can’t raise a million between them, I, I just don’t want to go ahead. But they did, and it did go ahead, and... And we had a sort of independent valuation of the shares, twice a year an independent, two, well two independent valuers were employed to value the shares, and we took the average price for the shares, and we ran a sort of balanced share shop, so that twice a year those who wanted to buy would say they wanted to buy; those who wanted to sell could sell. And, I was in this position that I could be the buyer of last resort or the seller of last resort, so that we would always sort of balance that market. [coughs]

[18:42]
Could we go back to the start of this process though. I’m wondering, why did you want to make it co-ownership at all?

Well it is this business that it’s a service company, I hadn’t put any, any money in at all, I’d only put in my free labour, and, I think, you know, it just seems right and proper to share it. It’s not mine, I didn’t inherit it or anything like that. I know it’s odd, but, you know, I feel so comfortable about it.

You used the phrase Steve’s company a couple of times.

Yes.

And that wasn’t what you were aiming for.

Yah. No.

What were you aiming for then?

A John Lewis Partnership type thing. I was certainly always very ambitious, it was going to... Well I, I never thought it would get as large as it did, but I always aimed for the next level up, and I think if, if you don’t do that, you probably become static. But, it seems as if the size you want to be is always the size of your, your next competitor. So there is a sort of drive to, not only make sure that it’s not a fair-weather company, that it is going to be there to stay, but that it is has some
significance. And when I started, the academics and the consultants were very much, ‘Oh yes, very interesting Steve, but it only works because it’s small.’ And as it got sizeable, they recognised it was no longer small but they didn’t think it was terribly strategic. And, towards the end when it clearly was strategic and, and it was making quite a, a bang for its buck, the same people would sort of say, ‘Well yeah of course it’s nothing new Steve,’ you know, and I think, well it’s taken me twenty years to get to this stage. Anyway, that’s neither here nor there. It was, it was fine really. [20:51]

But, there were a lot of shareholders suddenly there who were interested in money. They were still paid according to market rates, and with rather different, more flexible conditions than the rest of the market, and, because there were so many women, I think some of the recruitment was able to draw from a rich pool that nobody else was recruiting from, and that was a business advantage. But, as it got bigger and more impersonal, there were plenty of people there who just wanted their shares to make money for them, and they really wanted the uplift in the share value that, going on a, becoming a public limited company would mean for them, and the institutional investors were also very very keen to move away from this internal market and get a market for their shares. And, they hated the institutional investors, they hated that double voting, and that sadly had to go. And when the company floated in 1996, well we did it in two stages, it first of all became a public limited company so we could sell shares to the staff, but it floated in 1996, and I had retired by then, but the shares were well over-subscribed, you know, we had very good bankers, and, most of the top team became paper millionaires, which is...

[22:38]

Basically, I wish now with hindsight that I had done it earlier. It would have saved many many years of, not penury but really, really when I needed some money. It would perhaps have grown the company faster. But the fact is that, the need to care for and plan for our learning disabled child put a different complexion on things to most people. But the main thing that I did not do or did not understand was the psychological importance of the majority shareholding. And I had no idea that that was being, that was or could be stultifying or that it was... I, I just didn’t realise there was going to be that cultural change. [23:41]
So, in order to maintain the staff shareholding, there were, there were a variety of things that happened, things like, banks, the company bankers being prepared to lend money to any member of staff who wanted to buy shares, against those shares. The company gave, I think it was £3,000, to people joining the company as a loan to enable them to buy shares immediately that they started, in order to get them started on share ownership. And basically, you know, it was really, every effort in every direction was made to get it into co-ownership. And, there were various Inland Revenue approved schemes which were basically designed to help the employees build up a meaningful capital stake over a period of years.

[24:51]
We had at one stage, we came up against the Special Commissioners of the Inland Revenue about some of the things that we were doing, and, that was interesting I found. I personally gave evidence for one and a half days out of a week-long trial-like thing with the Special Commissioners sitting, a bit like a judge would do. And, it was held in some government office with a sort of bench at the back, and a sort of clerk and, quite a formality. And I came in, and, I came in with my chairman, my company secretary, my legal advisers, my auditors, you know, so, there were about six or seven of us. And, came in, and it was a sort of, room with desks, sort of in two sides. And, I sort of said, ‘Oh where do I sit?’ ‘Oh you’re that side.’ And it was like a court of law. And the other side was full of the Inland Revenue people. And you look at this room, which must have had about thirty people in it when we were... and you realise that every single cost there was met by some programmer somewhere cutting code, because, all the rest were public servants who were paid by our tax, the judge, the clerk, the... Oh it was absolutely impossible. And, the commissioner really was very, and the questions that he asked as we went along were very astute and clearly mean, you know, that he understood what was going on. And, then he went away to consider it, and about six weeks later he, he ruled, luckily in our favour. It wasn’t a question of right and wrong, it was a question of interpretation of the law, which we had interpreted one way and they wanted to interpret another.

*What was the difference, between the two interpretations?*

£80,000. [laughs] I remember because, I was spending a lot of time on battling this through, and it did take not only my time, management time as well, and the board
sort of said, ‘Look, I think you need to just drop it, let it go through. Let them pay their tax, you know, it’s only £80,000,’ which, you know, the company was quite, getting big then. And, it was a battle really on principle and for all the other people who have used the same co-ownership scheme, and, I said, ‘No no, I think I can get it, get it through,’ and we did. But that’s why I remember the £80,000, which is, that was the different...

How had your board been throughout this process of, gearing up for co-ownership?

[pause] They had changed over the years from a wishy-washy advisory council, which was just a sort of sounding board for me, to a genuine corporate board that had been strengthened in preparation for, a) going public, and b) floating, which we did as two things. I’m trying to think of the people that came in at that time. [pause] We had somebody from the public sector, a guy called Robin Linguard, and that, we got him in, because I realised that was a free access to a director level person, because, the public servants want the experience of being out in industry, and seeing what really goes on, and to me that was a free director. You know, I’ve always, you know, free, can I get it cheaper, can I pay it slower? You know, you do actually become very cost-conscious, or I certainly was. There was somebody there from an outside firm of consultants, but I really can’t remember the rest. I just... We had... [pause] Yes, what was his name? He came in from a firm of consultants. [pause] A very senior guy who, who had been on corporate levels of one of the big five, that sort of person. And we attracted a few people like that because it was a good experience. [pause] Peter Thompson was attracted because it was going co-ownership. So it was a, it was a, a reasonable board then. And, they were doing, you know, very corporate governance already.

Can I just clarify quickly as well, one relationship we’re talking about - the board.
So, so, you’re the owner of the company, and the board is a group of sort of advisory people, but what’s the relationship between your two positions?
Well they started as advisers, but eventually they become the decision-makers, and while I was the chief executive, which until Hilary Cropper came in I was, basically, the board’s responsibility is to appoint or retain or advise or guide or if necessary fire the chief executive. And so all the discussion is for them to listen to proposed courses of action and determine what they thought was the best route, and there are various styles of management really, top down or bottom up, and really, in line with all the other empowerment that we had, it was fairly obvious that this was bottom up. I expected to be able to put up alternative proposals, well we could do this and this is what the figures would look like, or we could do that and this is what the figures would look like. And, Hilary would do that in a much more professional way with a clearly structured presentation, using the same format month after month showing sales forward, showing cash flow. Just managing a business which could have been a software business or it could have been a car hire firm. And although, a similar thing happens to me now with the Shirley Foundation, where the money comes to the Shirley Foundation from me, but the Shirley Foundation trustees are responsible for its expenditure, and, it seems to work once people actually know what the form is.

[31:58]

*How did your board actually react to the... giving the company to the employees? Was it something you...?*

Well the only ones that came in were ones that were prepared to do that. I mean you know, they would, might advise. But if there’s somebody who really didn’t believe it, I mean that wasn’t somebody who was going to accept a board position, because it was just, it would be too... So you have to get people who are congenial in both temperament and in targets.

*What sort of overall board are you looking at for...? So what’s, how do you determine the mix of individuals to put in it then?*

Well to a certain extent, one tries to have a sort of balanced board with marketing skills and financial skills and corporate governance skills and, you know... But in another way, that’s not really what you’re looking to a board for, because all those things, you either have in the company or you can buy in, they’re the specialist skills.
So you’re looking for, strategic skills which allow you to balance between short, medium and long term, which allows you to take into consideration current strengths and weaknesses of the company, which allows you to, make suggestions, not be upset if they’re not implemented; they are just suggestions. Because now there’s a chief executive, and it is the chief executive’s responsibility to, to drive the company forward. And, it is a, a format that, I work to get senior managers in the company on to other people’s boards, because they would then see how that worked. Shortly after my retirement I did a sort of few years with a sort of portfolio of serving, me serving on other people’s boards. Because it is a fascinating way of doing it. I mean you just have a wodge of papers, a three-hour meeting, perhaps a dinner which is a bit more sociable where you might discuss some other things. And that’s it for the rest of the month. Except for the things that you do in between, and you don’t have to be on the board to do those things. And yet it’s absolutely all-engrossing, so I liked it. And also pays extremely well. When things are going well it pays very very well; when things are going tough, which is when the board really starts to earn its keep, then, you have to put in so much effort that you think it’s ridiculous, I’m doing this for a few, £20,000 a year or something, you know, it just is... Because that’s the board’s role, I mean when you have to fire somebody or, you know, it’s, or you’re in a legal situation or something, it’s, it’s pretty onerous. And the responsibilities of board members have changed over the years, legally have changed, and, although I would still love to be on a board, I have decided not to accept any more invitations, because, it’s just too heavyweight, there’s too many committees, you’ve got to serve on this committee and that committee and, and, no thank you, it’s not for me.

[35:41]

What was the first company you actually served on the board for? Apart from FI obviously.

[pause] I think it was the charity Help the Aged, where, that was a board where, turnover was about £65 million at the time, and, so you turn up with a board that is very uncommercial, surrounded by people who know a lot about relief work in Africa, and, you know, when you try to decide on some disaster, how you are going to spend a million pounds that’s just been collected from the public over the weekend, how to get it out to wherever it is supposed to do... Not exactly easy. But that was the very
first one. When I... I had enough sense to only accept that for three years, so that at the end of three years I said I didn’t want to go on. And I asked one of my colleagues, Jo Connell, if she would do it, which she did, and made a big success of it. Because she finished up as chairman of Help the Aged, and was responsible for its major, major merger with Age Concern, and that’s, you know, really super for her, and it’s now Age UK or something like that with the two of them together.

[37:10]
The more conventional ones were of, on an American board when they wanted a Brit to serve on an international, it’s a global company and they’d got somebody there from the Philippines, they’d got plenty of people from America, and they wanted somebody from, Europe basically. And, I think I’d just finished the British Computer Society then. I’m sure that’s what gave me the visibility as far as they were concerned. And they wanted a woman, and in fact that, they wanted a woman, first woman on the board, but, I was also the first non-American was it? Anyway. I served on that board for, several years, and learnt how an American board operates, which is somewhat different. And, to a certain extent I loved it, because it freshened me up for a long weekend. I used to travel on the, Saturday night I think, rest on the Sunday, do the business on the Monday, and come back on the Tuesday. So it was just a long weekend. But I was there in California, and it was, the sun was always shining, and, and it was very stimulating and I really enjoyed that. And was there as it finally was sold to... [pause] Wasn’t... It was sold... God! I’ve forgotten who it was sold to, but that sold to Hewlett-Packard. But there was the founder there, a guy called Jimmy Treybig, who, I think I was able to help quite a bit, because I know what it’s like for a founder to be stepping back from the company that he has founded, and seeing things happen that he wouldn’t have done or undoing what he had already done.

[39:23]
The other one was the government department, I’d been on a government committee for the Atomic Energy Authority, and, again this was really just all concerned with the research, this time into atomic energy. And, that was in preparation for its privatisation. So I was with them for eight years. And I found the privatisation process, interesting. And I thought once it was through, they would ask me to stay for the, you know, the traditional one year to sort of show a bit of continuity. Actually they renewed it for another three years. And towards the end I just felt I’d had
enough of that. I was, I’d become too... I’d lost my freshness, I couldn’t see it from outside any more, I felt like an insider. My contributions there were largely just straight commercial. I was the first person who had ever asked any of these commercial questions, how much does this equipment cost, you know, how many billions? I mean, nobody had got a clue. How much does it cost to run? Nobody knew. How much does this new spare part cost? Nobody knew. Why does anybody give business to us? Oh they knew, we’re the best. And, you know, it was just so un-commercial. And, so, the privatisation issue I found quite... I’m glad I took that one on.

Was it a challenging job?

Well I wasn’t trying to understand the technology, there were other people to do that. I helped them quite a lot about how to sell. [pause] So it wasn’t terribly challenging, because it doesn’t have that risk. It was a government department being privatised, and, you know, thousands of people were swarming over it for due diligence and stuff like that. Nice people, I like them.

How does one actually sell atomic energy?

[laughs] Well mainly to other government departments, to the defence, and so on. Very long-term contracts, five, ten, seventeen years, that sort of thing. It’s very international.

[42:09]

There were I guess three little things I’d like to pick up on, which we’ve discussed in passing, well, have come up but I haven’t asked about them yet. You mentioned a distress sale of your own shares during the...

That was for family reasons. I really needed some money for family reasons, and we’ll talk about that later if I ever can bear to do so. But one of my board directors, now that was right, a guy called George Sala, who was a local entrepreneur who ran a company called... in High Wycombe, it was a manufacturing company, you know, a very nice man. He came in one day and he found me in floods of tears and said,
'What on earth’s the matter?’ And, I was getting more and more into debt with the various things that I was doing. And he said, ‘Well that’s silly, you know, let’s sell some of your shares and be done with it.’ But that’s what’s called a distress sale, I just wanted to sell some shares.

[43:08]

Right. A question I should have asked a while ago, which was, BCS, what does the president actually do? Or what did you do actually do as president?

[pause] You’re the figurehead, you’re the, the one who talks to Government, the one who talks to the Institute of Electrical Engineers, the one who discusses with other professional bodies on qualifications, on things like that. You chair the council meetings. You go round the, the branches and the specialist groups, making sure that they’re all together. So it can be just a sort of titular thing, but if you’re going to do it properly, you really need to be thinking about where you can take the organisation, how you can take the organisation forward, and in what way. One of the things that I did was, in my run-up year as deputy president, because you sort of know, you’re appointed the year before so you can prepare for it, I did a market survey. I paid for it privately, it cost £15,000, and, I got a market research company to find out what the press thought about the BCS, what the other organisations thought, what the business people thought, what the Government thought, and pulled this together into a report. Some of which, as always turns up in these things, is pretty depressing, depressing but totally and utterly relevant. Business people don’t value the qualifications, they’d much rather have, whatever it is. And so... But you, that does then allow you to address these issues and make sure that people know why you’re addressing them, because if really people are thinking about us like that, what’s the point? We have this wonderful, wonderful first ever in the world national computing centre. Wrong name, the National Computing Centre was something else; the British Computer Society. And, it really had to be high quality. But some, the second woman president after me was Professor Wendy Hall from Southampton, and she was a super president. I need to be careful what I say here because the third one was a disaster, and she really did nothing. And, I think she had never run anything before, she’d never been in a leadership role before; technically she may have been wonderful, but, you know, you’ve got to know what you’re doing with these large organisations. Because in my
day it had about 30,000 members, and the aim was to get that up; I think today it has more like, 150,000 or something, it’s really creeping up and is...

*We can restrict this bit if you like, but I just have to ask, who was the third person?*

I can’ remember her name, and that makes it... Yes... Rachel somebody or other. Rachel. It’s all I can remember. Yes. Disaster. But I mean, these things happen.

*How do you rate your own tenure as head of the BCS?*

Oh brilliant of course. Absolutely brilliant. Really strategic, made a difference, really made a difference. [46:55]

There was another charity. Not charity. Yes it was, it was not for profit. I was one of the council members of the NCVQ, which was the National Council for Vocational Qualifications, and that was to get recognition for non-academic education, for things like, hairdressing, plumbing, anything really. And I found that, not particularly interesting, but I was glad to be there at the start of that emphasis on, outside the academic world. The redbrick universities were sort of starting to come, you know, the... No not the... It was the technical colleges were starting to spread their wings and be recognised as redbrick universities. And it was all part of that. I’d have to look up the dates. It would be in my *Who’s Who*. But, it was part of that... You ask, why do I get... I, I really believe in, in egalitarianism. I don’t believe in elitism. I, I really think, the hairdresser who’s skilled and trained and able to train others, I’m quite happy for her to have a qualification that I can recognise, and if I employ an electrician I will ask about their qualifications. Which, not usually very popular, but nevertheless, that’s the way I think.

*Why didn’t you find that job so interesting as the others we’ve mentioned?*

[pause] I think it was the calibre of the other people round. They were largely bureaucratic, not necessarily out of the public sector but they were, they were not entrepreneurial. They were educators, they were... Yeah, I think it was just, too much bureaucratic, and wasn’t a good chairman. Anyway.
Shall we take a little break in a minute?

Yah. I think we’ve done share schemes, haven’t we?

I think so.

Right.

[End of Part 11]
Switched on now. You were talking about smoking.

Running a business is very stressful, especially when you’ve got a double pressure from home events, and, I began to smoke not just socially but very very heavily. So that effectively I was chain-smoking. I had learnt from Aunty and Uncle that you didn’t light one cigarette from the next, but I did just stub out a cigarette and light the next one, and, cigarettes marked and punctuated the whole day. It eventually became not a pleasure but a negative thing that, I was more unhappy when I didn’t smoke. And, the whole house must have reeked of tobacco. And the pictures I remember had sort of black grime from them, from both Derek and I smoking very heavily. And that indicates I suppose some of the pressures that we were under.

How many a day?

Sixty. Each. [laughs] So it also became very expensive.

When you say Aunty and Uncle had told you not to chain smoke...

Well Uncle used to smoke, and, when I was about, I don’t know, eleven, say, I sort of said, ‘Oh let me try one.’ And he had very sensibly given me a cigarette, and I’d taken one puff and choked, and, and of course I never wanted to smoke again until I was about eighteen. It was a sophisticated thing to do. I kidded myself that it helped me to focus and concentrate. But it certainly became very much part of our lives and, and, it took a tremendous effort to eventually decide, both of us at the same time, to give it up. It was a long time before the craving has gone. I still have it, and if I see a cinema film with people smoking, I think, oh wouldn’t it be lovely. I just know if I had one cigarette today, apart from the fact that I’d choke on it again, I’d have three tomorrow, ten the day after, twenty the day after, and then I’d be away again. So, it’s one of those, I am an obsessional person and I was an obsessional smoker.

When did you give up?
About the fifties.

*Any particular method to it, or...?*

I went and had some acupuncture, which I thought might help. And the rest of it is sheer willpower.

*You could have acupuncture in the Fifties?*

Yes.

*Mm.*

Do I mean Fifties? When I was fifty. So that’s ages...

*Right, OK. Sorry.*


[03:11]

*While we’re on the subject of the Eighties though, I was wondering if I could ask you about IT82 and your own involvement with it.*

One of the people that I’ve mentioned... Oh God! [pause] One of the people involved in the formation of the livery, IT livery company, was Alan Benjamin, and he headed IT82, working direct with the Cabinet level people with whom he had some good contacts. And he set up an appropriate sort of, pyramid of various people, heading different sections, and I headed a section concerned with IT and disability. And... [pause] I didn’t really spend a lot of time on it. It was something that was sort of waiting to blossom out, and, I think the timing of IT82 was good, it was, you know, red hot technology, Kenneth Baker and all those people. And, my contribution was so small that I can’t really remember much about it, except that it was to do with disability.
How did you get on with Kenneth Baker?

Well I knew his wife better, Mary Baker. She was a member of the Forum group. He was, he opened, I think he was the guest of honour at our twenty... at our tenth company anniversary or whatever it would be. He was a cultured man, which I think meant that he accepted what was happening in FI, not just as technology but for what it was doing in society. I mean I remember that he was a poet and, and was really, not just a, a technical leader. I thought he was terrific, I think he’s much better than some of the other people we’ve had. But then, I was so young and inexperienced at the time, maybe I would have thought anyone who could do that job was terrific.

What do you think of the overall idea about IT82?

I think these, focus on a subject for a limited period of time, always has legs, whether it be Mother’s Day, or IT82, or Autism Awareness Day, or a Philanthropy Year, these are things that help in making a step function, and, they do move forward in steps and jerks rather than just a general trend. So I don’t know where that idea came from, but I would have thought it was good and well timed.

[06:30]
I think we should return to talk for a little while about sort of, your other interests, and, your family.

Well as always, people are sort of multi-dimensional, and throughout all my career, after marriage, after Dollis Hill, after Computer Developments Limited, the family became increasingly important. We had aimed to have a large family, and our first son, Giles, was born in 1963, that was a year after I had launched my company, which had always had this feeling of opportunities for women with domestic responsibilities. And, to begin with it all went very well. I, I didn’t want to do any work for about three months after he was born, I was sort of, really quite like a cabbage. But then, my intellect started to come, come back, and, I was able to combine caring for a quiet, amenable baby with a sort of Dr Spock in one hand and a coding book in the other, to... and the balance worked quite well. I’d sort of come round to the idea that he was learning disabled, and for somebody like me that was quite a blow, but, you know, it’s
very easy to sort of say, ‘Well all I really want is for him to be happy.’ And, the pressure really only came when you start to be, this awful gut feel that there’s something really wrong there, and, you’re sort of almost ashamed and you can’t believe it, and you can’t go back, and, and, you’re basically in denial. And, that is exacerbated at about, two and a half years old, when whatever skills he had, and they were clearly slow, he’d been slow in walking, slow in talking, but he began to lose skills. And it started off with just, sort of a couple of days when you think, he’s been a bit quiet today. And, it’s another quiet day. Gosh, he’s hardly said anything. And, then, you know, then you start sort of, encourage him to say the few words that he could say, and, and so on. And, basically over a very short period, days, it may have been weeks, he lost the little speech he had, and never spoke again. And, he also became extremely difficult, negative, he lost... He never had very good eye contact, and looking back, there were obviously things much earlier that I hadn’t picked up, because he was my first child and I don’t know, didn’t really know much about babies.

[09:50]
But the age of about, three and a half to five were extremely difficult. He was a wild child. I could still pick him up and tuck him under my arm to keep him out of danger. But he was totally out of control, and, a very unhappy child quite apart from anything else. Breaking things, tearing things. The tearing things was difficult, because he was tearing books, all our books had to go in the garage. Everything really got broken. The glazier used to come every Saturday morning to replace the windows that had been broken. And, it was rather like the sort of changeling in the fairy story, that this quiet, placid child should turn into, not the terrible twos, but a really disturbed young boy. And he went into a diagnostic hospital, the Park at Oxford, and, where they had a sort of pattern of, you go in on, Sunday morning... No you go in Sunday night, and you stay, come out Friday evening. So, you had the weekends at home. But most children went in for a two-week stay with one weekend in between, where they were observed, monitored and tested. And at the end of two weeks the diagnosis would be made and the children would go in order to be looked after by their families and the GP. But Giles wasn’t so clear-cut, and in fact he was in there for eight and a half months, which I suppose indicates how difficult they were finding it to make a diagnosis. I stayed with him in a mothers’ unit there for some weeks, basically running my business, because after all it’s all remote working isn’t it, from that
mothers’ unit, the nurses taking bets on how long I would be able to share this with a rather difficult woman who was there at some stage, dirty and horrible actually. But, we both shared the problem of difficult children, and I managed somehow or other. And, the eventual diagnosis was that he had a degenerative brain disorder, and having lost speech we should prepare ourselves for him to lose vision, for him to lose balance, for him to lose everything. And that prognosis was pretty cheerless. And we sort of said, before we could really internalise that and cope with it, we would like a second opinion, even after eight and a half months. And they were very good, and, arranged a second opinion from Great Ormond Street Hospital. And they kept him there in that intervening period, because, we could just about cope with him at home, but you know, I doubt if we could cope with him full-time. He was just getting... Well he was designated as needing constant attention, and I really mean that. So we went to Great Ormond Street Hospital, and they, for the first time, used the autism word, and they didn’t think it was degenerative any more, they thought he was autistic. And, they sort of said, ‘Really it doesn’t matter what it’s called; you need, Mother, to manage him better.’ And, so I concentrated on that for a bit.
[13:30]
Now autism at that time was classed as a very rare disorder, something like one in 20,000. Most people had never even heard of it, as I hadn’t. Now, over the years with different, better diagnosis, different definitions, and more services, it’s now round about one in 100 children. It attacks, it affects boys four or five times more frequently than girls, and I sometimes wonder whether that is, whether the under-diagnosis of girls... Because, the autistic children sort of, tend to be very extreme. Some of them become very very withdrawn and quiet, and if that’s the case, people don’t get quite so worried because they’re lost among the other children and, some like my Giles get really wild. So, he was at home with me, and I had a little bit of childcare with him, but I mean, one afternoon a week. Because the social culture at the time was that, if we, if children were not reared by their parents, they would be, turn into, children are delinquents. So it’s nothing to do with a disability. So, basically, I wanted to do it all myself. And, with a quiet child this was perfectly possible; with a wild child it became more, more difficult. I had babysitting Tuesday afternoons, and would always make my outside appointments on Tuesday afternoons. Afternoons because Derek came in regular as clockwork at about six o’clock, and so, he could take over then till I got back. During that period, or before that I suppose,
we had had the Castrol project where Derek had looked after Giles for two whole weeks entirely by himself with the odd phone call to me. And, so we were managing very much sleeping in shifts, because Giles didn’t sleep. He spent the evenings bouncing on his bed and went through several beds before he was five, just on sheer bounce. They were very difficult times, and, and sort of very upsetting really.

When he was, three, something like that, maybe earlier, maybe later, I mean it must have been a bit later, he spent one term at a little church hall up the road which was a little nursery group, and, they found him almost impossible to deal with. He was then quite little, and I know later on I learnt that one of the staff had been fired because she had lost her temper with Giles. And, I sort of said, ‘Well he is an infuriating child,’ because he had this, you know, he didn’t give eye contact; he, he didn’t seem to recognise things, he didn’t respond, his eyes didn’t light up when you came, he didn’t play with toys properly. He’d be much more interested in the label on some little car, or spinning the wheels, or flicking his fingers, rather than playing in any meaningful way at all, even when you concentrated on him madly, try and get him to roll a ball back to you and whatever it was. But, that unfortunate member of staff had been told if she chose to work with children, she should be able to deal with a difficult child for a couple of hours a week. And so she was fired. But just to indicate, he was very difficult.

I then got him into something which was called a training centre, which existed in most areas, where children, and adults later, attended a training centre for, basically day care, some sort of simple activities, and when they were adults, they were used to stuff envelopes or make very simple activities to sort of keep them going through the day. And, that gave a, a network of other parents that I knew from that. And, I would have been reasonably content with that. I’m trying to think how he got there. I think he was picked up by a little mini van. But I was rudely awakened from my acceptance when I waved him goodbye one day, and he flinched, and, the raised hand. Somebody had obviously been slapping him. And, so that was the end of that. So then I was looking round for somewhere else that could manage him. Autistic children, and many others probably, were at that time classed as uneducable, nobody thought that they were worth educating. They could not learn. And they came socially under the Health umbrella, rather than Education. And, it’s one of the big
things that happened when it was determined that all children should go to school, whether they’re lying supine in a hospital bed or, as mad as a hatter, they all should have education.

[19:46]
I looked around a lot of places, and, they were just not suitable. I took him to one or two places, and they obviously couldn’t manage him let alone teach him. And eventually found a small local authority hostel in, outside Milton Keynes, which had developed in... it had been a hostel for non-communicating children in the county, Bucks is a, a long thin county, and had some specialism increasingly in autism since the vast majority of people, children who don’t communicate are autistic. And he went there before he was six years old, he was collected and delivered back. Collected on Monday morning, delivered back on Friday night, evening, afternoon, by an ambulance, all of which was laid on by the local authority. And, it was headed by an [inaud]... What’s the word I want? A wonderful woman, called Janice Pratt, p-r-a-t-t. And, she had some flair or skill or training or something, and she was able to structure a lifestyle for a variety of children, and he stayed there as a weekly boarder until he was eleven. Which was the oldest that he was, they were supposed to. But I couldn’t find anywhere else for him to go then. Again I would take him somewhere and, and sort of just have... I mean and they just obviously couldn’t cope. And... [pause] So the Walnuts, which is the name of that little school, kept him twelve, thirteen, and then they said, ‘We just cannot keep him any longer,’ you know. And so I was stuck with him at home, locking the doors carefully because, we really couldn’t... [pause] Oh it was awful, it really was very bad.

[22:09]
How did you feel when it first became apparent that he was disabled?

[pause] I think surprise. I had assumed that his quietness was that he was thinking deep thoughts, and obviously that was not to be. [pause] Worried, what would happen. Starting to have difficulties with my in-laws, who were ashamed to have him visit them in their home in case the neighbours saw that he wasn’t right. Starting to have a lot of pressure, because Derek and I were living sort of Box and Cox to look after him. We were like two birds looking after a cuckoo, this sort of child who needed so much attention. We didn’t have meals any more, we just ate food. I would
spend half the night sitting outside his bedroom trying to keep him in bed and get him to sleep and... It, it was a very bad time.

*How do you cope with something like that happening, and what support did you have?*

[Pause] Well my GP introduced me to a family who had three daughters all of whom wanted to go into childcare or something like that, and two of them as they grew up came and worked for me as so-called mother’s help in that, they were not able to manage Giles on their own, but they did concentrate on him, to allow me to do something else, which might be washing my hair, because, life was so difficult, you, you... Some friends from the company took him out occasionally on a Sunday afternoon, they had four children of their own. ‘Oh we can manage Giles,’ and, you know, ‘Yes, he had...’ And, what did I do in those hours without him? I just had a bath and washed my hair and, had a bit of peace and quiet to myself. Because basically I was becoming very imbalanced and very, irrational, very paranoid, very everything I suppose. He was so wild, and I was so sick, that at one time I really thought, gosh, he’s, he’s got the Devil in him, I need to get somebody in to exorcise him, because he just did not... He wasn’t a human being any more. At one time I thought of getting a sheepdog, because I could manage a sheepdog, and, because I, I could hardly take Giles out because he would run away and he was rather too big to put... I mean it was a dreadful, dreadful time.

[25:27]

*How did you come to terms with something like that yourself?*

[Pause] Well I became very, very stressed really. When he was thirteen I broke down completely, in that, I really ceased to function, and, I was struggling, literally staggering I think, with illusions that the walls were closing in on me, and, it doesn’t need Freud to sort of, say what all that was about. But it was quite scaring, I just felt I was being suffocated by these walls that wouldn’t keep still. And I went to see a psychiatrist whom I had known from doing Institute of Directors check-ups there, and sort of said, ‘I really don’t feel very well.’ And, he put me straight into hospital. And because I was in hospital and I was Giles’s carer, Giles went into hospital as well.
And that psychiatrist, whose name will come to me in a minute... [pause] Strange, I’ve forgotten it. He helped both I and Derek to sort of come to terms with things, and insisted that he was not going to let me out of hospital until Derek had agreed that Giles could stay in hospital. And he sort of said, really he should not be at home any more. And I think it was quite right. And effectively Giles then was hospitalised, intended for the rest of his life. He was then thirteen years old. He was in a, a locked upstairs ward with fourteen I think other adolescent boys with a very prison-like environment, no carpets, the chairs were made of plastic including some nominal easy chairs. Because, you know, the children were throwing things around all the time. There were no curtains. There was... There was always some child, one child ate paint off the windowsills, another child widdled behind the radiators. It was pretty grim there. But, in the main, the staff were working to give some sort of structure and quality of life to their charges, and there was until Giles was eighteen, correction, seventeen, there was a hospital school that he went to.

[28:32]
Originally he came home, we would collect him on the Saturday morning, fairly late, and deliver him back Sunday evening, fairly early, but so he would have a night at home, and there was some semblance of home life still. But then we couldn’t manage even that. The hospital that he was in was in Henley-on-Thames, or just outside Henley; we were living in Buckinghamshire. So it was about a forty-minute drive or something, it may be even longer. And, I remember after we had delivered him back always, we had had him for forty-eight hours or whatever it was, we had a Mini car at the moment, and I would sleep in the back of a Mini. You know, we were just so exhausted, it was... But then it got to the stage where we couldn’t even manage him home for those hours, and so we went into a different routine, and we would visit him, originally it was on Sundays, and have a picnic in the grounds with him. Because there were no facilities for visitors, because most of the people in a subnormality hospital, they’re closed now I’m pleased to say, did not have interesting, interested family, and, so there just were no facilities, you could only see him on the ward. So we took him out into the grounds, which were terrific, big, and had a picnic, which is something that Giles would understand, he liked his food. And, that was fine in summer; it was pretty disastrous in winter, where we really cowered under a heat reflecting sheet, trying to keep warm, and trying to keep some semblance of family life together.
Now this was a child who, then and previously, I don’t think he recognised Derek at all. He began to at those hospital times. But when he was at home, and Derek came back from work, doing a conventional job, I would go through the form of, ‘Oh look, there’s Daddy. Let’s go and see Daddy, let’s…’ you know, and make some semblance of greeting, but I don’t think Giles cared two hoots. I don’t really think he recognised me, although, he never said Mother, because, he... But he did come to recognise me as useful person to have around, somebody that could put his world straight, somebody that would sort him out, and sort the others out. So, he was very, very egocentric. [pause] I said we used to visit every Sunday for, how long would it be then, three, four hours perhaps, but then we made it into Saturday, because a day after we had been there with him I was just unfit for work completely. And, there was a whole group of people who knew that I couldn’t really work on a Monday. I could push papers around and I was around, but I was not capable of any creative work or anything useful. And so we made it into Saturdays. And, then I had Sunday really to recover. Well all would have been well, subnormality hospitals have a mix of, had a mix of people in them. They were all adults. Correction. There were some children’s wards. Most of the people were there as adults, because once you went into a place like that, you did not come out. And, they still had people in there who should never have gone in in the first place, women who had had illegitimate children and, were classed as moral defectives from earlier in the century, and people who basically, were un-copeable with at home, for whatever reason. [pause] We had sort of come to terms with it. The school helped, there was some nice little discipline there, of some sensible activity rather than this prison-like ward. And when it came to seventeen, we realised that there was some gap in the legislation, because compulsory education was offered for all children, but somehow in the special education legislation it had got dropped out and it was being stopped at seventeen. So Derek did a lot of committee work there to try and remedy that, which I think he did. So I’m not sure whether Giles benefited to his own eighteen or not, but it was a, an example of what happens to vulnerable people, that you have legislation and it just doesn’t sort of apply to people in hospital or people with this or people with that.

Did Derek do committee work?
He joined a little committee on that one, yes. A local hospital group that was fighting for these children that were seventeen years old, and we thought should have had another year’s education.

[34:07]  
*How did Derek react to Giles?*

He was really a very, very good father, totally loving, but totally undisciplined. You know, he didn’t really structure his day properly, he just, in a way, I describe it, sort of, later on... Derek is very keen on tennis, and, he tried to teach Derek... tried to teach Giles some tennis. Now how you would normally start with a child is something like French cricket, where you have a bat in front of your legs and try and field off any balls. Or at worse, you know, you just hit a ball. Derek started by trying to teach him to serve. And, you know, it’s so unrealistic, and so, debilitating, to just see that he wasn’t getting anywhere, and he, he is very stubborn, and he wasn’t going to do anything else, and Giles wasn’t going to serve a tennis ball. And, the only good thing about it was that they were together and they were having some sort of communication in the open air.

*Do you feel that there was any stigma attached to having...*

Well I mentioned earlier my in-laws did not want Giles to visit them there, because their neighbours would see him. And certainly there was a lot of stigma, imagined or real. Certainly when you went out, I mean it was almost impossible to... We joined the local Mencap Society and had a little bit of social life there. But you became very closed in and, sort of locked into your home, and closed in in yourself to protect yourself. Giles became aggressive, and started attacking us, probably trying to get some sort of reaction from us, I don’t know. I mean he had always been destructive, but you know, by the time... You know, I know how to handle somebody trying to throttle me. I know, [laughs] I’ve had it, I know how to cope with it. And you laugh now but I mean it was, it was horrible, horrible times. [pause] But Derek is a bit inconsistent. He never really discussed with me, ‘We’re going to do this, that or the other,’ and stick, stuck to it. And he was too compliant, it’s part of his nature I suppose. But, without a doubt he has the most fantastic love for him, and, he reacts
quite differently to his death to, than I do. And, he has never really recovered from his death, which I think I have.

[37:15]
Anyway, all would have been well at the hospital, except that, things began to go wrong. There was a new sister on the ward, older than we had had previously, and they, they varied quite frequently, usually there for about a year. And this one started off doing things which I thought, oh well, you know, they’re trying now, they’re putting curtains up at the window, they’re putting, redecorating some of the rooms that hadn’t been done for fifteen years. And obviously making some effort to change things but in a physical environment. What happened though was that the emotional and social environment became more and more constrained, because she, as we later discovered, was pushing the twelve kids, young men, into a smaller and smaller area so they didn’t make a mess of the bit that she had got curtains up in and so on. And in particular, she was keeping them out of the kitchen, where there was a water tap for them to get drinks. And, we discovered from the ulcers in his mouth, and eventually one of the staff told us, that Giles was drinking from the toilets, in the rather disgusting toilet and bath area that they had for these boys. And we then complained, started complaining vociferously, and took a complaint right up to the ombudsman about the various things that were... there were a lot of other small things going wrong. The medicine wasn’t given in a professional way and was given by non-qualified staff, you know, that was one thing that they, they found and proved. But, you know, some of the other things were just, things that were un-provable. And we had a real battle for several years trying to deal with an ombudsman’s complaint where basically we were complaining about the very group of people who was looking after our vulnerable son who couldn’t speak and wouldn’t tell us what was going on. And... [pause] It was pretty nasty as far as we were concerned.

[39:51]
And for some reason, I think it was when I had that distress sale, I think it was George Sala who sort of, said, ‘Well, surely you can afford to look after him yourself.’ And so we decided to buy a little cottage, which was called Redcot, and, have Giles visit us there, so that we had, especially in winter, somewhere where we could spend some time with him and he with us doing, civilised family sort of things, rather than this picnicking in the grounds. The picnics in the grounds had been doubled when Derek retired, because he then started coming down midweek as well on his own, and, he
would picnic with Giles in the car or on the ground. And eventually couldn’t manage that on his own, so he employed an ex-member of staff whom somebody introduced to help him during those visits, and his name was Phil, Phil Hope, Phil... Phil, anyway. So we bought this little cottage, and with Phil’s help we started to spend that weekday with him, and, it was within walking distance of the hospital, so we would collect him, and, take him to Redcot and have a little meal there, and I used to bath him and groom him a bit, because, it was just awful in the hospital. And have some nice family time together and then take him back. And, to accelerate the story, that eventually became that Giles would stay overnight, Phil would stay overnight to help him, then he would come several times. Phil couldn’t do it so you found somebody else, a boy called Paul, but Phil did the scheduling. And that sort of grew into a little scheduling. And after many years it developed into the fact that we took Giles out of the hospital. And he had not been formally sectioned, so we were able to do that. But the consultants were very very much against it. And we were just so, not angry, we were just disappointed, we had lost faith and lost confidence in the hospital. And so we took him out. And, they couldn’t really stop us. But then I had to find back in the community a dentist that would look after his teeth, somebody, a GP who would look after him, and, the hospital, and of course all this was local to the hospital, was advising those potential professionals, ‘Don’t take him on, don’t take him on, he should be in hospital, he shouldn’t be out.’ Which was not helpful, but doubtless they thought they were doing the right thing. But somehow or other we did manage to get him living back in the community, a very simple life, going for walks up the lane, going for picnics in the woods, going to the little shop on a good day, going for rides and little outings. And generally sitting in a nice room with, a jigsaw which was the sort of thing that he liked doing, in a fairly sterile sort of way because he didn’t really look at the pictures but he just fiddled around with it. And, that took some years before we had got him out of the hospital, because he was very institutionalised.

[44:26]

_How did you find the attitude of medical professionals with Giles?_

They just thought we shouldn’t do it. That he probably... Later on we learnt that he was one of the most vulnerable people living in the community. And he was very vulnerable, I mean he was violent, he was, you know, couldn’t cross the road by
himself, he couldn’t really do anything by himself. So, I can well understand that.

We got a bit of financial help from something called the Disability Living Foundation, and they said they had never given such a large allowance, large allowance to anyone. Because he just needed so much support. And... [pause]

[45:15]

But, this was before the formal days of Care in the Community, but that’s what we were doing, and, there were odd irritations, such as the... When we’d been discussing taking him out of the hospital, it had been implied that there would be some financial support to provide him with somewhere to live outside the hospital, but it was never in writing of course, and when it happened and when I’d sort of caught my breath and got going and I sort of said, you know, ‘Is there any way of supporting this?’ ‘Oh no no no, that...’ He came out against our recommendation, and he was before Care in the Community. We do this now for people going out in Care in the Community. But, so I was bit irritated about that. But this is why I started really selling shares myself, to have the money to support all this little lot. It was a nice little cottage, with a sort of staircase coming out of the hall, and the hall was also the dining room where we had a little trestle table. A little kitchen with a bathroom off. And, it was a bit like playing house there, because it was so small, so modest. A lot of the sort of, household things just didn’t go on there, brought the washing home and, you know, it was just...

[46:50]

But that set-up grew into the first of my main charities that I have supported, and that was called Kingwood after the area that it was sited, on something called Kingwood Common. And that is a charity that... Eventually you realise, all this we’ve done for Giles, and in fact, we had moved out of Redcot when he came out full-time, into another cottage called, called, The Cuddy, and that had three bedrooms, a large living-room, a large kitchen and so on, you know. And, we realised that, we could have somebody else living there as well. And, it wasn’t possible to make it into a charity before we had three beneficiaries, because, it can’t be a charity with just Giles and somebody else living there. So for two or three years we had to support Giles and two other people, all very high cost, before it became a charity, and the cost halved, because one could pay at a... pay into the charity out of... Do I mean post- or pre-tax income? Pre-tax income. So I didn’t pay tax on the money that I put into Kingwood once it became a charity. And that grew, we had The Cuddy, and eventually we had...
three people there I think. And then we opened a second one called the White Barn, and that had five people in it. Then we had another one, Conchiglia, which is some Spanish word for shell, and that had I think four people in it. And I spent a lot of time setting up these, finding the houses, buying them, setting them up suitably, recruiting the staff, and getting them operational to modern social standards. So the sort of thing you do in a family is not acceptable in a charity which other people live in. For example, I can remember being acutely irritated when some inspector sort of said, Giles needed a new carpet, because there was some join in it or something like that. And I knew Giles was living at a standard far, far in excess of ours, and I was just so irritated, I could sort of see, well, you know, yes, it’s a charity and, you know, shouldn’t have a join in the carpet. But that’s the sort of simple regulation that was part of growing that charity, and learning something about, social services, learning something about the regulation, finding out about how to get some payment for these young people, finding out how to, what’s the word I want? Schedule, shifts, how to work the shifts. And, after a bit people like Phil and Paul, and Paul was there for twelve years so that sort of, talks about how long it was, we began to have some managers to do this for us, because there was a sizeable number of staff and so on. And, so gradually we got managers who had managed other things, who knew about care of the mentally handicapped, who knew about how to get people into different services, how to call the different services and so on. How to run assessment routine, meetings, every, six months I think they were. And it all became much more professional, and we would eventually then be turning up as visiting parents rather than somebody who was going to go in there and scrub the floor, or do whatever was, was necessary at that time.

[51:21]

It was still, I was still working, and, so most of my activity was during the week. Derek... During the weekend. Derek would go during the week as well. And although it was difficult, it was a different sort of sick to the problems that I had at work. And so, there was some contrast and you could go in still, fresh on a Monday morning, because you hadn’t been struggling with your business plan or whatever it was over the weekend, you could go in fresh. So it sort of worked for me. I think Derek got much too embroiled in it, because it’s all-consuming, and his wanting to have everything just right. And I’m just realistic, I notice, know that managers want time off, and managers are not perfect, and we had one or two that were not good, and
we had one member of the staff who overdosed Giles because he was just too violent and wanted to have a bit of peace and quiet so he just, drugged him. All the things that can possibly go wrong went wrong in a small charity. But after about seventeen years the charity did become self-sustaining. It did have management, it did have a little head office outside the three operational houses. It was no longer making financial demands on me, and, it became something quite different.

[52:58]

Why did you decide to actually set it up as a charity, when it sounds like it was so much effort just with Giles?

Well it was, having just Giles, and a lot of people helping to care for him, was a bit like, I think the metaphor I used earlier about cuckoos, about birds feeding a cuckoo, and there was just so much going on, for this one person. And, it wasn’t really terribly good practice to have him on his own. [pause] So the Kingwood Trust was the first charity that as actually formed in ’94, so it had been going for quite some time as an un, un-charitable organisation. And, after, round about that time, which I think was ’96, we started to think about giving money to other organisations, and all our wealth came from the company shares which had got enormous capital growth, capital gains on them, so that when we gave them to the Kingwood Trust, they went with a stricture, don’t sell these within six months, because otherwise I, Steve, will have the most enormous tax bill on them. And that was all right with the Kingwood Trust, because I was there on the receiving end as well, but it was pretty cumbersome if it was on a third party charity, and you always are not quite sure whether they do try and do something silly with it. So we formed the Shirley Foundation really to act as that intermediary, so that I could give company shares tax free to the Shirley Foundation, hold them happily there for six months, and then they were free to give as and when, as and where I wanted. And, the Kingwood Trust has some of those shares and still, very kindly out of sentiment they, they still hold on to them.

[55:30]

The second... [pause] I think round about that time we started thinking, well what is this charitable foundation going to do? And, it took a long time legally to set it up. By long time I mean three or months. And, having got it set up, I was raring to go. And the first few donations were reactive, and to the friend that I had worked with in
the States who was working in Bermuda and she had got some educational project there, and, people that, you know, I trusted not to, I trusted to use the money responsibly.

*Is this your friend from BOR?*

Yup. Um... Yes. Yes. Yah. Elizabeth Virgo. And, so she had a bit of money and... But then you realise, this isn’t really what I want to do. And, I remember a couple of evenings really thinking, what is it I want to do? And so worked out a, a strategy, which hasn’t really changed, and that is to concentrate on projects that are pioneering, because I’ve always done new things and research and pioneered and the first this and the only that, and which if successful, and pioneering projects can and do fail, and if they failed all the time I’d think we were probably not taking enough risks, and, I think it is the role of charities and foundations to take the risk that the State doesn’t do, but if successful, make a real, real difference. So those were two of the criteria, pioneering, strategic. But then in the two areas that I knew and cared about, and that is, information technology and autism, and, it really changed, stayed like that for many many years and only changed a couple of years ago. So the second major gift was to the livery company, which I’ve already talked about, and that was in ’96. In ’97, I wanted to spend some time with the new young chief executive of Kingwood, and she mentioned that she was going over to the States to see a particular school, and, I sort of said, ‘I’ve always wanted to see that school, can I come with you?’ But really I just wanted to spend some good time with her. And, this was a school outside Boston, and, it was called Higashi, and it relied on exercise to calm and, soothe. It was purely, it’s a residential school for autism. And they were getting some remarkable results there, using exercise a great deal, and, when I first read about it, because it was quite well known, called Higashi, and I just thought, well they’re obviously taking the easy ones, they’re not taking people like Giles. When I got there, I saw some people laying up the dining room for meals, and, I wasn’t sure whether these were people with autism or whether they were young staff, because they were so controlled, laying tables very slowly, that... When I looked at the little ones coming in as the new entries of three, four, five years old, they were obviously just as wild as my Giles had been, so they were really taking the difficult ones as well. And, I came back from that visit, which had been intended for something completely
different, thinking, well, why haven’t we got a school like that in this country? And maybe if I had had, if Giles had been to a school like that he would never have got to such a state. And, got myself a meeting at the Department for Education and something or other, whatever, DfE, Education and, Education... DfES, anyway, for the schools, and said I’d seen these extraordinary results being got from this educational process; could we not have a school like that in the UK? And they looked at me as if I was absolutely simple and sort of said, ‘Well Government doesn’t set up schools.’

[01:00:18] So, I thought about it a bit, and, spoke about it with my friend Penny who had been my company secretary, and, she listened, and she knew all about Kingwood and she knew all about Giles and, and you know, she’d... And she sort of said, ‘It sounds as if it’s got your number on it,’ you know. So we decided to, ‘OK, I’ll set up a school.’ And, that started late in ’97, and I can remember on New Year’s Eve I interviewed somebody who had been introduced to me as one of two. There are two businesswomen who want to help. And I somehow imagined somebody who wanted to put up some money. Anyway, I met them, I think it was just one to begin with. They were not moneyed people at all, they were two employees, and, they wanted to somehow start getting involved in autism, which, for reasons which, you never know how people get switched on to something like this. And, her name was Kate Luker, l-u-k-e-r, and she was young, oh, late twenties then or something, had been a middle manager in Whitbread’s or some such company, and, she became the project director as I started to look for a school, I think I’d already got it then. But I was using an educational consultant recommended by the Government, DfES, to do a feasibility study as to what one needed in a school from the point of view of location and buildings. [pause] His recommendation was to go for a greenfield site so that one could build it, purpose-built, for the difficult environment that these kids needed, and to have it in the Midlands, because we had by that time looked at where the children with autism were, and where the schools were. And there was a big gap in the Midlands where there were, where there were no schools or services, worth speaking of anyway. And it’s an example I think of how all the business skills that you’ve learnt over the years apply equally well to the charitable sector. You’re doing exactly the same thing, you’re doing a feasibility study, you’re taking on staff, you’re doing a pilot study, you’re doing... And, Kate became the project director as we set things up,
the very first employee, and I think we employed her, it wasn’t on a consultancy basis. And we eventually found, not in the Midlands of England but in Newbury, which is about forty minutes’ drive from Henley and therefore much easier for me, a school, an existing school, that was selling its buildings and land, not as a going concern, but just as a building and land. And that school was called Kingswood, which I thought was another of those little signs that this had got my number on it. And, I bought it. And, later bought some cottages, I extended it and modernised it and knocked buildings down, I built things on and so on, all together with Kate, and then a number of consultants and others. And that project took five years. Basically all my dreams and waking life, that was... I mean I did other things, but I thought, there’s a pile of things in the corner to go, and the lists of things I had to do, and the lists of things that came back from the school. It was quite a major project, but one that I thoroughly enjoyed, because, it was, a school is much more positive than a care home. And, I, I think I’m good with people, and I know what they’re capable of, what they might aim for, and I very professionally recruited the principal of the school. To my horror, principals are on two terms’ notice, so, we went for a long time before we had made the appointment, and then got him actually to start. But it was done very professionally, using headhunters, a longlist and a shortlist, and we got somebody who was really, proved very successful. His name was Robert Hubbard, h-u-b-b-a-r-d.

[01:05:38]
And, the school opened to time in September ’99. So, there were really, a very short period of time between actually starting and buying the thing and getting enough work done on it to get it ready to open, and getting the pupils there. And, we only had two pupils signed up when we opened with already thirty staff, and I really looked at the imbalance of this big, big school and two little seven-year-olds or something. Joe and, Joe and Jake, Jake I think it was. There were two Js anyway. And I seriously thought of cancelling and doing some more recruitment and waiting later. But, the educational consultant, and I always remind him of this, sort of said, ‘No, if you defer till January, you may have two or three people there, but, if you open, you will get the other pupils in pretty quickly.’ So we opened with two, and, that was in mid-September; October, November another couple came in, and by Christmas we’d got five, which was the, a class. We were going to have classes of five. And we of course were having to meet all the educational requirements of, everything was
inspected, every computer had to be in position even before the first child came in. I mean ridiculous things. Fire regulations, every fire organisation seems to have different regulations, some of which are sensible, some of which are absolutely bureaucratic. But we, you know, we got through this, and that was Robert’s task, and he marketed to the various local authorities.

[01:07:49]

What sort of pupils did you take? What were the criteria, if any?

Very clearly, diagnosed as with autism, and also with learning disability and challenging behaviour. So they were all again very difficult ones. And really the pupil profile was based on my Giles, on the basis that, you know, nobody else was, was even doing anything for these children worth speaking of. And, so they were, they were based on my Giles. It’s softened a bit since then because everybody.

[pause] The first five pupils were all boys, and although boys are much more frequently autistic, I can remember discussing with Robert, ‘Look, we’ll have to get some girls in, otherwise the imbalance is going to be so awful that, you know, if we got ten boys, it’s just so hard on the first girl coming in.’ But in fact, applicants number six and seven were both girls, and, you know, it sort of kept its balance, and, it was fine. It now has, it’s grown over the years, it was open formally by Princess Royal in, 2000, May 2000. And, that was very nice, and since then we’ve built on a, a sixteen to nineteen called high dependency unit. And I did not provide the funds for that. It was a little fundraising committee set up and got that together. There was a business plan in that the school should break even in five years, and it did, and this is again, by that time I knew a lot more about what I was doing, and I had the confidence, I’d got Kingwood behind me and all the mistakes that had been made there. And, it, it was a very successful project. After those five years I backed away, and, since then I visit for founder’s day and I visit for, various other special occasions, in particular when I presented the deeds of the school to the Prior’s Court Foundation. It was a Queen Anne building, is a Queen Anne building, red brick, gracious, graciously proportioned really, that had once been, a prior somewhere on the site, and then had been bought and developed and lived in by the Huntley and Palmer family. So that what we used as a dining room for thirty children had been their billiard room, and, it sort of had, we had to re-do the staircases so that they were safe, and, and open
up bits of the roof to get more space there, and, knock down one old building that was a mess. But part of it was listed, and that was the bit that went back to 1784, and, appeared in Pevsner, and, really was a very, is a beautiful building really. And had fifty-odd acres of grounds, most of which left to parkland with specimen trees in, and, a ten-acre wild wood, by which I mean a wood that hasn’t had anything really done to it, ever. And all we do to it now is just pick up branch... well, collect, you know, saw off branches that we think might be a health hazard and might drop on somebody. And all the rest is just left.

[01:11:50]

So in a sense, Prior’s Court provides, from the physical point of view, everything that I could have wanted for Giles and pupils like him in a material sense, and Robert provided a, an educational progress, progressive service, that provided all the intellectual activity that pupils of that ilk could, not appreciate but could, could make use of. And the final bit really, the spiritual side of these pupils, and these are pupils, very few of them have any speech, but they do have a physical intellectual and spiritual side. And, one of the things I felt that I could do was to address the spiritual side. And so I have put there on permanent loan a major collection of contemporary British art which is all in the wood, it’s in the grounds, it’s in the buildings, it’s in the main buildings above the main fireplaces but it’s also in the cleaners’ cupboard, and in the toilet cubicles. So that it is enriching. The idea is that, you should be able to, when you’ve been there for ten years, go round some corner and suddenly find something that you’ve never seen before.

*Why do you think that aspect’s important?*

Well, one has had the thinking, is this an animal or is it a person that I’ve got in Giles? And, it’s quite clearly it is a person. And, that is true of all of them who never quite got as bad as Giles, because, you know, over the years people have learnt more about autism. And, he reacts to nice surroundings, he reacts to some music, he reacts to colour, and, so do all of them. And, although figurative art is not appropriate, because, they find it too threatening in the same way that children with autism won’t look you in the eye, it is too threatening, and when I was mentally ill I couldn’t look people in the eye either. And you learn little dodges. If you look here, and I look at
you there, it looks as if I’m meeting you in the eye but I’m not, so I’m not getting that threatening thing. You learn little dodges...

_Looking between my eye and...

Yes, just, just there. So if you ever, ever happens to you, that’s where you look. Anyway. I think that’s part of human life. And the intention is to, it was set up with quality furniture, solid furniture that would stand up to all the problems. But given a decent environment, the damage rate in that school is no worse than any other school. They have original paintings there; yes, one or two of them have got bashed, a lot of the ceramics have got broken, but that’s usually because a child was in an area it wasn’t supposed to be in. And, it gives a very calming and, it sort of reaches the children in different ways, not all of them, some react to some paintings, others react to other paintings. Originally I think the staff didn’t know what the hell I was about. But I’ve, I enjoyed doing that, and I still, there’s a painting over there that’s just got to go over, you know, and sort of... If I come across something that’s suitable for them. How are we doing?

_Do you want to stop for a bit?

[End of Part 12]
You mentioned that some of your earliest experiences with computers had been on HEC4. I was just wondering how you came to use it in the first place.

When I was studying for my maths degree at Sir John Cass College, at evening classes and so on, one of my colleagues, or was it fellow students there, Bill Cameron, he was working at the GEC in Wembley, and, I was wanting to get into computing, Dollis Hill had put me off because I wasn’t the right grade. And so, he invited me to come and have a look at HEC4. And, I just made myself useful. And, it was to me very exciting, because it was embryonic of the future, and, I never really thought about HEC1, 2 and 3, before my time.

What did you actually do with it?

Quadratic equations is all I can really remember. [laughs] I really can’t remember. It was a very short period.

Later on when you had formed your own computer company, do you have any particular inspiration from the feminist movement in the Sixties or any other source?

Although in retrospect it’s very clear that I was part of the feminist movement, it was entirely independent as I remember. I wasn’t reading about it, I wasn’t hearing about it. And yet, I was very much setting up a company of women, a company for women, a company to address some of the inequalities, a company that did positive discrimination. And, when I discovered where the rest of feminism had gone, some of it I didn’t particularly like, if people asked me, ‘Are you a feminist?’ as they did later on, I always replied, ‘No I’m not, I’m a humanist, and that I really believe in people’s ability to be able to change things.’ The feminists were also quite sort of rabid anti-men, and this was not really part of my nature. They had quite clear ideas of, changing from the feminine way of life to a universal way of life, so that all the jokes about burning bras. But also there was a move to really concentrate less on women’s appearance, and that of course hasn’t happened over the years, but, women’s clothes have changed a great deal, and hair was one of the things that was, you know, a
woman’s pride and, and glory, which became less and less important as women, in my part of the world at least, ceased wearing make-up, they really stopped taking care for some of the femininity that is sort of worldwide, and, looking ahead were, in making, in getting equality with men, they became man-ish as distinct from equal but different. And of course some of the legislation followed that as well. And that equal but different took some time to come in.

_When the equality legislation actually came in in 1975, what was your own personal impression of it?_

I, as I say, I wasn’t involved in the public arena at all. I was just acutely irritated that something that so badly needed doing for women should actually stop me, who was one of the leading people, in the UK at least, providing decent professional employment specifically for women. So I was more irritated than anything else. It started off... What do I remember about that? I don’t think I’ve got anything worth recording on that.

[05:00]

_I just wondered, when do you first employ men?_

Well we had, I think, a couple of men before that, but from the public relations point of view, we said, and I still say, we started to employ the men after 1975, if they were good enough.

_Mm._

And that gets a roar of laughter if I’m talking to a women’s group. And I still do talk to women’s group, and in philanthropy women give in a slightly different way, and it’s interesting to follow what has happened, and, the sort of jobs that are now open to, to us. The problem of being a woman in business included things like lack of credibility, but there were also a lot of things that legally you couldn’t do: bank accounts, serving on the Stock Exchange, driving a train. Although these were not things that I wanted to do specifically, the fact that they were disallowed is, is pretty important to me. By chance I was in Bristol at the first ordination of women priests,
and although I, I’m not religious, I was fascinated by that bastion of masculinity actually falling, and, I happened to be in Bristol being given an honorary degree from, from Bristol, and, I had applied to go to the cathedral for this service, and, the university got me in basically. And I think I had thought that there might be three, four, five women going through. To me it’s equally important if just one woman wants to do something, and, but in fact there were hundreds. I mean I don’t want to exaggerate, maybe seventy, maybe 100, I don’t know, but lots. And it was the most uplifting and spiritual experience, not from the religious point of view, but that was what it was all about, but by the sheer joy of the women being allowed to do what they wanted to do, and for which there was no physical reason why they shouldn’t do it. And there are certain jobs that require the strength of the average men, man, but the overlap between men and women is so enormous, that there are always women better than the weaker men, and conversely, that overlap, as far as I know, is only... Sorry, the overlap only, does not exist in the sense of smell, which is apparently quite different between, for men and women, which is, perhaps includes, explains some of the things that have happened in, in, at least over the history. But that was a, a very moving occasion. Where had I got to?

[08:19]

That brings me on to... Actually it brings me on to a question I’ll leave for later. But, you mentioned in the earlier interview as well, you were slightly inspired by the Black Power movement. I was just wondering, what was the, what did you know of it?

I tend to think conceptually, and so, what do I, did I know? I can’t remember. And what do I know now, is still very little. But it’s the concept of the underdog, the holding back of a group of people for whatever reason, and that over and over again has inspired me, whether it be the trades union movement in Poland, or the apartheid in South Africa, the... I mean I’ve been to the south of, what is it, South Carolina, was it South or North Carolina, where although apartheid is long finished, the subservience of people according to their dark skin is, is quite noticeable still. And while I was working in the States my colleague was down in South Carolina and she sort of said, people were stepping off the pavement for her, because there was still that sort of relationship. I can remember when the first black faces appeared in, in England, and... Well two things really. The first time when a black hand bus, bus
conductor, appeared asking for fare of course, and, I jumped with a sort of atavistic surprise, because you just, we just had not seen black people in this country. And, then there was a wave of black, presumably families, coming over with the American forces during the war. And I was on again a bus with Aunty, during the war, later part of the war, and, an American soldier came in, onto the bus, and tapped the shoulder of a black woman who was sitting down, and without a word, she got up and gave up her seat. And Aunty, bless her cotton socks, rose to the occasion, and was sort of saying, ‘Hey, we’re in England now, we don’t do that. You sit down,’ and the soldier to stand up again. And, I was very proud of her, and I thought, I hope I always have the guts to, to speak out, because, it doesn’t need many people to speak out to get the message.

Well a lot of people really were surprised that I could cope with simultaneously two things, each of which was expected to be all-consuming. But I found that they each acted as a break and refreshment from the other, and, I said at the time and I think it was a correct analysis, that the only time I forgot Giles was when I was working, and the only time I forget work was when I was with Giles. And so the two somehow did fit together. What I didn’t do, and, people forget how much time goes on living, I didn’t have holidays, I didn’t have weekends, I didn’t, basically cook food, I didn’t do the shopping. It became a very, very basic lifestyle. And you can cut down the hours that are spent in, in living, if you structure your standard of living accordingly.

Did you ever think about having more children?

Well the original intention was to have a big family of five, you know, I don’t know where that number came from, but yes, I, I, I wanted a large family. But once we realised that Giles was learning disabled, I don’t think the autism word would have been used by then, I felt that the, we felt, it wasn’t a joint... it was a joint decision, that
the probabilities were, were slanted against us, and having had one child, we somehow felt that the risk of having a second vulnerable child was, was too high. And, we were groping towards something which is now known, that autism in particular is clearly genetic. We went for some genetic counselling at, Oxford somewhere, who said that there was absolutely no reason why we shouldn’t have a healthy child next time. But while all this was going on, Giles was getting more and more difficult, and it got to the stage when, if I was going to have another child, Giles would have had to have been institutionalised straight away, because I just could not get through another pregnancy if I had Giles at home, because he was already starting to be violent. And, so we decided to limit our family. And although I’m sad not to have children, because my only child has died, and very sad not to have any grandchildren, because at this stage in my life that’s what all my friends and, friends are doing, it was the right decision for us, we concentrated on the child that we have, had, and, never really regretted the decision for us. Other families make different conclusions. But... It, it, it was right for us.

[15:00]

How did your feelings towards Giles change over the course of his life?

[pause] I had some, this is a technical expression for it, but immediately after his birth I went through a depression, which surprised me no end because suddenly, I’d got the child that I wanted, blah blah blah, and yet I was in floods of tears. And, I gather that’s a fairly common physical reaction to childbirth. And then, I just could not believe that this... Well for about a fortnight I felt that he was part of my body, which was a weird sort of sensation, but that gradually dissipated, and, really then I couldn’t believe how beautiful the relationship was, and how close I felt to him, though it soon became, or it later became obvious, that he was not close to me. [pause] When I’m with other children now, I realise how slow I was to pick up that there were serious problems there. Because he really was very unresponsive, but he wasn’t terribly demanding, he thrived, he looked beautiful, he, he was slow to walk, slow to talk and slow to do everything, but that came later. And as a baby, I was astonished how masculine a boy was. Whereas I had somehow thought that babies were sort of asexual until they became toddlers, and I was looking forward to the toddler stage, which is always a lot of fun, when the kids start being their own person
and real company. It went wrong fairly early, three and a half or something like that, and I’d got a wild thing. And then it turned into a sort of, less pleasure, less comfort, less natural, but very dutiful. We had got this child, he was totally responsible... we were totally responsible for him, and he was totally dependent on us, and, that saw us through for, some time. My husband Derek was following a conventional career in that he left in the morning and came back in the evening, that sort of, going out, and, I know when he came in, we joked but it was really like the relief of Mafeking. As he came in the door, I just went out. I’d just about had it. [pause] Giles never said Mother or anything like that. I don’t think he really recognised his father, except as a useful person to have around, and to a large extent I was like that. As he grew older he sort of, recognised that I could put things right when they were, not going well in his various things, and, it became quite chaotic, feelings of, you know, unfair. How, how could I finish up, my life had been hard enough earlier, and how could I finish up now with this unresponsive, mad, wild young man, who was, became aggressive towards me, was very destructive towards things? And, certainly would have... I mean I still have dreams about him. Most of them are now quite pleasant dreams, but some of them go back to those wild times where you really think, well I, I wondered about, should I get some cleric in to exorcise the demons, because he did seem as if he was possessed.

[19:54]
After things really broke down and he finished up in hospital, or, wrong way round, I finished up in hospital and he therefore had to go into hospital, the relationship changed, partly because I’d got my mental health back, but partly because the relationship developed into a much more maternal relationship, I wasn’t doing the day-to-day care, so I could start to enjoy again, to some extent anyway, motherhood. I’d been advised much earlier not to try teaching him. Because a friend and I swapped handicapped children, we tried to teach each other’s children. But I’d been advised not to do that, really sort of told, concentrate on just mothering him. Other people would be able to teach him, other people would have skills to do that. You just mother him. And that was good advice for me, and, I eventually I think became, a good mother that structured his life in the way that he needed, although I still resented going through the world as Giles’s mother, much in the same way as I didn’t like being my husband’s wife. I like being my own person. So being, going to so many places, ‘Oh you’re Giles’s mother,’ I found quite difficult.
You talked a lot about. You took Giles out of institutional life and into the community, but, I was wondering what happened to him then.

The term institutionalised is very descriptive. And Giles had become institutionalised in the hospital. And in a sense it’s part of their intention to calm them down by removing a whole lot of stimuli, having a very plain lifestyle where they were not threatened or asked to do things or no, no demands made on them. On the other hand, food arrived every day and so on. So when he left the hospital over a period of about six years that transition took, he was... Was it resentful? No, he was just disturbed basically. And there was a sort of mixture of... I mean as always happens with autistic children, it was a question of, they want things to be exactly the same as it was yesterday, and yet you want them to move on and to, do new things, and, and have tomorrow slightly different. And, there’s a process called normalisation, and one of the professionals said, ‘What do you mean by normalisation?’ They said, well it’s, for some children it’s normal to go and play football or go to the pub or whatever, and other families it’s normal to play with books and, and listen to music. And that was I’m sure what instinctively we were trying to do with Giles. Derek desperately wanted him to play tennis; I wanted him to... What did I really want him to do? Derek was very keen on him speaking, and he felt that if he started to speak again, all would be well. I didn’t think speech was all that important, but I did find that the lack of communication was disastrous. And so, it, there was quite a bit of dissention there really. I think Giles found it difficult, he didn’t find it stimulating or anything. His personality was sort of, quite fragmented, and you spent a lot of time doing the equivalent of mental nursing, I guess, though I’ve never been qualified. Sort of putting him together again as a personality. And that eventually became his, his new personality, he began to enjoy certain aspects of life again. Very rigid as regards the structure of life. You know, if you were going to go for a walk every day, it had to be the same time after lunch and, and, there was a lot of, you know, tomorrow we’re going to have, well, tomorrow we’re going to go to the dentist, and sort of, later this morning we’re going to go to the dentist, and now we’re going to go to the dentist, and now we’ve been to the dentist, and, some of the day-to-day things that are markers in the lives of many young children became vast...
Everests of activity as far as Giles was concerned. But he did move on, and became relatively calm, relatively happy. Got very much overweight, which wasn’t nice, because, he was sort of eating the wrong sort of food and he was greedy and... Basically a good quality of life that I was, I was content with.

[26:05]

*Do you think there’s a parallel with your own childhood, this structuring and, lack of structuring and the importance of it?*

[pause] [sighs] I really do not think that there is a link there. I find creativity and innovation so important, so that when Giles was a baby there was a sort of, almost little joke about, you know, we don’t want him to turn into an accountant, with apologies to all accountants, but to me that seemed a very sterile activity. And so, as a baby I would do things deliberately; in retrospect it was quite wrong, but people have sort of said, well it didn’t do any harm. I would occasionally give him his pudding before his first course or something, and, deliberately try and trigger an innovation and expectation of entrepreneurial activity in what was an over-serene child and toddler, or early toddler anyway. So I, I don’t think there’s any connection there. What I noticed as a, for my own selfishness, was that having lost a lot of my family, it looked as if I wasn’t going to have the next family. And, I’m certainly conscious of that now. My husband and I are together, but we do not have the sort of family who are likely to look after us, and we have to, as we get older, as we age, and we have to make such arrangements for ourselves, although I have done it for my mother, I’ve done it for Uncle, I’ve done it for one of Derek’s cousins, to a lesser extent for his parents who were sort of... But you know, there is this responsibility for, for your parents, and we don’t have any children, and, sometimes I feel sort of, quite, there’s a sort of balance there that, you’re always at a cycle going on. I, I don’t know. But I don’t think the autism bit is part of it, I think it’s just having one child.

[28:47]

*Mm. When did Giles die?*

1997, October the 17th, it’s not the sort of... 1998, I’m sorry. There we go you see, I was just going to say you never forget. October the 17th. Derek remembers more the
date of his humanist funeral. It was somewhat delayed because there had to be a post-mortem. And there was about a ten-day delay there. It is a sort of, bitter sweet happening, because, there is no doubt that, especially with hindsight, it is quite a relief not to have him go on as... I mean we had already got to the stage where when we went for a walk we couldn’t walk fast enough to keep up with him, and, looking ahead, it became more and more impossible for us to look after him even for five minutes, he was too strong, too, too difficult and so on. So we were always together with Giles when there was another carer there, practically always. And, so it is, was a relief. He wasn’t, although he had developed and was still learning new things, as I believe we all do, he really wasn’t going anywhere. He was going to be staying in that Kingwood charity, he was going to be doing much the same thing in ten years, twenty years, thirty years, as he himself lost the bounce and natural beauty of being a young man. And I could see that, you know, he had plateaued and he wasn’t going to get any further. So we tried to be realistic about it, and, use our learning, or I tried to be realistic and use my learning with him, to work for other children with autism. My husband Derek feels quite differently, and he reacted to his death quite differently. And we mourn in quite different ways. But his attitude was, ‘Oh! I’ve spent every weekend, every bank holiday, every hour on autism. I’ve had enough. I don’t want anything to do with autism again.’ Now that doesn’t mean to sort of say that when we come across people with autism he’s not perfectly nice and, and you know, he cuts bits out of the newspaper for me about autism, and, all sorts of things like that. But, I have actually gone one way and my life was dedicated to autism, I called myself an ambassador for autism for many many years, and, most of my post-retirement activities have been concerned with autism, not all but most.

[32:00]

*I was struck last time when you were talking about Prior’s Court, and how it had everything you would have wanted Giles to have.*

Mm.

*I was just wondering, is he still a riving force there somewhere, for you?*
One of the things I’ve learnt in business, and I’m quite noted for, is the ability to manage succession, and so there have been five charities that I have set up, driven, given my heart to, and then stepped back from, leaving a management structure in place so that it will run on its own and will do its own funding and that sort of thing. So, it, it doesn’t have that vast evocation of, of Giles. There is a, a Giles House, but it, it doesn’t really link with, with, with anything in my emotions. I was fairly lucky in that while we were developing Prior’s Court, it was a very large site, and there was going to be a Sunday where he was going to come and have a picnic in the grounds there, just as a sort of different ambiance, and he died just before that Sunday. And I was sort of thinking, I’ve never actually seen him in that setting, I’m quite glad not to have, because a lot, a lot of places you go through, I can remember walking with Giles, and saying, ‘Oh I can remember Giles there. I can remember Giles there. Do you remember when we took...?’ And, and he, he does pervade our memories, and still to a certain extent my dreams.

[34:10]

I was wondering about, you talked about Prior’s Court again, when the charity work takes over, talking about successions and getting into new things. I was trying to sort of identify the sort of, the split if you like between computing and philanthropy. When do you make that switch from one to the other? I mean, I’m assuming they continue in parallel for a while, but...

Yes. And of course, computing is part of everything in the world, whether it be art or music or, physical education or philanthropy or whatever it is. I think really I used the business, the sort of corporate learning, the sort of, structure of, of my company, and what I had learnt there, and applied that to my philanthropic activities. Though I didn’t have a term for it, it’s now called philanthrocapitalism, because I’m using the same sort of market research, same sort of business planning, same sort of measurement and metrics as to what you’re doing, where the aim in a charity is some social, social change, or remedying of society, whereas in business it is primarily to make a return for the shareholders.

Mm. Is that something you were consciously aware of doing at the time?
I was very aware that I, my charitable activities were much, were very different from most people’s who were giving money rather than money and time and skills and drive and contacts. And, that was similar to my business life where you do become just, totally immersed in the activities, not in a survival sense but from the fascinating point of view that business is everything, it’s human relations, it’s technical, it’s, it’s, marketing, it’s, it’s dealing with, with the outside world, it’s political. And, it is absorbing, and I thought for a long time that the business was my magnum opus, and that I would never ever be as committed again. But, I was wrong I’m pleased to sort of say, and, I came across some papers this morning which talked, dated 2003, where I sort of said, another project was probably going to be my swan song. Well I’ve done two major ones since that. So, it’s, it’s in me to push, push, push.

[37:22]

I think that probably actually brings me on to one of the questions I planned to finish all this with, but I’m going to ask it now anyway, which was, what do you regard as, if you had to pick one, I’m going to make you decide on that one, which, which would it be, your big project?

I think my only big project really is that I have survived as a whole individual, and feel I have made my life worth saving, and I’m very content with that.

That’s something which you only feel now, or is it something which has grown for a while?

Oh no, the need to make each day worth saving, and, to make sure that I didn’t fritter my life away, has been strongly with me since I was five. So for seventy years it has been, what is noteworthy I suppose is that it as strong today as it was when I left school for example where you start thinking about, what are you going to do with your life?

I meant the contentment part of it.

I don’t understand the question.
It sounds like you were content that you had done that, that you had made your life worth saving.

I think that was my magnum opus. I mean I think that would, if I’d done nothing else, I was, balanced, I was a true survivor.

When does that feeling actually come?

When?

Yes. Is it something you’re sort of, sitting here now, is it something that’s developed recently, or is it something that’s...

No, it’s always been there.

...built up over a while?

Always been there, always been there. During the difficult times in the business where, I’d got to the stage with sort of, rocking in my chair with the worry about, because I didn’t know what to do with the business, I didn’t know how to get out of the current mess or whatever it was, I was strengthened by the idea that I was a survivor, there was a solution, and it was up to me to find it. And, so it has been a driving force. I... A bit sort of, you know, if I see something, no matter how small, a bit of paper on the ground, I will still pick it up, you know, and, somebody’s got to do it. And all those arguments about, leaving it to somebody else, no, I’ll do it. And I’m glad to have the strength and opportunity to do so.

[40:24]

Mm. After being that involved with the computer business for such a long time, did it feel strange to leave it? You talked before about, letting something go free once you’ve grown it, but I’m still thinking, that is thirty years of your life, it’s...

Yes, but towards the end of the thirty years in, in the company, I was doing a lot of things outside, and what I was doing internally was not actually the technology.
Because one of the first things you start delegating is the technology, and most entrepreneurs talk, whichever field they’re in, talk about that aspect of, they go into, patchwork quilts, and the first thing that they have to delegate is the actual making of the patchwork quilts, because there’s so much more to running a business about patchwork quilts. And that had happened to me for a long, long time, so one was learning, and enjoying to a certain extent, the corporate side of a business, learning quite a bit about finance, learning quite a bit about share ownership, I mean that stretched me intellectually for quite a few years. And, although I missed... Did I miss the technology? I’m not even sure. I just knew that it, I could no longer cope with today’s technology, I don’t attempt to cope because I feel that I mustn’t show my technological obsolescence. And, so, I’ve really moved towards a, trying to have some understanding of where the technology can impact life as distinct from what the technology is, and if I look back and I sort of think that the company started with, probably one of the first ever to consider the sort of social aspects of computing, and that theme has carried through in that, some of the later projects have used computing in the field of disability, some of the work I did have used computing in... for computers in the art, computer conservation. It’s taken me into a whole lot of areas. And, the ethics of business, and later the... and that came first, the ethics of computing, really led me into the sponsorship of one of my big projects, the £10 million plus of the Oxford Internet Institute.

[43:16]
*This brings me, brings us more or less to the point at which we had left off last time, which is, what follows from charity work we described last time?*

[pause] I think last time we were talking about the art collection which I have on permanent loan to Prior’s Court. And for some... in parallel with this of course I was building up my own art collection. I didn’t think of myself as a collector, and suddenly I realised if I saw a picture I could afford to buy it. And, I then started also making gifts of works of art, which were not charitable gifts, because, the Shirley Foundation isn’t involved with art at all. So I’d like to talk about a couple of those. I had had both a sculpture and a portrait of me done by charities. So the livery company had had a sculpture of me made, the artist I chose myself. Prior’s Court wanted a portrait of me, and again I chose the artist myself. The first, the sculpture I
like; the portrait did not come out well. It’s perfectly professional, and perfectly fine, except that it hasn’t got any of my zip or energy or, it just doesn’t shine through at all.

And, when I think about it, I was not well, physically well at the time, and it was at a time when I thought, right, this year I really will have time to sit for this. And that came through in, in the portraiture. But I do like commissioning art work, and I thoroughly enjoyed the work at Prior’s Court, and in the middle of doing another one at the moment, because, just sort of, tweaking and finishing things, and when things get broken. But I was at the Royal Society some years ago, and, I can’t remember what we were discussing, I’m not a fellow there, and I looked round, they have a very fine collection of portraits, I mean second really only to the National Portrait Gallery. And I looked round at these all very dark and learned and usually bearded male faces, and, I tried to persuade them earlier to have more fellows from the information technology field. And I sort of said, ‘Well, you know, you need to have, we need to have a portrait here of Tim Berners-Lee, while he still looks young.’ And he does still look very young. And, I was told, and this was over a lunch, ‘Oh we don’t have money for that sort of thing.’ And, I really thought I was getting the brush-off, and, and just dropped it. Anyway, about a year later I did learn that that was quite correct, that the Royal Society only, its funding comes from a parliamentary vote, and it does pay for its own portraits, but only of its own presidents, and they get some portraits of wonderful scientists in the past given, but they never actually commission anyone who’s not president. So I commissioned a portrait of Tim Berners-Lee, and I had a lovely time doing that. And he was in the States at the time, and it was a question of organising the art, choosing the artist and organising it and getting it done and then getting it framed and then getting it launched and getting it sited and so on. During the course of which I heard or watched a TV programme on Professor Stephen Hawking, and although I do not understand five per cent of what he’s talking about, I looked at that and thought, this is really, he is really one of the greats. And, anyway, I had his portrait done as well for the Royal Society. And when the artist showed me the result, he gave me the choice of three portraits that he’s done, the first, the second and the third, and, the first was pretty well, it hadn’t worked at all and, you know, absolutely reject, I just hope it’s never used anywhere else. But two and three were quite, quite close in quality, and, and so it was a question of choosing which one I wanted for the Royal Society. And, I chose a round one which had been measured at 123 centimetres, and it was, Hawking has a, a sort of interest in integers, and, the
round was sort of evocative of black holes, and it was a very powerful portrait. And, that, I really chose that. Then the messages came through that actually the Royal Society would prefer the plain one, the square one, rectangular one. And, I was getting quite sort of, uppity and sort of said, ‘Well you know, I, I hear you, and let’s ask Stephen Hawking. I mean, it’s still my decision as to which goes, which I’m giving.’ But then I heard that Stephen was in fact himself expecting to buy the second one, whatever it was, and giving it to his Cambridge college, which is, I think called the Institute of, Mathematical Science or something like that. And it occurred to me, I had commissioned this, I had had the idea, I’d done it, and so on, and in no way was I having him buy a portrait that I had commissioned, and so I bought that one as well. And this is how you learn the business aspects of commissioning art. I mean I should never have got myself into a situation where I didn’t own the work that went, that was just the study, one, two, three. And... But I’ve had a great deal of pleasure with that. Those gifts to the Royal Society were in 2008 and 9. The Cambridge one still has not been hung. And there are other sort of aspects of art in the non-charitable area that I find sort of follow one from the other, you know, that, if you have the time and if you have the money and if you have the ability to do things... While I was doing Stephen Hawking, well not doing, but while I was involved in that project, I came across a small little sculpture of his, very small, of him fairly young, by an artist called Milein Cosman, who happens to be a cousin or something like that. And so I bought that, and gave it to Stephen’s college at Oxford, which is University College. His main connection is with Cambridge but he did actually study at Oxford. And so I get a lot of fun out of those sorts of, of activities.

[51:02]
And then at Prior’s Court, I came across a, a sketch of the twentieth-century composer Gerald Finzi, and so I bought that and had it framed and a copy of it’s gone to the Bodleian and, but it’s gone to Prior’s Court because, there is that link there with the Kingswood school. So I’m, I really enjoy the creative part of being able commission art, being able to enjoy art. And when you give a work of art, you can still enjoy it, because it’s still there and in general you’ve got the aspect of being able to go and look at it.

Are there any particular things that appeal to you in a piece of art, which you want to support or have created?
Well in general I’ve bought British art, but that’s all part of this sort of patriotism, not terribly healthy these days, or not considered healthy, but I do buy British art in the main. I buy abstracts where the viewer add their vision and innovation to what the artist has presented in some way, so that, although I have bought pastorals, pastorals [pr. short a] for the offices, I’ve put them in the business offices, it’s really the abstracts that I enjoy most, and, certainly that was true of Prior’s Court where figurative art is likely to cause problems, and, one has to be very careful about not only the physical safety of a work of art, a statue or whatever it is, but that it’s not offensive, either sexually or aggressive in some way, that it challenges the pupils. The art there is chosen to be, serene, quiet, a limited palette of blues and greens, blue being very often the favourite colour, rather than challenging reds and oranges, the sort of thing that you might think of as being very appropriate to a young person’s establishment.

*Is the abstract art thing partly a function of your own tastes, or, with the sorts of environments of use you’ve got in mind for it in the end, such as Prior’s Court?*

No, it really was my own taste. I like Op art, I like a lot of the computer art. And, it’s fairly natural. [pause] No, I think it’s me, I think it’s me. And a bit sort of computery perhaps, I don’t know.

[54:00]

*What other philanthropic interests have you developed?*

Well since ’94, I have touched on about seventy philanthropic projects, and so far I’ve only talked about three of them, which happened to be rather big ones, the Kingwood Trust, the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists and Prior’s Court School. But of those seventy, some were just considered feasibility and then rejected, but quite a fair proportion of them went ahead. And, I had worked out... Once they, the charity, the Shirley Foundation, was set up, and that, a lot of boring legality stuff, so once it was set up it was sort of raring to go, and the first few gifts from it were totally reactive to approaches, and things that I would not consider for an instant, and today, the very first one was support for a debating society in Bermuda. Most of my
activity is in Britain anyway. I had visited Bermuda, but in particular I had got a good
friend there whom I trusted to use the, the money wisely, and she was involved in this
so I gave, it was more of a help to her. But, apart from that flurry of nonsense at the
beginning, I then worked out that the mission of the Shirley Foundation should be
pioneering, because I’ve always done new, new things at different areas, so it should
be pioneering, never more, just more of the same no matter how worthy, and it should
be strategic. So that, pioneering projects can and do fail, and, I suppose if they all
succeeded I’d worry that we were not taking enough risks, but if they succeeded
would really have some strategic impact on a sector or, moving ideas forward or
whatever it is, in the two areas that I knew and cared about, and that was information
technology and autism. And, the next big project that I did after Prior’s Court, and it
started in the same year, 1997, was, I called it sort of, lifetime economics. I was
thinking about persuading governments and others to do something about this
particular disorder, without ineffectually talking about how difficult it was, how sad it
was, all the various things about, you know, we really shouldn’t have these, these
poor, poor children. They suffered from autism, we’ve got rid of terminology like
that. And so, I sponsored and commissioned a, an economic study of the lifetime
costs of a family... sorry, on the family, of autism, and the cost to the nation of that
sector of the community. And they came out with some staggering figures, this was
in 1999. The result only came out in ’99. Because most of these projects took
eighteen months to two years, two or three years, that sort of timescale. The lifetime
costs were... I’m sorry, I’ve forgotten the figure so I’m not going to quote it. The
national costs were a staggering £28 billion a year. And, that makes politicians sit up
and take notice. And so you can talk about the national cost, most of which was in
lost employment costs, both parental lost employment and the individual. But... And
education of that was about, only seven per cent. So it came out with some very
interesting figures.

[58:36]
In ’98 I started a project which was a very early portal site on autism called Autism
99, which is when it was concluded and launched, which was basically a, started off
as a conference, an electronic conference, complete with, papers that were peer
reviewed, discussion groups, cafeterias, all the sorts of things that any conference has,
and that started in ’98, and was I think one of the very early ones which led later on
to... So the conference came first, and then there was a portal site later, but that

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started in ’98. I talked earlier about the National Council for Vocational Qualifications. And, so I was interested in different aspects of learning, especially using technology, and, so in ’98 I started with Birmingham University a project which allowed them to teach and examine qualifications for a post experience diploma in caring for people with autism, and that started UK only and then spread internationally. Basically this was all done distance learning. And, people sort of said, ‘Well you can’t do the sort of care practices, you know, that is really hands-on.’ But of course although there was odd summer conferences and things like that, much as the Open University does, it was possible to do, and, and, there was, the project I think took three years and hundreds if not thousands now of people have got that certificate, and I very often meet them and they sort of say, ‘Oh I, I was trained at Birmingham University,’ and they, ‘Oh yeah, that was my certificate,’ so to speak. And you become quite, possessive, ‘my certificate’, so on.

What’s your own personal role in projects like this?

Choosing the supplier; managing, not day-to-day but setting up a project management system, and to a certain extent publicising later on; quality control. But I do this always through people, because, I can’t look after seventy projects, and so, I employed on a consultancy basis, project directors to look after the major projects. And I would still be involved perhaps, discussion meetings every quarter, the Shirley Foundation would get written reports on every project, every meeting, and it used to meet every two months, now it only meets every four or five months, because there just isn’t a lot of activity going through at the moment. So, it was a purely supervisory role, and most projects you can come up with innovatory ideas and, and, for example, the art collection at Prior’s Court, I did sponsor a PhD study on that as to the impact on the pupils, and was able to sort of say, the only other example of work being used therapeutically like that is Chelsea and Westminster Hospital, which I’ve visited once, but you know, after a bit you, you get to know, that would be interesting to, to make that parallel. That ties in with the charity that I got involved with, Music for Autism, and they all sort of tend to go together in a very healthy way.
To actually pre-empt one of the other questions I had, because, how on earth do you keep track of all these projects? [laughs]

Well, there was a group of, I had an administrator for the Shirley Foundation, she’s still with me doing, still administrating but not doing so much project management. She would manage the smaller projects. I had a very good project director for things like Prior’s Court School and he finished up as its chairman. I mean it sort of... And in a sense, my business experience is always much the same about, fact-finding and market research, and then staff selection, getting the right people, structuring the project, monitoring its progress. All sounds very boring, but without that, you never get anywhere, and certainly I applied that to most of these projects, in a very crude sort of way.

[01:04:09]

Late in ’99 I, was lobbied really, there’s no other word for it, by a Welshman who was currently then Chief Executive of the West Midlands Autistic Society, and he was talking about the difficulties for people with autism, a major, major communications disorder, in a bilateral, bilingual, country like Wales. And, oh yes? I wonder if I can do something about that? There are about 9,000 children with autism in Wales, and you know, you sort of think, what on earth, and... And so I got together a group of people who might be interested, and, that was the National Autistic Society, they had a Welsh branch, and, there were about, five, six, seven, eight people met in Cardiff to talk about whether one could do something special, or should do something special, for, for Wales. And, with a lot of difficulty and over several years that, what started off, as I got it listed as a Welsh all-party group, so I was thinking of doing it with the Welsh Assembly, finished up as Autism Cymru, which was actually a very important development, not only for Wales but Wales became the first country ever to have a strategy for autism. And so other countries began to follow it, and Wales then started to work together with Scotland and Ireland, both north and south, in a, what do they call it? Anyway, putting them together, so learning from each other as to how to provide services and politically manage autism.

Would you say that’s sort of rather strategic...

Yeah, very.
...sort of spreading out from a small area to other ones?

There’s a word for it and I can’t think of it. [pause] No, gone. I think most of these projects were strategic. I look at them now, and some of the little ones in between didn’t get anywhere. But, most of them were pretty strategic. One of the ones that were IT oriented, starting again in ’99, it had massive activity in ’99, I’d got money, I wasn’t working on other things, massive, very very active, was, I was asked to support an IT, some computers for the Wirral Autistic Society. So I went up there, and I was combining it with a visit to something else, so by chance I took with me the educational consultant that I had used for Prior’s Court School.

Who is this?

John Woodhouse. And, we went to see what Wirral wanted, and they wanted £15,000 worth of computing equipment for use by their young adults with autism, and, they showed me round, which I mean was all very modest and so on. And then we went out for lunch and they sort of said, would I help? And, John always talks about the sort of, way this happened, because I sort of said, no, I wasn’t going to help them with that. But we had passed a building as we were walking round various places which would make a wonderful computer centre. And, basically I put a project director in there, and we have a wonderful Wirral Autistic Society supported home for, I think it’s eleven young men, and that’s called Giles Shirley Hall. Oh and I put a statue in there as well. Which serves as a computer centre, and it’s got a small computer centre with, it serves as a residential, and it serves as a heritage site where people can come, members of the public can come in and find out about the history and heritage of the area, which is all fascinating, Rowntree and, what were the other names up there? Social businesses where the employer was providing local homes, I think they called it Sunlight, Sunlight Homes, or something like that. Let me just think. [pause] I’ve forgotten it. Sorry.

It seems an interesting... Well I can see how autism and computing are both there as well, but you’ve also got that heritage aspect...
Mm.

...which hasn’t been something we’ve talked about. Is that the first one that’s got, you know, other aspects as well to those two?

I don’t think I was really... I mean they used it as a heritage site... [pause] I’m sure... I’m trying to, still trying to get its name, sorry. Sun... [pause] Gone. No, I don’t, I don’t think that’s particularly valid. I have a, I think I’ve got a feeling for history, I have a deep feeling for this country, I am conscious of my links with other things going on in the world, but I don’t really think heritage is a theme for me.

Shall we take a break for a cup of tea at that point?

[End of Part 13]
Right, going, now.

The Wirral Autistic Society project was great fun, because although it started in IT, it turned out to be quite, quite different, including a, a lovely group of young men who formed themselves into a Beatles band, and as autistic people, wrote and performed little bits of music. So it was really lovely to see them develop over the years.

But another project that also moved from, also combined information technology and autism, was at Nottingham University; I’ve supported all in all about twelve universities, I counted the other day. And this was called a virtual city project, and it was in the early days of virtual reality, and it was showing a city, whether it was really Nottingham or just a theoretical city I don’t know, in a way that could be navigated by, especially people with autism, so that they would learn how to behave in the real world. And, one of the sort of little things I can remember from that was, it included a bus and teaching them how to choose a seat on a bus, which most of us learn quite instinctively, that if you sit on the first available seat you are going to get into trouble very often. So, there were lovely things that came out of that Nottingham University project, and very, very clever technicians there. But again, my input was concept and autism rather than a lot of IT.

There was quite a lot to do with education in one way or the other. I funded a school in, in the Midlands, another one in Wales, another one in Edinburgh, bits. So, each of them I suppose was a little bit pioneering, well, yes, it was all pioneering in their different ways, and I funded a whole lot of projects through the Mental Health Foundation where I was sponsoring public information booklets and guide to commissioning services and, and a website, and all the things that, that was moving things on a little bit.

Round about the Millennium, I started to think about the... Sort of, we broke... I felt as if I’d broke backwards from the Kingwood Trust, which had supported people like Giles, to schools which had educated people like Giles, to, there was a project which I probably haven’t mentioned, about getting people into employment, and so, began to
think, well really the most strategic thing was that, although we know what autism looks like, we don’t know what it actually is. And so, round about the year 2000 I started referring to a sort of medical research unit to sort of start thinking about what one, what medicine needed in order to find out some of the secrets of this disorder. Because it’s a very perplexing disorder.

[03:55]

By chance, well it wasn’t by chance, two people in the Worshipful Company of Information Technologists, one whom I knew slightly and the other I, I knew reasonably well, approached me on behalf of Balliol College in Oxford. They had the idea, or somebody had had the idea, a guy called Derek Wyatt, an MP, about having an internet institute to look at the non-technical aspects of the Internet, social, economic, legal, ethical, and they put forward this idea in a way that I found very attractive, because, it would keep my links with the industry for which my wealth stems. And, so I started talking to Balliol College, and eventually the OII was set in a corner of Balliol where there was a building that had previously been let, and which faced and had its own separate entrance to St Giles, and, the whole concept of, oh it has St Giles as well, you know, absolutely wonderful. And I started to work on that, and discuss how and what and, I wasn’t really involved in the appointment of the director, but in the preliminaries to that, what were the strategies of the institute, what were the confines of the institute, what were the dreams of the institute? And now after ten years we’re just going to go through that exercise again. There was a lovely group of, what are they called, MSc students, who did a strategy paper on the OII as part of their own PhD I think, and, I worked with them, and they learnt from me and I learnt from them, it was great, it was really very good.

Any students in particular?

There were six of them, from all over the world, because, that’s how Balliol is. And, one of them I came across recently and when they, we finished the project, I gave them all a thesaurus, because they didn’t seem to know how to get at the words that they wanted. They were fine with a dictionary, the meaning of the word, but getting the word from the meaning seemed to be beyond them. And, yeah, I enjoyed that, really.
How did it work, did they sort of come out and visit you, or did you go and talk with...?

No. No no no. The project, I went to Oxford, you know, and we sort of sat in some cellar or something, because always accommodation’s very small, very short.

What about this one in particular appealed to you?

[pause] I think it was this... Well I was going to say I think it was because it was so strategic to think about the social and economic aspects of computing, not yet another one looking at the technology. And it was using my, the money that I made in information technology for information technology, it seemed to me very appropriate. But thirdly, I didn’t go to university, and so my links with, I have twenty-five honorary doctorates from different universities, but I really miss having had that academic environment, and this project has actually taken me into Balliol and I have those sorts of links where you’re meeting with other fellows on a fairly regular basis, so that one day you’re sitting by some clever soul who knows all about pain management, and the next day it’s somebody who, you’re talking about French literature, and then... It, it’s just such a lovely mixture of enthusiasms, and I thoroughly enjoy my sort of belated entry into the, into academe.

[08:50] Balliol had been very reciprocal to me, they do make me feel welcome in a sort of non-sycophantic way, because wealth attracts the less than sincere, and, it grew into another project which was suggested at over a dinner table where I sat next to the director of the management centre I think for Balliol, and he talked to me about a beautiful church next door which was contiguous to the Balliol property, and he said was the last bit of freehold land in Oxford which comprised St Cross Church, part Norman, mainly Victorian, which was a, Church of England I suppose, church, with a congregation that had dropped to five and that was probably on a Christmas or something. And, nobody had got any money to maintain this church, and, the suggestion was, it should be used for Balliol purposes, in particular for a centre, an archive of some of Balliol’s treasures, which are ninth-century remnants of documents, silver, various people’s collections of famous people who have given their collections to, to Balliol and so on. And, I thought this was rather a lovely idea, and I
got all very enthusiastic. And, with my Shirley Foundation I mooted it at one meeting, said, you know, did they think this was something that the Shirley Foundation should support? And got an OK from them. Three months later we met for the next Shirley Foundation meeting, and in the meantime I thought, well, this is not according to my mission, information technology, autism, pioneering, strategic. So I went into the meeting saying, I’m going to withdraw that proposal, and I haven’t developed it much more, only to have my co-trustees turn round and sort of say, ‘I think you should do this.’ Interesting. And I think they saw it, and one of them I can remember sort of saying... It was, I put a million into this. One of them said, another million’s not going to make any difference to the autism research that I was involved with, and, they thought it would be a good change for me, and indeed it was. So, I’m having a great deal of fun with that. That church is being converted, it will be finished... The roof was all right, but everything else needed things doing to it. You had to take out the, the organ. They’ve recently decided to take out the bells, which I’ve been recommending, because their bells are heavy things. And it should be finished by the end of 2010, and then take six months for the treasures of Balliol to be moved in.

[12:34]

I was interested in what you were saying there about your trustees thought it would be... Sorry, trustees, is that the correct term, or...?

Trustees, yes.

Thought it would be good for you. I was just wondering, who are the other people there? What’s your relationship with them like?

[pause] My business experience makes me realise the sort of management structures that are needed, and for a grant-giving charity like the Shirley Foundation I have what I think is to be sort of, minimum mix for something like that. One legal person with experience of charitable activities, one accountancy type person, who is not particularly experienced in charities, though she’s obviously touched on them as a woman, and one medical research charity, because in recent years the emphasis, the big spend, has been on medical research. The first one we had was a professor, and
he only lasted two years because, I suppose he and I diverged into where we wanted to go, and although trustees are, or should be, their own people, they must really be aligned with the mission of the charity, and that mission does come from me. And he clearly didn’t think that what I was talking about when it got to medical research was appropriate or sensible or whatever. And so he was tending to be very negative on, on various projects, and I wanted somebody to sort of help me, rather than find the holes in it. I’m still in contact with him, but... So after a couple of years we changed and then we got a, a professor from Edinburgh University who has done more than touch on autism, because her specialism, and she’s still a practising professor in a hospital, is schizophrenia, which is, sort of linked. A very, very fine person.

Who’s this?

Professor Eve Johnson. And, I think, I don’t know how long she’s been on the trustee board, but that looks, she’s, she’s coming up for retirement now, and, but she will go on I think as a trustee. And you don’t pay these people, but pay expenses, and the payback for them, why should they do it, is that they are interesting projects that are worthwhile as far as they are concerned, they get a lot of experience. They get some professional fees out of it, because, if a charity every few years is dealing with legal things, some, you know, a big loan or a big purchase or something, so they do all that. So they get those spin-off fees. And, I think it’s quite important to get that balance.

[16:00]

*How do you go about recruiting somebody like that? Let’s just take that one particular example maybe.*

Well the first one was the legal person, Michael Macfadyen, who belonged to a legal company called Charles Russell, which had taken over the private business, legal business, of another company, name now forgotten. He introduced Anne Macfadyen... sorry, Anne Menzies. Very Scottish isn’t it, when I think about it. So Anne Menzies is a local, senior partner of a small firm here. So that was clearly his introduction. And, then the medical trustee really took some finding. I think I just asked around. Met a couple of people. [pause] I’m trying... I think there was some introduction. Anyway, that, the first one didn’t work very well. The second one was
somebody that I had known for a long time and had been recommended by Professor Michael Rutter, who is the leading guru of gurus in the autism field, and he suggested Eve Johnson, and, I think they had worked together at some time in the past. And, that’s been very successful, and you know, we like each other as people. But, you know, so, when she comes down she tries to, from Edinburgh, she’s based there, she tries to combine it with other activities if she can, otherwise I just pay her air fare. And my driver picks her up from the airport which makes things, you know, nice for her. And, you know, it’s a good, it’s a good team.

Are there similarities there with sort of forming a board in the FI Group as well?

Very. I mean, it is a trustee board, and trustees are now corporate directors with all the responsibilities that goes with that. And, yes, you, you’ve got to have people who are able to work in, in cabinet mode, can get that balance between the philanthropist and... You see once I give money into the Shirley Foundation it’s no longer my money, it’s the trustees to, it’s public money which the trustees have responsibility for dispersing. And, most charitable foundations, I don’t know about most but a lot of charitable foundations, have, just disperse year on year the income from their investments. Ours was different, in that we clearly spent capital; if it runs out of capital, I give them some more. It has clear instructions as what to do after my death when it does get the whole of my estate, and it has clear instructions to make sure it winds itself off, up, in five years which is enough to see out any current projects, and just give it to a major autism charity. So that it does not have this longevity which means charities go on and on and spend, do less and less of value.

[19:55]

Why did you want it that way?

I think it’s because I want the money to work, I think money that’s not working is, is really obscene. It, it... I don’t like some of the ongoing charities where you have a little board of trustees, as we have, and they are spending £12,000 a year or something on, whatever it is that their original sponsor wanted, and, I think money just has to work.
I always thought of like, sort of, giving away to charity is one of those legacy things almost.

Yup. No I don’t like the idea of legacy.

No? Why? Is it that...

I think it becomes rather self-serving, and, there’s so much that needs doing, even within a narrow sector like autism, that if you see a good project and can afford to do it, well then do it. And, rather like with the Wirral Society, you know, if you see, if they’re asking for £15,000 and in fact they get a six-figure sum, it’s because there’s an opportunity there to make an impact, and if you have that opportunity, you have that chance, I think one should take it. It’s a very, family foundations are, are quite personal. Some of them are run very much at the whim of the founder or philanthropist who is funding them, to the extent that the trustees really are just administering, and I don’t like to see that. Because I’m very often wrong about things, and if I am, I’m hoping that my trustees will sort of say, ‘Look, what about this?’ you know, ‘You’ve forgotten that,’ and, ‘Don’t you remember so-and-so?’ and, much better off. I’m a great believer in teamwork, that, you and I are better when we work together than we work separately. Although, any entrepreneur, they, all the creative work is done in solitary. It’s a solitary thing, the creativity.

[22:15]

Where do you go with creativity?

Well I was just writing something this morning about the later project that has been running for, five years, a charity, and was triggered by something ten years ago. And, although I do think about it, I don’t know what the original trigger was. What I think I know about creativity is this business of keeping fresh and not burning yourself out going over and over and over again something you’re doing, and you’re just repeating and you can’t see a way out of this. And, it’s something that comes from a painting, or a piece of music, or, a friend or... Very often I think it’s a parallel, you suddenly see the parallel between medical research into the causes of autism with research into atomic energy. And, the lessons that you learn from one transfer into the others and
the contacts that you’ve got from one sector allow you to go and pick other people’s brains. And, we do stimulate each other, and, I used to, not recently, spend quite a bit of time mentoring young people, quizzing them on what they’re doing, and, not telling them that’s all wrong, but suggesting other approaches, or things that they might read, or relevant experience that I’ve got. And, you know, that, that, the act of creation is, is quite... I think it’s a mystery.

*When did you do the mentoring?*

A little bit while I was still with Xansa, still with the company. And, then it comes up over and over again. It’s comparable to the short period that I had two, three, four, five years as, with a portfolio of board appointments. The biggest mentoring I had was an approach to mentor a young chairman who had just taken over from his father, who had died, a very, very large organisation, I think it should remain nameless. And, I was introduced by, I can’t remember who, and I met him, and I think, he’d just lost his father, I’d just lost my son, so that must date it a bit. And, I thought, yeah, I, I, I could work with this guy, and help him to grow into that chairman’s role. Because he was I think fairly scared of it. [pause] So we had a couple of meetings, and then we went out to dinner once where I met his wife, obviously she was giving me a, a sort of good look over. And I saw him in an environment where he was so patronising to the waiters in the restaurant that the silver spoon with which he had been born really began to show, and I realised I couldn’t work with this guy. It was just, we were so far aligned in our beliefs and in our values, that this wasn’t going to work. And I think it must have been fairly mutual, because, as always these things are just discussed and no offer is made until everybody knows that all is well. And no offer was ever made in that, and, I had already decided I didn’t want to go ahead. So there’s a sort of happy, happy ending to that. But mentoring is very worthwhile, very well worthwhile, because you get, you’re just using all your experience.

*Mm. If you did want to name the company, we can just restrict that section for thirty years or something.*

I think the company will still be there in thirty years. Yah, better not. Better not. [27:07]
There was a period in the, 2003, 4 and 5, where we started no new projects at all, and that was after the dotcom bubble had burst, and my own wealth was decimated literally, and you were really worried about, have we got enough to meet the promises that we had already made to various charities? And, there’s no other way, when you get to that situation, of just stop all new expenditure, and, we made sure that we were able to meet the committed, morally and legally, expenses that we had promised.

**Were you expecting the market to crash in the way it did?**

I’m not interested... Or, I say, I wasn’t expecting it, I wouldn’t even be watching it you see. I’m jut not interested in investments. I have merchant banks and the bank does that for me. I just loathe the idea of having to pick up the Financial Times and see what’s happened to my investments. So no, I did not know it was going to happen. I did think my company shares were wildly over-valued, but I was already outside the company by then, and so I didn’t really know what was going on inside. But you know, nasty surprise for me and everybody else. It reminded me a little bit of when the Lloyd’s insurance went bust in that, at that time I had already got some wealth, paper wealth, because it was all in company shares, and my bank, then Barclays, introduced me to somebody on the Lloyd’s exchange with the idea of me becoming a name. And you had this crazy situation where they were sort of saying, ‘All you’ve got to do is show that you’re worth so many million pounds, and you will get all this return, but you never actually have to put up the money.’ And, I quizzed this, because I didn’t really know anything at all about it, and then it was clear that actually it was unlimited liability. And as soon as I knew that, I pulled back immediately and said, ooh no, I’m not, you know, not betting the company on this, no matter how unlikely it is to fold. And of course when it did fold, a lot of names were having to sell houses and, get their children out of public school and goodness knows what. And, general comment I suppose I’d like to put on the record is that entrepreneurs like me are not the big risk-takers. You know, yes I’d taken a second mortgage, but that’s about the biggest risk I’ve ever taken, and, for years I was wealthy on paper and yet really having to think whether I could buy a new pair of tights. And, the corporate guys, mainly guys, invariably guys, would patronise somebody like me, just heading a, an entrepreneurial organisation, because they were already earning very serious money, and I wasn’t. And, it took me a long time to
realise that in the... eventually of course those same people, some of them went out in that dotcom bubble, but really they just had high earnings for two or three or maybe ten years, whereas I had built up a vast capital asset which peaked at £150 million. And that’s serious money by anybody’s standards.

[31:22]

And it, it gives you a bit of confidence, and as a woman I find that... [pause] I sort of trailed the Queen at one time in wealth and so on, and... But it doesn’t mean to sort of say that you live any differently or think any differently. But I did learn that some of these people that had metaphorically patted me on the head, were not so marvellous as they had seemed when they were the big corporate chairmen of this or the chief executive of that, and I was a struggling...

*One other little point you mentioned in passing I really should pick up on. Wealth attracts the less than sincere. What did you mean by that?*

[laughs] People are sycophantic. People tell you what they want you, what they think you want to hear. And if they’re asking for money, which is the norm in, in the philanthropic world, you don’t really get a warts and all view of them either as individuals or of their projects. So I don’t really like that. I mean certainly those people that used to patronise me are now very very different. [laughs] Mm! I know what it used to be like.

[32:47]

A couple more projects that I’d like to talk about. In 2007... No, in 2005 I updated the economic study of autism that I’d done in ’99, and the interesting thing about that is that the conclusions had hardly changed, even with inflation and so on. And that’s a project that’s been quoted all the way round the world. And then in 2007 I started... There were a couple of people who died in the autism world, and it suddenly occurred to me, these pioneers, one or two of them had lost their, the sharp intellect, but a lot of them had just died. And unless we moved fast we were going to miss that aspect of the development of the sector. And so I sponsored a, what we hoped would be ‘the’ history of autism, the first ever history, which didn’t quite turn out as planned, but did become a work of scholarship, and was finally entitled *A History of Autism: Conversations with the Pioneers*. And, it was really a very worthwhile project. It took three years. As always you got the idea, then you’ve got to find some sort of
management structure for it, then you’ve got to find the author or the chief executive or the director or whoever’s going to do it. And then you’ve got to get it published, and, you’ve got to get it launched. These are the sorts of things that I’m involved with, and, that I think was a very happy project. We’re not yet, haven’t yet wound up the, the steering group which was two people plus me.

[34:55]
The main expenditure over the last few years started I suppose, well it goes right back really, but this business of thinking of the, what autism is as distinct from what it looks like, and the research into the causes, and, starting to, fund medical research projects, and we funded quite a few, some good, some not so good. [pause] And then I really began to stand back from this, partly responsive, partly entrepreneurial, perhaps we should do this, perhaps we should do that. Sort of really sort of thinking, what do we have to do to get at the causes of autism and halve its global cost? And that was the mission. And I’d probably been working on it for about six months before I sort of focused on that. And that’s hardly changed in my thinking. And, we started, as always, with some sort of fact-finding or marketing. And so I decided to commission a global study of literature about research into autism, and it was quite wide then, it was both into causes and into interventions. And that, you see, a project like that probably took two or three years anyway, because you’ve got to get the concept, then you’ve got to find somebody who can do it, and eventually we found somebody from the American National Institute of Health, took her six months or something like that. And, we finished up with this study of the existing literature. And, obviously it’s changing every year because it was new stuff coming out, so we stopped, and, we began to look at what was shown there, and it began to be clear, in my mind at least, what were the issues as regards the research. Firstly, the distinction between research into causes, which was clearly sort of medical, about which I know nothing, and secondly, research into, what do you do when you know what it is and, and various ways of schooling, and various ways of getting people into work, and various ways of dealing with the epilepsy, and, I think the current count, there are about 700, 700 different ways that are believed to be sensible ways of handling the autism, the person with autism. And, there of course I did think I knew something about it, because I’ve got thirty years of looking after my Giles. And, so I had some views as to, this was nonsense, and that was impossible. But in fact the focus, a lot of people are working in that area, my focus really focused on the research into causes.
And we started off with, again a mission statement, what do we have to do, and, define the causes and, and halve its global costs. And we got several universities involved. Co-founder with me was a guy called Chuck Gardner Junior, who was a founder or the founder of the MIND Institute in California. He had an autistic child, and had also got very committed to setting up a school for pupils with autism, a professor from Seattle University, Professor Gerry Dawson, who was one of the first to ever enunciate the concept that some people might recover from autism. She was the first, well the first I know of, I went to see her and discuss, ‘What do you mean by recover?’ And she was really claiming how some people did learn to, at least exhibit like neurotypical people, and, it was quite a high success rate, but obviously what she was talking about was a whole range of autism, including the sort of people with high intellect and yet profound communication problems, which is part of what’s called Asperger’s syndrome and, and we’ve done a lot of development there since. Anyway, Gerry Dawson from Seattle. Simon, Professor Simon Baron-Cohen from Cambridge, and a consultant who had been with my company and, and I’ve done various other things with him I think, called Peter Galsworthy. And, we call that project Kaspar, after the nineteenth-century guy Kaspar Hauser, who was thought to have autism. And, I suppose... It was purely virtual, we did everything on the phone, and we got as far as a plan, computer plan, medical plan, genetic plan, international plan, sharing plan, to meet that mission. And we got as far as costing that plan, and, that costing came out at .44 of a billion. And so this was way outside my personal capacity, and so I began to think, well, you know, if I’m going to go on with this mission, sort of... and obviously I needed to work in partnership, which I’m not good at, I like to be in control of things, and I like to, when you’re on your own you can do what you want to, and you can stop it when you want to, and do something else when you want to, whereas once you start working in a team, everything is that much more slow.

So I started to look round, and had a, held a beauty parade really in the States where most of the research work was happening, and, that was done by a colleague, Roberta d’Eustachio, whom I had known for about ten years then, and am working with today. So, you know, she comes in and out of my story. But she set up a beauty parade, and that finished up with me being invited onto the board of the National Alliance for
Autism Research, always known as NAAR, National Alliance. Dreadful name.
Anyway, it had been going for about ten years or something like that, and had a
science advisory board, it was the only peer reviewed research, and all that sort of
thing. And so I served on their board, going over to their quarterly meetings I think.
And after some, couple of years, I began to sort of see how I could fit in to that, and
not only just input into the board where I put a lot of computer stuff in, not put it in, I
had sponsored a database of their supporters, because they had lots and lots of
supporters, they’d been going for a long time, but they didn’t know the giving
capacity of those supporters, so they’d be getting a fifty dollar contribution from
somebody who could have given $50,000. And they didn’t even know that they were
in that sort of wealth bracket. So I put in a database. I sponsored, I often use that sort
of terminology, but I sponsored a database called Raiser’s Edge, and, wasn’t very
expensive but it made quite a difference to them. And then I decided to start a NAAR
in the UK, and... I wrote this up recently so I should know when, when this was.
It’s... Can we stop just a minute while I look this up?

[pause in recording]

[43:46]
.....clarification question as well. When you say sponsored a database, do you mean
installing a database there, or...?

Paying for the installation of a database there, and persuading them that that’s really
what they needed [laughs], rather than just using their computers for payment of
salaries and so on.

Is that to do with the medical side of it, or the administrative side of it?

Administrative. They were just using administrative. But they had, you know, a very
high level scientific advisory board which wasn’t, it was all American. Well... So I
started NAAR UK, and that was a subsidiary which built on their scientific advisory
board, so that we were able right from the very beginning to give peer reviewed
research projects out if we got the money for them. And in my innocence I thought I
could just go and meet parents, wealthy parents of children with autism, and ask them
for big contributions, and this of course I did, but, yeah, they make you a contribution, there’s £5,000, £10,000 or something, it’s not the sort of £50 million that I was thinking worldwide. However, I have met some very wealthy people. And that NAAR UK morphed into Autism Speaks UK, the whole name changed. It, the American NAAR combined with another charity in the States called CAN, Cure Autism Now, and became Autism Speaks, and on the 1st of January last year, which is 2009, Autism Speaks UK morphed into Autistica, and I am enormously proud of that and it now gives quite good size contracts and has had, it’s helped me see the difference between direct spend, because charity is measured by, you know, how many grants are we able to give? But there’s a balance between the grants that we give and the grants that we’ve persuaded other people to give, and that balance is about seven or eight to one. So when we’ve persuaded other people to give, it’s been very very valuable.

[46:15]

Why are you particularly proud of that one?

I think it is the most strategic that I’ve done. It uses all my, or it used, all my skills. I’m now the president, because again I’ve come out of that, it’s structured, it’s getting a, a new chief executive, it’s, it’s got a proper fundraising group of vice-presidents, it’s doing fairly sizeable fundraising things. And when I look at it now, I do think that the causes of autism, or some of the causes of autism, will be understood within the next few years, and also things that come up from the history project, that the sector is still terribly, terribly fragmented, and with the same expenditure, those researchers could do much more if they learnt to collaborate rather than compete for funding and so on. So, that project was, I was due from corporate governance to come out of that board of directors, trustee board of directors, in January 2009, which happened, and, for a few months I was, oh, could breathe a bit, and, was building up the sort of portfolio of things that I was doing, a lot of invitations to do that, and invitations to speak there, and, advisory there and, and so on. And, things were sort of calming down a little bit in my life, which was probably a good thing because I had had a lot of heart problems, and the previous year had had a, a pacemaker, and, it seemed quite sensible, it made it easier to sort of pace myself quite a bit.

[48:29]

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http://sounds.bl.uk
But as always, things happen and conspire to, to move me on. [pause] Early in 2009, spring, April, May, something like that, I was approached by, on behalf of Prime Minister Gordon Brown, to serve as the first ever, ever in the world, global... sorry, national, Ambassador for Philanthropy, and the brief was to serve for England, and this I did, liaising with Wales and Scotland particularly, and fairly successfully with Wales.

How were you actually approached?

Telephone. Very simple, by somebody from the Cabinet Office, and, from the Office of the Third Sector as part of the Cabinet Office.

[49:30]
And, I’ve mentioned Roberta d’Eustachio before, and she’s very involved with philanthropy and has published a couple of magazines on philanthropy and giving, and, the benefactor and the... And so I approached her and asked her if she would help me with this contract. Not contract, because it’s unpaid of course. Could she come and help me and advise me and so on? And I had in mind, [coughs] excuse me, two to three days a month, and then I thought, well, one week a month, and in fact now it’s pretty well full-time. Because she has a lot of experience and there is so much to do, and she works bottom up and I work top down, so between us, and we get on very well, between us we made a powerful team. We started off, classic thing, doing a market survey, and, you know, you learn all these things in business and it applies generally. So we had several months of, up to five meetings a day with different philanthropists and different intermediaries, saying effectively, ‘What do you think an ambassador for philanthropy could or should be doing?’

Had you not been given that much of a brief beforehand?

No. It was very, left very much open. And I think they thought I’d just do a little bit of speeching for them. But, since they don’t pay me, and they don’t even pay expenses, and, I, I asked about a budget, for various things, and was told... I was expecting something like £100,000 a year just to sort of deal with entertainment and travel and stuff like that. Anyway, it was £10,000. Hah! oh well, you know, what’s the point of having wealth if you don’t have these sorts of choices? And, I began to...
The market survey really focused on tax. Everybody wanted me to tackle tax. The tax breaks for philanthropic giving. And frankly, in this day and age it, it is not a very fruitful cause to be pursuing, nor am I particularly interested in tax and so on, but I did get as far as being able to sort of say two things were needed on tax, not necessarily better tax breaks, which were really quite good, but to simplify the tax breaks so that people could actually understand what they were, and to express them in simple English. There were a few, relatively small parts where the tax breaks are not good, but I wasn’t going to tackle those in any way.

After about six months it became a bit clearer what the job could be, and this was because the philanthropists, when you actually got down to it, did not have a voice, a voice to Government, a voice to the media, and a voice to the charities themselves. And, there were lots of these intermediaries, but they very seldom met between themselves without people sniffing around and hoping for a contribution to, to their particular charity. And so we started a fellowship of philanthropists, England only, which I thought would be discussion among ourselves, and we had several such discussions, and were absolutely fascinating, with people talking about how they had got into philanthropy, what they did, what they believed, the problems that they’d had, why they wouldn’t do this again and all that sort of thing. But it, it focused after some time on providing a voice to Government, and that’s largely what it’s doing now. It’s not the only grouping, there are some others, but it’s being copied particularly in Wales and other countries. Now that voice of philanthropy, and I believe that philanthropy is a question of values, not of the value of gifts, it’s once you start to think strategically about a gift, then you, then you are a philanthropist, if you’re adding your time and skills, that makes you a philanthropist. Even if you’re giving just £5 a month, you’re really thinking about how to leverage it and what to do with it. The big gifts, the highest proportion of gifts, come from the major donors. But the charities themselves depend on thousands and thousands of small donors who tend to give month after month, year after year to their favourite charity, and that of course is all unrestricted funding, whereas when a philanthropist gives money, they tend also to sort of say, this is for, donkeys in Spain, or it’s horses in Devon, or whatever it is. For the vast bulk of people involved in both charitable giving and philanthropy, we set up a website called ambassadorforphilanthropy.com, and it is a very very vast website, which behoves somebody like me. It’s rather like my own website, when I did it was
very advanced, this again is very advanced, and is largely interviewing, it’s not
textural.

[55:52]
Who’s your target audience?

Other philanthropists, potential philanthropists, and to give an understanding to
anyone who’s thinking of philanthropy, whether they’re charitable or somebody else
who has recently won the football pools or what have you, as to what it’s all about,
how you can leverage quite small sums of money, how you can get a great deal of
satisfaction. And I had focused I suppose on, not so much a mission statement, but
had there been a mission statement it would have been something like, to galvanise
and encourage philanthropy, in England, but made a pledge for this role as national
ambassador for philanthropy to promote the idea that philanthropy is a thing of, of,
that gives pleasure as well as being an act of compassion. Because, that it seems is
what it’s all based on. If you do it... I mean some people do give as a matter of duty,
a lot of the faiths give ten per cent or even more as a sort of, if you belong in this,
believe in this sort of god, then you give this sort of percentage month after month.
But, most people, we give because we enjoy it, and we get back as much as we give,
more than we give, and it comes back in, access to interesting projects, a feeling of
wellbeing that is actually shown when you do brain scans. Apparently people, when
they behave altruistically, the pleasure centres of the brain are stimulated. So it’s not
just a feel good feeling, it is actually a medical finding. Some people give because it
gives them access to some elite that they would like to belong to, and nothing wrong
in that. Some people give because, there’s some family tradition of giving. And so it
goes on. It’s a, it’s a very personal thing. And the website really is aimed to
demonstrate that, and is currently being modified, we’re talking in 2010 now, to allow
charities to put on to the website their own individual donors and do the filming
basically worldwide using Skype and such techniques. Don’t ask me the details. So
that at low cost they can get their own people on and so encourage their own donors
and encourage more donors for them.

You seem quite attached to the website. I was wondering how much of it was your
inspiration or...
No, not at all. Not at all. It just, you see I think conceptually, yes a website of course is what we want, and of course it’s got to be as, as, modern as it’s possible to be, and, you know, of course it’s got to move and it’s got to change every year. And if you just stay to what was good last year, it’s not going to be any good next year.

There are some other projects though that became obvious during the year. One is with the British Banking Association, and that is the need to encourage the retail banks to make giving easier and tax efficient. And so there’s a big project there this year that is aimed for that, which I think will revolutionise giving in this country within a very short period. And we’ve had a couple of meetings already to try and build up a market for advisers, two philanthropists, who are legal advisers, financial advisers and so on, banking advisers, so that it becomes routine for, simple example, if somebody’s making a will, for them to be asked, ‘Do you have a favourite charity, or are you going to leave a residual legacy? Would you like to leave a fixed price, fixed donation to this?’ And it becomes very routine, rather than something that, nobody really likes to talk about money, you know.

Well in May 2010 I got an invitation, as Ambassador, from the Commonwealth Secretariat, to go and talk to some of the ministers of the Commonwealth, which I did, and, that has led to a, major I suppose, or potentially major, project with the Commonwealth Foundation, itself a charity, which has focused on doing some prototyping of how to get ambassadors for philanthropy to encourage and galvanise philanthropy in different countries, and it’s focused on trying it, how, how it goes in three very separate Commonwealth countries.

**Which ones?**

Nigeria, because its standard of life for most people is, one of the lowest in the Commonwealth; at the same time they have some monstrously wealthy people there. And, so that’s why it was chosen. Also they were very keen, when they came to me at the Commonwealth, could we go to, could I, would Roberta and I go to the Commonwealth, to Nigeria? South Africa, and, I can’t remember how South Africa came in, but one of the group must have been very keen on that. And the third one
was Singapore, chosen for quite a different reason. Very wealthy, very developed, very philanthropic, they had already got their philanthropic advisers, a whole host of bankers out there. So that’s where it stands at the moment. I’m waiting for reappointment under the Coalition Government. I am concentrating on work with the Commonwealth Foundation, and focusing on the things that I can do, which is, I speak quite a lot, I’ve learnt to do public speaking, I’ve spent a lot of time preparing for it, literally, if anybody knew how long it took me, I’d be horrified. And I feel I can make some difference there. [loud bang] Ooh! I think I’ve come to the end of that. How are we doing for time?

[01:03:40]

I’ve got a few little things that have cropped up in my mind along the way. Talking about different groups of people. We talked a lot before about you being part of these networks.

Yah.

And I’m wondering, now in your role as Ambassador for Philanthropy, what networks are you part of?

I think always one is using the networks that you already have and they’re extending. So the majority of people in the fellowship of philanthropists are corporate people, people that I’ve worked with in the past, or where I have credibility as an entrepreneur, who I’ve served with on BNAC, or I’ve served with on, through the Percent Club or something like that. The lack of networks is, I really don’t know anybody in sport, I haven’t got a sports fellowship there. I really don’t know many people in music, much that I love it. So there are very few of the few wealthy performers who are yet involved. Made quite an attempt to bring in the Asian and black community foundations, found it very very difficult, because they give differently, they give privately and so on. Had a lot of introductions to Jewish philanthropists who are very generous and think of giving as a duty. But again, I have credibility because although they know I was not brought up Jewish, they do know my Kindertransport history.
As this is a government position, well, government appointed role, is there any sort of, involvement on that side of things as well?

Not at all. When I accepted the invitation, I sort of said, I am non-party political, and, it has to be on that basis. But it was an appointment by the Labour Government and so it stopped at the Election, which is why I sort of say now in August I’m still waiting for my reappointment. Pretty sure it’ll come through, but they may have some rabid Conservative that they, they want in.

[01:06:00]

What does a typical day involve for you now?

[pause] Quite a lot of desk work still, in particular, I have an office, quite apart from Roberta, who is full-time, and works in town, we have access to Cabinet Office premises in Admiralty Arch. Very grand, I could hardly believe, you know, this wonderful thing. The Queen at one end of The Mall, Admiralty Arch the, the next. But actually when you get in there, it’s very scruffy, higgledy-piggledy, because, you know, there’s lots, little tunnels underneath where you can get from one side of the arch to the other, and there’s little ways in which you can get through to the various Whitehall buildings without ever going outside. So it’s quite fun to be, to be there. But there are not really many capabilities and we, mainly, I have meetings at the Royal Society of Medicine, which I started using with the medical research work and is, is a very nice professional club without being extravagant, but you can take anyone there without having to apologise for it. So there’s a fair bit of sheer... I also have an office of two secretaries, which is remote from me in Henley, and one very much part-time administrator who only does, perhaps a day a week. So I am well supported with a driver. So what I try to spend my time at is, the thinking of the concepts, and the networking, I spend a lot of time helping... I... It’s... It starts off responding to requests for funding, I’m sure it all starts there, and, and usually of course it’s a no no. Very often I can help, ‘Have you thought of doing this?’ ‘Did you know that in the next town there’s somebody doing exactly the same as you are proposing? Couldn’t you do it together?’ There’s a lot of stuff like that, including advice to individual families, and I do respond to every approach in the field of learning disability and
autism. Not for donkeys in Spain, sadly. Unless of course I happen to know the
writer and then you jolly well have to. So there’s a fair bit of organisation.
[01:08:41]
There’s an element of, that this is now a time of achievement. I mentioned earlier that
I’ve got a lot of honorary doctorates, and I love going to those events, because I didn’t
go to university myself so it’s lovely to actually be there with the students and so on.
And I’ve got a whole number of awards. In 1991 I got a gold medal from the Institute
of Management. In ’96 President Reagan gave me a presidential pin for Anglo-
American charitable work. In ’99 I got the Mountbatten Medal from the Institute of
Electrical Engineers for work in electronics. More recently, this century, I’m
beginning to get lifetime achievement awards, that makes you feel very ancient, from
the British Computer Society and from the local authority here. The very first one I
got was in 1985. But you, you’re sort of, a stage where people are patting me on the
back and saying, ‘Well done.’ Very pleasant, but it all takes time.

Of all these awards, this is something I meant to ask about, which one’s the most
important to you?

[pause] I would think my OBE in 1980, which was for services to industry. And so it
was not for computing, because my dameship was for services to information
technology, but the 1980 OBE was for services to industry. Because I was
introducing this idea of flexibility, because I was actually doing job shares, and all
those different ways of doing economic activities without going down the usual path.

How did you find out?

I beg your pardon?

How did you find out you were being awarded an OBE? I’ve always wondered.

Oh you... Oh you get a letter, which looks very grand, but it just comes, maybe by
Recorded post, I can’t even remember that. And the phraseology is very cunning.
It’s, the Queen, Her Majesty the Queen, has it in mind to award you, appoint you an
officer of the British Empire. If this were the case, would I accept? Because this
obviates the need for people to sort of, shame the Government or shame the Queen by refusing an honour. Because you’re asked beforehand, will you take it? So that’s rather nice, and it’s all dead secret. And it comes about, I think it was... I was in the... I think about three or four weeks before the Honours List comes out. So you have a little bit of warning.

And the OBE means more than the damehood?

Well the dameship was much more established by then. I think the OBE was just fairly early, it was 1980, and it was, a bit of a surprise. [pause] I have served on the Honours Committee since then, I did I think eight years on the Honours Committee, which is very well administered, but is responsive to people’s nominations. But nobody sits down and sort of says, ‘Well we need six people from, market research, and ten people from computing, and three people from retail,’ or anything like that. So it merely responds to nominations that come in from the Government departments and private individuals, and I’d done a lot of nomination, in fact a lot of nominations, which then go through the Government departments and I may or may not see them come through.

[01:12:55]

Mm. How did you feel on getting the dameship? [pause] Is it a similar mechanism to the first one?

Yes, absolutely. I think it, because it was for the Millennium Honours, there were five people from high tech in the Millennium Honours, and I think somebody then had thought, you know, it is the Millennium, perhaps we’d better have some high tech people. So I was very pleased with that. It is a matter of a national honour, the actual presentation ceremonies at Buckingham Palace are, you know, just so lovely, you know, really nice.

[01:13:44]

Before we finish, can I just mention something that happened, completely differently, in November 2003. And it linked back to my childhood in that I suddenly had, out of the blue, an email from the Justice Minister in the State of Hessen I think it’s called in Dortmund, near Berlin, which is where my father had been a judge. And this said that
there was going to be a plaque unveiled in the regional court of appeal. And, they had got my name from, the very unusual Buchthal, from the Web, and if I was indeed the daughter of Arnold Buchthal, inviting me to a ceremony of conciliation basically apologising for the injustices carried out by the Justice Department in 1933. And I thought that was really a very, I mean the past is past, but you know, to, to make those gestures I think is very valuable. So I went. There were only two outside visitors, because after all most of the people are dead, I mean that’s what, you know, they were killed, so, only the ones that got out could possibly be involved, and most of them were dead from old age. But there were a couple, me and one other family member who went. [coughs] And I was very proud of that, I thought very carefully about how I was going to present myself. And, I wore my OBE, it comes with a sort of pin if you want it, and was very, very ladylike, and very, very English. And the message that I think I was sort of saying, you know, they called it Hitler’s gift to England, but I mean, they lost all those intelligentsia, and people like me, are thoroughly English, and, I don’t speak German, I, you know, blah blah blah. But I really thought I should record that, because that’s very important. When that happened, it was then that I discovered from my half sister in Australia, who had kept the name Buchthal, even though she had married, that my father had left this letter when he had been, had lost his job, all those years, in all the internment camps, in all his travels, but he had still got that letter when he died. And it was a three-line letter, which I’ve put into the museum at Dortmund, effectively sort of saying, a lot of reference numbers and so on, ‘By order of the Fuhrer of such-and-such a date, at such-and-such a date, you are hereby fired,’ you know, ‘with immediate effect,’ full stop. Literally three lines. And, you sort of think, well that’s a little bit of history, how it happened, and, what happened there. But it was, at that ceremony I was, together with a variety of people, one of whom was sort of saying that the Kindertransport and similar was just one of a series of such things, and, told me the story of how they had got out from Eastern Europe and Berlin. And of course it’s, refugees are always there, and they’re always kind people who will help them, and, there’s no really end to these sort of movements of people, struggling to get away from environments that are more than unfriendly, and being welcomed into other environments.

[End of Part 14]
Obviously spent a long time discussing, I mean seventy-five years of your life, it’s...

Mm.

How do you think you’ve changed as a person over that period?

Well the nature-nurture argument continues. I think I get more and more like my father. Physically, I look like my mother, and, we went to a wedding recently where Derek gave the bride away and I read the lesson and that sort of thing, so in the small photos and so on, I couldn’t find myself. And looking at the photos, there was my mother, long dead. And I just look like she used to look. So, nature’s also quite important. But I have changed of course. I am very English, and, I think I have done what was in me to do, and so can get a bit smug about that.

How do you feel about Germany now? It’s such a long time since you were there, but, going back in 2003, I wonder what it brings back.

Well for many years I refused to go back to Germany at all. I wouldn’t go back. Although there was restitution offered to, and persuasion to try and get the Jewish people to go back there, I refused. I wouldn’t even go into the German Embassy, I was, you know, I was so lucky, but I was still pretty anti-German. And, then my father went back to Germany and I realised I did want to keep that contact going, so I did. And then good sense prevailed, and I realised that Anglo-German relations had to be remedied, remediated, and, I joined the Anglo-German Society for a short period. And, tried to go out of my way to bridge across that divide. It is, it is a big divide. Certainly going back to Dortmund that time, and seeing the, the courtroom where my father had presided and things like that was, quite traumatic.

Mm. Linked, sort of, refugees throughout the years, bringing it up to date to now, what do you think the future holds for philanthropy in those areas?

What, for, for refugees, immigrants?
Or... Yes.

Well people expect me to be supporting refugee things, and actually I don’t. Because I really don’t think I know very much about it. I go and speak to today’s refugees occasionally, how often have I done it? Half a dozen times, not more. And that is talking about how to get jobs, and, how to, the sort of employers that they might approach, especially people who haven’t got English language, there are plenty of quality jobs where you don’t actually need languages. In the British North American Committee we have a lot of discussion about the flow of immigration, flow of migrations across the world, and of course it, they are enormous, and, in, well New York looks quite, quite different these days, and, I always dream that perhaps people intermarry so much that you can’t tell the difference any more.

[01:03:41] Do you think the... What do you think the future holds for philanthropy? You’ve talked about your efforts to bring it up to date, and [inaud] for giving. I’m just wondering, what do you think it’ll lead to, what you hope it will lead to in fact.

Well I think my invitation might have been triggered by the knowledge that public spending was going to be cut, that the philanthropists might pick up some of the slack. The Economist spoke about philanthropy as being one of the mega trends of the twenty-first century and that was in the mid-Nineties. So, it is something that is more and more natural for individuals and sectors to engage in. A philanthropist does know what needs doing in a way, in a closeness that Government finds it difficult to do. When it works well, for example the Lifeboats are totally funded by philanthropists, I find that extraordinary, why isn’t it a state service like, the National Health or something? But it works very well, so why change it? And there will be a few others like that. The... In autism, the, we funded an International Year of... International Year of Autism, it had some other slightly, title, in this country, and we pulled together over 200 separate little charities, all concerned with autism. All doing splendid work and so on. But, that’s the extreme, that you’ve got these semi-amateur little groups who don’t see the whole and just concentrate on what’s happening in their neck of the woods, without seeing the whole, and when Government really can
see the whole, they become bureaucratic and rule-bound. So I think there is a big need for professional philanthropy doing things with measurement, doing things with targets, doing things transparently, some of which Government does, but some of which really is just filling a, meeting a great need.

[06:34]

*Why do you think they chose you in particular as Ambassador for Philanthropy?*

Well, I wondered about why they’d chosen me as Ambassador for Philanthropy, and in fact it’s quite simple, they phoned round a lot of people and said, who do they think would be a good ambassador? And my name came up on several lists. And, I think that was because I had learnt to speak about my giving, because when I started I did it very very quietly, I would never, didn’t want anyone to know how much money I had, certainly didn’t want anybody to know how much I was giving away. But I had learnt to speak out about it, and I was... what’s the word? I’m independent. I mean although I had this focus on autism, I haven’t done anything in the last year, simply because, you know, you can’t, as an ambassador, go and see somebody and then ask them for funds for autism. But, I’m fairly broad, what’s the word, broad church or something. I really think it’s just as valuable to give to the local cats’ home as it is for human rights in the developing world. It’s people’s wish to improve and change some aspect of society, to challenge some aspect of society. And I think people realise that, I wasn’t... despite the focus on autism, there was much more than that.

*So a combination of giving and hoping to inspire some form of change.*

Yah. I mean, what I do is, is very little, but I do hope to inspire, yes.

*Why didn’t you want people to know about the fact you were giving money to charity at first?*

It’s a British culture. In America, as soon as you’ve got some money you let everybody know how much money you’ve got. Here there’s a sort of, a lot of money in my youth came from inherited money or women married money, and self-made money was, a little bit looked down on, trade or something, nouveau riche. A lot of
jealousy in this country of, other people’s good fortune, rather than seeing it as a, a challenge of opportunity as it would be in the States. But no, it was considered, not quality, not, not, not classy, not... You see they’re class words all the time, aren’t they, but, that it wasn’t the done thing to, rather like it might be considered as boastful.

Whereas with older money, it’s not.

Silver spoon, golden spoon. Extraordinary.

[09:45]

I wonder actually, is there that difference with people now you approach for charitable donations or communicate with as part of your other charity activities? Is there a difference between old and new money?

Oh yes, a great big difference. [pause] And I can understand some of it, from having owned the Prior’s Court, fifty acres with this beautiful Queen Anne building, you realise that you... And if that was a private... Had I been thinking in terms of leaving that to my children or something like that, the importance of that heritage would far outweigh anything else. So that people with inherited money, I think often feel that they’re holding it in trust for the next generation. And I can understand that. And it does mean that although they’re very wealthy, they may be quite cash poor, and they are not as generous as you sort of expect, or hope them to be. Self-made money, we’ve made it ourselves, we can do what the hell we like with it. There’s no ought or should about it. And, we have this measurement, desire to make the money work effectively, and, I think we do give in a different sort of way. We know that to give £50 to a charity is, fine, but, it doesn’t really help them very much. Whereas if you commit to giving them £5 a year for the next ten years, that actually is more helpful. Because they can plan on that; lots of people giving small amounts of money on a regular basis are invaluable for unrestricted funding of charities. Philanthropists tend to give restricted funding. I’m the exception. Because most of them give restricted funding, I tend to give for infrastructure, not projects, just infrastructure. Because, without that infrastructure nothing gets done.
[12:08]

*My last questions I have for you are about this interview actually. I was wondering how you first felt when we approached you to be part of this project.*

My initial response was, how interesting, how flattered, but I’m not a scientist, and I wrote back to the British Library along those lines, I think to you, and said I, I’m not a scientist. I have been involved in scientific happenings, and, President of the British Computer Society, my software house and all that sort of thing, the Oxford Internet Institute. Yes, of course I’m, I’m... but I’m not a scientist. So I was very flattered.

*How have you actually found the interviews?*

Egocentric, just to talk about myself in a non-judgemental situation, I think, sheer delight, thank you very much indeed.

*Thank you. Have you mentioned it to anybody else, the fact you’ve been part of this project?*

Yes. To friends and family. To the guy, Richard Asquith, who’s doing my memoirs, because I asked him, does it overlap in any way, and it was the agent looking after that who said, ‘Please make sure it doesn’t come out before January 2012.’ But apart from that... Again it’s always, I mean my life is so full compared to other people, you tend to be, keep quiet about it, otherwise it may look as if you’re boasting.

*Anything surprised you about the interview at all? I wonder as someone who’s sort of done a lot of them, whether this differs at all, if so, how.*

Well the fact that it’s long means that you can touch on a whole lot of, host of things. The fact that it’s audio I think is interesting, because, the way in which you express something, usually seems quite different when you’ve got, when you see it in the press, when you hear some of your own phrases but it’s been tightened up and improved. Yes, I’ve been able to garrulously, just talk talk talk.

*Have you got any closing comments before I call it a day?*
Well I think the concept of oral histories is an important one, and, I’m very glad that the British Library is doing this. I think they need to move into video as well. The... I have taken the idea of oral history through to Balliol, and it’s an example of, where do ideas come from? I’ve taken the idea and sort of said, ah yes, Balliol should do an oral history. There are currently five masters, chief executives, who are around and compos mentis, and it would be interesting to track them and thereafter. So, I think the idea of an oral history is well worth moving into different environments so that everybody gets the value.

Thank you very much indeed.

Thank you.

It’s been a pleasure.

[End of Part 15]

[End of Interview]