

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Glynn Probert

Role: President

Museum: Blaenavon Community Museum

Location of interview: in a large hall above the museum (Workmen's Hall, High St, Blaenavon)

Date: 8/3/19

Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

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The project is based at Birkbeck, University of London. The interview recordings and associated materials are archived at the Bishopsgate Library, London.

For readability the transcript has been made using 'intelligent' transcription (removing ums, ers etc).

TB: So, if you could just start by giving me your name and date of birth, if you don't mind?

GTP: My name is Glynn Thomas Probert, born in 1936.

TB: Lovely, and can you just tell me the role that you have at the museum here?

GTP: Well, I'm the president of the museum. I don't do so much work as I used to because I'm getting older.

[Laughter]

TB: (00:00:25) Okay, so, has your role changed over the years, have you always been president, or did you start... you were one of the founders, is that right?

GTP: I'm one of the founders of the museum, yes.

TB: Okay, that's lovely, that's great. And just tell me, how is the museum governed, are you a charity, a trust or how does it work?

GTP: We are a charity, all volunteered work.

TB: (00:00:50) Do you have any paid employees at all?

GTP: None at all, no.

TB: (00:00:53) Just volunteers. And how many volunteers do you have regularly involved?

GTP: At the present, we've got about twelve.

TB: Okay, good.

GTP: So, that's pretty good for us.

TB: (00:01:05) Yes, absolutely. And what year... I appreciate that you've moved from another building, but what year did the museum first open to the public?

GTP: We started talking about it... it started in 1989 with Torfaen Council, did all the paperwork and this, that, and the other, as you know... and we've just gone on from there.

TB: (00:01:37) Okay, so, '89 was when... was that when it opened or when the idea started?

GTP: No, that's when the idea started.

TB: (00:01:42) Okay, so, it opened in the 1990s?

GTP: We officially opened in King Street... not King Street... Lion Street in 2002, because we knew heritage was coming.

TB: (00:01:57) Wow, so, that's a long gap isn't it, between coming up with the idea?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:02:03) That's great. Let's just start off with... So, tell me about... where did the idea come from, way, way, back at the beginning?

GTP: Well, we always thought ever since an early age, we should have had a museum because of the history of the town but it never materialised for some reason. But once we had heritage, then it all kicked off and everybody was interested then.

TB: (00:02:29) Oh, right. So, we're talking here about the Big Pit?

GTP: The Big Pit, yes.

TB: (00:02:39) Do you remember what year that opened... I could look it up but just roughly?

GTP: 1980. *[Editor's note: Big Pit closed as a working mine that year but plans were already in place to turn it into a major heritage attraction which eventually opened in 1983]*

TB: (00:02:44) Right, you do know the year. So, it was really from 1980 that the idea... people were thinking this might work because you've got tourists coming in to see Big Pit?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:03:00) Well, let's just talk about Big Pit because you've lived here...?

GTP: I've lived here all my life.

TB: (00:03:09) Okay, right. So, maybe if we could just start off... If you could just give me a kind of thumbnail sketch of how Blaenavon... is it?

GTP: Blaenavon, yes.

TB: (00:03:23) Blaenavon, has transformed from the closure of the pits?

GTP: Well, I grew up during the war and the town was buzzing then... and from the 1960s when we started to lose our industry, then it started to slow down, and it has to this present day. You could still lose a bit of the industry because there is so much uncertainty about, that's the way I look at things today. But we are still here fighting.

[Laughter]

TB: Yes.

GTP: We don't give up.

TB: (00:04:07) There was an ironworks here and coal?

GTP: And the coal, yes.

TB: (00:04:13) And that was all run by the same company, is that right?

GTP: All by the same... most people worked under the Blaenavon Company.

TB: (00:04:20) Okay. So, this was a kind of pretty, typical company town in terms of... that was the one main company that everyone was employed by?

GTP: That's right, yes.

TB: (00:04:31) Okay. And how far does the town go back, where does that company start?

GTP: Well, before the industry, it was all hill farming. So, that is going way back to the sixteenth century, I should imagine. And of course, once they discovered what was here in Blaenavon, they started going to town then, didn't they?

TB: Yes.

GTP: Because, what is so interesting about Blaenavon, all those materials are within a three-mile radius, they didn't have to go far for their materials and that is how it started.

TB: Right, I see.

GTP: But there was coal industry before that, mind. They were sending coal to Hereford and it was better once the canal came in, the 1700s. So, they had it all.

TB: (00:05:23) Yes. And so, did Blaenavon really grow in the nineteenth century?

GTP: Yes, it started... it went up to about fourteen or fifteen thousand, that's the reason they built this place because the population was growing all the time.

TB: (00:05:43) Yes, and were you born in Blaenavon?

GTP: Yes, I was born in [unclear 00:05:48], I've seen a lot of changes in Blaenavon and it's still changing today.

TB: (00:05:59) So, you would have known it through the war, wouldn't you, I guess? You would have been ten, eleven, twelve, that sort of age?

GTP: I was nine when the war finished, thank goodness. We were still on rations then.

TB: (00:06:18) Yes. And some of the town came over to some war effort work, the munitions...?

GTP: It was a big part of the war effort then, during the war. Because we had a... up at Fortside just at the Big Pit, we used to call the Black Shed and it was black, and they used to bring all the guns back they had to be mended and serviced. So, it was quite an important town, it was, yes.

TB: (00:06:49) Yes, and what was your first job?

GTP: My first job, in a cement works.

TB: (00:06:54) And that was here?

GTP: That was here, yes.

TB: (00:06:58) And what was your role there?

GTP: Just seeing to the moulders and all that, as a boy.

TB: (00:07:04) But then you said that you went on to do some work underground?

GTP: No, before that, I went to Pontypool tinworks... Big tinworks down in Pontypool and then from there, I went underground.

TB: (00:07:21) Was that here?

GTP: No, at Oakdale. We had training in Oakdale and then you would come back to your local pit.

TB: I see, right.

GTP: And they would put you with a collier, more experienced, and that is how it all kicks off.

- TB: (00:07:36) Yes, I heard that... that often they would pick some of the oldest miners would be twinned up with some of the youngest trainees?
- GTP: Yes, with the Bevin Boy they called it. You gain experience off the old miners and you listened to them too.
- TB: (00:07:54) Yes. So, just tell me what that was like.
- GTP: Underground is hard and dirty work but it's the comradeship that holds people together and that is why I enjoyed underground. Because all us young boys, there were gangs of us and of course, we'd get up to a bit of wickedness now and again, but we enjoyed ourselves in the pit, dirty and hard as it was, we still enjoyed our way. And just nice to come back after a shift and have the pit-head baths. Because in the old days, they didn't have anything like that, they had to go home and wash.
- TB: (00:08:38) Yes. So, you had a hot communal bath up there?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: (00:08:48) And what was the social life like, because I imagine it...?
- GTP: Oh, social life was great in Blaenavon, we used to have a notorious dance hall, the Morston Hall, they'd be fighting on a Saturday night.
- [Laughter]
- TB: Right.
- GTP: But that's your enjoyment we had two cinemas, this one, and the Coliseum up the road so, we had everything here.
- TB: Yes.
- GTP: And the chapel had... they had reading rooms and one thing and another, it was all-go in Blaenavon, well, most of the valleys were the same.
- TB: (00:09:24) Yes. And just tell me about the working institute, the Working Men's Institute, is that what it's called?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: (00:09:31) So, was that somewhere you would come to as well, was that providing...?
- GTP: During the war, as young boys, we used to come... the reading room used to be downstairs, you could come in and read the papers. And that is how we educated ourselves practically. We came in but you had to be very quiet, you were afraid to sneeze.
- [Laughter]
- More discipline in those days.
- TB: Right, so quite strict about that.
- GTP: Yes, they were more strict in those days.
- TB: (00:10:01) Right. So, they had free newspapers downstairs. A library, I guess would be somewhere if you needed it, was there?

GTP: The library was here, yes.

TB: (00:10:11) But also, did they provide clubs and societies and that kind of thing?

GTP: Church and chapels had their own junior clubs, yes. And as youngsters, we used to go around them all, if there was something on in one, we'd go down there.

TB: (00:10:30) Yes, sure. I would associate a mining town with hard-drinking, and it would be...

GTP: Oh, they liked their beer alright?

TB: Yes, so, it was quite lively.

GTP: I used to like my pint at one time too.

TB: Yes, sure.

GTP: But we never got into trouble and the police used to come in anyway... "How old are you?" We were more disciplined, and everything was controlled you know?

TB: (00:11:05) You were in the coal mine for quite a few years, how many years did you say?

GTP: In the colliery?

TB: Yes, in the colliery.

GTP: Seventeen years I did.

TB: (00:11:13) Right, okay. So, did you leave because the pit closed?

GTP: Well, I was on the first miner's strike and when we started back I could see what way it was going so I left.

TB: (00:11:25) I see, okay. When was the first miner's strike... was it the seventies?

GTP: Oh, yes. I forget the dates now.

TB: (00:11:36) Oh, don't worry, okay. So, at that point, you realised that probably, mining, as an industry was on its way out?

GTP: I think the first one was about thirty-odd years ago.

TB: (00:11:49) Right, okay. So, what did you do then... did you...

[Audio breaks and restarts 00:11:54]

TB: Right, one, two, three, four, five, just count to five for me again, sorry?

GTP: One, two, three, four, five.

TB: (00:12:02) That's fabulous. Great, so, yes, you were just saying that you decided to leave the coal mining and... so, what was the next move for you?

GTP: My next move... I had itchy feet, I had a couple of jobs, I've been from one job to another... lucky in those days, there was plenty of work about.

TB: Yes, lovely, yes.

GTP: I went to an asphalt factory, another cement works, and then I decided I better settle down and get a proper job. So, I joined the... But before that, I went back to the pit for just over twelve months and I was on the pumps then, all by myself which

is against the law mind, but it happens. And I did over twelve months and I thought, "Well, it's going to close, I better get a proper job." So, I applied for the MOD, fire service.

TB: Yes.

GTP: And got in.

TB: (00:13:12) And how old were you when you did that?

GTP: When I did that I was about... forty, I expect.

TB: Okay.

GTP: Around there. But before I left the pit I was on the mines rescue as well, that was hard, mines rescue.

TB: (00:13:30) Right, so, tell me about that?

GTP: Well, what it is, when you join the mines rescue they train you up and one thing and another. But on a Christmas, after Christmas and New Year, you had to go for your medical and that was hard. They'd have three steps and in those days, they used to put a third of your weight on your back, whatever you weighed, they'd have a third on your back. And they would have a doctor, a nurse, and a bed by the side of you, [unclear 00:14:03], oh, it was hard.

TB: Right, crikey.

GTP: Real hard, it was. But it kept us fit.

TB: (00:14:11) Yes, so, with this load on your back did you have to run or...?

GTP: You would run up the steps and it would go tick tock... and if you messed it, you would do it all over again.

[Laughter]

TB: (00:14:22) Right, yes, okay. So, you got out of the mine... When did the pit finally close?

GTP: Well, it started to go downhill so I left in... I think it was '72, somewhere around there... down to [unclear 00:14:41] that's a filling factory, explosives, that's how I got the job.

TB: (00:14:48) And when did the pit close, do you know?

GTP: That closed in 1980, I think... it did close and then Mr Puddle, who was a big man on Torfaen Council, he said, "Have it as a museum." And that's how we kicked off.

TB: (00:15:07) So, that happened really quickly after the pit closed?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:15:10) Which is unusual because a lot of the other pits got bulldozed, didn't they?

GTP: That's right.

TB: (00:15:14) So, this was pretty much the only one that was...?

GTP: We're good thinkers in Blaenavon, you see?

TB: Yes.

GTP: Why throw everything away? I think we've been lucky in Blaenavon because in the sixties, they started to bulldoze everything, but they stopped ironworks, that was stopped, quite a few things were stopped.

TB: (00:15:39) So, the ironworks did survive, or some of it?

GTP: Yes. You've been in the old ironworks, have you?

TB: I haven't, no.

GTP: Haven't now?

TB: I'll go this afternoon, is it amazing?

GTP: It's fascinating, yes.

TB: (00:15:55) So, they kept that as well... as well as the coal mine?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:16:04) And so, there was this extraordinary moment when people working in the coal mine suddenly became tour guides, talking about...?

GTP: They had to change their ways, didn't they? We all did.

TB: (00:16:17) Did you work at all for the...?

GTP: As a guide?

TB: Yes.

GTP: No. I never applied because... when I had my heart attack in '87, I thought, "No, I can't do that." I could have, I've come alright now, and I could have done it.

TB: (00:16:33) Do you think... what was the feeling about that opening up, it must have been sort of mixed feelings I suppose?

GTP: I reckoned it was a good thing, yes. Because they had about... I think it's about a hundred and forty thousand [visitors] a year, so, it's a good thing.

TB: (00:16:56) Sure. Let's go back then to the museum itself so, was this your idea or was it a group of you that got together and thought about it?

GTP: Well, I walked into the rugby club one night and my learned friend who you saw downstairs... the portrait...

TB: (00:17:11) Yes, what was his name again?

GTP: Robert Kellyford.

TB: Robert Kellyford, okay.

GTP: And Robert was sat there with this lady who I didn't know, and I got my pint and he said, "Glyn, come and join us?" I go, "What the hell do you want?" So, he said, "We're thinking about starting a museum, are you interested?" It all kicked off from there and we had a nice lady who helped us a lot, Bogda [unclear 00:17:42] or something like that, she was a lovely lady, very helpful and that's how we started?

- TB: (00:17:50) So, why do think he asked you to get involved?
- GTP: Why did he? Well, we've known one another most of our lives and he knew where I worked.
- TB: (00:18:01) And at the time, you were working for the Ministry of Defence as a fireman?
- GTP: Yes, because he came into the factory and he was doing all the telephone equipment, so he had to come to me to have permission.
- TB: (00:18:16) Right, I see. So, what was your job there... was it to look after fire safety for industrial areas?
- GTP: Yes, you looked after [unclear 00:18:25] fire and safety was paramount in an explosives factory.
- TB: Oh, I see. So, right, it was explosives so, that's why the Ministry of Defence, they were... in charge of security and all the...?
- GTP: Yes. Because we used to have our... when the IRA were raising their angry head, people would come down from London and give us a chat like. So, you had to be on your toes.
- TB: (00:18:57) Right, I'm with you. Alright, so, there are three of you now who are planning this museum. So, museums need three things usually, they need a building, they need a collection, and they need usually some money. So, tell me about how you managed to...?
- GTP: Well, how we managed, we... she said, "We've got a shop in town that you can have." And we accepted and in there we had all the old photos and postcards and selling them and that was how we got a couple of bob to start.
- TB: Oh, really?
- GTP: And she found a little place up on Lion Street and that's how it kicked off.
- TB: (00:19:47) So, this was the lady that you mentioned, what was her name again, sorry?
- GTP: Bogda Shermach, I think it was.
- TB: (00:19:54) Bogda? Bogda Shermach, okay. So, did Bogda... did she rent that shop do you think?
- GTP: Well, I don't know how she did it. That's all she said, there's a shop for you, we don't ask questions like that.
- TB: (00:20:11) So, initially, it was mostly photos?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: You were selling reproductions and...?
- GTP: There is a funny story when we were in the shop. A nurse pulled up one day and he was looking for a certain street, well, in Blaenavon a couple of years... not so many years ago there was a man making coffins in a particular place. So, we said to him, "Go across here and it's called Coffin Corner." That's the locals talking now, isn't it?

I said, "Turn right there, turn right again and you will come into Mary Street, what you're looking for and it's a dead end." And I shan't tell you what he said to us...

[Laughter]

He said, "You having me on?" I said, "No." We've had some fun starting this museum, I can tell you.

TB: Really?

GTP: Yes.

TB: It's been an adventure?

GTP: And we've had some nice visitors from abroad and up country. We had one lady from Durham, her husband was built like a tank and we sat down talking about families and all that. And she said, "What's this cwtch, Glynn?" Well, I said, "I'll have to show you, there's nothing rude about it." So, I stood up and she stood up and I put my arms around her and gave her a nice cwtch. She turned to her husband, she said, "I want one of them every night."

TB: Awww.

GTP: Yes, we've had some fun and still having some fun.

TB: (00:22:00) So, you were selling pictures presumably to visitors who were going to the mine but then coming into the town to find something to do?

GTP: And local people because if they didn't have it, they'd buy it as well. They knew what we were doing, and they rallied around us.

TB: (00:22:13) So, where did these photographs come from?

GTP: Well, local people and some who had moved away and come back and handed things in.

TB: (00:22:28) Once you had the shop people started to bring things to you?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:22:32) Was it objects as well as pictures?

GTP: Yes, everything was coming in.

TB: (00:22:41) I'm thinking that the shop maybe wasn't too big so, did it become a problem to display things?

GTP: Yes, it did become a problem because like I said, underneath there, we've got seventy percent in storage.

TB: (00:22:54) Wow, right. We're sitting in this huge auditorium here so, literally underneath the stage is a massive storage area?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:23:04) So, just going back... before we move onto the next stage of the museum... So, you were open regularly, I guess; was it like a shop, you were open Monday to Friday or weekends?

GTP: We opened the biggest part of the week, bar a Wednesday, we close on a Wednesday because you've got to have a day off, haven't you?

TB: Yes.

GTP: So, that's how it is.

TB: (00:23:24) And you take it in turns?

GTP: Take it in turns, yes.

TB: (00:23:29) And what do you think was the main motivation for the three of you to do this?

GTP: Well, we knew heritage was coming and what Torfaen wanted was to get more people into the town, that was the whole idea. And of course, we were in an ideal spot up there but all this nonsense where governments have come in and ruin it all, haven't they?

TB: (00:24:00) In what way, just explain?

GTP: Well, we'd would have liked to have been... I would have stayed up there myself, we could show most of our stuff up the other place.

TB: (00:24:08) Okay, so, we're talking now about the other...?

GTP: In Lion Street.

TB: (00:24:11) The bigger building, this is the Working Men's Institute?

GTP: Yes, the first one, that was the first one.

TB: (00:24:16) Right, so, that wasn't the shop... that's not the shop we were talking about, is it? So, the shop first, then to Lion Street...?

GTP: Then to Lion Street, yes.

TB: Then to here, okay, I'm with you, that's great.

GTP: The shop was only to start us off to get a couple of bob to get some cabinets, just to make a start.

TB: (00:24:33) I see. So, you got some money together then for some cabinets?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:24:40) And how many years were you in the shop for, roughly?

GTP: I'd say about sixteen months, perhaps less.

TB: But you were getting traffic in from Big Pit?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:24:55) But you said it was locals as well?

GTP: Locals, yes.

TB: (00:25:00) So, the big motivation was actually to drive some of the tourism that was coming into the town so people would spend some money in the café and pub and...

GTP: And that is still a struggle today, to get them from Pit to town.

- TB: (00:25:12) Yes, because you've got a very beautiful road that goes straight there almost, and you don't have to go through the town to get to it?
- GTP: Yes, that's right.
- TB: Which is a problem.
- GTP: Because the private firms, the buses... I keep asking myself, they all go to Big Pit and I'd asked the question, "Why are none coming here?" And I still keep at them, I do.
- TB: (00:25:38) Yes. Do you have leaflets or anything there that they can give out to tell people to come here?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: (00:25:46) Okay, right. It's a struggle, isn't it... What about signage; there is a sign?
- GTP: We're on the internet, we've got leaflets, flyers, how much more can you do?
- TB: (00:25:59) Yes. Do you have any brown signs on the road at all?
- GTP: Me and Robert went to Cardiff and helped to design that, they gave them some private firms to tell them... All they told them was it's an industrial site... well, some of them were laughable. But there was one firm had it spot-on because all we wanted was Mother, Father, Son, or Daughter on the signage. Because it was pick and shovel and you can't get away from that in the old days. So, as you see the signs just now, that's what it is.
- TB: (00:26:47) Oh, okay. So, is this signs for this museum that are on the road or signs for the Big Pit?
- GTP: No, they're all for Big Pit, unfortunately.
- TB: (00:26:56) Have you ever tried to get a sign for your museum?
- GTP: Well, we've got some signage on the railings outside but...
- TB: Yes, I did see that.
- GTP: Other than that, no.
- TB: (00:27:06) Alright. So, we're at the shop, you're there for maybe sixteen months or so, you're raising some money, with the intention of getting some cabinets, and you're amassing more and more stuff and it's getting a little bit difficult. So, tell me what happened next?
- GTP: Well, what happened next after about sixteen years... with all the austerity, Torfaen was going to get rid of the building and when we had a meeting with the officials, they said, "The only place we've got for you is the Workmen's Hall, the institute."
- TB: (00:27:47) So, they were going to get rid of the shop?
- GTP: No, this was the old place now, we've finished with the shop.
- TB: (00:27:53) Great, okay... So, tell me that step, how did you get from the shop to the place on Lion Street, was it?

GTP: Well, that Bogda Shermach, she found that place, it was being done out and she said, "The only place we've got is the basement up there." We had a look around, we had to accept because there was nothing else about.

TB: Right, okay.

GTP: So, we made the best of a bad job.

TB: (00:28:23) I see, but it was bigger in the basement?

GTP: It was bigger in the basement.

TB: So, for you, that was a better move?

GTP: We had more rooms to show things.

TB: (00:28:31) But you could have stayed on at the shop if you wanted to, could you, but you didn't...?

GTP: No, we only had a certain time.

TB: Oh, the lease, was it?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:28:40) So, then you moved everything to this bigger building. So, that was the Working Men's Institute?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:28:46) Just describe that building to me?

GTP: Her Majesty the Queen has been up there as well, after the war, she came here in the fifties, I think it was. That's got a lot of history but like I said, it had been used that much, they had to come and build this one.

TB: (00:29:06) So, it was similar, they had reading rooms, and meeting rooms and a library?

GTP: Yes. It had it all, yes.

TB: But it was so well-used they actually built a second one?

GTP: Yes.

TB: Gosh.

GTP: Because the population was growing so, they had to build this one.

TB: (00:29:21) Right, lovely. So, you moved into the basement so, that was open to the public, a similar kind of deal but this time you're displaying more and more objects, I would imagine?

GTP: Yes, everything we had, we were showing.

TB: (00:29:36) Yes. And did you, in terms of displays and things, I don't know if it was similar to how it is downstairs or not but... How did you decide how to display it; did you visit other museums?

GTP: The only thing we had in order was the iron... like the brickworks, we had a couple of bricks, the rails, and the wheels, we had that in one corner, and it would go from

there. But the rest was higgledy-piggledy, and people loved it. We used to say, "Awful sorry... don't do nothing" They all used to say that because I used to ask them. I said, "We don't mind criticism, we'll accept any criticism." But they used to say, "It's making us look" and they could pick odd objects up, which you can't do in a lot of museums, so, they were quite happy.

TB: (00:30:39) Right so, it was one of those places where there was just stuff everywhere kind of thing, and people could actually have a sift through?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:30:47) Were there labels on things or not really?

GTP: Not on all but we had to explain some things.

TB: (00:30:57) When people visited did you tend to take them round, give them a tour or did you just let people wander about and do what they wanted?

GTP: We used to take some stuff up the ironworks now and again, but we don't do it so much now, it's so much hassle, you know.

TB: (00:31:12) But when people visited, would you show people around the museum itself?

GTP: We used to say, "Help yourself, if you've got any questions we'll try and answer it."

TB: Sure.

GTP: That's how it was. It's the same downstairs, if I have a visitor I say, "It's all explanatory but if you've got any questions, I'm still here."

TB: (00:31:42) So, do you know what year you moved to the older working men's club?

GTP: The one in Lion Street?

TB: Yes.

GTP: We moved in there in... I think it was 2001.

TB: (00:32:01) And at one point did you set up as an actual trust or charity, because I presume originally, it was just a group of friends that were doing it?

GTP: We set up as a charity practically straight away.

TB: Oh, really, okay.

GTP: Because you know, with all the laws and all that so, this Bogda, she was very good to us, she put us on the right road. We were only amateurs after all.

TB: Yes.

GTP: I wish she could come back, she was brilliant she was.

TB: (00:32:30) So, what was her background, did she know a bit about that kind of thing?

GTP: Well, she was on the tourist set-up and she's the one we used to deal with, nobody else and she knew what she was talking about. She would come in unexpected, "Right boys, any problems?" And she'd sit down and listen to you and it wouldn't be long before it was all solved. But now, it's different.

TB: (00:32:59) Was she local or was she...?

GTP: No, she lives in Barry, in Barry Island.

TB: (00:33:04) Oh, right. So, how did she become involved, was she working at Big Pit?

GTP: No, she was working for Torfaen, on the tourists side.

TB: (00:33:12) I see, was that bus tours?

GTP: No, she was just... her job was to go around the pit, this, and other things on tourism, but she was good at it.

TB: (00:33:33) So, she worked for... sorry, what was the name, Torfaen?

GTP: Torfaen, she worked for Torfaen Council, yes.

TB: Oh, I see, the council, I'm with you.

GTP: I expect she was on contract for a year or two.

TB: Which is why she had a role for a few years?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:33:48) So, was that a problem when she left?

GTP: Well, you've got different bosses again and that's how it always goes, you've got a different one, a different one and it doesn't work.

TB: Oh, really?

GTP: Not really.

TB: (00:34:03) So, do you still have a museum officer who is responsible for liaising with you?

GTP: Yes, Ashleigh her name is, but she's part-time now with all the cut-backs.

TB: Yes.

TB: (00:34:24) Don't worry, that's fine. So, how much support did you get... it sounds like you actually had a lot of support in the beginning, from the council?

GTP: We had good support off her. She is the one we were dealing with all of the time and she was brilliant but when she left... you've got to fight for everything now.

TB: Okay.

GTP: We have got a minister coming at the end of the month from Cardiff, he'll have an earful as well.

TB: (00:34:57) Yes. A minister as in church minister?

GTP: Yes. Dafydd Elis-Thomas his name is [Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism, Welsh Assembly]

TB: (00:35:05) Is he giving a talk?

- GTP: I requested him to come here and see how it all is and what we're trying to achieve because they all went downhill bad, so, they've all kicked off again. The only problem we've got is, we've got the museum, we've got our little committee and they've all got theirs, and never the twain will meet.
- TB: (00:35:35) Okay, we'll come onto that. So, how long were you in the older...?
- GTP: In the old building?
- TB: The institute, yes.
- GTP: About sixteen years, something like that.
- TB: So, it's quite recent that you moved here then?
- GTP: Yes, two years ago, I think it is? Is it two years we've been down here?
- F: We opened in 2016... all the details are downstairs. We were thirteen years up the other place, weren't we?
- GTP: Yes... more than that.
- F: Fifteen years. And we've been in here now... this is our... we opened two years ago in February, we reopened. Because we had the accreditation in...
- GTP: Will you get off my recording?
- [Laughter]
- F: Delete it.
- [Laughter]
- TB: (00:36:25) Okay, so, it's quite a recent move that you've had here. So, just... you did mention this to me when we were walking around but just for the recording, just say the reason why you had to move out of the old institute and the issues of moving here?
- GTP: Well, the simple reason was Torfaen weren't getting no money off the government, were they? So, they were selling their buildings off and... they were practically giving them away as long as they could move us. I'd liked to have stopped there, I would have but there you are, the powers that be got the final say, unfortunately. Because sometimes you would think, "Why don't they come and talk to the volunteers?" But it doesn't happen like that, unfortunately. I'm getting like one foot in the grave here.
- [Laughter]
- TB: (00:37:29) So, the decision was made, and you had to go; were you paying a peppercorn rent or no rent?
- GTP: A peppercorn rent, yes.
- TB: (00:37:36) And is that the case here as well?
- GTP: Yes. They've got to help you some way, haven't they?
- TB: (00:37:42) Yes, sure. So, they basically said, "Look, there's some space for in the other hall?"

- GTP: Yes. We would have liked to... we argued with the officials we met, we would have liked to have gone across the road, the school, that's where we would have liked to have gone.
- TB: (00:38:00) Right. So, there are still some empty buildings...?
- GTP: No, they aren't empty but... The library should have come back here to its original home, that's what I told them. "Oh, she said, you're haggling? I said, "I know, I'm born here, I know what I'm talking about." But it never turned up.
- TB: (00:38:24) So, what's happened to the library, where did that go?
- GTP: It's still over there but it's not used like it used to be. So, who knows what the future holds?
- TB: (00:38:34) Yes. So, a couple of years ago you moved into this space and it's a cinema, it's a large theatre, there are meeting rooms here. It seems to me like quite a community centre of sorts?
- GTP: Oh, yes, there are lots of things go on in here, weddings, lovely weddings here.
- TB: (00:38:57) So, in that respect, I imagine it's quite good in terms of getting people through the door?
- GTP: That's what it's all about, is getting people through the door.
- TB: (00:39:07) And so, the display downstairs, was it much different from how it looked up at the older place, apart from being a lot smaller?
- GTP: Well, you could say we're a little bit posher, that's all I can say. People say it's nice, but not very big and that's our problem, but there you are.
- TB: (00:39:35) And you moved to a more thematic way of displaying things?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: (00:39:38) Did that happen when you moved here or was it like that at the old place?
- GTP: No, when we moved, the girl with the authority, she said "You've got to move in block" I thought "My God." I cringed. You can imagine getting all our stuff in boxes, bringing it all down here, all under your feet, it was chaos.
- TB: (00:40:03) I see, so, it all moved in one go?
- GTP: In one go and I didn't want that. Why they moved us so fast I don't know because they didn't sell the building for well over twelve months, I don't know what all the worry was. It got me because what I wanted to do... They did do one thing that I requested when we got the room we've got now. I said, "You don't want carpet in there, you want a wooden floor, paint it out..." which they did, thank goodness, and that's all we wanted to do. We could have hired a van of our own and moved quietly put our own set-up and then put the storage underneath there. But they wanted in a hurry, I don't know why they don't tell you.
- TB: (00:40:59) Right. So, did the displays change quite dramatically when you came here, from that quite chaotic...?

- GTP: Yes, because we had so much household stuff that the women and men used years ago and its all underneath there. Because we had nice shelves against the walls and people could pick it up and many people said, "We used to use that." That's how it was but you can't do that downstairs.
- TB: (00:41:34) So, you had to make some selections about the key things that you had to display?
- GTP: Yes, key things.
- TB: (00:41:39) Did you have some advice or help with that or some money from the council to do that or was it something that you had to do yourselves?
- GTP: No, we paid... It cost us well over a thousand pounds to move, yes, our responsibility, which I was mad again, but there you are.
- TB: (00:42:05) Okay. And how did you make decisions about what to pick for the new place?
- GTP: Well, they'll have a meeting shortly and we'll have to decide what they can take out and what they put in, that's all they've got to do. I let them get on with it, I do, I've done my share and I don't want to do a lot more.
- TB: (00:42:29) Alright, so, that's something that you've left to the other volunteers?
- GTP: Yes, it's up to them to get on with it now.
- TB: (00:42:37) You've got some really nice kind of thematic posters really just saying, "This is about education, this is about..." whatever. Who wrote those?
- GTP: We did all those, yes.
- TB: (00:42:54) And were they up at the old place?
- GTP: We did these for the new site, yes, although we had some articles up at the old place explaining what it is.
- TB: (00:43:05) And tell me about the subject matter itself... You've picked some... when you were showing me around you said there is so much history here?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: (00:43:18) You could go on, and on, and on. So, how did you decide in terms of the themes, what would be the best things to display?
- GTP: Well, I think most people, especially visitors, the ironworks, is talked about, and then the pit. So, we can put a theme out on any of them. We can do so much if we had the room, you know.
- TB: (00:43:49) So, you decided to cover the ironworks and the pit but presumably, I guess a lot of visitors would go and see that anyway, so, you wanted to also give them another...?
- GTP: Another insight into what people used in the homes. I've got something to show you later on.
- TB: Oh, right, okay.
- GTP: And I want you to tell me what it is.

- TB: (00:44:11) Sounds good, I look forward to that. Okay, so, it's applying a bit more of the social history of the town?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: Compared to the industrial history which they were getting at those sites?
- GTP: Most of it is about Blaenavon, that's what we wanted, the history of Blaenavon, the story of Blaenavon and we didn't want anything else.
- TB: (00:44:33) Just tell me a bit about the community itself and what the museum means to it; do you think it has played a role?
- GTP: Well, it's been a good community here. When we had all our industry, people seemed to more happier, helped one another, because you could be working with a gang of boys and you meet in the night and go and have a pint of beer, that's how it was. Because there were shift workers in those days, that's why they were always open in the day. They could come into the library and things like that.
- TB: (00:45:14) Yes. So, do you think having the museum here has been helpful for the community itself to kind of...?
- GTP: Well, we don't have so many local visitors, we rely on outsiders now.
- TB: Really, okay?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: That's interesting. I just spoke to someone yesterday who was saying for some of the local museums in villages around Ebbw Vale... but it takes a time... when an industry closes it can take ten or so years for people to kind of get over feeling so raw really and angry and upset about it until you can start to think about having a museum?
- GTP: Well, I think we were lucky in Blaenavon, things happened so quickly.
- TB: Yes, straight into tourism?
- GTP: Straight into tourism. Once we knew we had heritage, then it kicked off.
- TB: (00:46:13) Yes, so, here, you didn't really have that... or not as much anyway. I'm sure people were... they were made unemployed when the pit closed and were very upset about it. But perhaps, yes, that happened to you much, much faster than other places?
- GTP: That's right, yes.
- TB: (00:46:32) And what about being made a World Heritage Site because that came afterwards, didn't it; after Big Pit?
- GTP: Yes, it came after in 2000... I think they announced the other [unclear 00:46:51] in here... I think that was in 2001, or 2000, somewhere around that area. And of course, everybody had their arms around it then, didn't they? I used to say to my friend, "Aye, give us ten or fifteen years, you'll see it will alter" My words are coming true.
- TB: (00:47:16) What do you mean by that?

- GTP: Well, what I mean by that, in the beginning, everybody wanted to know what's going on, but it will have all petered out. I think... especially Blaenavon people, the old Blaenavonites we call... they know what goes on, where it is and we're alright as a small museum, but as far as I'm concerned, Torfaen only scratched the surface on tourism, and they don't want to know much now. I don't know why?
- TB: (00:47:54) I see. So, you felt that after the Big Pit opened, there was a lot of effort really and it just dissipated?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: (00:48:05) And then the World Heritage Site thing happened, I don't know how that came about, presumably you have to apply for that?
- GTP: Well, it came about because Blaenavon had so much history and if you've got so much history well, you've got to put it... I forget their name now, they went to see... in Australia, the board. And they put the case forward and got it.
- TB: (00:48:28) Right, the World Heritage Centre, or UNESCO, is it?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: Were you involved in that campaign?
- GTP: No, no, no. Torfaen... that was Torfaen's baby, that was.
- TB: (00:48:44) I see, so how did that go, were people generally very pleased when that happened?
- GTP: Oh, yes, everybody was pleased, it put us on the map.
- TB: (00:48:54) Sure. But did you feel that... you were just saying that when that happened, you said everyone wanted a piece of it. So, did you notice that more people were coming in?
- GTP: Yes, they were coming in then, yes. But talking about heritage and Blaenavon, but Blaenavon had been, throughout the world, famous, before ever this happened because they were making... of course, steel was invented here and they were shipping all that steel abroad, the wheels, wheelwrights they call them, don't they? So, it was famous before we had World Heritage.
- TB: (00:49:46) I see what you mean. So, it's easy to focus on that quite short space of time, but in fact, throughout the centuries, it was a world centre for these things, yes?
- GTP: Yes.
- TB: (00:50:02) Yes, I see what you mean, yes. And how is it going; so, we're now what... I don't know, is it ten or fifteen years on since World Heritage status? Have the numbers held up, is it going well or not, has it been a struggle?
- GTP: No, the pit is doing alright, they'll always do alright, they will but the rest of us, it seems to fall off a bit. So, when we meet Dafydd Elis-Thomas from Cardiff, we'll have a word in his ear.
- TB: (00:50:44) Will he have some power do you think?
- GTP: Oh, he's got the power, he's Sports and Heritage so, we'll have a little word in his ear.

- TB: Right, okay, I've got you. Sorry, he is a minister for...?
- GTP: Because if you don't ask, you won't get.
- TB: (00:51:03) Yes, sure. And also, at some point, they made Big Pit free as a national kind of museum?
- GTP: They charged in the very beginning and then Tony Blair brought it in all the big museums were free, weren't they? The only trouble we have now and again is when people come in here, they think it's free.
- TB: Right, yes.
- GTP: And I keep telling them, "No, this is a small museum, independent and we've got to charge, if we don't charge we'll fold" but they understand once we explain to them.
- TB: (00:51:40) Because someone said that was a problem and numbers went down... for the charging ones because everyone was going to the free ones, so, you did notice a bit of an impact?
- GTP: That's right. Because when visitors come here they think everything in Blaenavon is free, and it's crazy.
- TB: (00:51:55) Is that still the case, is it free at Big Pit now?
- GTP: Well, they've got to pay for parking now, haven't they. They brought the charges in I think. I've never believed in this free mind... I've never believed in it. A small charge, no trouble, but free is a different story.
- TB: Yes, it's hard to keep going, isn't it.
- GTP: Yes. Because we only charge two pounds to come in and we can give them our museum and the history of this hall. So, it's worth two pounds.
- TB:(00:52:35) Okay. I was going to say did you model the museum on any other museums at all?
- GTP: No, me and my friend, we did go around all the other museums and get some insight, but we never copied off anybody. All we were after was a bit of advice.
- TB: (00:53:01) Just for you personally, why is it so important to... have a museum, why is the history that it tells is so important to you?
- GTP: Well, it's important to me because, like I said, I was born and brought up in Blaenavon and seen all these changes, but we've got to try and get business back into the town somehow. What will happen, I don't know because what's happening, people in the valleys are going out to town like Cwmbran where all the shops are and that's the problem. It's trying to keep them here that's the trouble and I'll come back to my argument Torfaen have only just scratched the surface in Blaenavon, they could have built hotels for busloads, and things like that and until they do it, it won't alter. That's my argument.
- TB: (00:54:04) Right, okay, I see. Right so, for you, it was a very strategic thing rather than the... Yes, okay, that's interesting. And what about the stories themselves that are told... do you think... I don't know... are they... what has the history of this town got to tell the world? Apart from the industry and all... is there any kind of...?

- GTP: Well, I think what we could teach people and we haven't lost it yet, it togetherness, because when they closed our health centre... not the health centre, the sports centre, we were having arguments galore over it and they stuck together, but it still shut anyway. Because in the end, the local authority get their way, unfortunately, but the people are still together, not as much as it used to be and of course, they mix more people up today. There's people coming here, fair play, from Bristol, some Londoners come back, they've been away the biggest part of their life and they come back.
- TB: Wow.
- GTP: Yes. We get all the news in the museum. But that's all you want to see is a bit more life, you know, it might come back, what goes around goes around.
- TB: (00:55:45) Well, that's really interesting people are coming back?
- GTP: Oh, yes, they're coming back.
- TB: (00:55:51) So, what work are they doing, is it work relating to tourism or is it?
- GTP: No, they just come back and retire. Some have come back for work, where they can find it, like in Cwmbran and Newport, and Bristol, some travel to Bristol. It's just trying to get a bit more life into the town because there's so much shut, the pubs have shut. Socialising isn't so good as it used to be.
- TB: (00:56:27) How many pubs do you have in town?
- GTP: Not many now, three or four, that's it. In the heyday, there used to be seventy-odd pubs.
- TB: Seventy, wow.
- GTP: Seventy-odd. And up in Lions Square, there is a famous pub there called The Lion where they had the riots in 1868, they had riots there and that was over voting. It was the Liberal Party in those days and the Conservatives and there was a bit of hanky panky going on so, they rioted. And we've had a re-enactment of that, we've had some good shows in Blaenavon.
- TB: (00:57:12) Yes. Okay, I think we've covered most things...
- GTP: Are you switched off now?
- TB: Not quite.
- GTP: I don't want to start swearing.
- TB: (00:57:40) Sure, alright. Well, just... are there any current challenges, is it going to go okay or are there any big issues that you're confronted with at the moment?
- GTP: Well, we've gone a bit lower but we're still going. Now whether Torfaen have got any future plans, we don't know. But if they have got future plans I hope they involve the volunteers because sometimes, we've got better ideas.
- TB: (00:58:19) Yes, sure but you think it sounds like you've got enough people involved to be going on?

GTP: Yes, we're doing alright, we've got our head above water, that's the main...

TB: (00:58:27) Okay, just as a final thing, what has been the biggest challenge of your involvement in the museum, it's been a long time but has there been a toughest moment for you?

GTP: Well, who does this go to?

TB: Well, it will go to an archive.

GTP: Well, your biggest problem is with authority, that's all I can say about it. I don't want to start swearing.

TB: Okay sure. Yes, I can see that as a museum you've been pushed around, haven't you, quite literally by the council for whatever reason?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (00:59:11) Has there been a particular high point, what has been the best moment of your involvement in the museum?

GTP: Well, the best point is when the Kennards, who the family was... the money people, years ago, we are still in contact with their great, great grandson and he comes here now and again. So, we're still in contact and that's a big thing... he's an artist and he's a nice fella too.

TB: (00:59:42) So, just tell me about the money, were they landowners here?

GTP: Well, they were the bosses of Blaenavon Company.

TB: Oh, I see.

GTP: They were the bosses. There was so much money went out from all the valleys.

TB: I'm with you, so, you're still in touch with that family that ran the company?

GTP: Yes.

TB: (01:00:07) So, occasionally, he's comes back?

GTP: Yes, he comes to the concerts and all, he lives in... where does he live? Down the west country somewhere, so, it doesn't take long to come over the bridge.

TB: (01:00:23) What do you enjoy most about working in the museum itself, I presume you must be meeting people from all over?

GTP: Oh, I like meeting people, I always have. Of course, tell them the story about this place as well, our two dragons out there...

TB: Oh, yes, I see above the stage.

GTP: Well, what I tell them, in the beginning, they only had one dragon and they didn't know whether to turn left or to the right... political, isn't it? So, when another old member came along he said, "Lads, I've got the answer" he said, "We'll have two dragons facing one another." And I tell them... "I tell lies as well."

[Laughter]

It's just a little story, isn't it?

TB: That's great. So, you enjoy entertaining people?

GTP: Oh, I enjoy it, yes, I've met some nice people. I don't know what they say about me after they've gone home, that's another story.

[Laughter]

But I do like meeting people.

TB: That's great, thank you so much.

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