

## Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Vivienne Williams, Sandra Plaister, Alan Williams

Role: Company Secretary; Director; Curator

Museum: Brynmawr and District Museum

Location of interview: In a museum display room/meeting room

Date: 7/3/19

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.

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

TB: First of all, could you just, for the recording, just give your name and your date of birth, if you don't mind?

VW: I'm Vivienne Williams, and my date of birth is XX-XXX 1939.

TB: Thank you, Vivienne, that's great. And just tell me your role in the organisation currently?

VW: I'm company secretary.

TB: Company secretary, great. And the same for you, please?

SP: I'm Sandra Plaister, my date of birth is the XX-XXX 1947, and I'm a director.

TB: [00:00:34] Okay, brilliant. Yes, so, just a couple of factual things, in terms of governance you are a trust or a charity, is that right?

VW: A charity, and a company limited by guarantee.

TB: [00:00:48] Right, okay. And when did the museum open to the public, was that... the official, was that actually at the launch in 2003?

VW: Yes, that... it's all there.

TB: [00:00:58] Alright, so, it opened in 2003. Okay, but we'll get to the inaugural bit in a minute. Do you have any paid staff at all, is it all volunteers?

VW: No, all volunteers.

TB: [00:01:11] Okay, great. And do you record numbers of visitors?

VW: Yes... we do gates.

TB: [00:01:15] Great, here we are... brilliant. So, for the last sort of year that you've got figures for, what are we looking at?

VW: I think... Alan's got it. He made a list somewhere in this book, didn't he? Here we are.

TB: Oh, this is great. Can I take a photo of it?

VW: Yes.

TB: [00:01:42] That's fantastic. It's looking fairly consistently around the high three thousands sort... which is... for two days a week is very impressive. Can I take a photo of you two as well, would you mind? Thank you, that's great... brilliant, can I just have one of you two together? Go on...

[Laughter]

It's just if anyone listens to this, they'll get a sense of who you are, you see, that's lovely, brilliant, thank you. Great, that's all done.

VW: Yes, we think that the numbers are pretty good considering we're only open thirteen and a half hours a week.

TB: [00:02:29] Yes, that's amazing really. Okay, so, please just start with the very early idea of who was it that came up with the idea of having a museum and why?

VW: Well, I think the idea was thought many, many years ago by the historical society but it never came to anything.

TB: [00:02:50] Were you involved in the historical society yourself?

VW: We all are, yes.

TB: [00:02:54] Were you there at that time?

SP: No, I wasn't.

VW: Yes... no... I was yes.

TB: (00:03:00) Right. Thinking back to that time, so, people talked about it for a while, but it just never really got off the ground?

VW: No, it didn't get off the ground because there was no facility for a building at that particular time. And I don't think the local authority at that time were all that helpful. But Edwin was the main instigator there.

SP: The chairman of the historical society was a great historian.

TB: Oh, right, okay.

VW: His picture is out there because initially, he was our local history advisor, but he died quite a number of years ago now.

TB: (00:03:40) So, he and you were both in the history society?

VW: Yes.

TB: (00:03:43) So, was he a driver for this idea or was it more you?

VW: Well, I think it's all in the...

TB: (00:03:51) Tell me anyway, because it will be nice to have it. Because people will be reading the transcript possibly not looking at this so, just tell me the story?

VW: Well, the idea was mooted by the Town Centre Partnership and because they couldn't do anything on their own, they invited the historical society to come on board. So, it was literally, half and half.

TB: (00:04:09) Okay, so, tell me about the Town Centre Partnership, is that sort of shopkeepers as like a council?

VW: Yes.

TB: To try and improve the town?

VW: Yes, and they are still in existence.

TB: (00:04:21) Okay, so they approached the historical society saying, "Look, we thought this would be a good idea, would you be up for it?"

VW: Yes.

- TB: (00:04:32) But it sounds to me that it obviously met with some ideas that had happened before that for a museum from the historical society's point of view?
- VW: Well, the historical society had collected quite a number of artefacts over the years and they're here now.
- TB: Yes.
- VW: They're in cabinets and some of them are in store, I think some of the cups upstairs came from there.
- TB: (00:04:54) I was going to say... So, what was in the collection for the museum as it were, the historical society's collection?
- VW: Not a great deal, it was just cups and things that had been collected and that clock.
- TB: Oh, wow, okay. So, these were things that were donated to the society.
- VW: By the historical society to the museum once we got going, yes.
- TB: (00:05:16) Right, I see, I've got you. Right, so, this inaugural... this idea was pitched for the two organisations to get together. So, just tell me how this went from an idea to actually reality?
- VW: I don't know really. Well, we became a company and a society and... I can't really put my finger on it, it just grew.
- SP: Originally, we just had two rooms above, a shop, just farther over in the town, which is demolished now.
- TB: (00:05:58) So, who owned those rooms, how come you got those?
- VW: Well, it was a man from Birmingham, wasn't it?
- SP: Yes.
- VW: He owned the store downstairs and he let us have the upper floor.
- SP: I think the labour exchange was there originally.
- VW: Yes, originally.
- TB: (00:06:12) Okay, so, was he part of the historical society?
- VW: No, no, no.
- TB: (00:06:18) But word went out that you needed a space and he volunteered it?
- VW: Yes.
- TB: (00:06:22) So, how long were you in those rooms for roughly?
- VW: Only a few months really.
- SP: Was it? I don't know.
- VW: Yes, it was just a few months, in 2003 until the local authority let us have the top floor here.
- TB: (00:06:36) So, how did that come about... the local authority...?

- VW: We knew that there was an empty space upstairs so, we had a meeting with the local authority, and we suggested that we take over the first floor, and they agreed with us.
- TB: (00:06:52) So, this is a Carnegie Library so, was it a library then, up to that point?
- VW: No. They had moved the library next door a number of years before that to back the end of the Market Hall and they used downstairs as an open learning centre to teach people computers.
- TB: Okay.
- VW: So, that was downstairs at that particular time, upstairs was empty and so, we asked could we have upstairs, and they said, yes.
- TB: (00:07:20) Oh, right, okay. So, down here was a learning centre?
- SP: Yes.
- TB: (00:07:25) And what had upstairs been used for previously, did you have any sense of it?
- VW: The library was upstairs.
- TB: (00:07:28) Oh, right, were there still shelves and stuff?
- VW: Initially the library... the books were upstairs, there was a research room in this room and in there were the local papers on big boards.
- TB: Oh, yes.
- SP: The reading room, wasn't it?
- VW: Reading room, yes.
- TB: (00:07:42) Oh, right, I've got you. So, when you arrived, presumably, downstairs had pretty much been converted to more of a computer kind of space?
- VW: Yes.
- TB: But upstairs was pretty much as it was?
- VW: Yes.
- TB: (00:07:56) Okay, so, just tell me that process of converting something...?
- VW: The local authority, they came in and did quite a bit of work upstairs, they removed all the old bookshelves and everything and painted and decorated it and put a carpet and then let the space to us.
- TB: (00:08:10) Okay, brilliant. And at what point did you start to collect... build up your collection; clearly, you had a few things from the historical society but...?
- VW: Well, as soon as people realised we were here, we kept getting artefacts in daily more or less. Because our main interest was the Brynmawr Experiment, the Quaker Experiment in the 1930s and the furniture factory mainly, people wanted us to have the furniture because they wanted it to come home.
- TB: (00:08:47) Okay, right. So, these were local people still living in the town?

- VW: No, they were people from all over the country, really.
- TB: (00:08:57) Really, right, okay. So, they would literally come in and say, "In my boot, I've got a..."?
- VW: Yes. I think when people were downsizing, the furniture is quite big and bulky, you saw it upstairs and we've got a lot more in store in the institute next door. They're downsizing and Brynmawr furniture came home, but it is very collectible and very expensive.
- TB: I was going to say, it's kind of art-deco... kind of '30s, it's really big now, isn't it?
- VW: Yes, it's the tail-end of the Arts and Crafts... and Charles Rennie MacIntosh was... I think Paul Matt, the furniture designer, I think he was one of his...
- TB: (00:09:38) Gosh, yes. So, from the beginning, you decided that would be a good thing to collect. Did you have any other kind of themes that you particularly wanted to collect or was it more a case of just seeing what people brought along?
- VW: Well, it is local history really, the rest of it, but the main interest is the Brynmawr Experiment and the furniture, that's why we're unique.
- TB: (00:10:01) Yes. And what other things did people bring in on spec as it were?
- VW: Well, they do tend to bring in... When I say 'rubbish' they think that if it's old, we want it, and we don't. So, we've got to say "No, thank you. Unless it's related to Brynmawr, no thank you."
- TB: (00:10:21) Okay, so, if someone brings in an old iron that was made in Sheffield...?
- VW: Yes, yes.
- TB: Okay, I'm with you. So, you're trying to focus just on locally made things or things that directly apply?
- SP: Yes.
- TB: (00:10:35) So, just tell me about the layout of the museum and how you decided on the look of it and so on; did you visit other museums, were you inspired by any other museums or was it more just doing your own thing?
- VW: No, it's just us... but it's evolved really, hasn't it, the collection and the way we exhibit. We just changed a lot of the displays.
- SP: Yes, we have, upstairs.
- TB: (00:10:54) Okay, so, tell me about that, how have you changed them?
- SP: Well, for a long time, we had a display of the Welsh Folk Dancers, the lady and gentlemen who we know created them, in the first place and I think they had been there for quite a long time... many years. We decided it was time for a change but there was quite a lot of dissension about it, "Why have you taken Jessie and Hector down?"
- [Laughter]

- SP: But we thought we must have a change. So, that's what prompted that and then we found that we had a few police uniforms so we thought that would be a good idea to make a cabinet of that. And we had post office uniforms so, we thought we'd do a cabinet of that, all local.
- TB: Yes, that's lovely.
- SP: And the hospital as well, we had quite a few things in store so we thought it would be nice to put those on display.
- TB: (00:11:46) So, you've got your collection in store and you're starting to think about what would fit together to make a display?
- VW: Yes.
- TB: (00:11:53) Right, I see, sure, that's lovely. And just tell me about the labelling and so on, is that one person that does it all, because it's great, isn't it?
- [Laughter]
- SP: Yes, Vivienne does it all. Vivienne and I usually change the displays. If it's anything heavy, we need men to help us.
- TB: Right, okay.
- VW: And we've got a couple of volunteers who have been putting new pictures and things up.
- SP: Yes, they are from the history society as well, but they are members of the museum.
- TB: (00:12:22) Right, great. Let's just... organisationally, obviously, I'm sure a lot of people who are involved in this are involved in the history society, but you decided to set up as an independent thing from the history society. So, just tell me about the thinking behind that; because you could have run it from the history society presumably if you wanted to?
- VW: Well, we had to become a private company limited by guarantee and a charity, we had to be... autonomous.
- TB: Okay.
- VW: So, we set up and appointed a board of directors and some of the directors... we are nine... and four of us are the original ones... is it?... or more, Alan, me, John Davies...
- SP: Ann?
- VW: And Ann Axford, four are the original.
- TB: (00:13:08) Oh, I see what you mean. So, it was important to become a charity presumably because you wanted to fundraise and that sort of thing?
- VW: That's right and source grants.
- TB: (00:13:19) Right, okay, I'm with you. So, that's set up now as well as the company, so, how many trustees do you have now?
- VW: Nine.

TB: Still got nine involved, that's quite a big board and how many volunteers do you have that are actually seriously contributing in some way?

VW: About twenty, aren't there? We do a shift system, we've got to have at least two on each shift and there are four of us in on a Thursday morning because we do a coffee morning... for funds.

SP: It's very, very popular.

VW: And then three of us in the afternoon and Frank is usually here on a Thursday afternoon as well. There are two on Friday mornings and three or four on Friday afternoon and two on Saturday morning.

TB: Okay, right, so, it's quite a big group of you.

VW: Yes, we have got back-up volunteers as well as if someone is not well.

TB: (00:14:14) Brilliant. And you say you pay a peppercorn rent to the council?

VW: Ten pounds.

TB: Wow, that's pretty good.

[Laughter]

VW: And we don't have to pay rates because we're a charity, which is another...

TB: That's great... brilliant.

VW: But we do have to pay the council's part of the insurance on this building... their proportion of the overall public buildings but we've got to take our own insurance out as well on our own furniture and fitting which costs us seven hundred pounds a year.

TB: Right, okay, gosh. And you don't charge... is it free to come in?

VW: It's free to come in. Our intruder alarm costs us nearly six hundred pounds a year as well because it's a top quality one, it's connected to the police station.

TB: (00:14:59) So, how do you meet those costs then, do you have talks or...?

VW: Well, our coffee morning and... it's time for all our members to pay up now, this time of year.

[Laughter]

TB: Okay.

VW: And we've got over a hundred members.

TB: Oh, right, and they pay an annual fee to cover...?

VW: Yes, we've got... there's a list on the door there.

These are the vice presidents, those and those, they pay twenty-five pounds a year.

TB: Oh, wow.

VW: And they all pay twelve pounds a year.

TB: Okay, that's great. So, for twenty-five quid, I can become a vice president?

VW: Yes, you can, yes.

[Laughter]

TB: (00:15:56) That's great... brilliant. So, just going back to the reasons for having this museum, I appreciate that this might be different for all of you but, what is the point, why do you think it's important to have the museum here in Brynmawr?

VW: Well, I think it's to keep the local history alive, for people to know what the town was like in the past.

TB: Hmm... is that the same for you?

SP: Yes, and to inform youngsters who have no idea what it was like and what was here. Because I don't think they do that sort of thing in school anymore. We used to have... I used to take children... schools would bring a group of children and I used to take some lectures with them, just demonstrate toys or washday or something like that. But they don't come anymore because that's not on the curriculum.

TB: Oh, really?

SP: It's a shame.

VW: Sandra is a retired deputy head teacher, primary.

SP: Yes.

TB: (00:16:55) So, this is to do with the changes in the National Curriculum?

SP: Yes.

TB: Because local history is in there, but some teachers just don't bother with it, do they? I think that's the problem.

SP: Well, I don't think... What we can offer, I think is not part of the curriculum anymore. I'm not sure because I don't have anything to do with it now...

AW: It's changed, and it will change now in three years' time. So, there's a period of change at the moment going on and there are three new inset days been given for teachers, one this year, next year, and the year after. So, they can get in readiness for the new curriculum.

TB: (00:17:34) Okay. So, maybe there is an opportunity there for local history to go in?

AW: So, we don't what is going... The biggest part to the new curriculum is wellbeing, that is the biggest part. So, the four core subjects.

VW: Yes, we used to do Victoriana, didn't we? Victorian and Edwardian washdays and toys.

SP: Yes, old toys.

VW: And we used to do World War I and II lessons as well but they're not on the curriculum anymore.

TB: Wow, so, none of those sessions are running now?

VW: No.

TB: Crikey. Has anything replaced it all or are they just gone?

SP: No, they've just gone.

TB: What a shame, crikey, that sounds tough, doesn't it.

SP: Yes.

AW: There are fifty-six vice presidents and sixty-seven members.

TB: Right, okay, brilliant, thank you, thank you for counting.

VW: At present, but they're all up for renewal now.

[Laughter]

TB: (00:18:37) Okay. Now to get the museum started, what did you need? So, obviously, you had the offer of the rooms, the buildings, that's fine. Collection-wise, you had some things, but did you put out an appeal at the very early stages for objects?

VW: We didn't... When we were in the original premises over there, we had no display cases, did we?

SP: No.

VW: ... Except sort of cobbled together things...

SP: The china cabinets, I think, wasn't it?

VW: Yes. But then when we moved here we put in applications for grants and the council were very good with the initial grant.

AW: They gave us ten thousand, didn't they?

VW: Yes, and we bought display cases and then we had something from the Severn Valley Trust.

AW: The N Trust, the Severn Valley Trust, we had ten thousand from them.

TB: (00:19:27) So, what's that? From the N-Trust?

AW: N-Trust.

VW: The Severn Valley Trust.

AW: It's an environmental thing.

VW: Right, okay, great.

AW: Then we had it through the Welsh Housing Association.

VW: Yes, and... Awards for All Wales we got grants from all over the place initially, to buy showcases and computer equipment.

AW: But now, it's all drying up.

TB: (00:19:49) Right, okay. But at that time there were various pots of money?

SP: Yes.

TB: (00:19:55) So, that was to pay for computers, the display cases.

AW: The actual collections, people just... we didn't advertise, they just knew we were here, and people started bringing them to us.

VW: They're still bringing stuff in.

[Laughter]

TB: (00:20:09) Yes, that's brilliant, that's great. Better that than not, I guess. Okay. And... Sorry, I'm just looking through here. The founders as it were, how many of you were there involved in that initial committee that got together to set the whole thing up?

VW: The same as now.

AW: No, well from the board, Sue's out...

VW: Oh, you mean...

AW: The original.

VW: Oh, the original people, yes.

AW: One, two, three... there were three of us...

VW: Norman died.

AW: Four... four originals are gone.

VW: Yes.

AW: Sue, Robert, Norman, and that boy, Morgan.

VW: He never was in it.

AW: Wasn't he?

VW: No, no, they declined, yes... the three.

AW: There was three.

TB: (00:21:05) Okay, fine. Can you give me a sense of what their backgrounds were or what stage of life were they; are we talking about retired people here or did they have jobs, and this was something they would do in the evening?

VW: Well, we were mostly retired, weren't we?

AW: Robert, was a...

VW: Optician, and his wife worked for him.

AW: Optician and still working, his wife was working for him and the rest of us were retired.

VW: Yes.

TB: (00:21:35) Okay, so, you had the time?

VW: Yes.

- TB: (00:21:38) And so for you, at that point the motivation to actually go and set this thing up was really a sense of something to do with passing things onto other generations?
- VW: Yes.
- TB: (00:21:47) Did you feel that the town needed some kind of representation?
- VW: Yes, I think we did, and I think... when you were younger, when you're working you don't think about history, do you? When you finish work you think, "I suppose we ought to be doing something to keep the memories alive" and I think that's the motivation.
- TB: (00:22:10) Hmm. And in terms of the town's history, because you set it up in the early 2000s, just tell me about... Was the town doing well at that point, were there lots of... or was it in decline?
- VW: No, then, it was starting to decline then, wasn't it?
- AW: Starting to decline, yes.
- VW: The steelworks was declining, wasn't it?
- AW: Semtex had closed.
- SP: Semtex had gone, that went in 1982.
- AW: Tuf was on the verge of going.
- SP: Dannimac had gone by then.
- AW: Dannimac and Edward had gone.
- VW: Yes. There were quite a few light industries in the '70s and '80s, wasn't it? But by that time they had all started to decline.
- TB: (00:22:55) I see, okay. Now what tends to happen when you have interests like going is the younger generations tend to move to where the work is, don't they?
- VW: Yes.
- TB: (00:23:04) So, would you say that the population of Ebbw Vale was declining?
- AW: Well, Brynmawr has a population of five thousand... around five thousand.
- VW: It's pretty much stayed.
- SP: It's pretty static, isn't it?
- AW: I'd say it's pretty steady... yes, static is a better word.
- TB: (00:23:21) Is it fairly mixed in terms of age?
- VW: I think there are a lot more older people in the town than there were.
- AW: When we did a survey back in the sixties, I did for the church, a third of the population was aged.
- TB: Right, okay.
- VW: I think it's more like half now?

AW: I'd have thought so.

SP: I'd have thought so, yes.

AW: They were in their thirties in sixties...

TB: (00:23:48) Okay. So, do you think something was happening at that moment then when... I don't know... when perhaps if you'd got eight people at the time to do it but also, as a town perhaps, just looking back, it was an important thing to do in some way?

VW: I think it is important to try and keep the town alive.

AW: And as Vivienne and Sandra were saying, it was to retain and to give memories to children.

SP: But not only that, I feel that since we've become part of Blaenau Gwent... I know I'm being quite controversial, everything seems to be centralised in Ebbw Vale and we've lost our identity as a town and I think in that respect, it's a good thing to have this here for people to know that we did have an identity. We weren't always Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale, Blaenau Gwent, we were Brynmawr.

VW: Breconshire.

SP: And I feel quite strongly about that.

VW: Yes.

TB: (00:24:57) Now, this is fascinating because there was a change in local government, is that what we're talking about here?

VW: Yes.

TB: (00:25:02) And borders as well?

VW: I think 1974 was the catalyst.

TB: (00:25:05) Yes, the Local Government Reorganisation Act?

SP: Yes.

TB: (00:25:11) So, before that, did Brynmawr have its own council?

VW: Yes, it was an urban district in those days.

AW: Our claim to fame was that we were the highest...

VW: Urban district...

AW: Urban district in the United Kingdom.

TB: Oh, really? Right.

VW: Our town centre is twelve hundred feet above sea-level.

TB: Right.

VW: And Brynmawr was two or three coats colder than everywhere else.

[Laughter]

SP: Because we were a part of Breconshire, which is now Powys.

TB: Right, I see.

SP: But we were merged into Monmouthshire at that time and that is a bone of contention with a lot of residents even now, the boundary change.

TB: Right, yes.

AW: I would say something in favour of Blaenau Gwent and that was the MP and council objected to Brynmawr being called Ebbw Vale because they wanted...

VW: But the post office overruled that.

AW: The Post Master General even said, "It's got to stay..."

SP: They took the post office away from us because we had a sorting office as well and it's all gone over to Ebbw Vale.

TB: Oh, I see, right crikey.

AW: Because Blaenau didn't want to be out of the area either.

VW: No. They had no choice.

SP: We were all towns... five towns in their own right but now we are Blaenau Gwent.

TB: (00:26:20) Right I see. So, all five of these towns are all part of the same authority?

SP: Yes.

TB: (00:26:26) And where is the central office?

VW: Ebbw Vale.

TB: Aberdare?

VW: Ebbw Vale.

TB: Ebbw Vale, sorry. Okay. Okay, it's fascinating because I've done some interviewing in Yorkshire and exactly the same thing happened...

SP: I can imagine.

TB: (00:26:41) Yes, independent councils were... A lot of ill-feeling about it and in the seventies, in particular, there seemed to be a real movement in Yorkshire to set up museums and I think, it's just a theory, but it's connected with... a lot of ill-feeling about identity and about sands shifting and sort of needing to say, "Do you know what? We're here and we're separate." So, it's really interesting that you've raised that unprompted by me because that is quite current.

So, for you perhaps, it's something about the town and town identity about having an organisation like this?

SP: Yes.

TB: A space to think about that?

SP: Exactly.

AW: I don't think Sandra is by herself on that, I think a lot of Brynmawr people object...

SP: The older people, shall I say?

AW: And youngsters as well, because they've got no sporting facilities around here because they have to go to Ebbw Vale.

TB: (00:27:37) I see, so, there is a kind of feeling that you are now on the periphery of something?

SP: Yes, exactly. In 1974, Brynmawr had a lot of... things and activities that went as soon we became Blaenau Gwent, we had our swimming pool, that closed.

VW: There was Trafalgar House was ours, this was the drill hall, the Market Hall, the swimming pool, the welfare, all... the park... all part of Brynmawr and it was all signed over to Ebbw Vale and they closed the lot.

SP: Yes. So, there's nothing.

TB: (00:28:17) I see, that's fascinating. Okay, I think I've covered all that...  
Sorry, just bear with me. Oh, yes, accreditation, now, are you accredited?

VW: Yes.

TB: (00:28:50) Okay. And when did you decide to do that?

VW: Frank did that for us, didn't he?

VW: Yes.

TB: (00:28:58) Okay, so, was that relatively recently?

VW: It's there...

TB: Okay... Sorry, I'm just...

VW: It was renewed last year, wasn't it?

AW: Last year, yes. The certificate is on the wall.

TB: (00:29:16) Oh, here we are, 2013, full accreditation, okay, great. So, tell me about the decision to do that because not all museums do it; what was the motivation to go through that?

VW: I think Frank would be able to tell you more about that than us, but he more or less insisted we become accredited, didn't he.

TB: (00:29:43) Oh, okay, alright. So, that was something that the council felt was the right thing to do?

AW: It meant that we could have things coming to this museum.

VW: Access grants and...

AW: And we could borrow things as well.

TB: Right, that's right.

AW: This is what encouraged us to go in for it.

TB: (00:30:01) And how has that process been?

AW: We've never applied for anything to come here, no... we've not applied for any to borrow.

TB: Not yet, okay, right, sure.

VW: No.

TB: (00:30:11) But the process of accreditation, was that okay? It's a fairly time-consuming thing to do.

AW: It was for Frank, but Frank did it all.

TB: Oh, right, okay.

VW: In fact, he did it for the five museums in the borough.

AW: In conjunction with... he's asking questions from the rest of us directors, it wasn't just...

TB: (00:30:33) Right, sure, okay, great. Okay, how do you manage to keep going? It's a bit of a loaded question, isn't it, but not all museums kind of carry on forever so, has it been okay, have you struggled in any way?

VW: Well, we're surviving with the income from coffee mornings.

AW: Membership.

VW: And membership subscriptions, and donations.

AW: And the volunteers do work hard in here, you know, they'll come and we're never short of volunteers to run it. So, there is no problem there.

TB: Good, that sounds very resilient.

VW: Thursday morning is...

AW: Manic.

VW: It is pretty manic, and our regulars think that it's part of their social calendar.

[Laughter]

TB: I see.

SP: Tea and toast... it's their morning out.

TB: Right.

SP: I just ask for donations for the tea and coffee.

TB: Right, gosh, that's good.

VW: No, we don't charge, they donate.

TB: Wow, that's brilliant.

AW: And they're very generous... they're very generous themselves.

SP: We have had grants though, haven't we?

VW: Oh, yes.

SP: In the past.

TB: (00:31:44) Right, okay. So, just tell me about the visitors, you have got impressive visitor numbers for the hours that you're opening. So, are these mostly kind of local people or is it summer-based tourism; just give me a sense of the cross-section of the visitors you're getting.

VW: Of the membership?

TB: No, people that are visiting the museum?

SP: No, the visitors.

VW: Oh, yes, we do get local people, but we do get a lot of ex-pats from abroad...

SP: And people who used to be at school here and have moved to other parts of the country, they come back and have a look at themselves on the school photographs.

TB: Yes, that's a nice wall, it's lovely.

SP: And people doing family history, they come back as well, don't they?

VW: Yes, but we haven't got any...

SP: No, we don't do...

VW: We don't do genealogy.

SP: But they like to know, they like to see names in lists and things like that.

VW: Well, we had a lady from Gilwern come in about a month ago, and she went upstairs... she came down and she said, "I never thought I'd see myself in a museum but I'm in one of the school photographs."

[Laughter]

TB: (00:32:56) Yes, I can imagine that being quite strange. So, that's fascinating. So, right, you've got a big diaspora, haven't you... this kind of migrant community that have left...?

SP: Some people actually pass by and call in because they didn't know there was a museum here. They see the sign and think, "Oh." A man did the other day, didn't he? He said, "I was just passing through and I thought I'd come in and have a look at the museum."

TB: You've got a brown sign, haven't you?

SP: Yes.

TB: They're not easy to get at some councils, let me tell you, so, that is quite a coup to get one of those, so well done.

VW: We paid for them ourselves.

TB: Did you, yes.

VW: Oh, yes.

SP: And we've got a new website and I think...

VW: You've seen the website, haven't you?

TB: Yes, it's great.

SP: People are quite interested in that.

TB: Yes.

SP: And of course, we have the lectures on a Friday and there are nearly forty people every Friday come to the lectures.

VW: Frank is a lecturer, he's an archaeologist.

SP: We don't have them through the summer but... hopefully, they'll start again in September.

TB: (00:33:52) Oh, that's great, brilliant. And do people pay a few pounds to come in?

VW: Oh, they pay Frank, yes.

AW: But that's the local authority.

VW: Yes, nothing comes to us.

AW: He gives us a donation.

VW: A donation.

SP: But it boosts the numbers.

TB: Yes, absolutely, that's great, I'm sure. It's great to have events, isn't it?

VW: Hmmm.

TB: (00:34:11) Okay, brilliant. So, has the museum changed in any major way; you mentioned already that you've redone displays upstairs, but from when you moved in here, is it... have there been any big changes particularly or it is much as it was in 2000?

VW: Well, we didn't have the downstairs then, did we?

SP: No.

VW: When we moved in so, now we've taken over the ground floor as well.

AW: And this was the original tea room and all this here was in that room in there, so, we've changed...

SP: Changed the layout a bit.

VW: It changed really because of the lectures, needing more space in there.

AW: And more people come for tea.

VW: Yes, and more people come for tea because it is quite noisy and manic in there.

TB: (00:35:01) Yes, okay, great. So, that was great that... So, basically, as these rooms became available, you then spread out?

VW: Yes.

TB: (00:35:07) And is there scope to carry on... what's next door?

VW: Ahhh.

- SP: Well, we don't know.
- AW: That's another story, that is. It was an institute and the Charity Commission came here and they were going to close it. A fellow director and myself went to a meeting in there with the Charity Commission and we suggested that we have two of their rooms in there as an education room adjoining this museum, and that saves the snooker hall, right? But since then, we've lost the one room, but we still retain...
- VW: The storage room.
- AW: Because the local radio station has moved in next door so, there is no hope of getting it.
- TB: (00:35:53) Right, sure. It's fascinating that you are strategically keeping buildings going really?
- AW: Oh, yes, we saved it... we've got documentation to say that we saved it. The Charity Commission were quite prepared, and they were adamant they were going to close it. And so we said, "Well, can we use the school?" And we used to teach children in there for educational talks.
- TB: (00:36:20) Wow, gosh, that's really impressive. Okay, great. Do you have any links with other museums in the area; is there a network or do you meet regularly with other town museums?
- VW: No, we don't meet regularly but we're all quite friendly and if something comes in that we think is more suitable for Blaenau, or Ebbw Vale or Tredegar, we pass it on, and they do the same for us.
- AW: And we had spare mannequins and we gave.. not gave... but they gave us permission to...
- VW: Yes, we had spare mannequins we sent to Tredegar, yes.
- TB: Okay, right. Okay, so, kind of doing favours for each other?
- VW: Yes.
- TB: (00:36:54) Are you involved in any wider networks or do you get any, apart from the museum officer... Frank, who is obviously coming in? It sounds like he's been here from the beginning, pretty much providing the support so, perhaps you don't need it, but do you ever go further onto any umbrella organisations like the Association for Independent Museums?
- VW: We belong to the Independent Museums, AIM, yes. I think we just paid it there.
- AW: Yes.
- SP: And we've lots of training days, haven't we, for the volunteers?
- VW: Yes.
- SP: On how to mark artefacts and things, with paraloid and things like that.
- TB: (00:37:32) And who has provided that training, was that AIM or was that from the council?
- SP: No... we do it in-house, yes.

TB: (00:37:40) Okay. So, it sounds like you've... With Frank, you've pretty much got what you need in terms of professional kind of guidance when you need it?

AW: And if Frank can't do it, he can arrange to do it.

VW: But Frank is our trainer as well as our curatorial advisor really. We can't do without him really, can we?

TB: (00:38:00) Yes, it's brilliant, and he comes in, did you say, once a week?

VW: He comes in every Thursday afternoon and he does lectures on a Friday morning.

TB: Right, so, that's...

VW: But, he's got keys to the building and we allow him to use it... and I obviously know when Frank's used the computer because he's left-handed and the mouse is on the right-hand side.

[Laughter]

TB: It's like having a squatter isn't it? [laughs]

AW: We couldn't survive without him.

VW: No, we couldn't.

AW: Because his knowledge is unbelievable.

TB: (00:38:31) Brilliant. Okay, so, do you have any museums locally that have closed at all?

VW: No, I don't think so.

TB: Okay.

AW: The biggest museum around is the Big Pit Museum.

TB: Yes.

VW: That's the National Museum, yes.

AW: That's national, that's the biggest one I know.

TB: (00:38:53) Do, you think, in terms of tourism, has that been a big draw?

AW: No, not at all, not for us.

TB: No? Okay.

AW: We've sent people from here...

VW: Up to Big Pit.

AW: But I don't think there's anything coming that way.

TB: (00:39:07) Have you been involved in any... I know there is... gosh, I've got a leaflet somewhere, but it's like a Valleys... Industrial Valleys and the European Industrial Heritage routes? I'll just show you these...

AW: We used to be on it.

TB: Valleys that changed the world...

AW: Ebbw Valley.

VW: Yes, we are...

AW: We used to be on there.

TB: Okay, great. I'm just wondering whether you know whether has this been... Yes, I think you probably are... there's a huge list of...

VW: We might be on there but...

TB: (00:39:38) Are these sorts of things... do you think they've driven visitors to you?

VW: Well, Alyson Tipping has wanted to know, a couple of years ago, whether we wanted... a leaflet printed.

SP: Yes, yes.

VW: So, we all agreed and said we'd pay but we've not heard anything since.

AW: No, we've not.

TB: Oh, right, that's a shame.

AW: We're not on here.

TB: (00:39:57) Do you have a leaflet or a guide?

VW: No, only our opening hours.

SP: Just a little leaflet with opening hours.

TB: (00:40:05) Okay, sure. Great, look, I think I'm probably... I'll just double-check.

AW: We're not even on the map.

TB: You're not on there, okay.

SP: No, we're not.

AW: We're a nonentity.

SP: Yes, exactly.

TB: It might be a bit dated...

SP: That's another thing...

VW: We were in the top ten at one time, weren't we?

TB: (00:40:27) Okay, well, here's one... do you think that the museum has had an impact on the local area in any way, on the town itself?

SP: I don't know, it's hard to say really, isn't it?

VW: I think it has with our customers on a Thursday morning.

TB: Well, yes, clearly people are coming here to the museum and perhaps have a cup of tea or whatever.

VW: Well, most of our customers are members anyway, aren't they?

TB: (00:41:03) Right, okay, sure. Okay, that's fine. Last thing; and this might be different for you, but what has been the most challenging moment of being involved in this entire set-up; what has been the hardest moment or the toughest moment for you? And what has been the best bit, the real high point of being involved in this museum?

AW: A challenging thing... when we were over there in that building was finding somewhere permanent and fortunately, for us, the council came up with upstairs. And we were all worried, they're thinking of pulling that building down, which they eventually did, and where was going to be our new home? And fortunately...

VW: And the other challenge was finding somewhere to store artefacts to put on display, which is when the institute came on board.

AW: Then the happiest day was when it all came to life.

TB: (00:42:07) Right, yes. So, you had a big opening event?

AW: Oh, yes. We had... Morgan, wasn't it? He opened the museum for us.

VW: Peter Morgan.

AW: Peter Morgan.

TB: Oh, right, yes.

VW: He was the first major benefactor, you could say because he gave the Brynmawr furniture from the cottage that he inherited to the museum when it started.

TB: Oh, wow.

VW: His aunt married Paul Matt, the furniture designer, I think the story is in the cabinet upstairs.

AW: He was a retired head teacher and he had a museum in Sittingbourne.

VW: Sittingbourne, yes.

TB: Oh, really?

AW: That's independent, Sittingbourne.

TB: Right, okay.

AW: And he runs that, he still runs it today.

VW: But he was from this area originally.

TB: (00:43:02) Oh, I see, that's lovely. So, he came to open it? Brilliant. And just going back to that moment where you were worried that you were going to get turfed out of the old building. Was it very straightforward to find this place?

AW: Well, in fairness the council... We had a meeting in the old council offices?

VW: Yes, in the main street.

AW: And the deputy leader at that time was Nigel Daniels who is the present leader of the council and he basically offered us upstairs.

VW: We knew this building was empty and we asked what were the possibilities, and they...

AW: They come up with it. And then when this became vacant downstairs they gave us this as well. Then we had to sign a lease for twenty-five years and we get this for a peppercorn rent at ten pounds a year.

VW: In fairness, the local authority have been very good to us.

AW: Oh, they've been very good.

SP: They have been, yes.

AW: And when we moved here, we had a meeting upstairs, when they opened upstairs, and Nigel gave us a cheque for ten thousand pounds and that's where we got the cases from.

TB: Yes, that's great, yes, wonderful.

AW: Oh, I can't fault them as far as that goes. They've taken things from Brynmawr...

TB: Right, yes.

AW: But as far as we're concerned we're okay.

TB: Yes, it wasn't all bad?

AW: It's not all bad.

TB: (00:44:27) That's lovely. Sorry, because you were out... but could I just ask you to say your name and your date of birth and the role that you have in the organisation, just for the record, please, if you don't mind?

AW: My name is Alan Williams, I was born on the XX-XXX 1939, I'm eighty next Wednesday.

TB: (00:44:47) Right, okay, great. And are you a vice... are you...?

AW: I'm the curator.

TB: The curator, okay?

AW: The curator of the museum.

TB: (00:44:52) Perfect, that's lovely. Is there anything that you would like to add at all or something that I haven't covered, just about the whole development of the museum, please?

SP: What we haven't told you was in the...

TB: Sure, thank you, that's great, I've got that, and I'll put that in with the transcript.

AW: Thank you for coming here.

TB: Not at all, I'm delighted, it's been great.

**Audio ends: 00:45:15**