Mapping Museums Project Interview Transcript

Name: Richard Larn
Role: Founder
Museum: Charlestown Shipwreck and Heritage Centre
Location of interview: Café near RL's home in Hugh Town, Scilly Isles
Date: 13/3/19
Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

For readability the transcript has been made using 'intelligent' transcription (removing ums, ers etc). The interviewee has reviewed this transcript and minor amendments have been made for clarity.

TB: Could you give me your name and date of birth, if you don't mind, please?

RL Yes, Richard Larn, LARN, XX-XXX 1930.

TB: (00:00:10) That's lovely. Okay, so, Richard, you were just about to tell me about your background. I'm particularly interested in the museum and how that idea came about but clearly, your previous life is bound up with the museum itself. So, if you just give me a kind of thumbnail sketch of your involvement with the sea from the age of fifteen, that would be great.

RL: My father was a major in the Machine Gun Corps in the First World War and went through all the different battles. And the second battle of the Somme finally cracked him up mentally, what in those days, they called shell-shock, post-traumatic stress disorder. He was in and out of mental institutions until 1923, married my mother, had my sister and I, when he finally hung himself. I was eighteen months old so, I never knew my father, I had a bit of a disturbed childhood. I was fostered, I went to live with grandparents, and I didn't go to live with my mother until the outbreak of World War II, in Oxford.

I hated school, I just didn't get on with conventional school at all and when I was about fourteen, she said to me, "You're not doing good at school, what are you going to do with yourself, how do you imagine you're going to spend the rest of your life?" And I said, "I want to be a sailor." The only one of the family who had ever been to sea. Anyway, in the end, they sent me to a Royal Naval Training Ship which took kids from fourteen to sixteen, and at fifteen and a half, I had been there eighteen months… it was called The training ship Mercury.

I took to it like a duck to water, suddenly, all the avenues of history, and geography, and maths, all suddenly seemed real and it worked for me and I loved every minute of it. The end of the war was looming in Japan and relatives who had been in the forces and said, "Oh, you don't want to go into peacetime navy, you want to go into the Merchant Navy. That's the future, the country will be using the Merchant Navy to build up again, it will be a good future."

So, I got a cadet-ship, as an apprentice deck officer in the Merchant Navy, the South American Saint Line. We tramped from London and Cardiff down to South America, the whole of the East Coast, from the Amazon right the way down to Punta Arenas. By the time I was eighteen, I had been to Buenos Aires and Montevideo and Rio twenty times or something like that, when travel was unheard of.

And then, having been to this naval training ship wearing Royal Navy uniform, we slept in hammocks on a ship, I had always had this inkling I would rather be in the Royal Navy than the Merchant Navy, I don't know why it just lay there dormant. And then something happened, I was homeward bound on a ship called the St Merriel and it was probably about two o'clock in the afternoon. The 2nd officer who was on watch with me said, "Larn, get down aft to the main mast" he said, "Because there is a very large warship up ahead" he said, "And we're going to have to dip our

flag." That's what merchant ships do when the two ships pass, the merchant ship, they dip the flag.

TB: I see.

RL: He said, "Get down aft and be prepared to dip the flag" he said, "I'll broadcast it on the loudspeaker and tell you when the moment to do it." And he moved over so the ships were only about half a mile apart and it was HMS Vanguard, our last battleship, steaming down to South Africa with Princess Elizabeth on it, going down there for a visit before her father died. I stood there, I almost forgot to lower the flag I was so mesmerised by this bloody great battleship. And it went steaming past and I pulled the flag down, pulled the flag back up again and they acknowledged, as they do. That made such an impression on me and there were a load of sailors on the deck and everything else and I thought, "I'd like to be on board there."

When I got back again I talked to different people about it and decided that I'd leave the merchant navy. I'd just taken my certificate so, I'd got my qualifications if I wanted to stay, but I transferred straight to the Royal Navy from there and within eighteen months I was doing exactly what I wanted to do. I was in Korea on a warship and I was there for eighteen months, I went on three different ships in Korea and I loved every minute of it, it was fantastic.

TB: Yes.

RL: So, developing on… I did five years in the Merchant Navy and twenty-two years in the Royal Navy.

TB: Right.

RL: And by the time we get to 1963, I'm the chief petty officer diver and weapons mechanician as they call them. The navy had given me two-year training in machine shop practice, turning, milling, grinding, cutting, engraving, you name it, I could do it with my hands. And then I had learned all about special weapons and things like that.

And then, an opportunity, I was down at HMS Daedalus in the Solent, and I was talking to some other chiefs in the mess and they said, well, you're a qualified naval chief petty officer diver we think it would be a good idea if we could get sport diving introduced into the Royal Navy as an accepted occupation. The Navy accepted sports like sailing and climbing and potholing, but they didn't have any diving in those days, because it was still early.

TB: (00:07:05) By accepted, do you mean that it was an acceptable activity to be organised or was it more that you would accept people that were trained in that into the navy?

RL: Nobody had ever considered starting a sport diving club in the Royal Navy.

TB: Oh, I've got you, yes, as a social kind of…?

RL: The navy had a whole series of activities they called expedition training. It's supposed to be very good for you to learn to sail and things. And so, I went and saw the Admiral and said, "We'd like to start up this organisation, the Royal Naval Sub-

aqua Club." he said, "Well, you'll have to talk to HMS Vernon, the diving school." He said, "You know all about that, you've been here enough times." He said, "You'll have to make an appointment to see the captain of HMS Vernon in Portsmouth (which is now a shopping complex) and see how Vernon take to it because they are the diving authority.

I went and saw the captain of Vernon and he said, "What is it you want to do chief?" I said, "We want to start a sport diving activity under the heading of expedition training, and we'd like to call it the Royal Navy Sub-aqua Club." And he said, "Oh, no, no, no, we couldn't possibly consider that." He said, "Just ordinary people out of the navy, putting them underwater?" He said, "Christ, you'll be killing them, they'll be drowning, they won't have had any proper training. Oh, no, no, we couldn't possibly entertain sport diving in the Royal Navy."

So, I went away with my tail between my legs thinking, "Shit, these guys are so blinkered." There are thousands of people doing sport diving, the British Sub-aqua Club was up and running. I thought "Christ, if you can take office workers, ladies out of typist pools and they can learn to sport dive, what's wrong with training sailors?" But Vernon were so worried about drowning somebody and the court-martial and all…

So, I went back and said to my bunch of guys, I said, "Vernon won't have it." and they said, "Well, could we do it under some other guise, could we perhaps call it the Fleet Air Arm Sub-aqua Club?" I said, "Well, don't let's call it Fleet, let's call it Royal Naval Air Service." So, I went and saw the admiral in charge of the Royal Naval Air Service, and he said, "Wonderful idea, I'll go along with that." He said, "Yes, sure, what do you want?" I said, "Well, we need an officer to be a chairman so that you can court-martial him if something goes wrong." So, he said, "Alright, I find you a lieutenant."

So, he found a guy, who was a friend of mine actually, Roy Graham, he'd done a bit of cave diving and this outfit grew to the point whereby we had a sub-aqua club in every Royal Naval air station around the country. Now, in those days there were at least twelve or fourteen of them. We had at least a couple of thousand guys in this organisation. And we had annual expeditions and everything else. I'd been reading a book about Sir Cloudesley Shovell's disaster in the Isles of Scilly, 1707, and I thought, "God, that would make a wonderful expedition, nobody has ever found the wrecks, why don't we go to the Isles of Scilly and see if we can find them?"

So, again, go the admiral, take your hat off, "Sir, can we have…?" "Yes, that's a great idea, I love the idea, Royal Naval Divers, find Royal Naval wrecks. Yes, yes, that's a great idea, what do you want?" I said, "I'd like a minesweeper." He said, "Right, you can have one, I'll give you a minesweeper." So, they gave us a minesweeper, a crew and we rustled up twelve divers and came to the Isles of Scilly in 1964 and started searching in the right area but the weather was… some years against us and some years it was with us. But we couldn't find it, but we did find it in 1967 and there were bronze cannon and gold coins and stuff everywhere.

That really sort of cemented this organisation because the publicity for that was phenomenal, it went international. I've got newspapers cuttings at home of newspapers from Hong Kong to America to Australia, 'Royal Navy divers find historic wreck' and all this. It brought a bunch of trouble with it, of course, as it would do, you start finding gold coins and the navy started saying, "What are you doing with these gold coins, you've treasure hunted?"

TB: (00:11:32) Well, that's interesting, even at that point there was some ethical kind of issues are thrown up?

RL: Yes, and of course, in those days, there was no Protection of Wreck Act and the finding of the Association was only the second historic find of a shipwreck in modern times. The other one, about four years before, early sixties, say, '61, was an East Indiaman called the De Liefde, a Dutch East Indiaman up in Shetland, they found this shipwreck with bronze cannon and things like that and then we were the second one. Of course ours, compared to theirs, was huge, the find was enormous.

TB: (00:12:17) Was this the second one by the navy or the second big find…?

RL: The second find by anybody. The first one was found by civilians in Scotland.

TB: (00:12:25) On the British Isles?

RL: In the British Isles, yes.

TB: (00:12:27) Wow, that's amazing. So, you were right at the beginning here?

RL: Oh, right at the forefront.

TB: (00:12:32) So, you found all this stuff, you've got the cannons, the gold, and stuff. So, how did you decide what to do with it, given that there is… I don't know?

RL: Well, we didn't have a lot of choice because were being funded by the state to do this through what was the Admiralty in those days. And we had to be very careful what we did, we had to record everything because we had to be whiter than white. We all had the odd gold coins stuck up our sleeves and things like that, you do, don't you? But when it came to big lumps like cannon and pewter potties and that lovely ornate cannon you saw in the museum, we had to declare them and then the navy itself decided what was to happen to them. And they gave one to the Tower of London and they said, "Would you like to give one to Tresco, here on the Isles of Scilly so that Scilly has at least got something from the wreck. So, we gave them a huge 28 pounder bronze cannon.

TB: Wow.

RL: Which is still over there outside the Valhalla figurehead collection. There is a collection on Tresco called the Valhalla Figurehead Collection, owned by the National Maritime Museum. And just outside in the open space is a gun carriage with this huge great bronze gun which we gave them. And it was worth three or four thousand pounds even in those days. Two guns went to the Tower of London and the other bits and pieces went all over the place.

And then, of course, we had to pull out because we must have been there six weeks or something like that and we kept asking for extension after extension. And eventually, they wanted the minesweeper back and eventually, the wanted us back at work.

TB: Fair enough.

RL: And so, we had to leave and then everybody with a diving cylinder in the country came to Scilly… tore it to bits, they took everything that there was away. And it sold at auction and… you could down the pub and buy a coin for a quid and things like that. So, that's how it all started.

TB: Wow, okay.

RL: Not for me because I had learned to dive… I taught myself to dive in 1947.

TB: Right.

RL: A very old magazine called Exchange & Mart, which I don't think…

TB: I know it, yes.

RL: Does it…. It used to sell all this government surplus stuff and there was an advert in there for German submarine escape apparatus made by Drager in its original sealed packaging, ten shillings a set, fifty pence. And so, my mate and I bought two each. And when the packages arrived, they were the yellow sort of oilskin stuff and they actually had the German spread eagle and swastika and everything, with all the instructions and everything on it. We tore them open and there were these submarine escape apparatus, which we knew about anyway because they were quite similar to English submarine stuff.

I had never dived up until this moment but my mate, who was already a diver in the navy, said, "Come on, hold my hand and we'll jump into the river Thames together, at Oxford." And we stood on the bank of the river and jumped in, he was holding my hand, and we landed right on top of a sunken river steamer. It was a company called Salter, they used to run these steamers up and down. And this thing, because of the war had never been used, had filled up with water and eventually sunk. And it was good visibility, you could see what you were doing, and I landed on top of this sunken vessel and I thought, "Wow, this is fantastic; if every time you jump into the water you find a ship." And I just got hooked on shipwrecks from that moment, I started researching and researching.

TB: (00:16:21) Yes. So, you learned to dive, did the navy pay you to be a diver, did they train you?

RL: Well, I went into the navy already trained up, but I had taught myself. But yes, I trained to navy standards at HMS. Vernon, Portsmouth, and was paid 10 shillings a day extra.

TB: Oh, I see, you had already trained?

RL: But of course, I had to start all over again, blowing bubbles with them, but it was old hat to me.

TB: (00:16:36) So, you're self-taught, that's amazing. So, you found your first wreck… and that started a huge hobby for you… was it a hobby or perhaps it became a profession, of wreck diving? So, did you leave the navy to do that or is that something that you carried on?

RL: No, I carried on and did my twenty-two years, which gave me a pension. But throughout my career in the navy, I had read every word I could find about shipwrecks and during my leave periods, because I wasn't married and I lived in Oxford, I used to go to the Ashmolean Museum Library and other university libraries. Although I wasn't a student, I used to go in and say, I'm very into history and they used to say, "Come in, come in." And so, I amassed a huge amount of information about shipwrecks, but I had no idea what to do with it all.

Until eventually a woman called Joan Du Plat Taylor, have you ever heard of her? University of London on Gordon Street, Gordon Square.

TB: That's where I'm based now, funnily enough.

RL: Are you?

TB: Yes.

RL: Well, this woman, Joan Du Plat Taylor, she was a lecturer there, she was either a doctor or a professor, I forget which, in archaeology. She started an organisation when… people like Hass and Cousteau were finding historic wreck in the Mediterranean, she was forward-thinking enough to think to herself, "This is going to happen in the United Kingdom." It hadn't happened yet so, she thought it's time that we really had an underwater archaeology interest as well as a land archaeology. She started an organisation called CNAS, Committee for Nautical Archaeology. And that started in Gordon Square in the School of Archaeology.

And she invited me, somehow or other I'd met her, probably at a lecture, and she invited me onto the committee. And I used to go to London occasionally when I could get away from the navy to these committee meetings in London and we formed this early, early underwater archaeology group. But it wasn't going anywhere because there were no shipwrecks, we just were talking about what Cousteau was doing in the Mediterranean.

And she came to be after we found the Association, she came to me at one of these meetings and she said, "Richard, all this research you're doing, what are you going to do with all this information?" I said, "I've got no idea, I don't have any outlet for it, I just do it because I like doing it." She said, "Why don't you write a book?" I said, "Write a book, clever people write books, authors write books?" I said, "I couldn't write a book." She said, "Of course you can, anybody can write a book." I said, "Well, I'm a bit doubtful about that." She said, "Would you like me to introduce you to a publisher?"

So, nothing ventured, nothing gained, and a company called David and Charles at Newton Abbot had only just started up as a new publishing house and she had somehow or other got connections with it. She made an appointment for me to see

a man called Stanhope Sprigg and he was a lovely, old-fashioned gentleman, he really was. And he invited me to his house in Dartmouth where we had cucumber sandwiches, little tiny cress sandwiches, cups of tea and doilies and you know, it was lovely.

He just talked to me about ships and shipwrecks and what I'd done. And at the end of it… I must have sat there for a couple of hours talking and looking down on the River Dart and he said, "Okay, fine, I'm convinced. I'll give you a contract for a book." I said, "You're going to do what?" He said, "I'll give you a contract for a book." I said, "I haven't given you a synopsis, I haven't given you… you haven't seen anything I've written." And he said, "No, that's alright, you got the means, you've got the ability to do that, I can judge that you can do it. I'll give you a contract and we'll give you eighteen months to finish it."

And so, my very first book was 'Cornish Shipwrecks - the South Coast' because I was living in Cornwall at the time and it was a huge success, it was the first book published in this country about shipwrecks, on a county basis. What I did, I had taken the South Coast of Cornwall and wrote everything I could find about every shipwreck. I brought in a fair little bit of money and I went on and I did nine books with them, in the end, and it was lovely. And that is how I got into it, by accident, through Joan Du Plat Taylor.

TB: (00:21:46) You see, that's very interesting because… it wasn't like you were diving constantly after that first one. You were in fact, researching about shipwrecks for years and years and years.

RL: Hmmm, and diving as the navy allowed.

[Aside conversation 00:22:04 to 00:22:14]

TB: (00:22:13) So, you were writing these books and also, you were working for the navy and occasionally, you were going on dives to look for other wrecks?

RL: Yes, we had these expeditions and then, of course, it came to the end of my career in the navy and I'd been in just about twenty-one years and on one of these trips to Scilly, having found the Association, we were looking for other wrecks here on the islands. And a guy I met on the mainland called Roger Parker, who ran an electronics company, it was electronics actually, that brought us together because I got talking to him about what the navy was developing and things like this.

And we formed a friendship… how are we doing for time… we're alright? I said to him, I'm allowed to bring a couple of guest divers, civvy divers, from the mainland, on these trips to Scilly, "Would you like to come along, Roger?" He said, "Oh, I'd love to come along… dive on the Association, oh, wonderful." So, I brought him over and I sort of bonded with him in a way.

Sometime after that, I met him down in Cornwall and he said, "What are you going to do when you leave the navy?" I said, "Roger, I've got no idea." I said, "I've got an electronics background, I've got a machine shop background and I've got a diving background, and I can write books. But what I'm going to do, I have no idea." He

said, and this is the bit impressed me, he didn't say, "Would you come and work for me?" He said, "Would you like to come and work with me in my company, Partech Electronics?" So, I said, "Doing what?" He said, "Well, I'll tell what my ambitions are, my factory is in Welwyn Garden City, but I want to move to Cornwall" he said, "I don't like London anymore and down in Cornwall, the property is cheap, there are grants going, and I can do my diving and my kids can grow up sailing and paddling around." He said, "I would like to be able to move to Cornwall and set up the factory in Cornwall, are you up to doing that?" "If, when you leave the navy, if I come down, we'll go around together, and we'll find premises and I'll write the cheque and take the lease or buy it or whatever we have to do. Then I'll give you a broad outline of what I want, and I'll just leave you to get on with it.

So, I said, yes, I was well capable of doing that because in the navy, if you join a new ship and you're involved in electronics, for example, you invariably have to set up the workshop on board because every time a ship goes in for refit, all the gear gets taken out. And so, you then have to know what bits of test equipment, what oscilloscopes and test meters and all the other things that have to go into the ship, for the current generation of electronics. Because as the years go, what ships use all change. So, the workshops have to change to go with it. So, I was quite used to setting up workshops in ships and it's no different putting it into a factory.

TB: (00:25:33) I see, and what was this workshop for?

RL: Well, Partech Electronics, specialised in making water treatment instruments for measuring Ph, oxygen, acidity, all sorts of things, and water, in the early 1970s, the quality of drinking water was becoming a big issue throughout the country. And all these different water companies that were providing water supplies to cities, and towns, and villages were all desperately looking for ways to be able to monitor the quality of their water because it was now getting inspected.

TB: I see.

RL: And so, Partech Electronics was making these instruments. To cut a long story short, they actually made all their own instrument cases, sprayed them, fitted them all out and welded them together, whether they were aluminium or steel and so on. So, we had a proper workshop with lathes which was right up my street, I could handle all this stuff. And then I had to go out and recruit twenty women and teach them how to solder printed circuits how to identify components, how to put them together and set up this electronics workshop. And Roger eventually moved down with his family, from Welwyn Garden City down to St Austell. And it sort of grew from there.

Now, he always knew that my heart wasn't really in working in a factory. He said, "You'd like to be involved in diving, wouldn't you?" So, I said, "Yes, I would really." "How can you earn a living out of diving in civvy street, unless you actually… you're going underwater and grubbing around with your two hands?" I said, "At the moment, Roger, I'm taking a great interest in the North Sea. The North Sea is killing seventy divers a year."

That's true, seventy divers a year were dying in the most awful conditions, some of them. People sat in chambers and the valve would break and all the air inside the chamber… and they're on the bottom, all the air in the chamber would suddenly rush out to equalise outside water pressure. And the only one way inside a chamber, if a valve in the toilet goes, if the man sat on the toilet, is through his mouth and it disembowelled him. I actually knew of two guys who actually sat on the toilet in a chamber and the valves blew and they were just… the air pressure just physically took all their innards straight out through the toilet seat, they died instantly.

TB: Jesus.

RL: And accidents like that were happening all the time. And so, I said, "What I would like to do, Roger, is start a commercial diving school so that we're not losing seventy divers a year. I know enough people in the Royal Navy, in London, especially the Inspector of Diving in the North Sea. And we if had an establishment, we could call it a commercial diving school and we'll set it up between us, I think we'd do very well." So, we got premises, in Charlestown, a property called the Long-Store, a huge, great building. I wired it, plumbed it, fitted it all out. Put an indoor diving tank into it, put classrooms into it and we called it Prodive Limited and it became a huge success.

We had been going about a year and I went up to London to see Jackie Warner, who was the inspector of diving for the government, and he had a big office on the Embankment and said, I think that there should be a professional standard for commercial divers going into the North Sea. At the moment, if you turn up at an office in Aberdeen and say, "I'm British Sub-aqua Club 2nd Class" they'd say, "Fantastic, got a bag? Here," next flight out to Alpha B platform." They'd take anybody who could blow bubbles, literally. I said, "That's not good enough." So, he said, "Well, what do you imagine?" I said, "Well, I've thought about it and a three-month training course, finishing up with welding and cutting and underwater tools and things like that, explosives. I think that's just about right."

So, he set up a little government committee and they looked into it, we didn't have Health and Safety in those days, it was called Manpower Services Commission. The Manpower Services Commission eventually got me in on a meeting and said, "Right, we like this idea, we're going to establish a twelve-week diver training course which every new diver going to the North Sea has to have got a certificate from us, the government. We'll pay you, we'll give you three thousand pounds a month for every diver that you train." I said, "Well, think about this… I've got to buy all the helmets and all the equipment, and I've got to have staff and if a student fails, that's not my fault, it's because he's not suitable, or not capable, or even chucks his hand in. I want to get paid, up front, so, that I've got enough money to keep my diving school going until we come to the end of the course. Whether I finish up with one diver or twelve at the end of it is a risk, you, the government have got to take but you can't expect me to sacrifice three thousand pounds a month for every guy that drops out, because I've still got all the overheads."

So, they said, "Oh, okay" and eventually they agreed to that. So, I used to get a very, very big fat cheque at the beginning of every course, which was fantastic. You could plan, you could buy equipment, you could do everything. We became what they call a government approved diving school, there were only three of us in the country. One of the other ones was in Plymouth and that was run by a Lieutenant Commander, Alan Bax, who is a personal friend, so, Alan and I cooperated on what we did. And when we made a change to the training, we did it together, and we went to London together and we did… it was fantastic, it worked out great.

And then we got a fantastic opportunity, it turned up… we were Charlestown five or six years, doing very well and I had a phone call from the Managing Director of Falmouth Docks, and he said, "Mr Larn, we've never met but I know about Prodive, I know what you do. We've got a problem, I hope you can help me. At this very moment, there is a huge Russian floating dock under tow from the Black Sea to Murmansk coming around to the north coast of Russia." He said, "It's big enough to take a battleship or an aircraft carrier, it's enormous, it's got about six or eight tugs on it and it has almost broken it's back in a gale in the Bay of Biscay." He said, "There are forty-foot cracks up both sides of it and fingers crossed, it could sink or break."

[Audio breaks and starts 00:33:10]

TB: (00:33:11) Okay, that's great, so, you got this job… these forty-foot cracks that were down the side of it.

RL: Right, so, they got it into Falmouth, but this was too big for us and we were running training, I didn't have the staff to take off and put on this job, it was going to be a two-month job. So, I sub-contracted to a commercial diving company in South Wales, again, the old-boys network, they're all ex-navy people that I knew. They came down to look at the job and said, "We can do that." It was a special welding, what they call Lloyds Coded Welders and they took away samples of the steel so they could analyse it and get it dead right and had to have special rods made and they came down and welded all the cracks up, put it back together and the Russians towed it off to Murmansk. And the managing director sent for me and said, "That was a fantastic job, everybody is so pleased with it." He said, "What are your plans for Prodive?" I said, "Well, I haven't got any plans, we're just jogging along, we're taking these government students." He said, "Would you like to move into Falmouth Docks, out of Charlestown? I'm sure we've got better premises here than you'll have and you'll be right on the water's edge."

TB: I see, yes.

RL: He said, "In fact, we've even got a dry dock that hasn't got any locked gates on it anymore, it's like a big swimming pool, big enough to take a ten thousand ton ship." He said, "We haven't used it for years, you can have that as your private swimming pool."

TB: Wow.

RL: You couldn't turn that down.

TB: (00:34:40) Great, that's amazing. Can I just ask, on the Cornwall front, where were you brought up, you might have said that, but I've missed it?

RL: I was born in Norfolk, we were living just outside Norwich when my father hung himself, which split up my family. My mother and my sister went one way and I went off to be fostered. Why I was fostered, I have no idea, my mother wouldn't talk about it, but I think she had a hard time.

TB: (00:35:07) So, were you fostered in this area at all?

RL: No, just Norfolk. World War II changed my life in that it took me out of Norfolk into Oxford, I went to the training ship, the naval training ship and I've never really lived anywhere permanently after that until I came to Cornwall.

TB: (00:35:25) So, it was really your business partner that brought you down here?

RL: Yes.

TB: (00:35:28) That was the main reason. So, let's go to… I'll need to get to the museum, but you've just got to… Falmouth, it's quite a long way away, but still, you knew, at least Charlestown from that earlier experience?

RL: Now, when we were in Charlestown, this is how the museum came about, this is the bit you want. In Charlestown, we had been running these commercial diving courses and I had taken over the Pier House Hotel for accommodation for my twelve divers and the whole village was involved in Prodive if you like. They used to the post office to get their government weekly… not pension… what do they call it? Allowances.

TB: Oh, yes.

RL: They had these government certificates and they used to go to the post office and cash them.

TB: I see, so, the whole village was tied in?

RL: And they used the pub and they used all the rest of it. So, Prodive was very much part of the village and in those days, Charlestown was privately owned by one family, called the Crowthers, who were QCs in London. They owned the whole village, lock, stock, and barrel, every house, the dock, the beaches, they owned everything, and they employed everybody to do everything in the village. They had stonemasons, they had painters, they had carpenters, they had blacksmiths, you name it, they employed these people.

And the agent for the company came to see me one day in my office and he said, "Richard, you probably noted, we're getting less and less ships into Charlestown to load china clay. It's getting very worrying that very soon, the china clay trade will dry up because the port is only big enough to take a five hundred ton ship and they're not making five hundred ton ships anymore. They are now a thousand and fifteen hundred tons and they go into other ports like Fowey or Falmouth to load china clay Charlestown has only got a narrow lock gate, you can't get a thousand-ton ship in it. The day will come when we cannot take a modern coaster. So, my

owners, the Crowther family have said, “See if you can find an alternative source of income for Charlestown?”

He said, “I thought that perhaps we could go down the tourist route, it’s a historic port and its got the widest road, the widest access road going down any port in the whole of Cornwall and Devon. He said, “I just can’t imagine what we could do with tourists, have you got any ideas, you’re a bright lad, have you got any ideas what we could do in Charlestown with regard to tourism?” So, I went away and thought about it and came back and said, “Why don’t you start a tourist attraction?” He said, “Like what?” I said “Well, a building where you had a shop and a café above it or whatever, and you offered them something to look at, which could be either the history of Charlestown, which might not interest everybody. Or, I’ve got a garage full of stuff I’ve dredged up from shipwrecks, we could start a shipwreck museum?” So, he said, “That’s interesting, I’ll put that to the boss.”

So, he went away and came back and said, “We love it, but you’ll have to have a building.” I said, “Yes.” “Right, give me half a day next week and we’ll walk around Charlestown and you choose the empty building that you would like.” Because it was full of empty buildings where they had stored corn, and timber, and coal and all these empty buildings, all different sizes. And we walked around, and I eventually chose this building and he said, “Right, we’ll refurbish this at our cost, and we’ll take it on as a trial project because it may not even work, it may not even succeed. So, how long do you think we should give it to establish, to find out if it’s going to work or not?” This was in 196… no, no, 1976. I said, “Give it four years. At the end of four years, we should know whether it’s a success or not.”

And then, this is a little interesting side story. He said to me that they had now refurbished the building and they had given us what I wanted, and they had made some showcases and we got the stuff in it and he said, “How much do we charge people to come in here?” So, I said, “I’ve no idea… one pound fifty?” He said, “Yes, that sounds about right, we’ll give it a try at one pound fifty” He said, “Now, the accountants have been onto us, and they want to know what the bottom line is. How many people do you think you might get in the first year, so, we’ve got some idea of income?” I said, “My God, John, you can’t expect me to answer that, I haven’t got a crystal ball.” He said, “Well, give me… how many people do you think?” There are other attractions in Cornwall, you must have been to them, you must have got some idea?” I said, “Well, I suppose, if we get twenty thousand the first year at one pound fifty each, I don’t know… twenty thousand.” So, he said, “Okay, I’ll pass that on to the accountants.” Everybody at the bank seemed happy with that. At the end of the first year we had seventy-five thousand people.

TB: Crikey.

RL: And suddenly, they realised, and I realised that they had hit on a topic that the public were so interested in.

TB: That’s amazing.

RL: Yes.

TB: (00:41:31) Okay, there are a couple of things which I'd like to unpick there which are really interesting. The first one is, in that period, the seventies, I guess there were quite a few industries that were closing down, not just clay export, but the mines were shutting down and so on. At that time, I guess there was a big effort, wasn't there to get the tourist industry cranked up and going?

RL: Grant money was running… it was flowing down into Cornwall.

TB: (00:42:01) Did you… I'm not sure if you were in fact, in charge, given that someone else had invested in it whether you had much doings with that… but did you tap into any of those big government grants?

RL: I didn't because I didn't own the building you see, because the village was owned by Charlestown, they weren't going to let me have the building. So, they applied for the grant, and got it

At the end of four years. They did nothing at first, they had no grant money at all until they could prove to whoever it was, I don't know… English Heritage or whatever, that it was a viable project. And after four years when the figures were steadily going up and up all the time, they said, right, there were two buildings, there was the building that we had here, this is the dock and the building was here. There was another empty building at right angles to it. And they said, "Right, what we'd like to do is take over this other building here, we'll get grants for it, we'll make it a two-storey building" as it is today and "Can you fill as much again?" So, I said, "Yes, we can." So, he said, "If we put all the showcases in so you don't have any expenditure and we'll make you the curator and we'll give you an annual fee. Would you like to run it on that basis?" I said, "Yes, I will, Bridget and I will actually run it for you, as curators, we will change the exhibits from time to time, we'll worry about the strip lighting in the cabinets and we'll change things." We lived in Charlestown anyway, I said, "We'll go down and visit every day." And it grew into a business, a big business.

TB: I see, yes.

RL: At its peak, that centre has had 105-110,000 visitors a year. They have had some days when they've had a thousand people in the day, the height of the summer.

TB: (00:43:56) Yes, that's incredible. So, at that time… well, there are a few questions I've got, the first thing is the collection. You said that you had some stuff in your garage or whatever, so, as a hobby, you had been continually wreck diving while you were doing Prodive and so, this was…?

RL: I never wanted to sell any artefacts.

TB: (00:44:17) Well, that was going to be my question because there is a Maritime Museum in London but… I don't know. Did you ever think maybe this should go to some big collection or in fact, was there really a place for that kind of stuff?

RL: There wasn't any other shipwreck outlet at that particular time anywhere in the country and when we went to the National Maritime Museum and said, "Would you be interested?" They didn't want to know about shipwrecks, there was no Nautical

Archaeology Society, there were no regulations, there wasn't an English Heritage. In those days, it was the Royal Commission for Historical Monuments. It was all to do with castles and burial sites and land sites and Romans. And to suddenly introduce shipwreck and maritime affairs into this closed museum world, people were looking down their noses at us, "Who are these peasants?"

TB: How interesting.

RL: But it really took off and as I said to you in an email, I think, there were… other people copied us in Cornwall and eventually, by 1984/85, there were five shipwreck museums in Cornwall, all of which eventually folded. Now, do you want to record details… well, not details, just where they were?

TB: Yes, that would be nice actually, please.

RL: There was one in Padstow, run by Roy Davies and his wife. There was one in Penzance, Roland Morris Museum of Nautical Art. There was one in the old lifeboat station at Porthleven, run by John Bugh, (BUGH)… there was another one in Porthleven, run by Tom Henderson, and there was the Charlestown Shipwreck Centre.

TB: (00:46:30) Now why did all those other ones fail but yours carry on? Obviously, you might not know about the others intimately, but perhaps in general, what happened there because that's interesting that none of them made it.

RL: These were people who moved into little Cornish fishing villages and town and struggled not owning the premises, renting, not having a capital to develop. And also, having either the building in the wrong place or the building was too small or something like that.

John Bugh, for example, bless his heart, he started one up in an old lifeboat station, the old slipway was still there and at the top, there was the lifeboat station. It hadn't been used for twenty or thirty years. And he got permission to turn it into a shipwreck museum, well, it was only really the size of this area here.

TB: Just one room, isn't it?

RL: And it was awkward to find, you had to go down lots of steps to get to it and it just never was going to be a success because it was in the wrong place, there weren't the tourists. Charlestown succeeded because a) it had Charlestown Estate Limited behind it, who funded it through the early years and could have taken a hit if it had gone wrong… but it didn't. And also, the fact that we're right on the water's edge, we're in a historic Cornish port and we had hundreds of tourists.

So, all those things all came together, plus my name… I'm not being conceited when I say this, but I was so well-known in the business that they would have said, "Oh, well, no good trying to compete with Dick Larn."

[Laughter]

TB: (00:48:24) Yes, sure. And also, for you, I suppose it was a space to show some of this stuff because up to that point it was… you could show your friends?

RL: I had stuff on the mantlepiece at home, a few souvenirs, and if somebody said to me, "Oh, have you got anything from the Association?" I'd say, "Yes, I'll go out in the garage and get a few coins." I had no outlet for it. I'm being quite honest with you, I've done a lot of salvage and with friends, I've lifted bronze propellers off ships and cargo, and we've sold great lumps of metal because nobody else wants them. It can only go back into the scrap business. But when it comes to nice little artefacts, I couldn't bear to get rid of them so, I used to keep them and bring them home.

TB: (00:49:10) So, what is it about shipwrecks and about these things that you find that are so magical to you because clearly, it is, and it always has been. Can you put that into words, what is it, what's the thing that you love?

RL: Well, I suppose I've tried to bring this out in the books that I've written. Every ship that sinks is a mini tragedy if you like to look at it like that. It's a huge loss to the owner of the vessel, the vessel may have to be replaced, there is a lot of expense involved. The crew will have lost their jobs which means that their families that they rely upon to feed and clothe suddenly don't have an income anymore unless the man… the male finds another job or goes on the dole or something like that. And the human implications of a ship sinking and the environmental aspect of it, all being thrown up on beaches, oil like the Torrey Canyon, millions of pounds spent trying to stop the pollution, cargo coming ashore, people helping themselves, the Receiver of Wreck, the law, the police.

The ancient law about lord of the manor, who is allowed to claim wreck on his foreshore, and has done as well you know? Suddenly, out of the woodwork, this gentleman would say, "I own the foreshore rights of wreck in this area here. So, therefore, when all that timber has come ashore, it's mine." And they fight the Receiver of Wreck and they fight the government and they win. So, all these aspects of shipwreck just fascinates me, it still does.

TB: (00:50:52) Because strangely, these things… they aren't owned by anybody, but everyone wants a piece of it in some way and that tells a lot about society, doesn't it? And people and about how they interact with this thing, this strange miraculous thing that has just turned up on their doorstep.

RL: If you want to learn quite a lot about the other side of shipwreck, I'll show you a book when we get home called "Shipwrecks of Great Britain and Ireland." It's one of the best books I've ever written actually, and it covers the whole history of who owns what and the early days of lords of the manor and before there were police and all this business. And you might just find it very interesting.

TB: (00:51:37) Just tell me a little bit about, well, the first museum, it sounds, was in a different building and it was one room, I guess?

RL: That was huge, a very large room, as big as the whole of this building.

TB: (00:51:48) Oh, really, okay. So, just tell me a little bit about how you decided to design it or theme it, was that something… did that organically grow, or did you have strong ideas about what…?

RL: We didn't have any ideas at all really. The building was a strange building, it had been used for loading china clay and the china clay came from a clay dry in little wheeled trucks into an area where there like a big pit, a three-sided pit, and lorries used to back into it and the little trucks would tip their china clay into the lorry. So, when this building became abandoned, we had open areas, walkways around the top dropping down ten feet into a pit.

And we thought very hard about what can we do with this pit? And in the end, we salvaged the whole of the bottom of a shipwreck in Padstow harbour, we took the whole wreck apart until we were down to the frames and the keels and some planking, put it on a lorry, took it to Charlestown, laid the keel out, put all the frames back and put the planking around the outside and put a lot of sand and stones and stuff in there and made it look like a shipwreck. So, you could walk around the top and actually look down on a shipwreck.

TB: Yes.

RL: Then we started putting artefact material on it, cannons, things like that and then we had a few dummy figures of people in diving dress and cylinders. And then we had them holding metal detectors and all sorts of things. That was as far as we got with that building and after four years they said, "Right, we're going to open up the other building. You are going to have the whole of the use of the ground floor, you design it, you tell us what you want."

So, again, my wife and I went to London and we visited every museum we could find, we spent about two weeks up there, searching for ideas. And going into every one of these museums, we asked to speak to the curator and told him what we were doing and said, "Could you give us somebody to take us around the museum so we can ask questions?" But we weren't asking questions about the artefacts, we were saying, "Oh, we like that cloth you've got in that, where did that cloth come from? Now, that concealed lighting, where did you buy that lighting from, and the glass in the front, how thick is the glass, is it 4mm is it 6mm? And what sort of insurance do you have to carry for a museum and who made your showcases, they're obviously, bought in, where did you buy them from?" And those were the… we came back with all the answers to start our new museum.

And we gave those designs for cabinets to the estate and they said, "Well, we'll provide fifty percent of them and you provide the other fifty percent because we are paying you, after all." Okay, we'll do that and so, in the end, if you can imagine, this is the bit of the building that you went into?

TB: Yes.

RL: We had a plan of a very long rectangular building and we thought, "We can't put showcases all the way down the side and you don't really want the showcases sticking out." And in the end, I devised that idea of putting in all the alternate walls, so you literally go…

TB: Yes, sort of snake around.

RL: Zig-zag in and out, because one of the museums we went to in London, it was the… Victoria and Albert, the curator said to us, "Whatever you do, if you have a room or an enclosed space in which you've got exhibits, do not make the exit obvious. Don't have your exit door right in the middle of the end wall and don't put a sign above it that says, "This Way" or "Exit" or "Exhibition continues" or something like that. Because the strange thing about people, as people walk around a room, halfway down the room they will eventually look up, see the door, and they'll leave the exhibition and go out through the door." He said, "We find that we've got that problem here and because we're so big, people wander around." He said, "If you have this long building, put these walls out alternately, make them zig-zag around because at no point, do they actually know what is around the corner and neither do they know the way out.

TB: Yes.

RL: And it worked and that's how Charlestown came about.

TB: (00:56:28) That's amazing, I see. And so, I've got the old guide and I appreciate this might be very, very from when you had it because this was…

RL: No, it wasn't very different at all. This guy kept it almost a hundred percent.

TB: Oh, really? Okay because it's got…

RL: There's a picture at the front there.

TB: (00:56:43) It's got… for example, a gas exhibition, is that something which you inherited?

RL: When I found out he'd done that, I nearly committed suicide. It's gone now…

TB: I guess, yes, I was curious.

RL: I'll tell you how that came about. The guy that bought the museum from us, and quite honestly, we were just interested in selling our house in Charlestown, selling the Shipwreck Centre and getting over to Scilly.

TB: (00:57:13) And what year was this… roughly?

RL: 1999.

TB: (00:57:24) So, you were in there from '76?

RL: '76. So, we were… no, it was longer than that… '76…'86… '96, '97,'98,'99… twenty-three years we were there… Ah, here we are.

TB: (00:57:49) Here we are, I've got the plan there. So, in this plan, was it mostly…?

RL: That was how the Shipwreck Centre started off, just that bit of a building in there.

TB: Okay, so, the Charlestown Road section of the map?

RL: Yes, and the original entrance was this door here, that was the original entrance and the lorries used to drive in, we had a big open front here. And I understand that the new owners, Tim Smit, are doing something about having a new entrance in there. So, then they said, "Right, we're going to build this building up here, put two storeys and these are the…"

TB: (00:58:28) Right, okay, so, this is the bit that I saw here, basically, I haven't seen this. Yes, I've got you.

RL: That's right, you haven't seen that bit at all, that's still all closed up.

TB: (00:58:36) And this turned to a massive, massive tourist attraction, one of the biggest in Cornwall given the numbers you're talking about. So, how does the business work because you didn't own the building, was it like a profit share between you and the estate… how did that evolve?

RL: We had a set fee per annum, increasing by ten percent per annum.

TB: (00:59:03) Okay, your fee went higher and higher?

RL: Well, of course, every year we kept adding to it, every year, we kept improving it, building more cabinets and we said, "Allowing for inflation, say three or four percent", as it was in those days, inflation, and a profit level, we'll have ten percent increase each year and they were quite happy with that.

TB: (00:59:24) Okay, right. And did they run the shop and the assistants?

RL: They took all the profit from the gate and from the shop.

TB: (00:59:32) And they organised all that, the staffing?

RL: Yes, yes. I didn't have to worry about anything except the contents of everything that was in the building.

TB: (00:59:43) I've got you, okay, wonderful. So, that then gave you time to run Prodive?

RL: Yes, as well as.

TB: And everything else? Okay, brilliant.

[Laughter]

TB: (00:59:52) And the collection was yours?

RL: And then my wife said to me… oh, we moved to Falmouth Docks as I mentioned, and we were still living in Charlestown. And my wife said to me one day, she said, "Richard, you're going to kill yourself on that road, driving twenty-two miles to Falmouth." Because I used to have to get up at six o'clock in the morning because the divers started at eight and didn't get home until six or seven o'clock at night. She said, "The road is getting more and more busy, you're going to kill yourself, I want you to pack it up." I said, "Well, I am getting a bit fed up with it if you like." She said, "Well, Roger Parker is still your buddy, sell him your shares." So, we had fifty-fifty, so, I sold him my fifty percent and stopped going to Prodive.

And by now, I had got… I had about eight or ten books under my belt which bring in a bit of income and we'd got some savings. And we took off together because my wife used to dive. We took off together and had five years underwater treasure hunting. And we had a fabulous time, we went all over the country, we were quite successful. And then along came this offer of the Longstone Centre in the Isles of Scilly which brought us here.

TB: (01:01:19) Yes, and just if you could you briefly, this was a Butterfly Centre?

RL: It was a failed Butterfly Centre.

TB: (01:01:24) Yes, and you took it over and you did a similar kind of thing, in as much as it was… something which is interesting this isn't just shipwrecks, you had a section on the local history of Charlestown too?

RL: Yes.

TB: (01:01:35) So, it's local history and shipwrecks?

RL: Yes, and it was here on Scilly.

TB: And you did the same thing here and that worked successfully for another five years or so, you said, I think, is that right, until you sold it?

RL: Yes. And then this guy from Lloyd's register of shipping appeared and said, "I'll give you a ten-year writing contract." I couldn't turn that down.

TB: Wonderful.

RL: I try and write a book a year roughly. And at the moment, I think I've written sixty… Bridget will tell you… sixty-seven, sixty-nine, something like that, books.

TB: (01:02:06) Yes, that's amazing. And just on the museum, there are a few things which I've been asked to cover. Okay, one question is… it seems to me that the collection started first and the museum… it wasn't like you had the idea for the museum then you collected the stuff for it? The collection started and got bigger and then you had the museum and it so happened, that you had a nice collection to start it off. But the museum wasn't really the goal at all in the early days, the collection was just there, building up?

RL: Yes. It was just because I didn't want to sell this stuff and I was also perhaps canny enough to realise that you don't find these things twice, you know? The whole thing about shipwrecks is all our shipwrecks are deteriorating underwater and in a thousand years' time, there won't be any shipwrecks. All the steel and the iron will have turned back to natural minerals, the wooden ones will all have been eaten away. And apart from lumps of a few cannon and that, there won't be any shipwrecks, so, it is a diminishing asset.

TB: I see.

RL: So, I didn't want to get rid of all these bright shiny bits. And when Charlestown said to me, "We want a tourist attraction." Up until then, I had never thought ever of doing anything with this collection, I just thought they're my bits, that's what I do, they're my hobby like people collect rock samples and butterflies, I was collecting bits of shipwreck.

TB: (01:03:46) It seems that there are a hundred and fifty wrecks in that collection and over eight thousand objects, I was told by the curator.

RL: Right, I didn't know that.

TB: (01:03:54) So, that's a lot of stuff and at that moment, you had to sell it, right? That's your collection so, was that a difficult thing for you to do, to part with that?

RL: No, strangely enough, it wasn't. I didn't feel like I had cut my left hand off or anything like that, no, no. Bridget and I decided between us that we were going to sell it and we were going to move to the Isles of Scilly, and I thought, "So be it." It was a bit like giving up Prodive in a way.

TB: (01:04:20) Yes, you felt you had done that, and it was time to… new chapter?

RL: Been there, done that, got the tee-shirt.

TB: (01:04:26) Yes. And something you said to me earlier which was you wanted a new project?

RL Yes, I did. Well, I was only… how old was I then? I was fifty-five, fifty-eight or something like that and I just wanted something else to get my teeth into. And Bridget, bless her heart, didn't really want to take on this project in Scilly, but now, if you talk to her now, she's very glad she did because she'd never run a business.

Because running the Longstone involved two aspects, there were the big buildings with all the exhibits and the restaurant and the staff, we had a full-time chef and all this sort of thing. So, she looked after the running of all of that, and the menus and the food supplies and everything. I looked after all the main tenance… I was Mr Fixit, I looked after all the maintenance, kept the exhibition going, looked after the grounds outside, cut the grass, mended the fenceposts.

TB: (01:05:36) Well, that's quite a step because at the Shipwreck Centre you had… another business was looking after all that stuff. So, this… the one in the Scilly Isles, you have to do everything?

RL: These two overlap by the way. We moved to Scilly and had the Longstone Centre while we were still in Charlestown.

TB: (01:05:56) Oh, really, gosh. Was it called the Longstone Centre, was that still the name you kept?

RL: Yes.

TB: (01:06:05) And it was a history and heritage kind of centre?

RL: Well, we added the word Heritage so it became the Longstone Shipwreck and Heritage Centre.

TB: (01:06:18) Right, and what year did that start or open to the public?

RL: '87.

TB: '87, and that was a privately-owned thing, it wasn't a charity that ran it or anything, it was you and your wife?

RL: No, no, the buildings are owned by the Duchy of Cornwall, so we pay the rent because as they do, they own all the commercial buildings.

TB: (01:06:35) Okay, but you bought out the lease from the previous owner?

RL: Yes.

TB: (01:06:40) Wow, okay. So, that's quite a big thing to run a café and all that kind of stuff?

RL: Yes, and Bridget had never run a food establishment, she's an excellent cook herself and what she used to say to the… Because we managed to keep chefs, but you know, a couple of years at a time. But she used to say to these chefs when then they started, "Don't think you're ever going to hold me to ransom by threatening to walk out, because anything you do in this kitchen, I can do and if you walk out, I'll just take your place until I can find somebody else."

TB: Get it, yes.

RL: I can make cakes, I can make pasties, I can cook breakfast, I can do anything in the kitchen, so, don't think you're going to hold me to ransom.

TB: So, quite a strong manager then?

RL: Very strong mind, yes.

TB: (01:07:27) It's what you need, I suppose. Also, just one thing which I would like to get on the record, you had some involvement with the foundation of the museum here on the Isle of Scilly which still exists, which is called… it's called the Isle of Scilly Museum, isn't it?

RL: Well, I didn't really have anything. When I was in the navy, I helped provide all that stuff for their first exhibition if you like…

TB: (01:07:48) Yes, and the first exhibition was on a wreck, that was the first wreck…?

RL: That's HMS Association.

TB: (01:07:51) That was the Association, that was the big one that started you off with the navy diving anyway?

RL: Yes, and it started off a museum here. And then of course, I went back to the navy and so on, and many, many years later, came to live here and I hadn't been here ten minutes and they said, "Oh, Richard, you've been a curator of a museum, would you like to be one of our trustees?" And I've been a trustee here since 2000, yes nineteen years.

TB: (01:08:20) Brilliant, okay. So, having been a curator, of course, it's perfect. But it's lovely that you've come back to your original collection in a way. Those few objects were the beginning of their museum.

RL: Yes.

TB: (01:08:34) And just a couple of technical questions which is accreditation, did you become an accredited museum at the Shipwreck Centre?

RL: No.

TB: (01:08:45) Why did you decide not to bother with that?

RL: Mainly because… I looked into accreditation and it involved a lot of work and it involved a lot of changes were necessary to the exhibition as well. And I thought, "I don't really want to get involved with this, we're doing alright as we are without

accreditation." But the way that the world has gone, that today is a standard and it's a bit like having, on a hotel having AA four star, or something like that, or Egon Ronay on your restaurant. It's a standard… When we started the Shipwreck Centre here, that sort of attitude wasn't around but it is around now. And I've talked to Kevin Davey and Tim Smit about this and they're going to go for accreditation once they're ready, they are going to go for accreditation because it allows you to join the Museum Society or the museums…

TB: Association?

RL: Association and you become one of the club. Whereas at the moment, Charlestown is out on a limb, really, in a way.

TB: (01:10:04) Yes. A couple of things you said that it would have required some changes to cases. Do you mean things like climate controls and… or was it more cataloguing and all that kind of stuff?

RL: Yes, well cataloguing, indexing, having a library, encouraging people to come and do research, having a study room of some sort.

TB: (01:10:29) So, all of these would have been extra cost and initially, which you could do without?

RL: Yes, we didn't have the space to give anybody a classroom… well, not a classroom, but a research room. And that research room would have required a couple of computers, a printer and a photocopier and it goes on. But these people can do it, they've got the money…

TB: (01:10:54) Did you have connections with any networks, I'm just thinking… you mentioned fairly early, Archaeological Society in London was interested in things?

RL: Yes, the Committee for Nautical Archaeology, CNA.

TB: Yes… sorry, are you okay for time… we need to move on… But did that develop into something that quite meaningful in terms of shipwreck museums?

RL: No, we never got involved with any… The only organisation that Charlestown was involved with was the… Cornwall CATA, Cornwall Association of Tourist Attractions.

TB: Oh, right, okay.

RL: Because after we started this, suddenly, a guy down at Helston started the Helston Aeropark, an old naval aircraft in a field. And then Dobwalls started up with railway thing that ran around it. And then China Clay started a china clay museum. In many ways, we sparked off tourism in Cornwall… when we… Charlestown was one of the founder members of CATA, Cornwall Association of Tourist Attractions, and I think when we started, we had three members.

TB: Wow, right, crikey.

RL: And it's grown today and probably today there is probably fifty.

TB: (01:12:24) And the idea was to cross-market and do leaflets, was it that kind of cooperation?

RL: We exchanged leaflets between each other, and we had an annual meeting and a bit of a knees up.

TB: Yes, yes, amazing.

RL: And we all got to know each other. And that was about as far as it went, we didn't cooperate in… We never had a joint ticket with anybody, but some of the others that were close together, like in Newquay, where there are several attractions, but they're all on top of each other.

TB: Yes, it makes more sense, doesn't it?

RL: Sea Life and all sorts of things over there, they had joint tickets.

TB: (01:13:00) So, you've witnessed this incredible flowering, in terms of tourist attractions all over Cornwall?

RL: Yes, and we put Charlestown… I hate to say this, but when you go down to Charlestown now, we inadvertently, Bridget and I destroyed Charlestown.

TB: (01:13:21) How do you mean?

RL: If you go down there now, both sides of that main street, nose to tail car park, you get down the bottom and the car park is full in the summer, coaches turn around and come out again because there is nowhere to park. There are too many people going to Charlestown, it's too successful. And I'm afraid…

TB: In the summer it's a nightmare.

RL: I'm afraid I'm responsible, but I don't ever tell anybody, except you, but please don't put that in writing.

TB: (01:13:48) It's the irony of tourism in that respect, it can be a victim of its own success?

RL: Yes.

TB: But it is seasonal and some of the year it's quieter but… yes sure. But still, what a thing to have done?

RL: Yes, we've left a legacy in many ways, yes.

TB: (01:14:06) Yes, absolutely. Has there been any particular high point of your involvement with the shipwreck museum that you can think of, was there ever when you've thought?

RL: A wow factor?

TB: Yes, just I'm really pleased I've done what I've done or…?

RL: I can't think of anything in particular. The only thing that's come out of it in a way, and it came out through Lloyds, doing these shipwreck volumes, which in a way, helped the nation because as I say, the government latched onto it and said, "Wow, you've given us the beginnings of a maritime archaeological record", which is now in Swindon in a big old railway engine shed there. It's a whole organisation employing about fifty people. And this is the centre where you go to know anything about shipwrecks.

TB: (01:15:06) Oh, really, right, they've got their own staff now?

RL: With English Heritage, oh, yes.

TB: (01:15:13) Just for the recording, just explain what these are. So, Lloyds approached you saying, "Look, you've been using our archives for decades, can you create a register of all the shipwrecks in the British Isles and Ireland?"

RL: Yes. And that was very much tongue in cheek because we had no idea how many ships there were or how long it would take. And we devised a system of these volumes with maps and indices and things like that and I had never done that sort of thing before. I think we got it eighty percent right, I'd have made changes, in hindsight, but I think we got the system nearly right. The books were a huge success, it left the government now, with a record that they are still building on day by day as they hear of new shipwrecks.

And of course, when shipwreck legislation came about, protected wrecks, war graves, when all this lot came, that fell right in their lap because they then said, "Oh, yes, we've got a record of all the ships in Scapa Flow because Richard Larn produced this list."

TB: (01:16:19) Yes, yes. So, you produced these directories that took you nine years to do it?

RL: Yes, we devoted every single working day, six days a week, Sunday, we had off, and we employed two girls who did nothing but keyboard work and Bridget was doing the cataloguing and giving the girls the work and I was out on the road collecting the information, all over the country.

TB: (01:16:42) Amazing. And this information was coming out of newspapers and county records?

RL: Oh, everything you could imagine, Lloyds list, Lloyds register, all the different newspapers. I used to find which were the best newspapers for each area and you could concentrate on the Dover Gazette, for example, or the Ramsgate Chronicle, you know that one newspaper always reported shipwrecks.

TB: (01:17:07) I see, yes. Se each entry has got the name of the wreck and the year it was built and all the basic…?

RL: I'll show you.

TB: I'd love to see that, yes.

RL: There are fifty-seven… each wreck has got fifty-seven fields of information, fifty-seven fields.

TB: (01:17:22) Wow, yes. And also, you have this online too and people can apply to your website to get the information?

RL: No, strangely enough.

TB: Okay, right, that's the shop window?

RL: When we started this, home computers were still really in their infancy so, I never had a day's instruction in computers in my life and Lloyds Register who were funding it had a very funny old-fashioned attitude about publishing books. I'll tell you a little

tiny story in a minute about how old-fashioned they were. They never saw, and neither did I because I was computer illiterate, I never saw the future of putting this lot onto CDs and selling them as CDs. Because once a book is printed you can't make any changes unless you have a reprint, if you've got a CD they're dirt cheap, all you need to do is just add some more information to them or take them out or correct it away, because CDs would sell forever.

And had Lloyds been savvy enough to realise that they should have sold the printed book or a set of discs and then got you to subscribe to it and then it paid me to continuously update, update, update. And we would have had a set of CDs to this day that you could have bought for any county in Great Britain. But I was not computer savvy enough to realise that this was possible or that it was the future and Lloyds were too old-fashioned enough to think about it.

When we brought the first volume out…

TB: Okay.

RL: When we brought the first volume out of the series which covered the west country, it covered… it was almost Bristol, right the way down the north coast of Cornwall, Isles of Scilly, along the south coast to the Solent, stopping at Dorset. So, that was volume 1. Lloyds said to me, "It would be good if could launch this book somewhere." So, I said, "Yes, well, there's no good launching it in London because people wandering up and down Fenchurch Street or wherever, don't give a toss about shipwrecks, you want to do it somewhere where it's relevant." I said, "I know Margaret Rule of the Mary Rose very, very, well indeed, let's launch it at Portsmouth, at the Mary Rose?" "Oh, brilliant, absolutely fantastic."

I did a bit of homework and I actually went to the boss of Lloyds and said, "You know we've got the launch of this scheduled for… I don't know, 24th April, Prince Charles is there on the 25th on another project. Why don't we move ours forward, you write to Prince Charles and say, "Would you please come to our book launch?" And we could have him, he could do his thing in the morning and we could the book launch in the afternoon, at the Mary Rose. And do you know what they said, "Oh, no, we don't really think we could do that, oh, no. There wouldn't really be any advantage of having Prince Charles at a book launch."

[Laughter]

And I despaired because it was a golden opportunity. Anyway, so, we had our book launch at the Mary Rose we arrived that morning and there were loads of people, the director of Lloyds and everybody all came down. Loads of people, the Mayor of Portsmouth and the press and the television, all these people there. And I had to stand up in front of about two or three hundred people and make a little speech about what we had tried to achieve and what the future was and where we were going to go with the whole system.

And then there was a lunch paid for by Lloyds with champagne and everything else like that. And then the grand plan was that their sales team would have a big table with all these books and posters on it, and they would sell books by the dozen. They

had never done a book launch before and they didn't know that at a book launch you took a stock of books, they took one copy.

TB: Oh, dear.

RL: The Director of Sales of Lloyds Register, who is used to selling millions of pounds worth of books about oil rigs, and submarines, and ports, and harbours, and ships, took one copy with him. And when we went down, and I said… I forget what the guy's name is now, I said, "John, where are the books, are you ready to do the sales?" "Sales, what sales?" "Well, we're here to sell books to the public." "Oh, I haven't brought any books…"

[Laughter]

I went outside and cried, I couldn't believe it.

TB: Nine years of work.

RL: They had this Mary Rose… No, this is only one year, this is the first year, the first book. Here we were, the Mary Rose, prestige outlet with everything, Portsmouth Dockyard, all the publicity, the Mayor of Portsmouth, everybody was there, and they didn't take any books.

TB: Dear or dear.

RL: This new book I'm just doing now with Mabecron Books, Ron Johns, is the guy I deal with, he's the owner. And he and I have been in touch almost every single day for the last three weeks. He has fixed up a book launch at Charlestown, in the evening, champagne reception, canapes. There is going to be Mayor of Falmouth, there's going to be West & Morning News, television, the whole lot there. The next day we go to Waterstones in Truro and do a book signing, the next day we go to Falmouth and Padstow, the day after that we go to Dartmouth. I'm going to be on my feet for about five days but selling, selling, selling, selling copies of that book because he knows what he's doing.

TB: Yes, sure, exactly.

RL: But compared… I love it, I think to have a guy who has got equal enthusiasm to do this and I'll support him all the way.

TB: Yes, absolutely. Richard, thank you so much, I'll stop it there.

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

TB: And again?

RL: Not yet, one, two, three, four, five, one two, three, for five.

TB: Yes, so, you were saying that there is this moment when the National Maritime Museum said that they weren't interested in the things that you found here in the Isles of Scilly, is that right?

RL: Yes, that's right. And then the newspapers had publicised it well and everybody and his uncle came to the isles of Scilly, who could dive and starting looting basically, these wrecks. And I was living in Helston at the time and we had an MP for St Ives called John Nott, NOTT. And I went to see him at one of his surgeries and said, "It's awful that a historic wreck like the Association has been found and even our National Maritime Museum is not the least bit interested in the artefact material, they don't want to know about. And the fact is that all these other divers have moved in and have stripped the wreck of all of this stuff and really, this is the second historic wreck found in Great Britain, there are going to be others. Really, there should be some sort of legislation to stop people tearing these wrecks to bits and just… selling the stuff off."

TB: Yes.

RL: And so, he said, "I'll take it up with parliament and he got a… what do they call it? a five minute… Bill or something or other?

TB: Yes, a Private Member's Bill?

RL: A Private Member's Bill and he got chosen out of the hat and at the first reading, it became law that they would create a Protection of Wreck Act.

TB: Gosh.

RL: It took from 19… that was 1969 I saw him, it took until '74 for it to go through the legislation and all the rest it had to go through. But it was introduced as an Act of Parliament in 1974.

TB: (01:25:48) So, it was your local MP that first raised it.

RL: Yes, and I kicked his arse and told him to get on and do something about it.

TB: (01:25:59) That's amazing, and for that, did you have to present, or did you have to…?

RL: I had to put it in writing and after we'd had an interview like we are now, in a pub, he said, "Well, put it in writing and tell me why you think this important?"

Audio ends: 01:26:10