

## Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Mel Warrender

Role: Chairman, Ebbw Vale Works Archival Trust

Museum: Ebbw Vale Works Museum

Location of interview: meeting room, Ebbw Vale Works Museum

Date: 7/3/19

Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

---

Material from the interviews can be downloaded and re-used under the terms set by Creative Commons (CC-BY-4.0). This allows all users to quote from, distribute, remix, and build upon the research, so long as it is attributed.

We recommend that you use the following information when citing the interviews:

Name of interviewee, (year of interview), interviewed by Toby Butler, Mapping Museums project, Available at [www.mappingmuseums.org/interviews](http://www.mappingmuseums.org/interviews) Accessed (date)

We would like to know how our research is being used so please use the [Get in Touch](#) link on the Mapping Museums website to tell us about your work.

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

---

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

TB: Okay, so first of all can you just give me your name and date of birth please if you don't mind?

MW: My name is Mel Warrender, my date of birth is XX-XXX 1938.

TB: Thank you and could you tell me your role in the organisation, your current role and any other roles that you have had in the past?

MW: I commenced work January 1955 and worked for the company known as Richard Thomas and Baldwins which was the result of a major development in the valley in 1936 when Sir William Firth of Richard Thomas company constructed the first continuous strip mill outside the US in this valley. The continuous strip mill was in the order of about three miles long in a narrow valley. So, that's when I first started work, not in 1936 but in 1955.

TB: And what was your job?

MW: I actually started as a, it was called a helper in the metallurgical department, and at the time I had a job to spell metallurgical let alone what it did. But I started as a helper which in today's terminology would probably mean a laboratory technician as for 44 years I continued my employment with the works.

Obviously, I had various jobs, positions during that period and whilst working and I mean working a four-shift system, it was not days regular because the steel industry was a continuous operation. Most of us at the time were on shift work, three shifts; days, afternoon, nights then your rest day so that made up the four-shift system. And I worked that type of job in the laboratory doing different things because you were moved around the process. You were moved to different locations to carry out different types of work but all of it was related to the metallurgical processing of materials.

I was then sort of realised that a period of the company looked after the welfare of people and the education of people. And I was allowed to attend the local technical college which I did for I think it was a period of about seven to eight years. I studies metallurgy and it was the old courses called S1, S2, ordinary national, A1, A2 or higher national then I was allowed to study for another two years, sorry one year where I gained a licentiateship to the Institution of Metallurgists. I did another two years of study and I gained an associateship of the Institution of Metallurgists. So, whilst studying I was also working shifts and working at different jobs. And then on qualifying I started on the rung of the first levels of supervisory or management. And in that position, I became a metallurgist in control of rolling, coating, galvanising and other aspects of tin plate galvanised finished products. It was a sort of wide ranging experience because the company churned out 20,000 tons of material a week, it was a fairly big operation employing almost 12,000 people.

So, there were lots of different types of job within the industry itself and because the company looked after the welfare of people it even operated things outside the realms of the production process. I think that I could go on.

TB: No, no that's great sure, no that's wonderful. Also, when you were showing me around you rather elegantly gave me a real kind of quick sketch of the history of the company. And I think given something else you said that was very interesting was that the company was there before the town essentially.

MW: Yes.

[0:06:36]

TB: And the town grew out of the company, so can we just, just give me very quickly going back 200 years just give me the history of the company as it applies to this valley.

MW: Well, there was a guy who started the whole epic of was a guy who was selling iron products and he was based in a forge in a location called Llangattoch which is probably it's in the Breckon Beacons. But he was looking for a source to manufacture iron for his forge, so he toured the area and bearing in mind other industries had set up in the area in adjacent valleys he came to Ebbw Vale and purchased some land and realised that around that land was a source of iron ore, a source of coal and a source of dolomite or calcium carbonate. And he realised those were the essentials of producing iron. He also noted that there were great sources of water because a river flowed down through the valley. The only thing that was missing was people, there were no people to employ. And of course, that started with the influx if people from outlying areas and they soon built up a reasonable workforce. But if you think originally there were only 120 people living in the area occupying about 40 farms which unfortunately that figure doesn't relate unless you look on a map. Because the area in which the works was initially set up was a mix. It was where the four parishes met, Llangynidr, Llangattoch, Aberystwyth and Bedwellty all came together at one point. And it was around this point that the first works was set up.

TB: And that would have been in the 17?

MW: 1790. Following a lot of ups and downs and threats to vacate the area a guy by the name of Harford took over. He was a Quaker came from the Birmingham and Bristol areas, and he set up a company which was Ebbw Vale Ironworks. It was a very small sort of operation producing about 30 tons a week, which by today's standards is miniscule.

Following that it went under various ownerships albeit for limited periods of time. One of the major leaps forward then was when a guy by the name of Abraham Derby IV became involved and he did because of his association with the ironworks at Shropshire had a family quarrel and came to Ebbw Vale to become involved in the company at that particular time. He stayed for a while and the company grew and grew until eventually in the 1850s, 1840s, 1850s it employed as many as 30,000 people albeit in different geographical areas in mainly South Wales.

That continued with the introduction of various new innovative processes and one of those innovative processes was the Bessemer process. And one of the chemists within the works was on the edge of actually developing a steel making process by a different but slightly different method to Bessemer. But Bessemer had a patent and the work management at the time decided to go with Bessemer's patent to introduce Bessemer steel making in the valley.

It went on for many years under different chairmen, one of the well-known ones was Sir Frederick Mills who was at the helm of the company for about 30 years. He was also a very sympathetic guy when he came to the community in general, he was involved in many things in the area or the vicinity of Ebbw Vale. He thought of things of part time education, technical colleges, literary institutes, he was a very sort of magnanimous, philanthropic person.

Unfortunately, external influences like cheap imports, subsidised cheap imports came into the valley and the bulk tonnages of both coal, iron ore and dolomite limestone necessitated going to other areas and even importing from abroad. So, it brought the company into a difficult situation in 1929, October 1929 he had the unenviable task of declaring the company redundant or insolvent whichever police word you want to use.

Then after a prolonged period the deprivation in the area prompted governments which up until that time were Laissez-faire in their attitude to industry but they decided because of the political climate at the time it was even said by King Edward that something must be done, those well quoted words. So, government became involved, declared it a special development area, they called it other things, but they changed it to special development area as opposed to a depressed area, trying to raise the profile of it.

One thing and another a guy by the name of well, he was William Firth at the time he was knighted some time later had gone out to the US. He was chairman of the company called Richard Thomas, he actually saw a technology out there which was turning manufacture of iron and steel into what we would now term an automated type production process as opposed to a batch process. He wanted to implement this continuous steelmaking technology, rolling technology integrated into one place on this particular site. A lot of problems with people like Sir Montague Norman Chairman of the Bank of England, there were all the competitors of the industries like [unclear 0:15:31]. A very fragmented iron and steel industry in the country, they were all against it because they knew once the process was up and running they would have difficulty in competition. There were obviously people for it like the unions who realised that any industry of that nature in this valley would really give rise to hope for thousands and thousands of people.

That industry once it started October 1938 didn't stop being innovative and achieving major goals both on a business and a technology point of view. They took the industry to a peak and during the probably the 1960s or the company Richard Thomas and Baldwins employed almost 12,000 people at its peak both in profitability and productivity.

Following that another round of recession I suppose was in the offing when governments became involved international crises developed and again the steel industry was used as a political football. And the government of the day announced that there would be a closure programme and with a lot of disputes, marches and strikes it was finally brought to a head and the government announced that the heavy end of the world would be closed. Bearing in mind Llanwern had already started in 1962 to be a major producer of iron and steel products some of which impacted on the order book of the Ebbw Vale works.

Where are we, then with the result that the closure of the Ebbw Vale works was to take place it was mid-1970s there was one palliative for want of a better description. The government announced that there would be a major development in the finishing end of the plant whereby blast furnace, coke making, iron making, steel making, hot rolling would all go. The money would be spent on a modern finishing plant. That did come to fruition but on the way to it the government sold off the business and it then became British Steel Corporation first, that was the first stage to bring it back to profitability. The next stage was to call it British Steel Plc and that set the company on an even keel in terms of finances. And of course, because it was private the shareholders had major input into the future of the industry.

Again, one thing led to another and the world glut of steelmaking capacity came to the fore where other smaller countries producing their own iron and steel products it inevitably impacted on the export ability of British Steel Plc to export.

So, the mood then was one of merging and the British Steel Plc was a major activity or business for European steel to become involved. And the company Hoogovens of Holland under their company called Corus merged with British Steel Plc and it became Corus from Hoogovens to Corus.

And as time went on Corus was again ripe for a takeover and of course, the Indian company which manufactures among other things iron and steel. That company had been around since 1920 sought to take over the company Corus which it did and formed Tata Steel.

I think the rest of the history is fairly well known in that there are now negotiations going on between Tata Steel and August Thyssen a German company with another merger in mind. So, that really is it in a nutshell.

[0:21:42]

TB: Right, okay, lovely. So, did that finishing works is that still going in this town? You mentioned this new finishing works or did that?

MW: That was closed in 2002.

TB: Ah, right.

MW: The final, because we don't really know, and I wrote a master's degree on why they put the industry there in the first place would still to me. We still don't know why the works which employed 2,500 people suddenly closed, the announcement was made in February 2002 that the works would close in August 2002.

TB: And what was the company name at that point, was that?

MW: That was Corus.

TB: Corus, okay.

MW: Or was it Tata.

TB: Don't worry, it was one of those yes, but it was at that time.

MW: I think it was still Corus I am almost sure it was still Corus.

TB: Yes.

MW: But meanwhile that was the process.

TB: Yes, so in 2002 so this was a real bolt from the blue people didn't see it on the cards?

MW: IT was rumoured, and I go back to my original statement that when Llanwern was in the market it was always rumoured that was the end of Ebbw Vale. And in fact, parts of the Ebbw Vale

process were transferred to Trostre works which is now the finishing end of the Port Talbot works. There was a gradual chipping away of the business of Ebbw Vale.

TB: I see.

MW: But if you ask for the actual reasons for closures that's all very vague. I happened to be, I had been promoted I was rolling manager, I was tin plate finishing manager, I was galvanised manager and then I was made technical manager for the plant. But it still at that level it was still difficult to understand why the works had suddenly come to a closure. Because the works manager at the time said the productivity, the levels of quality materials being produced was over and above anything that had been produced previously and commended the workforce on that stage of the game. And he had the difficult job of saying boys, the works are going to close.

TB: That's amazing, so this was a decision clearly taken at board level which didn't filter down in much detail.

MW: Not the detail, you must remember that during the crisis when Ebbw Vale was, it wasn't only Ebbw Vale mind you it was other works. The government set up a committee and that committee wanted to interview everybody in the decision making of the closure programme for this works and other works. They wanted to know exactly, and they sent for people to come to that meeting. One of the leaders was Sir Brian Moffett who was the Chief Executive of the company when the closures were announced. Now he, I have got to be careful what I say.

TB: [Laughing].

MW: There was intrigue because he and he alone went to the House of Commons to explain. And I know that others wouldn't go to that meeting.

TB: Oh, right.

MW: It was [sigh].

TB: They wouldn't go because there was a bit of a cover up in that respect?

MW: They declined, they declined, I can't, I won't repeat why.

TB: Right, okay yes sure.

MW: But it certainly, there was something going on in the background which had decided the path of Ebbw Vale works.

TB: Right, okay.

MW: I don't think that's every really been disclosed.

TB: Okay, so it is still a mystery almost what the true meaning might have been, okay.

MW: Well, in some respects.

[0:26:26]

TB: Oh, right okay thank you [laughing] very diplomatic. Alright, so let's obviously the focus of what I am interested in is the setting up of the archive and the museum. But from what you were saying earlier that happened alongside the running of and then the closure of the business.

So, just tell me about those, that amazing time between the February whenever it was and the following August. So, just give me a sense of how that worked and clearly and how did the idea of having an archive or a museum come about?

MW: Right, in 1999 I retired but a couple of years before my retirement I was technical manager and I knew within two years at the age of 60 I would be retiring. So, the works manager at the time discussed with me whether I would be prepared to set up a museum and my interest in local history really made that decision for me. Because I said at the time that I would be delighted to set up a museum, but I am still working here, and he said well, you would be on special projects for the last two years of your time and in fact the project was to look at advanced inspection system. And I was given license to visit the US, Germany, I went anywhere I wanted to go because I had a lot of contacts that were out in the world because of my job as technical manager. I used to have a lot of meetings with people within our own manufacturing industry and our competitors because I was on a couple of international committees. And I said to him I would be prepared I said but there are a couple of things I would like to think about. So, he sent me away and I had actually [laughing] I can remember it now came back from the US and we were walking down from this place, walking down to the staff canteen, managers' canteen. He said to me on the way down he said have you made your mind up? I said yes, I will do it I said but there are a couple of things that I want out if it. Because I will be doing it, I would be working for the last two years in parallel with my sort of proper job. I said there's a couple of things I want out or I would consider. A) I wanted a good facility for it to be set up, I just didn't want to be in the sort of pokey back room. And his name actually was Anthony Dutton-Parr who was a Scot who had come to this area as the works manager of this plant and I thought it was ironic really that he had come all this way asking me to set up a museum. Bearing in mind the previous general manager had tossed the idea around, but he never approached anybody to do it. During the redundancy of the Ebbw Vale plant government grants were poured into the area like no one would understand. And of course, the development at the south end of the worlds involved putting up a retail park. And the previous general manager had suggested that the museum was put up in the retail park, but he had never really come around to doing it. And I didn't realise at the time that he had a serious illness before he went.

TB: Ah, right.

MW: So, obviously when the new works manager came he must have at some stage kicked it around as an idea and still wanted to pursue it. So, I agreed I said I want a room, I want some people and I want some money. He agreed to the three of them and the room he actually gave us was the works manager's room which he was occupying at the time. He said I tell you what, I will move out.

TB: Wow [laughing].

MW: Which he did, and he moved into another office opposite. So, cut a long story short he said the money is there, you do with it what you want to. So, I said let's get onto the third thing and I identified two other colleagues who were long time served like myself because I had actually done at that time 41 years in industry. So, I said I would like John Cadden involved because he was a

manager of the stores, but he was a galloping kleptomaniac, I knew he was and I knew he hoarded things, and the other one was a guy named Barry Caswell who was a manager in the estate department. And the other thing about Barry was he was interested in old maps, map making, cartography and all that side of it and he had a legal qualification. So, I thought to myself if the three of us could get together then we would make a good team. Which we did, we set up in the works manager's office and then we started to pillage, is the word pillage?

TB: Pillage [laughing]?

MW: Pillage, sorry, we started to pillage everything we could [laughing].

TB: Yes [laughing].

MW: We went into attics I can remember going into a church attic up town, pictures up there. We went into cellars in the works, we went into people's garages, they said come and you can have this, you can come and clean it out. It was one big hectic, so I would come into work with my proper job and I was curtailing those activities and then I would come into the museum and do a little bit. And we then with the display cabinets which we purchased, started to organise ourselves into a display museum.

Then other events came to the fore because you are now talking when I retired in 1999 the works was still in production.

TB: Yes.

MW: Full production in fact.

[0:34:04]

TB: Okay, so this entire period no one was aware that it was going to close.

MW: Not at that time.

TB: So, right so this was.

MW: Foresight.

TB: The idea to have a museum was very much of a live company, why do you think? It sounds like it was in the air for a long time?

MW: Well, I did.

TB: What was that about, why did the company need it?

MW: Well, when you come to think of Llanwern coming into, coming onstream steel making and some finishing products in 1962 the death knell of this works was being predicted.

TB: Oh, I see right.

MW: But and of course the unions were all, oh it won't be long before we will be shut kind of thing.



TB: Right, ah I see right.

MW: So, there was an element of inevitability about it, it wasn't quite right at that time because it went on for what 20 years after didn't it?

TB: Yes.

MW: But that really, the reason why the works manager had suggested the museum be set up was this works had a sister works West Wales. Port Talbot the steel industry supplied Trostre works which was a major sort of stream of steel making products. Now, ours was Ebbw Vale had a stream we had four major tinning lines; Trostre had only two at the time. So, probably in a manufacturing scale Ebbw Vale was larger than Trostre but Trostre had only started in the 1950s, so their history was a lot less than this works. But what they had done then they had an old - what only could be called like a farmhouse, which they had converted into a museum.

TB: Ah.

MW: And of course, because the two works managers reported to the same boss which was called tin plate group there must have been an element of oh, come on over to the museum for lunch which they used to do. They used to have cosy little meetings and it was away from the works, but it was a wonderful sort of atmosphere to have a cosy little chat or meeting. Now, I feel that he came over with the idea of why we don't have one in Ebbw Vale, it's got much more history than Trostre, we have been around 200 years.

TB: Yes [laughing].

MW: What have we got to show for it? I have always said the problem with the museum was it was only really introduced at the end of the life of Ebbw Vale works. And that's the time when you shut it down people start to philosophise and reflect, oh, we had a works here, we employed, they are looking in the past. But there's nothing sort of structurally firm to represent that sort of feeling and thought and reflection.

So, I think that was one of the reasons behind starting the museum. Of course, I came to the end thinking I had everything, I had an education, I had a job for life, I could support my family, I travelled the world in my job. You know it was all singing and dancing so to speak so I felt I owed a debt to the community.

TB: I see.

MW: So, we move on. The announcement came, and I was sat in the office. Works manager made the announcement and he sent a BBC reporter [laughing] in to ask me my feelings on it because I had worked in the industry, I was a senior guy when I left, I was on the sort of main board running the company. Melanie Doll from the BBC Wales I can remember it now. Anyway, I really speaking told her that virtually a lot of what I told you but at that time which was 2002 the museum had already been started. It became more of a focus because the world was aware that Ebbw Vale was going to be closed so it was a sort of focal point for activities of the works. And bearing in mind as I told you it had yachting clubs, it had darts teams, pool teams, rugby teams, tennis teams

photography it had a welfare system second to none. And a lot of this came to the fore when the works manager would say well, what are we going to do with all this? Dump it in the museum.

So, time went on and the general office by edict had to be vacated because the Welsh Development Authority became involved because the industry was now gone. A plan was put forward on demolition and recovery and regeneration of the area. Well, that process obviously meant that buildings were to be knocked down and some wonderful buildings were knocked down. But they couldn't knock this one down because it was listed, it was in a dilapidated state after two years that the building laid empty. But because the WDA was involved the Welsh Development Agency grants were being put through CADW which is an organisation which protects listed buildings in Wales. They became involved, all this was going on at the level which I wasn't involved. But we had all, we had been told that we had to vacate the property.

[0:41:01]

TB: So, you said this place was empty for a couple of years, was that apart from you, were you still in there?

MW: No, no.

TB: Oh, right.

MW: We were kicked out.

TB: I see.

MW: Which is the next part of my story.

TB: Sorry, yes.

MW: We were actually told to pack our bags, so we sort of pleaded with senior management at the time. Because there were senior management looking after the run down of the business, and we were told that we could occupy an old works manager's house which was at the north end of this works. If you go out of the building there's a big area which is, well there's nothing there, scrubland, I know what's going there but the house itself was an old ironmaster's house. So, they said we could occupy that, so we took everything out, put it in, we were given some upstairs rooms. We put all the stuff out, laid it out again, continued during the redundancy period to go out collecting stuff and hiding it away in our rooms. We had a top floor of the old ironmaster's house and then the Welsh Development Authority told us that we had to vacate that building. Because CADW had failed to protect it because part of the building was occupied with what was called the Works Club and Institute. It had been taken over by the works welfare organisation under the auspices of the works management during its heyday which was the late 1950s and created a club. But because they had done that they had structurally altered the building from an old really ironmaster's gatehouse, it was sort of we were told we had to vacate it because the Welsh Development Authority said that any other land outside this building was to be sold off vacant possession, as simple as that.

TB: Wow.

MW: Get out. So, they said to us you can actually have a building and building is an overstatement. We were given a unit, you know these industrial units constructed by local authorities. The local authority then came to our rescue because they realised what a good collection we had. They said we will give you rent free a shed, sorry a unit up in the local industrial estate which if you look out the window I think you can just see it. It's up on the side of the mountain, up on slag tips of the old works. So, again we relocated and if anything, I was getting a bit despondent and my two colleagues.

So, that brought another change, the change then was that we had to have a deed, a covenant which for posterity to maintain or ensure that the collection was protected for society. So, a legal document was arrived at and another story creeps then.

[0:45:01]

TB: Sorry, just tell me when this was, was this 2000?

MW: This was about 2003.

TB: So, that's when you drew up a, you became a charity or a trust or right?

MW: Yes, what happened then I am a chairman of another society and you see it on the card, either side of the card is the Ebbw Vale Metallurgical and Historical Society, it wasn't historical society then it was the Ebbw Vale Metallurgical society. And that was an organisation in place in 1937 with the new works, new people, fresh ideas, a desire to learn. That organisation was what's the word, was organised.

TB: Constituted or?

MW: Anyway, that came of age, but that committee was still running parallel to the works closure as it is today. We have still got a Metallurgical and Historical Society. So, what I suggested then was the secretary, treasurer and some committee members joined with us when the company Corus by deed said we are going to set up the Ebbw Vale I can't remember what it's called [laughing]. The Ebbw Vale [pause] Archival Trust that's right.

TB: Okay.

MW: They set it, so I think said well, we need some trustees. So, that developed then into a small group of people I was chairman. I asked Brian Baker who was secretary of the Metallurgical Society would he come, yes, Les Pinny treasurer, yes, he would come, Barry Castle yes. So, we set up a trust of seven members.

TB: Right, okay that's interesting, sorry do you want some water are you okay? If you want a break just do say.

MW: I am alright.

[0:47:39]

TB: So, okay so the setting up that archival trust you said came from Corus?

MW: Yes, simply because.

TB: That was a part of the winding down, right.

MW: We were in existence, we were in existence and us to a certain extent were an embarrassment sort of what are we going to do with this organisation? It's now set up, it's successful, the local council and people in the community like it, so what are we going to do? So, it was a bit of an embarrassment.

TB: I see, so they kind of wanted to get shot of you in a way.

MW: That's right.

TB: But set you up as independent thing.

MW: Through a legal sort of way.

TB: Right, I see.

MW: So, they organised the solicitors, we had a meeting, we signed, and we became trustees.

TB: Right, so now you are entirely independent of the organisation?

MW: Independent.

TB: Of Corus.

MW: Yes, it is now a trust.

[0:48:27]

TB: And when you got moved to these other locations was that open to the public or?

MW: Yes.

TB: Oh right, so in that unit people could come and see?

MW: We have been open to the public well in a sense it's been open to the public since we created the museum. But it was mainly people involved with the industry that came into the museum.

TB: Yes.

MW: And of course, it was in its early days anyway, but I would have said when we got into it fully with visitors it was. It still wasn't a public attraction as it is today, it was still in relative terms it was still in its infancy. We were a group of people interested and we would come in sort of what shall we do with this article, how shall we? And it was only when we became a trust and we formed the next stage after the trust we decided that we should have a management committee to manage the organisation of it. Because initially with the trust we were six people, so you couldn't operate with it opening on a couple of days because when we. Another stage then was we were oh no, the trust was set up first, we realised that we would have to have a management committee because the general office now after this period of time had been completely refurbished £750,000 refurbished.

A lot of empty rooms, who can we get to occupy it, the council said what about the museum, give them a room or two. And we pinched more than that [laughing].

TB: [Laughing].

MW: So, we then came back into this place, but we had the essence of a management committee in place. We had attracted quite a few more members, say it went up to 10, I can't remember I could find out, but I can't remember. And then it grew because either people were aware of it, other people locally who were interested in history they became involved in it. So, that now we have three officers, I am chairman, Brian Baker secretary, Les Pinny treasurer and in all we total 20 people.

[0:51:12]

TB: Wow, okay that's brilliant. So, do you think the move to this building has helped that?

MW: Yes, definitely.

TB: Because its on the site first of all, it's on the edge of things but, its more central maybe.

MW: It is still in existence, it's not a one roomed shed up there and the room was half the size of this room.

TB: Ah, right yes.

MW: So, you could tell it was and it was a jumble of stuff, we hadn't formally logged anything, and we have done all that in the last 2006, probably the move back into this forced us really to become more organised.

TB: Right.

MW: But the move back into this place gave us a higher profile a) council, local authority b) with the tourist board it gave us more of an opportunity and more of a raised profile.

TB: Yes.

MW: Then we marched on and looked really to what we could do further to enhance our position. And we realised that we needed to become accredited, well that accreditation process is through the English Arts Council.

TB: Yes.

MW: It is a little bit of a tenuous link in my mind but at least we thought, right if we comply with their criteria then we can become registered which would add another string to the bow so to speak. So, that's what we did, so this is the fifth year now of accreditation.

TB: Wow.

MW: So, we are now nationally registered as a museum.

TB: Yes.

MW: Because don't forget that we first started out we were an archival trust and because we have expanded in what we do we now seem to be a sink for the local community. The catchment area around because a lot of people came to work in Ebbw Vale from the other valleys, so we find that we are getting stuff now from a much wider audience than we would have expected.

TB: Oh, really okay.

MW: And so.

[0:53:48]

TB: That's interesting. So, just on the accreditation so the motivation for that you said it was another string to your bow. But was it, was that more a decision in terms of getting funding or was it more status or being on the map or was it all of those things?

MW: Both.

TB: Okay, alright yes.

MW: It gave us access because I haven't really mentioned funding but because we are a voluntary organisation we do not get a fixed sum to run it. Maybe that's a disadvantage but we not for the record right, we get the local county borough council contributes indirectly to the running of the museum.

TB: And what about your rent and rates and that sort of thing, is that covered by the council? Okay, fantastic [laughing].

MW: [Laughing] so that's one thing that helps. The other thing is we go out beg, steal and borrow but by getting accreditation it means that we are linked in to the Independent Association of Museums.

TB: Yes.

MW: Who offer grants, but they only offer grants to those people who are accredited. So, we can now apply for grants, we just applied for £2,000 to not refurbish, well it is in a sense refurbish two old maps which go back to the 17th century. They have been done and the accreditation gave us access to those funds and they paid for the refurbishment.

TB: Yes, brilliant yes.

MW: So, we also go out with as I said the begging bowl and we approach various organisations like AIM. But also, as an example recently I have gone to the Metallurgical Historical Society. I have applied for a grant to publish the memoirs of an ironmaster and they are considering it now and by the end of the month they should have given me a decision, but its looking favourable. But we have got to go out to be able to spend money on newsletter, well I will come to newsletter for articles in booklet from and other abbreviated forms to sell to be able to make money to keep us going.

[0:56:53]

TB: I see, yes. So, is your income mainly from publication apart from grants, occasional small grants?

MW: Yes.

TB: Right, yes.

MW: But we have to generate cash to be able to produce.

TB: Yes [laughing] I see what you mean.

MW: I just got a quote for this publication on the ironmaster, they want £1,500 to produce 250 copies, I must say that if we publish it 70% of the sales will go into our kitty. So, we are continually on the edge when it comes to funding.

TB: Right.

MW: There are a lot of other things we want to do but because of the durations and sales and grants we are restricted.

[0:57:47]

TB: Yes, I see sure. Just going back, just something, you mentioned which is quite nice just about the collection itself and the, well I was going to say objects but actually I would imagine most of your collection actually is photographs and documents.

Given that it was started as an archive, but you have got pictures and photos and a huge array of stuff. So, you mentioned that you kind of had to go to people's garages and stuff in those early days but just tell me about the getting stuff from Corus you know when it was still going. You mentioned that basically you managed to get hold of the whole photographic collection, just tell me about that. Did you have to negotiate that, or I guess all the staff knew they were going and were passing the stuff to you, or how did it work?

MW: [Pause] because I was a senior manager, a senior manager in the industry and I had worked in the industry for when I completed 44 years I had a certain amount of license to go into departments and talk to people and say well, do you really want that there or have you got any information on X, Y, Z? And the managers knowing full well the industry was running down, get it out of the way kind of thing.

TB: Yes.

MW: Some of the old equipment lying around was spares and it was redundant equipment. We would say oh, that's a fine example of that machine, we will have that one, yes okay. The other option was they were going to transfer some of the more expensive usable spares to the sister plant as Trostre so there was a bit of toing and froing.

TB: Yes.

MW: But Because I was located on the plant as my other two colleague we could you know use a certain bit of elbow to get things done.

TB: I see yes.

MW: But with a lot of it we published articles in what was, it was still running because the sister plant was still running in the works magazines. So, we put something in the works magazines to say hey, we are up, and running have you got anything which we could use? And it paid off because people would tend to stroll in with their father's docket or a company lapel badge. All of it started to come in albeit dribs and drabs but it tended to flow in which suited us.

[1:00:32]

TB: Yes, lovely. And just tell me about the... well, since then I guess people, do you find people are still bringing you things as they?

MW: Oh yes, we have got a book because we are now a registered museum we have a compliance, we have an accreditation procedure which we have got to register gifts. Whether they be permanent or long-term loans or a loan, things like that we have got to declare in a formal route.

TB: I see, sure.

MW: So, it's all above board.

TB: And are the things you are given mostly restricted to the business itself and the social clubs and so on that are attached to it, or have you started to take things that are more general, local nature?

MW: There is an element of personal stuff coming in, where you draw the line is difficult.

TB: Tricky yes.

MW: Because if I said to you anybody who has been in industry for 40 years you were given a littler gold badge. Now, that's given to that guy or woman, how do you declare that then in a book if they donate it to you? Is it because it's works or because it's a personal thing? I have gone down the line with my colleagues in fact we have had an occasion last week should we accept what we have been offered or should we turn it down? And I know full well I always say, I feel quite strongly that if we are a museum based on the works where do you draw the line between items which are relevant to the works or do you say an employee has something who worked in the works and it's his own sort of personal possession? How do you draw the line? I feel quite strongly that if we want to be in the broader sense a museum we shouldn't balk at someone coming in and asking is this any good to you? We have got to look at some of those peripheral items on the basis of what they are. Do we say oh, we will have that, or do we say we will have it for the sake of saying yes, we will have it? Because our problem is storage.

TB: Yes.

MW: We can't display it there, but what we can do is retain it for posterity and put in the records room. Only we have not a confrontation, we have a bit of difficulty because they believe that records room some of the individuals, not all, they think it's their property when in actual fact it isn't. Because when the grant was made by CADW to refurbish this building, we were asked would we be prepared to keep stuff in there simply to qualify for a grant for its refurbishment?



TB: Oh, I see.

MW: So, it was a little bit because its grown up, they have got a protocol to protect what's in there. They will say ah, but there's private stuff in there, personal stuff in there so you have got to have access through us. It's a little big vague if we wanted to have a row over it we could, but.

[1:04:08]

TB: Yes, so just to explain you are sharing this building with another organisation. Is that essentially the council archives or, oh that's Gwent archives?

MW: No, that is Gwent archive, its not Ebbw Vale archive it's Gwent archives.

TB: Right.

MW: The unfortunate thing that I am going to go back a little bit now to when the trust deed was set up. The solicitors in Birmingham had already drawn it up because they were asked by Corus to draw it up. They actually used the word "archive", the Ebbw Vale Archival Trust, now in my mind the word archive shouldn't have been in there, it should have been something else. But unfortunately, it's in there and a lot of our people believe that we should say whether we are an archive or a museum. Because that affects how you can go out for grants, it affects how you take in materials. It has connotations over and above the description of museum. But when we set up the management structure we deliberately called it the Ebbw Vale Works management committee, so Ebbw Vale Works Museum management committee.

TB: Right, okay.

MW: So, that we differentiated to a certain extent between archive and museum. But in that event, you are still managed under the auspices of the trust, so.

TB: I see, okay.

MW: But it does affect us further on down the line, but like what do we accept, or we turn down?

TB: Yes, I see what you mean, yes if you are an archive then you might be thinking well, you know we don't have to worry really what it's about, in 100 years' time it might be valuable.

MW: Yes.

[1:06:17]

TB: But if you are a museum you have got to be really quite focused haven't you about your collection, so I see how that's different. Okay, and just tell me when did you move into this building, what year was that would you know? Don't worry if not.

MW: It should be stamped on my brain.

TB: It was a few years.

MW: When we first moved in because we started in this building, in that room up there.

TB: Yes, that was.

MW: So, in there then.

TB: That was the late, that was the early 2000s.

MW: No, that was the first time, when it was initially set up. We came back.

TB: And it opened in 2003, 2002 you said, was that when it was officially?

MW: No, he gave me the room in 1998.

TB: Oh, right okay sorry I have got you, yes.

MW: 1998 because I retire in 1999 and he already asked me in the earlier years. So, we were in that one room.

TB: So, in there for a while and it was 2002, 2003 that you become constituted as the trust.

MW: Yes, yes.

TB: Right, okay.

MW: They we were out and about then so the date we actually came back, I can get that off Brian.

TB: Don't worry, yes.

MW: I have got a funny feeling it was 2004.

TB: Okay, alright.

MW: would that stack up?

[1:07:30]

TB: Yes, okay great. And just tell me about the style of the displays and so on. Did you model it on anything on other museums or has to kind of been more of an organic kind of thing? You said that there was a process of.

MW: Well, it's organic in a sense but I have a personal interest in visiting museums. But when I go back to the initial challenge to Andy Dunbar I said a room, money, people. Wham - we had the money we looked around for ways to display it and we came up with the idea of well, display it display cabinets. So, we put display cabinets, we had them made and we had a display cabinet a divided one which opened up like that down the middle of the room. So, it was very much off the cuff, there was no grand design in it, it was just fit in this room as many display units as we can possibly fit in.

TB: I see.

MW: And take it from there and it wasn't long before they got full.

[1:08:50]

TB: Yes, absolutely. And just this is kind of more of a broader question but just tell me about kind of the role of the museum in the community. Because you know I imagine the community has changed very dramatically really you know since 2002.

MW: What you must remember is initially nobody knew we were here and in fact you will run into people in Ebbw Vale now and casually sat in the dentist where do you work, you know how it goes where do you live. Oh, are you up in Ebbw Vale I am in the museum, what museum that kind of thing. We still not fully recognised in the community, so what was the question [laughing].

TB: I was wondering kind of what function does the museum have in terms of the town?

MW: We have found as we have developed if there's anything to do with the history of the area and the works and the people and the various organisations within what was the works they will come to us. There is no other sort of authority in Ebbw Vale which can sort of provide what they want.

TB: Yes.

MW: Because we are a lot of old stagers they tend to come to us for personal information, not about us but about what happened. We have had a number of people come in purchasing the land and they want to know who owned it, what was there before. And some things we have got to be guarded with because we don't want to become involved in that of aspect. But you get organisations, I always go back to when Morrisons the grocery company were setting up, they came for photographs of the area, so they could display up there.

TB: Oh, okay yes.

MW: That is the sort of request you got that are so diverse you can't really generalise on how we are used. But we are used quite a bit and the local authority use us quite a bit.

TB: Right, yes sure.

MW: So, it's.

[1:11:32]

TB: Yes, and perhaps you can this is quite a long journey isn't it and we are kind of what we are 20 years aren't we?

MW: Well, we have been around about 20 years isn't it?

TB: Yes, so for you can you give me a high point and a low point? What's been the toughest moment of those 20 years in terms of keeping this show on the road and.

MW: The closure of the works was the first, I had tears in my eyes when he sent Melanie Doll to interview me. Because I thought, a long over 44 years association with the works it had provided me, my family with a relatively good standard of living, educational opportunities, ability to travel.

It had, that was the low point and I suppose there have been lots of high points, probably mention a couple. Gaining qualifications after coming into the industry with nothing and fairly high-level

qualifications, peaking out as technical manager in the works was marvellous for me. If I look further in the circle of events it's meeting a lot of dignitaries and of course one was the Queen. She actually came and spoke to a number of us. So, that's probably it and one of the other memorable ones was the official opening of the museum of course there were only the three of us. We were asked to come to a dinner which we held in one of the rooms. And the people who came to open it were the general manager who rose to director, a very eminent person in the area was Mr John Powell MC. He was an ex-army type, but he became director of strip mills, he was there. Lord Brookman who initially started out in the works as a crane driver, he became assistant secretary general of the union, House of Lords now, he came. The works manager Andy Dunbar responsible for the opening, so that was another sort of high point.

[1:14:47]

TB: Yes, yes. And okay, well with kind of just an eye to the future here. I mean it seems like you are fairly secure in this, at the moment in the building and I can see that it's in great condition your collection and so on. Well, just a question why it is important to keep this and keep it together and thinking into the future?

MW: In the grand scheme of things probably I couldn't really justify it, but you know as well as I do, I will turn the question around what's the importance of keeping the War Museum in London? What is the purpose of museums? Its really so that society can reflect objectively on the past which might in a way affect their decision-making process for the future. Its something which you have to protect for posterity for children and young people coming up and allowing them to see what life was like outside their own little domain. It is one of those things anybody who really attempts to justify the creation of a museum how can they justify it?

If a bomb dropped on it tomorrow well, I mean if you think of the war out in Iraq and Iran and countries like that they have destroyed things that have been there 4,000 years old. It's sad, it's very sad but that's unfortunately the nature of life, some things will be on forever and some will be lost. Difficult question.

TB: Yes [laughing] okay.

MW: I become philosophical!

TB: Yes [laughing].

MW: I would like to think the museum will go on, I think the form will alter. I have been in discussions with some innovative methods by which we can display our artefacts. That's going to take a lot of money I fear, maybe we will chip away at it and have a pilot study. I have been trying to get the Blaenau Gwent learning zone involved in the museum for the obvious reasons. There's a source of up and coming youths who are studying to take up probably senior jobs in society. They should know a little bit about the background, but I find, we are finding it difficult.

TB: Really, right.

MW: We have got a newsletter which we publish to members, we have got a newsletter for Friends as we call it, which generates money. And we continually look at the past but we also in that question people's ideas for the future.

TB: Okay, brilliant yes.

MW: You know we have got the communication process in place but it's difficult unless you have got a lot of money you can throw at it then tart everything up and raise the profile. Who knows.

[1:18:26]

TB: Yean, yes. There's one kind of element which I don't know perhaps it is covered in the displays itself. And I appreciate that you have got an awful lot to do and a lot of history to cover but do you have anything about the closure and the aftermath of that or not? And if you don't was that a deliberate decision or is there a reason why not?

MW: Do you mean in the sense that the industry closed or?

TB: Well, yes, I suppose the works closing. Obviously, the focus of it is on the works as a working works but...

MW: Well, if you look at the history in 1929 financial collapse of world economies it grew again in this area with the development of the what's commonly called the New Works. But when the final announcement was made for the closure of Ebbw Vale works there was what I can only describe as an air of despondency in the area. There were [sigh], there were deals that the wrong words, there were processes by which people who had worked in industry for many years and were of an age approaching retirement were looked after in a sense. They were provided with redundancy packages, there were relocation packages, everything to soften the blow.

But I think because as I said although 50% redundancy occurred in the last 1920s early 1930s the redundancies went from 17 – 21% in the early days of the closure of the works. And there was a proper despondency hanging around, although people had a large sum of money in many cases to leave and would probably protect them. I suspect that in reality those people were thinking well, what about my son, what about my grandchildren? How we go again like from the 20s, so there must have been a lot of that around. And on a personal level my wife worked in industry, my lad did for a certain time, but it wasn't a very pleasant time for the catchment area of Ebbw vale. There's no doubt about that and I don't think it's really got back to that level of when the plant was working fully. Of course, it's clouded by national problems, so the answer to your question is how long is a piece of string I suppose [laughing].

[1:22:05]

TB: Yes, okay so I mean locally there's clearly there's light industry, there's the retail park so there's new smaller businesses have kind of set up and created some employment. But I suppose my question is have you collected around some of the post closure at all, so you know it might be impacts it had or?

MW: Yes, it's an ongoing process so we get it from certain areas but because its going back really to answer a question. Because I can remember one union saying to me when he visited the museum

he said they have offered us redevelopment of the area, regeneration in the area but what does that mean? It's going to mean making you know the terms snowballs, you could buy like they were like.

TB: Like sweets?

MW: Puffy sort of chocolatey, he said it's not good having those jobs you want an industry. Now, most recently we became involved with the race track, you have heard of it? A major development scheme was proposed for the area north of this works up on Llangynidr Moors. Now, that was to be hotels, automobile testing facilities, it was to be virtually a relocation of the Brands Hatch type approach, but that went to the Welsh government for support. Now, the politics I am not aware of in depth, I know of it and we had the people behind the project came to visit to understand the history of the area when they were fighting to open this new concept. And it was called, I think it was called The Racetrack, but it was a facility to revolve around the automotive industry the development of engines hoping to attract in other industries.

And I know that other industries were involved and indeed they still are, but it seems to be an age before everything is done. They have even set up courses in the local Blaenau Gwent learning zone in what's really the A Level student, they have set up aero-technology courses, automobile courses. All to encourage the study in the automotive and aero-technology areas. Well, of course the advent of that race track and the concept up there must have influenced decisions on designing courses or where they were going to go.

TB: Wow, I see.

MW: But there are other industries still in the pipeline, so I am told to try and bring other major industries into the area as opposed to the local. I know we need them but to bring in the industries bigger than the unit factories which employ about two people, a carpenter and his mate kind of thing.

TB: Yes, yes.

MW: Whilst they are needed whilst I believe in that sort of enterprise, I don't think its going to cure the problem like this. And of course, people of my generation and later appreciate what affluence that brings if it comes to the area.

[1:26:31]

TB: I see, okay yes. Okay, so right, so I suppose in a way you are saying why would you dwell on say the down side of the closure of the works when in fact just like in the early 1930s that's a blip and in fact.

MW: It came back.

TB: Over the centuries you will see yes, the racetrack could be the next new works couldn't it potentially?

MW: I mean the area which the Welsh government and local government are looking at is tourism. Now, museums come into their own when tourism is sort of at the fore of any developments. But I think in a sense because we were a successful industry for such a long time and

in relative times only recently stopped, tourism is going to have a devil of a job to get up and running.

[1:27:45]

TB: Yes, actually I was going to ask whether you were involved at all with the Valleys that Changed the World, are you on here?

MW: I think, we have written so many things.

TB: Yes, okay right.

MW: They tend to come and use photographs and.

TB: Well, kind of being part of the industrial heritage of and a route I think that's a really good idea.

MW: Yes.

TB: Or the European Route of Industrial heritage I don't know if you, well anyway but.

MW: Well, a lot of it is, no.

[1:28:14]

TB: Well, tell me does it work or is it?

MW: I think its starting to work, because I think any drive from the Welsh government via local county borough councils is starting to grasp the nettle. But because of the financial status it doesn't give them that room to maneuverer. You know nationally the government spending has gone up in all local councils, I don't think there's many have reduced in. But in a deprived or what was a deprived area I don't think the financial situation of Blaenau Gwent is going to help in driving tourism. Because they have got their eye on other aspects of running an authority like the aged and looking at care systems. Because it is an old, older generation in this area, I can't see any silver bullet for curing the problem.

TB: Sure, yes.

MW: I think we will drift into it, but I can't see it being a flagship leading it.

TB: Yes, sure okay.

MW: Unfortunate but that's the way it is because coming with tourism also comes improving public facilities in the area. We have even heard that they have closed toilets to even out the expenditure. In towns they look to local shops to be able to use a toilet to satisfy that. You won't get that with this, not with the valley towns as they are now.

[1:30:40]

TB: Yes, well do you get any support in terms of networks? You mentioned AIM which has been useful to you in terms of funding, are there any others, are there any other you also mentioned the metallurgy heritage as another.

MW: Well, the Institute have helped us but that's only because we run the Ebbw Vale Metallurgical Society in parallel with the museum. Because I am a fellow member of the institute.

TB: Oh, I see yes you are a director yes.

MW: So, it becomes a little bit.

TB: Are you involved in any kind of industrial heritage networks at all locally, I think there is one called the valleys...?

MW: We are involved with the tourist officer Frank Olding, you might have met or heard of him, but he is retiring, he has been made redundant at the end of the month.

TB: Oh, right.

MW: We are involved with the local council, I am a member of Destination Management committee of this borough. But I am not going to say anything.

TB: [Laughing].

MW: But we also get involved like the heritage society, we send people to those events to show our face and to demonstrate that we are prepared to contribute. But they seem to run onto the buffers, we have a website which we are promoting. I think its time that we revisited that website and I would be looking to augmented reality systems which are used by some museums. We have got to be looking to the future but its often difficult with a museum because you are looking at the past.

TB: Yes [laughing].

MW: It is difficult and unless you are looking at technology and presenting yourselves to the public in a better light its often difficult to say what you should do.

[1:32:57]

TB: Yes, but it sounds like the, so you know you are contributing to these local initiatives and so on, but you said they don't seem to go anywhere.

MW: We put on talks.

TB: Right, okay.

MW: I go out, I went out three times last year to talk about the history of the area. But there's only a little, I am prepared to do it, but there's only a limit. And again, people say well what do you, oh I give up my spare time, I said if you would like to donate to the museum which claws back a couple of £ and helps us to maybe produce another paper.

TB: Yes, sure. Okay, well thank you that's great, I think I will stop it there.



Audio ends: 1:33:43