

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Stuart Whittle

Role: Chairman, Horwich Heritage

Museum: Horwich Heritage Centre

Location of interview: back office/archive/storage area, Horwich Heritage Centre

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Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

Also present: Volunteer, Norman Pendlebury (NP).

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

TB: Could you start by saying your name and date of birth please.

SW: Yes, my name is Stuart Whittle; and my date of birth is XX-XXX 1946.

TB: Great, thanks Stuart; and tell me the role that you have here.

SW: I am the chairman of Horwich Heritage; I have been for about 30 years. I'm also one of the two founding members.

TB: Just tell me briefly about Horwich Heritage; you said that it's got a membership, just tell me what kind of organisation it is and the governance.

SW: Well let's start with some origins, OK. Because Horwich Heritage was formed specifically after the demise of Horwich Loco Works. The town has got into, as you can imagine, quite a slump after that. It had lost its main employer, people were feeling a bit depressed.

TB: What year was this?

SW: The works closed in 1983, after almost 100 years of production and it was the backbone of the town. So perhaps remarkably the other co-founder, Geoff Waine, who was the vice principal of the local College, and myself as a planning consultant with an interest in heritage, we were introduced to each other and got talking about Horwich and what might be done to form a Local History Society that might help to boost the morale of the town. And obviously the feeling was that will be based substantially on its railway heritage. So that was 1985.

TB: You mentioned Geoff Waine; he was?

SW: He was the vice principal of Bolton College.

TB: Which was a Sixth Form College?

SW: A further education College.

TB: And where you both local residents, is that how you met?

SW: Oh yes, the other intriguing thing is that Geoff had moved to Horwich in recent times, because he had had educational positions all over the country. So he wasn't an original Horwicher; and neither was I. OK, I'm from Bolton which is just over the hill, but I have no prior detailed involvement in Horwich; so we were a couple of outsiders who suddenly decided wouldn't it be a good idea to form a local society. So we're then talked to some of the local politicians and so on, held a big public meeting, and whom, we are off, we formed a committee; we then have to decide where we are going to meeting what we are going to do, with no premises or whatever else so we were fairly itinerant.

TB: Stop there, this is lovely, so this is when you both moved to the town is that right?

SW: Well I am just a couple of miles over the border in Bolton, but close enough.

TB: And he lived here?

SW: In Horwich. So two outsiders forming a society for the town.

TB: It's a funny thing but so many people I spoke to that have set up local history museums have had the same outsider role.

SW: Well sometimes it takes that external dimension, doesn't it, to get people to recognise what they've got. When you were so close to it, sometimes, you don't recognise it, or you don't feel it's important enough to do something about. Once we kicked off people responded tremendously. You've heard that Norman and co came in early doors, and we started to do things.

TB: And tell me about your job, did you work for the council, on the planning side of things, or was it a Consultancy?

SW: I'm mostly retired now, but as a town planner I started local government and I worked in the towns and development corporations; overseas consultancy and then have my own practice for number of years. But I was always interested in the Heritage side of it. We did lots of big national heritage projects; we were involved in Portsmouth naval Dockyard; Ellesmere Port boat museum; other waterfront projects because they were quite the thing, weren't they, in the 80s. We've got Liverpool's waterfront, all these things were coming into Vogue at the time. And heritage centres for the other thing that were happening; and Geoff and I, from the word go thought it would be a great idea to somehow have a Heritage Centre in Horwich. Now if you like the obvious place might have been the loco works. But the loco works was closed and in private ownership. And equally, when you haven't got a thing to your name, you're not going to want to suddenly setup a centre in the middle of great big industrial premises; you have to start small which is what will come onto shortly, you know. So what we did to begin with was have, which we still have, monthly meetings; speakers, whatever. We met whenever we could, in the local public hall. But the turning point was when these premises were opened, as I mentioned earlier as a resource centre, a community centre, that was 1991. And we moved our meetings into here, and from the word go we had, and we still have consistently, 150 or more members.

[00:06:35]

TB: In the very early days when you set it up, what kind of numbers are you getting in those early days would you say, at meetings?

SW: At a meeting? Well very quickly we got more than 150 members signed up. They didn't all always come to the meetings, but from the word go we had really strong support, I mean 100 be a decent attendance at those meetings.

TB: You mentioned that you had a public meeting, so presumably you advertised that, this is at the very, very beginning.

SW: Yes 200 came to the public meeting.

TB: Really, where was that held?

SW: It was on the local leisure centre; it has been demolished recently, to make way for a new leisure centre, but also a new health centre.

TB: So why do you think so many people turned up to that meeting? You must have really hit a chord here.

SW: Yes we'll I think it was this feeling, substantially perhaps locally about the Works. But also, we made sure that we weren't just talking about the Works, we were talking about the unique characteristics of Horwich. And as you walk around, you have seen all the other aspects that we have been able to tap into, whether it is mining or cotton mills or bleaching or leatherworks or you name it. This was a very self-contained town until quite recently. When the loco works closed that was

probably the end of almost a domino effect of loss of local industry. I mean nationally it was the same pattern, in the 60s and 70s all these local industries seemed to disappear. They were brought up by national combines or whatever else and then closed down. So suddenly, I mean look at Horwich today, it's a nice place to live because it's on the edge of the moors, but it is probably more than anything else a commuter town for Manchester. Because once you open the M61, you're straight into town and the railways got good connections. So all That original ethos has disappeared.

TB: For the recording, just take me through a little bit of that industrial history and those closures. You said that originally there was a tiny Village first of all and then a bleach factory came. Can you just give me a potted history so we get a sense of the context?

[00:09:17]

SW: In the late 1700s there were only 300 people living in Horwich. It was a scattered Hamlet on a windswept Moor. And then these bleachers from Bolton, the Ridgeways, had a fire in town and decided that they needed some new premises. And they latched onto the fact that Horwich had cheap land, plentiful water, and rolling hillsides that they could develop across. And to their credit they built very quickly a thriving bleach works and local community that lived more or less nearby. And that local community of several thousand people is the bedrock of the Horwich we know today. And as I explained, those attractive old Stone cottages and whatever else are still around on what we call the topside of Horwich. But that was it for a while until the loco works came a century later and in an even bigger transformation, turning this 3,000 population into 12,000 within 10 years. People coming from all over the country to work here, as you heard earlier. So that was it. It turned into a railway town. Everything about it became railway. And it went on for generations; you can still find people in Horwich who's Great Grandfather's, grandfather's, fathers worked at the Works.

TB: And how many people do the Works employ, at its height?

SW: at its peak 5,000.

TB: And the peak would have been early 20th century, late 19th Century?

SW: Yes I think so.

TB: And how many does it employ roughly towards the end, in the early 80s when it shut.

SW: a couple of thousand. It's had stopped being fundamentally a railway production centre; it had gone through the steam age, the diesel age and it had finished up making a variety of things, carriages, wagons, other industrial components. But of course it was a victim like so many other railway works of drastic late 70s, early 80s closures in this country.

TB: that raises couple of issues; what is I just want to quickly check on this, did you have any professional interests in the planning of that situation, or were you free much a local who was interested; were you involved in any professional way in planning what happened after the Works had finished?

SW: I have no involvement in the works at that time, I wasn't terribly familiar with it all until I got immersed here. And I also found out that my antecedents came from Horwich so if you believe in serendipity or whatever I was drawn back in to it. But as things have gone on, the Works has been subject to major redevelopment proposals; 1,700 new homes to be built, and only a small what we call heritage core of buildings to be left. Now I have been involved in the discussions on that project for as long as it's been going, 10 years. And we battle the way with English Heritage and others to try

and retain at least some of the core of that works for posterity. And so far we have managed it, but there are still issues over one or two of the buildings and whether they can remain. But with lots of other things that we are aiming to do to retain that works heritage, to design in and around the Heritage core of buildings that seem to be appropriate. We are also working hard for the developers now on a heritage trail, which will involve everything from street naming to signage to sculpture to zoning according to how the works operated. So we really want to put our historical stamp on it and they seem keen. because it is a good marketing thing as well, to cooperate on that.

TB: So take me back to the 1980s, is the late 1980s, the works have shut; you have had this enormous community meeting, can you paint me a picture of the town at that point, was it mass on employment, where people moving out, were there other things for people to do, just give me a sense of what the situation was.

SW: Horwich went into the doldrums in the late 80s. There weren't any other obvious employers and I think a lot of ex local folks just retired early. But there was at yet another transformation of Horwich; I have mentioned the two previous transformations. In the 1990s the Middlebrook development which you may have passed when you came in off the M61, was built. This is a massive retail centre, with the Bolton Wanderers Stadium next door and an office complex and everything else. And suddenly overnight, wham! A whole new generation of jobs that haven't really been available in Horwich were created. And this is a major employment and business hub now. The only downside of that is, of course it shifted all the business dynamic away from the old centre of Horwich a mile or two down the road to the edge of the motorway.

[00:15:23]

TB: Yes; often the Victorian town tended to have the High Street as the focus of things, and clearly That Old Town isn't quite the focus in the same way as I've moved over to the retail parks.

SW: There were assurances given to try and protect the centre of old Horwich, but really it's been no contest, really; there are a few local shop surviving. But again if you walk around you will see that it is very much a local sort of walk-in facility now. All the major shopping expeditions are at Middlebrook or the Trafford Centre even further on.

TB: At that meeting, what came out of it, some aims and objectives?

SW: The public meeting - oh yes we have a constitution you can take a copy of it, in fact we have just been talking about upgrading it. But that came out early doors. It was all about maintaining the heritage, doing all the various projects you could do to promote it; either written or film or whatever else. And we pretty well stuck to all that as you can see. But yes, down at the bottom there, as and when it might be possible, we would love to set up a Heritage Centre. And that came about if you want to hear that now, as a result being in the community centre next door, holding our meetings. We were offered the opportunity of setting up a small facility to display our wares and interests. That room was about the size of this. And we packed an awful lot into there. But we did it consistently over 10 years to the point where it had caused interest, and fortunately the local politicians from Horwich Council who run this place, was sufficiently impressed with what we were doing to give us a shot at these premises when they became available.

TB: Fantastic so you started off as a history society would you say?

SW: Oh yes.

TB: What was it called?

SW: It has always been called Horwich Heritage, a nice catchy title.

TB: Why heritage rather than History Society would you say, it's a broader term?

SW: Well because of that aspiration to produce a Heritage Society. If you call this off a history society it tends to be, and again I don't know how people in your profession view it, but it tends to be a bit narrow. We thought you know heritage is a broader church; a broader title.

TB: And that was important to bring everyone in.

SW: Yes otherwise it might have sounded a bit bookish really.

[00:18:32]

TB: So you have this room, it must be about 20 feet by 15, not huge but a similar size room to what you had in the beginning. And the Heritage Society was set up in 1991 was it did you say?

SW: 1985.

TB: Right and at what point did you have this room in a state where the public could come in and have a look.

SW: From 1995 to 2005, down in the bottom there. So we did 10 years of earning our spurs, right.

TB: And that was through talks?

SW: The talks were in the big room, the main hall; this was specifically for putting on exhibitions; so again we developed and honed our skills for displaying things. We started to receive artefacts from left right and centre. But of course we were limited in where we could go and what we could do.

TB: I was going to ask where did the collection come from?

SW: Well it's amazing to think back where all this has come from. And clearly we we couldn't seriously start to collect anything until we moved into these bigger premises. And you have to give credit to Horwich town council for that, because they believed in us sufficiently to offer us the tenancy to this building, when they could so easily, and I know they were factions who would like to have given it to just another commercial tenant. But they believed that we were an asset to the town that would bring in visitors and interest, and also represent the town's history. So end of 2005, as you heard, they said right we will give you a chance in here, you have to prove yourselves, it's an empty shell; off you go. And in 3 months we set up the bones of what you can see here. So we had a good team.

[00:20:53]

TB: You told me this earlier but it would be nice to get this on the record; just tell me a little bit about this building.

SW: Yes it was a barracks built just at the beginning of WWI. And the local Horwich territorials actually marched off to war from the front of this building in August 1914. So it has great historical significance. This part we are in now was the rifle range, which was added a bit later. But when the council took on this building, initially they only had enough money to do what they called the first phase; the section next door. But then they got the resources together to refurbish the shell of this place by 2005; and then we came in and we were given the opportunity to do our thing.

TB: and you said that the deal was that you had to prove yourself; in what ways? Are we talking about visitor numbers? Did they give you targets?

SW: Yes we were monitored closely as to how many visitors we got, and what we were doing and so on. We had to keep submitting reports to the council to say, yes we're doing this, we're doing that. But we came through all that. I can't say precisely how many visitors now but over the years it has probably been around the 3,000 or so mark. And it varies because as you have heard we have regular new exhibitions which bring in hundreds; whereas on a day-to-day basis you might only get a handful, it just depends. But we do a big schools programme, so there are hundreds and hundreds of school kids coming in as part of that programme as well.

TB: And how many days a week are you open?

SW: We are open Monday to Friday 2 till 4. And Saturday mornings, 10 to 12:30.

TB: So those numbers are pretty good just for a few hours a day.

SW: Yes I think so. And we do lots of other things. I mentioned the monthly speaker programme next door every second Tuesday. We run trips, large and small. We do local walks; we do other outreach projects with people as it suits. So it's a busy thing, and of course once you start to run operation like this, 6 days a week plus whatever. It takes quite a lot of managing. We have a committee, doing various tasks, but I think as I said to you before, it is a good job I'm retired, and I've got a very patient wife, because it does take an awful lot of administrating.

TB: how many volunteers do you have actively working in the museum?

SW: will we have a committee of 10 and we have another roster of between 15 and 20 who coming on an intermittent basis, two at a time, volunteering once or twice a month.

TB: Do you have any paid employees?

SW: No, oh hang on, we give the caretaker a couple of quid don't we, for cleaning up, but that's all.

TB: OK. And in terms of governance are you a trust or a charity?

SW: Yes we are charitable, we are registered.

TB: And are you an accredited Museum?

SW: No, we've not bothered any of those routes.

TB: Why is that? Have you just never seen the need?

SW: I think that's probably fair. We have spent all our time doing what we do. We are registered as an attraction here with various organisations; but we have never felt that it would be a particular advantage to us. And it would probably be a lot of administrative effort but we could do without. That's not to disparage accreditation; it's just that you can only do what you can do and if we thought it would make a heck of a difference we might do it. But we are what we are. Fairly localised, but you would be amazed who turns up here, the number of overseas visitors or whatever is quite remarkable because even as a small town like Horwich of 20,000 has tentacles all over the world. And people seem to have quite an affinity for their home town here.

TB: Yes and I think with the genealogy and all the online resources, people are discovering this, aren't they.

[00:26:05]

SW: Oh yes family history has become a big thing here. We have course is run by one of that committee members; you can drop in and find out on the computers what you need to know. And of course we mentioned earlier how much research we have done and all the soldiers from WWI. All those 420 that we discovered.

TB: You have kind of got a research area which is rather nice, right by the shop area.

SW: Yes, all those cabinets are full of files of documents and photographs.

TB: So people can drop in if I've got a question about something, you can pull them out a folder.

SW: Absolutely. And we have a website of course which is active, Facebook, all these things that you have to do now.

TB: I'm just looking around here, it looks an extremely well organised archive we've got here. But where did you pick up all the skills necessary to run a museum? Have you had any advice or training?

SW: No, no. Only latterly have we got a couple of ex-librarians in who have been reorganising some of the filing. But otherwise, no it has been what other people have brought to the party. Norman has done all sorts on archiving and whatever.

NP: Just a bit.

SW: Yes just a bit; he and Terry were responsible for setting up the original archive system down here, and doing all this labelling or whatever else here. And then we were lucky to get a series of fairly skilled people to build things for us. So yes, we just been able to pull together all the necessary skills without special additional training. I suppose my planning and heritage background has helped a bit to steer it at one end, but everybody else has played their part.

TB: So have you had any connection with Museum networks or local heritage officers who have come in?

SW: We are strongly connected to Bolton Museum, yes. We loan things from them from time to time; if we needed any specific advice, they will give it to us. There are other similar local societies, none of whom have a Heritage Centre but there are three or four around in the various districts of Bolton. But of course, like so many authorities these days, when we first started Bolton Museum service was a major force. Now it's a much diminished resource.

TB: Is that due to government cuts?

SW: Yes. And they do what they do but it's as well we are as independent as we are, because we couldn't rely on anyone else to help us really.

TB: Going back to where the Collections came from, did you get any large-scale donations from Bolton museums or from Industries that have closed; or has it all been bits and pieces of personal donations from local people?

[00:29:39]

SW: Well I mentioned we have got one or two fine exhibits on loan from Bolton, like those scale locos are on loan from Bolton. Because before we were around anybody from this area who wanted to leave something, automatically left it to Bolton. Now since we've been around that has changed; quite a number of people have come here as the first call to leave things because they wanted to stay in Horwich. So that's been a positive. We've made sure when churches and Industries have closed, but we have gone round to see what practically we could save. Obviously sizes and issue and it's a good job that we have not been trying to save locomotives from the Works. But we have saved all sorts of things from local churches; commemorative stones and plaques, you have seen some of the things we have saved from the Cottage Hospital.

TB: Yes there is a wonderful gas heater, which was suspended from the ceiling.

SW: Yes, so things like that. The kitchen range with salvaged from a lost building that was demolished for the Middlebrook development. So it's amazing, you have seen the mining tub and the mining display. And of course the toll post, the tollgate.

TB: Yes, which is rescued from a farmer - a farmer used it for a while, but basically it was from the council you were saying, because it was getting redeveloped.

SW: Well the council wouldn't have recognised it until one of our members said this was... and it needs to be saved.

TB: So it literally was members picking up the phone, if a building is at threat, getting hold of the people and saying look is anything we can have here?

SW: Well yes, if you hear a church or something is closing, I mean often things are offered directly; but we would make contact with them. But it's small things. People have come in with all sorts of little gems, from World War medals to old Victorian wedding dresses; you name it. We've got all sorts of remarkable things and as I said earlier it is perhaps as well we were starting when we were, because you can't imagine some of those things just turning up, certainly not for free these days. We are well insured and I'm sure one or two of these things are worth quite a bit now.

TB: Just tell me about the role of this place in the community, because I think when people give something like this, there was clearly an element of trust isn't there, and of wanting other generations to see, but what role does this place have in the community, what does it give people would you say?

SW: Well we are trying to be as broader church as possible here. I mean obviously when you've got a core of 150 members and people coming to the regular meetings, that is one audience if you like. But that isn't necessarily the same audience that comes to those monthly meetings, that would be interested in Heritage Centre. In fact I would say there were two distinct audiences. Those people might wish to be more entertained, these people might want to know more actual detailed information. So that works on those two levels. But we often joke about there are still people in Horwich who don't know about us, but hopefully most people do. And we engage with anybody and everybody that's doing things. We have to do that to maintain the profile, but also to offer the service that we're trying to do. And of course everybody would worry about longevity, because people would always associate heritage centres with older folks, and of course that is somewhat the case here, but we try really hard to engage with all the schools on a regular basis, and to drawing what might be a slightly younger clientele. Certainly the people to capture if you like, for posterity, we find in terms of interest and volunteering are those that have retired around 60 or whatever. But

yes, you have to be conscious after all these years, I'm not getting any younger, Norman isn't, that you want this effort to be continued as far as possible. He always have to have half an eye, don't you, to continuity.

TB: Yes, so it's partly participation and entertainment, but also I wonder symbolically, just going back to the railway works closing down, do you think having something like this where people can understand and reflect a little bit about the town and its history; is that important or is it more of a visitor/entertainment issue?

SW: As I say you've got a split audience that I have mentioned, because our talks on a Tuesday are many and varied. They're not always absolute local history or whatever else. But up here I would say that there are still a hardcore of people who want to remember or reminisce or whatever else about Horwich as a railway town. Even though it's part of Bolton borough now, I have always detected a real sense of Independence. And that was born out of the fact that it was a railway town that was self-sufficient. And that sort of streak runs deep really.

TB: That's interesting, so it's about community identity, it's Horwich Museum it's not a Bolton museum.

SW: Oh no, don't tell people their part of Bolton in Horwich. It doesn't go down well. People always think, well, it's like every other authority amalgamation that came out after 1974, where you got strong local groups. They want to maintain that. And there's always a feeling that they are being let down or under resourced by Big Brother. I mean the amount of money that Bolton still want to throw at their town centre, and I must admit I am part of Bolton Civic Trust, so I am part of that discussion as well, but people wonder when they talk about needing to spend a few more million on this, that and the other, people wonder why they can't spend even a few thousand up here.

[00:37:19]

TB: I think you've just stumbled across something that's really fascinating, that I hadn't thought about before, but you mentioned 1974, so that was the government reorganisation into boroughs. The late 70s and 80s were a big growth area for local museums, so one possibility might be put it was a time when a lot of areas perhaps suburban or satellite towns which got amalgamated, perhaps there was a general feeling that local identity should be celebrated, and a statement made really I suppose. would that be true here, I was thinking about that public meeting with so many people turning up. Could have been part of an ill ease really, about the town and its status, do you think that might have had something to do with it?

SW: Yes I think you've got to have something that you think is strong enough, identity or theme or whatever, to run with. You know I don't think any of us would have run with this if we hadn't got the strength of the loco history or whatever else to go with it. If it wasn't that special, we wouldn't be bothering. That's not to decry other areas, but there are other parts of the Bolton borough that don't obviously have heritage societies, because they perhaps feel that there isn't that much to celebrate I don't know.

TB: I see that's interesting. You said that the really works over one of the biggest six in the country.

SW: Yes, that gives you a real platform to work from. And obviously railway display, railway talks, railway whatever has played a big part in what we have done. And even though the Works has been

closed for 30 years we have still had conducted tours down there, and they're still part of trying to maintain the Works' role in the future.

TB: It's amazing having that almost ruin for so many decades, still empty basically, as part of the town. That's quite a thing to live with isn't it?

SW: It is cast a long shadow over Horwich. And the fact that it has continued to be there, without being a works, but intact for so long, it has maintained that connection. If they had have demolished it 30 years ago we probably wouldn't be having this conversation.

TB: So it's kept the whole thing alive in away.

SW: Yes it has. It can be a bit frustrating because it was declared a conservation area as a whole. We tried to get certain buildings listed but English Heritage said no, this is just standard 19th century railway architecture. But until recently it was the biggest single intact railway works in the country. Not that it was never going to carry on indefinitely like that. Unfortunately it became a knock about Industrial Estate without too much maintenance. And although there is this tremendous history in the walls, that won't keep them up forever.

TB: I see so it went to light industrial use for some of those buildings.

SW: Yes the industrial estate, that it became, has operators until the present time. Because there's a big old sheds we're perfect for metal bashing and concrete fabrication and all the rest of it. But fortunately, the office block which I mentioned earlier, was restored for office purposes some years ago. So that's safe. And hopefully some of the other buildings will also survive, which are more readily able to be converted. But when you were talking about loco erecting shops, you're talking about massive structures here which cost millions to convert. So I can't really see, with the best will in the world, I can't see that surviving unless something miraculous happened. There has been talk of converting one of the big buildings to a primary school, which will ultimately be needed on that site. The problem is time is against you. There might be ultimately 5,000 people living there with I don't know, 1,000 kids. But at this point in time they have started building but there are no residents, nobody requiring any facilities, and the clock is ticking against these old buildings which the owners would rather obviously get rid of than keep in perpetuity in case something came around.

[00:43:00]

TB: I see so it's a chicken and egg sort of thing where you need the demand to justify the investment.

SW: You see it might take another 10 years to generate enough demand in that heritage core for schools, for pubs, local shops, whatever else. There will never be a major centre there because it's right next door to this Middlebrook development are we talking about which has every conceivable superstore and everything else that you could need. They can literally walk to that lot. But from my planning background, when you create 5,000 people on one site you create a village which requires a village identity and the village core. And amongst other things it stops people driving every single time they need something out of it, because traffic is a separate issue which we won't talk about in Horwich, but people are up to here with the prospect of so much additional traffic on the local roads without really much prospect of relief.

TB: I see yes because you're quite near to the arterial roads and the centre that you mentioned.

SW: There is only one big road in and out of Bolton and to the motorway, Chorley New Road. And that's already pretty heavily overloaded. But when I mentioned Horwich being an attractive place to live, developers are crawling all over every last piece of green territory in Horwich now, to build, hoping the government will give them the nod. You know the score, if you're not meeting a local building targets then the government is inclined on appeal, to allow you to build on a Greenfield rather than a Brownfield site. So that is what has been happening in and around Horwich. And that's on top of this massive Brownfield site which is the loco works.

TB: So there was lots of speculative interest, but it's really trying to think a little more strategically about how that development might work in a sympathetic way with existing community.

SW: Another thing, I might not be around to see it, but the other thing that could happen here, and we have talked to the developers at the loco works sites about this. With such a strong effort to get heritage built into that scheme, there could be another opportunity to do something as a heritage type display or centre down there. We would never have wanted this to be down there, because this is much more about the overall community history of Horwich rather than just the loco works. That goodness me, if down there you could find the opportunity and it may well happen, to bring Horwich locos from the National Railway Museum to display in their hometown. That would be terrific wouldn't it. That would be some draw, that would.

TB: Absolutely. Let's go back - one little question that interests me, you said at the very beginning from the first draft of your constitution, you mentioned that Heritage Centre was written on there. Why a Heritage Centre? It could have just been there collection that you keep, and by invitation only you can come to; or like you were saying a resource centre for some research. So tell me about that decision, why was it important for it to be something public?

SW: yes well it's intriguing thinking back. As I say Geoff and I always talks about the idea; I have been involved in planning heritage type centre things elsewhere so I knew a bit about it. And Geoff obviously felt that particularly from a local point of view, there was something, some story to be told here that was more than just a friendly society. But all we need is a bit of luck and support. Norman will remember that when we first started, and with no money, premises came up in Horwich that would have worked as a Heritage Centre; when was 5 grand, another was about 20 grand, and it was most frustrating because there were certain grants and things around at the time, but we were so newly formed that we had no chance of grabbing these opportunities. I mean that could of told a different story but on the other hand, what we appreciate here is not only being given this opportunity by the council, but the fact that we are within their secure domain. To go out and do Horwich, in your own independent building, in this day and age requires a massive amount of additional management, additional security and everything else. So this is the best place in my opinion for us to flourish. Obviously we are separately alarmed and everything else. I'm insured and everything, but it is the council's building, so we are their tenants.

TB: I see do you pay a peppercorn rent?

SW: Well more than a peppercorn, we pay a reasonable commercial rent for this. Because as I said at the beginning we had to prove that we were as viable as anybody else coming in on a commercial let.

TB: Do you charge entry to come in?

SW: No. We have a donation box.

TB: Right so my next question is how on earth do you keep going now if you're paying commercial rent; but also in the past did you get any grants, you must have had some funding to set the thing up, so where did that come from?

SW: Yes a little bit. We got a tourism grant from Bolton Council.

TB: how much was that roughly?

SW: I'm trying to think, it might have been 5 grand. Nothing that big. And we got 10 grand from the Lottery Fund, in 2006 when we open here, to help us to set this up. We get £1,500 from Horwich Council towards the upkeep of this place. And the only other money as we earn externally is through the schools programme, which is run through Awards For All with a partner. Everything else is earned through membership, sales, events, whatever. But we are viable. Even if we lost the grants, we have got 20 grand or whatever in the bank, which we spend as and when. So we are not, you know on the brink of anything. But you're only as good as your last day of operation aren't you.

TB: Well that's pretty impressive for a lead that you've got that sort of reserve, and it also sounds like there's a lot of activity going on.

SW: Absolutely, again, people are what they are. There are plenty of different ways that people can spend their time in this day and age. You've got to work hard to attract people to come in. It may be a bit older end apart from the schools programme, but so what. As long as the people want to come; but it does mean constantly refreshing what you're offering; all these extra exhibitions and so on.

[00:51:37]

TB: How many exhibitions have you done since you've opened?

SW: 117 Norman said. In ten years.

NP: That started at the bottom and moving into here. But big events have been in here.

TB: OK, can you give me a sense of the range of the different sort of subjects that you have covered, just to give me an idea, it's locally based, right?

SW: Yes, occasionally we stray into areas like the 1960s, we did one once; or local holidays, that would involve a wider domain, trips to Blackpool or whatever else. But local exhibitions have been strong, obviously. But in this year alone we commemorate it 60 years since the air crash on Winter Hill, which involved all the relatives coming over from the Isle of Man. We have commemorated 80 years since the beginning of the Haverlands British Aerospace factory at Lostock. Which a bit like the loco works was a major, major player for many, many years, employing as many people as the loco works. It's now a pale shadow of its former self, but it still operates as MBDA which is a major missile and technology company.

TB: You said yourself that the displays stop at the 1950s in the permanent section. So why has it stopped in the 50s, simple as that.

SW: When I mentioned the sixties - the 60s we do as a reasonably regular thing either with the kids or with other groups because we don't just have children coming in, we have any group that wants to have an outing. We have had book clubs, other societies, all sorts of groups you fancy a visit; some come from quite some distance. But why have we stopped, only because of space. We could recreate far more tableaux than we have got here. But we have got a problem because the only changeable space is that area that you've seen down the bottom. And when we have a launch of one

of those new exhibitions, we actually transform the whole of that top area, but as soon as we've had the major launch and the major push we have to contract it a bit, so that the rest of it can still operate. Yes so space is limitation. But we try and make up for that by putting things on that we would like to put on permanently, but can only do temporarily.

TB: I see I've got you, OK. Going back, I forgot to ask you this, but you said that you walked into a shell. So tell me about the idea behind the displays and their design, we influenced by other attractions or museums or anything, did it come about in a very piecemeal way; but did you have some one with skills and talents in exhibition displays? Just tell me a little bit about how you figured all that out.

[00:56:07]

SW: The basic layout is my design, from my experience of elsewhere, but also what I thought would work in here given the various elements; shop, archive, AV and tableau type display. But then we relied on the other members of the team, Norman, Geoff Pollitt who designed the loco and whatever else, to actually articulate the various designs that we have got there.

TB: So you were using the skills of the people that were most involved.

SW: Absolutely yes, no outside influences other than our own.

TB: And you said that you had a really skilled team first of all, and by that I got the sense that you mean practical skills so they could build locomotives and metalwork and...

SW: Yes practical skills, we are still got practical skills now. Unfortunately the guy who brought the logo or whatever else, he died a few years ago as well. So we have lost two valuable GeoFFs in the last few years. But fortunately we have found other people coming in.

One thing to mention is, in terms of our community outreach, we have had a few donations in recent times that amounted to a few thousand pounds. So we thought well what we do with those, that sort of money. And we decided looking around the town but there were a few things that need upgrading. So we have unilaterally taken on these projects. So for instance, it won't mean a thing to you, but up on the Moors buy the mast there near where the air crash was, there was something called the Scotsman's Stump which is an iron monument to a murder that happened 180 years ago. We are in the paper today about it because we had a commemoration last week. We had a dinner and a re-enactment at the place where the inquest was held, to commemorate 180 years, only last week. Anyway this was looking dilapidated so we decided that we would restore it. We spoke to United Utilities who are the owners of all these moors, they hadn't got a problem with it, as long as we observed health and safety and everything else. You have a little team lead by a guy called Roy Davis who have been taking on these projects that we are funding. So we funded that, refunded a whole series of renovations of stone walls and other features; of local stocks. We have also renovated the pillars at the entrance to Lever Park; now again that won't mean anything to you, but you'll have heard of Lord Leverhulme somewhere down the line. He was a big influence on this area, he came from Bolton, and he never lost his Love of the town. So Lever Park, he donated to the people of Bolton, which one's happened to the moors above Horwich. And there were two big columns to commemorate that, so we have restored those recently. So that's earning your sort of community cred, as well as just in the four walls here you see. So we aim to continue with that sort of community endeavour.

TB: That's fantastic. This is more of a personal question I suppose, clearly the focus of the heritage here is on, it's quite broad but perhaps it got an emphasis on the working life of the town, as well as some domestic things and so on, but why is this Heritage important for you personally. Can you articulate that.

[01:00:38]

SW: Well it's interesting isn't it. You have heard where I came from; someone who wasn't that familiar with Horwich, even though I only lived a few miles away and my working life and never really involved any connections here. But then it did help when I found that I had historical connections.

TB: When did you find out about that, do you remember?

SW: Well, as a result of starting to do family history and other things.

TB: So this was after this was set up.

SW: One of my colleagues said well wouldn't you like to know. Sorry I've lost the gist of the question.

TB: Why is this heritage important for you?

SW: Well hopefully I have become, like Norman, and honorary Horwicher now. I mean you've been here how long?

NP: 64

SW: 1964 he came.

NP: I came here when I got married and started looking for a house which I'm still in today. But it wasn't the house that I fell in love with, it was the countryside as well.

SW: So you see that's another example, isn't it, someone moving in and finding a special affinity with the place. Well obviously once Geoff Waine and myself got going on this, we traded on all the things that's as outsiders, Horwich suddenly meant to us. From the word go when you walk out of the door here, if you look around between the buildings you can see up to what we call Rivington Pike which is an old hunting Lodge on the top of the hill, that's the great local landmark which dominates Horwich from wherever. So that's a great sort of focal point to start with. And as I mentioned before, if you didn't have so many interesting stories to tell then we may not be where we are, but we have been peeling back the layers to reveal more and more as we've gone on. So it really gets under your skin. Of course, crumbs, I've invested as Norman has, 30 odd years in all of this. So it becomes a labour of love, if nothing else, doesn't it.

NP: I spent days and days when we were setting up here.

SW: I mean we all put an incredible amount of time and effort in, this is why you just want to be sure that you can ensure it's continuity for as long as possible, because obviously, I might have been a lot younger when we started, I was only in my 30s, so that's half my life involved in this. You just hope it's been worth it and it can carry on through others.

TB: So what's the reward for you, for all of this effort. What do you find most rewarding. You've already mentioned it is uncovering these stories. Is there anything else you can think of that you particularly get out of it.

SW: As long as people seem to be enjoying what we do. The worst thing would be to see it sort of tail away for whatever reason. So we work tirelessly to try and make sure that it is what people want to see and hear. Whether it has meetings, events, exhibitions, whatever else. You just know that you can't stand still, even though some of the committee might start saying, not another project, you know. But yes. It's the challenge. As long as you like the challenge that's fine. As soon as it becomes too much of a chore then you think well somehow perhaps I've got to hand it over.

TB: And in some respects is it seeing the numbers turn up to the meeting or whatever.

SW: As they say the sheer interests of producing all these exhibitions and whatever else. Because you are learning all the time more things.

TB: Would you say that this is giving you a sense of belonging to the community, finding out all these different stories and the past - has it helped give you roots do you think?

SW: I don't know if anyone would accept me as an honorary Horwicher as such, but my whole sort of affinity is here, more so than Bolton even though I am just over the border there. I've become locked into this [laughs].

TB: it's a very interesting sense of identity. This area is ethnically changing, right, it is quite a diverse community in Bolton.

SW: Bolton certainly, but Horwich, not so much so. I presume that's because Horwich had a few mills, but it didn't get the sort of Asian input that Bolton certainly did, there isn't a large ethnic community in Horwich.

TB: You mentioned that migration has been a big big part of the story of Horwich, since the Beginning by the sounds of it; it is just whether more recently, whether there is any thought about the more recent migration stories.

SW: Well we would respond, clearly, if there was a story to tell. Any story, ethnic or otherwise but in this particular case it isn't part of it. You are starting to see a little bit more of diversity and some of the local primary schools and things. But we don't have that sort of dimension; will be happy to embrace it if it gave us another story, another angle. But it's not the case here.

[01:07:50]

TB: From 2006, when opened has the museum changed in any great way, what have the permanent displays been fairly constant?

SW: Fairly constant but there has been some changes. We had a pub here, instead of the 'way we were'. We have an old style toffee and tobacconist shop where that Tollgate is. Once that came...

NP: That is going nowhere.

SW: I was going to say, it takes a bit of shifting. And WWII wasn't always there. That was much more of a social community history thing. So things have changed. Some of it is obviously fairly fixed like the footplate and so on. And World War II, particularly as it's coming round again now, it's likely to stay that way, for some time. And I said before, what you have to do then is try and work all the other changes into the top end.

TB: And having that temporary space I suppose allows you to bring you stuff in all the time.

SW: Yes we do our best to bring out... Next year we are going to do the changing face of shopping in Horwich, so that will involve everything from shopping tableaux to talking about how individual shops have moved through different ownerships and so on.

NP: And we had a butcher's on every corner.

SW: There were 37 butchers in Horwich. There's one now.

TB: That's amazing, that's a great story isn't it.

SW: Of course being a semi-rural community, and it's lost a lot of that. But they were slaughtering on the premises as well, you know you had blood running down the High Street.

TB: Is there any particular highpoint for you, something that you've really enjoyed doing?

SW: The biggest high point was open in here in 2006. Because we'd already been going, 85 to 2006 what's that, 20 years, 33 altogether. But you can't beat opening here. And when we have 100 + visitors for openings of exhibitions, then you think it's worthwhile don't you. I mean this World War One day...

NP: 152 has been our record visits for one day.

SW: That would only be in half a day, 10 till 1. We had over 300 for that World War One full day. And again the nice thing is we can tandem up between here and next door, because we have gift fairs and all sorts of things in the biggest space that we can't do here. So yes, opening this place and haven't been good responses, terrific responses makes it worthwhile.

TB: What's the toughest part of setting up and keeping this thing going. Has there been a low point, all difficult moment.

SW: I don't know if we wish to say too much about this but we had a tough time with the previous Council town clerk and her community centre manager. For some reason, we won't go into detail, but basically between them they decided to give us a hard time. I think the town clerk really thought that there should be something else here rather than the Heritage Centre and she made life rather difficult for us. And she used this under manager to reinforce her efforts. Anyway we survived that by - I mean it cost her her job and this other one her job, but we actually fought back, saying this is unreasonable. So we got through that. And the council apologised and to put much nicer people in place, it's sweetness and light now. But given that the Council were behind the very initiative; it certainly upsets us to think that the very people who were supposed to be supporting you were behind the scenes, trying to undermine you. And that wasn't known to the main political leaders. It was a bit of subterfuge. But we managed to expose it and that sorted it out.

TB: Crikey that sounds quite tough. This might be a strange question, but if this museum did close down, what would happen?

SW: Yes that's difficult isn't it because we've got so much stuff here. I remember in the early days being asked similar questions by the council. And of course when the council turn to Bolton Museum, which was a stronger service than it is now, and said if this closed down would you take it over or would you wish to take material. And they said no we don't want anything to do with it! So there's no backstop there. And of course if we weren't here and the council wanted it to continue, they will have to pay somebody to run it. Which may or may not have a workout, because they have got one or two staff but they're not in a position to do that. So what would happen. All the stuff has

been donated, one way or the other; it is all Horwich related. So difficult to say, I know you would have come across museums that have had to face up to this. You would have to, if the worst came to the worst, you would have to try and distribute the material to a good home. But I don't know, the only other possible outpost as I mentioned, if this loco works development progress to such a degree that there was a way of opening either another facility or if this was in trouble for whatever reason, for this to be transferred down there; that might be another future possibility. But I certainly would like to see all this disappear. It's such a community asset. I'm not just talking about the place but all this is the nearest thing Horwich has to its own identity, wrapped in one little bundle.

TB: And if the museum hadn't of happened, how would your life of been different?

SW: It would have been a lot easier [laughs] how you get sucked into these things I don't know. I mean the transformation was coming up here and realising that we are going to have to run this six days a week, or six half days a week. Set it up, continue to change it, continue to run at the volunteers and whatever else. Amazing to think I was still holding down a job for half of this time.

TB: Yes I was going to say, if you started in your 30s, at that moment when you realise my god this is actually running a major organisation, you must have still been in your work.

SW: Yes what would I be we just worked about, I was still being my 50s when we came up here. But I often like to reflect now that given that it takes up so much time, how did I go home before, well when I was a bit younger maybe I had a bit more energy. I'm involved in other things; I built a church not too long ago with the local community. I'm involved with Bolton Civic Trust amongst other things. So yes heritage and that sort of thing seems to have taken over my life, but there we go.

TB: So it would have given you some time to do other things, but it also would have left a hole of some sort.

SW: Well yes we could all wonder what we'll be doing for the last 30 years couldn't we, if we weren't doing this. It would have been a lot easier just to have stuck at level one, like lots of societies do just have a monthly meeting and a chat and this that and the other. But everybody was up for this, weren't they. I mean we wouldn't have done it... Anyway fortunately, where are we, 12 years down the line there was still plenty of people who want to volunteer to help, there's still a hard core of people who are putting on all the stuff; as long as that continues we're OK. But yes you have to have half an eye for the future; we have got one or two younger professional type recruits on the committee now, which is a deliberate policy to try and bring in, alright they are may be 10 or 15 years younger than me, but that makes a difference.

TB: So for the future you're fairly confident it will continue.

SW: That's the way we're working. You can't continue, however good you think the regime is at the moment, you know it can't continue indefinitely. We are past 70 aren't we. So you never know, and you have to be wise enough to work towards those future options.

TB: Thank you so much this has been amazing, so inspiring just to see it.

[ENDS]

