

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Geoff Burton

Role: Founder and Chair

Museum: RAF Ingham Heritage Centre

Location of interview: Geoff's living room at home in Fillingham, following a site visit

Date: 6/2/19

Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

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

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

TB: So Jeff could you give me your name and date of birth please?

GB: yes Jeff Burton, XX-XXX 1960.

TB: I'd like to focus particularly on the early days. Just tell me the story of how on earth you got this idea, and where it all came from.

GB: I moved to the village of Fillingham with my family in 2003... became aware that there was an old airfield upon the hill directly behind us and started to do research; that really went on for about 7 years. The internet... It's like the branches of a tree you go down one; and it splits again... so I'd spent about 7 years researching and found out who was up there, the fact that it was the Second World War Airfield. We found out that the Polish Air Force were there. It got to 2010 and I thought I really need to get this out there to local villages to tell them. May 2010 I hired the village hall here at Fillingham and put a display on for the day that advertising around all the local villages and it was just a free event. On the day we had about 200 people that came which was absolutely incredible. Near the door on the way out we had a form that said if you're interested in forming a heritage research group put your names down. During the day itself so we had to Old veterans who lived locally (unfortunately both have now passed on) but they came along and brought their photographs. They sat on chairs in the middle and everyone was huddled around and thoroughly enjoyed what they had to show and tell. End of the day we've had about a dozen and a half people who put their names down. The following week we organised a meeting here at my house and everyone wanted to do a bit more than just research. We knew about the old buildings up on the airfield, so the idea was that we were going to form a group we are going to ask the landowners to see if we could hire or lease some of the buildings so that the research that we did could then be Displayed to members of the public.

[00:02:11]

TB: OK great so if we could rewind a little bit. So the first thing was for 7 years you started to research the history of that site. What was it that got your curiosity going, what was it that you loved about this particular subject or topic?

GB: I was still serving in the RAF at this point but I don't necessarily know if this is a direct connection or not. It was just a fact that We'd always lived in RAF quarters but now we had a house of our own and directly above us was quite clearly a piece of historical interest. Between our village and the village of Ingham next to us, very few people knew really what had happened up there, and some people didn't even know there had been an airfield. you were talking to people in their 70s and 80s who were children during the war years who remembered the various things that happened and I think it unfolded like that. It got my interest and obviously with 20 years ago it might have been a totally different thing but with the internet it allowed you to explore and that was really where I spent an awful lot of my time on my computer. Obviously I spent time away with the RAF and some of the places I worked at when you have down time there wasn't a lot else to do especially on a Sunday desert type of place so if there was internet connection you'd go on and I would spend hours

doing research so it was a wonderful opportunity which would not present itself in an normal working life.

[00:03:44]

TB: Could you just told me something about your background then? A bit about where you grew up and a bit about your career- that's interesting because it so clearly connected.

GB: I was born and spent the first 25 years of my life in Leicester. During that time I suppose my main passion, which links in a way, was steam engines. We had the Central Steam Railway at Loughborough, and it came down to Leicester. Even our Village had, in the early 60s, a steam train running through it, apart of the British Railway, before that all finished. So there was always that captivation with Steam as my main thing.

[00:04:24] TB: Did you get involved in that?

GB: I did to a very much lesser extent, as I was in my early 20s and teens then. I joined the RAF at 25, then obviously spent 30 years going around the world doing different things. When I was here in Lincolnshire at various points, there was always steam trusts that I got involved with. So there was always that interest in the past, but it just manifested itself in the way that I actually wanted to do something physically and change things uncover things create things almost like the Time Team programme find, send things so there was always that interest. The fact that when we moved her there was an old Airfield which nobody seems to take an interest in the history books and the internet showed very little about it. It was only ever a wartime Airfield, so it's one of those things I've been lost in time back to agriculture. I think that was the hook and the fact that it was local for me. So that was where the fire started the build. And obviously you can appreciate after 7 years of research I wanted to go and tell people, and then the fact that a dozen and a half people wanted to be involved and that they were local people, it just grew from that this was the embers that started the fire going.

[00:05:42]

TB: You are an outside coming in which I have to say is incredibly typical for people that start museums, 9 out of 10 are not locals, they're that people that have come in, which is interesting

GB: Maybe that's because people always accept what they got on their doorstep it's a bit like tourism, go to things a lot further and you forget what's on your doorstep.

[00:06:08]

TB: It sounds to me that you got a lot of interesting research but also you got to meet an awful lot of local people. Was that also part of the motivation or not particularly?

GB: No but I realised that if we wanted to create something and make it happen it wasn't something that I can do on my own and I didn't particularly want to, and I think the key thing that runs all through this, I'm a person that doesn't really flourish too well in limelight when we have big events- I'm happy to just organise it. I'm not a " here's me, look at me" Type thing. it's always very much when I talk on the radio and when we do other things, it's all about the team, and I'm always that that, it's about the volunteers it's about the committee it's about the team. I couldn't - we couldn't

do this if it wasn't for the team that I've got around me. Who's to say that I'm not going to be the chairman, I've always been the chairman because nobody wants to do the job, and I have a passion right at the very top to keep it stoked, and staring each week each month, to do it. But there's nothing to say that any year or two's time somebody else might want to take over and I'll take a step backwards, and maybe delve down into particular parts of it that I can get involved with. rather than having to administer or look after the whole organisation.

[00:07:28]

TB: You're the chairman and I'm guessing you always have been... Did anyone help you or was at literally just you organising that meeting, did you have any family support or anyone that could have given you a hand at that stage?

GB: From the very early stage of Brandon Pritchard, who's... I say we're partners in crime... He has had the most, and the same kind of enthusiasm that I've had, but he's allowed me to take the top slot as it were, he has been very much the deputy, but when we go to the Polish Embassy in London, when we go to other organisations and other events, he's always very much the partner with us, the two of us go together because we both have the same level of passion in the same commitment whereas. He was one of the people that came to the display, and stuck with us, he is an architect by trade, so that helps in many respects, and he is able to open many doors, and bring his expertise. But also he knows so many people within the construction building trade, and the whole thing to help us with our projects.

TB: I've got you. But at the Beginning it was just you, hiring that hall?

GB: It was, that was just it. And I just wanted to see... It was more a case of saying look, this is what I found out about your local area, did you know there was an airfield, did you know what happened there, here is a day's exhibition. And it was very much that day but the bolt on bit was 'if you're interested, fill the form in'. We could have ended up with one or no people on there, and I was quite ready to do that, I just thought well I've done a one day exhibition. Since then, obviously the other person that supports me is my wife. She realised very soon on that as this was my main passion, my hobby, my interest, everything, She said 'it's better to be on the inside than on the outside'. So I recruited her I was the secretary for the committee, and it just allows her to kind of be part of what we doing and understand it. She doesn't take a massively active part, she certainly doesn't come up on Sundays, but at least it allows her to understand what I'm doing. So yes, she is very much the rock, that when I come home, if I've got frustrations about funding or anything else, then at least I can talk it through with her, I talk with Brendan obviously as well, from a professional point of view, but she is my sounding board at home, just in case I'm doing things a bit daft sometimes, all going a bit over the top with enthusiasm, she's the person that calms me down and says, let's go at a lower level, you know, you are just really going up this 100%, you need to perhaps go at 70%, hold on, so yes that's very much the case.

TB: Just a couple of quick questions: in the RAF, what was your role?

GB: For the last 10 or 15 years, counter-intelligence. So I looked after security risk, so the best way I can describe that is really, my second from last job was here with the Red Arrows. So when they deployed away, then I looked at the security threat, and to the assets, the aircraft, and the personnel. So it's very much looking at where they were staying, what the local threat was, speaking to departments or agencies in London, speaking to other agencies, and I build the picture up to say right, where you are going this is the existing situation. Then I moved on, my last tour was at RAF Coningsby, also in Lincolnshire and I looked after the security of the Typhoon fleet, the Typhoon aircraft, that were based there. Again a very similar role. There was also a lesser role to look after the security on the station, but most of it was towards security risk, if you like.

TB: So lots liaison and talking to people I suppose which put you in good stead?

GB: Very much so; we came back from Germany in '99, so the rest of the time from that point onwards, because the kids were going through teenage, we wanted to settle down rather than, you spend your RAF career as you probably well know, bouncing from one place to another, and overseas as well, so we wanted to settle. So we settled in Lincolnshire, and I think that was where the hook, the bug, started with aviation for me, as opposed to the steam engine side of it.

TB: Yes that's right it's interesting that you moved over to that.

GB: I think that's because Lincolnshire it is just synonymous with aviation and there are so many old airfields.

[00:11:58]

TB: I'm just talking about the site itself, when did you first encounter it and start to explore it, because it is private land presumably?

GB: Yes very much so, probably a year or so before we formed. I think the very first time it was one winter, or Christmas time when it was all snowy, and my wife and I just walked up there for a walk one day, and we walked around the old buildings, and they were full of all bits of Farm machinery, you've seen today it's completely empty, but it had tins of fertilizer, you know, big things, it was a right old mess, windows all broken, it really did look as derelict as it could have been then. And the idea that wouldn't it be great to have something up here, that was before the exhibition, so we did walk up there a few times and I think that was probably another separate fire that was lit, your brain starts thinking, this is a possibility, it's off the road. We had looked at the two Nissen huts that you saw further down, they were closer to the road, they were initially what we had looked at. But quite soon, when you look to the practicalities of it, you're thinking How would we keep it warm, how would we keep it dry. It's got a rounded roof which creates all kinds of problems for storage etc. And it was very close to the road; we felt if it was a little bit back from the road, practicalities like a driveway, a car park and things like that. And the other building lent itself very much, so as I chatted to you earlier on, we were from the very early days thinking about what if, what if, what if. Looking almost like a blank canvas; where would be the best place, because you go to some museums and Heritage centres, not necessarily Aviation linked where you think; we are very critical, positively critical if you like now, we think 'oh they could have done that better'. But if it was a case that one thing comes under then another thing comes, they perhaps didn't have the chance that we have,

with an almost blank canvas to go, where would it be best suited. Like we talked about the memorial, let's have that to the north, facing South, so that the sun is always to your side or behind you for photographs that people want to take. And it just flows out into the open field, we purposely didn't put any walls or hedges behind that bit because we felt, during the war years, everything would have just rolled out across the fields where the aircraft took off from, so we wanted to make it as that's what we could, and I think to an extent we have achieved that by laying a little bit of seeded grass behind it which we keep short. It just separates it from the field, but gives it that - so a lot of what we have done is thinking ahead, thinking practically. And the building we took the footprint of the building, the measurements, and we spent a lot of time of blank drawings, writing out, designing rooms and how it would go to best suit visitors and the guest experience.

[00:14:50]

TB: Just going back, you mentioned this exhibition that you made; was this information boards, or was it a presentation?

GB: It was a whole range of different things. I cobbled quite a few bits together, including getting some sandbags and some old cam netting, as well as a lot of boards; I also had some of the big foam A1/A0 boards made up with some photographs that I had found, and I displayed them. I had also managed to acquire some artefacts, small things, so we displayed those on a table as well. And there were one or two short pieces of film that I had found on the internet which rightly or wrongly, we we showed in a darkened corner, just to give people a bit of...

TB: That's amazing, that's a lot of preparation for that public meeting.

GB: It took a couple of weeks with my wife's help, I must be honest, at that point, because there was just the two of us involved in what happened. The village hall here is typically a little old school house, it's probably twice or three times the length of this room, so there wasn't masses of room to display, but there was enough to fill the room. And that was it; we had typical teas and coffees and biscuits for anybody that wanted it, but free entry was the big thing. We did that 2 years later in 2012, after we have the lease on the land which we spoke about earlier, down in Ingham Village Hall, which is a bigger one and it's like a school assembly room attached to the school. And we did that over a whole weekend instead of one day, but I had a whole team of people then; we brought in display cases that we borrowed and bought and we had a whole big assembly room full of artefacts. But again we wanted to do it for free, because he wanted maximum attendance; the money wasn't the important thing, the attendance was, and getting the word out there. There was a lot more advertising for that, so I think the furthest person came from Southampton, but he had a Polish connection; that was over 2 days and I think we had over 600 odd people over two days. We estimated that because obviously the clickers weren't working all the time. But that was a lovely thing for a weekend; and it alerted Ingham Village, which obviously the RAF station was named after, and a lot of people just didn't know the history, and it was lovely thing for the village and the surrounding population.

TB: Which village will be in now?

GB: This is Fillingham.

TB: And how far away are you from the site here?

GB: A mile I would say, just up the hill. All of the village here is along the bottom of the escarpment, and the airfield, like Scampton, the next one along, RAF Scampton, they are all on what we call the top of the hill, people say Lincolnshire is flat well, not quite because you have this escarpment that runs all the way along to Lincoln itself with a castle and the cathedral.

TB: Just tell me about the volunteers; most of the more local at the beginning, what do you think they got out of it, do you get a sense of their motivations and the rewards that they get from being involved in it, in those early years?

GB: We have kept most of those original, what we call the 'originals' that set it up, plus we have acquired new people. Occasionally we lose somebody, perhaps they didn't feel they have the same enthusiasm that others did. I think the journey so far, over the 7 or 8 years, a lot of people came along because it was a local project, it was something to do. I'm not saying it was definitely a blokes garden shed type brigade, but they felt it was something on a Sunday they could get involved with, that had a purpose and the direction and an end goal. We made that quite clear, what we were trying to achieve; are we still haven't achieved it, but it's all small, and the fact that we were able to get funding and keep getting little dabs of funding here and there, kept the project going, so every Sunday we had something to do. And apart from Remembrance and Christmas Sunday, we are there whether it snowing, rain, it doesn't matter we are always there. Sometimes you don't get all 20, sometimes you'll get half a dozen to nine people, a lot of that will depend on the work, and their family commitments as well because obviously everybody has a pull. They all get the general idea, some have a deeper understanding and interest in the aviation; others are just happy to come along and get involved because it's an interesting project and it's got legs. And by drip feeding funding in to do little projects, so long as we have got something to do. There is nothing worse than having nothing for volunteers to do, we very much acknowledge that, they will start drifting away and look for other projects. So we are constantly, behind the scenes, Brandon and I are looking for funding, you know where's the next £2,000 or £10,000 coming from, what can we do? They may think they're turning up on a Sunday and getting involved as volunteers, but we work 7 days a week to facilitate what is going on. But don't get me wrong, it's not a chore, it's great, but it's challenging at times.

[00:19:49]

TB: So you've got this core of 20; you said you've got 100 who are members of the organisation, that come and go to events and things

GB: And they can be from all around the country, and they are, and internationally, we have got one or two international members. A lot of them have Polish connections, so again the second, third and even fourth generations, Poles, who by now have probably lost the Polish name, and she wouldn't know until they start talking about Mum and Dad or Grandma and Grandpa. But they want to feel involved; and the membership was one way of getting involved, we have a newsletter that comes out quarterly, which we send electronically to them now which helps to keep the more involved, especially if there's several counties away and they can't get here regularly perhaps once every couple of years. And it's very much for an international audience now because we are very much aware that a lot of future funding is probably going to be coming from the Polish government, regardless of Brexit, because they see it as a much higher thing.

TB: That's only important part of the story so let's come back to that; just going back, you've had the big meeting, you have volunteers; you have figured out but it's not just going to be about the research, but in fact that there is enough interest there to do something a bit more active. And from the beginning did you have your eye on, were you beginning to scout out the site, have you worked out that was where it was going to be?

GB: No, as I say we've been up there before, my wife and I, just four walks around, and obviously I had had an eye on the buildings, she was just enjoying the walk; and then it was very much a case of after the first meeting, the two rusty Nissen huts were our priority; but when we talked to each other, the smaller group, We realise that practically it wasn't going to be the best building. The one further up, the brick buildings we're going to be the more sustainable. And that within a short space of time was what our target was. The landowners were happy to almost straight away agree to us having the rusty Nissen huts, but the brick buildings took a lot longer. Because they have been sub-tenanted out to the tenant farmer whose family had been farming the land since the Second World War, it was a lot more of a delicate subject, and we had to approach it very diplomatically, and understand that they obviously had to have their lease rewritten, and all the costs for that, and a new lease, fell to us obviously because we were the one asking. But that was 2012 and we had to have the lease sorted for April, it was a close-run thing because as I mentioned the Royal Engineers were coming in April, and they couldn't start on the land unless we had the lease to operate, so it was all done within the space of about 7 days. It got that 7 day period where we were waiting for the solicitors to sort everything. But it sorted itself.

[00:22:45]

TB: Just to explain, the Royal Engineers were trainees who were coming in and they had two weeks to build a road, or months?

GB: They had two weeks. They were based down in Cambridge as an old RAF base called Waterbeach. They were 12 Air Support Group, they were a group within the Royal Engineers that traditionally had repaired airfields; that was their role from the Second World War onwards. So they had that connection anyway. They tend to do their two weeks of training at Waterbeach where they built a new road, and then ripped it up after two weeks, and that was the trainees job, to do it. So we had the connection with them, I am not sure where the idea came from, but let's get the Royal Engineers involved. We asked the question, and very quickly they said yes, that would be great because they're doing a project. They provide the Manpower and the machinery, and we provided the hardcore and any of the materials that we needed. It was great, they came for two weeks, and they did an incredible job that we couldn't have done, and saved us probably hundreds of thousands of pounds in the process. But they got a lot of benefit from it, because the trainees there, it wasn't just make it then rip it up, it was billed something for posterity. Now I know it's only hardcore still, but the fact is they dug it out of a farmer's field and they have created a roadway and a car park for us, so it was good.

TB: And just to go back to the landowner, basically it's a big Estate right, it's got a mansion

GB: Yes.

TB: So just give me a sense of that approach; was the door open when you rang them up and said look I'm interested?

GB: We did, a very quick history; it's the Rose family. From the First World War, through the Second World War, up to about the 60s it was Rose engineering, based at Gainsborough, and they made everything from machinery, tractors, they made gun turrets through the Second World War for aircraft and some other gun and other things for the Navy, through the 50s and 60s. They sold the business and then moved on to farming and agriculture, and they have a big Christmas tree enterprise that they run now. So I suppose in a way, William and his brother Alfred were both, they understood a little bit about where we were coming from, because their father was the one who had obviously been involved in making the gun turrets through the Second World War. So there was a little bit, but again they're businessman at the end of the day; so they had to understand what we were doing and whether we were genuinely serious. They probably think we're still a little bit barking, but they see the difference that is happening and it's a volunteer project; it's always remains their land if you like, because there's a lease on it. But they are happy for us to do what we are doing, so we have got their sanctioning, and the fact that they have given it to us for a peppercorn rent, that was just purely to set up the lease, you had to have a fiscal payment.

TB: How long is the lease for?

GB: 25 years. We renewed it; it's £1 a year, just to make it a proper lease you have to pay, so that's the peppercorn rent. We renewed it this last year because heritage Lottery needed a minimum of 20 years, and it just got to the 19 year point, so we've gone through the process of renewing it now for another 25 years, to make it compliant. I presume that if I'm still here in 25 years, whoever it is will then apply to them for another 25 years, or we may even approach them to buy the land, and they may feel that once we are open, that it's a proper thing to do, but we will cross that bridge when we come to it.

[00:26:29]

TB: OK that's brilliant. Another broader question, thinking back to those early years, 2011/12 that sort of time, there was a lot of airfield museums of this ilk around here, over a dozen I should think; and by the sounds of it you would have gone around and seen some of those. So tell me at that time, what was in the air that made you think that a/ we need another one and b/ that you could make a go of it?

GB: I think it was really a case that we wanted to do what we were doing first, then we realised obviously the Aviation Heritage Lincolnshire was there: I contacted Dave Harrigan and Phil Bonner as it was, the pair of them were basically running it as part of, I think it was a Heritage Lottery Grant that they started up 10 years prior to us getting involved. And we realise that they were just an umbrella organisation, that looks after the interests of everybody, and promoted Visit Lincolnshire, Visit England, the ACE project with the Arts Council funding, and they made Lincolnshire Aviation Heritage unique in the UK, and there are now other counties that are trying to, not copy but they are taking, getting involved with Dave to find out how they can run it. We are lucky because Lincolnshire, as they call it, Bomber County, we have so many aviation sites, and old airfields, naturally a lot of people gravitate towards Lincolnshire for anything aviation. And because it hasn't been overdeveloped like London areas have, you obviously used to have Biggin Hill, Tangmere,

Northolt, a lot of the other ones that have probably been flattened and built on now. Lincolnshire it because it's agriculture, most of it is stayed where it is, so it has that kind of draw to it still. You can spot old RAF airfields. If you drive through Lincolnshire, they might have been gone for 30 or 40 years, but you can still spot iconic buildings; you think yes there was an airfield there, and there are some great books that look into these things.

[00:28:38]

TB: In the planning stage did you get much advice and support from Dave and the alliance?

GB: Very much so. Certainly from 2010 onwards we were very much the new boys on the block. A lot of the other aviation centres had been up and running for 5 or 10 years plus, so we were very much the youngsters and a little spotlight with shone on us; and a lot of useful information; we went out to, me and Brendan we went out to other places and said how have you done it, what are the pitfalls that you have found, and obviously very quickly we realised we needed to become a registered charity. A lot of funding doors and other doors open; we have a committee, we had a constitution, then we had a bank account; then we became a registered charity and we had to do it in that order. And we also became a company limited by guarantee, just to protect our three trustees, £10 liability each, so if it all went belly up, we wouldn't be hammered and lose our houses. So again we did all the right things from the beginning, we listened to other people, and things were they found they had gone wrong, or had perhaps not gone down the right path, and right from the early days, we had got our legislation and everything right, policies right, just to make sure that we were not having to backtrack over a 10-year period, and even to the point of, although we are only going through working towards accreditation now, as soon as we started to get artefacts, we build a simple spreadsheet and numbers and catalogued them, and looked after them because we had heard from other heritage centres, where there were now having to do it with 10 or 15 years worth of collection. They didn't know who it had come from, they haven't got any providence as to whether they owned it or whether it was loaned to them. So we have stuck rigidly to that, so we know any particular piece you can go, we've got it for 5 years but it actually belongs to somebody else and they may want it back. We try to do everything right from beginning, so that we wouldn't trip up five or 10 years down the line.

TB: Dave mentioned that he tries to have two key mentoring sites for a new museum, I don't know if this happened with you, what are you giving specific people?

GB: Not specifically but we were given free range, where everybody at the meeting, I don't know if you've been to one of their monthly meetings, sorry the quarterly type of meetings that they have, and there is a representative from each site there, and everybody said please come and see us, and we just took an open invite to a lot of them. But it also gave us a chance to see how some, and almost cherry-pick good things that people do and then night things that we thought, 'well that's not so good, as a guest or visitor; we could do better than that' or not so much that we could do better, but that we could do it in a different way that we think would give the visitor more of a better experience; it's difficult to say. We have also been to visit non-aviation sites, and there we are able again to look at good things that work and cherry pick those, but also look at things 'well we wouldn't do it like that, we have come as a visitor and we feel that a particular room is atmospherically cold, not temperature cold, and it doesn't do anything it's just a dead room if you like, and how would we have done it different? We would have put a bit of sound in there, to bring a

particular exhibit or diorama alive for visitors, because it's all about your visitor experience. We are doing the research as well, so a lot of what we're doing is for the visitors, but we are free cognizant that here in the UK and Poland and probably America, Canada, Australia, there will be the 3rd 4th and 5th generation Poles who once they know the centre is there, they will make us one of the places that they want to come and see, as well as the big graveyards where the Polish airmen are; and we will tell the story of the for Polish bomb squadrons; not just the air crew, but the men and women on the ground, so the cooks and the administrators; so if they're grandma was a cook or something else, we will be telling individual, personal stories. Tell the bigger story but tell individual personal stories, and the oral histories of there for that purpose as well.

[00:32:48]

TB: Well this is perhaps the most important part of the project; let's just talk about the international dimension because one of the first things you said to me was that you soon realised that that Polish dimension could be a really important part of just getting some energy around the whole thing. So in a nutshell just tell me, it was a base used by the Polish Air Force, could you tell me how on earth you managed to turn this into an international site, because it's quite impressive.

GB: It kind of flowed over us, and overtook us, in a nice kind of way. When we first started I went down to see a gentleman called Richard Kaninski(?), whose father was a Battle of Britain pilot, and still alive up to about a year or so ago, bless him. And he was in charge of the then Polish Air Force Association Charitable Trust, which was the main organisation that looked after the veterans and their families post-war. And we have found him via the internet, and I actually went down to London to his house, had an afternoon with him, basically showed him quite a bit of the things that we had from the first exhibition, and I said this is what we are hoping to do; we are a new organisation, we would like to do this, we would like to do that for our Polish squadrons. During the conversation it became clear that there was no museum, no Heritage Centre that looked after them, for the Fighters, RAF Northolt in London is where they were based and there is a museum in the officers mess; but the four bomber squadrons had just been forgotten, a bit like Green Park, with the new Bomber Command memorial, and the International Bomber Command [Centre] here. So he said right ok, I will go away to the committee, and within about a week he came back to us and said, the committee have said, love your project, we think it's great, we want to give you a five figure sum to start you off.

TB: Wow!

GB: A lower five figure sum! But we would like to give you this, but we would like you to consider becoming the home for the Polish bomber squadrons, and focus on that because there isn't anywhere. We were obviously incredibly honoured and delighted for a new organisation to suddenly say we would like you to. So we carried on and we thought right, that's it in Britain. And it's only really in this last year that I have looked into it and we went to visit Poland, my wife and I last year. And although they have an aviation museum, there's only 2 glass cases that talk about what happened in Britain. We have checked on the internet, which is a fairly good sounding base, and there is nowhere; Canada, Australia, there is nowhere where there is a museum, even in Poland itself. So we now started to talk about ourselves as the global centre, the focal point for the Polish bomber squadrons, which we thought we're going to be national, but realistically we are now talking global, which is quite incredible when you haven't really got a proper building that you can use at

the moment. So the goal, The aspiration of where we're going to be in the next 4 or 5 years is quite phenomenal. And I do appreciate that the job I'm doing, because I work for another charity at the moment, but the job that I'm doing, there will be a time in my life when I am probably going to have to walk away from that because this is going to become a full time volunteers task, once we open, because of all the international connections, and the third Wing, which is just a concrete base at the moment but we are going to have a metal building on; in 3 or 4 years time that will move somewhere else and that will be rebuilt. And the third wing will be a research department where are all of the records which are held in London, copies will be here so people can research their families, from an electronic point of view, and see the original documents, again if we can get the originals, but electronic is much quicker. So the third wing will very much be an educational and research facility. That's our wish; and future generations will be able to come, even if they don't remember their grandma and grandpa, all great grandma and grandpa, as it is, they will be able to come back, possibly see them talking, certainly see evidence of what they did, old documents, photographs and things like that.

[00:37:02]

TB: You mentioned that the Ambassador came when you built that memorial there, it seems to me that that's almost one of the first things that you did, was to get that memorial going, but I might be wrong there, so tell me about the memorial bit.

GB: Consul generals and ambassadors tend to rotate every three years, the way the diplomatic things work. Through Richard Kaminski, he made contact with the consul-general who is based up at Manchester, they have a consulate up there. He wanted to come down and 2013. So we invited him down for the day, we put on a bit of a display for him, and got quite a few of the volunteers together and we hosted him through the day. He thought it was an incredible project, and that started a funding stream, which helps us to get to the point of having the big event for the memorial Day. We involved the Ambassador, he then came down; and the deputy Lord Lieutenant of Lincolnshire came and unveiled one of them; and the Ambassador unveil the other one for the day. We had 200 invited guests including veterans, local dignitaries because we wanted to try and do the right thing, and a group of school kids came down as well. Then both unfortunately, we just got the good relationship with two individuals, and they both departed, and we have now got a new ambassador. But we have got and even closer relationship with him, and we are on the invitation list now for all things Polish, and we tend to get invited. The latest thing which I wasn't able to go to which is happening next month, there is something called the Belvedere Forum, which takes place each year either in Poland or in Britain. And it's the two sets of ministers plus interested parties, that come for a conference, for a one or two day conference. And last year I got the invite but through work I couldn't attend. Now that's way above my paygrade and comfort zone should I say, but the fact that the Ambassador had considered it was worthwhile inviting me, and putting my name forward on behalf of our group, meant that we can and in future will network with people at a Polish and Polish international level, and hopefully that's going to increase our visibility on people's radar, especially in Poland because there must be an awful lot of families that are there, that decided to stay or had to stay, who didn't come to Britain, but there grandparents, great-grandparents, would have fought and possibly died over here in Britain. So it's a huge reach that we've got, and we are just starting to reach Australia and Canada with their veterans organisation, the Polish veterans organisations that they have in those two countries as well.

[00:40:02]

TB: You said that you've got about £200,000 so far. What proportion of that has come from Polish sources, either England based or out in Poland?

GB: Somewhere in the region of about 50%. Some have been private donations, some anonymous donations from London. Some have been from organisations and groups for the different small projects that we have done. And then the other 50% is things like the Armed Forces Community Covenant, Lincolnshire County Council, West Lindsey District Council when they have funding, obviously a lot of these things have now finished, and a lot of smaller groups. Because we often find similar organisations say there is no funding out there. The funding is out there but you just got to find it, and a lot of them are private foundations and donations, but you have just got to make what you're doing, your particular small Project, fit into the criteria of them and we are getting reasonably proficient at understanding what they want, and what they want to hear, from what we are doing. And we will tailor a project we are going to do around the funding available; right we're going to have to do this because that funding is available. We kind of tailor things.

[00:41:11]

TB: You mentioned that you've done 15 oral histories with Polish veterans, and that fitted the HLF funding, so you got presumably tens of thousands for that aspect?

GB: Yes we got just over £13,000 for that to buy the kit, to provide some money for travel and subsistence to go round the country, and also for production costs afterwards. The nice thing with that is the kit was ours to keep afterwards, so we've got that and we can use that for future oral history of that we find, or anything else that fits the use of the equipment. I think moving forward, the big stumbling block, the big momentous point now but we are waiting for is heritage Lottery and we have already put in them for the renovation of the main building, and that's everything taken up to a suitable standard where we can say right we just need to fill the inside with the exhibits and our things, and then open to the public. So that somewhere between 8 and £900,000. But we are working with them on that at the moment.

TB: You have just had a bid turned down for that amount?

GB: Yes there were one or two areas that they felt we needed to expand on; but we have got a meeting next week with some up at Nottingham, so we will kind of iron out the, get a bit of feedback, and work out where we have not ticked all the boxes. We thought we have but quite clearly, because this is a whole different step up from a lot of the other funding we have done, we will just need to obviously address that; wherever they steer us we will go in the right direction.

TB: We have covered buildings and funding; just very quickly, objects. You did tell me a little bit about this earlier, you have some objects already, people are literally turning up with the stuff by the sounds of it, already.

GB: We have yes, people do turn up with things, everything from photographs and documents, to pieces of kit, big and small, and the nice thing is quite a lot of them are connected with the people themselves. They will either loan them or donate them. Quite often we will get a phone call or an email to say I have got this, and the easiest thing is to go along, whether it's Lincolnshire or further

afield, and sit down for the afternoon and talk to them, because at the end of the day it is their family as heirlooms; all the history that binds them to the grandfather or the Grandparent or great-grandparents. So there is always a lot more of the story that you can gain, it's not just 'yes we would like to have it'. We are trying to be very careful because if it's not connected with what we want, and we understand this from the museum's accreditation, then we will politely say no and we will try and sign post them to other places. But normally if it's something Polish, Polish Air Force, then we are normally very, very interested.

[00:43:57]

TB: And there is one last thing that you mentioned, there is a local Polish population here, right, because you have got picking. I'm really interested about that, you said that that's a different audience to people that have a personal connection because some of them won't have a direct connection; has there been any response from that population at all, do they come and visit?

GB: Very much so; something that we have become very aware of, there are two distinct Polish communities. There is the one that has been here since the Second World War, which we call the veterans community, other Descendants community if you like. And there are the migrant population who are here generally just to work and provide for their families, and earn some good money to take back to Poland. But the ones that come from Poland, the younger ones, because they tend to work 6 or sometimes 7 days a week, a lot of them want to get involved, and luckily we have had some from Derby, and some from Lincoln itself, who have got involved for a certain amount of time because they see it as part of their heritage. Traditionally, and this is the first ambassador that opened, not the present one, he addressed a meeting that I went too and said that he has grown up in the Communist education system, because obviously he was in his 50s now. And the Communist education system in Poland had completely written out everything that the Poles did in the UK. The only thing that mattered was what they did with the Soviets fighting the Germans. And so for him, a very intelligent man, it was a journey of exploration, and that was very much the same in Poland. But now over the last 5 or 10 years it's getting out there, with the help of the internet. And Poles are fascinated about this 5, 6, 7 year part of the history that they knew absolutely nothing about. It was like that have been completely obliterated off the map. So it's like I suppose any group of people, any citizens, they want to know, they are fascinated by this piece of history that they knew nothing about. So we are getting other people involved, and to answer your question, so I've gone around the houses on it, the migrant workers are interested; but you can see they have constraint on their time and their abilities but they have been involved. What we didn't realise in this country, and this was another part of the journey, as part of the descendants from the Second World War, they set up Scout groups but Polish Scout groups, with Polish scout uniforms, not English scout uniform. So they have existed with in Britain under their own organisation. So when we were getting the memorial built again the consul general, by all accounts, and this is the phrasing, he instructed a Scout Group up in Lancashire to come down for a weekend, and give us a hand. It was all the older teenagers, 16, 17 up to 20. And they came and camped for the weekend, they sorted a lot of the garden area out for us, and they worked really well, so that was another way of integrating with the youth. But the Polish youth in the UK. So that's wonderful. And we're very lucky, we've got one of only two Polish scout campsites in the UK, and one is based at Torksey which is 20 minutes drive from here. So the people they have said that once we are open, that we will be part of the weekly activities that all

Polish Scouts and Cubs within the UK come to. So that's a great way to get into the local communities around the UK, not just here in Lincolnshire.

TB: Thank you so much that's amazing, I appreciate you have to shoot off.

[ENDS]