

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Carol Deer and Mike Deer

Role: Owners

Museum: Micro-Museum, Ramsgate

Location of interview: Reception desk at the museum

Date: 5/11/18

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).

[00:00:00]

TB: I just want to just ask you some basic fact checking things. So when did the museum first open to the public?

CD: Well, the first version of it opened in 2005 and that was run through a summer, eight weeks during the summer period, but the museum here opened in 2014.

TB: Okay, great. So we will cover that a little bit later. And in terms of governance, could you just say for the recording, so you're not a registered Museum?

CD: No.

TB: And you're not a charity?

CD: Not with any major organization, no. We're not a charity or a charitable trust.

TB: Right? So basically, this is an independent museum run as a commercial process. And in terms of governance then, you haven't got any trustees or a board I don't suppose.

MD: We're the board [laughs].

CD: Yes, we sit on the sofa at home and say shall we do this or shall we do that or not? And then we discuss it, and that's our board meetings.

TB: Sure, that's lovely. So basically as far as the business goes your partners in the business. It's a family business. How many people work in the museum and how many volunteers do you have.

CD: The numbers vary; currently we have three regulars and we have a couple of occasional people have come in during this year. But the numbers vary depending on how long people want to stay; what their own personal commitments allow.

TB: Okay brilliant, right. So let's just start off. Can you just describe the museum for me and what it does?

CD: Well, it's a museum which is a showcase for our personal collection of vintage computers, games consoles and various other associated electronics. Basically anything that's got a microchip in it that interests us. The computers we cover start from about the late 1970s and go up to about the year 2000, or just after.

TB: Okay lovely and just tell me a little bit about your background because you said that you're retired now.

CD: We're both retired. I've worked for about 30 years in local government at a local authority as a support officer for school governors. And then I had a 10-year period when I was a full-time carer for parents, up to my retirement age.

MD: I was a salesman, a menswear salesmen in Montague Burtons, Willerby's Tailoring and one or two other menswear shops. I worked as a security officer in some of the big places up in London like Citadel House, Banburger House, Warehouse, Courtauld Gallery, the Museum of London as a gallery assistant; doing various things from the switchboard to working on the galleries front of house, giving a small tour around the museum, anything that they ask us to, that's exactly what we would have to do. And really, we were made redundant about seven years ago, seven or eight years ago, and they give us a bit of a golden handshake. Carol's mum left us some money. So we was able to buy this building, which we done up over about three years because it was a derelict building and it needed everything done to it. Because we never had a...

CD: We discovered things go wrong with it as we were going on.

MD: And it actually needed new roofs, floors ceiling. We have to have new PVC windows and doors and my God, it was

CD: it was a nightmare

MD: Well, we had to put in a disabled toilet and we've we've got to have cases built because getting on a bit and now we just get people to come in and build them when we want them.

TB: So what was this building before?

[00:04:42]

MD: It's been a plumber's merchant. That was the last thing; before that it was a company making frames for pictures. And dado rails and all that. But originally I think it was stonemasons for the church over there.

TB: That's extraordinary isn't it, because it's an industrial sort of unit. Or you would think it was unless you looked around you, and suddenly it's actually in the historic centre of Ramsgate, this is a really amazing location.

CD: Next door is the Church of England parish church for Ramsgate with a long history of its own.

TB: So why here? Do you live in Ramsgate both of you?

[00:05:27]

MD: No, we used to live in London, I used to go to work at the Museum of London, but what happened is, we were trying to find somewhere to set up a museum

CD: and retire to

MD: and retire to; we tried to find somewhere in Barking

CD: That's where our home was; sorry to interrupt.

MD: We had a short period of an exhibition in Barking Central Library, the old one before they demolished it, and we had that there for about eight or nine weeks, because I got a sabbatical from work and that has allowed us to do it just over the summer period and so we did that, and we we did

have the exhibition in the museum of London, which was about six months which was all part of the *carry on collecting* exhibition.

TB: Just tell me a little bit more about that, so that was an exhibition where people could bring in their own collections.

[00:06:35]

MD: That's right and it was quite amazing what they had in there, they had people that collected barbed wire, they had people who done plasters; people collected

CD: sticking plasters that is, that you put on a finger. Really weird!

MD: Memorabilia on Churchill. All sorts of things, painted leaves and... well, there was about 50 people that brought in their collection and we had a centre spot up on the upper Gallery which was level 5 I believe it was. But yes, whenever people came into the museum that was the first thing that they would see.

TB: Yes, and you had the C5 there and some other computers around it or

MD: That's it, we had computers, the early Spectrums the Acorns I believed we had a little bit of a history that we showed in there. There was quite a lot we've got photographs somewhere but

CD: Magazines and things we had as well, various other associated bits and pieces.

TB: So it was a fair bit of space you had then, 10 foot by...

MD: Yes, it was probably 10ft by 6ft. The case was probably worth about, I would say about 5,000 pounds or something, because it was it was heavy glass.

TB: All right, so that they gave you the case to put the stuff in, OK. So was that the first time you've ever exhibited anything?

MD: No, the first time was back in Barking Central Library and that was for the eight weeks.

[00:08:24]

TB: And what year was that, with Barking Central Library?

MD: I think it was probably about nineteen ninety seven, eight or nine. It was when it was a very hot summer. And there was an eclipse. And everybody came to the library. They could play on the games and everybody rushed out to see the eclipse.

TB: Oh really? And what year was the collecting exhibition at the Museum of London, around 2000?

MD: I don't know but it must have been about 2003.

TB: yes, sure. I can look it up, so just tell me a little bit about the first one you did then. So this is the one at Barking. It sounds like you had a bit more space for that one.

MD: We did, it consisted of BBC micro which people couldn't play on, and also an Amstrad CPC464 and we had some educational computers which was made by VTEC where they could sit down and

they could play some of these educational games. I've got, I've still got a few of the games machines now, but we haven't used them since we've opened

CD: We also had the very first version of the history boards, quite condensed, not as much information as I've got on them now. So we're also teaching a little bit of the history as well, which seemed appropriate for a library situation.

[00:10:09]

MD: We had about four cases which we had some of the early computers on there, the ZX80, 81 Jupiter Ace and all those sorts of machines. Anything we could put on a shelf or put in a case. And people could come come round and see the exhibition. The only problem with that was we were one end of the library, and the other end was the reference library. And so what we had to do is disconnect the speakers to the BBC micro, and we had to turn the sound off of the CPC and the other games, so you could see the pictures on the screens, but you couldn't hear anything because it had to be quiet.

CD: Because these were the old days where you have to be really quiet in a library.

TB: yes, that's changed a bit, hasn't it? That's amazing. So already, that your first ever exhibition, right? And it sounding pretty sophisticated really, you have got information boards; so where did you pick up the skills to put all this together? Was it the museum? Tell me about that.

MD: For the cases it was anything that we could find from MFI

CD: in order just to build the cases, the display case we are talking about.

MD: We got plastic from a plastics company.

CD: We literally built things, everything ourselves, but we just had to learn how to do it, you know, and as for the collection, Mike's the expert on the equipment, because he knows what he's looking for in that, and I'm just I've just researched and learned a lot, as much as I can for the history.

[00:11:57]

MD: She is an unpaid volunteer.

CD: [laughs] Yes, we don't get any money from this place at all. We do for love.

TB: Yes. And where does that love come from? Because you know, this is an unusual museum. I know there are other collections and so on, but still quite unique; so is it all from your side of you both got an interest computers?

[00:12:24]

MD: No, it's really from my side what it was was, in the early 70s, mid-70s my dad and myself used to sit and watch Tomorrow's World and every now and again you'd get an article about either games machines, like the very first Magnavox computer game, which was like a very early, well, it was the early Pong type game; and then I think it was about 1980, we saw an interview with Sir Clive Sinclair and he was talking about the ZX80 which was going to come out for a just under 100 pounds. And he

was saying you had the power there to run a power station. And well before that all we knew about computers was that they're the size of a room and they were getting smaller; but I mean to have a computer in your home, and your bedroom or anywhere, you could connect it to a TV! It was fantastic, because up until that time, what we had a home was a stereogram and that was it. When I went to school there was no computers, and it's only the some of the volunteers who were younger than us said. 'Oh, we had one, and you was allowed to use it once a week, if you were lucky' and well, that's really what it was.

[00:13:59]

And then I suppose working for the Museum of London. There was a chap called Ernest King and he used to make, in the 19th century, he used to collect these what they call penny toys, which were little tin plate toys, and they had a collection. And every time I worked in the galleries, I'd go there and I would look at this collection and it always seemed to change whether or not I'd seen it before and I forgot about it, but they used to replace some of the objects in the in the cases. And so that's what I used to do; where I got the inspiration for the pester toys, because I mean if you look in that case now, if you go into any shop, you won't see any of these LCD games. And so I've collected them and we we have got a lot more that we could put out at some stage.

TB: And what was it about that tin plate toy collection? What was it about that appealed to you so much?

[00:15:05]

MD: Mainly because it was a collection that someone had taken the trouble to collect for future generations to admire. And I thought well the same thing would happen with us; we we do it because we love to do it and we like to show youngsters how it all came about. I mean the people like Charles Babbage, Ada Lovelace Tommy Flowers, Alan Turing, Bill Tutte, it needs to be marked in some way. And this is why I tried to do this. I mean, we don't make any money from this, anything we get we spend on getting games or things for people to play on.

TB: Yes, but it's interesting that you identified the toys as a thing that inspired you. So clearly it is fascinating for children. So is your main audience here children?

MD: No, it's usually three different types of people. You get the engineers, you get the nostalgic level and then you get the kids who want to play on the games. We try to encourage the children to do a little quiz where there's about 20 questions and if they get the questions, right, then we give them a little certificate. I think Carol said earlier, we do one for them really small children where they get a little certificate for just finding the beanie toys, but is to give them something that they could take away and say I've achieved something, so really that's what it is.

CD: We are also part of the the children's University. Which is all about teaching and learning as well, which is quite nice.

TB: I have not heard of that. Okay, is that like an international thing?

CD: It is, the UK branches of is a branch off of a worldwide thing actually, but kids get a little passport and they go to places which have been identified where there are centres of learning, and if they go

there and they do an activity, in our case, it's the quiz, which proves they have been trying to learn something, and they get a stamp in their passport. And then every year, if they've got enough stamps and things they actually have a proper graduation ceremony and the University of Kent. They have it at Canterbury and they get caps and gowns and get a proper graduation ceremony that's laid on just for the youngsters which is quite nice.

TB: What a great idea.

CD: So we've got this sort of educational strand as well, as well as the place and having fun.

[00:17:47]

TB: So when when did you start collecting, start your collection?

MD: We started off with a ZX81 in 1981.

TB: and so how old were you then when you would have got that?

MD: I must have been about 25, 26. Because we're we'd been married.

CD: Yes, we were married already because I remember playing on it too.

MD: And then what what I wanted to do was get Commodore 64, but we were trying to buy a house at the time and Carol wanted to do word processing, and so a friend of mine, he had a BBC micro and he turned around to me and he said 'Mike he said there's a lot of technology in this machine. He says there's enough here to last year 20 years'. So I bought a BBC micro and after about 18 months, two years. It was superseded by the Archimedes. So really that's how it really started because I could see I wanted to get a ZX80, just to have it next to the 81. And what happened was I couldn't find one for love or money. So anyway, I did, when I was working in the Courtaulds Gallery as a gallery assistant, security. Someone had one on sale. So it was in a place called Simpson Village near Heathrow and I'd done a night shift at the Museum got my scooter, went over to Simpson Village, waited there all day till 7 o'clock and bought the ZX80 off of a chap for I think it was about 15 pounds; took it home and thought I'm going to have a lovely sleep tonight, and do you think I could sleep? I could not sleep. And I had to go to work in the morning. So by the time

CD: You were up all night playing on it, weren't you, or trying to sort it out how to make it work if I remember.

CD: I went to work and got home about six o'clock the next day and I fell asleep and that was it. But yes, that's really what started it in the first place.

[00:20:15]

CD: But the thing is what we realised, Toby was that during that period new machines were coming out so rapidly and the analogy I draw is with the modern mobile phone, you know, if someone comes out with a new camera or a new gizmo and your phone will not do something else or we've got AI and all the rest of it and everyone wants the latest model. The thing that does the most fantastic new stuff. And the old things get either traded in or stuck in a drawer. And this is very much what was happening during that period when Mike started collecting, in that there were so many

new things and everybody wanted the latest machine that did the latest thing, that did the latest fantastic graphics or sound or everything, you know that the old ones, we couldn't trade them in the old days. You either tried to sell them or you stuck him in your loft or your shed. And we realised that during that period that Mike was collecting, about 40 odd years of it we've been doing it, that these things were going to get lost because if you store things badly they don't work, you know, I don't you know that with computers if you store them and they get slightly damp, you put them on and bang, you get smoke and flames and all lots of things, you know, so these things were going to get lost. So it really became like a sort of rescue mission for us because by then we had both developed an interest in them.

TB: That's fascinating, so let me just turn to you then about your interest because clearly this is something you know, which Mike started but for you, how did your interest grow? You said that you use the BBC for work or to type

[00:21:51]

CD: Well, yes at work they started introducing computers and we started, I started using them in a work situation, but it was when, when we started looking into the history - well, my particular interest is in the history of computing. So when I started researching that when we when we were sort of thinking about starting the museum in 2005, leading up to that period I had to start getting some in history and historical information out, prepared, and I discovered how fascinating it was, because there were so many strands to it, to things around computers and computing and what they were used for, and even going back to the - as you were looking around the museum you would have seen our very first board which starts with 0. So there's the thinking around how do we show a zero without a zero, you can't have binary, you can't have the binary language. So even going back as far as that, it's all - I find that bit quite fascinating.

[00:22:47]

TB: Okay. That complements each other quite well I guess.

CD: Exactly because he is the hands on man, and I'm...

MD: Well Carol's finding out more about the amount of women there was in computing which nobody knows about. I mean,

CD: Yes, we just had a we just had a slide show running doing a link to Ada Lovelace day, which you may have heard about? This year was on the 9th of November and the weekend prior to that, for the whole weekend we ran a slideshow which I'd put together about women in who've been involved in computing right from Ada Lovelace onwards and it's quite fascinating just researching that, how many women were involved in in the development of computers.

TB: And lovely to see in the display there.

CD: As I say we were running a slideshow for that whole weekend which was quite nice and people found quite interesting.

TB: Yes, that's brilliant. So apart from looking in magazines and buying secondhand, you also mentioned boot fairs to say is that something, was that was that a bit later?

MD: No, what happened was that I went down the car boot sale and bought myself a Dragon 32 and it came with these magazines, I've got some up up up there, and it's basically the home computer course, and what it showed was all the insides of all the computers and they worked and it was great to get them and I bought it all for about eight pounds.

CD: A bargain!

MD: If you look at what they charge for the magazine, I got the full volume and a Dragon 32 for £8.

CD: We pored over those didn't we and we said this sounds interesting, this looks interesting, and it sort of grew from there.

TB: So it was of course. So is this on programming?

CD: It was like a part work, you know, like you can buy part works on various things these days.

MD: This is the advanced course, if you open these up, you'll see all the insides, all the innards, because I was really interested in the insides of everything. It's been put upside down.

CD: Sorry, I put them up there in a hurry.

TB: So some of this, some of it is about computers themselves in a general way; then there's little bit about programming and about logic; there's a bit about electronics. So it's actually quite a quite a broad education, that isn't it?

MD: They are beautiful really.

CD: Yes you have got your odd free cassette and things.

MD: To get you to buy the magazine, it was 80 pence.

CD: So we reckoned it was a bargain.

[00:25:49]

TB: Yes, absolutely. And so that tape would have some basic kind of games or routines that were referred to in the lesson, OK.

MD: Yes, mainly they would have a game, they would have a routine. They might have a program to do with fractals and all that sort of thing. I think, you know, it was quite fun to sort of get them. Especially when they were free, almost for nothing.

TB: So did you work your way through the lot? Or did you browse through?

MD: I browsed through; it was interesting to see the inside of the computers. I learnt about the different processors, processors like those X80 the 6502s, the 6509s funnily enough the 6509. It was the one that came with the dragon. It was supposed to be a faster computer, but in actual fact everybody went for the Commodore 64 or the Spectrum, which was the Z80 for the Spectrum and

the 6502 for the Commodore 64. With the dragon it had funny colours. There was about nine colours, but it's funny compared to the others.

TB: Oh, I see the computer itself was colourful?

CD: No, the colours on the screen.

TB: Oh I see.

MD: It was more, yooky, yooky colours.

TB: So you would go to boot fairs, and is that how you increased your collection mostly, or was it a mixture of classified ads?

MD: What it was, I was trying to find a Commodore 64. But when you go down to a boot sale you never know what you are going to find. I was coming home sometimes with a big pec computer, or the next time I would go down there I would find a calculator, but then I got quite interested in Sir Clive Sinclair and I started collecting lot of things to do with Sinclair once I knew he invented to C5. I've got a zike in the the other building.

CD: that's an electric bike, in case you didn't know.

[00:28:10]

MD: and because it was the history of Sir Clive Sinclair, when he sold it to Alan Sugar, incidentally, I went to the same school as Alan Sugar. He got rich but I didn't. But he must have just left the school as I joined the school, because I can't remember him and my sister, she used to go around with a group of girls and they remember him going around when he had black curly hair. It's grey now. So that was my claim to fame really wasn't it.

CD: Going back to what you were saying. Well a lot of it did come from car boot sales and second-hand shops and charity shops because if we could have afforded all these brand new when they first came out, we would have been multi millionaires, but we wouldn't have been could have spent it all by now, but that's the only way we could have afforded it.

[00:29:04]

TB: And have you found people bring you stuff.

MD: We have in the last year or so, but what we find, there's usually always something wrong with it.

CD: and it's a case of 'I'm downsizing and I found this in the loft. and we always cringe a little bit nowadays because it's usually something that was put in the loft because it stopped working, because there is something wrong with it.

MD: Yes, because unfortunately with electrical stuff, over the course of time the capacitors and resistors tend to break down and once the elastics, the drive belts, they tend to deteriorate and then they break. And that's when people think 'where can we get rid of them, there is someone in Church Hill who collects all this! But some of the things are quite useful, like you get extra power supplies,

and they're the things that go, or the joysticks get broken and if people give us the joysticks, then we can keep it running for a bit longer. Other than that we have got to go to the specialist shops like CeX who charge you a fortune for the joysticks.

TB: so it's useful to keep them and use them for spares.

MD: Yes, it enables us to keep it running because normally we wouldn't be able to carry on if it weren't for these spares that we get; because I'm not an engineer. I can take things apart, but I can't put them back together again in the right order.

TB: At some point you made this decision to open a museum and it sounds like that happened quite early, in terms of it was probably a few years before you actually did anything about it, so tell me about that decision, how did that come about.

[00:30:59]

CD: Well it sort of happened at the stage where I was having to climb over boxes to get around my house, in some of the rooms in my home. And the shed was full, the loft was full in the spare room was full and every spare corner was full of computers and bits and it was at that point we were trying to think what can we do with it, because we actually wanted at that stage to start sharing, sharing what we had with the public, and start this sort of educational process which we like to carry on. And we sort of started thinking, well, how about opening a museum and we started planning towards that. And then about 2005 we did the trial run, and the plan was to open then, move permanently to Ramsgate. But as I say personal circumstances got in the way, so everything had to be put on hold until we reached our own retirement age. And we've only just, two months ago, moved down to our base here in Ramsgate, which was our second home while the museum was running every summer. And finally we were actually able to do what we wanted to do.

TB: Okay, so let's unpack that a little bit, so in 95 you had the idea?

CD: During the 90s certainly, we started thinking about it then, yes.

TB: Okay, that's interesting so you thought we can clear out this house and also people can see it, it was a win-win!

CD: That was a factor, definitely, as far as I was concerned.

[00:32:30]

MD: I think really, what it stemmed from, was when I worked in a the Museum of London, and I used to enjoy the job there. It never used to pay a very good salary, but it was one that I could live on, and I could enjoy myself in the museum, because I used to like showing people around the exhibits in the museum. If anybody asked me where a certain thing was I could say. Oh, yes, I like to take you over there or I could point in the general direction, because the history is wonderful really there, and I enjoyed it. There was only one job I never used to like there, and that was a cloakroom. And that was when people came in with soggy raincoats, on a wet day you would have about 200 people.

CD: So we just give our visitors a hanger to hang up their own coats up now (laughs).

TB: but there's something about about helping the public or talking to the public about history and things which you really found rewarding

MD: Apparently, I read at a later date, I'm a Virgo and they're supposed to be very good communicators and collectors. And I think probably that has been drummed into my mind ever since. I'm very, how can I say it, I'm bloody minded; if people say I can't do a thing I'll go out to prove that I can. And that's what I've probably done with this museum because the family looked at me as though I was strange, because I was collecting all these obsolete computers. But I had the vision to see that at one stage they're going to disappear completely and who was going to be there to show them to people? And so this is what I was able to do when we got made redundant, all sixteen of us.

CD: Because even at the Museum of London when he when he used to take things there after the car boot sales, he'd bring them in and put them on his on his locker and then bring them home at night. The people they would laugh at him, and one of the directors of the Museum of London actually said to him, I remember you telling me the story that 'oh, I wish you would should shut up about your XXX computers'. She went on to become the director of the museum in Edinburgh. And the funny thing was, one of the first exhibitions she's set up was of computers. We followed her career because we knew her. But it made us laugh. But I mean they used to laugh at him at the Museum of London as well.

[00:35:18]

MD: Because they couldn't understand what I was trying to get at. But I never had the funds or the money to be able to do it.

CD: to do it at that stage.

TB: I see yes. So for 10 years you were caring for your mother was it?

MD: my mother and Michael's mother and my father.

TB: Crikey, right. Wow.

MD: She was a busy wife.

CD: And him!

MD: I had to go out to earn the money to keep the place going. And Carole used to look after the parents. Because you don't get much as a carer. So I was working at the museum and the Courtauld's Gallery between 60 and 80 hours a week. Just to keep the money coming in.

CD: Everything had to be put on hold. The parents have now passed away and we've reached our own retirement age and we have finally, really been able to bring our dream to fruition.

CD: Absolutely. That's amazing.

MD: That's why we only do it at weekends now, because I don't want to work too hard.

TB: Right, you've done alot of that before, time to rest, you are supposed to be retiring.

MD: We are planning on opening an extra day next year.

CD: During the school holidays we open extra days because visitors come into the area and schools are out, and parents are wondering what to do with the kids.

TB: So we've got to the early 2000s and you have suddenly got some inheritance money and there's some redundancy is as you said. How how did you decide where to go? You were looking for seaside places?

[00:36:54]

CD: We were looking for somewhere to retire to basically, because we knew that we were reaching our retirement age by then. So we remembered Ramsgate, funnily enough both of us were brought here by our parents as children and we remembered Ramsgate and this area around here, and we came and had a little scope, we thought we'd go and see what it's like; we came back down here. We liked it. We thought well, okay, we will settle here. So that's how it happened. Basically. We'll just look for property here.

MD: Yep. We know that in other parts of the country like there's Bletchley Park. There's a place in Swindon that's got computers. And there's one I think in Barnsley, there is one Leicester, and there is nothing in Kent. So this is where we're - next door was the very first computer Museum in Kent. And we was able to do that for I think it was six or eight weeks, eight weeks, and your mum got ill didn't she. So we have to close it a week early.

CD: It triggered the stopping as it were.

MD: But we're working for the Museum of London and we had this building here; we couldn't afford to keep it running and work at the same time up in London because the fares, they are astronomical.

TB: So you did a kind of a summer season then for that first season, and it was in the next store building, so you own both of these buildings.

Speaker3: We do, yes.

CD: We rented it out, the other building, ready to find somewhere else after the parents had passed on. And then we then we found this one, coincidentally, which was just up the hill.

MD: We thought it would be a good idea because I mean the thing was our email address was rams and gates - random access memory systems have logic gates - and we thought well is it an omen?!

CD: So it felt right.

MD: Because up in London, what this building cost, we could only afford to run a building there for one year. So we thought well, we'll come down here because it's cheap.

CD: cheap properties, but the area is nice, isn't it? Yes, be nice place to retire to, so there we go.

[00:39:27]

CD: We don't actually live in Ramsgate we live on the border with Broadstairs, everyone seems to love Broadstairs, but we quite like this one, don't we.

TB: So when you got to setting up the museum, you had already had a try out, hadn't you, at the museum of London and the library as well; what sort of response did you get from the visitors there?

MD: Everyone seemed to like it, yes, we've done surveys and of the surveys I think I think it is about 85% to 90% of the people said, we surveyed said they liked the museum, liked the exhibits. But the only thing was it was free and this Museum we have to charge because we don't get any funding from anywhere. So I mean people; if it's free like the Turner Centre, they're going to say oh we love this because it's free, but I mean, this was really the first trials that we were able to do in, when we opened, in 2014. And gradually we get more and more people coming to the museum.

[00:40:46]

CD: We doubled we tripled our visitor numbers in the first year. In 2015 over 2014. And it's sort of levelling off now; then it doubled 2015 to 16 and it sort of levelled off now.

MD: think a lot to do with it was the brilliant summer we had because I mean who wants to go into a museum when you've got beautiful sunshine?

CD: Well I don't know because the thing is we've had some some really hot days and we thought well, we were going to be sitting here twiddling our thumbs, get the cards out (we play cards) and then suddenly you get hordes of people coming. You really can't say; I mean because you're there, you're open to the public specific times; they come or they don't come in, there is really nothing you can do about it. You can do your bit of advertising and keep your fingers crossed.

MD: I think a lot to do with it is the fact that we are a little bit off the beaten track. I mean, like I say if people say it's impossible to do it, then I would go and try and prove that I can do it and where we are, people, a lot of people go from the station, go down to the harbour, but they miss this little place here, and if we were better supported and advertised a lot better, I think we would do a lot better than we are. But if we do that it means we have to work a lot harder. And that was not the idea in the first place.

CD: The trouble is Toby, is that we find that a lot of the people who are involved in museums or tourism out of London, they can't get their heads around quite what we're doing because I think you mentioned earlier this is a bit unusual. This is unique and I think if you're not the war, if you're not if you're not sort of recognised historical artefacts you're showing; or the real big major Museum type artefacts that you are exhibiting, people can't quite get their heads around what it's all about. Something funny. We have a town promoter in Ramsgate. She's been in office for about three years. She stepped through that door for the very first time this year. And then she said, 'oh, haven't you got a lot of people in here' and 'I can hear lots of noise' and went and looked and she went and poked her head into the museum for the very first time and she said, gosh, look at all those people, you know, they don't expect that. I mean you need earplugs sometimes when we have got loads of families in there, as you can imagine, you know, we've got the games all going, the kids trying to get to the quiz to get their certificates and there is this coming and going, and it can be really busy, you

know. But I think generally people can't quite get their heads around what we're doing until they actually come here and experience it. We're fighting that all the time with our advertising.

MD: The thing is with this museum, I think is the most important Museum in Kent and the reason for that is: without computers we wouldn't have been able to go to the moon we wouldn't been able to go to mars and we won't be able to conquer the universe unless we had the computer in the first place, and that's why I think this is the most important Museum. in Kent anyway. Because I know there is other museums that are bigger and better, because most of them are funded, and we are not.

[00:44:31]

TB: What are your numbers, annually, would you say, your visitor numbers?

MD: that is one for Carol.

CD: We are around 2,000 visitors, but the thing is we're only open at weekends, April to October. This year we've done an extra day during the school holiday period. We also have school groups as I said, but they come mid week when we're not open to the general public. Yes. So we're sort of roundabout 2,000 every year now, we've settled down to that sort of number.

MD: We are trying to make it so that there's not one great big crush on one or two days where we get an extra day to spread it and make it more comfortable.

CD: So now that we've based here, next year we will again because we'll be across two buildings. We're going to open for more days. So hopefully that'll sort of spread out the numbers a little bit better as well. Make it manageable.

MD: We're hoping to do a tour where we can talk about history in that building, and then when they come into this building they will be able to play the games and so that would appeal to the youngsters as well, because we know damn well that what they want, is the kids just want to play two games.

CD: They get distracted.

MD: The girls tend to like to do the quizzes, the history quizzes, but the boys tend to want to play the games like football

and that sort of thing and you know, it's surprising, we have got all the games in here which are sort of millions of colours and all that, and the ones they like the best are the Old Pong games, which is black and white. It's unbelievable.

CD: Followed shortly by Pac-Man, really simple things because it's easy to pick up

MD: And you don't need to have a manual to sit and work out how to play it.

TB: I was just wondering when you opened up. Did you get any help at all from anybody, or any grants or business advice or anything like that?

MD: Yes once. And that was the town team, and they give us match funding for the sign outside. But that was it. And then we had to fight to get their money from that, it was about three to six months before we got the money back.

TB: right? Okay, and how much was that a few hundred pounds?

CD: a few hundred pounds, yes.

TB: Did you have any advice from the tourist information guys or from any business advisors?

CD: Nope, no. Not even your basic Barclays advice about you know, because we haven't got a business account because we're operating as a sole traders. It's learnt.

TB: Well that's brilliant, you know, very impressive. You said something earlier, you could do lots of work in advertising all that kind of stuff. But you said you don't want to because that isn't the point of this. And so just a little bit more - What is the point of this in terms of your own lifestyles as it were?

MD: well, it's an easy lifestyle

[00:48:03]

CD: It's just to share, the point is just to share it with people and I mean it gives us great pleasure to see - you know, we've had our youngest visitor was about two months old, a little one in a pram and she was taken out and put in front of it a computer screen while Mum was playing and pressing the buttons to see what happened. And our oldest visitor we've had was a 90 year old gentleman who asked to be brought here for his 90th birthday as a special treat.

MD: And you know, the funny thing was, just after the visit. We got a four page letter from his daughter saying how much he enjoyed the museum. Because I don't talk a lot, but when it gets onto the subject of computers then I just ramble on. I'll get told off by Carol because I keep going on and on and I just thoroughly enjoy myself, you know.

CD: But the thing is all of the generations can find something to enjoy and we just enjoy, it gives us pleasure to see people enjoying, discovering history, discovering, just learning how to play a new game if nothing else, or going down the nostalgia trip as I mentioned to you earlier, you know, just saying, 'oh I used to play that or I remember that computer or I remember that computer and I wish I had that computer and my friend had that computer and you're making me remember I used to go next door to play at my friend's place. And it just gives us pleasure to see people enjoying themselves.

[00:49:31]

MD: I'll give you an incident when we had the school came in the other day. There was a young girl there and I had the BBC on, the micro, and I was just showing them how to put a simple BBC programme in, putting the name in it, doing exactly what I did with you where you just put print the name, quotation marks, and go to go to 10. And she simply loved doing it. She turned around and said to one of her teachers, 'the best thing I like about this museum is the program I put in'. I mean I

could have just walked around just checking the games were going, but she had an interest in the actual programming side and I thought it was lovely when she said it to the teacher.

CD: Because what we call proper programming, is not coding which is what they're teaching in schools. And you know, it's something different for them to actually experience what it was like to write a program. She had got some friends and pulled some of her friends and they wanted to have a go, they were saying 'put in my name it might make my name come up' and we had to show her how to do that. And so it was it was fascinating to see them actually enjoying writing a mini program.

TB: Yes. So the children were kind of getting a sense of what was behind the game which is which is rather amazing, and then their parents are kind of well, I guess that they're the generation bound up with computing; I notice you have got mobile phones in the collection and other things as well, which I guess as you say, bring people back to these very pleasurable times, I suppose of when they discovered, whatever it was, games or something. So that's working in two quite different ways, isn't it? It's the discovery for the younger ones, but it's also nostalgia you said.

MD: it's really the people that's worked in the industry like the engineers and

CD: they're fascinating to listen to because they know so much more than we do, we enjoy talking to them.

MD: I just like to listen to them, so it is a two way street, really.

TB: And did you model this Museum on any other sort of Museum or display type or anything? I mean you mentioned the Museum of London. I'm sure it must have influenced you

MD: A certain amount. but I did, there's a Museum in Swindon and I think they started before we did, but it was mainly because we never had the money to be able to do it because we had the equipment already, the collection.

CD: We just did what we could afford basically.

[00:52:32]

MD: And if you look at the furniture and all this sort of thing, I mean, the tables they come down from the car boot sales or charity shops and these display cupboards here, they came from a chap down the road.

CD: from charity shops and the cases we've made as you see they haven't got glass on them. They've got perspex because we couldn't afford glass, but it works and we just build it up as we could afford it.

TB: I'm fascinated by your expansion plan kind of thing. So is the other space a similar size to this?

CD: slightly bigger than this.

MD: It's very worrying for us because we're lucky enough to get zero business rates on this building, but if we open next door we not only got to pay the full business rates on that building

CD: because it's a second building, This one become becomes more business rates as well. So we had to make sure we've got a savings buffer which we may have to call upon. We are going to try it for a couple of years we can afford that.

TB: And how much are the rates?

CD: It's about a year eight or nine a year or something like that. For the two buildings.

TB: Okay. So this is a big move then, in terms of overheads.

CD: But the thing is as we're getting older we'd like to do the best we can with it before we get too old to do anything. Because I don't mind telling you we're both 68 now. So, you know, who knows how long we're going be able to keep going, but let's keep going as long as we can but you know, let's do it the best we can, otherwise we will be on our death beds and we won't have achieved what we wanted to achieve.

[00:54:26]

MD: We are lucky because we have had a few good volunteers.

CD: Over the years. We have yes, we've got three who have stuck with us for a few years now, which is quite nice.

MD: We have lost one of our youngsters who helped me in the beginning. Young George, he got his mum to ask, because originally they come as visitors. His got his mum to us if he could help out and so normally, when they are that sort of age, you think, yes, they just want to play the games for a couple of weeks and that's it. Three years later he was still with us. The only reason he's left is he has gone to college. We have always said as long as it doesn't interfere with your education you can come here and you can help out. And he wasn't a young boy to play games. So he used to be exactly like we are, and that is we like to see people enjoying themselves, and he used to just turn on the equipment for me and let the people play.

CD: over the years he learned a bit more about the history, he wrote our history quiz for us which was great. At the moment we've got three and one who I don't think we will see again, he is a youngster who has just gone to uni. But we've got three regulars now at the moment.

TB: and it's quite nice, isn't it? I guess to pass on some of your experience or knowledge to the next generation.

[00:56:12]

MD: Really that is what it was for, really. Because we don't make any money really do we, because it all goes to keep keep the museum running.

TB: What has been the highest point would you say of doing all this?

MD: Winning the Pride of Thanet Award which was great in the beginning, because I mean we were taking on people, big organisations like Dreamland, the Turner Centre and all those, and we actually won the Pride of Thanet Award.

CD: Yes, that was quite nice, yes, some local recognition which was quite nice.

TB: Did people vote for it, or was it a committee coming round or how does it work?

CD: No, you're nominated and voted for by your visitors. So that was really quite nice.

MD: They have changed the rules now. I think it is probably the well-known people that are able to win.

CD: There is a current competition, which is similar to that involving South Eastern Railways and Kent County Council; they shortlist - you put in an application. There's a panel which makes the short list and then about four or five people for five organizations and people are asked to vote for those. So you've got to get through this short listing process and it's always the big things nowadays. There's an awful lot of local politics in Thanet, I'm sure there is all over the country, but definitely a lot of it here. Politics with a with big p and a little p.

TB: I see I'm with you. I was going to ask about cooperation with other visitor attractions and also whether the council has a networking group or anything that you are a member of.

[00:58:00]

MD: what tends to happen is, we've been to one or two of these workshops.

CD: By the tourism office.

MD: They tend to pick our brains. And what they come up with is what we have already tried. So I mean I don't go to any of these now. Carol went to one after me.

[interview stopped briefly to change batteries in recorder]

CD: Yes. What we was what I was saying was that because perhaps because we have started without any guidance. We have perhaps discovered some - and I should say and because we have to do all the free advertising we can - I think we have sort of discovered and stumbled on things which those in the mainstream of tourist organisations or tourism attractions, may not have found. And so very often we sort of chipping in and giving them, giving the The Establishment as it were, locally, some ideas which they might not have thought of. So that's what Mike was talking about what he meant by they've been pinching some of our ideas. That's that's what he meant anyway.

TB: Do they have leaflets with the with the top ten attractions of Ramsgate to pick up from the tourist office?

MD: apart from TripAdvisor. Hmm. We are always excluded, aren't we, really.

CD: The thing is there is a visit Thanet website and we are on that, we make sure we're on that and any events we have, they feature on there. And there's also visit Ramsgate one, which we've dropped out of because it's not being managed properly at the moment. I think we will wait and see if it improves, because it's only just started this year. But and of course visit Thanet feeds into visit Kent's website, which is the main advertising. they don't do it. I mean we get mentioned on the local maps and the Thanet map which covers Ramsgate, but there's no no other things which are organised that we actually quite easily fit in to, so we tend to be dropped off everything. So a lot

depends on us doing the advertising ourselves; our website is our main means of advertising and I've put up our events and things on various events and things on the internet. Because the thing is if you are interested in computers you are more than likely to look on the internet you want to find out something. People if they go into an area they look on the internet to find out what there is around and about, so that that's to me to my mind is the modern way of reaching people with people with mobile phones they'll look you up on on the on the internet.

TB: Yes. Absolutely. What's been the toughest moment, the hardest point of the project?

[01:01:14]

MD: I think it was probably trying to get this building into reasonable state, because it was because it was a plumber's merchant.

CD: They were tenanted before and the plumbers did in Moonlight flit. So it was just actually left in disrepair.

MD: And yes, there was nails and screws on virtually all the walls. And to try and get the nails and screws out was virtually impossible.

CD: I know it sounds silly but these walls are solid stone walls. So you try and put a nail in this wall.

MD: That painting, the one I showed you from the Royal Academy. We had the chap, Peter Askew, come round and and I said to him, 'look you will find these walls very hard to bang in'. 'Don't worry' he says, 'I have got a special drill which will go through this'. Two hours later we put one screw in, and the only way we could get it to stand up, hang up rather, I got as a sort of chisel type thing and you just put it in bang it and turn it. And if you if you didn't do that, you wouldn't make an hole in it. Well and I swore to Carol after that, I'm not going to bang a screw or nail in this place.

TB: So it's all sticky tape then?

CD: We just had a poster fall down this morning. It sounds funny but that was the worst thing about the building. New roof, no problem, but just getting a nail in the wall. That was the real difficulty.

MD: I had to do it in the winter, and the thing is there's no central heating in this place and it gets so cold your hands after a couple of hours go red. It is warmer outside than it is inside. And so I mean we've got that to look forward to this year. It's warm in the summer, cold in the winter. But we are going to have to do it to keep it going. Yes, but you see because we got to pay rates in advance of being able to do it, we are going to have to watch what we spend our money on. Because as Carol was saying, we are just pensioners.

TB: Event wise you keep you do the school things, which is amazing, but I'm just thinking I don't know, groups of adults that are nostalgic - not quite stag nights, but something like that...

MD: me tell you about KFC. Do I mean - KCC

TB: Kent County Council.

MD: I like my chicken! We phoned up Kent County Council and we said that we were going to open the museum here and what we would like to do is get children to come from schools to come to the museum. We got an automatic response, we will be in touch with you in three days.

CD: Shall I pick up the story from there? So then I found out that I managed to get a list of every school in the whole of Thanet. We thought we'd start small and build up to Kent. We sent an invitation to the head teacher for every school, 42 schools in Thanet. Because at that time was just when they were started to teach coding in schools and we said look this is the ideal place for kids to learn how, they got to the stage where they're having to learn coding in school. So it would tie in very nicely with the government's plans for kids to become computer literate. And so we sent this invitation out to 42 schools.

MD: How many do you think came back?

CD: not a single one responded. And it's only through people who have been as visitors and who happen to happen to work at schools, have contact with schools or schools who have since discovered us who have been bringing the school groups in.

TB: Yes. It's hard as that because you really is the computer studies teacher and it's quite hard to find out who to contact if the head doesn't pass it on.

CD: You said tag nights jokingly, we've had stag parties who have come here for an afternoon and then go on to the boozer which has been quite nice. We've had a couple of birthday parties for youngsters, which is nice because although we haven't got catering facilities in this building, you know, you can we say to people you bring your cold food in because we have got facilities to heat things up and keep things hot for you and your birthday cake and your drinks and whatever and we'll provide you with an entire Museum and that works quite nicely. So we had a couple of birthday parties, and quite a few of the schools as we said.

[01:06:51]

MD: We did have an open night where one of our volunteers, he wanted to open this building up for an open evening.

CD: Oh, yes a late evening of games, that pretty good. But we're hoping to be able to do that in the future, but in was with a obviously with the whole building because what we're going to make this the game's gallery of the museum. Yes. I think we mentioned earlier and the other one the museum proper and so we'll have a better area in which to do something like that, so we may be doing something like that again next year. Because this guy is very into games. We call him our games master. Like we have a C5 expert, our music and sound expert, you know.

TB: Is this board games we are talking about, or computer games

CD: Computer games.

MD: We have got a collection of electronic board games like Cluedo, monopoly.

CD: I think I mentioned to you is walking around that it's anything which has got an electronic component in. We might expand into something like that. Yes. The thing is not having a Board of

Trustees and having our board meeting sitting on a sofa with a cup of tea, you know, if we want to do something we just go and do it. We haven't got to get everybody else's approval.

MD: We haven't got a 50/50 arrangement. If Carol wants to do it, we do it (laughs). No, it's about equal.

MD: you know, so if one of us comes up with an idea, you know, we'll just play with the idea, see if it might work in then we'll go for it. And we do it, you know, we'll give it a try. It's like we're going to be opening for the first time at Christmas time. It seems like a good idea when the kids are going to be getting fed up. So we will try it for four days between Christmas and the new year. So we're going to try that but you know, we didn't have to get anybody's approval. We just go and do it.

TB: My last question is what do you think this has given the the community or Ramsgate?

CD: A lot of fun basically.

MD: Not only that, we are offering a service here that wouldn't be here if it wasn't for us? I mean as I said before with there's a lot of museums really the other side is the country. You've got London, You got Bletchley Park. I mean, Cambridge, Oxford, Swindon, one in Wales, but there was nothing over this side. And so this is one of the reasons we thought well we've come to Ramsgate, because at the time we were setting it up there was nothing for youngsters to do. And we overheard them saying that didn't we? And so we thought Where can we set up? Oh, yes. There's nothing over here. The name of the museum the micro museum, the the Rams and Gates, that's useful. So this what we did.

[01:10:07]

CD: The thing is as I said about good two-thirds of our visitors come from outside of the area. About half of those from outside the area come from London. So we hope we're bringing people to the area who might not otherwise think of coming this way because a lot of them come just for a day trip, and they say we've come down specially to see you. Because I found you on the internet and we are very interested in this sort of thing, working with computers.

MD: When we were in the building next door in 2005 we were called the Computer Museum. But then as I said to you earlier, we had a few visitors who were expecting mainframe computers. And I mean, if you look from the outside of these two buildings, you can see that it would never be that sort of size. I did that the offer of an IBM Mainframe computer and terminal, but the thing is it would have been so big it would have virtually filled up half of this room. And I never had anywhere to put it.

TB: So you changed it to the micro museum.

MD: Yes the micro museum, but really is should be called the Micro-computer Museum. We called it the micro museum to save on the money for the signage.

CD: Cheap? What us? We could have called it the microchip Museum, but then people would have thought we were a take away.

MD: Or Mikes Place, then they would have thought we were a fish and chip shop. And so we have done it as best we can and as cheaply as we can. But still, although it is as cheap as we can, it is still costing us a bomb. Just keeping it going.

TB: that's brilliant. Thank you so much.

[the following is a clip from a conversation after the interview, about an offer they made to donate the collection to the Science Museum]

CD: Wonderful. They said yes, we'd love to have it. But you've got to just give it all to us. And we said we would loan it to them. We didn't want to lose control of it.

MD: What would happen is that they would put them in the resource centre, and the only people would be able to see them as the privileged people.

CD: Yes, we didn't want that either. So you know that to go to the major museums, You have to get permission and have a viewing of it yourself.

TB: I see yes, just in the archive, not on display.

CD: We didn't want that. We want people to be able to enjoy it.

[01:12:39]

MD: At the Museum of London they have a resource centre at Eagle Wharf Road. And what happened? Once stuff goes in there it doesn't come out until it's time for a special exhibition. They have got paintings in there that people haven't seen for the last 50 years. Now from our point of view, we were trying to put everything on show when we could afford to do it. That's why we've only got half of the collection on show now, and we are determined to try and open next next door to make it, so that we can get most of it out on show so people can enjoy it.

[Ends]