Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Tony Lewery

Role: co-founder

Museum: The Boat Museum (now the National Waterways Museum)

Location of interview: Tony's garden at his home

Date: 13/5/19

Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

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

[00:00:00]

TB: Okay, so Tony, first of all, could I just ask you to give me your name and your date of birth, if you don't mind?

TL: Right yes, Tony Lewery, L-E-W-E-R-Y, slightly odd. Date of birth XX-XXX, 1941.

[00:00:17]

TB: That's lovely, thank you. I'm pretty sure you've had a number of roles actually at the museum over there years but could you just tell us and I don't know if you actually have a relationship today or not, but just what your roles were and what your role is now, if you're involved?

TL: Right, well I was one of a small clutch of enthusiasts really, that came up with the idea of doing a waterways museum. There was one already in existence, of small stuff, down at Stoke Bruerne in the Midlands but they weren't collecting boats and we, up in the North West here, were very concerned that a number of regional canal boats were rapidly going out of existence, particularly the wooden ones. This is in the late 1960s really.

I had the huge benefit of being a friend of Edward Paget Tomlinson, he was the keeper of shipping at Merseyside Museums but as a hobby, he was interested in canals and as a hobby, he was interested in steam engines. Now this overlaps with the man that I was working for at the time, Peter Froud who was a canal enthusiast and also a steam enthusiast.

So, it was the three of us, I was totally besotted by the boats, Edward and Peter were keen on steam as well but we met at Preston Brook. Now Preston Brook is on the Bridgewater Canal, which is where the Trent and Mersey Canal met, so it was a significant meeting of waterways where wide waterways, that were capable of carrying Mersey barges and flats could moor up, quite logically and properly, with narrowboats from the Midlands.

It had been a very busy, important place, in the 1930s, it really got a bit of a boost during the war but had run down the warehouses, some of them had been demolished, some were in other usage by the time I got there, in the 1960s. It was the basis of a pleasure boat firm and I went to work there.

[00:02:31]

TB: Okay, so we're not talking about the Ellesmere Port, here? Was it somewhere else entirely?

TL: No, not at all, nothing to do with Ellesmere Port, whatsoever.

[00:02:38]

TB: Okay, I've just got you. So before we go into this important meeting, just tell me a little bit about your background and your interest in canals, more generally?

TL: Right, two strands I think, I went to art school in Brighton, on the south coast, which is my hometown. So I was interested in arty things, I was interested in… it became apparent, as it were, that I was interested in folk art as much as I was in fine art and this caused minor frictions at art college. But I had nothing whatsoever to do with canals but my parents were both keen sailing dinghy enthusiasts and I remember sailing from Brighton and Shoreham.

So I had a familiarity with boats and things that float on water but again, I wasn't so interested in the dinghy racing and sailing, as I was in the historic stuff, you know, waterways and barges they're earning a living by sailing along the coast, well this has all changed.

Then I read about canals and the idea and I read about canal boats that were all painted up with bright colours and flowers and roses and castles and I assumed it was totally exaggerated nonsense really. This is the sort of thing that didn't happen in post-war England, in my experience, but I did cycle up slowly, another story altogether, to the Midlands, to have a look at canals and low and behold, by happy choice, I went to the right place on a sunny day and there were the boats, doing their job still. Traffic was running down, this is '62, '63, I think, 1963, '64 and I became really totally besotted with the canal boat painting.

I loved the idea that not only was it decorative but it was part of a way of life and that way of life was earning a living, was using boats, it was practical, everything was practical and I already I suppose, I've always been sure that folk art has got a practical necessity behind it. It's doing something spiritual, for the people that are involved in it, whether it's peasant carts down in the Mediterranean or English canal boats and so forth.

So, it was the painting that drew me up, then I became really totally involved in the boats themselves and the functional beauty of a little floating box, carrying all this cargo about, with a minimum of effort, that is to say up until that point, horses mainly. Though there weren't any… there was one or two working in the Midlands by the time I became involved.

So what happened then? I –

[00:05:32]

TB: Just tell me about… I'm really interested in the folk art and how that moved to actual boats themselves because clearly, I suppose they are very entwined, aren't they, because this art exists on the boat or on objects on the boat, kind of thing. So the two are quite bound up, I suppose?

TL: Yes, they're very much so.

TB: Yes, I see.

TL: I'll show you my book about it, afterwards.

[00:06:00]

TB: Yes, I was going to say, because of course you still paint, right? Or do you still do it?

TL: I've more or less retired from the paintwork lately but I write about it and I have written about it a lot and it has been one of the mainstays of my living, for my whole life really. Having got involved in canals, I then, sort of, specialised into the boat painting, a bit of carpentry as well but became accepted as one of the regular boat painters and there weren't many about at that particular time, more now probably, than there were when I got involved in the 1960s.

But it was because of my specialisation in the signwriting and boat painting, that Peter Froud, who ran a pair of hotel boats, we met, I don't know how and when but anyway, he employed me to come up to Preston Brook to paint up his hotel boats in the spring, you know, the beginning of the season. On one particular year and I think even the second year of springtime I went up and then finally moved up to Preston Brook, for me, really to work for Peter Froud on a regular basis, for a number of years.

TB: Wow.

TL: Both painting and also running the trip boat, steering the boat and things like that.

[00:07:18]

TB: Gosh, right, so at what point did it go from an interest to actually being a money-earning profession, for you?

TL: Immediately, really.

TB: Wow.

TL: Yes, I mean as soon as I went to… as soon as I got involved in canals, I managed to find a boat that needed repainting and asking if I could, this is in the Midlands, he said I need somebody to paint the boat and I said, well I need somewhere to live. If you let me live on your boat, I'll paint your boat for you and that was a first… that was several weeks existence, as it were. I didn't need very much and that led on to everything else, from then on.

[00:07:59]

TB: That's amazing, when you say paint a boat, at that point was it just painting it green, kind of thing, or were talking about the boats and the castles and all that kind of stuff?

TL: The lot, really, the lot. It was, right from the rubbing down and painting it red and green, with lines and stripes but also because I was capable of doing that, anyway and I said I wanted to do the roses and castles on it and the lettering on it. So, that's how he allowed me to learn how to do it really and paid me a small amount but yes, that was the beginning and then from there, to Norbury Junction, to paint a boat.

Norbury Junction is on the Shropshire Union Canal and whilst I was there, painting that boat, with a wife by then, we thought wouldn't it be fun to run a horse-drawn boat, as a trip boat, here at Norbury Junction and my boss, at the time, said it sounds alright, how much will a boat cost and we made a few phone calls and Blue Line… sorry I should say the Samuel Barlow Coal Company, in the Midlands was running down and they'd got spare boats.

So we bought an old butty boat, a wooden butty boat, The Iona, for 200 quid as I remember and then I spent the following winter, altering it, putting seats in it and then the following season, we ran it as a horse-drawn trip boat, on the Shropshire Union Canal, running from Norbury Junction and that's where I made all the later connections, really and became a total nerd about historic boats and particularly horse-drawn boats, which were just vanishing so fast. A whole 150 years of canal history was suddenly going and people were waxing eloquent about stinky old motorboats and thing, historic 1930s engines. I'm saying: "What about the horses?"

TB: Yes.

TL: So I mean I had my own historic boat later on, with a historic engine in it but already I was very interested in horse-drawn boat transport, the boating life entwinned with the boating decoration.

[00:10:11]

TB: So this is amazing, because I suppose, by the sounds of it, you were literally witnessing the end of an era, weren't you, in front of your eyes?

TL: Yes, at the time I didn't really realise it, I mean again going back to that first boat painting job, in the Midlands, at Norton Canes, I was living on the boat and it was up a dead end of the canal, that had just been closed off due to coal mining subsidence and there were narrowboats as far as the eye could see, two abreast sunk, up the side of the canal, the Midlands Joey boats.

So I mean I never thought, at that moment, that we were at the end of it, I just thought "oh these boats have just been sunk out of the way, for the moment"; those boats are now - from hundreds, there's now only one in existence.

TB: Crikey.

TL: You know, there were just hundreds sunk all over the place and all the coal traffic was just finishing, steam was beginning to finish, there wasn't the investment in unloading equipment. So the boats were still being shovelled out by hand, 20 tonne of coal, into a hole in the wall, no wonder it was fading away and there was still one or two horse boats still running around then, because –

[00:11:25]

TB: Was there, in the 60s?

TL: Yes, oh certainly, right up to '67, I think '68. It's a very efficient transport, one horsepower, working off the tow path and on solid land, 25 tonnes plodding along at two and a half, three miles an hour and it had been that efficient for the previous hundred and fifty years.

TB: Yes, I see.

TL: And that's what I was excited about really, being at the end of this.

[00:11:52]

TB: Well that's amazing, so because it was so, so cheap, it didn't make sense to me, to move it over to rail?

TL: Exactly so, what got expensive, of course, was time and labour. You always need two people for a horse boat, one to walk behind the horse and one to steer the boat and of course, if it takes a long time and wages are going up, by the hour, then suddenly wages are becoming expensive. The same with the motorboats up and down the canals, they were moving faster but the only way that they went right through, into the 1960s, is because a motorboat, started towing a butty boat behind it, a dumb boat behind it. So the same two people, the horse driver and the steerer, could now have 50 tonnes, be travelling with 50 tonnes, instead of just 25 tonnes. That kept it going, from the 1930s, this is, you know, when that really began to happen, right through to the 1970s, I suppose, when it finally faded away.

TB: I see, right so it was quite slow and gradual, over that period, that's fascinating.

TL: Yes.

TB: And at the same time, the last steam train on the railway lines, I think was 1968, so there was this moment, wasn't there, where suddenly there was a lot of steam trains, locomotives, but also a lot of dumb barges, particularly –

TL: A lot of boats becoming redundant.

[00:13:09]

TB: Yes, now what happened to them all, were they all scrapped?

TL: Mainly scrapped, iron boats of course were, well, worth about as much money as it took to break them up, I suppose but they were still scattered about. Wooden boats, there were a lot of them, sunk about all over the place, some of them being brought up for house boats but unfortunately by poor people, who didn't realise the maintenance cost of a wooden boat. To stay in the same place, you have to spend thousands of pounds really, every year, just to stay in the same place. It was alright when they were earning a living and the planks were being replaced regularly, whenever there was a weak link but as soon as you leave a wooden boat, for five years, suddenly there's a backlog and suddenly, even then it was hundreds of pounds to… and the sorts of people that had bought these boats, hippies like us, oh of course you haven't got that sort of money, so they got broken up and sunk and out the way.

That's why the wooden boats were becoming so rare, quite visibly rare in the 1960s, which is why, when we started talking about a museum of canal boats, it was the wooden boats that were going to be critical, because of the expense. It was the wooden boats that were going to disappear and were in danger by then. The iron boats and the metal boats, not so bad because they last longer and because motorboats have got their own engine and therefore, they were being turned into pleasure boats or being used for pleasure, they're in a healthy situation to this day now.

You may have heard of, or come across the Historic Narrowboat Owners Club, I mean there are two or three hundred members with a boat and most of them are maintained superbly well but they're not wooden and they're not horse boats.

TB: Yes, I see, okay.

TL: And those, again I'm going back to this, suddenly this whole 150-year canal history was vanishing very fast.

[00:15:10]

TB: Absolutely, that's amazing because I was interested in the exhibition, I know the museum has moved a lot, in all sorts of ways but the older displays which I imagine you may well

have something to do with. The coverage of the wooden boats is incredible, compared to the metal, there's much more emphasis on that and that explains why, because that was really the reason for it… first of all, anyway?

TL: Yes, I think so, I mean the earliest iron canal boats are only the 1860s or something and there's a few of those still kicking about. By the 1880's and 90s, the new steamboats were being built out of iron and have lasted well but wooden boats were still being built. The last wooden boat was built in the 1950s, so they were still in parallel, so long as they could earn a living and when I was… going back to Preston Brook, when I was asked to go to Preston Brook, to paint up the pair of hotel boats, three out of the four boats that belonged to the firm were wooden boats.

I liked that because they were floating hotels and because they were earning their living, they were getting the maintenance every year. Every winter we had to caulk them up and things and so they survived and survived and survived and today, I'm involved with the Saturn Conservation Group, which is one of those hotel boats, because it was a hotel boat for so long, it survived and survived, it was built in 1906 and then, well 20 years ago, we got a major grant to rebuild it and it's now back to its original working condition.

TB: Amazing, yes.

TL: But that is, again, a different parallel story in many ways but it was the hotel boats at Preston Brook, that were run by this man, Peter Froud. He in turn, was a deep canal enthusiast really, as well as a steam enthusiast and he had acquired a great big wooden Mersey Flat, which is a barge, a really big… the largest barge that could get onto the Bridgewater Canal and that was down on the River Weaver.

Now this is another old… I think we decided it was the 1870s when it was originally built, but it was one of the very, very few surviving examples of a wooden Mersey Flat, still floating, still in existence. Do you want to switch off for a moment?

[00:17:48] [interview paused for a break]

TB: So, we're aiming towards this meeting and so you've made these connections through your work with some other people that are interested in canals?

TL: And I'd moved to Preston Brook, we were living in a cottage by the side of the canal, working on hotel boats and working with the remaining carrying fleet, there was still a fleet of narrowboats, working the area. So I was painting those boats up now and again as well, so I got to know the boat people. Peter Froud is the main person, he came, Edward Paget Tomlinson**,** as I've mentioned, came from the Liverpool museum, he turned up being interested and then it developed that he was working on… had he started working on a canal encyclopaedia, a massive volume, which I can show you?

TB: Yes.

TL: We got on very well, but we were as chalk and cheese really. He was a very big, quiet, shy man, shy to the point of… yes just shy I think will do, very knowledgeable but of course I was loud and brash and so when we went out to places, if we met somebody, a boat person, it would be me that would go chatting in and waving and ask the questions and then pass over to Edward, who was the man with the notebook and with the real sensible questions and of course everybody loved him, as soon as they got to know him. He was a delightful man.

[00:19:24]

TB: So what was his background, because he was an artist, or he did some painting later, did he?

TL: Not really, Edward was a museum professional, he'd served his time at the Maritime Museum in London, he then got a job at Merseyside Maritime Museum and then he worked up and became the keeper of shipping at the Merseyside Maritime Museum. No, it wasn't the Maritime Museum then, it was the Maritime Collection of Merseyside museums in general. They'd got a huge collection of model boats in store, left over from when they'd been put away in the war but the museum was developing fast, in lots of different directions.

So he was a museum professional, Peter was earning a living with the hotel boats and I was working for Peter, mainly. When the idea of a museum started, we thought well Preston Brook, where we were was ideal, for several different reasons, it's on a broad canal, a barge canal, connection to Yorkshire, if necessary, and the Trent and Mersey canal, it had got a set of basins there; canal basins where there had been a big warehouse but which had been knocked down before we got there.

But all this, a handful of basins would be perfect for a collection of canal boats, it was at the beginning of the Runcorn New Town development and the Preston Brook area, came into that. So planners, down there, were quite interested in these lunatics at the edge of the town that might set up a museum, give them a bit of culture. So that was a good idea and then the big question was, how do we take this idea forward, who do we need, what sort of people. Edward and Peter said, we need to talk to Dr Owen, Dr David Owen, who was the keeper, the curator of the Manchester Museums. Lovely man, with a canal boat, his own, we already knew that, a pleasure boat but he was a big head man in the museums' world and we felt that we needed that sort of technological input, in order to form a society.

We contacted another friend of mine, Harry Arnold, who was developing then, as a canal journalist and that was going to be important too. Mary do you want me.

UF: I was just wondering if you'd like some more tea?

TB: Oh I'm fine thank you, I'm good, thanks so much though.

UF: Or an orange juice?

TB: That's very kind, I'm okay, thank you though.

TL: More later Mary but thank you. This is Toby by the way, that's Mary, you've probably guessed, haven't you?

TB: Hi, Mary how are you doing, nice to see you.

TL: So then those are really the critical five people. Edward Paget-Tomlinson, first I think primarily, Peter Froud with the actual boats, Dr Owen with a very deep knowledge of the museums world, as well as an interest in waterways, me as a painter enthusiast and Harry, journalist and interested in waterways history and that was the first meeting, with the idea of setting up a museum at Preston Brook.

[00:22:57]

TB: Right, now is the famous pub meeting, which is on the timeline on that exhibition?

TL: Yes possibly, we had a chat at Ring o' Bells up at Daresbury, I think if that's the one that was mentioned, yes.

[00:23:10]

TB: I think that was mentioned, yes. So was that a convenient place for you to meet?

TL: Yes, it was really. Harry had got connections to Warrington because he'd come from that area, he was working further down south. Peter and I obviously lived nearby, Edward was from Liverpool at that time and Dr Owen from Manchester, so yes.

[00:23:31]

TB: So was the first time that you had all actually gathered together, at that meeting?

TL: It sounds like a good story, doesn't it? Yes, I think possibly so, quite formally and to decide to set up a society.

[00:23:46]

TB: So yes, I was going to say, thinking back to that pub, so what was covered, what was discussed? Was that the first thing, a society first, you felt that that was important to…?

TL: Oh yes, why did we think that? Yes, I think an actual society of a group of people with knowledge and interest and in order to raise some money really. I think all those things were in mind, that we would need money or we'd need a respectable organisation to get money from, Runcorn Development Corporation, for example and to deal with the Manchester Ship Canal Company, who owned the site, they were another problem.

It had to be a respectable organisation and the respectableness, that was one of the reason for asking Dr Owen to join us because he was the absolute height of respectableness and as was Edward. Peter and I were a bit of the scruffier end of things but that's fine.

[00:24:54]

TB: Oh that's interesting, right there's this rather lovely alliance between the younger and older as well, I don't know but age-wise were you all of a similar age, I don't know?

TL: No, I was… Harry and I were by far the youngest. Peter and Edward probably had at least ten years more than me, at that time and Dr Owen had another ten years beyond that. So as I say, he was a very well-established figure, possibly even approaching retirement thoughts at that point. It was a wide-spread group. I was, what was I? Barely not 30 then, so yes.

[00:25:41]

TB: Right okay, tell me then, why a museum because it didn't have to be a museum, I mean there's plenty of steam engine workshops that aren't open to the public, just for preserving steam engines but clearly, you felt that there should be some sort of public thing here, so just talk me through that?

TL: So certainly a museum and exhibition, a display, particularly of all the regional variations of canal boats, narrowboats were already quite popular and photogenic and appearing in magazine articles and things like that, they weren't likely to disappear, except the difficult wooden ones. Narrowboats, in general, were getting quite a good press and building up and the pleasure boat world was progressing. We could see that there were going to be more and more pleasure boats over the following few years but by pleasure boats, I mean seven-foot-wide ones that can go all up and down the country.

Where we were, in the North West, it was the bigger ones that were in danger of disappearing entirely, particularly the Mersey Flats, working on the River Mersey and the River Weaver, particularly the Leeds and Liverpool canal boats, which were a very peculiar size, half way between a Yorkshire keel and a flat with a whole different style of decoration on them, very pretty. Not a moment's press at all, nobody knew anything about them and

there was a fleet of them, just coming to the end of their working life at Wigan, which of course is nicely, easily connected to Preston Brook.

So Leeds and Liverpool boats were important, there was an icebreaker that had already gone into some preservation on the Shropshire Union Canal, we thought that would be a nice thing to have, as a maintenance boat, to try and build out the picture of what a canal system needed. Big boats, little boats, narrowboats that could go anywhere and the maintenance boats that go with it.

So, that was the kernel thinking, there would be three or four narrowboats and a couple of Mersey Flats and a Leeds and Liverpool boat and that would be fine, we would cover, to some degree, the history of boat building, canal boat work in the North West of England. North West, we –

[00:27:59]

TB: Tell me about that, because that's obviously very important, so why that, why not national?

TL: Because we were in the North West, because Preston Brook was just connected to those waterways, because we thought it would be ridiculous to go any wider, to bring in Yorkshire boats or Norfolk Wherries or anything from the south of England, that's just silly. We wanted a manageable museum that we could envisage. I mean we were talking with Edward, with very experienced museum professional, Dr Owen, very experienced museum professional, they knew what museums were… what size is sensible really and a North West museum, that would be great.

That would cover a lot of the waterways that didn't seem to be getting the same publicity as the narrowboats in the Midlands in the South of England. Bearing mind, all the publicity for canals, right from the 1930s onwards and particularly the IWA's coming from London, London, London, south east. Reporters had got as far as Braunston, felt they were in the deep north. Anything further north than that, was just not worth thinking about because it wasn't in the day trip from a London office. Everything to do with the publicity of waterways has been so London-centric, that us in the North West, we did feel a bit out on a limb and a bit forgotten, with all these wonderful Leeds and Liverpool boats, still churning along with coal, to Wigan Power Station.

With the Mersey Flats having just finished, the Mersey Flat that we'd got, the last surviving remnant of what had been a fleet of sailing barges up and down the Weaver and the Mersey, this was important, this was really critical that somebody looked after the last few of those.

[00:29:55]

TB: I see, okay but important for who and why?

TL: Yes, difficult question that, important for us because we wanted to preserve that whole network memory, I suppose of boat building. Put that question in different words, who are we, I mean –

[00:30:24]

TB: Well it's interesting, so partly it's a question of, you've got this, in terms of the history of canals in the UK, it seems to me that there was an area of it, which wasn't getting much attention and in fact was under threat. So as a curator or historian, there's something important about archiving that bit of that history.

TL: Historian, that's right, I think we all felt ourselves to be historians, that it was important to document these things and preferably documented in three dimensions, in reality because trying to talk about what a Mersey Flat was really like, this enormous boat with all this skill and all this caulking and all this, just talking about it and taking a few photographs seemed like nonsense and I think that was the flavour of the decade, in many ways, in steam engines as well, I think, wasn't it? Certainly transport, all the way over.

TB: Yes.

TL: Peter was very interested, that the Preston Brook museum should be a transport museum, rather than a canal or waterways museum. Edward and I were very keen on the waterways museum, as being narrower and probably easier to get the support for, that we thought it needed. Peter had got a steam engine, he'd got an old bus and he really wanted something much more hobbyist, he may have been right, it may have done very well as a mixed bunch of transport stuff, with boats overlapping with Leyland buses. I'm not sure, I could never work up that enthusiasm, I didn't mind him having that enthusiasm but I was just keen that I wanted people to be able to relate boats together; icebreakers to narrowboats to carrying boats to Mersey Flats and that they should be in one place and that the skills for restoring them, should be set up. That's what was disappearing very fast.

Part of the museum idea at Preston Brook was that immediately one of the canal basins would have a slipway put in and with six or eight boats. Obviously one of them would have to be up on the slipway all the time, being maintained, to stay in the same place. We recognised that already, that maintaining wooden boats is just a huge effort, not only for money but for the skills to do it and they were becoming less and less. Fewer and fewer boat builders, they'd gone off and done other things or there hadn't been any apprentices for 20 or 30 years. So the skills of actually boat restoring and repairing, that was critical, we wanted to set that up.

So it probably wasn't top of our minds but it would be an employment opportunity for some skilled tradesmen eventually but that wouldn't have been top of our priorities, it was just concentrating on preserving the skills.

[00:33:27]

TB: Yes, I see. Okay now why did you decide to have boats floating on water, because if you go to any maritime museum in the world, the first thing they do, like the Cutty Sark, is take it out because –

TL: Nowadays they do, they didn't then.

[00:33:40]

TB: Oh right, okay, so tell me about that?

TL: Well because the idea was all these boats would float about and go places and come back again and be seen to be doing the job. Seeing a boat boating still seems to me ten times as important as a boat static, in a way. It's very difficult because it means you need skills, you need crew, you need money, you need time and what we find with Saturn, this other boat that I'm involved with, finding a situation where people can actually see it operating, is quite difficult because it goes by in three minutes, it's gone, oh is that it? Whereas us on-board, we're having a lovely time, all day and learning things.

So yes, boats in their natural environment, boats that when you lean on them, you can prove how easy it is to move a 30 tonne boat, by just leaning on it and to get that underlying message of the incredible value of floating transport, how easy it is to move huge weights slowly and then how difficult it is to move them faster. But that ecological balance, I suppose is really important; why keep the boats in the water? Because they were in the water, they also, initially they're better kept damp and in their natural environment, so long as the maintenance is kept up.

In fact, when boats went out of work for a short while, they would have been sunk, because that would keep the water and the planks moist and wet and tight and things, then it could be pumped up and away you go again.

[00:35:22]

TB: No, really?

TL: Oh yes, in the short-term, two or three years, something like that, sink a boat out the way and then it will be fine when you pump it up again, it will still be tight. Going back to my first really canal experience, at Norton Canes in the Midlands, when I went there to paint that

boat, there were these lines of canal boats in both directions, two abreast sunk. Purposely sunk, not accidentally sunk, purposely sunk, waiting for the traffic to start up again, but of course it was already ten years, 15 years after the traffic had finished so they were going fast, the topsides were rotting in the sunshine and cracking open and there were one or two that we did pump up and were sold on. They were still useable.

But no, in the short-term just sinking a boat is okay, keeping it in the water is okay, so long as the wind and weather, they say, you know, on the waterline is the critical place of any wooden boat to be kept maintained. Dry it's alright, wet it's alright, half and half, that's where the boats go rotten.

[00:36:31]

TB: I see, so at that pub meeting, so we've established that you decided to –

TL: Bearing in mind we were all canal enthusiasts in one way or another, we wouldn't have discussed that sort of thing, that was just an understood how important canal boats and boats were [to be kept in the water].

[00:36:49]

TB: Right, I see, yes so that would have been taken for granted that you all felt the boats where important and needed to be celebrated and so on?

TL: Yes.

[00:36:56]

TB: Just one quick thing, just give me a sense, at that time, clearly there were some maritime museums and boat museums around and you've already mentioned some in Liverpool and collection. So was this meeting a new need or in fact was this happening… was this part of a bigger thing happening, all over the country?

TL: It was really part of a bigger thing happening all over the country and all making the same mistakes. About that same time, The Maritime Trust came into existence and The Maritime Trust then took on a collection of big boats and they thought, right we'll stick them in the pool of London, the basin, the pool of London there and they had this tremendous collection, they had The Cambria there, a big sailing barge, they had a warship and this, that and the other and immediately they started deteriorating because they'd got two men and a boy to walk round and tighten the ropes. Hopeless, hopeless and it was very soon apparent that that collection was going to pot very, very fast.

This is the National Maritime Collection and so what they did, they divvied out the boats, all over the country, so that wherever a boat went, there was a group of enthusiasts that could look after it and love it and take it over and there were two or three that went to Scotland, The Cambria went down to Faversham for a while.

TB: Gosh, that's amazing.

TL: So the Maritime Trust was, I'm sure that was coming into existence and making those mistakes at that time. Liverpool Museum hadn't got many boats at the time, it hasn't got many now, it's got a hall with some smaller ones in and it's got a ferry and one or two other bits and pieces, Mersey Ferry, I think is part of their collection. The other waterways museum, strictly inland waterways museum, at Stoke Bruerne, had got a trip boat but I don't think it had got a boat on display, proper boat, it was just relying on the traffic going by. So we felt that was letting the side down, rather.

[00:39:08]

TB: And Kings Cross, that came much later, didn't it?

TL: Yes, with the icehouse and things like that, that as a waterways museum is a very tiny operation and it came a bit later. I think they had already learnt a lot and they kept it… we were realising that museums are a doddle indoors, keep the doors closed and just keep the rain out, keeping boats outside, keeping boats, which you have to keep outside, is a totally different problem. We knew this from people owning boats, never mind preserving them.

So yes, I think we were aware of the problems which is why, at this early time, we were trying to keep the project relatively small and relatively regional. What happened, of course, is that the idea came out, we started the society, we got publicity and then people would come up and say, well we've got this old icebreaker from this canal, would you like it? Oh well… all of a sudden, the collection had got three, four, five icebreakers and this was Dr Owen's fault in many ways, I could already foresee the problems, just because you're offered something, doesn't mean to say that we can afford it.

What is now very, very clear, the National Trust don't take over buildings without there being a huge legacy to go with it. The Maritime Trust don't take over a boat unless they're promised a back-up package. We were taking on boats without that, just because people were being generous, we were given a Leeds and Liverpool boat, which still survives quite well or we were being offered things for ten pounds. Oh right and of course once you've taken over ownership of a boat, oh thank you very much, it's your responsibility, you've got to find people to do it and if you don't find the people and you never did find that many people, then the boat starts depreciating.

We had one ice boat, which was in good-ish condition and it's a typical one, it was perfect, for any canal company only needed half a dozen icebreakers to a fleet of 300 boats. So why should you want more than one icebreaker in a tiny little museum?

[00:41:38]

TB: Yes, so what happened to all the others?

TL: Most of them have destroyed themselves basically or been broken up because they couldn't have been maintained. The Boat Museum at Ellesmere Port; oh blimey I don't know how many they've broken up there, over these last few years.

[00:41:54]

TB: Right; so they had got five and they had to make a decision and say, sorry, we can only keep one?

TL: No, they didn't make any decisions, they just fell to pieces until they were an absolute embarrassment and had to go and then somebody would finally smash it up.

TB: Right, okay, I see what you mean, that's a real problem.

TL: This is where I started to fall out with the museum really, even in those earlier stages, when this expansive, "we are going to be the National Waterways Museum"… oh right.

[00:42:23]

TB: So when did that come in then, was that quite early, it sounds like it was?

TL: Quite early.

TB: In the 70s now, are we?

TL: Yes, I can't just remember, we can look up the precise dates.

First of all Preston Brook became unavailable because it belonged to the Manchester Ship Canal Company and the Manchester Ship Canal Company are a very commercial operation. They could see no way of getting money out of us and making money and they wanted to sell the land for housing, which they did, later on. All this became apparent, as the years went by.

TB: I see, yes.

TL: Cheshire County Council were very keen though, they said, well I'll tell you what, why don't you go to Anderton, top of the Anderton Lift, which is a derelict area, which they had some responsibility for and we want to develop the idea of the Anderton Lift being a centre of historical significance. Righto, are there any canal basins there? No, but there's a whole area of land which we could build a set of canal basins into. Right, can we get the Mersey Flat there, the biggest boat in our collection? Well yes, you could go from Preston Brook (if we ever got to Preston Brook), go up the River Weaver and then it might just go into the Anderton Lift and go up the Anderton Lift and then get into there, that would be its absolute gauging point. The same would apply to any Leeds and Liverpool boats getting there.

Right because it's on a narrow canal there; the Anderton Lift itself is wide enough for two narrowboats side-by-side, but the canal itself is a narrow canal. Right so Anderton wasn't ideal but Cheshire County Council were keen and put in, I think some money and help in design and possibilities. Dr Owen, who initially had said he never wanted to be a permanent part of this organisation, got all bushy tailed about it and was keen. At that point, other boats were being offered and things like that.

[00:44:26]

TB: So had the museum opened at the first site?

TL: No, nothing.

TB: These are all possibilities that you're thinking about?

TL: It was all possibilities, no there was no museum opened at all.

[00:44:36]

TB: But that one sounds really quite a serious offer, basically from the council?

TL: Yes, oh the help at the Anderton Lift, indeed it was. What happened at about that time is that the huge, wonderful warehouses at Ellesmere Port burned down. There was a set of two-storey warehouses that spanned canal basins there, they'd been empty and derelict for a number of years, not quite derelict but empty for a number of years, but I mean a huge place and suddenly, we suspect internal vandalism, rather than anything else, these buildings were becoming another drain on the ship canal company, they magically caught fire and the biggest ones had to be knocked down, well were burnt out and collapsed down.

But that left one warehouse, the island warehouse on the top level, on the Shropshire Union level, and suddenly that and its surrounding basins became another potential museum site, within the constraints of how we thought we could finance it. Before the place would have been too big, it would have been a national museum, that would have been ideal for the

national shipping museum, where you could get big ships in and square riggers alongside it but that was never in our thinking. That was not sensible.

So Ellesmere Port became available and Ellesmere Port Town Council were very keen that something should happen into this very, very run-down derelict area of Ellesmere Port at that time –

[00:46:18]

TB: So they were keen because they thought it might regenerate the area?

TL: Yes, oh yes, exactly so. They desperately needed some regeneration of some sort in the docks area of Ellesmere Port, which was very, very run-down and with this derelict site where the big warehouse had been.

[00:46:35]

TB: I see, yes, okay so basically the decline of canals has happened now, it really has stopped and you've got this big empty warehouses and buildings dotted all over the port?

TL: And the difficulties of digging out basins at Anderton were becoming apparent, it was the whole area, as a subsidence area, the area that we were digging into, with derelict land that been rebuilt and remade and I think a bit of sense was creeping in here, that actually building new basins on this subsidence land at a high level, above the River Weaver, possibly one of the capping things is we brought the Mossdale, the big barge, I keep talking about, which was kept on the River Weaver and we brought it down from Northwich, put it into the Anderton Lift to make sure that it would go up the lift and it did. It went in the lift, just about, got up to the top and then bang, it wouldn't come out the top because of some new wooden fendering, that the British Waterways had put.

TB: Oh my god.

TL: Right, it wasn't insurmountable in the sense that it was a lot of effort, we could have taken all this fendering off or British Waterways would have had to do so but it did, sort of, it did kick the idea into a bit more difficulty, at this point.

[00:47:55]

TB: Right, just explain, there was an issue about the width of boats, isn't there?

TL: Yes.

TB: Which has quite important regional implications?

TL: Very important round here.

TB: So just for the record, can you just explain that?

TL: Yes, a narrowboat is basically seven-foot-wide and will go nearly anywhere in the country but it's 70-foot-long, so it can't get up onto the Leeds and Liverpool Canal. A Mersey Flat, standard Mersey Flat is 14-foot-wide, so two narrowboats side-by-side, generally speaking, in the North West, any locks that were built for a Mersey Flat will get two narrowboats in, side-by-side or a Leeds and Liverpool boat, which are also about 14 foot, but they're on 60 foot long.

So a narrowboat can't go up the Wigan locks at all because the locks are too short, even though you can get two in side-by-side, but you can't get the gates to close but the Ashton Canal in Manchester, that was all barge canal… barge, Mersey Flat size canals, the River Weaver was bigger, that's enormous, you can get ships up there, so that was no problem. Ellesmere Port, again theoretically the canal from Ellesmere Port up to Chester, is a barge canal 14-foot-wide, two narrowboats wide.

Great we can get Mersey Flats up there, except that they just put a main road in across the top and they'd narrowed the first bridge and it's still narrow to this day. So it's only 12-foot-wide, so we can't take any barges up to Chester, which would have been great, from Ellesmere Port, you can actually start doing some really interesting boat trips with some of the bigger boats.

So going through Ellesmere Port, hmmm but of course everybody promised well if it gets really popular, we'll rebuild the bridge, it's only a motorway bridge, we'll knock out the towpath. No I don't think that's ever going to happen, I mean it never has happened, of course, it's still a possibility but extremely unlikely, I think.

[00:50:04]

TB: Yes, so this thing about width, it does mean that regionally there's a big difference between the north and the south, as much as physically these little… the big, long narrowboats can't get into the 60-foot locks and wide beams can't get… is there no pinch point in the Midlands somewhere, where it's a narrow lock?

TL: Preston Brook effectively was that pinch point because the canal tunnel at Preston Brook, onto the Trent and Mersey Canal, is just about 14-foot-wide but they used to have special ten-foot barges that would go through there and then there's a stop lock. From then on, that's narrowboat country, really coming southwards.

TB: Okay, yes, I've got you.

TL: So that is why Preston Brook was such a perfect place, even looking back, with hindsight, it was perfect, the basins were there and interconnected little network of basins, derelict land that could have been developed, several interesting warehouses nearby, broad canal going by, access to the Leeds and Liverpool Canal and the Manchester canals, terrific. I mean the perfect place, which is why the idea flowered, really, if we'd have been working anywhere else, the idea probably wouldn't really have surfaced, it's just that we were all living at Preston Brook and working there, oh this seems a good idea.

[00:51:26]

TB: Yes, but that's all been built on with flats and things now?

TL: Yes, it's just houses round the basins, yes.

TB: So that left you then, with this massive site, which was cheap –

TL: At Ellesmere Port.

TB: And the council were pleased for you to do it?

TL: Yes, not such a massive site in the sense that I think initially one didn't think they would go down into the bottom basins, although again, this expansion thing, oh it's big enough, we can take some much bigger boats and one of the boats that they took on was the Daniel Adamson, which is a great big… it was a steam barge, much too big to get up on the canals, could never have got to Preston Brook and again became a whole drain on resources and manpower later on.

Also they took on the Besuto, which is a Scottish barge, that had been working up and down the ship canal, that would never have gone to Preston Brook, would never have become the drain on resources, money and time and attitude that it became later on.

[00:52:21]

TB: Right but you had the space there, so that meant that these gifts could be given and accepted?

TL: Yes and even from the south of England. Yes it's just the expansive thing, partly it was Dr Owen, who was the volunteer chairman of the society. As soon as it went to Ellesmere Port, there was a plan developed for when the museum would open and as soon as it opened, it took on staff, it took on Tony Hirst, who is a name that you will come across.

TB: Oh right, yes.

TL: Tony Hirst was the first paid professional director of the museum and I blame him for a lot of the… blame is a disparaging word, the excitement of creating a bigger museum and accepting huge gifts and the huge idea of being the national waterways museum of Great Britain and therefore it needs boats from all over Great Britain to be part of that, without recognising the downside of every boat, needs 35 dedicated people to keep it going, really.

[00:53:32]

TB: Right, so Tony was a key driver of that ambition to do that?

TL: Yes, I think so. If you get a chance to talk to anybody else, you need to check that opinion of mine with other people that were there at the time. But yes, he drove it forward and it became bigger and theoretically better, which after 20 years, suddenly you've got an enormous collection of boats, all of which were getting worse, really.

TB: I see, right so long-term, in fact, that wasn't a sustainable policy or you couldn't just keep that many boats floating, as simple as that?

TL: No and that's what's happened in the last few years, the British Waterways have changed and is now the Canal and River Trust that have taken over and they've basically bitten the bullet and have just hoisted boats out of the water, lifted them out and put them into storage, into a big warehouse, hopefully for some of them to be restored in the future but I think it's very unlikely but to slow the degradation anyway and to keep something that can be measured and looked at. But they're up on the bank but most of them are out in the open, so they're not even under cover.

[00:54:48]

TB: Wow yes, so how many boats have been taken out, roughly, just give me a sense of it?

TL: 20.

TB: Right, gosh because you've probably got about… I mean how many boats are at the museum now, there must be…?

TL: What in display?

TB: Would it be –

TL: Not many, 15.

TB: – a dozen perhaps?

TL: 15, yes maybe and maybe some of those you saw today might have been privately owned ones that went there for the Easter gathering and are left there, looking good, for the time being.

[00:55:12]

TB: Oh I see, okay, yes. Right, so there's a big proportion of them that have come out then.

TL: Oh yes, a greater proportion have come out and are now in store and a similar number have been destroyed over the years, have been broken up. There were all sorts of things tucked round the back, which have just given up and been broken up, on one or two occasions, given away to people, so they take them away to restore them themselves. No it's been… oh it's been so sad really.

[00:55:41]

TB: Well I was going to say, that must be quite heart-breaking, I should imagine, seeing that?

TL: Oh that's one of the reasons I just drifted away, I couldn't bear it really and I had to earn a living and the whole museum depended on huge volunteer efforts, unpaid volunteer efforts and I put in my hours to begin with but really, as time went on and I was doing, for nothing, the sorts of jobs that I ought to be getting paid for, in a way and we weren't very rich, so it was important that I earnt a living, rather than spend more and more time on the Boat Museum, which was now becoming less of what I hoped for or what Edward and I had envisaged to begin with.

[00:56:27]

TB: I see, I'm with you. Right, so it got a life of its own.

TL: Of course it did, yes.

TB: Okay, so just tell me –

TL: Other people, though have come in later, will think of it as a terrific success story. So I don't want you to go away thinking that everybody thinks as depressively as I do, it's just that having seen it right from a small conceptual idea, to grow into this massive thing and then to actually be festering away in the water. Then you think well we have saved some boats; the success is that there are really 12 boats in pretty good condition there and a whole exhibition inside and things like that. So that's got to be good news, honestly, it's alright, don't just keep going on about the boats that didn't survive.

[00:57:18]

TB: Yes and also, I suppose the ones that didn't, probably would have died the death 30 years ago, wouldn't they?

TL: That is the other big question, if we hadn't taken them over, would somebody else have taken them over and looked after them? I doubt it very, very much. However there is always that niggling doubt that if we hadn't taken over these things and they've fallen to pieces there; they might have had a different future elsewhere. But I don't think so, I think we were in the forefront of trying to keep boats and restore boats.

[00:57:47]

TB: Yes, so when you had the port, what was your role, were you… obviously you were on the committee?

TL: I was on the committee for a good many years really, yes.

TB: And you were a volunteer as well?

TL: Well yes, all the committee were volunteers, yes.

TB: And so just tell me… okay –

TL: And I was the specialist painter, to some degree as well, of course, the roses and castle type things but I'd also got an interest in boat building and I'm a general handy carpenter, so I'd done a bit of that sort of work, so I could restore cabins, which I did on the Gifford and so forth.

[00:58:27]

TB: So, just tell me a little bit about that time, because I mean in some respects, I think it's the most exciting time of a museum, is when everything is dilapidated and you're doing stuff up and clearing things and buildings things –

TL: Getting noticeably better and the collection is getting bigger, yes.

TB: So, looking back, you said in the end it was just too much timewise but just paint me a little picture of how that works, was it weekend work parties, how did it work?

TL: Weekend work parties, every weekend for a couple of years, actually physically digging out the basin, clearing the mud and then demolishing the roof of the Toll House and repairing that, so that there could be an exhibition put in there, which opened for the first summer, just during the summertime, this small exhibition in there, not the big warehouse that

you've been in today, at all, just the Toll House on the island between the locks and the top basin, did you remember it?

TB: Yes.

TL: In fact there's no exhibitions in there at all now, it's just used for offices, I think but we had a ground floor exhibition which I designed and did with lots of clutter and stuff in there. That was probably '76, '77 something like that. We had a big Easter gathering for the first time. The Queen came at one point, although I think I had dropped away a little bit by then, to visit the museum, I think that was probably when the bigger warehouse exhibition was opened.

[00:59:58]

TB: Right, so this was done in stages then, so it started off with the Toll House and you had some boats obviously, I guess at that point, did you?

TL: We had a few but when we went to Ellesmere Port, to begin with, most of the boats were scattered about, being looked after by independent groups. So there were two boats, Leeds and Liverpool boats, up on the Leeds and Liverpool Canal, were being kept pumped out there, three in fact, another one in Manchester. The iceboat was at Market Drayton, waiting to come our way, the Mossdale was down on the River Weaver still, the deep water down there.

[01:00:42]

TB: So this waiting for there to be space?

TL: Yes and with individual groups of people taking over responsibility to keep them afloat and keep them there.

[01:00:52]

TB: Okay, well just tell me a little bit about the society and the volunteers and so on because… can you give me a sense of their backgrounds, what sorts of people were attracted to it?

TL: Yes, interesting times really, looking back, they were relatively young, sort of, 40s, quite a lot with youngish families, school teaching, I think, teachers, people like that were quite important. Many of them are still there to this day but of course, the whole society has got older, without really building up quite as much young blood coming in as one would have wished. I think it's doing okay; I think it's still several hundred members, but out of any several hundred members, there's only a 10% proportion that actually do the work or are fit

enough or have got enough time, can afford to actually come down, every weekend and dig the mud out.

One of our chairman, Di Skilbeck, still very strong, I mean she was a headteacher and she would bring her girls down and have work parties and get them all muddy, doing lots of things that would be utterly impossible today, just not allowed. So the enthusiasm was terrific, the enthusiasm was contagious, of course and I was part of that enthusiasm and I think we went and giving talks and meetings and it was part of my role, in the early days, to be the keen enthusiast, to talk over the slides and say how important this bit was, how we were being given that one and things like that.

[01:02:37]

TB: I see, so your role, apart from all the practical stuff, was also as a figurehead or spokesman?

TL: Yes, I became so, because I was noisy and happy to do it really. I didn't want that role but if somebody else is not going to do it, I better get up there and wax enthusiastic.

TB: Yes, just tell me about what rewards you got from that time, clearly you enjoyed it but what did you get out of it?

TL: A terrific connection with all these other people, who were sharing similar ambitions or who were listening to me and being enthused by my enthusiasm, that of course is a very nice feeling, isn't it? That people believe you and oh righto. So there was that, there was also, of course, I was learning a great deal by being connected with all these people, particularly the Liverpool museum, via Edward and then via the other staff there, I had some jobs there, learnt a lot there but I was immediately in touch with the people that did know, similarly, I mentioned Harry Arnold, the journalist, he has started up a waterways world magazine, so I would write odd articles for them and his work there was benefiting the museum no end, with publicity, nationwide, nationally.

That was good, to be part of that scene. Working with Edward was brilliant for me, he asked me to do a couple of book illustrations for his canal encyclopaedia, which he liked, so he asked "would you like to do some more?" and I really had about two or three years work with him, doing pen and ink drawings for this book, going all over the country, allowing me to study something that I already liked and had the petrol paid for. I mean Edward was really one of my patrons and he drew me back, via those book illustrations, into being more and more an artist, a visual artist, rather than just a carpenter and boat caulker and boat painter.

[01:05:10]

TB: Oh really, that's interesting, so in fact you got pulled in, well in your life you got pulled into it?

TL: Yes, back towards the art through that.

TB: How fascinating.

TL: And then from there, I did quite a lot of work for the other waterways museum that developed down at Gloucester Docks, that came a bit later, also with boats down there.

TB: Now was that entirely separate?

TL: Entirely separate.

TB: Okay, of it's own story and founders and all that kind of stuff.

TL: Not the same founders, no. The curator has been the curator at Stoke Bruerne in the Midlands, in the small museum but British Waterways wanted this much better place for a national waterways museum, on the docks there, deep water, huge warehouse and that developed separately, quite successful but in terms of waterways and visitors, Gloucester is out on a limb, strangely enough, it never generated the right visitor numbers. It was a lovely museum, lovely collection, nice people to work with as well but it never generated and eventually the idea was developed that the two museums would merge, to become the national waterways museum, which it now is.

Gloucester, I think still survives but in a much more quieter way and is a different story, which in some ways, it will be nice for you to follow-up. In fact, make a note of the name Tony Condor, he was the one, he developed that museum for the British Waterways, as it then was. He's now in retirement but very knowledgeable about it and also, he then went onto the Stamp Museum down in London, so a museum professional.

[01:07:03]

TB: I see, yes. So okay, so that's fascinating that those two came together in that way and the British Waterways, was it in 1948, when the canals were nationalised?

TL: Yes.

TB: That was British Waterways, was it?

TL: They became British Waterways, yes.

TB: What was it…?

TL: Docks and Inland Waterways Executive. I mean it was the nationalised industry taking over most of the canals, although not the Rochdale for historic reasons, nor the Bridgewater Canal, which belonged to the Ship Canal Company, which is again one of the reasons why Preston Brook didn't happen. If the Bridgewater Canal had been nationalised at the same time, I think it was very likely that we would have had the museum at Preston Brook but because it belonged to the Manchester Ship Canal Company, who were a very sharp, hard-nosed, financial organisation, they weren't the slightest bit interested in boats, they were just interested in money. It became apparent, as the years went by, they would say polite things but actually if it wasn't going to show a profit, if there wasn't a capitalist profit, they were not the slightest bit interested.

So, where do we start there? Yes, British Waterways, the Docks and Inland Waterways Executive, then it became British Waterways later, but it was the nationalised industry.

[01:08:32]

TB: I was going to ask whether their policy was very important in those early days but of course it wasn't because the sites we're talking about, in fact weren't owned by British Waterways at all?

TL: No, but they were quite supportive, because the sites weren't theirs and because I think already, they could see that they wanted a bit of culture happening. Canal culture for their expanding pleasure boat world, they've never been against… they've been pretty helpful over the years, yes. And also, so many of the British Waterways personnel, were long-time canal people and therefore they're interested in their own business and they came with a great deal of knowledge. I mean the River Weaver, the staff on the Weaver, amazing knowledge waiting to be used there. I mean they may have been a bit sarcastic about all these things but actually of course, they're pleased, like any job that you've been in all your life, you're proud of it and disappointed to see it all running down. Then pleased to see it developing into pleasure boats, I think, most of them, well there's a future here for us anyway, somewhere.

[01:09:50]

TB: Yes, sure, well I guess you've witnessed the canals going from this strange long industrial decline, post-industrial thing that's happened and you've also see, at the same time, this huge boom in pleasure craft and I was just wondering whether that's had an impact on the museum, I'm sure it has, in terms of visitor numbers and interest, amongst enthusiasts and boaters and readers of Waterways World and whatever. But I don't know, perhaps I wonder if there's any thoughts you've got about that shift?

TL: Yes, several bits of thoughts really. I was a bit taken aback, when Tony Condor collected a couple of pleasure boats to go into the museum, one significant mahogany pleasure boat,

built at the Chester Boat Yard, as a canal cruisers and is now upstairs in the museum, where you've seen it today.

That was a very significant class of new canal cruisers, developed at one boat yard but there were only ever nine or ten of them, most of which have now gone, yet they were built by ex-canal boat, boat builders and very nice boats they were too. But I didn't think… they weren't of interest to me because they weren't carrying boats, they weren't earning a living in that way. Similarly there's an old pontoon up there, when I first became involved in the canals in the early 1960s, there were quite a lot of peculiar old… anything that would float and they could shove an outboard on the back, became a pleasure boat and one liked them because they were rare and they were interesting people that were cruising the canals and therefore they're bound to be on our side, weren't they?

TB: Yes.

TL: But as the boats became more and more glossier and professionally built, of course the attitudes of the owners of those boats is not the same. Most people on the canals, have no interest, really in canal transport, in old boats, they're just interested in their modern caravans, their modern floating caravans and where to get the next Calor gas from and things like that.

All of that, I accepted as being history and the development of the canals but really not of interest to me, I wasn't going to be part of anything that was going to seriously spend money on looking after ratty old pleasure boats. Do you see what I'm getting at?

TB: I do, yes.

TL: This is an internal thing. I can see it happening, similarly with the waterways worlds magazines, well all the magazines that were developed, they're all about pleasure craft, of course and people having nice holidays and the canals being modernised to cope with canal holidays. Right I suppose it has to happen but it doesn't really interest me, at heart, so easier to just drift away and leave it the way it is, the way it's becoming.

[01:13:09]

TB: Yes, I see, so for you, having a focus was important and it was North West, it was working boats –

TL: It was working boats in the North West.

TB: – and it was trying to get those key, different types, as it were to have a representative sample?

TL: Yes.

TB: So it seems to me, that… so in all sorts of ways, it's been pulled in different directions hasn't it and yes, so for that reason, you lost your interest, which is understandable?

TL: Yes, I think I'm still pleased that it's there but it doesn't fire my inner soul really, no.

[01:13:48]

TB: And you said that you designed the first exhibition, is that right?

TL: Yes.

TB: Well that's quite a departure, isn't it? Was that quite exciting to have a room to fill, in that way?

TL: Yes, two rooms in fact. I enjoyed doing that. Have I done any designing before? Not really, I did more down at Gloucester later on but it was a matter of arranging things in such a way that people go could through, without reaching the really delicate things but I didn't want any barriers. I wanted people to feel the quality my dears, so there were big tillers hung up in significant places, so you couldn't walk past them but they were great, big, real boat tillers and a rudder here. There were one or two glass cases, with some delicate things in and of course some captions, but not the huge caption degree that modern exhibitions seem to think they need, with very few objects.

I'm a collagist really, my pictures are lots of bits of stuff nailed together and that was the atmosphere and the quality that it wanted in the room, which I thought the canals were like that, all this quality in close confinement, like a boat cabin, all this close confinement and yes the quality of everything, so that the exhibition that I did, was very much using up the material, the objects that we had been given or lent, in an interesting slow-walk through.

[01:15:27]

TB: And narratively how did it work, was it looking at different skills, was it anything like it is today, I mean I've got the guidebook?

TL: No nothing whatsoever to do with today, I'm really just trying to remember, we went in, the first room, two rooms really, weren't there, with the staircase in the middle. The first room, I think was devoted more to boat building than anything else, so a bench up there with lots of tools on, the tools in use, some planks of wood, to guide people past those tools, as if… well yes a little bit as if they'd just gone out for a cup of tea, their clutter was all there, lots of stuff hung on the walls, as you would when you've finished the patterns for boats, were hung up there, piled there and then into the next room, which is a bit more formal. I

remember I painted the floor and then put border designs around it, to guide people around the glass cases. That was much more… we painted ware, cans and hand bowls and decorative items and a bit about cabins, I think there are probably photographs inside a boat cabin, I really can't remember in detail.

[01:16:47]

TB: That's nice, that gives me a sense of it. So to start off, with the technical and the practical and then a little bit of the social history and some of that context?

TL: Yes.

TB: Okay, lovely and we haven't… okay to start off a museum, you need labour and I think we've covered that and it seems as if it was entirely voluntary, initially, until the director was appointed?

TL: Yes, until the director and then he guided that labour and it remained very much voluntary labour for years, before anybody else was actually employed on a regular basis.

[01:17:20]

TB: Yes, so did Tony come in a few years, after it had opened, that he had a paid…?

TL: No, he was there from the moment it opened really, he was one of the early volunteers, his particular gang… another boat that I haven't mentioned, is the Sharpness that was there, I don't know whether you noticed it today, looking a little bit shabby, very graceful, iron hull, with a big chimney in the middle?

TB: Yes.

TL: That was outside our house at Preston Brook, that was another one that we'd acquired and that lived outside our house for a long time and Tony was very early in, as one of the little work party gang that gathered around that and did that up. So he was one of the volunteer groups and then from there, I don't know how it developed, but he became… applied for the job or it became obvious that he would do the job quite well. I can't remember what he was doing for a living before that.

[01:18:21]

TB: Yes, and what about money, because even though it was volunteer labour, there was an awful lot of insurance and bills and all that kind of stuff. So where does all that come from or were you not really involved in that?

TL: I don't know, truthfully, I'm awful with that, I would leave that with Dr Owen to worry about.

TB: I see, yes but presumably he was trying to get grants in and council money and all that kind of thing?

TL: Yes, I honestly don't know the answer to that and one of Tony Hirst's first job was of course, to start doing the fundraising, on a professional basis and getting the money in.

TB: I see, sure.

TL: One thing I should mention, Edward Paget-Tomlinson, going right back to the beginning, when we were thinking about this canal boat museum, a boat became available on the Shropshire Union Canal, the Gifford, a horse-drawn tanker, a decked over boat, it was in reasonably good condition. Edward thought this was a very important boat, wooden boat, horse-drawn, in all its life, a tanker which was unusual and he bought it. Not only did he buy it, he then spent thousands of pounds having it restored at a boat yard, up in the Black Country, for the museum. What he said was, he understood right from the beginning, he was a reasonably well-off man, but he said, right to begin with, somebody had got to spend some real money for there to be any future to this collection and he went in and he spent, what was then, I think nine or ten thousand pounds, which is a huge amount of money, on a wooden boat that would then be worth about five thousand when it was finished, because it had got no other use.

He spent money on the understanding that he was promoting and, what's the word I'm looking for? Sponsoring the museum in some ways, having done that, he really passed the boat over to the Boat Museum Society, who still own it to this day, it does not belong to the rest of the museum and the society have that boat and the Worcester, the tug. Separately owned and separately maintained and they've just spent hundreds of thousands of pounds to get it in the same place, again. It's been rebuilt three or four times since then, which is why it's in such good condition. It is there at the moment, isn't it? The Gifford, beautifully painted –

TB: Oh yes, it rings a bell.

TL: – with a deck all the way along it, a narrowboat but with a deck, right the way along. So, when it was working, it was for oil and gas oil and tar. So it just pumped into the middle there and waterproofed at either end. So one of an important fleet of Midlands boats, the last survivor now.

[01:21:19]

TB: Yes, but that's fascinating that he gifted it to the society and not to the museum?

TL: Yes, because he could see that the museum was never going to… by that time Edward, being the professional, he didn't really get on with Tony, the museum director, Tony Hirst, gosh my memory for a name. He could see a division of attitudes, coming up and Edward being the shy and retiring person, just retired away and left the boat to be carried on by the Boat Museum Society and I think he stipulated that it should not be taken into the major collection, as it were.

[01:22:11]

TB: Yes, and so the volunteer labour, was that the society really, because some museums have their own volunteers, don't they? But it seems to me that society is still very much a presence there and it's got its own little exhibition.

TL: It has, until recently, been the complete volunteer organisation that's helped to run the museum. In the last few years, the Canal and River Trust have developed their own volunteers that are separate to the Society. Again it's something I don't really understand and I've not had anything to do with. So I'm still a member of the Society but really just a newsletter member, more than a very useful one.

[01:23:00]

TB: Sure and at what point did you decide to back away, really, from it all?

TL: About then really.

TB: So pretty much when it started, the first couple of years after it started?

TL: Yes.

TB: Okay, so it was really early then?

TL: Yes, I drifted away and as I said, partly from just pressure of earning a living, truthfully, I could not afford as much time as other people could and if you're not putting in as much time as other people, you feel you're not supporting the side, in a way. I was poor with three small children and I couldn't put in as much time as these rather better paid people were doing at the weekends. So yes, I think I'll just drift away, now it's up and running. Also I could feel my, with Edward really, I could feel a difference of attitude in the way the exhibitions were going and this collecting too many boats, I could just see it as being a nightmare; self-preservation, I think.

[01:24:11]

TB: Yes, okay, perhaps you didn't want to be a part of that?

TL: Yes, I moved, I'm thinking about it now, I moved a little bit from being a volunteer, to being the professional. So when the big exhibition was developing upstairs, in the Island Warehouse, upstairs, I was employed as a technician to come in and do the Friendship and I repainted and rebuilt the cabin and did a lot of restoration on that, the narrowboat that's upstairs in the museum. I did a lot of work to that, as a paid professional.

TB: Did you work downstairs, because now there's the workshops?

TL: No, initially I did, I set up some of the displays but I think I did that as a volunteer, the workshops displays but they've been changed and revamped since I did anything in there.

[01:25:07]

TB: There's one thing I noticed, downstairs there was an old sign saying these are the workshops and you can see over there, there's a lathe and some volunteers might be coming in and doing things and now it's storage and I was just wondering whether, or perhaps you don't know, but has there been… is there less to do or perhaps now there's less boats there, there is, I don't know but are there still being doing workshop stuff or is it now more volunteers coming in?

TL: I'm not sure, I don't know the answer to that. I don't think there's ever been much use down there, really.

TB: Right, okay but when it was opened in those earlier years, presumably one bit was open but you were working on the next bit, weren't you?

TL: Yes, the tollhouse in the middle, that was open in the first year and I think for one or two years afterwards, we then went upstairs into the first floor, the main floor of the museum, downstairs was all storage for several years and again, because we've got apparently big storage, it fills up with all sorts of bloody clutter that had no relevance to the museum and that's had to be almost bulldozed out over the last few years.

TB: God, what was it?

TL: Oh stuff from workshops from here, a paint store from, surely, we need a paint store, so we'll take over this and that and the other. Then there was stuff from Preston, I can't remember, workshops lathes and tools, that must be useful, if we ever have a workshop and it just built up and built up.

[01:26:38]

TB: Well this is interesting, because presumably these workshops were shutting down because that whole industry just almost disappears, come back again, with maintaining pleasure boats and stuff, I suppose in some ways, but not necessarily in the same places?

TL: Yes, there was a gap in between, there was a very significant gap in between. So talking about the Gifford, when Edward bought the Gifford, the oil boat, really the only boat yard that I knew about that was still up and running was a trad boat yard at Walsall, where I'd worked briefly and knew the owner; but his speciality had been the coal boats, the slab-sided BCN coal boats. So we took this graceful, long distance boat, up there and Edward paid to have it rebuilt but of course they weren't very good at it. We went there because it was the only option. There were a few old boat yards that just about survived but then gradually, over the following 20 years, new boat yards opened, usually building steel boats but with younger craftsmen coming on-board and there's now a few people about, that are doing really quality classy work, because there's not much competition, they've just had to do it. So there's been an interesting resurgence - very tiny - I mean really down to half a dozen people up and down the country, that can do the quality of work that used to be expected of the 300 boat yards that there were up and down the canal system, it's that sort of thing. But there was this terrible hiatus.

So Gifford came back from the Walsall restoration, slightly odd shape, slightly different, it survived for ten or 20 years, but then with rather poor treatment in the museum, it then had to be rebuilt again. And by then, luckily, Malcolm, a friend of mine up at Sandbach, took on the job and tackled it really thoroughly and in a craftsman like way and rebuilt it much, much better because he'd spent 20 years learning how to do it in that interim period. Then recently it's gone to somewhere else and had to have significant work, after another 20 years and that's the pattern of it.

TB: Yes, I see.

TL: It's become, every 20 years, you've got to spend a huge amount of money, to stay in the same place. A boat, Saturn, that I've mentioned once or twice, the one that I'm now involved with, that had… we got a major grant for that, £75,000 to rebuild that. 15 years ago, now it would be £24,000 or something… £240,000 I mean, the prices have rocketed, timber has become more difficult, skilled labour has gone up. Incredible, and the few people that can do it have learnt how to do it and now they're charging a proper price.

[01:29:41]

TB: Right, yes, where was that grant from, do you remember, the £75,000?

TL: The grant with the Heritage Lottery Grant, we got in very, very early, as it was invented, with Saturn, as a separate organisation. We'd already had one boat that we'd failed to do, the Symbol, which had fallen apart in the dock and then Saturn became available, 1906 boat, in floating condition but by then the Heritage Lottery Fund had just come into existence and

we'd got some clever people, British Waterways came on-board and we'd got some clever people that got in on the act early so we got one of the early, massive grants to do it, which was spectacular and she's in fine form and is on the way up here, to Ellesmere today. I got a phone call this morning.

[01:30:33]

TB: Yes, well it's nice just to hear that some of the yards are opening again. I know one of the big problems with boat yards, is that they're always next to water and everyone wants to live on the water and so one-by-one, they get turned into flats, don't they and they can't go back, after that.

TL: Yes and then the flat people complain about the noise, that the boat yard is making, yes.

TB: I mean just a general question here, but is there a class issue here, in a way and I mean that in the broadest, broadest sense, where you've got things like that, you've got working yards and industrial spaces, being turned over to flats and often to fairly rich people living there. You've got the attention of people about basic history, from working boats, or there's a tension with the recreational and I mean… but also going back to one of the first things you told me, was that your interest was in folk art and that that didn't go down, perhaps very well at the arts school, that you were at. I'm just wondering whether there's something that you're trying to… or an interest here that you feel is being threatened, I don't know. Am I just joining up the wrong dots?

TL: No, no. I certainly became totally besotted really, with the boating population and they were the… are, were, still are really, the humblest of the working class in many senses of the word. They were living in what was seen as appalling conditions, with not very much money but doing a relatively skilled job and turning it into a lifestyle, which at the better end, was really interesting, pretty, well-behaved, polite, really nice people, everything. At the other end was the most awful, squalid, malnourished children, filthy, bug-ridden.

The first thing you did when you moved onto a narrowboat, was to stove it, to kill the bugs, it was just a fact of living, living in this tiny confined spaces and yet I liked those people, I liked their trade, I liked the fact that they were doing a trade that was real, it was absolutely necessary, it was a transport trade and important to keep everything going. I liked being part of a cog in a respectable wheel, I think. God I've gone off the subject of the class thing there.

TB: No, it's lovely.

TL: So, then I was beginning to question the books I was reading, about how wonderful these boat people were and some of the ones I'd come across were pretty rough and tough but we got on alright and then, eventually I got to meet Joe Skinner, a famous name in the canals. He was the last horse-drawn working boatman, with his own boat, the Friendship that

you've seen upstairs and he'd retired onto that boat, at Sutton Stop, near Coventry and he was set up to be a class of his own and to meet him, he was a delight. He was thoughtful, he was careful, he was responsive to my southern, middle-class interest, he just answered questions and he'd been doing this all his life and his generations before that.

Suddenly you see an example of the boating people that LTC Rolf was talking about in his books that had sparked so much of this interest and you thought, oh right, he was so right. Since then, of course, I met quite a number of other boat people, who are just very thoughtful and careful and I love being part of that world. But they were part of a life that was part of a transport system, that was part of the industrial world, that was part of Britain, all essential, it all linked together, I loved that connection really and they also painted roses and castles all over everything. What?! This is wonderful, this can't be true but it was true and it developed in the grimiest, middle of the 19th century, at some point or another, this flowering of delight, of visual delight, floating up and down the canals, doing an absolutely essential job. What?

Much like, I have the same sort of respect for Afghan lorries nowadays, when you see the photographs of these Afghan and Pakistani lorries, smothered in beautiful paintings and yet they're doing the grimiest jobs in the grubbiest, depressed areas, but it's an essential part of the pride of doing the job well, is showing a delight for other people to look at. I love it and it makes me feel more positive about humanity, when you see this and then around the world, I've got quite a wide-spread interest in these flowerings of folk decoration and art, for no reason beyond it improves the quality of the world that they're living in.

There's no money in it, nobody is making money out of painting these lorries, I don't think, expect maybe earning a living doing it but nobody made money out of painting canal boats, but the boat companies paid for it to happen, to keep their crews happy and working and earning money, delivering coal. Oh right, it's confusing but it seems positive and human and I love it.

[01:36:57]

TB: Yes, it's astonishing, isn't it?

TL: Yes.

TB: So did that perhaps contrast with where you were brought up, which was around Brighton, you said, I don't know?

TL: Yes, Brighton is my hometown, a nice respectable town. I'm trying to –

TB: Because it was fascinating, presumably because it wasn't…?

TL: It wasn't industrial and I knew nothing about what was called industry, at all and in fact the first time I hitchhiked up past Luton, my god, I thought I'm in the industrial heartlands now. I mean north of London, hitchhiking up the M1, as it had just opened, it was mind-blowing to me - then living in the Midlands for a short concentrated while, in the middle of the mining areas, with pit mounds everywhere you looked and some of them catching fire at night, which they just did. Nobody took any notice, they just caught fire, like a little volcano and the canal there, rapidly becoming derelict, but just filled with boats. The Black Country canals were a very significant turning point for my personal development, as it were and I've never really gone back to the south of England, since then, from then. I'm still a southerner, of course and always will be.

Going back to Brighton, I went to a regular little primary school, I was lucky and didn't realise it at the time, to get the 11 plus and go on to grammar school, which I disliked pretty intensely but it dragged me along to getting my O-Levels, as they were then, which allowed me to go to art school, which I did want to do and of course, you got a grant if you went to art school, it didn't cost anything, there was none of this terrifying nonsense nowadays, of going into debt for 25 years to pay for your college. I just didn't appreciate it, it was just what we did and the art college was very good for me, I was there for four years. A rather old-fashioned art college, at the time, even then, in its training, lots of life drawings, steady, regular stuff, measured perspective, all these old-fashioned things, which the sparkier colleges, like Croydon had already given up.

But in Brighton, we were a trad place, which was good for me, as it happens, I'd have got very lost in the wilder realms of modern art at the time. So it grounded me very well, taught me a lot of useful stuff, which I still use to this day. So Brighton Art College was very good for me, even though I apparently rejected it and reacted from it, initially and went off to become a boatman and boat building and stuff like that but as I said, got drawn back to painting and now my life's ambition now is to be a painter again, after all this time.

TB: Yes, going full circle again.

TL: A picture artist again.

[01:40:08]

TB: Yes, but the folk art, wasn't any of that traditional stuff, was it, in terms of what's thought to be art?

TL: At art school, you mean?

TB: Yes.

TL: It was not even… I don't think it was even recognised. I was already, when I was at Brighton, I was really, really impressed with the Brighton fishing boats, because I was down there a lot with my parents but the fishing boats, in the summertime, they used to have a backboard, which they put across the back of the boat, as a back seat, for taking people rowing out and each of these back boards had the name of the boat on and a bit of a scroll and maybe a picture in the middle and I thought they were all wonderful. Because they were clearly part of a localised tradition.

They were skilfully done by a skilful, old-fashioned sign writer, with all this elaborate stuff and I'm not sure that I ever went to anybody in the art school and said, I think this is wonderful but I just didn't mention it because clearly it was not the sort of thing that a whizz-kid, hippy art student should have any interest in, I was supposed to be into Kandinsky and that's a complete abstraction.

[01:41:20]

TB: Yes, I see, but it's the craft.

TL: But I took that with me to the Midlands and then of course, the canal boats, similarly sign writing, it's become a significant part of my interest really, lettering, generally. I did study lettering as part of my art school training, classical roman and book design and things like that, only as a craft, not as a main subject. But that's stayed with me and still is useful, I still have a deep respect and understanding for roman lettering, which is the basis of it all, even the most elaborate stuff. Elaborately decorated, Victorian stuff, it's still roman based.

So I took that with me. Gypsy caravans were also another significant influence on me, the whole lifestyle, constrained by what one horse could pull along the road and then all this elaborate painted work, scroll work and chamfered work and the life that was led within it. I had a period gypsying which was really good for me.

[01:42:29]

TB: Oh really, crikey, with a gypsy caravan?

TL: Yes, well I was in a tent but I was with six or seven wagons, I went fruit picking and then travelled with them, for a few months, until it became impossible, in the middle of the winter but a huge respect of the traveller population at that time and they, of course were changing, the horses were going out and going out. I was quite lucky to find an accepting family to travel with for a good many months.

TB: That's amazing.

TL: So that overlapped with the boat people to some degree because of the constrained lifestyle, which seemed to force, you can't have more of anything, so it's got to be better, you can't have a bigger wagon, so we'll cover it in gold leaf. You can't have a bigger boat, so we'll just fill it full of knickknacks and decorate it.

[01:43:23]

TB: I see, were those ever connected, because it seems so close, even the styles?

TL: It's been suggested, there doesn't seem to be any proof, no, not really. I'm sure a few gypsies would have taken to the waterways and the other way about but not in a significant cultural sense, no I don't think so. I think it's the physical constraints that make them come up with similar answers in a way.

[01:43:51]

TB: I see, I'm sure. This is great, I'm just going to see if we've gone through everything I need.

TL: You're not going to transcribe all of that, will you?

TB: I will, it's wonderful. Right, okay, so we've gone through the money, we've gone through the location. Did you model the museum on any other museums, I mean it sounds like you've got some professionals involved anyway, haven't you?

TL: We have, professionals from standard old-fashioned museums, so Manchester Museum, was very much a town centre, thing. Dr Owen had his own boat, so he was interested. Edward was Merseyside museums, he had, of course deep experience of the maritime museum in London. Did we model it on any other museum? I went to Enkhuizen in Holland but really, I think that was perhaps a little bit later.

The only museum that we were working away from, really was the Waterways museum at Stoke Bruerne, which was in a small little building, it was all the small-scale stuff and a few photographs and a little mock-up boat cabin, which I hope is still there but it was the insufficiency of that museum that I suppose we thought, we've just got to do something bigger and better and with real boats. It has to be the boats have got to be the centre of it, not a little display that you can keep warm in, on a winter's day. It's the boats that are critical and everything should be built round that, including a boat yard to service them and then we'll have a bit of an exhibition over there, to talk about the boat building and the boats.

Whereas what's happened now, of course, the whole thing has turned round, so you've got this museum about waterways and when it got to Ellesmere Port, what you mentioned earlier, local history suddenly became an important element or was allowed in, really. Again

against my purist judgement, so that the cottages were, I don't know whether you've noticed them today, there are three cottages?

TB: Yes, I didn't actually go in those.

TL: No quite, but they were developed as typical workers cottages for Ellesmere Port, nothing to do with boats whatsoever, except that they might have worked on the docks.

TB: Yes and there's a big gallery on the port itself.

TL: I find that easy to do, I could do that, blimey, just keep the water out and put some nice pictures on the wall and put the stuff in, doddle. There was no problem about that, I've been to St Fagan's museum in South Wales, a marvellous museum for recreating interiors but all of it, relatively easy in that it's got a sensible roof over the top and you can keep the rain out. Boats, we knew were going to be difficult, really difficult to get a spirit of what the canals were really about, what transport was really about.

[01:47:02]

TB: Yes, what is nice, is that there are still boats floating there and you can still go and get in them, which is great and you're right, it is different to just seeing it in a covered warehouse or something. Well yes, I've got a question that is about the local and what the museum does for the local community.

TL: Here, now?

TB: Well yes, I don't know, obviously you stepped away from it, some time ago but I wonder, at the time, what the relationship was, with the local community or whether it was seen as a regeneration project by the council.

TL: Yes, by the council it was. Fraught really, I mean we just lived in terrible fear of vandalism, the first few years, because there was no fencing to it, it was a derelict area, where all the down and outs would hang out and lurk about. We used to spend time, again as a volunteer effort, particularly weekends, staying on the boats, in order to be security on site for the first couple of years, I think and then we had a chap came and lived on his boat there all the time.

So going back to the beginning of the question, the relationship with the town; it's such a run-down town anyway and the town is quite a long way away. The docks were the reason it ever developed but by the time we went there, the main employer was the car works, further along, Vauxhall. The docks, they didn't employ anybody, to speak of, when we moved there with the museum –

[01:48:57]

TB: So it was quite a peripheral area, in that respect?

TL: – and the road had been built, that was the other thing, of course, the main bypass there, which had cut off the whole site from the town, so there was no real easy connection up to the town, it didn't feel like part of the town, nor does it now. Although there's a lot of flats that have been built there now, which makes it feel a bit more urbanised.

[01:49:21]

TB: Yes, I see okay, gosh so it was very cut off actually, physically?

TL: It was physically cut off and it was all flat and derelict virtually, expect for the island warehouse. The Toll House was derelict, all broken windows, tiles off the roof, the place was awful.

TB: I suppose your initial vision of this idyllic –

TL: Yes, Preston Brook.

TB: It looks amazing now, I've got to say, you've done a bloody good job.

TL: Here's my deaf and blind dog.

TB: Oh really?

TL: Over here, she can just about hear a whistle, hello, come on, keep coming, I'm here. Oh I can smell somebody interesting, over here Ginny, good dog.

[01:50:31]

TB: Oh lovely. Right, how has the museum changed, in terms of displays and it sounds, you've given me a sense, I think of how the displays have changed very dramatically and you've discussed, just the issues about the scope and how that's changed into a national museum. I mean visitor numbers, were they pretty good, earlier on?

TL: No idea, I'm afraid.

TB: Right, okay, were you surprised at how few or many people turned up in the earlier years? Was it popular, I don't know?

TL: I think we thought so, so much so that the visitor numbers fuelled the expansion and the idea of expanding it.

TB: Did you charge to go in, from the beginning?

TL: Yes, again it was not anything, as a society member, I just drifted in and out, I can't remember the details of that.

TB: Don't worry.

TL: You'd get, as I say, if it was worth it, you'd get a very different story from Tony Hirst and a whole different set of attitudes and come from, I think.

[01:51:44]

TB: Yes, it really does sound like quite a different period, really in all sorts of way?

TL: Tony went to become quite a big wheel in the Museum's Association and things like that, which surprised me but that was the way it was. Museum's Association? I think he was chairman or something for a while.

[01:52:13]

TB: Right, well I think we've really covered why it's important, which is great. Okay, if the museum closed now… okay yes, so first of all, imagine that the museum never happened, so how would your life have been different? It sounds like it led to all sorts of things, so perhaps you've answered that already, I don't know.

TL: If it never happened at all, I suppose I've no idea, in the sense that I think I'd have still carried on being involved with canal boats in one form or another. It's difficult to answer that, isn't it?

TB: Sorry, yes, it is.

TL: Because it led me into so many connections and work at Gloucester and work at other museums and, you see, I've got two ways, the other way I've earnt a living is completely separate, which is in the theatre world, outdoor theatre work. So that has been most of how we've earnt our living for the last few years, not from museums. Canal painting has always stayed a steady earner for me but it's really only been probably less than half my income, for the last few years, it's nearly always been theatre work.

[01:54:06]

TB: Oh really, so in what way, is it design?

TL: Well design and making and performing and generally shouting about in the street, outdoor work. I've done a little bit of indoor theatre work, designing costumes and things but mainly it's been for… the big company I work for, was called Welfare State International and they were big news in the 1980s and '90s and then they've faded away in the last few years.

TB: Right, have you heard of Claque, they do community plays down in the south, it is but I just wondered if you had?

TL: No, but that's the sort of thing, worked in the south again, with a number of companies down there. My son is still in the business really now and he's a sculptor, maker, welder and fireworks and things. So yes, he's gone off into that business.

[01:54:57]

TB: Well I was struck that you had a theatrical element to your launch event, I noticed on the displays, there was a theatre company came along when the museum opened?

TL: Yes, the Mikron Theatre Company, they were big news at the time and they cruised with a boat, every year and they kept it going. In fact, I think the boat still survives but they're based at Hebden Bridge now, up there, they still survive but yes, he was a very… Mike Lucas was the foreman, four-person team and they used to tour the canal system and of course, because they were in the swing of things, they were invited. So yes, they were there immediately for that and came several years running.

[01:55:47]

TB: So, over the whole of your involvement with that museum, what's been the high point and the low point, would you say?

TL: The low point has been a slow lowering of expectations, I think. Oh there was… I do remember one low point, I was… that's right, we decided we'd form a committee to try and work out which were the most important boats, basically. Faced with the problems of, there had to be a way of scoring points for the boats in the collection, in order to almost decide which ones weren't going to survive, which ones were going to have work done and which ones were going to go away.

So we started developing this point scoring system, if it was a wooden boat, it scored five, if it was a metal boat, it would only score two, if it was so old, if it was one of a class, the last survivor of a big class or whether it was one survivor of a small class of boats, therefore that was less important.

So we went through meetings, boring meetings and we had a chap come down from the Scottish Maritime Museum and talked to us and we tried to work something out and

eventually, there was this adding up went on and the one that scored the most was a wooden box, that was sunk in the bottom basin, with a crane jib on it and the Mossdale, the last surviving Mersey Flat, was way down the list and it was ludicrous and people were taking this quite seriously because we'd done a lot of work.

It was just a system that didn't work and it was shortly after that… why did I actually, finally write a letter of resignation? I've even got the letter somewhere, it was just ludicrous and I just thought it's impossible to work with these people that can even give any credence whatsoever, to this list. I'm just so out of focus, out of touch with it, there's no point in spending any… wasting any more of my time, dealing with these people. That was a point, this is not that long ago, 15 or 20 years ago.

High spots? I suppose the high spots was probably, I enjoyed setting up that very first exhibition and it being received so well, we even gained a prize, I think for it, at some point.

TB: Oh yes, I saw a plaque saying Museum of the Year.

TL: Yes. Arriving there with the Gifford loaded with slates to do the roof was something special, that was before it ever opened, of course.

[01:59:38]

TB: Right, sure, where did you get all things like that, slates, I mean did you call in lots or did people give stuff?

TL: No, the slates, because one of the warehouses at Preston Brook was going to be demolished for housing, we were there and loaded the slates directly from the roof into the boat, to take to Ellesmere Port, to try and restore the warehouse there.

TB: I see, so recycling the industrial destruction, almost, blimey yes.

TL: Terrible.

[02:00:05]

TB: I didn't ask directly about the objects and where they came from but obviously in this realm, we're talking about boat and you did say that all sorts of people came out of the woodwork and offered you them?

TL: Yes.

TB: But did you also get, I'm thinking in the collections, there's a lot of objects, isn't there and amazing kettles and patterns and you mentioned the fact that workshops are closing down, so that's another big source. Are there any others, apart from just individuals in the canal world and those workshops shutting down, any other major sources of stuff?

TL: Yes, but again that's a Tony Hirst question really, when he started collecting, in serious quantities, to begin with, it was very largely my collection and my collecting and then my contacts, with similar people interested that had put things to one side.

[02:01:06]

TB: Okay, so you had your own collection, I didn't realise.

TL: Yes, a lot of the painted stuff that's in there was mine. Given to me by boating people because they wanted it preserved and at that time, it had got little commercial value and it was just clutter but it's their life, so they found somebody like me that was interested in it. I was given a huge number of interesting pieces, all rather shabby, that was the nature of it. But because I was the only person that was showing an interest in it, I had quite a big collection of tools and particularly boat building tools, hand tools, which were going out of use and therefore the retiring boat builders, really wanted their stuff to go somewhere, faced with the same thing now really, people just want a home for their nice tools, which have go no value in the modern world.

So yes, I had quite a lot of tools given to me, Ken Key at the boatyard up in Walsall, good stuff from them. Painted stuff from the boating population, as they left the boats.

TB: Yes, so you've donated a lot of it?

TL: Initially, yes, that little exhibition in the tollhouse, the first one, a lot of it was via me, one way or another or I talked people out of things. So yes, I was a key visual… I was the only visual artist involved, in a way, right to begin with. There was a chap who worked at the Manchester Museum, Andy whose sadly died, he got involved at that point but really, he came in on the back of my enthusiasm, he became much more important later.

TB: Tony thank you, that's wonderful. I think we've covered it but is there anything that we haven't covered, which you'd like to just get on the record in any way but thanks for being so frank and it's been great.

TL: Yes, I don't like being frank, in a way, because it seems to negate or insult some other people, for whom I have enormous respect because I disagree with them and that's difficult, isn't it?

TB: Yes.

TL: I don't know whether, if I'd taken on the job of directing the museum, whether it would have been any different, whether I'd have just given way to the same pressures of being given things, which were otherwise going to disappear, oh lord, do we have to have this? Well if you don't have it, I'm going to chuck it in the bin, oh well alright we'll have it.

What is interesting and now you may be familiar with it, there's a book, which I've got here, called Conserving Historic Craft.

TB: You mentioned that in your email, I saw there's two volumes, the first one had that scoring system, of sorts, in it.

TL: Yes, I haven't seen that, I think that's only online but this is actually in print.

TB: I'll have to get it from the library.

TL: Of course they make it sound so easy now but it's all on the back of the mistakes that were made by the Maritime Trust and museums, presumably other museums like ours that I don't know about. There's a fishing boat museum up in North East Scotland which I've always wanted to go and never have got to but yes, boats lurking about, festering away in creeks, the Dolphin Trust Museum, I loved that, going there but that just rotted into the ground and their barges, I think have to be disbursed to people that look after them. Sittingbourne, up a creek, miles from anywhere, marvellous I loved it but of course there was absolutely no future, even I could see that at the time. A wooden barge museum, up a creek, like nowhere.

[02:05:11]

TB: It's fascinating because there's an intrinsic problem with boat museums, wooden boat museums and its so, so clear that unlike any other object I can think of, usually you can stabilise it, Mary Rose, I mean that took a long time but I mean it's in a stable state now, not spraying it with water.

TL: Enkhuizen Museum, in Holland, they had lots of boats in the water and then they gradually gave up and they've put them all indoors and it's all marvellous but it is an indoor museum, filled with boats and sails up and it's easy. It hasn't got the atmosphere of gritty men in jerseys, shovelling coal out. Right is that important? Well, it was 90% of the canals were about, it was shovelling coal out.

[02:06:07]

TB: Yes, so suddenly that magic disappears, doesn't it, somehow?

TL: Yes, the actual need and the reality of the grittiness of it.

TB: When I lived on the river, on the Thames but every year I used to get my coal, from a working barge, I don't know where it came from but I think it was run by a trust actually.

TL: Yes, the Narrowboat Trust, yes, they're still doing it, I think, they're still delivering coal, aren't they, to houseboats around London.

TB: Yes, so that was quite special, just to get your delivery from them.

TL: Yes, they were set up after we'd got the museum going, because they wanted to keep working boats working. They had grandiose ideas but it's only ever levels up to, I think, three boats have they got. Certainly a motor and a butty and a spare one. I am still vaguely in touch with them because of the Historic Narrowboat Owners Club, which is now called something else, we all more or less know each other, it's a wide-spread world but it comes down to a fairly limited number of names.

[02:07:04]

TB: Yes, sure, I didn't ask about the lay of the land, in terms of the enthusiast movement, I suppose but has it left around the society, that you set up with others or I don't know, are there lots of other inland waterways associations and societies, I don't know quite how it works now?

TL: In terms of boats, really, really boats, our society is important, the Boat Museum Society is important. The Historic Narrowboat Owners Club are important as a grouping of people, with their own boats, nothing to do with museums. I honestly don't know of other societies that have got canal boats at their absolute core. There's a museum over in Yorkshire, with a couple of Tom Puddings, near Goole, but they've only got two or three boats and they'll be interested in the Yorkshire boats and which ones survive. There's a bit of traffic over there, thank goodness.

[02:08:14]

TB: And the Kings Cross one, that's still going, I think isn't it?

TL: Yes, but they haven't got a boat in their collection at all, have they?

TB: Oh perhaps you're right, I don't know, I haven't been for years.

TL: I don't think so, they're on a canal basin and the basin is operated by some enthusiasts down there, with some nice boats there. So there's some boats outside by accident but I don't think the museum actually own anything, in terms of floating boats.

TB: Yes, you may be right.

TL: I have only been there a couple of times and that's quite a while ago, so it could have changed dramatically but I mean the whole of London has just been taken over by houseboats, hasn't it?

TB: Yes, it's incredible, absolutely.

TL: There's nowhere to moor up now and people even moor two abreast, I gather, in places, gosh.

[02:08:59]

TB: Yes, and I suppose there must have been… had there been a moment when the British Waterways just sold off their entire stock of carrying boats or something, the same way that British Rail just axed a whole load of stuff?

TL: Yes, they'd inherited all these… well they'd taken over the boats and then they'd sub-contracted a lot of them out to Wren Carrying Company in the 1970s and when that firm, ran down and folded, the boats of course, gradually came back to waterways and they hived them off on tender lists in all directions. So they were just sold off and sold off and sold off.

TB: I see, in batches.

TL: Round here, they kept a few for maintenance work and for showing off but even that's folded now and they've only got some ugly modern boats to do their maintenance. Nearly all their maintenance is done by outside sub-contractors that come in now, extraordinary.

[02:09:55]

TB: Wow, so most of those would have been lifted out and cut up for scrap?

TL: Yes or turned into pleasure boats.

TB: Yes, sure.

TL: Shortened, many of them shortened, of course, so they can go anywhere, so they're 50-footers, rather than –

TB: Oh right, I see yes. Well thank you, let's stop it there.

TL: Okay.

Audio ends: [02:10:14]