

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Susan Gosling

Role: co-founder

Museum: Purfleet Heritage and Military Centre

Location of interview: inside museum; open plan multi-purpose café/work area

Date: 7/2/19

Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

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

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

- TB: So, if you start by telling me your name and date of birth if you don't mind?
- SG: Susan Gosling, XX-XXX 54.
- TB: (00:00:39) Okay, that's brilliant, thank you. So, Susan, we've got so much to discuss but I'm particularly interested in the setup time, the idea of it, where it all came about, and I imagine that is probably... So, I'm interested in you and your husband's own personal interest in doing this?
- SG: Well, it was my husband's originally.
- TB: (00:01:04) Was it, yes, so, where did the idea come from, how did it all come about?
- SG: He was talking to our local beat bobby at the time and this is back in '92 and she said, "Well, what do you want to do with it, Alan?" Because there was talk of it being converted maybe into flats, but they said it was impossible because of the thickness of the walls. Then they came up with an idea of a bowling alley and that got knocked on the head as well. And she said, "Well, what do you think?" He said, "I'd like to turn it into some sort of museum, to save the building." Because at the time, it was just being used as a council store, there was old window frames, furniture, you name it, it was in here.
- TB: (00:01:42) Okay, so, who was it that asked whether he would be interested?
- SG: Our local beat bobby, Alison Campbell.
- TB: Okay.
- SG: Yes.
- TB: So, she was just very involved in the community, I guess?
- SG: Oh, very much so, she was at the time, yes, she was brilliant.
- TB: (00:01:56) And why did she come to your husband, was he very involved in the community?
- SG: He worked for Thurrock Council and he was a resident estate attendant here, and so, he would see the building every day.
- TB: I've got you. So, what does an estate attendant do?
- SG: Like a caretaker, but they had more responsibility then, a lot more responsibility.
- TB: (00:02:18) Just give me a little bit of the back story to explain what this building is and how it got to be preserved?
- SG: Well, it was one big military establishment and one of five buildings and each building stored roughly, ten thousand barrels of gunpowder, sometimes more. There would be two barges out on the river that would store more, and it was the biggest establishment in the country. But all the workers here are all civilian, none of them were military which is very unusual.
- TB: (00:02:54) So, was that connected to a gunpowder factory then?
- SG: Everything would come from either Waltham Abbey or Faversham and they'd come down by barge or punt, whatever.

- TB: (00:03:05) So, this is where they would be loaded onto ships, is it?
- SG: It would come here to be tested, each number on each bay that you can see up there, that would be for one certain batch of barrels of powder and samples would be taken from each batch, be tested for quality etc. which would be in the building that is just across the road here, which is called the Proof House.
- TB: Yes, that's still standing, I saw that.
- SG: That's still standing, yes. There used to be a big gallery, and everything inside there and there also used to be a range as well to test the power of it.
- TB: (00:03:46) I see, I've got you, yes. So, here they would do all the testing. So, this is like a big national store, was it, and then it would go off to wherever it was needed?
- SG: It was, and it was built here after there was a massive explosion at [unclear 00:03:55] and another one somewhere else. King George thought, "That's a bit too close for comfort, build one a bit further down the river." So, he didn't get blown up, and that is why is built here.
- TB: (00:04:07) So, what period are these buildings?
- SG: 1760.
- TB: So, there were five of these gunpowder stores all in a row?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: (00:04:16) And the size of them, we're looking at... It must be three hundred feet, a couple of hundred metres, maybe more?
- SG: Easily, yes.
- TB: It's really, really big.
- SG: And in places, the walls are up to five foot three thick. And up in the roof space, above here, you've still the sand so, in case they were hit at any time or anything happened, it would retain the blast and the building would just collapse instead of going outwards.
- TB: (00:04:46) Then at some point, they decided to knock them down and build a council estate, right?
- SG: Yes, that was in... The decision was to... Well, it shut down this establishment... Hold on just a minute...
- TB: That's fine, yes, no problem.
- SG: Right, oh, yes, when was it demolished?
- TB: (00:05:07) Yes, so, what year did they start to...?
- SG: Well, the site itself shut down in 1960 and so, you had all those years in between where it was just getting derelict and whatnot, but then they started to demolish it in the late '60s, early '70s and they started building the estate here in '72 because I

moved here in '77. And as I say, it was just thanks to one lady standing in front of the bulldozer to save this building and the Proof House that it has survived.

- TB: (00:05:48) So, they knocked down the others and they built that estate and the council used this as a store while they building basically?
- SG: They did, there were things here stored from all over the borough and of course, no lighting in here whatsoever and it was a mess. There were big holes in the floor and goodness knows what. And there was a lot of these timbers stored in here from the other four that were demolished.
- TB: (00:06:17) So, they decided to knock this down and they got as far as getting bulldozers in to do it?
- SG: Yes, they had to use explosives as well to bring some of them down because they were so well-built, they tried cranes, they tried ball and chain, they tried everything, and it was one heck of a job for them.
- TB: (00:06:35) I'll bet. So, were you here at the time of that protest or was that a little bit before your time?
- SG: I was still at school then.
- TB: (00:06:44) Right okay, sure. So, there was a local campaign to save this?
- SG: It was the local historian's wife, she was very interested in the history and everything of the borough. Amanda Carney, I think her name was, I think that was her name and yes, she managed to get this one salvaged and the Proof House and the Clock Tower, did you notice that as you came in?
- TB: No.
- SG: There's a lovely old clocktower there and it still chimes, it's lovely. And part of the old security wall still survives in places as well.
- TB: So, this is all part of this kind of military complex basically?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: Okay, right, amazing.
- (00:07:26) So, where did you grow up and how did you end up coming here.
- SG: I grew up just a mile and a half away from here, in Aveley but my husband, he is a cockney and so, that is quite a change for him. It was only when he moved out this way that he started to realise just what was in the area.
- TB: I see, okay. And had you met before he moved down here, or did you meet here?
- SG: We met when we both worked in Barking, yes, at a jewellers there.
- TB: Was that before you moved, you live locally now, is that right?
- SG: We live on this estate, yes.
- TB: So, you met before that and he got a job as a caretaker for the estate so, that's why you moved here?

- SG: That's right, yes.
- TB: I see, I've got you, brilliant.
- (00:08:16) So, you've already said that he was working on the estate, but this was still empty and still full of stuff?
- SG: Full of junk.
- TB: Okay, yes. And the community was just thinking, "Okay, we've saved it but what the hell are we going to do with it?"
- SG: Yes. But he and Alison got together and came up with a formula, put it to the council. They hummed and hawed for a while and there were letters going backwards and forwards and it took about two years, but they finally agreed. And the first time we opened to the public there was a big refurbishment going on in the estate and we borrowed some of their arc lights, brought them inside because as I say, there was no electric, nothing in here. And it proved a hit and from that first opening, the following year we had our proper first opening and only half of the building was able to be used. And the big hole that was in the floor round there, we used it as like a bomb hole, with an arm sticking out and chairs. But the people loved it.
- TB: (00:09:29) Brilliant, yes. Let's just take me through that step by step. So, it started off that you came up with a plan, with a proposal? Just tell me a little bit more about that, originally, what was this idea, can you just give me a sense of...?
- SG: His main objective was, one way or the other, he wanted to save this building from getting any more dilapidated. And thought about it and came up with the idea of a museum of some sort for local history. Another group got involved got with us, they wanted to be involved with us, and that was the Hornchurch Aerodrome Association. And between the two groups, myself and Paul, we came up with a business plan, put that together and then it went before a full council meeting and they said, "Yes, we'll give you so long to see how you do."
- TB: Give you a lease or whatever.
- SG: And then five years after that we managed to go through and apply for charitable status, which we finally got.
- TB: (00:10:43) Right, okay, brilliant. So, in the early days, I get the sense it wasn't military focussed necessarily, it was more of an idea of local history?
- SG: Local history, yes. But then, people thought...
- TB: (00:10:54) So, how did it become military?
- SG: Well, they thought, they supplied the powder that would go to the army, that would go the Navy, because The Bounty picked up her powder here, so, did The Endeavour and a few others. So, we thought, "Well, we'll start introducing that as well." And had some nice loans from other people, like temporary loans, like powder barrels etc. and it just escalated, it overtook us really.

- TB: (00:11:27) Okay, right. So, it sounds to me like almost incrementally, it became more military, coming out of that whole gunpowder history. But also, I guess the involvement of the other society you mentioned, which was about air... An airfield was it?
- SG: Yes, Hornchurch, RAF Hornchurch.
- TB: That was a big RAF base, wasn't it?
- SG: It played a major part and of course, it was responsible for the skies over here.
- TB: (00:11:50) Right, okay. So, that brought a whole military dimension...?
- SG: A different aspects of it, yes.
- TB: (00:11:57) Yes, so, you've got the aircraft stuff. Was there a local history society that was involved as well at that time or was it really just..?
- SG: There was, and there still is Thurrock Local History Society but they never became so involved with us.
- TB: Okay, is that because they were more Thurrock rather than Purfleet?
- SG: More the other end of Thurrock, the posher side, yes, not the industrial side.
- TB: Oh, right, I see. So, do you think that was maybe a bit of a class kind of thing?
- SG: Possibly, possibly. They've got more involved with us over the years.
- TB: Yes.
- SG: But there is a divide between the east and west side of the borough, like it or not, there is.
- TB: (00:12:33) Sure, I see. So, is the community fairly... Does it have two hearts in a way, two centres with Purfleet and... I don't know the geography of it?
- SG: Purfleet now has expanded beyond all recognition. When I was a little girl it was just a tiny little village. But now, there are so many people living in Purfleet and they're adding to it more and more and we're finding that a lot of the new people are Eastern European or Nigerian, and a lot of those are interested in the area and we're getting them coming in and asking about where they're living.
- TB: Oh, really?
- SG: Which is really, really good.
- TB: (00:13:15) Yes, so, that sounds like this is playing a part in making them feel... Or getting a sense of attachment or understanding where they are?
- SG: Yes, they are. We love it when we get the schools coming in as well, especially the local primary schools. We had a group in last year which was absolutely amazing because when we... Shortly after we first opened, we had the association with Bram Stoker and Dracula, and we did a Dracula display and the kids thought it was absolutely fantastic. But when we were doing some change arounds, we had to put him to bed and his coffin was in a bunk down the bottom there so, you couldn't see

it. And we had another group come in and they said, "We want to see Dracula." "Sorry, he's gone home." And the disappointment was overwhelming.

TB: Oh, dear.

SG: So, we thought, "Oh, dear, we've got to do something about this." And so, John said, "Well, I'll do another display for it" and that's why it is round there. And that is a proper coffin actually via West & Coe, on long-term loan.

TB: That's an undertakers, is it?

SG: Yes, in Aveley, yes.

TB: It's great, it's a lovely display.

SG: And we've put it back out and of course, when we had another group come in, "Is Dracula back?" "Yes, he is." "Hurray!" We were chatting about it to another group that came from West Thurrock, down the road there. They got talking about Dracula, they all love talking about it and the teacher with them said, "Oh, by the way" she said, "This young lady knows where that is." She came from Transylvania, one of the pupils.

TB: Really, how amazing. Crikey, she actually had her own...?

SG: I said, "So, I'm telling you what you know?" She said, "I didn't know that."

TB: (00:15:05) That's lovely. So, what year did the museum actually... You said there were two openings really, there was there like a kind of...?

SG: Like an introductory opening in '94.

TB: Yes, the arc lights one, so, that '94?

SG: And we had, in '95, that was our first big proper opening.

TB: (00:15:21) So, going back to that time, you said it was a couple of years for it to come about really. So, I imagine that the proposal to council, was that going in about '92, '93, that sort of time?

SG: they gave the go-ahead in '94.

TB: (00:15:36) Oh, right, okay. So, just tell me about the area at that point. An almost new council estate here, we're right by the river, aren't we?

SG: Yes, which is lovely.

TB: (00:15:50) Just give me a sense of locally, the feeling about having a museum here and, I don't know... Why has it come about at that time?

SG: The majority of people were very pleased, and we had a lot of local people, the older people that grew up and lived here when this was still functioning, the whole site, which included my own dad because he lived in the village here. They were bringing artefacts in which was tremendous and when the other estate, Maddock Park Estate opened up, we had a chap come in and that is where the military camp was, and he dug up a bedstead and brought it in. We've had all sorts of things brought in, it's fascinating and photographic history as well.

- TB: I was going to say, you've probably got... I haven't counted how many objects, but I would imagine you're looking at tens of thousands?
- SG: I am working on the inventory and I have been for the last five years and I'm still not at the end.
- TB: (00:16:55) So, where did it all come from, was it all that, people bringing them in or have you actually done some collecting?
- SG: Some of it is on loan from people where they haven't decided whether they want to hang onto it or not. It's sad the amount of people that come in saying, "This was my dad's including his medals, no one in the family wants them" and you can't see that go and that's where a lot of... Well, that is just one man's collection that you see in that cabinet there and you know, it breaks your heart sometimes, some of the stories.
- TB: So, that is someone's grandad and they don't know what to do with it?
- SG: Yes, it really does.
- TB: (00:17:34) What I'm really impressed by is how... I notice there is a label saying, "This is the Arthur Smith collection" or whatever. So, this is a family that has basically given you a box of stuff and said, "Look, we don't know what to do with it."?
- SG: Two suitcases worth is that one, yes.
- TB: (00:17:50) And what you've done with it is build... It's not a shrine, is it? It's almost like a little biography sometimes. So, you've built up a story around an individual and I think that's really quite striking and rather lovely.
- SG: We try, if it's someone's personal collection, we try really hard to keep it all together otherwise, bits tend to get lost. Down the other end, we've got... Air Marshall, Harry Broadhurst, based at Hornchurch because that far end section there is all based for Hornchurch. We've got his, Hill's collection, Dave Glassey's collection, all sorts down there.
- TB: And these are all families, or perhaps individuals themselves?
- SG: Well, Dave Glassey himself, even though he served during World War II, RAF pilot, he was one of the pilots that used to come here. We would have an RAF day every year and we still do, for the Battle of Britain and he and several others, they always used to come here, and they would sit there and sign autographs etc. all that kind of thing.
- But of course, one by one, they're all getting less and one year actually, we had the actress, Ingrid Pitt here, she married an RAF man. And of course, we had the Dracula display as well and she came here, in fact, she came here twice and one of the guys was showing her around and she said, "Oh, I don't want to see Dracula" she said, "I'm here to have a look at the RAF" so forget it. Hammer House of Horrors, go away, I want to see that. But what a lovely lady she was as well, really was.
- TB: (00:19:39) So, people will come in and then they'll say, "Do you know what, I can lend you some stuff or I've got some..."

- SG: Or, I want to donate something or gift it and it's through that kind of thing, like that couple that's just gone out, they'll come back one day, and they'll say, "Well, I've got these, would you like them?" and that's what happens.
- TB: (00:19:59) Yes, amazing. Do you ever turn anything away?
- SG: We've had to, the last few years, we've had to.
- TB: Because you haven't got room for it?
- SG: No, we've got a lockup, which is what I'm going through at the moment, but even that is practically full up now as well. We rotate as best we can, but we can't take any more radiograms and old hoovers and things like that.
- TB: Yes, so, you just try and minimise the repeats that you've got?
- SG: Yes. And sewing machines galore, I didn't realise there were so many sewing machines.
- TB: (00:20:34) Just tell me about the displays themselves. Did it just kind of... You start off at one end by the sounds of it and it just got bigger and bigger?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: (00:20:42) So, has it been driven by people's enthusiasms or has it been thought through as one big organisational...?
- SG: No, it was through people's enthusiasm and this quarter of the building here, it was full of massive timbers like that one behind you.
- TB: Oh, okay, because we're in the café sort of area.
- SG: And we couldn't keep it, we got permission from... Not the Charity Commission... English Heritage, because we're limited on what we can do. Any repairs or anything we have to get the okay from them, or we get a sharp slap across the wrist and we can't drill into the walls or anything like that. But they reluctantly gave us permission to get rid of the timber and we sold that off to a local timber merchant, who incidentally, owns a lovely windmill.
- TB: Right.
- SG: Yes. And bit by bit, we've opened up, and opened up, and opened up and now we've just got one entrance door left to open and that's the river end because there are four entrances, one either end and one either side.
- TB: I see, I've got you. So, eventually, it will open up the other side?
- SG: Yes. Because that end, of course, they would bring it in directly off the river in their little wooden wheelbarrows, no metal whatsoever otherwise, it would have gone bang.
- TB: (00:22:13) Yes. So, tell me about the organisation of the museum, so, initially it was, I guess you and your husband?
- SG: And two others, Alison Campbell and Frank Horlock.

TB: (00:22:24) Right, so, this was like a work party or committee that got the idea together?

SG: Yes.

TB: (00:22:29) Tell me about the other two individuals, Alison and...?

SG: Frank Horlock, that was my dad.

TB: Oh, okay.

SG: Sadly, he's passed away. Alison has now retired from the police force.

TB: That was the police, okay, right, I've got you.

SG: Yes, but she still lives locally, she still lives in Purfleet.

TB: (00:22:47) Yes, and from that, did you set it up, you said after five years you decided to go for charity status?

SG: Yes.

TB: (00:22:54) But before that, I guess you were kind of like a voluntary organisation?

SG: And we still are.

TB: (00:22:58) Did you call yourselves something at that point?

SG: Well, when we settled on the name, we were advised by a very dear friend who sadly passed away last year. He said, "Don't call yourself a museum" he said, "You will come up with so many restrictions" he said, "If anything, call yourself a heritage centre, it will give you so much more freedom" and it has. It has definitely paid off.

TB: (00:23:25) In what way, just explain that?

SG: Because if you're a museum, you have to get qualifications for this, that and the other and it's what you can do, what you can't do. But being a heritage centre, it does give you so much more freedom to do everything, absolutely everything.

TB: (00:23:44) Right, yes. Do you mean that it's such a broader term that you don't feel constrained by people's expectation of what a museum is?

SG: That's right, yes. And what most visitors like about it is, it's not sterile which is what you get in a lot of the big museums and we're much more hands-on.

TB: Yes, well a lot of the stuff you can touch and pick up and there are no ropes around.

SG: Yes, that is it, and that's what we like.

TB: (00:24:13) Although you do have an amazing amount of glass cases which is clearly important for valuable things and so on. Where have they all come from, is it shops or what?

SG: The shop unit there came from Roomes Stores at Upminster and so did that little cabinet there and a few of the others. That came from... Oh, good lord...

TB: That looks like it's a museum case?

SG: It is a library cabinet, it is, the other side should be all drawers, but we converted the bottom of it. We've got three or four other big ones that came from a store at North Weald Airfield and they were getting damp and they said, "Well, can you use

them?" "Yes, we'll have them." That cabinet there came from Palmers College in Grays, they've come from all over.

TB: (00:25:08) Yes, so, have you bought them?

SG: Given.

TB: Really? Okay, gosh, that's amazing.

SG: Yes, given, which has helped us out an awful lot, it really has. We always say, 'All donations gratefully accepted'.

TB: (00:25:21) Yes, absolutely. In those early days when you came up with the plan and so on, tell me about the budget and funding? Because it's hard to do it for nothing so, did you do some fundraising, how did that work?

SG: We did do some fundraising and we were also given a grant when we first started.

TB: (00:25:39) Was that from the council?

SG: And that was from the council.

TB: (00:25:41) And how much was that for, roughly?

SG: Oh, good lord... I can't remember if that was five or ten thousand pounds now... Nine, it was nine, yes.

TB: So, not huge but still a useful amount?

SG: It was a good start, it really was.

TB: (00:26:00) Yes, and what did you spend that money on, was it trying to clear the space and getting some lighting and electrics...?

SG: Getting the place cleared out and starting up, yes. Getting the electric put on and then we ran water pipes through so, we could have the water in here because we had to keep going over to the Proof House across the road for any water that we wanted.

TB: Right, wow.

SG: And we thought, "Well, we must have a toilet as well, we need a toilet", we got that put in. Of course, by then, the money was starting to run out fast and at the same time, we were having quite a battle with the local authority because they were charging us full rates, which we were really struggling with. But once we got our charitable status finalised, it knocked it so far down, it was unbelievable.

TB: Oh, really?

SG: Yes.

TB: (00:26:55) Was that part of the reason to get charitable status or was that just a lucky...?

SG: We were advised to go for it anyway.

TB: (00:27:02) Okay, because you can get funding is that why?

- SG: Yes, it makes it easier to get funding although sometimes, that is still very difficult, but we did have a nice grant last year because of the hundredth anniversary of World War I, and Purfleet had an amazing show in the evening with the beacon being lit up on the green there, silhouettes of nurses, Zeppelins, tanks, horses, everything. And in here, as well, they combined the lot and that was with the community forum as well.
- TB: (00:27:37) Fantastic, so, was that a lottery-funded thing?
- SG: That was local authority.
- TB: Oh, was it?
- SG: Which was rather good and they're going to give us another one for March because Purfleet Gunners played a big part in bringing down the very first Zeppelin, the L15. Where the pre-school is, up the hill there now, is where the old water tower used to be that supplied the whole of Purfleet and there was a gun there.
- TB: Oh, really?
- SG: I don't know if you know that story? The Lord Mayor of London giving everyone, right through the estuary, that took part in that, as a thank you, he had commissioned a gold medallion.
- TB: Really?
- SG: And we've got one here, Gunner Derbyshire, and he was one of those at Purfleet.
- TB: (00:28:27) How amazing. Because they were really hard to shoot down, they were so high up that they were out of range a lot of the time, weren't they?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: So, that was really quite something to do.
- SG: Yes, it was, and it came down at Herne Bay.
- TB: (00:28:39) Gosh. Just going back to the organisational history, so, it starts off with four and, I can't imagine just four of you could have done it in those early years. So, did you open it up then to... Just tell me a little bit about you grew it into the organisation?
- SG: Well, at that time, RAF Hornchurch Association was still with us and there was about four of them from there got involved. Alison's husband, he got involved and he is one of those that runs Headcorn Museum over in Kent. And he gave us a lot of valuable advice as well because he was already with them for many years. And gradually people would start coming down and say, "What are you doing? Oh, I wouldn't mind getting involved with that" and it just sort of gradually grew. And that was when John, around the other side, he started to get involved. He left for a while and then in the last few years, he's come back.
- TB: (00:29:45) Okay, so, how many volunteers do you have involved in the organisation would you say now?
- SG: We've got about ten that come regular. We've got some that can only come Sundays, but we've got a membership of over eighty.

- TB: Wow, okay.
- SG: Of course, people working and so on.
- TB: Yes, but ten core ones that come...?
- SG: Yes, there are usually six here on a Thursday, sometimes more, then it will go up to ten.
- TB: (00:30:16) And how does the governance work, do you have...? Obviously, you have trustees, I presume?
- SG: Yes, we do.
- TB: (00:30:22) How many of those do you have?
- SG: Three.
- TB: (00:30:25) Okay, is that you, your husband, and...?
- SG: And another member, yes, Alan Breadnam.
- TB: (00:30:31) Okay. So, how are decisions made as an organisation, does it tend to...? Well, I don't know...
- SG: Yes, we have meetings. We are due another AGM, but we do have our... Oh, God, what do you call it? Not book of rules.
- TB: A constitution?
- SG: That's the word, yes, we've got that as well.
- TB: (00:30:54) Okay, does it work fairly informally usually?
- SG: Fairly informally, yes.
- TB: (00:30:59) Do you have regular group meetings or is it more every Thursday, people come, and you have a chat about things?
- SG: The way it's been working over the last year it's when most of us are here. We will call a meeting every so often to try and get the others to come but sometimes that's like that trying to get blood out of a stone. But it's usually the core ones that are here, they'll come up with an idea or something or, like the event we've got coming up for March and we'll sit down and have a meeting. Of course, we keep minutes of our meetings and everything.
- TB: (00:31:39) Sure. And just tell me a little bit about the volunteers, age group-wise are we talking retired mostly?
- SG: Mostly, yes. It's unfortunate now, we did have a lot of younger ones but of course, it's work commitments, family commitments and things like that. We could definitely do with some younger bodies here because none of us are getting any younger.
- TB: That's interesting you had some in those earlier days. Were they coming from the estate do you think?

- SG: Some were, some were coming from further afield. John, he comes from Ilford and we've got some come from Stanford. Now and again, we've got from over in Kent, he'll come over and it's just as and when.
- TB: (00:32:25) What about gender-wise? I noticed you've got someone here who is a lady sanding down and 1820s...
- SG: A paint stripper, 1881 cannon.
- TB: An 1881 cannon?
- SG: Yes, we've let her loose with that today, but she tried strangling herself last year. She was using an electric sander and forgot she'd got a scarf on and her scarf got caught in it.
- [laughter]
- And it's just... John, John, Help!
- TB: (00:33:01) So, you've got some women as well as men?
- SG: Oh, yes, we have.
- TB: (00:33:05) Is it fifty-fifty?
- SG: More men than women, yes.
- TB: That's impressive.
- SG: But when we had that big event last November, a lot of the others turned up and gave us a hand. I mean, the queue for the tea bar was down past the entrance here. And there was five of us working behind there which was a bit ridiculous, but it was a case of having to. And one of our other ladies, she made a load of cakes to World War I recipes which went down a big treat with people. And they just muck in and do whatever they can.
- TB: (00:33:40) Yes, that's fantastic. So, as far as keeping going, income-wise, just give me a sense of how you're managing to make ends meet?
- SG: Basically, we run on what we make on the door and on the tea bar and the shop, we are self-funded.
- TB: And that's enough to pay the bills?
- SG: Just about, yes.
- TB: (00:33:59) And in terms of visitor numbers, how many visitors a year do you get would you say, do you keep a tab of it?
- SG: We keep a rough tally... Two and a half to three thousand usually a year.
- TB: Okay, and you're open?
- SG: Thursdays, Sundays, and Bank Holiday Mondays and then we shut down the middle of December until the middle of January.
- TB: (00:34:19) So, for a couple of days a week, that's pretty good going, isn't it?

- SG: It is, yes.
- TB: (00:34:25) Have you thought about opening up more or is it just impossible?
- SG: It's as people are available. If we get a group booking we try to make it for a Thursday, but sometimes, they can't do it on a Thursday so, I have to ring around and see if people are available to do a Tuesday or something like that.
- TB: So, it really is just a question of staffing?
- SG: Yes. It's funny, we do get a lot of groups from the U3A, University of the Third Age and they've come from all over, which is really good. Word gets around and...
- TB: (00:35:03) Sure, that's great, isn't it? Because you're guaranteed a group and that turns the entrance fees?
- SG: Yes, and a lot of those make repeat visits as well.
- TB: (00:35:09) Do you do evening events at all?
- SG: We have done but not many.
- TB: Because I was just thinking, it's quite atmospheric, isn't it?
- SG: It is in here, yes. And there are things in here as well, I've seen them.
- TB: How do mean... have you, really?
- SG: Yes, I went hunting for one, one day but there wasn't no one there. I saw him through the archway here but when I went around and had a look there was no one there. I wasn't the only one that saw him.
- TB: (00:35:38) How bizarre, so, can you describe what you saw?
- SG: He was dressed in a brown top, short dark hair. He could have been one of the old workers here or something. We've got one, we've given him a name and that's Maurice. And there was a Maurice worked here and he fell off one of these bays and barrels fell on him. With all the different things that have happened, we've found things not where they've been left. I was in here one day and a hanger went flying past my head and a couple of the youngsters that used to come down here, they saw a soldier in a red tunic. And Sandie, that used to come down here, she always had her hair in a ponytail and her ponytail went that way. And she said, "That's that little girl again, I've seen her in here before." Yes, it's strange.
- TB: (00:36:39) That's extraordinary, so many as well you know, that's really interesting, isn't it? Just tell me a little bit about the relationship between this place and the estate next door because it's really, really close?
- SG: The people in this block, next door, there is a couple that live in that block and they keep a very, very close eye on this place.
- TB: Oh, okay.
- SG: If they see anything going along, I mean, we've had problems with travellers outside, parking up and we've not been able to get in. But you can guarantee they will always give us a call to say, "Trouble".

- TB: Okay, right, so, keep an eye out.
- SG: Yes, and they've reported things that they've seen as well, yes, and it's a very, very, good relationship.
- TB: (00:37:21) Yes, that's great. And I imagine, well, clearly when you have events, it must be nice for them just to literally, out their back door, they've got something happening which is quite good?
- SG: Yes, yes, it is.
- TB: So, the relationship is pretty good with them?
- SG: It is, yes.
- TB: (00:37:32) Is it mostly families or is it quite mixed?
- SG: Quite mixed, yes, very mixed. When you get the lady visitors they like seeing the living room and the kitchen and whatnot round there. So, we've got a feel for everything.
- TB: (00:37:48) Yes, that's right, it's not just military, is it? I notice you've got the flooding display, you've got the Dracula one, as you say, you've got lots of domestic displays too?
- SG: Yes, we've got the royal round there.
- TB: (00:37:59) So, actually, it is kind of quite... There is a big stream of local history and the prisoners of war camp and I suppose...
- SG: Yes, there was, well, there was two camps here. People called them top camp and bottom camp. Bottom camp was just the regular troops, which originally, were Italians, they got moved on and then German but top camp was the hardened SS.
- TB: Oh, really?
- SG: They were never let out. The others, I mean, my nan, she used to trade with them when they were taken on the march; go and do some work. And she used to trade stuff with them.
- TB: Gosh.
- SG: Yes, and we've had a couple of them come back here.
- TB: Really?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: (00:38:36) Because that dolls house is pretty special?
- SG: Oh, yes, that was given to us by a young woman and she said, "A POW made that for my mum when she was little" she said, "I don't want to get rid of it, would you like it?" "Yes".
- TB: (00:38:53) And that prisoner used to have Sunday lunch with them every so often... I was reading the little thing, but that was how they knew each other?
- SG: With some, yes.

- TB: Amazing, yes, a really nice object.
- SG: And I've got a wooden box round there that was made by another one, Jacob, Jacob Potts, and he was a sub-mariner and he used to work on a farm at Chadwell and he kept in touch with that family until he died last year. And he was a lovely man and he gave me that box and that tin cup, that was his, yes.
- TB: Gosh. That's amazing... That he walked through the door and...
- SG: Yes, yes.
- TB: So, did he end up staying in Britain then?
- SG: He went back to Germany. Dietrich, he went back to Germany as well and I can't sadly, the remember the last chap's name. But there was a lot of them did stay here. Some lived in Rainham, some in Aveley, all around the area.
- TB: (00:39:58) Just tell me a little bit... With these newer communities that are coming in, and I guess, was that from the mid-nineties onwards that you've had Eastern Europeans...?
- SG: Over the last five years, yes, there has been two big... Three big estates built and as I say, Purfleet is just expanding and expanding. Industry is dwindling because we had two big major employers... Three actually. Vandenburg & Jurgens, margarine makers, Thames Board Mills, a cardboard box place, and Esso Petroleum and that is dwindling now as well. We've still got the ferry port down there, Cobelfret, that's all transport.
- TB: (00:40:43) So, is that the main employer now, apart from the retail park?
- SG: That's one of the biggest, that and Esso. Yes, oh, the retail park, yes. Oh, that's a nightmare. But, the whole of the Thames Board Mill site, that is all going to be another big housing estate.
- TB: Is it? Crikey.
- SG: Yes, and that is going to be huge.
- TB: (00:41:03) So, those early nineties when... It wasn't the first estate but still, it was a fairly recent estate that went in, I guess there have been others in this area before that probably. But for Purfleet, that was the first, in fact, of a whole series of big housing developments?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: (00:41:21) That's quite a social change to live through, isn't it, just in this last fifteen years?
- SG: It is, tremendous.
- TB: And how do people cope with that? I imagine that there must be tensions and issues but... I don't know... Do you sort of get a sense of the community kind of running with it okay and is it working?
- SG: As a majority, yes. I worked in the local pharmacy over here until last year so, I got to meet a lot of the new incomers.

- TB: Yes, everyone I suppose, everyone needs medicine, don't they?
- SG: Yes, and definitely a variety of people, that's for sure. But when the Olympic Park was built, we had a lot from East London moved down this way.
- TB: Oh, really?
- SG: And they didn't integrate very well.
- TB: Right, that's interesting.
- SG: They were a bit of a problem.
- TB: Were they East London, was that Claygate Estate and those...?
- SG: All around that area, yes, and there was a right mixture in amongst that lot as well. And they even knocked on my aunt's door in the village, wanting to buy her house. She told them where to go. Since then, like I say, most of them are immigrants that have moved in but a heck of a lot of them are interested in where they've moved to, which is a good sign, it really is a good sign.
- TB: (00:42:46) Yes. So, it sounds to me like this place is kind of... Well, I imagine there is other community... There are other spaces where people can come and get a handle on the place but this sounds like a pretty major one in terms of the village.
- SG: Yes, and what does help a lot was when they opened up the river walk properly that goes right the way through... It will eventually go from Southend right through to London.
- TB: Will it, like a Thames path?
- SG: Yes. And it's a cycle path and we get a lot of people up and down here all the time because they go right through to Rainham, they can either walk, there are joggers galore. And my son, actually, two years ago, he took part in an off-road cycle race from London to Brighton, which included going through the old rifle range, the RSPB site now, through Purfleet and onwards that way.
- TB: Okay, great.
- SG: And all things like that introduces people to the area and they find things that they knew nothing about.
- TB: (00:43:48) Have you thought about maybe doing something on migration? I imagine historically, a lot of people have moved here to work from all different places, so, I'm sure there are Irish and all sorts of migrations in the past. I was wondering whether you've ever directly embraced some of these new communities, or is it...?
- SG: That might be a bit more difficult to do with what we've got in here anyway, but every so often we will hold a Purfleet Day and if we can get funding for it, well, then it will be free admission and you can encourage people in like that and give it plenty of advertising and so on.
- TB: Yes, sure. Okay, that's great. Okay, we've talked about funding, we've talked about the objects and where they come from.

- SG: A lot of the objects in here do belong to members as well.
- TB: Oh, okay, right. So, it's almost like their... That's interesting.
- SG: We like to say we're more like a family.
- TB: (00:44:46) Yes, so, tell me about being a member then? In some organisations, it basically means that there's a monthly talk and it's free to get in, but it sounds to me like being a member here is quite different?
- SG: We pay a membership fee, all of us and we do a quarterly newsletter, we put a quiz in, get a prize etc. and things like that and let everyone know what is going on. Unfortunately, some of our members, they live up in Peterborough and wherever. But you get feedback from them, which is good, yes, we try and involve them, everybody as best as you can.
- TB: (00:45:28) So, if a member has got some stuff that they would quite like to put on display then if you feel that it works, you can give them a cabinet or whatever?
- SG: Well, the big machine gun around the other side, that belongs to one of our members that lives down near Southend, and we've had it here about several years now.
- TB: Yes?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: (00:45:50) So, is this like a space... I don't know, if you like old things right, and if you... The shelves are quite big, you can't stick that in your front room very easily?
- SG: No, that would be a bit difficult.
- TB: (00:46:06) So, is this sort of serving a slightly different purpose to a museum in as much as it's a space where people can display things they're passionate about, they could never do that at home. But, do you know what I mean? It's kind of like a... Not a storage thing but it's public, do you know what I mean, it's a space they can keep stuff or collect stuff?
- SG: If you go to one or two members' homes, it's like walking into a museum as well, with some of the things that they've got. Rod, one of our members, that's his machine gun that's down that end, the Cutaway one. And you say to Rod, "Well, what haven't you got, Rod?" "Oh, well, you know..." And he'll start.
- TB: Right, so, some of these are real collectors?
- SG: Oh, good lord, yes. A few years ago now with Reg, the one that was responsible for getting the [Bectham Bomb 00:46:53], God, he was a walking museum, he was. The stuff that he had that, unfortunately when he passed away, his family wanted his things back and it all went to auction. I mean, he had some amazing World War I items, he really did. The Pickelhaube's and everything he had, it was absolutely amazing, it was such a shame, to see all that go, but it had to be.
- TB: (00:47:26) On the display front, do you have any rules or... When you give someone a section say, "Do you know what, just do whatever you want" or...?

- SG: Yes.
- TB: Okay, so, it really is [unclear 00:47:37]?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: Okay.
- SG: I've got my areas that I look after, Len's got his. Brenda, she'll do whatever, like John does but some of us have got our own sections that we've got.
- TB: (00:47:52) So, some of these... There's like a kind of coronation, a monarchy kind of area so, that might be someone's personal collection?
- SG: Yes, John's is the Nelson section, that is one of his. Len is RAF regiment, that is his old regiment anyway, and mine is mainly royal and the Gurkha section round there, and Burma.
- TB: (00:48:12) Why that, why did you pick that?
- SG: That picked up because when the Gurkhas were given permission to stay in Britain, which they rightly deserved, Thurrock ended up with a big five hundred community of them.
- TB: Really?
- SG: And every year, they hold their own day here and the kids do the traditional dancing, they do their food, their cuisine, and we're lucky, each time so far, it's been a lovely day, and everyone sits outside, it's wonderful. But some of them have brought in some of their things.
- TB: (00:48:45) Oh, I see, so, you thought, "Right, let's do something on this" because you've got that community now?
- SG: Yes, and we did do a special exhibition one year for them because most of them had served in the Falklands, in the Falklands Conflict and we did a special one for them.
- TB: Awesome, yes.
- SG: But they're lovely people, they really are lovely people. I wouldn't want to cross one of them but, they are.
- [laughter]
- SG: They are, they're lovely and they've got to be friends now and you see them out, "Hello, namaste" and all that.
- TB: (00:49:18) That's awesome, really nice. Just tell me about... Have you had any advice or support or training from... I don't know museum networks or anything in that way?
- SG: A lot of our training came from one of those, well, two of those that gave us a lot of advice in the past and that was David, from his experiences at Headcorn. And the main one was Jonathan Catton and he was a curator at Thameside Museum in Grays. And he was the one that advised us about becoming a heritage centre and not a museum, but he gave us advice on cataloguing items and things that you

should do, what you shouldn't do, and care for things. He gave us a heck of a lot of advice.

TB: (00:50:08) Yes, that's great. So, how did he get involved, is he a member or in the early days, did he just...?

SG: He had a big interest with the Coalhouse Fort Project at East Tilbury, he had a big eighteen pounder gun and what that man didn't know is not worth mentioning. He was a walking encyclopaedia, literally. You would ask him something, anything obscure and he'd have an answer for you.

TB: (00:50:41) Yes, wow. So, how did he get involved with this, did he hear about it and get in touch?

SG: He heard about it and I think Alison went to speak to him, Alison Campbell and next thing we know, he's come down here and started to get involved with us. He said, "I'm not going to join, I'm not going to do anything like that," he said, "I'm here for advice." And that is what he did.

TB: (00:51:07) Okay, and how long was he involved for would you say?

SG: Sadly, he died very unexpectedly two years ago.

TB: Oh, gosh.

SG: Only in his fifties, he just had a massive heart attack and that was it, gone, yes, it was such a shock for everybody, it really was because he was making plans for the one-hundredth anniversary that we had last year.

TB: Oh, I see, right. What a useful...

SG: Oh, he was, such a knowledgeable man, and we do miss him, we really do miss him.

TB: (00:51:42) So, do you have... Are you part of any club network, local, regional or anything in terms of tourist attractions or heritage centres or anything like that?

SG: We use... Essex Historical Society, we keep in touch with them. And we do a membership with them every year.

TB: Right, okay.

SG: Occasionally with The Thurrock Historical Society, we've got the Royal Opera House at the other end of Purfleet.

TB: Oh, I saw that, yes.

SG: Yes, they can be a pain in the bum, but they can have their uses as well... And schools.

TB: (00:52:22) Right okay, so, you're not in the Museum Association or anything like that?

SG: No, we used to be a long time ago but that sort of faded out.

TB: (00:52:33) Did you just find it wasn't particularly useful?

SG: No, not very.

- TB: Yes, they're quite expensive some of the events, I've had a few comments about that?
- SG: Yes, we've done loads of outdoor exhibitions, gone to different functions and goodness knows what and put on displays etc. so, we try our best to put our word out as best we can.
- TB: Sure, yes. And I think... Let me just check my question sheet, I think... We've covered such a lot.
- (00:53:05) A couple of just sort of general questions. Has there been a real kind of... What's been the highest point... The thing that you've most enjoyed or been most pleased with over the time that this has been setup?
- SG: The event that used to give us the biggest response used to be our Battle of Britain ones. But over the last few years the interest in World War I has grown so much and that, we get a terrific response. Because Purfleet holds its own Purfleet Remembrance Day, the week before the national one.
- TB: Oh, really?
- SG: And we get loads of people turn up, local people, MP's, councillors, mayors, everybody turns up.
- TB: (00:53:49) Why is it the week before?
- SG: So, it doesn't clash with the big main one and it has worked out so well for the local people, it really has, and we get such a response from it. In fact, three or four years ago, because we've got a close connection with Ensign Bus Company as well and they help us out a heck of a lot and they've produced a book and given us permission to carry on with it. One of the managers there, Mick, he said, "I'm going to try and get you the Battle Bus." "Pardon?" He said, "From the Transport Museum in London", he said, "I'm going to try and get you the Battle Bus", he said, "The real one, that went to the trenches." And he did it.
- TB: Crikey.
- SG: And we had a ride in it, going down the A13 at seven miles an hour, the sense of power it gave, it was fantastic. My granddaughter was with us, she was a bit wary, she was only four or five at the time and sat up she said, "I don't like it, nanny." I said, "You wait and see." It has no springs, nothing, so, every pothole we found, and it's just wooden benches so, you're sliding everywhere. But in the end, there she was, hanging over the side waving to everybody, they're waving back, it was a struggle for the poor old bus to get over the flyover at the end there, but she did it. But oh, what a fantastic day and the response that got from people. And the kids, they thought it was absolutely amazing and we had three other vintage vehicles out there as well. And when you get things like that and the appreciation you get back from people is phenomenal, it really is, and that is proving to be the biggest one that we hold in the year now, the World War I, yes.
- TB: Yes, yes, it was brilliant.

- SG: It is.
- TB: (00:55:49) So, for you personally, there is clearly a big reward when you get that kind of sense of... Do you know what, without me, this wouldn't have happened?
- SG: Yes, well, not just that, I'm just glad that people appreciate it, you know? And you know that what you're doing is worthwhile.
- TB: (00:56:05) And for you, what is it about military history or local history? I don't know, for you, it sounds to me like you've got perhaps more of a social history...?
- SG: A bit of everything, yes.
- TB: (00:56:19) So, why is it important to you, why do you love it, kind of thing, why do love the...?
- SG: To keep it going, to keep the memories alive and things like that.
- TB: (00:56:30) Why is that important though, do you think?
- SG: Because otherwise it just gets lost, stories get rewritten and things just get forgotten and that's why I like to keep it going. And we're gradually finding more and more about Purfleet itself, stories that we've never heard of before and things that we've never heard of at all or seen before. You know, you keep getting things turn up.
- One of our members, Alan Sholver, he used to work for Thames Board Mills and the Thames Board Mills exhibition round there is his and practically everything round there is his, what he has managed to salvage and to keep over the years.
- TB: (00:57:15) The amount of... It's like a whole archive there, isn't there?
- SG: There is, and he's still coming up with things.
- TB: He used to work there?
- SG: He worked at Thames Board Mills.
- TB: I thought, "My God, that company must have given you their archives" there is so much of it.
- SG: Some of it, when they shut down, they said, through Alan's connection, they said, "Right, come down and take what you want." They came back with a chandelier, those big cabinets and loads of things. And the Fisk family that was heavily involved with the directors, everything, you know, there was directors, Fisk, the widow came down with her family and brought in a load more and we're thinking, "We can't take much more" you know.
- TB: (00:58:05) I was wondering, do you have any contact with... I don't know what... What would it be here, the Essex local history centre where would that be in...
- SG: Chelmsford.
- TB: Chelmsford. Do you have any kind of partnership or contact with them?
- SG: Only occasionally, only occasionally.
- TB: Right, yes.
- SG: Mostly, it's when we've needed to find out something and we've contacted them.

- TB: Right, sure because something like that, there might be a space where you could say, "Look, we've got no room now but maybe you would be interested?" or whether they could...
- SG: It's whether they've got room, that's the thing. Because a load of the records from this area all went there and what they couldn't keep ended up at Kew.
- TB: (00:58:50) Yes, there was something you were saying about the importance of remembering and not forgetting certain stories. What kind of stories do you think are important to remember, can you give me; is there a particular... Can you give me a bit more of the sense of, for you, what you think is really...?
- SG: Well, there was one story, I haven't got it written down but... A German bomber that got hit... They all bailed out, but it just carried on flying, my nan was one of the many ladies that went out and grabbed the parachutes, of course. But it skimmed the top of the Royal Hotel, left a big oil field and its remains are still out there in the river somewhere. They've done surveys, everything, and they still haven't found it, but it is out there.
- And when they were building the new A13, at the bottom of the Sandy Lane junction, they were digging down for drainage etc. and we got contacted by the contractors there, "We've found a combustion chamber from a V2 rocket, would you like it?" "Yes", we said, "We'll have it." And up until just a few years ago, we had it on display outside. Some people started to abuse it and travellers tried to pinch it, so, it's now over at Headcorn and it's on long-term loan over there.
- When we heard about this, that was when my dad was still about, he said, "I remember seeing that" he said, "It blew up in mid-air and we all thought we'd be sent home from school" he said, "But we weren't." He said, "But part of it came down there and the rest of it carried on and came down in Grays and landed on some houses in Grays." And it all things like that, you know, those stories will get lost.
- And there was a family at the bottom of Purfleet Road, their house took a direct hit and most of the family were killed. That is another story which is why there are two odd houses on that road that don't match the rest.
- TB: (01:01:15) Right, so, if those sorts of things are forgotten you mean that local people of the future, they just won't really have an understanding of why things are like they are?
- SG: They won't know. It's like, one of the chaps from Purfleet Community Forum is getting a petition going at the moment and he's got to put it before council because not far from here, about a five-minute walk, you look down in the pit and you will see it. It's the old Purfleet chapel that dates from around about the same time as this, it's been burned out a few times and conveniently, both cottages at either side of it weren't demolished, they were dismantled brick by brick, slate by slate and on the backs of lorries and disappeared. But the framework of the old chapel is still there and in fact, I knew the last lady that lived in there and he's trying to get that saved because the rest of the land there is all up for development again. So, he wants to save that and put the building back into the community.

- TB: (01:02:22) Right, okay. So, what we've got here is an area that has been transformed really, really rapidly?
- SG: Oh, my God, yes.
- TB: (01:02:29) So, we've got another issue which is holding onto those stories but also holding onto some of the fabric as well by the sounds of it?
- SG: Yes, which is why we were glad when they extended the primary school, which is what my kids went to, one of my grandchildren is still going to. They've kept the main building but the last time I went up there to one of my granddaughter's open evenings, I wondered where the heck I was going. It's been extended, and extended, and extended so much but at least the basic building is still there.
- TB: (01:03:02) Right, it's a lovely Victorian sort of school is it?
- SG: It was, yes, it's just over a hundred years old, the school and it's still got two bricks in it, one has got the WD arrow and another one has got a date on it.
- TB: (01:03:17) Right, what is the WD arrow, what does that mean?
- SG: War Department.
- TB: Oh, really?
- SG: Yes, War Department arrow because the boundary went right up to that for this site. And where my daughter works just across the other side of the road, in the pre-school, the big wall around the outside of that is the other side of the road, and the little road through Purfleet used to run between the two.
- TB: I see.
- SG: The little lane and I can remember travelling down there as a kid with high walls either side, to go to the village.
- TB: (01:03:48) Right, okay. Well, it's like the geography of the place, even the shape of that road is all about history, isn't it?
- SG: Totally different, yes.
- TB: Yes, because your understanding of that, you understand why the road bends round.
- SG: Yes, they've straightened it out a heck of a lot to what it was, it really was a narrow, barely two-lane road.
- TB: (01:04:05) Sure, gosh, that's great. Is all of your activity base in here and just outside or do you get involved with things in the area? I'm just wondering whether your members get involved in conservation campaigns?
- SG: We have done because just outside is a conservation area as well and up at the pre-school, that stands in a conservation area. So, we've been involved in many things, like the school, I've got a big bag down there of things to take back up to the school because when we had the hundredth anniversary they had a big board up there with all their work on. So, it works both ways, they get involved with us and we get involved with them.

- TB: Yes, interesting.
- SG: And also, with the RSPB when they first got the site over there, where it used to be the rifle range. Of course, they had to come to us to get a lot of information about over there because there was so much explosive material over there as well. In fact, some of those there, some down the other end, all come from over there.
- TB: (01:05:27) So, we're looking at these bomb case?
- SG: Shell cases. Some of them are in a terrible condition but the RAF also used part of the range further up as a bombing run as well.
- TB: I see, for practising?
- SG: Yes. And my grandad used to work in the signal box that used to be there, and he used to tell us stories of many a time he had to dive for cover because of the bombs coming down, they're just going, plop, plop, plop in the mud and didn't go off.
- TB: (01:06:00) So, the RSPB came down to say, "Look, we're going to take over this marshland but we're not quite sure where these bombs are, and can you give us a sense of...?"
- SG: No, and they ended up having to bring in the bomb disposal team, the army disposal team.
- TB: Right, to clear it?
- SG: To clear it out, yes. And of course, they used to come down here because they knew about us as well, the army disposal team and they would say, "I've got some more in the lorry out there, do you want it?" "Yes, okay, bring it in."
- TB: Brilliant, that's fantastic.
- SG: "It's alright", he said, "I've made it safe, my doc's checked it as well, it's okay."
- TB: (01:06:34) That's amazing. But it shows you how, even the developers, even the changes of use, they're still needing to pay attention to the military history...
- SG: Yes, that's right.
- TB: Otherwise, they're going to blow themselves up.
- SG: There is a mummified... Good lord, what was that? There are mummified trees over there as well.
- TB: (01:06:57) Is there, from the river marshes?
- SG: Yes, when the tide goes out it exposes it all.
- TB: Thousands of years old.
- SG: Yes, millions of years old.
- TB: Really? Crikey.
- SG: Sandy Lane, that's where they found the woolly mammoths that are in the Natural History Museum.
- TB: Right, God.

- SG: We used to go down Sandy Lane when it was just a track road basically, the top deck of the bus and saw all the marquees and everything out there where they were digging them up.
- TB: Crikey, that's astonishing.
- SG: Yes, I have to remember all of that.
- TB: It's coming back now, isn't it, that's brilliant.
- (01:07:27) Okay, just a general question, and I appreciate that this is the work of many different people, isn't it in terms of curation and deciding what topics to do?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: (01:07:43) But there is a kind of, I suppose, an element of nationalism with a small 'n', I'm thinking about... We've got the RAF and Spitfires and stuff and Trafalgar and the...
- SG: And social history as well, yes.
- TB: (01:08:01) Sure, yes. But I'm just wondering whether there is any sense of... This is a local history museum, but it's got a sense of the national as well.
- SG: Hmm, a bit of everything.
- TB: (01:08:12) Yes, is that deliberate or has it just come about...?
- SG: It's evolved.
- TB: (01:08:19) Okay, so, it's just following the interests of people that have got involved in the museum.
- SG: Yes, hmm, and the response that we get from the public.
- TB: (01:08:30) Okay. Right, so, I think I've asked why you set it up? It was to preserve the building, number one, then secondarily, was to have something to explore local history. That was the other kind of aim to it. Did Alan share that kind of... Have you both sort shared that interest?
- SG: Yes, well I was well into history anyway.
- TB: Oh, were you?
- SG: He wasn't so much, it was the building fabric that he wanted but he's gradually changed over the years.
- TB: (01:09:03) Oh, that's interesting. So, in the beginning, was it more kind of, he was into the, "Right, let's do this building stuff."?
- SG: I want the building kept.
- TB: And you were more about, "Great, let's have something in here that's really cool."?
- SG: Yes, hmm, a bit of everything.
- TB: That's quite a good partnership, isn't it?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: (01:09:21) Did you model this on any other sort of museum that you had seen?

SG: No, no, it's just our own thing.

TB: (01:09:37) We talked a bit, haven't we, about the role of this place in the community and you've obviously got links with the estate that is next door but also very strong links with the primary school just up the road.

SG: Yes.

TB: (01:09:51) And we've also talked about migration and how there is now an interest in getting a sense of where you are and the history behind it. So, is there anything else about this place in the community that we haven't gone through that is worth mentioning or maybe you've covered it?

SG: I don't think so.

TB: Okay.

SG: You do know that Purfleet used to be a major trip for Londoners?

TB: (01:10:15) See, I drove past that hotel and I was like... Wow.

SG: And that is famous for the king, Edward, Victoria's Edward, he would go there for his [unclear 01:10:26]. He rowed across the river to meet one of his mistresses.

TB: Really?

SG: And be rowed back, yes. And then he would go back home.

TB: Amazing.

SG: Yes, that's got quite a history that building, hmm.

TB: I'd love to stay there, I'm going to see if I can get my wife over and just... The view from there must be absolutely stunning?

SG: Oh, it is, yes, it is.

TB: Yes, it's really, really special. I've done projects in North Woolwich on the Tate & Lyle social club and they had pleasure gardens and hot air balloons and stuff going on.

SG: There used to be a pleasure gardens here.

TB: Was there, really?

SG: On the board, behind you.

TB: Good, God.

SG: Some of it there.

TB: Oh, yes.

SG: That is the building Trevor's is trying to preserve to get the site.

TB: Right, yes.

SG: That one.traight down to... I don't know... Kent coast kind of thing.

SG: Yes, yes.

- TB: But this was a...
- SG: It was a major stopping-off point and Londoners used to come down by steam train and they'd get off at Purfleet station and there used to be a bridge that would take them across the line and walk them right through to Botany Bay Gardens. They'd go through there, to [unclear 01:12:34] Park, down by the Royal Hotel. But on the cliff face going through Botany Bay Gardens, people used to put seashells in the wall as they would go up and down the cliff. And there were all steps, proper steps cut into the cliff.
- TB: (01:12:52) Right. So, is the cliff still there?
- SG: It is, but sadly, that Botany Bay Gardens, there is a massive housing estate.
- TB: Oh, really, that's...
- SG: That's something else that has been lost. And the developers cut into the cliff face too much and it started to fall down so, that's all had to be strengthened. A chap that I know, he nearly got crushed, his car did get crushed by the chalk.
- TB: Crikey. Wow, so, that was a bit of a loss?
- SG: Yes, that was naughty, that was very naughty.
- TB: (01:13:26) Yes, what a shame. What it a bit overgrown or what is a proper park before they put the estate on it?
- SG: It was overgrown, there were some industries down there, small industries and so on.
- TB: (01:13:37) Right, so, it had changed a bit since Edwardian days?
- SG: Yes, but when you walk down there to the old chapel and the two cottages, the atmosphere down there changed completely. There were beautiful willow trees down there, you could be in another world, it's absolutely lovely down there.
- TB: That's the chapel that you mentioned has been...?
- SG: And that is what it used to look like down there.
- TB: That's fantastic.
- SG: But, it used to be known as the Botany Bay Gardens down there and they would hold their big sports days and everything because they had the boys training ships along here as well. They had some here right through to Grays and further on.
- TB: (01:11:48) So, these were sea cadets joining the Navy?
- SG: And the naughty boy, naughty boy ones as well.
- TB: Oh, really?
- SG: Yes, and they would all have their training. But in Botany Bay Gardens they used to hold their big sports days and everything in the Edwardian era and all of that. So, it's all that kind of thing that people don't know.

TB: (01:12:07) I had no idea that the steamers stopped here, I thought it was North Woolwich then straight down to the Kent coast.

SG: Yes. This was a major stopping off point.

TB: (01:13:54) Well, it's a pretty amazing site you've got here, along the river, that walk is something else, isn't it?

SG: Oh, yes.

TB: So, there is still lots here.

SG: Yes, we've got a lovely view from here. Not so good when we had the hurricane but that was another story altogether, that was.

TB: (01:14:10) In [unclear 01:14:11] this was?

SG: Yes.

TB: So, you were hit badly by that?

SG: Oh, yes, we were. There were torn up trees and goodness knows what we lost down here. The block by the side here, had the whole side wall sucked out.

TB: Wow.

SG: Because it acted like a vortex going through, it just sucked the whole wall out of that block.

TB: How extraordinary.

SG: Yes.

TB: So, was that like a block of modern housing?

SG: The maisonette's here, yes.

TB: Crikey.

SG: It didn't do too much damage to this one, apart from the roof, we lost quite a few slates off of the roof but other than that it was the trees that came down. We were cut off here.

TB: How amazing. I live in Kent and it was pretty badly hit, woods-wise.

SG: Where?

TB: Well, I stay in Edenbridge which is...

SG: Oh, I know Edenbridge, yes.

TB: There Sevenoaks lost all its oak's and stuff.

SG: Oh, it did, yes.

TB: So, it was quite a dramatic change.

SG: Oh, it was.

TB: (01:15:20) What has been the toughest bit, the toughest moment, the hardest episode of...?

- SG: God, we nearly lost the place once because our funds had gone so low and that was when we were fighting for our charitable status. That was a really tough, worrying time but once we got that, it's just steadily built up, built up. Getting permission to get jobs done, what needs doing. We keep having a problem with one of the porches, it leaks. It's been repaired properly two or three times but each time it's come back, and we've needed to lift part of the floors in here, you have to get permission to do that and it can all take time. Fortunately, we've got a very, very good relationship with the lady that we have to deal with.
- TB: (01:16:18) In the Charities...?
- SG: Yes, that and the...
- TB: Charity Commission?
- SG: Not the Charity Commission... Oh, the other big commission, they've all combined now anyway.
- TB: Oh, okay, yes.
- SG: And we contact her, "Yes, okay, put it in writing, send it to me, I'll okay it."
- TB: I see.
- SG: She trusts us, I'm glad to say.
- TB: (01:16:45) Just going back to that tough one. So, you were applying for charity status and this was probably around?
- SG: That was in '99.
- TB: (01:16:52) '99, so, you had been going a few years, but you literally didn't have enough money to keep going?
- SG: We didn't. I managed to get the council to delay a payment on our rates etc. because if they had taken that we wouldn't have had a bean. And I said, "Can you just give us a little bit more breathing space to get this to come back?" "Okay then, we will." And they were very good, I'm glad to say. And then we managed to get another grant and from there, it just carried on.
- TB: (01:17:31) Was that a council grant again or was that from somewhere else?
- SG: That was a council grant again, believe it or not, but we only pay a penny every five years for rent.
- TB: Right, can you believe that?
- SG: Peppercorn rent. We've got to be seen that we're paying something. I think over the years now it's gradually built up and it's five pounds every five years we pay now.
- TB: That's amazing. But still, enormously important so, they are kind of subsidising you?
- SG: If we could get them to lose the building insurance, we would be laughing. They've even said themselves, "We've got to charge you this, even though if anything did

happen there is not a thing we could do with the place.” But it’s got to be seen to be done.

TB: Right, okay, yes, it’s just one of those it’s...

(01:18:27) And how are you doing now, are you okay with your entrance fees and your teas, is it enough to keep going?

SG: In the last year things started to get very tight again. But this year it’s starting again, it’s building up so, we’re okay for a bit longer.

TB: (01:18:46) It does sound like it’s quite hand to mouth sometimes.

SG: It is at times, yes.

TB: (01:18:52) But these events, maybe these are things you can fundraise for and bring in maybe and a little bit of that can go towards the core fund?

SG: That is, yes, it does.

TB: (01:19:06) Great, okay. Visitor profile over the years, has that changed at all or is it...? It sounds to me like you’re getting obviously a lot of local people?

SG: A good variety, yes, a very good variety.

TB: In terms of passing people?

SG: Yes.

TB: Just people that are passing by?

SG: Yes, and a couple of times now, the opera house, they’ve organised certain days. And they did a silk walk last year where they created these massive silk signs and they walked them right the way through Purfleet and stopped here.

TB: Oh, really?

SG: Yes.

TB: (01:19:42) Gosh. Tell me about that, what was the event?

SG: Kinetika, it was called, and they do these big signs like you see outside of different places, advertising and such. It was all different symbols on it and each one they had reflected a different aspect of Purfleet.

TB: I see, okay, lovely.

SG: And they did the guided walk around Purfleet and finished here.

TB: Wow, that’s a lovely idea.

SG: It was good, hmm.

TB: (01:20:13) I imagine Lakeside...

SG: We have done a couple of displays at Lakeside.

TB: I was going to say because you’ve got literally millions of people going there and this is so close, I was just wondering whether...?

- SG: Over the years we have done, I think we've done about three displays over there at different times.
- TB: (01:20:29) Right, how did it go down, does it work?
- SG: It went well, yes, it did go well. Of course, that's had a change of management since and I think it's in bother now, it's one of those that has...
- TB: Oh, really?
- SG: Hmm.
- TB: (01:20:46) I see, okay. Have there been other museums around here of a similar kind of ilk?
- SG: Not to us, no. Even Coalhouse Fort, theirs is a different aspect altogether, it is purely military. And Tilbury Fort as well, that's English Heritage, that one, anyway, Tilbury Fort. And the only other ones, RAF Hornchurch for many years tried to get the buildings there for themselves to open a museum without any luck. And there is another group in Hornchurch now trying again.
- TB: Oh, is there, right, okay.
- SG: Yes, we do know a couple of the guys that are going for it and they've been down to us for a bit of advice and what have you.
- TB: (01:21:34) That's interesting. So, are they... So, up here, they're kind of a like a...?
- SG: Theirs will be purely on RAF Hornchurch but they will be volunteers as well.
- TB: I see. So, that's not RAF driven or anything. So, is Hornchurch shut down, is it?
- SG: Yes, it's a big country park now but they officer's mess building and a couple of the others were saved and one of those is a doctor's surgery now, I think, and they've got photographs up of what it used to be like and that over there. This is another building that they've been given access to and they now want to open one dedicated to Hornchurch.
- TB: I see, great, that sounds like it could be amazing.
- SG: Hmm.
- TB: (01:22:18) But historically, it's obviously so important in so many ways.
- SG: Yes, and when you consider most of the roads, the newer roads over in Hornchurch and all around there were all named after different pilots and servicemen that spent time at Hornchurch.
- TB: (01:22:38) Have you ever regretted being involved would you say?
- SG: At times.
[laughter]
- TB: It can't be easy sometimes?
- SG: At times, no, sometimes it does really take over your life, yes, it has done over the years.

- TB: Has it? Just in terms of the hours?
- SG: Yes, and trying to work and family, juggle everything.
- TB: (01:23:00) I was going to say because you've both been working, haven't you through most of this?
- SG: Yes.
- TB: Well, all of this.
- SG: Well, Alan has retired now. I left my job last year, a little bit early because of his health and what have you.
- TB: So, that's quite something to struggle with, with work...?
- SG: It has been, it has been. That's probably why I'm so white as I am. My daughter, she would like to be more involved, but she doesn't have a lot of time. And my son, he lives up in Bedfordshire. And the best one is my six-year-old granddaughter, she comes down here quite a lot, she goes to the local primary school. But she's been down here with me before and I've gone, "Where's <name> disappeared to?" And she's giving somebody a guided tour and everything she's come out with is right. And you say, "What are you doing?" "Oh, leave her alone, she's okay."
- TB: Yes, that's lovely.
- SG: "She's giving me a tour, leave her alone." She loves it in here, absolutely loves it.
- TB: I bet, well, it's magical isn't it? Absolutely magical.
- SG: Yes. And one of our other members, they bring their grandson down every so often and the pair of them you just leave to it.
- TB: (01:24:16) Well, there's something quite powerful happening there, isn't there. It sounds to me between your generations?
- SG: And the younger generations, yes.
- TB: (01:24:260) So, it's giving you quite an interesting space to have your granddaughter?
- SG: Yes, whether she'll be the same when she's sixteen, that's a different story but we will see.
- TB: Yes, but you're sowing the seeds now, you know, it's powerful.
- SG: Yes, it is.
- TB: It's lovely. So, thank you so much, it's been absolutely brilliant. I think we've more than covered it.

Audio ends: 01:24:46