

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Mary Lee, Bob Baldwin, Myriam Norrie, Ewert Johnstone, Chris Sutton

Role: Founding member (ML); vice-chairman 1999+ (BB); Archivist (MN); current chairman (EJ); manager (CS)

Museum: Smethwick Heritage Centre

Location of interview: Smethwick Heritage Centre, display room

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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).

Start [00:00:00]

TB: Okay great well first of all thank you all so much for giving up your afternoon for me. That is terrific. Now, the first thing I would like to do is just go around and if you just please say your name and your date of birth if you don't mind. That would be fantastic.

ML: Mary Lee, XX-XXX 1945.

TB: Mary Lee, was that?

ML: Lee. Yes.

TB: That's great. Lovely thank you Mary.

BB: Bob Baldwin, XX-XXX 1944.

TB: Lovely, thank you.

MN: Myriam Norrie, XX-XXX 1943.

TB: Okay.

EJ: The youngster, Ewert Johnstone. XX-XXX 1946.

TB: Excellent okay. And I don't know if you were going to say anything, but if you just say, do you want to do a quick...

CS: Probably will, won't I.

TB: Yes, go on.

CS: Chris Sutton, XX-XXX 1961.

TB: Okay, that is fantastic.

BB: He's a child.

TB: That is great. And also can I just ask you – I should have done this before – can you just say your name again and the role that you have or have had in the organisation, that would also be really useful.

ML: Okay, I am Mary. I am a founding member in 1997, was it Bob?

BB: Yes.

ML: And I eventually became chairman in 2008. And I left four years ago.

TB: That's great, thank you Mary. And Bob?

BB: Bob Baldwin. I got involved in 1999. I was vice-chairman and was involved in the fundraising for the building of the centre. I also produced the magazine, started the family history workshops. I am still, and I have been involved, ever since I was a trustee, until I left. I packed up being a trustee in 2011, when my wife was poorly and then I have stayed as a contributing member and I have

continued to run the family history workshops. I have just recently been voted back onto the trustees.

TB: Right. Fantastic. That is great, thank you Bob.

MN: I am Myriam Norrie and I am classified as the archivist. I take care of all the new things coming into the museum, logging them on to the computer and finding the appropriate boxes to put them in. And changing the displays around.

[00:02:23]

TB: That is lovely. And how long have you been involved?

MN: I think this is my 8th year.

TB: Okay. That is lovely, brilliant. Thank you.

MN: I have lost count.

TB: Yes, okay. Great. And Chris?

CS: And I am Chris Sutton, the centre manager and I have been here I think 12, 13 years now. I am the only paid employee. I have had a variety of roles. I do the magazine now and funding bids, email enquiries, website, Facebook admin, general stuff.

TB: right okay. Keeping it all going. Okay brilliant, thank you.

EJ: I am Ewert Johnstone, joint chair. I have been involved for 7 or 8 years now. Recently been appointed as joint chair. And basically I am used by this lot nowadays, as the go to person if you want to know something about Smethwick. Because I was born and bred in Smethwick, lived in West Medic, lived in Morley and the only bit about Smethwick I am very hazy with, is that bit over the back of the park. Ballock street and Sixways and places like that.

TB: brilliant, okay, yes yes.

EJ: But I am basically the go-to person amongst the volunteers we have here now if you want to know anything about Smethwick.

[00:03:45]

TB: Alright that is lovely thank you. Great okay, there is a fair few of you so I will perhaps leave it to you to figure out who might be best to answer... and I thank you so much for that timeline [handout provided by BB, attached at end of this transcript], that is really lovely, but it would be nice to get onto this recording just really the story of how the museum came about. And I appreciate the fact that the main founder is no longer with us, but maybe if someone could just outline the early story and where the idea came from?

ML: It first started with David Bryant. He was a member of the history society and he always felt that there was a lot of artefacts, as all the industries were going, he felt that we ought to be saving some of them. So he started with his sister and his brother in law, a little committee, and then my father.

We met him at a history society exhibition, and he said, I want some people to paint some pictures of Smethwick and I said, okay my dad will do that. He was retired and so he did about 25 pictures of the local scenes, and we started to sell them. And that is how we started to get some money. Then David, we started a magazine in 1999, which still goes today and that actually has been the bedrock of the society really because, people have been members, and they have paid for that, and we still have some members to this day. How many years since 1999?

BB: 20 years on.

ML: And they went, these magazines, went all of the world. Australia, Canada, everywhere. Not so much now because of the internet, they can get things on the internet. And we started doing little booklets to sell and we started doing roadshows at the local churches and we gradually got enough money to ask for lottery money. Now I will hand you over to Bob now because he was the mainstay in getting the lottery money together. You can't just ask for lottery money, you have to present yourselves, and say, well we are making our own money. We can't expect you to give us everything. So I will have you over to Bob.

[00:05:50]

BB: I think the key was, that it became very apparent very quickly really that the ideal situation would be to find a suitable venue to be able to house all the different artefacts and photos that were being handed in. so we started to look at this and very quickly identified this building as a potential. It was run down. It hadn't been occupied for a great number of years and in fact the only thing that occupied it was the pigeons.

ML: In the ceiling.

BB: We had a quick word with the local council and said what we were thinking about. And we said that we were thinking about raising some money. And they indicated that they were open to this suggestion. We then had a word with the heritage lottery people, who were very useful, and they said, well the best thing you can do really is to do a feasibility study to see whether it is viable. Whether you were going to be able to generate the income to be able to, a rebuild the place because it needs to be rebuilt, but also to kit it out and to operate it. So we raised some money from local charities and charitable trusts and that sort of thing, sufficient to actually get a feasibility study underway. We were fortunate in as much that David, and you will see from the notes, was an architect and so was able to do some very detailed and good drawings right at an early stage. We were able to get these costed out through David's contacts in the building trade, and put together a cost. We talked to the council again, and determined that they would be able to, because effectively we were going to invest a lot of money to save an old building of theirs, that they were prepared to give us a 25 year lease initially for rent effectively for nothing. And that, we then put all this together as a proposal for the heritage lottery and subsequently, after lots of meetings and god knows what, they actually granted us the first trench of money, which was in total circa £250,000.

TB: Wow.

[00:08:30]

ML: Can I just mention something? Before then the council actually gave us a room in one of the old houses and we started to start our collections because people started bringing things in and we had little exhibitions. So we had already started really to get the ball rolling.

TB: Ah so that is really interesting, so you already cut your teeth a little bit in doing little travelling exhibitions, before getting a permanent place.

BB: We had lots of things. We had a small version of this in a local canal heritage centre museum which was an old pub on the side of the canal, just further along the high street.

TB: Really?

EJ: Along from the High Street, you go down.

ML: It is now the West Bromwich Albion.

EJ: It is the West Bromwich, it is something to do with the Albion now.

TB: So that was a pub?

EJ: I think Bob did make a little Freudian slip when he said housing the local architect, rather than the archives. Because David was, as far as I can gather he virtually did live here half the time.

BB: When we were starting.

ML: Oh no, no. He was only 10 minutes away.

BB: We were fortunate and once we got the money from the Heritage Lottery, then we set about giving people - we phoned up for the quotations - we set about giving people the contracts to do the work. Again because David had the knowhow and the building contracts, and we kicked the thing off. We were very closely monitored by the Heritage Lottery. They appointed, it was an engineer/accountant who we had monthly meetings with. And I am pleased to say we actually got the job done, to the budget and on time.

TB: Wow.

MN: Well done.

BB: So we got a good response from the Lottery who sort of said, well that is one of the first ones where we haven't been asked for any more money. Alright, we had had to go out and get a bit more from other people, but it worked quite well.

[00:10:32]

TB: That is fantastic. Can I just ask you a couple more things. First of all, do you know what this building was before?

ML: Park keepers lodge.

TB: Right.

BB: Yes, that is right.

TB: And it is a 19th Century building right?

BB: That is right.

MN: It wasn't then. It is now.

BB: It obviously wasn't then, but it is now.

ML: So that is good for us.

TB: And it was £250,000 basically to convert it?

BB: To convert this and basically to kit it out. Because we, I mean.

MN: I think there were 5 members of the Park Lodge family,. Husband , wife and three kids.

BB: Who lived here.

EJ: Looking back on the telephone archives, it was originally the home of a chap who was brought it to the Smethwick council way back in 1900s to house the chap.

ML: When the park was opened.

EJ: The park's superintendent.

TB: And that became available, because they didn't need it?

BB: They didn't need it. They didn't have them now. The days of park keepers have long disappeared really. As we say, the service was gradually going.

ML: But a few years later, we had the Barn, or where they kept all the equipment, which we made our exhibition.

BB: Well this was the garden, this was where the gardeners made the park and we talked the local council to let us have that. We then went back to the Lottery and we got another £100,000 which did a variety of things. It actually enabled us to invest in some of the additional equipment like computers and that sort of thing, But also, it gave us access to a museum curator, a qualified museum curator, which we were able to pay for, for 3 years. She then really helped us with the technical side of being able to set the museum up. Unfortunately, we the end of three years, we ran out of money and we just couldn't keep her going.

ML: That was when we had to start working very hard.

BB: Yes, Indeed.

[00:12:35]

ML: The roadshows that we did, we did 4 a year, and we started doing books. We have written a few books. We started with small pictures of schools, which we sold for a couple of quid, and then it went up £3. Now we have written proper book about Smethwick, there is about 4 of those now. They are still available. And we did some lottery money for the WW1 as well, we got some lottery money to write about what Smethwick did in WW1.

EJ: Some books on that. And the Smethwick memorials scattered throughout local industry ones, church ones, the main one, various ones. And we got photographs of most of them, if not all of them.

ML: Yes, I think most of them.

EJ: I am not going to say all of them, because as soon as I say all of them, somebody is going to say, oh you haven't got a photograph of that one.

ML: The thing we have got in this area, is this huge companies that made so much during the wars and so much during the Industrial revolution. It all started with Smethwick foundry, so the history here is phenomenal and that is what David really wanted to do.

EJ: He was punching above his weight really.

MN: It was just like David to see a skip outside from some company and think, oh yes, I am going to go through that first and he told the companies, don't throw anything away until I have looked at it.

ML: But people pawn things, and they have things in their lofts for years. And they say, oh well I took this when the firm went bust. Do you want it? But don't put my name on it, because obviously. You know.

MN: If it is anything directly associated with Smethwick, I will never say no. I mean, I might have three or four copies of the same item, but rather than it going in the skip, I will keep it and if it is something I can share at a roadshow, and I can tell people who are looking through books, that is fine. I have one original that I keep, and no one touches.

BB: We also wanted to get the museum accredited and that was quite a big task.

TB: Why was that? Why did you decide to go down that path?

[00:14:47]

ML: Well lottery money for starters.

BB: Yes, it was really part of David's dream really for us to become a proper recognised museum. We were fortunate in the early days that we had what we called a curatorial advisor who sat on the board with us, and the guy who was the director in charge of the Black Country museum was actually sat on our board with us and advised us how we should go about things and that was a really big help for us to be able to set things up properly and to be able to get it accredited. And he actually arranged for us to have a number of training courses, because we actually had to jump through a number of hoops to be able to produce in 5 year plans and all that sort of thing. The problem that we have subsequently found is that the amount of effort that you have to put in to keep that accreditation is just not worth it.

ML: It is not worth it. We just couldn't afford to do it.

BB: We couldn't afford to do it.

MN: You could spend your whole life just filling in everything.

BB: So we obtained it, and then we thought, oh this is too much like hard work. But we had it for a number of years.

ML: We are all volunteers here. It is only Chris here who we pay and actually we have increased Chris. He used to work for 1 day, then 2 days, and now he works 4 days, but you know, money is very tight.

BB: Because that is the main problem, like with most small businesses, presumably, which are run as a charitable organisation, is keeping a regular income coming in. And we don't get any local support apart from the rent free building from the local council. And from nobody else really. So all the money that we generate, has to be generated from either things that we make or sell, or from roadshows, and from running various things like, funnily enough, the family history thing.

EJ: Or we might go and do a talk somewhere.

BB: Talks and that sort of thing.

ML: Oh sorry, sorry.

TB: Don't worry, it is fine.

ML: Let me turn it off. I will just go.

TB: So, that's okay, don't worry. You can take it if you want.

ML: I will do.

BB: Sorry Mary.

ML: Hello.

[00:17:06]

TB: So, on the income and the expenditure, what are your main costs? I mean presumably you have got electricity bills.

EJ: Electricity.

TB: As a charity?

BB: Salary.

TB: Yes, that is a big one. Of course.

BB: And then it is like typical things, like administration. Like running a roadshow, producing the magazine. Although we have got a local company that sponsors us, now. We didn't originally, we used to have to find the cost of printing that, for a lot of years. But we have got a very supportive local community now.

EJ: A very good begging bowl now.

ML: One thing I will say...

Myriam: I mean, when no one is in the museum, I have a habit of saying, right we don't need all the lights on. Everything goes off. You know, you try and save money wherever you can.

TB: But you are not charging entry? Why is that?

MN: No, that is our position.

BB: I think the other thing was that when we went for museum accreditation, we couldn't charge entry, it was part of the accreditation requirements that you didn't charge entry.

EJ: I think, one of the biggest problems we have now is that we are not sure because we haven't tried it. If we started to charge entry, would the council start saying.

ML: And we wouldn't get anybody in.

BB: You have to bear in mind as well, part of the population that is actually really interested in this are people like us, the older generation, on lower incomes. And I mean, one of the problems that we have got is that our subscribers are gradually dying off. So that, when we were in the heyday in the 2000s, there was 1000+ members, we are now probably 700 and odd, are we Chris?

ML: Which is not bad going.

BB: Which is not bad going.

EJ: Well if you look around now, you are going [19]44, '43, '47, '46. We are...

BB: All getting old.

EJ: ...we are all a cross sample of the members.

CS: There is a point there about target audiences. What we are saying is that the original target audience are all the old Smethwickians, which is the obvious bedrock to build on. Then you have got local communities and wider than that. We had a situation where each year, we don't pay rent, the council don't charge us rent, for what we provide for Sandwell. But they actually wanted to charge us partial rent because we had more people coming from outside Sandwell, than from inside Sandwell. And they said that that meant that they couldn't give us a full rent rebate anymore.

ML: The reason for that is because we have got a lot of Asians, a lot of Indians, in the High Street, and we have invited them many times. We have...

EJ: They have come, they have spoken to us, and then they have gone away.

ML: Yes, but they have their own history and they really don't want to know about ours.

BB: We have tried to engage with them, and we do have one or two. I mean the problem is, I think we are approaching 50% of the population of Smethwick now is Asian. And so, we do get some. We have actually got a volunteer that is Asian, haven't we? But, it does impact on who is available. Now what we also do is we do get schools involved. So we have school children coming here and we teach them about the hidden industries of Smethwick in particular and that is trying to get an interest for them.

ML: We have also, Chris and I, been out to schools and taken artefacts with us and we have let the children handle them. We have done that. We have even been to old people's homes.

CS: We have phoned this, so this is number 41 on your list isn't it, so all the other 40 have said this, you develop your museum, that is the first bit. You have then got to have a plan going of how you are going to expand, how are you going to get your new audiences in from? That is the challenge going ahead. Funding is difficult because they will generally only fund you for a project, not for poor business, not just for being there and for being a museum.

EJ: A few years ago, Mary and Chris went out to Abbey Road School and they took an old artefact with them, and they actually went to the school i.e. me.

ML: Yes, but we actually took old photos of the school as it used to be, and the children were really interested. So that is a way forward, getting the school children interested. They will then bring their parents to our roadshows. That is going to take a few years to happen.

[00:21:42]

BB: We do always get very good attendance at roadshows really. I mean, down in church halls.

EJ: Oh yes. We do try to have them where we think we are going to get an audience. You know.

BB: Try and find one that has a bit of footfall.

ML: And we never ask for money before they come in. But we always put a tray there and we put a few pounds on there. And they always give us money. And we get the same people. But as we said before, the generation is getting older and they have moved from Smethwick, to the outer skirts of Birmingham, Solihull, Halesowen. So they do still come to our roadshows.

BB: But if you look at the volunteers, it is surprising how many of them were born in Smethwick, but actually live outside Smethwick. I am an example, Mary is an example. I was born, married, Christened, the whole shoot, went to school here but moved out when I got married. But the strange thing is, having lived away for more years than I have lived here, Smethwick is still my hometown. I still see it as my hometown.

ML: And me.

BB: It must just stay in your blood.

EJ: Actually, a lot of the people I went to school with at Abbey Road, they got married, they went to live somewhere else, but once they got to about late 30s, early 40s and they have got a little bit of money behind them, they came back to, shall we say, the more affluent areas of Smethwick, and bought houses. They went out and bought the cheaper townhouses in places like Halesowen, you know the bypass and places like that, and then they move back into Smethwick.

ML: You get the other people who move to Australia. Because they worked in GKN, and there is a factory in Australia GKN and they remember and they by the magazine, and they send articles to the magazine, which we still produce.

Myriam Norrie; You can get two or three strangers in here, and you can hear them talking, what street did you live on? What school did you go to? That is the most important.

ML: That is the question.

EJ: Well, the one that we have just had, we have just had two blokes in. One has got a place in Mexico, but he has got a house in Worchester, which unfortunately is only the houses, and is not in the magazines. And the other one, I think he is in Leeds or something like that, or Kettering. And they just so happen to have a claim to fame as having the father, ex hire lodge boy, have the father of one of England's rugby internationals, Dan Kerr.

BB: The other thing that got them involved was that the guy was interested in doing his family history. So I actually did that for him over the internet, which he paid a commission for, which all goes into the funds. He has now bought his brother and his sister, and they have now given me another commission to actually do there's.

EJ: And two of them became members while they were here.

[00:24:53]

TB: That is brilliant. So genealogy research is also a research stream then?

BB: Yes.

TB: That is brilliant.

MN: We charge £3, £4 for people to just come in and go on the computers, and Bob sit behind them and he saying, try this way.

BB: We give them a tutorial and get them an account and we give them a one-to-one really. It is quite cheap. But the people who are coming are relatively low incomes, most of them, we also offer a facility where, if they can't attend because they are still working, give us your basic information. For a minimum donation, of £10, we will do the basics. If you want a bit more, we will charge you a bit more. But that generates not only interest from their point of view, but also interest in the museum and the fact that they may well take out membership, which is what we are trying to do all the time really.

TB: And it is interesting to me that you don't have members, you have subscribers. So that indicates to me that the magazine is an important core.

ML: Yes, We couldn't survive without it.

BB: It is very important.

EJ: Without the magazine, we would be lost because...

TB: What was the magazine called, sorry?

ML: Smethwick Telephone.

BB: That was the local paper, the telephone was the local paper, and so we named it after that.

ML: And it was very unusual the Smethwick telephone, and the reason being.

EJ: There is a headline copy of it in that cabinet out there.

TB: Oh right, I will have a look out there in a second. Thank you.

ML: It was produced at the same time as Alexander Graham Bell who produced the telephone. So we are unique, there is no other paper in the UK which was called the Telephone.

TB: Oh right, I see. And why was it called Telephone? I mean...

ML: Because of the telephone, Alexander Graham Bell.

TB: What it was based here?

ML: No, no he invented it didn't he.

Ewert Johnstone; He invented it at the same time.

BB: At that time, that is what they called it, a telephone and so they just kept the name.

MN: Communication.

CS: It also mentioned social isolation as well.

TB: Sorry?

CS: Social isolation is a bit thing as well because we have volunteers here, who some of them may be living on their own, it gets them out to come here. They can come to genealogy, probably for partly that reason as well, to get some air. People come to our roadshows. Again, it is about getting them out. We started going to homes and places now. It makes a difference.

MN: We do Facebook days, where people who are on the Facebook group and they can come in and meet other Facebook people and talk.

TB: Oh that is a good idea.

MN: While we are here, we try and get them to become an actual member.

ML: The difficulty with that is there are lots of people in different parts of the country and can't come here, on Facebook, but when we do get them here for a roadshow. We stop them and talk. Do you remember that Chris, do you remember that? And they come in here and look at an artefact, and they say, oh I have got one of those, and they say, I will bring it in. And at the beginning, we had so many artefacts, we couldn't keep up with it. We had a committee deciding which of them we were going to keep, but now obviously, over the years, it is now 20 years, it is not as much now. I mean what do we get now? 1 or 2 a week?

MN: I take them all. I never say no.

[00:27:54]

EJ: I used to get cussed by Shelia Bryant, who would say to me, because David lived six doors up the road from me, and I used to hand him stuff, and Shelia used to say to me, do you realise that I have got to catalogue all this lot.

ML: We were actually opened in 2004, and Carl Chin, who was the local Birmingham historian came to open it. And it was a fairly big occasion. We had a marquee outside, we got the mayor, and 25 years later, no it was our 10th anniversary, we invited all the other people who had been at our opening all to come back, and that was nice and we had a marquee. It was worth doing. I mean once the word gets round. I mean Myriam, looks after, somebody rang me up and said to me, do you want a few artefacts of that glass, because I was the last person to. And I said yes, fine. And they said, well come on over, I've got one or two baskets for you. So I went round with some people and it was 32 boxes and 400,000 pieces of glass. So, our archives are tremendous. And obviously we can't show it all.

MN: No, we would need a room four times as big as this. I can take you upstairs to my storage room and show you all the boxes.

ML: And there are some very important documents up there.

EJ: I think the other important thing, from a structural point of view, was that originally, when the trust was set up, it was just a charitable company. And I became concerned when I became involved that it meant that the trustees were personally liable in the event of a problem occurring. So we restructured it as a company limited by guarantee, and that then gives a measure of safety for the trustees.

ML: So if anything ever went wrong.

TB: But doesn't that mean you have to pay rates though?

MN: No.

EJ: No.

TB: Oh okay then. Alright, so you are still a charitable?

EJ: We are still a charitable? It is just a charitable company limited by guarantee. The guarantee. How we set it up was that we changed the members who bought the magazine, to subscribers, but the members that were working group volunteers, as we called them, they had the vote of who became trustees. And they agreed that in the event of the place going belly up, they would put a pound into the kitty.

MN: So for the trustees it was only a pound.

EJ: So that is how we set it up. With the help of the local volunteer organisation, solicitor, we managed to set it up. The other thing that we did as well, which really is a big thank you to David, is we managed to get David an MBE.

MN: He did all that.

EJ: So, well it was only me, but.

[00:31:00]

TB: It is a bit of work, isn't it.

EJ: It is a bit of work, but we had a lot of help from our local MP, who is still our local MP, John Spiller.

MN: He still supports us.

EJ: He still supports us, and he comes for all the roadshows and all that. And we have had other people that we were able to call on, like the vicars from local churches, all the stuff, and David was awarded an MBE.

TB: Why was that so important for you?

MN: Because we wanted to acknowledge.

ML: For recognition as well.

EJ: Because we wanted to recognise the shared effort that he had put into it.

ML: His dream.

EJ: Yes. And I mean, even, he was poorly for quite a few of the last few years of his life. He had kidney problems. But, I mean, he dedicated his life to it.

MN: He still wanted to know what was going on.

EJ: he absolutely was in here, dedicated his life to it. He was so dedicated.

TB: So tell me a little bit more again about his motivation. Because you mentioned this briefly about being the industries that were closing down. So, this was, I guess, we are talking about the 1990s really.

EJ: Well it was earlier than that.

MN: 80s.

ML: 70s.

TB: So paint me a picture of this area, what was going on?

BB: Well you had some very major companies. Well they famously say that Birmingham was the city of 1,000 trains. And I think... yes you are about right. Smethwick was a city of 1,001. Because everything that in Birmingham, we had.

ML: Well the reason for that was because we had the canals. Then the Birmingham firms came along the canals because it was a good...

EJ: Supply route?

ML: ...yes, so they moved. And then that became Smethwick. I mean, I had written a book about the industries and you will find that, oh 40% came from Birmingham.

TB: Right, I see, but what happens, tell me about the 80s and the 90s though, because a lot of these shut down then.

EJ: Yes, well funnily enough, my career was doing just that, I moved from running a company to actually managing the acquisition and reorganisation of groups of companies. And the problem was, a lot of them in this area were metal bashers, as I like to call them, so rolling mills, casting shops, forges.

MN: And they still are.

EJ: They still are to a certain extent.

ML: Avery's is still here. That is the only one left, Avery's.

EJ: And a lot of them were world renowned, like Avery's, did somebody say Avery's.

ML: Carriage Works?

EJ: Yes, Carriage Works, Tangle's, Jack's, Birmead metals, all of this. Now, all these companies were employing like the group I worked for Evered, 4,000 people on site. You know, it was massive. And they sort of dwindled down in the late 70s, early 80s, and they were down to, 100s and that was it.

ML: So a lot of people lost their jobs.

BB: At the risk of Mary getting in, because you had Chance Brothers who was famous for the lighthouses, all around the world.

ML: In the middle of England, because I have written about it. So, you know.

BB: It is Smethwick. 100 miles to the nearest sea.

EJ: GKN.

ML: Yes, GKN is still going and the story about GKN is that they were a huge firm, and their main office was in Smethwick, and they wanted the wreck, where they had their community centre, as their big main office. I saw the plans for it, helicopter pad, the whole lot. But the council would not give it to them because they wanted it for a cemetery. So they moved to Redwick.

TB: Oh I see, crikey. Oh wow.

MN: So that was GKN.

ML: They used to make all the screws.

TB: Oh I see.

BB: We always used to say to all the kids, that come in, the school kids, perhaps not so much nowadays, but years ago, and your parents will know growing up. There were two things made in your house that were almost certainly made in Smethwick, those are the screws that are holding

your doors up, and the glass you look out of in your windows. They are all, almost certainly made in Smethwick.

ML: And the crystal palaces were made by Chances, the glass.

TB: Oh I see, yes.

BB: We let Londoners have it, and they burnt it down.

ML: It just upsets me when you have all these historical programmes.

MN: The glass from Big Ben came from Chances too. I think it was...

ML: Yes. And they repaired it the night after the War. But the thing is, what was I going to say? I have lost my track now. People don't realise. All these historical programmes on the TV, they all go up north, they never come to Birmingham and Smethwick. A huge amount of heavy industry.

MN: Oh, resting Parterton.

[00:35:42]

TB: Well let me just ask then, so there was a big period of unemployment, and it sounds to me like people also started to move away, I guess. For work right?

ML: Yes, no jobs.

BB: The problem was a lot of the industries were sold overseas and a lot of the heavy industry stuff, was sold to Pakistan, India, Korea, China, all over there. And the jobs just disappeared.

EJ: They were almost gone within a week.

ML: One of the reasons why, after the War, was there was no money about, so these firms, used a lot of people during the War, and they didn't have the money to make better.

EJ: Well, Germany lost the War, but Germany won the War from the point of view of industry, because they had a lot to reinvest and rebuild, but we didn't.

ML: We hadn't got the money to do it.

EJ: When I was running Evered's metal side, the rolling mills, we were still using equipment built in the 1860s. yes, okay it had been changed from steam driven to electrical driven, but it was still the same machine basically.

TB: Okay, so let me ask this then, so you have got a community which is in some respects falling apart. You could say, so why does the museum come then at that moment?

EJ: To capture the past.

TB: Okay. to capture the past. Alright.

ML: And that was David's dream. To not let all this go and not let anyone know about it.

TB: But why, why was it so important to capture this? Why was it so important for you all to do this?

MN: Because anything made in Smethwick, went all over the world. I lived in America for 38 years, and one day I was walking down my local street and I just happened to look at the grates, what did it say? Made in Smethwick, made in Hainsworth.

ML: And I actually went on holiday in the Caribbean and picked up a Chancer's glass, made in Smethwick.

EJ: Basically, three of the four of us sitting here, are Smethwick born and bred.

MN: I am the foreigner.

TB: Are you from Ireland, or where are you from?

MN: No, I was born in West Bromwich, but I went to America and I lived there for 38 years in America.

EJ: It was just up the road.

BB: We let her in with a passport, you see.

EJ: But the rest of us where born and bred in Smethwick.

ML: I have got to say, I shouldn't say this, but we are a bit parochial, aren't we?

EJ: Oh we are.

MN: Very parochial, and as a foreigner, I know that you are very parochial.

EJ: We were born and bred in Smethwick, and to be honest, we are proud of the fact that we were born in Smethwick.

BB: it is a strange thing really, because like that the roadshows, we feel this when people come in. They may have moved out of it, but I have never come across anybody who doesn't, sort of, relate to the fact that we are born in Smethwick, and we wanted to sort of encapsulate that.

MN: All these people weren't born in Smethwick and they forget that back in the 30s, 40s, in Smethwick, blue skies were a thing of unknown. Because of the dust and the pollution.

TB: Well that is great. Well that is yes, one of the...

ML: The other thing is, these firm were very good to the schools. They gave money, they gave money to the community, they wanted people to work for them, so they looked after the community. And the amount of money they gave to schools, education, roads, churches, parks. We have got 5 parks in Smethwick, 5!

TB: Wow, okay. Yes, I see what you mean.

EJ: They also donated. The chances are there with be something from them, if not most of them.

TB: So clearly, I was going to ask, the sense of identity is very strong here.

ML: It is very important.

TB: But why is it so strong? And I think you partly answered it, and that is I guess that the industrial culture I guess that evolved, there was a very strong feeling of community perhaps. Is that right?

MN: Don't tell a Smethwick person they are in Birmingham. They would probably kill you.

EJ: It is like in the companies, as well though. There was almost a paternal type environment. When you work for a company in the 60s, and before, then you worked for life. You started and there were many generations. You would have grandfathers, fathers, sons, all working in the same company.

ML: They would get you a job.

EJ: And it translated into the community outside as well.

BB: Actually Smethwick as well...

MN: And it was because you were keen to get the certificates of long service, you wouldn't get that nowadays.

EJ: There is a situation you get, when I started at Evered's, yes okay, I don't like this, pack up, walk out at lunch time, go down the round to Everett's and get a job down there. But that was the way it was back then.

BB: People moved within a small circle really. But there was this translated into the community really, there was this paternalism really.

[00:40:34]

TB: And that was interesting about the generationalism thing that people, perhaps their sons would go into the same business, whereas now, they go to university or they go out. It is much more mobile.

BB: It is much more mobile now.

MN: I have a deed downstairs, which is a document of apprenticeship where the man who was in the poor house, he apprentices himself for one of the companies. I can't remember which one off hand, but then he took his son, who was 7, with him to be an apprentice too. And they worked for five years to become an apprentice.

EJ: That is going way back though.

ML: We started at 17 though, within the canals. That was how it all started.

TB: Yes, so it was all early history wasn't it, okay.

ML: Communication. And then of course, we had the motorway which followed the same route as the canals.

TB: Okay, so let me ask you again, because I have got the idea that. Well the founder presumably felt strongly that this should be saved and I guess, in terms of objects, there was a lot of stuff that was literally going to the skip which he must have felt needed to be saved.

ML: He belonged to the history society, you see. So there were people there.

TB: Oh, so that is where it stemmed from?

ML: That is how it started. The history society.

EJ: Which is still going.

ML: It is still going. But then we began going as well. And he felt that they were talking and having lectures about Smethwick, but what was happening with all the artefacts. So that is what gave him the idea to start collecting. And it was only a short time. But the things that came to us, were unbelievable.

TB: Right, okay, but I really want to...

ML: Scales, the size of the scales, Jaffer Aid, you wouldn't know anything about that. You name it, it was made in Smethwick.

TB: But let me ask you personally, why are you... okay, you got involved which is great, but you are still involved, so what is it? What is your motivation for kind of doing all this work?

ML: Well basically I was a historian, and I love. I did history in college and I did the industries. When my dad started as a painter in the Chancer's I was still working. But then I retired and that is how I got much more involved. But I think, basically, because I helped to write the books, not now obviously, because I am retired, but I am a historian really.

TB: Right, so you have enjoyed the research kind of aspect?

ML: Yes, absolutely.

EJ: Well I was press-ganged into.

ML: I used to go to school with his wife.

EJ: I had just, coming up to, I retired when I was 60 fortunately and I had, although I didn't live here, my parents lived in Smethwick, and I was coming over here and saw a roadshow, it was one of the first roadshows, and went in there with my wife. And I started talking, and David came up to me and said, I know you, I am sure I do. You go to the tech, oh yes. And he said, what are you doing now? And the next thing I know, I go to visit my parents who lived in a retirement block and his wife's sister lived in one. And he comes over and he says to my wife, do you fancy getting rid of him for a bit. And she said, yes find him something do, I am fed up on him. The next minute, I am attending the next meeting I am attending, the next meeting I am the vice-chairman, the next meeting I am doing the magazine. The next meeting I am raising funds, and it sort of goes like that. But underneath it all, I had always felt, although I had moved away, I had always felt that I belonged to Smethwick. If anyone had ever asked where do you come from, I would say Smethwick. I always felt very connected to Smethwick.

ML: David was always a very good motivator you see. He cajoled me, oh you can do some pictures, okay fine. Cajoled people in, so at the beginning.

TB: Oh I see, he had that kind of.

EJ: Well once you have been involved in the birth of something like this, you can't let it go. The last thing you want to see is that it runs into trouble.

[00:44:40]

TB: Why? Because you have invested so much into it?

ML: Time and effort.

EJ: Yes, because you have invested a chunk of your life. Now, I get a lot of fun out of it. Like particularly with the genealogy stuff that I do, it was my other hobby if you like, family history. You come to also enjoy yourself, it is company. There is nice people and we have a nice time and that is part of it as well.

TB: I see what you mean.

MN: A cup of tea and a biscuit goes a long way.

TB: It is a social thing as well isn't it.

BB: David of course was a Smethwick lad, lived in Cheshire road, just round the corner from here. But when he got married, and he bought the house in Bitkern Road, David and I. I could never say I was a bosom buddy of David's, but he was an Albion support, he supported Smethwick Cready club, he was a Warwickshire supporter, and I do all three of those.

ML: That is another thing.

EJ: And we also, used to. As I say, we were never bosom buddies, but if we passed each other, and I was going up the road or he was coming past, we always stopped and had a talk. Because we have got those three things, and Smethwick, if nothing else, to talk about.

TB: I see, alright. That's interesting.

BB: He was also well connected. I mean because of his work as an architect and he was involved in Cricket as well, he was chairman of the Cricket club for a while, Smethwick Cricket club and on the Warwickshire board. But, a lot of the work that he did from an architectural point of view was on buildings and developments in Smethwick. Whether it was domestic, some of it was churches, like the major church on the High Street down there, he did quite a lot of work down there. And in fact, there is a plaque in there with his name on thanking him for the work he did on the development. So, he knew lots of people and that helped us in terms of just getting the thing off the ground really and getting some sort of help from the council in the early days.

TB: I was also going to...

ML: We've also got his name on a plaque here, because we named the exhibition after him.

TB: Oh yes, I saw.

ML: As our 10th anniversary.

TB: Oh that is lovely.

ML: Just to remember. That is why we don't want this to fail. But we are finding it more and more difficult, aren't we Chris, to get the money in and the volunteers. It is...

[00:47:09]

TB: Well I will come to the future in a second, but I just wanted to ask you, what about you? Why are you involved and what do you get?

MN: Well, when I came back from America, I was sort of lost. I was retired., but my mind wasn't retired. So I was living in Albury, and I went to their volunteers section where the council look for volunteers and I said what is going on and they gave me information about this place. And I thought about it for a week, and I decided, oh I will take a ride, and I came down and I looked around. And I thought, and the next thing I know, I am volunteering for one day a week. And now it is three days, sometimes four. And I started just assisting with records of items coming in. When I first started, there was three boxes, waiting, pending to be looked at and archived. And I thought okay, I haven't got anything else to do, I will volunteer one day a week. And one day became two and so on and so on.

ML: And that has happened to us all. It ended up five days a week.

EJ: Well that has happened to me because one of our major supporters, Smethwick building supply, I am a very good friend of the chap that owns that and he says to me, I was at a loose end, and he says to me, why don't you go down the centre and volunteer for a day. He said. You know a lot about Smethwick, so I did. And here I am now, four days a week.

TB: Yes.

ML: It is a problem though at our age because there are jobs that have to be done, to keep it clean, to paint it. We can't do it.

TB: What I was going to ask was about the active volunteers, this is the working party that I think you mentioned. How many of you are there in the working party?

EJ: Taking this group, there are about 30. Or thereabouts.

BB: 30, 35.

MN: We have about 9 that work here. They are our core.

BB: It is the savers, all circumstances, situations, there are lots of people who talk the talk. There is not many people who walk the walk.

TB: So maybe 9 or 10 of them are very active and who come regularly?

MN: Nine or 10 are here all the time.

TB: Alright great.

ML: And we are all getting older.

TB: And you all say, you are of a similar age.

MN: I mean, when I first started, I could lift the boxes that I needed to work on.

[00:49:17]

TB: Another question is just about background and professions, is it pretty mixed?

EJ: It is all mixed.

ML: Mixed.

TB: Okay, something that you said that was fascinating was that you had something in common and it was the football and the cricket. But it was...

EJ: With me and David it was football and cricket.

TB: ...But it was the place as well. So that connects you all.

EJ: The one question we asked when people come in, one of the main questions, is what school did you go to? Where do you live? Where did you work?

TB: So these are the three identity questions I suppose? So we can place you I suppose.

EJ: Mary comes from the same part of the world as I do i.e. what is the Abbey Ward area. But her problem is, she went to Bearwood Road you see. Now I went to Abbey Road, which was competitors.

ML: All of them were rivals. All the factories had playing fields, so all the children went to the playing fields, so did the adults. There was always something going on. Football matches at the weekend, big jamborees in this park, huge things, it was a very.

EJ: Oh yes, that was one of the highlights of down here. We would still choose it, looking back eh.

TB: But also quite divided it seems. So what school you went to is probably quite important. So there were lots of different communities.

ML: Oh yes.

EJ: Yes.

TB: Right, okay.

ML: Talk to the people from Holly Lodge, Oh no.

EJ: We used to have a chap who would come here. I think he was one of the original volunteers.

ML: Who? Who was it?

EJ: Harry Burton.

ML: Harry Burton, no he wasn't.

EJ: Harry Burton used to come in and rearrange. And I used to do the door on the Abbey on Thursday. Now Harry went to the Tech, and I went to Holly Lodge. And when people went to town, we asked the question, and Harry and I got on exceedingly well, but if anyone ever came in that were from either Holly Lodge or Tech, Harry and I were at each other like a cat and a dog. Because of that.

BB: I mean, it is friendly rivalry.

ML: Friendly banter and friendly rivalry.

BB: I suppose it is the.

EJ: If I was sat on the door and we bumped, Bob and I sat on that door, and somebody came in and went to the Holly Lodge, Bob would have a go at him. I would defend him.

ML: But that school was gone a long time ago, we need new volunteers and where are we going to get them from.

MN: We are desperate for volunteers.

EJ: I mean we did try.

ML: I know we have tried.

BB: I mean we have tried engaging with the Asian community.

ML: Many times.

BB: We had the chap who was MP for West Brom, Lord King. And what he wasn't going to do to help us have an entrance into that community, was nobody's business. In the end it came to nothing, despite all that we tried.

ML: Who was the man that gave up £2,000 from Holly Lodge? He said, I will give you this money...

EJ: Chris Webb.

ML: ...as long as you get the Asian community. And we said fine and we had a meeting here with all his entrepreneurs and they said, yes we are going to do this, and we are going to do this. Never came to anything.

EJ: I think he gave us some money.

ML: He gave us £2,000. That was for education.

EJ: They came, they met us. I think they came back once more, and then they just disappeared.

ML: And I tried very hard to engage with them, I emailed them. They didn't want to know.

BB: The hope is that the school kids that are coming through, at least 50% of them are Asian, that that will actually be the catalyst.

MN: I hope we do see an Asian gentleman in here, because my heritage. My first husband was also from India. So I always say, we need your heritage because it is part of Smethwick. You came from the Punjab, you came from Africa, to a cold country. Not knowing the language, not being able to get a job, how did you go about doing those things. I want to know those things. Urgh.

[00:53:08]

TB: Well I was going to say, one of the fascinating things about the strength of feeling that you have about a place, which is amazing, but it is also trying to open up the story.

ML: To keep it going.

TB: To all respects of the place. And I know that you have got an exhibition, is that right? That does actually engage with some of that history.

ML: Yes, we did one two weeks ago.

TB: How did that go?

CS: Every year, I get. It went extremely well, it was very popular. And those are the ways forward, going through those tangents. But I have to say, if you had said to me, what are the top 10 things you get asked about every year in what you do. There are certain things that are important, but number 1 would probably be Malcom X's visit to Smethwick. Which I get asked about every year, by BBC, Channel Four, ITV, all the papers will ring up. Because they want to know all about it. And we don't comment on it because whatever we say will be taken out of context, so nobody would listen.

ML: And he was here for hours. Hours.

TB: Really?

CS: Do you know about the Malcolm X visit?

TB: No, I don't.

CS: Well that is the irony. They all go on about that little angle of disruption...

EJ: Just that one angle.

CS: Which isn't healthy, I don't think. Rather than the positives of the black community and the contributions made by communities then.

EJ: Basically, I am, by nature, Conservative. But this council is Labour. But we have had Labour councillors and MPs in here. And I have talked to them. The first one we had was on the 10th anniversary, the big one we had here, and all the people that were there, and Mary was one of them, they were all concerned as to...

ML: That was the book that I wrote. And the pictures are absolutely beautiful.

EJ: ...how I would get on with the councillors. How would I get on with the councillors. And I said, well I will be alright. And then after the show and they found out that I got on with the councillors, then John Storrow said, oh you know all these councillors. And I said, well I stood against most of them.

ML: Look I am going to have to go.

TB: Sure, yes of course. That is brilliant.

ML: Do you want me to. Are you going to wind it up? You want to go as well, don't you?

EJ: I have got to go too soon.

[[00:55:15]

TB: Have you got to go too? No problem. Well I just wanted to, before you all go, just a couple of things. One is the roadshows. That sounds to me like they are terribly important. It would be great if you could just give me an idea of what they are like. I understand that they are in a hall and that they are usually in a place that people walk past, and they are free to go in. But I haven't got a sense of what happens.

MN: Well we had a theme, we had a theme. So, one week we would do the Birmead. So we would invite all the people from Birmead. Mind this is a few years ago, and bring their artefacts, and bring their memories. And we used to have stands. We also had pictures from the Smethwick telephone. We did tea and coffee. We did everything we could.

EJ: It was to sell the products that we make as well. So that is an important source of income.

ML: But every time, or I would say most, we always used to have about 400, 450. And they would all give a £1. So that was, the hall used to cost us about £100, so we did make some money. And we used to have 4 a year. We did used to go up to 6 a year, but because we didn't have the volunteers to do it.

EJ: We couldn't manage it.

ML: It is hard work taking all the equipment. We used to have a table of new artefacts for people to see, and then that encouraged people to give more, and then we used to have a table where they have us some. So we tried to do it. We always did exhibitions.

EJ: We also use it as a recruitment drive as well, so that we try and do that.

MN: We have also tried to do things that are in Smethwick, so the bakery. We asked them to come over. What do they call them? Sunfields?

EJ: Sunlight.

MN: And they came and started selling cakes, so we did try. And we also had Avery's, when they were all about the Titanic, because one of their managing directors died on the Titanic. So we made a big exhibition of the Titanic. So we can't just do things that are past history, because we are doing

them over and over again. So we have to find different angles. We did one about prefabs, you know the houses after the War. So, we have to diversify a little bit.

EJ: That one was rather strange, because that one was going to be a small article in a magazine, and we found that there were thousands of these things all around. The important thing, what do you call them, carry on.

Myriam Norrie; No, you carry on, what have I got to do?

TB: So, let me get this right.

EJ: What I was going to say was that one of the thing that gets people to come to roadshows, are exhibitions and photographs. People love photographs.

TB: I noticed those in the genealogy room.

EJ: Yes, so we have quite a lot of photographs on display for people to walk around and look at. As well as items that they can look at like school books and various items like this.

MN: Yes, we might have photographs of unknown people. So it is, do you know who they are? Can you name?

TB: Oh that is nice.

CS: It is about the scale. As you can see, we are limited by space. We are trying to do more and more here, more events, but these roadshows. If you have got a Church hall or a big centre, we can get loads more people in, loads more displays. It is a big impact day. The first one I went to, so I have done half a dozen projects around Birmingham. And I had only been here about a month, and they said, you have got to come to this roadshow, it is on a Saturday at St Marks Church. I thought, oh gosh this is going to be quiet.

ML: Boring, you thought.

CS: And there were people who had stopped the night, who had come from Cornwall and places, and they were coming and all they want to do is talk, where did you go to school Look at the pictures. I was absolutely overwhelmed. I worked for years in Birmingham, and no one had ever asked me those questions or any of those people. A bit later, it was a bit haphazard, but that was absolutely passion. And I had never seen, for a local community, and I still never have, ever. I was touched by this.

EJ: But also, with these roadshows as well, there are talks as well. Like for example, when you have had ex-Albion footballers come in and give a little bit of a talk and that is how you can attract the fans from those days.

[00:59:08]

TB: Oh, I see. So that really brings people in, doesn't it?

EJ: And like one of the.

MN: We had a Ukulele band.

EJ: yes, we had a Ukulele band. We had like one of those racing drivers, Ken Warton, had a garage in Smethwick. We had some cars showing. And then.

MN: We had the first ever big fire engine come back.

BB: it was a 1937 one.

MN: 1937 one.

BB: 1937 fire engine was bought by some local, went to work in Leicestershire or something. And he restored it and then bought it in here and we said, well how are we going to? He bought it down on a low driver on a Saturday, on the Friday. And we said, well what are we going to do with it? So, we didn't know what to do with it, so we phoned up the local fire station and we said, we have got the 1937 M&B fire engine coming down, can we store it in your fire station? And they said, yes.

ML: Then we did an exhibition and they had fire. You see? It snowballs.

BB: What it did, while it was there, the crew that were on duty that night, didn't have a call all night. So they spent all night polishing the brasses all night. Polishing. It came out of there spick and span. And I don't know if you can still get it, but it was on both BBC and ITV news, a film of it, with the fire engine actually coming along Smethwick High Street. Bells were ringing and everything.

EJ: Occasionally, at one stage, we managed to get Carl Chin, who has got a radio programme on WN. When it was my old company, when it was 200 years old, he invited us onto radio, in 2009.

BB: I was going to say, was it double or you?

EJ: It was me probably. But he had us on, was asking questions about it, as an idea to get people to come in an in fact we managed to talk the company then, because it was sold on after, when I wasn't involved, to the Germans and they produced a medal, of the event. And we invited all old employees, that we managed to get the records of, to come along and we gave them a medal to say, for the 200th anniversary. Thanks for working there. So it is coming up with ideas that actually get people's involvement.

ML: We have to diversify now because the people that worked at the Birmead, Everett's and all these big firms, they have all died. They have got their children, who say, oh my dad worked there, but they live miles away. So we have to diversify. We can't keep repeating history, that is it.

EJ: Because one big employer that we have, that we lost as well, and we were midlands famous for, was the Midland Red.

BB: The buses.

ML: The buses. Make their own.

EJ: Head office was just up the road.

[01:02:28]

TB: Oh right. Okay yes.

EJ: Every built red bus, whether it was either Leicester garage, Nottingham garage, Rampton garage. Every garage had a name and registration saying Smethwick registration.

ML: And the Mayor still has HA, but that is all gone now. Can I ask a question?

TB: Yes, of course, sure. Do you want me to pause it?

ML: Yes.

EJ: The ones that I could ask photos for as well.

ML: Yes, so that is an important book about the industries.

TB: And what was it called again?

ML: It was called the Industries of Smethwick. And the other book is, that is it, Know Your Smethwick. And that was really for, that is all about schools, buildings, the council house.

EJ: Fortunately at the time, my son worked for the Birmingham Postal mail, so I got him to help me put it together as a book. He designed the logos on the covers and that for me.

ML: But those books, they are all registered, so they all go to the, is it the Bodlian? And they all, and our magazines do as well. So someone has got the history of Smethwick there.

EJ: One copy of every book we produce goes to Bodlian.

ML: And the magazine, when we first started doing the magazine, Bob will know this because he did an awful lot, it was gradual. You know, we started having, we had to write things for the magazine, but now we get everybody. Now, they are writing their memories for the magazine now, so it is actually getting more and more popular, because there is more and more stuff in it.

EJ: There is another, was Lily one of the original volunteers too?

ML: Who?

EJ: Lilian Dukes.

ML: Say that again.

EJ: Lilian Dukes.

ML: Yes, she wasn't one of the originals. I have got a picture of everyone.

EJ: Because she was an early volunteer. Well she wrote a book on Our Lost Village, near Auberry Road, and that was where I was brought up, just in West Smethwick. And I read that book and I thought, yes okay. then I sat down one day, and I read it a second time, and I thought, oh I know all these places. And then I thought, unfortunately, I had never known Lilian, she had passed away by the time I had become a member here, or I became a volunteer here. So I never knew her. So I actually added my. So she was 10 years my senior. I was a young lad of 9 or 10 and she would be 19 or 20. So I would never have, we possibly even walked into or bumped into each other, walked past

each other on Auberry Road. But because she was a woman of 19, and I was a young boy of 10 or 9, we wouldn't have passed a comment to each other. But let him just ask his questions.

[01:05:25]

TB: Well I just want to ask, it is a fascinating point, and I suppose this idea of being on the shoulders of giants. And when people do publish things, it really does open your eyes and you want to add to it, which I think is very important. But I just want to talk about, and again, this is terribly important, but if you can just tell me a little bit about the magazine and what kind of stuff you have put in it and has it changed over the years.

BB: it has changed, and it has become more professional. And part of that, is the fact that computers and computer programmes have improved tremendously and also the ability to be able to photoshop photographs to improve the quality and that.

TB: But in terms of content, have you?

BB: Content, has changed to a certain extent I suppose. But in the main, it is local. It is people with local stories. And if we haven't got anything like you, who would do some research and would take articles from the Smethwick telephone and reproduce them. That sort of thing.

EJ: Now, we tried to reproduce them as they appeared in the telephone, i.e. take a copy of it, and then print it. Or if we cannot get a satisfactory copy, we will then retype it.

BB: And that gives us the chance to add a few notes as well.

TB: Add a few bits too. I see. Right, but it goes back so far that you can kind of recycle some of the articles?

BB: Oh yes. I mean, I did it for 11 years. And I mean there were some months when you were a bit short on stuff so you would just sort of develop something of your own, by looking at Smethwick history, or doing some research on a particular firm and writing about that. And googling photos so that you could take them off the internet to put in the thing and that, but it has all worked.

TB: Well clearly it is popular still, 700 subscribers still. That is really amazing. Well we have talked about money, we have talked about the building, we have talked a bit about objects. And just to summarise, some of these literally came out of skips or were given by people working in firms. Most of it seems to have been donated, is that fair to say?

MN: 99% of it is all donated.

TB: So people are coming in with things. And it was interesting to hear that you do take repeats, and that you have a handling collection. Don't you, quite a bit one.

MN: yes, that is where the repeats go.

TB: Just tell me about the handling collection, what is that used for?

ML: It is used for exhibitions and it goes on roadshows.

EJ: If we have an exhibition or a roadshow, based on the theme, we get out what we can, that is related to the theme we have chosen.

BB: And also, there are some items you use for schools, aren't there?

EJ: Yes. And also, if we know somebody is coming, say you came in and you wanted to talk about, what have you got on the carriage works? You let us know when you are coming, and we will try and find out about the carriage works for you and we will get it out. But the trouble is, because it is so complicated, we can't do it at the drop of a hat.

ML: Can I just say goodbye. Thank you very much.

TB: Yes, it has been such a pleasure.

EJ: See you Mary.

MN: There is always an open invitation if people are looking for a particular industry, and they make an appointment, I like to make sure that I am there and I will get the boxes out and say, there you go, have a look through it. But I am always watching to make sure that nothing gets broken or lost or not put back in the right box. Because that is a bane of a problem.

EJ: You see, we have a lot of stuff in the room at the back, but having said that, between the exhibition room and the room at the back, there is a lot of stuff that can easily disappear. So we have to make sure who is going where. Because I know we have got all Bob's computers in the back, not Bob's computers, but the computers Bob uses for his genealogy bit. Quite honestly, it would be nothing for someone to walk in there and walk out with it, and no one would notice.

BB: We have to be careful.

TB: Bob, I know you have got to go, but there is one thing that it would be nice to talk to you about, and that is genealogy.

MN: It is a big thing.

[01:09:45]

TB: And I am just wondering if you could just tell me a little bit about the sessions you run, the people that come to them and what you think they are getting out of them. If that is not too big a question.

BB: Well we started off really. What I can do is I can give you one of the handouts when we start people off. Generally, it is the older generation who suddenly realise, oh where the hell did I come from. A lot of this has been generated by what's on the TV. 'Who do you think you are', and strangely enough, I am getting more and more questions now about the one that is one now, 'Long Lost Family'. I have had a guy within the last two weeks saying to me, my birth mother disappeared when I was three, do you think you can help me find her? And we do our best, we have a go, and all that sort of stuff, but what is driving people really is they would just like to know a little bit about what they are about and where they came from. And especially if there is a bit of a scandal, you

know, they love the bit of a scandal. And we provide the service, quite cheaply, really, when you think about it.

If you go to a genealogist, you are probably paying several hundred pounds just for it. If you are a member, we will charge you £2, you get a cup of tea and a biscuit. If you are not a member, we charge you £4 and a cup of tea and a biscuit, a session. And then if we do, like a commission thing, then we will charge a bit more, and you will get a more professional thing. But, I suppose it is driven by the fact that people have realised, in watching the TV, how much information is now available. But they don't know how to access it, and they don't know how to put it together, and they don't know. A lot of the people that come as well, because of the age that they are, have never used a computer as well. So, part of our involvement is actually showing them how to use a computer. And we even go to the stage that if they say, I am thinking about buying a laptop, oh well bring it in and we will set it up for you, and we will show you how to use it.

TB: Wow, that is amazing.

EJ: And as Bob said, you have got the ones that are thinking about buying a laptop. There are many more that just haven't got a laptop. They haven't got a computer. So they come down here, and for members £2, or non-members £4, bring a couple of friends with them and they come.

BB: Yes, and it works quite well really. I think as well, a lot of the times, you were saying about the people that come down here, it is, there is a sense of community about it as well. I mean, we started this in 2006, we have still got some of the same people that come every single solitary time we are open. I mean, they know how to do it, but they come for the company as much as for doing it.

EJ: Even Malcolm Derby. Malcolm Derby has been coming years, and all of a sudden, he is talking about prefabs and how he had been putting up all these bloody prefabs.

MN: He is helping Bob.

TB: Brilliant.

BB: We find also that at roadshows, we can get people interested because if we happen to get access to the internet at the roadshow, we can say, oh what was your grandad's name? Oh was that him in 1911, that is his actual signature you know. Oh really, is it? Can I have a copy. Well if you would like to come down the centre, blah blah blah. It doesn't always work.

[01:13:50]

TB: That is genius.

MN: That's why we don't charge people to come in. because people say, I am not going to spend £3 on whatever it is to come in, but once they are here, they think, oh that is a nice book. And they might spend £10 on a book.

EJ: As daft as you like, when we have the show here, we don't actually charge them for a cup of coffee or a cup of tea, we have got a tray.

BB: And people put money in.

EJ: Whereas if you said, oh that will cost you £1. Oh I won't pay £1 for a cup of tea. But for your cup of tea and a biscuit, I will throw £1 on the table.

TB: Yes, I see what you mean. And that is different, isn't it. But it makes it more accessible.

MN: By then we have got your arm twisted.

EJ: Anybody who has gone to the trouble of dropping a couple of pound coins on to the table, we have done a lot before you even start.

BB: What else have you got to ask?

[01:14:50]

TB: Well this is a general question, but can you give me, what is the highest point, is there a moment when you thought, oh this is absolutely brilliant. I am so glad I have been involved with this? And likewise, has there ever been a really tough moment when it has been really difficult?

MN: Well the point now, we are sort of on a balance like this. One week is, urgh, and the next week we are back on a high.

TB: Is this in terms of people or money coming in?

MN: Money coming in. We have got to spend what we have got. We would like to do more shows, but we don't have the money to do the shows.

BB: It is sustainability, that is the thing.

MN: Just keeping the thing, the balance of things going.

EJ: From my own personal point of view, my highest moment has got to be when having added my little bit to Lilian Duke's book, which is now entitled Smethwick: Our little lost village.

TB: So that was reprinted?

EJ: Someone actually bought copies of it. Paid £5 for it.

BB: So you are an author now?

EJ: That was, let me say, my own personal high point. I have written part of a book, I co-authored a book and somebody bought it. We actually sold out of the first batch that we did.

TB: Brilliant.

BB: Well, my high point really has got to be when we opened the centre in 2004, because we worked so hard, and it has all come to fruition and suddenly, we were opening it.

TB: Yes, because that must have been a good 4 or 5 years of work.

BB: Yes, that is right. That is right.

TB: That is what I was going to ask, you said that you had your feasibility study and some of that would be how much of that it is going to cost to convert the building. But presumably, built into that, you had some income and figures?

BB: Yes, of course, and what sort of footfall we would expect. We had to do some sort of look at the demographics, we had to talk to schools, the whole sort of range of things that we did. We talked to a lot of the organisations, like the labour club. We talked to the Royal British Legion, just to sort of get a feel, can you give us some support? And would you go? But, you know, the main thing that helped was the fact that we were able to generate so many subscribers at that time that were buying the magazine. And that was the think that gave it the confidence and gave the lottery the confidence. Thinking yes, there is a real interest in this.

EJ: I suppose, one of the biggest problems that we have now is, as Bob says, is the fact that we haven't got the footfall that we would really like.

BB: That is right.

EJ: Because we are off the beaten track. We are round the corner. But everyone that has found us, has said, oh this is alright.

BB: but you have also. Apart from, apart from getting funds in, the other major thing of course is the if you like the continuity of people that are going to look after it. You know, what is the plan for actually making sure that there is somebody who is going to do the accounts. Making sure there is somebody who is going to come in and help and open up,. That is the other major concern.

TB: So it is replacing those key trustees then or volunteers sorry?

BB: Yes.

EJ: We have to be, because sometimes, some just pack up and go and unfortunately.

BB: Some snuff it, simple as that.

EJ: Some of them fall of the twig.

[01:18:29]

TB: Yes I see. That kind of focuses the mind a bit.

EJ: Yes it does.

MN: Between Ewert and I, well I can't do this Saturday, but we need someone to open up, can you come in? So I will come in, open up, and stay for an hour. Then he will come in, stay for a while and then you will close.

EJ: Because I am one of those people that don't drive, so I can get here, but having said that, if a bus is missing, I could be running late, and everyone could be standing outside. If it is a nice day like today, they are alright. If it is pouring it down with rain.

TB: It is a responsibility, isn't it.

EJ: So on those occasions, Myriam comes in, opens up and then I get here, and Myriam does whatever she is doing, finishes and then goes home. And I finish locking up. But I always forget to put the alarms on.

TB: I am, just thinking back to that early study, would you say, I don't know what was in it, but you had some dreams and some ideas and stuff, how has it turned out?

MN: Well it is still going.

[01:19:40]

TB: Are you pleased, is it how you thought it would?

BB: Oh yes, it has turned out.

EJ: 15 years later we are still here.

BB: It has turned out very well really. And as we were just saying, the concern is how are you keeping it going for the future. That is the concern. Because despite the fact that, like you get the local councillors, who get help from the local MP and everything else, despite that, and it is on the internet as being one of the attractions of Smethwick, we get no funding support whatsoever. Other than the rent, which is free.

MN: Even the council sort of looks at it and say no. Apart from we get free rent.

EJ: We did go on the beg, occasionally, from the council, last year. For the first time we went to this open heritage weekend. It was the first time we ever partaken in it. And they said, we are going to have something open that isn't normally open to the public. So we said to the council, can we have.

MN: Well I would like to take over the council house to put all our things.

EJ: So we used the council house. We had a talk in there.

TB: Is that the council offices?

EJ: No, next door. The old Smethwick Council House.

MN: it is beautiful in there.

TB: Oh yes, the old Victorian building.

BB: it is not used as the council. It is now part of Sandwell and the authority is actually in Auberry.

TB: Oh right, I see.

EJ: If you have ever been in the council chamber at Birmingham, this is a miniature version of that.

MN: I would love to take the whole building.

TB: When did that happen? What that in the 70s?

BB: It happened in 1966.

EJ: 66 we became Worley, 70s we became Sandwell. When we became Worley, we were the major section.

TB: Okay, so do you think that that change might have also contributed to people's feeling of how important it was to keep the heritage?

MN: Yes. Without a doubt.

TB: Because I picked up on this in quite a few places.

BB: Very much so.

TB: It kind of concentrates people's minds because suddenly the powers have gone. Or the powers that be. Identify problem.

BB: Well, that's right. A part of the original thinking was that, God, Smethwick could disappear, it could just be a memory. It was a county borough.

EJ: When Smethwick became Worley, it was the major part of 4 or 5 towns that became Worley. But people living in Auberry, which Worley gobbled up, were never going to live in Smethwick. They were never going to live in a place called Smethwick because they were Auberry. And not only was it Auberry, Worchester, as opposed to Smethwick, Staffordshire. So, they were total foreigners. And then of course when we became Sandwell, they had the problem again, because the people from Worley said. I don't live in West Bromwich. I don't come from West Bromwich. And conversely, people in West Bromwich said, I don't live in Worley. And they said, no. So whereas Worley came about because Worley was a part of Smethwick and Auberry. Worley lay across the border between Smethwick and Auberry. Worley was settled for. And Sandwell and West Bromwich. Sandwell was in both.

MN: And then Birmingham tried to swallow up Smethwick. And we will have none of that.

TB: Oh, what you resisted did you?

EJ: No, no. We have it in a book somewhere that Mr Arthur Keen.

BB: Awful bloke.

EJ: Mr Arthur Keen, that's right. I thought I had said it earlier on. Arthur Keen was the chairman of the board and went in and decided that Auberry went in and became a part of Smethwick. Smethwick said, oh no, we will stay out.

TB: Oh gosh, that is fascinating. So this is local politics. And you mentioned this earlier with the local councillors and someone. But clearly that is a big deal and it is connected with feelings of place. Guys, thank you so much. I know I have taken up a lot of your time. Is there anything else that you want to put on the record?

MN: No, I think we have covered it.

EJ: I do think we have given everything.

[After the group interview had finished a short interview was recorded with CS]

[01:24:25]

TB: So yes, Chris, just I think what would be great, because we didn't have a chance to talk about it in any great detail.

CS: Yes, fire away.

TB: What was great was that we did talk about the fact that half of the population is Asian and there is an issue with local history museums which is they tend to finish in terms of subject matter, they kind of finish in the 1950s usually, 60s if you are lucky. And clearly there is an issue there with what sort of stories are being told and there is a whole, as I heard, they have clearly made quite a lot of effort to do something about this. Not least, setting up this amazing exhibition. So if you could just tell me a little bit about it really, in your own words.

CS: Black country Sikhs or involving the local community, or both.

TB: Well both of those.

CS: Both of those. I think the issue that you have got is that you have got a period of Smethwick's golden age, as I always call it. You might not agree but. From the late Victorian period up to WW2, you have all these massive industries that you have seen. Empire, nationwide, well known industries. And going across the globe, for such a small town, it is incredible really. That is its Golden Age, I would say. And then you have post War decline which hits Britain, as you know about, you will know about that. You have got the migrant communities coming in. Actually the first migrant community were the French in the Victorian era. They came here in some quite significant numbers. But post-War, you have got this change that is happening across Britain, and certainly in Smethwick. Now in terms of what you consider to be history. I always used to say that history was whatever happened before I was born. Because that has got to be right, hasn't it. And before you were born. As you get older...

TB: Because it is different or exotic in that respect isn't it.

CS: ...When you talk to kids like you, you find you are talking about your own life and your own era. You saw the moon landings on the TV, yes I did, god I am feeling old now. So history has almost sort of caught up with you or something. But I guess in general, in terms of what we cover in the magazine and in the museum, yes we are going up into the 1960s for sure. Touching on the 70s, which is the era which hasn't quite made it yet perhaps into the history, and the 80s. which is perhaps most arguably, is the era which perhaps most of the local community start to really buy into it would be the 60s for the most part I would say.

Then there is the material, because you could say, and I would say, that all of the material in this museum because their families came and worked in these industries, using these tools, making these products. That is a fact. But in terms of photographs, it is difficult to find those pictures. There doesn't seem to be as many pictures in those communities as there is in the caucasian white

communities, if you like. And this is where Black Country Sikhs came into it, gathering this kind of material, which isn't easy to find.

[01:27:20]

TB: So just tell me about Black Country Sikhs then. So this was a photographic exhibition that you put together?

CS: It was, yes. We travelled across the Sandwell's, West Midlands area and they basically harvested material from many different sources from the Gurdwara's and from private collections and some from the Alemi online site, which you will undoubtedly be familiar with. And they head to buy some material from there. We do have some pictures here of Asian workers at the Birmead and some of Mitchells and Butlers, but there is not many. There is not a lot. And so those pictures are highly sought after. And I think you will have probably seen there that the Malcolm X visit, which is undoubtedly in there I am sure that we spoke about earlier. I think the future for the museum is probably to turn it into more of a hub. And we are trying to have more events on so you just pull people in for events and meeting people, and this is a bolt on to it.

TB: Yes, okay, so the museum can perhaps be a bit of a backdrop to anything.

CS: Yes, because in the nicest sense, you can actually walk around it fairly quickly. Even if you are taking your time, so what is going to bring you back. Which is what you all say. You go to anywhere in the UK and you go to a museum, which you probably do, and you will find lots of local people that don't go, or haven't been back. And we are there going, oh this is fantastic this museum and I love this.

TB: Well yes, this is, I think, having a temporary exhibition space is one way that you could do that. But clearly you are quite constrained here in terms of space, it is not massive.

CS: I think when they set it up and the ambition was, just get it set up, get a museum and a centre, and they got the museum, got the centre, and now they have reached the stage where they need a bigger museum or centre. But then have you got the volunteers to run the bigger museum or centre? So, the trade-off for that was probably right to have these roadshows that you have heard mentioned many times.

TB: Which is fascinating because I haven't come across any other museum that has done that. It is honestly.

CS: I thought it was nonsense the first time. Who is going to come to that? Who is going to come? I couldn't believe it. When the door was open and these people pouring in. I mean, people ring me up, and they know I am not from Smethwick, okay, they know I am a foreigner. Because there is something in my voice which is not Smethwick. If Ewert is in, I will say, do you want to talk to Ewert? And they always say yes, 9 times out of 10, because they want to chat to, forgive this, a Smethwick old timer about the old times. And just like that they have that connection over the phone, even if they are half way across the country. And they love that.

[01:29:52]

TB: And why is that so important? Is it just the feeling that they are talking to someone who?

CS: I don't know. As I said, I worked in a lot of places and I have not encountered this anywhere else. I mean, I can count them off in the background in a heartbeat, I mean, you only have to mention the Black Country in Birmingham and Ewert is off. He is straight off, as I said, you don't connect them to Smethwick, your life is in peril. But it is a very passionate area. I mean, where did you go to school? Primary school? Secondary school? Where did you work? Where did you live? They will ask you that. I asked this to somebody, like I said to you earlier, he walked in and asked those three questions. They thought it was a set up. It wasn't, it is just the way it is. It is just how passionate it is, how interested it is.

TB: Right, I see. That is amazing. Chris, just tell me about your background, because clearly, you say, you have come in towards the end, well I say towards the end, you have been here quite a while.

CS: Well I worked as a librarian, then I worked in computer centres, back in the 80s when they had them big tape drives in old films. I did that. Got downsized out of that. Ended up working for the police as a criminal research analyst. Which was the best and worst job I ever had. The research analyst bit was the best, the police was the worst. Don't print any of that. And then I met a mate on the street from when I used to work in libraries, and this was when the lottery fund had really just kicked off and was really making some noise with the money.

And he said, we want someone to work on a project, digital library of Hainsworth, but you have got to have a librarianship background, be interested in local history and have worked with computers. And it was like somebody had gone, here are three things which are very hard to find at the moment, in the late 1990s, but you have got them all. And I got into that project, and then because of that project I got another project. Because by then they were looking for people who had delivered a project. And I ended up here. And within the first week, several of them had asked where I had come from. And done that business that we just talked about. And I said Birmingham. The disappointment was palpable.

TB: Really. Oh dear, that's amazing.

CS: And Ewert still reminds me about it to this day. But no, it is an interesting area, very much so.

[01:32:10]

TB: Well what is interesting is that very few museums have a paid [employee], well they do, but not for this sort of scale. That is impressive, they are pulling in the money to be able to finance that.

CS: Well tell me, I am very impressed.

TB: But I am just wondering, they were talking about challenges in the future.

CS: Well they had three employees when I came.

TB: Wow!

CS: Actually three and a half. There were three and a half of us.

TB: And that was when they had the lottery funding, so they had the curator?

CS: There seemed to be money sloshing around that you could pull down and get from the lottery. But you have to keep inventing new projects to keep the lottery happy. I mean, this would be one. If it wasn't one, it should have been one. I have looked at the back.

TB: Yes, that was lottery.

CS: Exactly. So I don't know what they do the rest of the time, but that is something that the lottery will back. And we have got what we feel is a certainty for next year, that the lottery will back. But you do find yourselves thinking, what can we do?

TB: What is the next project going to be?

CS: To offset the core business if you like, in a way. Definitely so.

Ewert: You can't have it. But Chris was talking about the Golden Age, well here is a book.

TB: Well this is nice. Smethwick and its National Significance: An Official Handbook. Smethwick Corporation. Wow.

CS: It is, and I don't experience this anywhere else. I have been all around Britain and I have never seen anything like this. And those number of industries, I mean there is 10, 15, 20. I don't know, what just you would say. The absolute bench marks of what you would call British industry at its pomp and finest in this town.

TB: Well there are plenty of sort of company towns as they are known.

CS: Mitchell and Butlers, GKN, Birmead, Midland Red buses. You can go through it. It is incredible really. And they are all in this town.

TB: Because often you would have a town which is built around one industry, like a mining town. But this is like, as you say, so many different ones. It is really.

CS: Extraordinary. To have that many, it really is extraordinary. And what is interesting is that if you think of Birmingham, and you run through Birmingham's industries, the slightly bigger place up the road as my friend would say, you can't get to that many before you start to run out in your head. I can't anyway, and I live there. I mean, I know quite a few, but I don't think I could name as many there as I can in Smethwick.

TB: Yes sure. Chris, that is great. Thank you. I think we must have covered everything.

[Ends 01:34:37]

The Smethwick Heritage Centre Timeline [handout provided by Robert Baldwin]

- 1997 David Bryant, a local architect and Smethwick born man who was a member of

The Smethwick History Society, proposed that consideration should be given to

setting up a Heritage Centre to preserve the history of Smethwick's people and its industries.

- For a small borough, Smethwick contained many world-renowned companies that played a very important role in the development of major manufacturing Industries post the industrial revolution. In addition, these industries played a vital role in the war effort in both world wars. The concern was that as these companies began to disappear in the 1980's and 90's with the changing face of UK manufacturing, their contribution to the country would be lost.
- David pulled together a small number of like minded people and Smethwick Heritage was born.
- Initially in order to gather support requests went out to the public for " artefacts" that could be shown at "Roadshows" held in local church halls to help spread the word. A charitable company was set up with a board of trustees who then set about fund raising.
- One of the major items to raise funds was the production of a bimonthly magazine containing photographs and stories of Smethwick by Smethwick people. The magazine was the key to setting up a membership base which generated regular income. In addition volunteers also began to write and produce books that could be sold at roadshows.
- In the background in 1998/9 whilst all this was going on a search was carried out to find premises that could be developed into a heritage centre. The current premises, which were unused and in a state of disrepair were identified and an approach was

made to Sandwell Council who were open to consider the idea.

- Initial discussions with the Heritage Lottery Fund were positive and it was decided that the best approach would be to carry out a feasibility study for which funds were raised.
- The study concluded that the idea was feasible, Sandwell Council agreed to grant a 26 year lease on the property and a formal application to the Heritage Lottery was put together including detailed drawings and costs for the work required and a working budget for the operation of the centre.
- Included in the budget was the cost of employing a full-time qualified curator for a threeyear period, In order to correctly set up the centre as a museum.
- The Heritage Lottery subsequently supported the application with a grant of £260k and additional funds were raised from a number of other sources.
- The building work and the kitting out of the facility along with the recruitment of a curator, with close monitoring by the Heritage Lottery Fund, was completed on budget and The Centre was opened in September 2004 by Dr Carl Chinn.
- A further application was made to the Lottery Fund for development of an Exhibition Room which could be used for other functions such as local schools visits, family history workshops etc. This application was successful and a further c£100k was raised.
- Whilst the development of the centre was taking place, it was decided to change the structure of the company from a simple charity to a charitable company limited by

guarantee, in order to afford the volunteers who served as trustees a measure of protection.

- The Centre does not receive any funding assistance from either the local council (apart from rent free accommodation) or anyone else. The income is generated from subscribers to the now quarterly magazine, sale of books developed written and put together by volunteers, school visits, family history workshops, funding applications for specific products and projects , donations from the pUblc, special talks and events etc.

- The Centre is open 3 days a week and for all aspects of its work relies on a part time employed Centre Manager and a core working group of volunteers numbering c36, including the trustees.