

## Care Leavers' Stories project

Larry Gardiner

Interviewed by Khatija Hafesji

C1597/08

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# Social Care Institute for Excellence

## Interview Summary Sheet

## Title Page

**Ref no:** C1597/08

**Collection title:** Care Leavers' Stories

**Interviewee's surname:** Gardiner

**Title:** Mr

**Interviewee's  
forename:** Larry

**Sex:** Male

**Occupation:** Dementia Advocate and  
Charity Trustee

**Date of birth:** 1952

**Dates of recording:** 13.05.13

**Location of interview:** Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2-4 Cockspur Street, London, SW1Y  
5BH

**Name of interviewer:** Khatija Hafesji

**Type of recorder:** Canon XF 305

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Stereo

**Total Duration:** 3:01:43

**Additional material:**

**Copyright/Clearance:** The following section is closed for 10 years until 24th October 2023: Track 1  
[02:01:19 - 03:01:43]

**Interviewer's  
comments:**

Since the interview took place Larry's condition/diagnosis (discussed) has been revised: doctors have now definitively exclude Alzheimer's and Vascular type dementia as the reason for disordered memory and cognition and investigations continue.

## **Track 1**

*Okay Larry, hello.*

Hello.

*Do you want to start by telling me your name and a little bit about what you do at the moment?*

Okay. My name's Larry Gardiner. I'm sixty years old and at the moment I'm the chair of something called the Oxfordshire Dementia Empowerment Group, which is a very new group in a sort of start up phase. It came out of being a trustee with Oxfordshire Advocacy and working with people who needed to have a voice. And the empowerment group is for people with dementia because it's a very vulnerable constituency. The kind of advocacy we do is around things like deprivation of liberty, 'cause people with dementia tend to get parked in care homes, sometimes prematurely, and the other thing is about the Mental Health Act. Dementia presents sometimes with a symptomology that looks like a mental illness, but people with dementia don't have a mental illness. What they have is their brain cells are dying and the capacity is declining; it's a progressive organic physiological disease. But most of the decisions about people with dementia are made by clinicians who are psychiatrists or community psychiatric nurses. And so the group that I work with is challenging the stigma attached to dementia and confronting the portrayal of people with dementia as not having any self agency or being able to think for themselves, because that can – personhood continues to survive when the brain cells are dying. That's me.

*How did you get involved with this group?*

I've got dementia and I had recently some experiences, acute admissions in hospital, where the treatment I received was something I thought I had to change, so I got Jesse, my PA, to come into the hospital and stay with me because the staff in the hospital didn't really know about dementia and didn't know how to treat patients with dementia. And the problem that arose is that when they gave me a general anaesthetic

for operations, I had a sort of delirium episode afterwards because anaesthetics really affect my brain, because the brain cells that have been killed are in a part that – it's the part of the brain that's involved in epilepsy, so I had sort of convulsions, fits and delirium states. And Jesse understands that 'cause he's worked with me for three years and so he took over and provided my care because the staff in the hospital didn't know how to do it. And that was really the start of my little journey.

*When was this?*

Oh, quite recently. It started in 2010.

*And how does it affect your day to day life?*

It's my entire occupation now. I ... I – [laughs] this is going to sound a bit funny, but I think there's room for a sort of dementia guerrilla charm offensive to explain to people that we're not mad but we do have a progressive degenerative disease. And I see it as a sort of – like – there's a history of sort of liberation movements – 'cause I think people with dementia and their carers are treated very oppressively. Carers are deprived of resources and respite, usually deal with their caring unpaid and it takes over their lives because of the progressive nature of dementia. And their loved ones I think are also oppressed by – by the way that – well, it seems to me that what – what tends to happen with older people with dementia is they get parked in care homes where they're humanely treated until they turn their toes up and die. And it's almost like a warehouse for old wrinklies. And I don't want to go in one [laughs]. I want to live a whole complete life until the end of my life [laughs]. And I think the models of liberation are the ones that are useful to me, so ... the feminist perspective created a revolution so that women asserted their rights and their human rights, and that resulted in changes in the law in this country. There's – the black liberation perspective on reclaiming power is a useful thing for me to think about. It's also a liberation. So people who are targeted by racism have very, very successfully mobilised an effort – it's also resulted in changes in the law. More to be done, especially about migrants. So I – I think quite politically. Although I'm not particularly interested in politics, I am interested in the mechanisms for changing. So I suppose you could call me a dementia change agent. And there's a source of need, I

think – we call it an empowerment group because there'll be a need for successive waves of leadership to emerge because the people who are out there advocating now as people who use services and have dementia, their capacity to do it will decline. So I've got a sort of window of opportunity that is shrinking all the time. What needs to come behind me are other people who can speak out.

*You say this window of opportunity is shrinking all the time. Can you – in your personal day to day life, can you see that happening?*

Yes. Yeah, my capacity is declining all the time. I drove here today. I got here safely. It was a huge challenge to drive. Jesse's going to drive me home. I keep pushing. I've been to a place where they assessed me for my capacity to drive, at a place called the Wrightington Hospital, where they checked my reaction times and my ... peripheral vision and all that sort of thing, and – but I have to keep telling the DVLA and they will probably make me have annual tests. There's going to come a point where I say to myself, 'Larry, you shouldn't be driving anymore,' and that's coming very soon, I think. The other thing that's happening to me is words kind of drop off. And my brain's starting to stutter, is the way I describe it. It's a bit like, you know these fluorescent lights? You know when you switch them on and they go boom, boom, boom, boom. Well, my brain needs to do that every day. Sometimes I give it a shot of coffee and other times it'll just come on by itself. And sometimes I get my brain back and I've got everything, which is absolutely brilliant. It's a joyful experience. Makes me really happy.

*'Cause most commonly dementia's associated with a loss of memory.*

Yes.

*Rather than all these –*

Well, I've – yes, it is and I want to say that I think that there are ways that the progression of dementia symptoms can be arrested and I think that the best way to do it is by stimulating your brain all the time. And in Oxford where I live, there's a professor. She's a baroness. What's her bloody name? She's really quite a famous

person in her field, which is called neuroplasticity. Ah, her name's Susan Greenfield. And her field of study is how the brain has the capacity to make new connections when you stimulate it. And she's also the patron of an organisation I belong to called Young Dementia UK, so she's interested in early onset dementia. And I've come to understand from her work, we've got this huge cognitive reserve of about seventy percent of our brain, which is – all those brain cells are just sitting there, talking amongst themselves. They're not under my direction or conscious control. And I think that it's possible to stimulate those to take over from the brain cells that are dead and dying, to preserve elements of my functioning. So ...

*How are you doing that?*

Well, for the last three years I was a student at Ruskin College. I didn't pass my first year. I found it really difficult to be a student. Learning new things is also – the portrayal of people with dementia is that they – their capacity declines really, really fast and they have no self agency and their personhood ceases to exist and they can't learn anything new. Well, bugger that. I did pass my second year. I got a – so at a sort of certificate level, I got a CertHE, and I probably won't pass my final year because ... a problem with the memory. It's – I find it – I retain information that is of interest to me but not at a sufficient depth to be able to reference it in a coherent way. So I probably won't pass my final year. But I've enjoyed being a student and I've learned a great deal.

*What do you study?*

At the moment – well, I started studying law, 'cause I was interested in European law and human rights. I found writing academic essays really difficult and the exams really difficult. So I then switched and I'm now doing writing for performance and poetry and short stories and that sort of thing. And I'm taking part in something called the Dementia Monologues [laughs] and I presented my dementia monologue at the Chipping Norton Theatre, not far from Woodstock where you live, and that was recently. And there's a – I really enjoy it. It was about 130 or 140 people in the audience. It was bloody brilliant [laughs]. Had a good laugh.

*Have you done it before?*

No, no, I've never done that before. So my dementia monologue – I did a performance poem, I did a song and I did a little rant, and it went down very well.

*That's very good. And how does dementia affect your – your relationship to the past?*

Well, that's interesting. When I sort of reflect on things that have happened in my life, the things that I've done, there seem to be sort of like little red threads [laughs] that join them up. And one of them comes from – a lot of them come from my childhood. And I think that ... the sort of traumas and hurts and distresses from childhood are very powerful in producing behaviours later in life and sort of patterns of behaviour, and I can see some of my patterns. And I would say ... if you gave them characteristics – see, what happens in childhood is, when we're hurt we usually don't have any information or perspective or context for what's happening to us. What happened to me happened to me early in my life, when I just didn't understand what was going on and nobody took the trouble to let me know what was going on. And that resulted in a sort of powerlessness pattern, which I'm really trying to challenge. I spent a lot of – long part of my life feeling hopeless and helpless and powerless and afraid ... hmm ... and it's an interesting thing about dementia. The past is – is sort of sealed off and I have quite limited access to it. I have some memories. The memories are mostly about emotional things ... and ... I've forgotten where I was going. Oh well, there's nothing much I can do about the past. The only thing I can do is change how I feel about it. The things that happened to me probably shouldn't have happened and shouldn't have been done. Some of the things I did I shouldn't have done and wish I hadn't and have regrets about. And I have a lot of regrets about things that I didn't do which I probably should have done. And that's because I'm a parent [laughs]. I wish I'd done a better job. You'll have to ask me another question now 'cause I'm starting to go a bit blank.

[15:18]

*Okay. Well, let's ask about your parents then.*

Well ... well, my mum's dead. She died very early. She died when she was fifty-four years old. And I didn't spend very much time with her 'cause I grew up in children's homes and the reason was that my mum was a migrant. She came here in 1947. And during the Second World War she'd lived in Vienna. She was born in Vienna. She was adopted, so she didn't grow up with her own family. She didn't talk very much about her life. I suspect it wasn't an especially happy childhood. And then – so in 1920 – she was born in 1922. In 1938 Hitler invaded Austria, so she was only sixteen. She was still a schoolgirl. And she came to England in 1947. She'd lost her whole family, absolutely everybody. She never talked about it so I don't know how. But all I know is that throughout my childhood she had episodes of – like a nervous breakdown, mental health problems, and I think it was because of having the experience, the traumatic time. I wish she had talked about it but she didn't. So I've got no information and I can't make it up, conjecture about things that happened to her. Erm ... I – just about two years before she died I came to London – not far from here is the Austrian Embassy and I managed to get her papers so that she could go back for a visit, and she went back to Vienna two years before she died. And er, when I got her papers, they gave me a thing called Auszug Aus Der Heimatrolle which is an extract from the electoral roll. And it – the date of it – sorry, it was produced during the Nazi occupation of Austria and – a sort of annexation And this was the paper that was used – they found this – they got an archive copy, gave it to me and this is what I was able to use to get her a passport to go back. So she lived in England as an alien. She'd never naturalised, so she was still Austrian, but she didn't have any papers to go back to Austria so she hadn't been able to go back. She never talked about her visit [laughs]. And that's my mum.

*What kind of woman was she?*

She was an interesting soul. She was, erm – she was cultured. She knew a lot about music. She used to sing. She used to enjoy music. We used to have music on the radio all the time. She was well read, so she was an educated – she had a convent education in Vienna and during the war she stayed in the convent, so I guess that must have been a very safe place. And it's probably how she survived. All I know about that is that she had the opportunity to read really widely. Er ... what else? Erm ... She was probably the most resourceful person I've ever met, because during my

childhood there were a lot of shortages and when my family situation changed – my parents separated when I was very small, so we lived – we had – I suppose you could say we grew up surrounded by sort of deprivation and not having much in the way of resources. And she was really, really resourceful. She could make something out of nothing and that's the joy of her. I can remember her making decorations for the house. She got twigs from a tree and wrapped them with a bit of white crepe paper and we made decorations out of milk bottle tops and things like that. She was very clever. And she used to do those things with us, so – yeah. And then there sort of came a point, a crisis, where she just couldn't cope at all and nobody knew what to do with her, so they gave her electroshock, ECT. That bugged her up completely and it took her probably about fifteen years to recover. And that was – those fifteen years were most of my childhood [laughs]. And so I grew up in children's homes with short visits back home when she was able to cope.

[20:50]

I'm the eldest of five. My dad, he's still alive. He's – he lives in Derbyshire, just outside Derby, and ... yeah. During the – he was a little bit younger than my mum, so she ... when they married in 1952, shortly before I was born, my mum was thirty and my dad was – he would have been ... twenty-two, something like that, so there was quite a gap. During the war he'd been sent away as an evacuee and then after the war he did his national service and he was a conscientious objector. So when he was inducted and – he served in the RAF during his national service and he refused to be issued with a rifle. And so really he had sort of – he was in the glasshouse for the whole of his national service, doing menial things like cleaning toilets and endlessly peeling spuds, those sort of things, until they recognised, and he asserted, his right to be treated under the Geneva Convention for conscientious objectors. So they allowed him to train as a medical orderly and then when he met my mum he was training to be a nurse and my mum was retraining to be a nurse, 'cause she'd been a nurse in Austria but her papers weren't recognised here. So she had to do the training again and that's how they met.

*And your dad talked about his childhood?*

I've had more access to his childhood because I've also – I knew his mum, my grandmother, for a few years before she died, and I've helped to organise sort of family reunions for my father's family. So we have sort of family gatherings. So I've also met his siblings and their children. So I've – I've got quite a lot of access to my father's extended family and they all, you know, we've had conversations about what it was like when he was growing up. He grew up in a very strict environment and his family are quite religious, in a sort of – they have a very strong faith conviction. I find it quite rigid, a very strong sense of right and wrong, which I think is good, but also a very strong sense of oughts and shoulds and should nots, so very prescriptive. And that affected him. He was a socialist and he stood as a Labour candidate and became a Labour councillor in Hornsea in North London. And I can remember in my childhood, he used to plonk me on his shoulders and we'd march off to some meeting or other, where he'd help – get me to help organise the chairs and things like that, and then I'd probably fall asleep while they were doing all their meeting and then he'd carry me home again. And I'd steer him by his ears, things like that. I was quite small. Another memory of my dad is he used to take me for walks and talk to me. But I didn't know him very long either, so ...

[24:54]

My mum had five children in eight years. I'm the eldest. I've got two brothers and two sisters and we all have been in and out of care, except for the youngest. And I got separated from my family because my behaviour ... I got a sort of mad, sad and bad label quite early on, 'cause I used to sort of kick off quite a bit about being in children's homes, and I was a bit of a scrapper [laughs].

*What's a scrapper?*

A fighter. And I used to run away a lot. So I –

*So how old were you when your parents separated?*

I was eight.

*And did you go into care straight after that or –*

Oh, I was in – I went into care the first time when I was – er, let's see. I was born in June '52. My sister was born in November '53. And shortly after that my mum had a sort of postpartum depression and an episode of illness, so she went into hospital and my sister was fostered and I was put into care. And I don't have much memory of that except it was – I know the place and I've been there. It's in a place – it's in a small town called St Margarets, which is in Hertfordshire, near ... between Hoddesdon and Ware, sort of just outside Hertford, in a place called St Margarets. And there was a children's home. I think it was a children's home and also a – like a mother and baby unit for women who were having illegitimate children. And there were lots of babies and lots of children, lots of small children like me, so I think I was sent there because it was a unit that dealt with small children. And the only memory I've got of it is a funny one, really. They – in order to stop us from wetting the bed, they used to make sure we went to – on the pot before bedtime, and there was a room with a row of little pots and children were parked on them and we had to sit there and produce something before we could go to bed. And I – I suppose ... well, my memory of it is that I was sitting with my elbows on my knees, like this [demonstrates], waiting to produce, and then I nodded off and fell over, fell forward, and the contents of the pot tipped all over me. And everybody was really, really angry that I'd made such a mess because I needed to be washed and cleaned up and all my clothes had to be changed and everything else like that, so – and then I was late going to bed and then I wet the bed anyway [laughs]. Oh dear. It's horrible. The memory of it is that the sheets go sort of clammy and sticky and very uncomfortable, but there's a sort of warm patch [laughs], spreading up my back. And the smell of the urine when it starts to go stale is a sort of strong ammonia smell. So that's my memory of that. And I must have been very, very small, probably not even able to talk properly, so at a stage where – feeling a lot of things, feeling a lot of things emotionally, but not remembering much that was said because the – I was still acquiring language. So probably wasn't thinking with words, my brain was probably thinking more with feelings. And I can remember just having this powerful anger and frustration and grief. And I can remember being – so when a baby, any baby really – when a baby is tired, baby cries. When a baby is wet, baby cries. When a baby is hungry, baby cries. When a baby is lonely, baby cries. When a baby is confused,

baby cries. And I was baby and I cried and they tried to shut me up all the time. The thing that I can remember is don't cry. It didn't get me hugs and kisses and attention and nurturing. It just attracted hostility and aggression. So that's the first time I was in care. And I was in and out of care for the early part of my childhood and went to lots of different schools. And then from about twelve, until I left care at sixteen, I was in a children's home the whole time and could sometimes go and visit my and they never came to visit me. And I was separated from my brothers and sisters, er ... and the result is my family isn't a very close family. I have a good connection with the youngest, with Michael. I think he quite likes me. I quite like him. He's a character [laughs]. He's a survivor. He's struggling against cancer at the moment, and I think he's got it beat. He's quite a valiant individual. And my youngest sister, Helen, I have quite a good connection with. She describes herself – I'm the nice one, she says – and she is, she's really genuinely nice. I love her. She lives in the Netherlands. She married a Dutchman. And I spent a period living in the Netherlands and I used to see quite a lot of her. The other two siblings, Dennis has said I don't – what was it – I can't remember his actual words but it was something like, 'I prefer not to keep in contact.' It's – I guess – it's – hmm. Whenever our family have got together, it's not been an easy experience for anybody. And my sister, Diane, the one who's immediately younger than me, I haven't seen for years. She went off to live in America. I got a telephone out of the blue, telephone call, saying she was in trouble and she wanted to get out of America. And she'd had a daughter, called – what was her name ...? Francis, I think. Anyway, I wired some money, she got herself a ticket, she flew out with her daughter, and I met her at Schiphol Airport, 'cause I was working in the Netherlands, and she said she – we went to see my sister, Helen, stayed overnight there for a little while and then I drove her through the Channel Tunnel to England, to my dad. And she got a place to live quite close to my dad, but then they fell out and she fell out with everybody. And then it turned out that the child that she'd brought to England with her had been illegally removed from the States, so there was a big legal process to get the child returned, which eventually – so she had her daughter taken into care and fostered until the legal process was completed, when she was sent back to her father in the United States. And my sister Diane went mad ... and then went missing and nobody knows where she is. And I've tried to find her and my dad's tried to find her. I guess she doesn't want to be found, is where that is.

*Did she go angry mad or ...?*

Yeah. And there's a kind of, you know I was talking about the sort of behaviours that come from hurts and her ... so on the outside, looking in at the behaviours that I experienced with her, it's a sort of passive aggressive kind of flip flop between two states; being very, very angry and then being a complete victim and then being very angry about it and sort of flipping between these sort of two states. Er ... she ... I think – she spent a lot of time trying to ... I think trying to get attention for herself, and one of the things that she did was she used her daughter to get attention for herself, which is a bit sort of Munchausen's kind of thing. And ...

[34:55]

When I look back on it, I think my mum kind of did that too. I mean, I'm sure that I was not an easy person to be with when I was a child, 'cause I was very, very angry and I was completely unbiddable. There was nothing that anybody could do with me. And they tried everything. So I was quite difficult to be with and I think my mum used that to get attention for herself and, erm ... it sometimes happens that parents, who are feeling a bit inadequate and powerless, kind of project some of their stuff onto their kids. And the – erm, you know, you often hear stories, a sort of anecdotal thing, about being the black sheep of the family. Well, that's me [laughs]. And I think what happened is that all of the difficulties in the family were projected on me. And I'm sure I was the source of some of them but I think it's unlikely that I was the source of all of them [laughs]. But I did get a great big dollop of that, as I was the problem.

*That's a large burden to carry.*

Yeah, yeah.

*Where did this anger that you describe come from?*

I was mistreated a lot. I was beaten a lot. I think children who are beaten ... Well, we try and cope somehow and I think one of the ways I coped, I learnt to lie. I learnt to

lie in order to try and avoid being beaten. So the stock answer was, 'It wasn't me, I didn't do it.' And usually that was actually true, but I got – I was kind of held responsible for all the bad things that happened and I got beaten for them. And my last episode in care came from being beaten. My mum was really angry with me. I don't know what it is that I'd done, can't remember. What I remember is I ran upstairs and I locked myself in the lavatory and she came up the stairs and started beating on the door. And she told me to unlock it and let her in and I wouldn't, 'cause I was terrified of getting another beating. And I'd just had one. And she was battering on the door and I thought the door was going to come in, so I climbed out the toilet window. And outside of the toilet window was a sort of big cast iron drainpipe thing sort of stuck, and I climbed out onto that and it came away from the house, loose thing. It just sort of came away like that with me clinging to it. And I landed on the floor, on the ground. So from the first floor of a building to the ground with this great big lump of cast iron clasped to my bosom, and it knocked me out spark-o when I landed and, huh, I remember – I passed out. And when I came to, my mum had my head in her lap and she was cradling me and she was crying and she was saying she was sorry. And what I woke up to was her tears splashing onto me and she was crying and cradling me and saying, 'Sorry, sorry, sorry.' But it was sorry too late because I went to hospital, they called the social workers. There'd been a history of me being battered. And I had sort of quite substantial injuries, so I was admitted to hospital and they – I'd obviously been concussed so I didn't give a very coherent account of what had happened. I was taken into care and that's where I stayed until I was sixteen.

*How old were you?*

I was about twelve.

*And you'd been in care before that?*

Yeah, yeah, in and out. I'd had about ... by the time I was twelve I'd been in and out of care about five times. I'd been fostered for a short period. I'd been in a care home with education, so a children's home that had a school attached. And I'd been in a care home with a – it's like a secure care home, where we were locked in.

*Can you take me through some of these?*

I don't have a lot of memories about it. I mean, that's not to do with dementia. I think it's because I've just – a lot of those things are kind of buried and occluded. But little things – I know I was abused in care when I was quite little. There's a photograph, I've got a photograph. My mum – when my mum died, the whole family sort of descended on – and sort of took things away. And the only – they took – there wasn't very much of value or anything. They took just about everything. I was the eldest child and I was responsible for, erm, getting her buried and all that sort of thing, the funeral arrangements. So the family, sort of like vultures, kind of descended and stripped the whole place, and what I was left with was a few photographs. And there's a photograph of me that was taken in a children's home on the only time that my mum ever visited, and it's a picture of a little boy and on his face you can see he's completely shut down. That's me, completely, completely shut down. And there are other photographs from my childhood. I should have brought them really, shouldn't I? I've got them now. Some of the sort of photographs – every now and then the school photographer comes in and takes mug shots and then sells them to the family, and I've got two or three of those. There's some when I'm at home and there are some when I'm in care. And the ones when I'm in care, I had good clothes that fitted me and they were new, 'cause clothes were bought for me. And sort of quite well presented but completely shut down. And then there's photographs of when I'm at home. My clothes are very tatty. My mum struggled to cope with five children, you know, and they were all younger than me, so some of them were babies. And she was a busy woman, so my clothes were not regularly laundered and stuff like that. And my – and I looked very unkempt and dishevelled. Er ... I used to like to – I used to run away. I think the – the pattern of behaviour has been, when situations are overwhelming and unpleasant, I used to just try and find an exit so as to run away. And I ran away from home and I also ran away from children's homes. And sometimes had a – sometimes was away for several days. I can remember, near where I lived were some allotments. An allotment's where people grow their own vegetables in little plots of ground and flowers and things like that. And near there was like an air raid shelter, a concrete air raid shelter, buried in the ground, and it had been sealed up but I managed to break into it. And it became my little home [laughs].

And I used to scavenge out of the allotments [laughs]. I think I was gone for about a week that time before they found me. And they found me because I had acquired an old paraffin heater, which I'd managed to put in my underground air raid shelter, and I tried cooking vegetables that I'd stolen from the allotments. And I think people just followed the smoke and the smell until they found me buried in this air raid shelter, and I'd been there about a week.

*How old were you?*

About eight when that happened.

*And where was this?*

In Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire.

*Was that running away from the children's home?*

That was running away from home, and I wound up in a children's home in Letchworth, which is a little town not far from Hoddesdon ...

[44:47]

*Did you go to school?*

I used to absent myself from school quite a lot and do all sorts of crazy things. I had a friend who also used to – he was a guy I'd shared a dormitory with in a children's home once. His name was Anton. And he was brilliant with his hands and absolutely fanatical about motorbikes. And he had a friend who had one of these sort of lock up garages behind the shops on a council estate near where we lived and I used to run away from school and go round the back of these garages and we'd take motorbikes to bits and put them back together again and things like that instead of being at school. It was bloody marvellous [laughs]. Other things – what other things did I used to do? I used to – hmm. I used to build kind of like little dens, or little hidey-hole houses, and ... there was a sort of housing boom going on. So I was born in 1952. We still

had rationing until about 1956, so there were big shortages, and there was a shortage of housing. And so we had a lot of temporary homes when I was little. The first one was sort of like a – like a – hmm, I don't know what you'd call it, really – a little shack [laughs] down on the River Lea, along the towpath, on a little strip of land between the River Lea and the railway. It was sort of like a little shack or a little hut and we lived in there, and I can remember being in there. And I can remember my mum lifting me up and holding me so that I could wave at the drivers of the trains as they went by. They used to toot me with the whistle, toot, toot. Or they used to toot their whistle but I thought it was for me anyway. So I remember that. We weren't there for very long. I have – another memory about living there was that my mum had to do shopping. And the towpath was about as wide as this carpet and it ran along the side of the river. And she used to push me in the pram, with all the shopping piled in the pram and underneath the pram, one of those sort of big bassinet bouncy prams. And she was pushing me along the towpath and a bit of the towpath had given way and she was trying to steer around a kind of gap in the path and one of the pram wheels sank into it and I wound up in the river. And my mum had to sort of dive in and get me and try and capture the – the shopping as it floated away. And I can remember she just cried and cried and cried and cried and cried. Because I don't think we had a lot of money and to lose your shopping, or to have it ruined in the water, and to almost lose your baby – she just cried and cried and cried. I think she must have cried all day 'cause all I can remember is that I kind of clung to her to sort of – and I was just a small child, to try and comfort her [laughs]. So that was a strange experience, to – I can remember that. I can remember the next place that we lived in, which – in a street called Burford Street in Hoddesdon. And it was a very small street and we lived in a – like a – a very small worker's cottage kind of place. It was at the end of a row of ... what are they called – like terraced housing. And then there was a little gap and then there was this house by itself and it had a stream going past it, a little tributary of the River Amwell. And we lived there. I went to school from there, so I was five. We probably lived there until we were – until I was about six. And my mum was just so busy trying to keep a roof over our heads and food in our belly and a shirt on our back, she just worked all the time. So I can remember things like – she had a copper wash boiler. There was no such thing as washing machines. It was sort of like a big round tub that you filled with water. It had a gas ring underneath it to heat the water. And you kind of paddled your washing around

with a stick to get it clean. And then you'd have to lift all the big heavy things like sheets, lift them out and wring them out and then put them through a mangle to get the water out and then hang them out. And it was a whole – wash day was a whole operation. It took all bloody day, you know, all bloody day. And with small children who are wetting the beds and soiling sheets and stuff like that, she was always washing. And my memory is that – as I got older, I became really independent really quickly, 'cause she had no time for me. And I played – I kind of invented games. And I was always making little houses to go and hide in. And I started exploring this stream, so I used to jump into it and wade up the stream, and found a little place where I could build a little hut. And I built a little hut and I'd go and sit there all day and talk to myself.

*What were you hiding from?*

... I think my mum's anger. She was very angry too and frustrated. She was just frustrated. It was really hard. I was there until my dad left and he had a mental breakdown, he tried to gas himself, and we found – we could smell the gas. We'd found him. He'd locked himself in the door. We got the neighbour to battle the door down. He was unconscious. We turned all the gas off, opened all the windows. I can remember my mum just literally going mad. She was so angry at him for trying to take himself out of a situation that was just as hard for her and for being a coward, I think. And for being – she saw it as a huge selfishness, that he was trying to end his life while she was trying to keep us alive. And I think she felt betrayed by him and she was just really angry. And she used to say to me when she was really angry with me, 'You're just like your bloody father.' And I think I used to do a lot of running away – 'cause that was the first thing you could say to me. My dad had gone. I loved him and he wasn't there. And he'd tried to kill himself and I knew he'd tried to kill himself, so I knew he was really unhappy. And she used to say, 'You're just like your bloody father.' So I kind of got a lot of the resentment and anger that rightfully belonged to him [laughs]. I got it just because I resembled him. So I used to run away, used to run away a lot.

[52:32]

*How did it feel, finding your dad? How did you make sense of that, did you –*

Oh right. My dad – it was actually my dad made contact. When my mum died, I don't know how he came to hear of it but he came to hear of it, and he wrote me a letter and he said, 'I'm very sorry to hear about your mum dying and if there's anything I can do, please let me know, and here's my address.' And so I wrote back to him and said I'd like to meet. And I hadn't seen him ... let me see, I was twenty-seven and the last time I'd seen him, when I was eight. So I hadn't seen him for a really long time. For most of my life I hadn't seen him. And – a really interesting thing. When I – when I went to see him, so in the intervening years, he'd gone back to nursing, then he'd worked as a hospital social worker. They used to call them almoners in those days. And he trained to be a social worker and he became a child protection social worker. Erm, I don't know what his – I can only speculate, he hasn't told me very much about his motivation, but I think he knew that I'd been abused in a children's home and I think he wanted to make sure that that couldn't happen to other children. So he specialised in child protection and that was the rest of his career and he wound up teaching social work, working for Staffordshire County Council Social Services, leading their child protection team, and then teaching and training and supervising other social workers until he finished work. And he's my dad, I don't feel like we have a father/son relationship, really. So biologically he is my dad. We've kind of befriended each other, in a funny way, and ... we've had sort of quite long conversations. I suppose the interesting thing about our relationship is I'm not angry with him. And I think the reason I'm not angry with him is because he's just got no denial at all, you know. I can ask him anything, and have done, and he's just told me like his version of things with as much openness as he could muster. And when I've said, 'Do you know about that?' He'd either say, yes, he knew about it, or he didn't know about it. There are some things that happened to me that he doesn't know about 'cause he wasn't there, and so I've told him about those things. So he spent most of his career in social work, trying to protect people like me in care [laughs]. He was involved in a lot of care proceedings and a lot of court proceedings. And I guess that he became an advocate for young people. And the other thing he did is he spent most of his life trying to kill himself [laughs]. He made several attempts, got very – he had lots of episodes of depression. And the other thing he did was he pretty much smoked himself to death. He's been a lifelong smoker and his lungs are like a pair of lace

curtains, they're just completely shot, and he's very breathless. And he has an oxygen concentrator and mask and nebulisers and all this sort of stuff. He can hardly breathe [laughs]. So I don't suppose I'll have him for long, you know. He's eighty-two ...

*Do you remember him running away and leaving home?*

I remember when he left home, yeah. Well, I remember – the episode was that – the one I'd just described, when he tried to kill himself. So they took him to a mental hospital and he was sectioned because he was an attempted suicide, and then when he came out he didn't come home again. He visited one Christmas with Christmas presents and I can remember my mum being absolutely bloody furious with him. And that when he left she took all the Christmas presents and she put them in the bin. [Laughs] Happy Christmas. She was so angry. And then she – after that she wouldn't allow any contact. She did allow contact from his mum, my grandmother, who I remember. I think she tried to be an ally to my mum as a mother and because her own children had been taken away, evacuated and what have you, she didn't want us to go into care and she offered a kind of respite. So she'd take me to her own house in London for the odd weekend and stuff like that to try and – because I was the one with the most difficult behaviour ... erm, but then my mum fell out with my grandmother and she wouldn't allow any more contact. I lost touch with her. I can remember, I was in a children's home, the last children's home, and I decided I'd go to London and find my grandma [laughs]. So I bunked on the train. And I was in a children's home in Ipswich. It was a children's home – like a secure children's home, but I managed to get out. Me and Anton climbed out of the bedroom window onto a sort of porch thing and then shimmed down the support and we buggered off and ran off. He went off somewhere else and I decided to go and find my grandma in London. And I knew the address, so I bunked on the train. And the ticket inspector would be coming up and down and I'd be in and out of the toilets, hiding myself and what have you, until – and then I got off the train and managed to go through the barrier with a crowd of people. I just attached myself to a man who handed some tickets in and I just walked through. I don't know how old I was then, about thirteen or fourteen or something like that. And I managed to get the bus and walk and find my grandma's house and I found her. And she was old. And I remember she – [laughs] she said, 'Are you hungry? Shall I cook you something?' I said, 'Yeah, I am

hungry.’ So she tried to make me an omelette and she was going to put butter in and instead of putting butter in – she was – I mean, she was quite elderly and frail at this time. And she put – instead of butter, she cut a piece of cheese and put that in the pan and it burnt and made a horrible smell. And I didn’t get my omelette but we had a cup of tea and a chat. That was shortly before she died. So I went to find my grandma. On the way back I saw my bus, the one that I wanted to get to go back to the station, and it was just pulling away, so I ran and ran and ran, grabbed hold of the handle, got myself on the footplate of the bus, and the conductor said, ‘We’re full up.’ And he banged my hand so I let go and wound up face down in the road. And – not badly injured but with scrapes and what have you. And somebody called an ambulance, so I got took off to hospital and then they asked me loads of questions and then they found out I was in care in a children’s home and then I got took back. And there was a bit of that experience where I felt like a bit of a hero, ‘cause I’d been – I’d had an adventure [laughs]. I got lots of status, you know, brownie points from my peer group, so a bit of a hero, you know. I’d broken out, done that. And I got a lot of shit from everybody else. I was grounded and I don’t think I got out for about a year. It was almost like being in prison. And bloody horrible.

*Can you describe this secure –*

*Female: I’ll just let you know that we’ve had an hour now, so if you –*

Oh right.

*Female: I know it’s gone quick. If you wanted to break you could now. That would be a good time.*

*Okay.*

Okay? I’ll go and have a toilet break and have a drink of my orange juice.

*Thank you.*

[Break]

[1:01:44]

*Okay, so we were talking about your life as it is now and some of your early life in the first part of this interview. And what really struck me was that you seem to have a keen awareness of the kind of historical context of what's going on around you almost all the time. And I wondered where that came from. Were you always interested in history? Are you interested in history, even?*

Yes I am, yeah ... hmm, well, when I started work, I started – I had a part time job while I was still at school and I worked in the Co-op. And I did two things in the Co-op. The first thing I did was I worked in the – as a ... they call me a provisions hand. And it was in the department of the Co-op that dealt with things like cheese and bacon and ham and stuff like that, and I spent a lot of time boning out sides of bacon and slicing it up and things like that, and slicing up wedges of cheese and things like that. And it wasn't a – I suppose it was the beginnings of the supermarket. It was the food department in a big Co-op department store. And the Co-op in Ipswich at that time was really thriving and I did that job for – I had another part time job immediately before that where they had a big truck that would go round and deliver people's shopping. And if you were a member of the Co-op you had a divvy number and you had a little book and you'd write down your shopping list in the book and I'd go round and collect all the books, on a Tuesday I think, and then the truck would come and deliver everybody's big box of groceries. And my job was to go round with the man in the van and put the boxes on my shoulder and take them to each person's door, give them their book back and give them their box of groceries, collect their payment, take it back to the man in the van. And they had another round where they – almost everything was delivered. The bread was delivered by a bread man. The milk was delivered by a milkman. There was a grocery van that came round and there was a green grocer's van that came round, and the Co-op even delivered your coal. So the Co-op was a real thriving thing. And I – I started with these part time jobs and I joined the union. I joined the Union of Shop Distributive and Allied Workers. And my education was pretty scrappy. The reason I was doing these jobs was 'cause when I left school I could really not read and write very well, and it's because my education had been interrupted. And in joining the union – the union's sort of like a solidarity organisation and a collective, but it's also in a lot of ways a kind of advocacy organisation. And so I did these evening classes [laughs] that the union paid for and I

suppose history, the perspective of – not just accepting things as the way they are in the present but enquiring into how the present came to be the way it is, was something that I learned in the union. And I've been a trade unionist all my working life. I'm still a trade unionist now [laughs]. My last employment was in the Netherlands and so I was in a Dutch trade union called FNV, Bondgenoten, and I still pay my subs and get their magazine every month [laughs].

[1:05:44]

*How did school treat you?*

I got battered quite a lot. I got battered by other kids. And I went through of phase of saying – I used to be quite a scrapper. I used to ... [Laughs] I was quite – yeah, quite an angry sort of bod. If you picked on me, you did it at your peril because I was going to have a go and I was going to win if I could. So I suppose I won about – I won about half of the time and the rest of the time I got thoroughly hammered.

*Do you remember starting school?*

Did I ...?

*Do you remember starting school?*

Yes. The first school I went to was St Paul's Infant School. It was a church school. And I can remember my first day at school. There was a lot of wailing and gnashing of teeth, children crying for their mums, as their mums sort of parked them into school, a lot of people crying, and I was wondering, what the hell are they all crying about? This is brilliant, why on earth would – why would you cry? It had a Wendy house and it had a sandpit and it had, you know, it was bloody brilliant. So everybody was crying and wailing and what have you, and I hid myself in the Wendy house and started to play. And they didn't know I was in there, so when they eventually got round the register and called my name, I shouted out from in the Wendy house and they came and sort of retrieved me. It was a church school and there was a lot of religion and ... I suppose ... what happens in school with very young children is that

we accept everything uncritically and unevaluated, 'cause we've got no context for anything that we're told. So I got a lot of religion. And, er, I can remember something that I did. The school playground was next to the church and the church had a churchyard and the churchyard was full of tombstones, and I used to walk around and read the inscriptions on the tombstones. And I came to a bit where there were – some children had been buried and they were really very young. And I thinking – looking at these tombstones and thinking about children my own age being dead. And I started to cry [laughs] ...

*Why?*

I thought it was just very sad that these young children had died. I don't know how they'd died.

*Did you stay at the same school?*

A little while. The school and the church kind of adopted my mum for a bit and they used to bring her harvest supper food boxes [laughs], you know, when people have sort of donated food for the Harvest Festival. And they'd come round at Christmas with a Christmas box. And the worthy women of the parish, the women who'd do the flowers and all that sort of stuff in the church, they'd come round and try and give my mum a hand with stuff. I remember we had a go at decorating [laughs], and I was – oh yes. And I can remember, some of these women came round to give my mum a hand with bathing and putting the children to bed. I can remember being bathed by a total stranger when I was about five and really protesting, you know, for my modesty and my dignity, standing in the bath, covering my genitals while she was soaping my head [laughs]. It was a – I had a weird childhood. It was just, like, totally weird. Very difficult to understand.

*Even for you?*

Hm?

*Even for you?*

Looking back on it and reflecting on it, I can understand things. At the time I couldn't understand at all. I remember my mum went into hospital – my dad struggled to try and keep us at home, but he was pretty useless. And then they sent a home help in to help him [laughs]. And – and she started – I mean, it was good that she came in because we got hot food and stuff, but the food that she prepared was food that we had never eaten before in our house and it was strange, you know, being cooked by somebody else, so I wouldn't eat it [laughs]. My perspective on that is that when people feel powerless, they use whatever is available to try and assert a little bit of power. So when I was really little, the only control I had, the only way I could rebel, was running away, and this time I rebelled by just refusing to eat what I was given. That started another sort of pattern.

[1:11:14]

I've had a food pattern [laughs]. There are still lots of things that I won't eat. And there's another thing about food security. So in my bag over there is a carrier bag and a sandwich [laughs] and ... yeah. I've got a big thing about food, absolutely huge. It's massive, about food. There's lots of things – I really object to ... I really object to chain stores taking over all our towns and feeding us with the same garbage and the lack of choice. I really object to – yeah, this thing about food. I want my food fresh. I want it decent and wholesome. I don't want to eat garbage out of packets and cans and tins and boxes. And I don't want – I just really object to there not being very much decent food around in our country. And I've lived and worked in other countries where you can have decent wholesome food and in England we eat pure and unadulterated – fifty-seven varieties of garbage most of the time. And it will probably kill us.

*Was it the same when you were growing up?*

Yeah. Well, I suppose my nutrition was almost entirely school dinners [laughs] and they were mostly quite mediocre.

*What were they like?*

Well, sort of – a lot of stodgy stuff, and poor quality. You know, industrial catering, poor quality food. Wasn't good.

*Did you enjoy them at the time?*

I became quite fussy. I'd eat some things and not other things, you know. I wouldn't touch the meat, which was mostly full of gristle and stuff like that, and I'd eat the potatoes [laughs].

*And food at the care home?*

Ah well, now that was variable. Sometimes in the small care homes we'd have a kitchen. And I can remember one care home where – it was a sort of Barnardo's model of care home, with a house father and a house mother and a small group of children. And the good thing about it is we could get involved in the kitchen and help prepare and cook the food, so I started eating it. And I learned – I learned to cook. And I can remember periods at home, when my mum was really out of it, that I kept our family alive 'cause I cooked.

*What kind of things did you cook?*

Oh, I can – I mean, even when I was young, I could cook a whole – a whole good meal and even a Sunday roast, no problems, when I was, I don't know ... From about age seven or so, my mum used to send me to the shops to do the shopping and have a shopping list and the money and I'd go – and it was the sort of shopping where you just had to go – there was a butcher, a baker, a candlestick maker, a greengrocer and everything else. You'd go along to all these different – and she'd tell me which shops I had to go to for which things. And she'd tell me what – what cuts of meat she wanted from the butcher and she'd describe to me what I had to get. And I learned to come home with the right things or I'd get battered [laughs]. Oh dear. So I became very good at shopping. I used to take the children's pushchair, load all the shopping in it and wheel it home. And we lived quite a long way from shops. I think my earliest memory of going shopping was with my mum. So she'd have my younger

brother and sister sitting top and tail in the pram and me walking along holding the pram and collecting all the shopping and stuff like that. And I – I suppose just by going round with – we didn't have a fridge, so it was shopping every day. Shopping was every day. I'm sixty years old, you know, my childhood was a long time ago. We didn't have supermarkets and we didn't have a fridge. We didn't have a washing machine. We lived in one place where we didn't have electric lights. We had gas mantel lighting. And another place that we lived when I was really little, she cooked on a – like a primus, paraffin stove. You had to pump it up. And the smell of it, it's horrible. And ... yeah. So I learned to do the shopping and then I learned to – because I'm the eldest and I learned to do an awful lot with children, so I learned to change nappies [laughs]. I've seen a lot of bums [laughs], wiped a lot of bums. Er ... It was necessary to be the help in the house. Yeah. The bad thing about it was being held responsible for everything that went wrong. You know, that was – I got held responsible for everything that went wrong. So the little mishaps, it was always my fault. But then I couldn't be an adult father and partner to my mum, which is what she really needed. I was a small child doing his best and getting it wrong about half the time. Anyway, I learned to cook. So I'm a brilliant cook and I'm – I can make a meal out of anything and it'll taste okay. And at home I cook from – now I cook from fresh ingredients, so I don't buy stuff that's ready prepared very much. I like to get my own vegetables. At the moment I'm into – I like Mediterranean food very much, so I buy things like courgettes and aubergines and I grill them and douse them in olive oil and garlic, with grilled peppers and things. I love doing that sort of thing because it's so bloody tasty, really nice, crunchy and [smacks lips].

*It's a change from potatoes and gristly meat.*

Yes, yeah. And I suppose that food pattern is – it's like a kind of frozen need from the past. In the past it would have been really nice if I'd been properly fed. And now that I'm responsible for feeding myself, it's become a bit of an obsession 'cause I'm trying to – I suppose I'm trying to correct something that – in the past and I can't.

[1:18:19]

And that's another thing that drives me ... the past is sealed off. The moving line of time moves along and all of those things that are in the past are in the past. They're all history. I can't do much about them. And – but what drives me now is to try and make the future different from the past. I don't want a future that resembles my past. I don't want it for me, I don't want it for others, and that's really why I became an advocate. And it started by being a trade unionist and then becoming a shop steward and then going into – like accompanying people when they are contesting a disciplinary action or things like that, you know, or trying to save jobs. I became a bit of a fighter, a bit of a scrapper. Oh dear. Oh, the history thing. Well ... 150 years ago we used to send women down the mines, and children. We don't do that any more. There seems to be a sort of upward trend in history that I quite enjoy thinking about. And it gives me a bit of a perspective. And in my own lifetime I've seen lots of brilliant things happen, so ... When I was a child, I can remember the coalman used to deliver coal on a horse and cart, and in my own lifetime I've seen a man walk on the moon [laughs]. And when I was little, I can remember there was this big thing, like – well, the campaign for nuclear disarmament was something I got interested in, because people wanted to change something and thought it could be changed. And so – and things did get changed, you know. We stopped doing atmospheric testing, which was a brilliant thing because most of the milk I drank when I was a kid had high levels of radioactive seasoning [laughs], because we kept exploding atom bombs all over the bloody place. And it got into the atmosphere and sort of whirled around and wound up in England. They don't do that anymore. In my lifetime I've seen the Berlin Wall come down. I've seen the Iron Curtain be dismantled. I've seen apartheid dismantled in South Africa. I was there when it happened. I was part of a project in South Africa during the transition from apartheid to democracy and I did a – I was a project manager. I had twenty-seven little projects doing stuff, mostly about capacity building and mostly about advocacy. And we did – one project was constitutional development and another bit was constitutional education, so voter education. 'Cause most people had never voted. Most people had never, you know, had getting ready for the elections. So the British government, the ODA, Overseas Development Agency, sponsored lots of NGO projects in South Africa at the time and I was in – part of one of them. And it was about helping the transition. And it was a very positive – so my view on history is it's quite positive. There is an upward trend in human development. It's difficult to see the wood from the trees if you've got your

nose right up against the tree. It takes perspective, it takes standing back and looking at things. And I mean, we still live in a country with a hangover from feudal society. We've got a monarchy. It's ridiculous that we have, you know. And we have – and we still have an aristocracy who are principally landowners. And this is a remnant from serfdom, you know. We don't have serfs anymore. So the sort of feudal – and slave owning society. I mean, we're a country which has a big history in slave – in the slave trade, you know. There is this sort of upward trend in human development that I'm very, very passionate about, want to be part of and want to be a change agent, want to make something happen. I want to make good things happen and I want to stop bad things from happening. And that's – and it's driven – that's a driven behaviour. It's quite compulsive and obsessive and I'll bore you to tears talking about it. And it's become my way of life now, and I think it started by being in children's homes.

[1:23:24]

*You strike me as a man who learns through living.*

Mm.

*Were you academic?*

No, no. When I left school I couldn't read and write very well at all. They did O levels, GCE O levels, and they did CSEs and they put me in for both and I floundered and didn't do particularly well in either, and left school without any qualifications. And most of the jobs I did were manual labour jobs, where I earned money by getting very sweaty, working very hard, getting very tired. I worked in factories. I worked on building sites. I became a driver, used to drive trucks. Then I became a bus driver. And it was mostly jobs that didn't require anything to do with, erm, reading and writing, 'cause I wasn't very good at it. And in 1990, when I was thirty-seven, I did a thing called Second Chance to Learn, in Liverpool, and they got me writing by doing – a part of the Second Chance to Learn was doing creative writing. And that became a bit of a – a bit of a passion. And I was part of a group and we produced a little book of the things that we'd written and we self published it and used to – and used to

distribute it and sell it. There was – and on – there was a women’s history group on my Second Chance to Learn course who – there were some older women and they wrote about a lot of things. They wrote about – some of them had been in service in – and had been either maids or cooks or housekeepers or whatever, and they wrote about being taken away from their own homes, going to live in somebody else’s home, wearing a uniform every day and doing menial jobs. And they wrote about it really powerfully, so we thought we should publish that. And another group – another group from the women’s history group on my Second Chance – I did two years at Second Chance to Learn at Liverpool City College as I was learning to read and write. So I’m not dyslexic, I don’t think. I think the struggle to read and write was mostly – my education was disrupted and I used to run away a lot, so I was absent from school and I missed it.

*So care very much shaped your education.*

Yeah. I didn’t get an education, really. What I learned through the experience of being in care was to be resourceful. I certainly learned to be deceitful and to lie a lot. And I was an expert thief. Anything that wasn’t bolted down, I’d have it. I was also driven by this huge kind of compulsive pattern to acquire [laughs], because I had bugger all most of my life and if I saw something I wanted, I would just take it. I don’t do any of this any more.

[1:26:40]

So I graduated from care – I went to prison pretty much soon after I left care.

*What for?*

Hmm?

*What for?*

Thieving, petty larceny. I was ... I was in a care home. They got me a job. They took me to the gents’ outfitters, where I got fitted out with a new set of clothes to go

to work in, and that was it, I was off to work. Then they prepared me for leaving home by calling me in to say, 'You'll be leaving next week' [laughs]. And they put me in the local YMCA hostel, where, within a, I don't know, a week or two, a key went missing, and because I'd been in care and had a history of thieving, they put me down as the person who'd nicked the key. Well, I hadn't. And I remember, I was – I had – somebody had asked me if I'd do a bit of babysitting, so I went to somebody's house and did a bit of babysitting. And my social worker turned up on the door with a policeman to question me about this key that had gone missing in the YMCA. So I think within a – I don't know, a month or so of being in the YMCA, I was homeless, they kicked me out. And then I did a bit of couch surfing and bumming around. And then I decided to hitchhike back to London. I had six shillings in cash, in old money ... That's 30p [laughs], six shillings, and a cardboard suitcase with a few clothes. That's all I had. I went to London, I got a job, I got a bedsit. I picked up with a – I started doing drugs – well, I'd been doing drugs before but only sort of as an amateur. In Ipswich it was a sort of – it was an agricultural market town when I lived there. It didn't have very much. There was a funny – I was only there for five years. It was a funny place, Ipswich and Suffolk. And I was an incomer. So the reason I went to London is I just didn't feel at home in Ipswich at all. It wasn't for me. I went back to London, 'cause I knew that's where I came from. And ... hmm. I had a bedsit. There was another lad who was couch surfing with me and – 'cause he'd been chucked out of somewhere. And the house next door was empty, derelict, and we went in there and we nicked whatever wasn't bolted down and the few things that were. We even nicked – they had like a water geyser that used to heat water. It had a copper coil in it. We nicked it for scrap. I was absolute – I mean, that was Christmastime and we were absolutely skint ... [Laughs]. And anyway, I wound up in a youth detention facility in Ashford in Middlesex. Oh, the first part of it – I was – I can remember the sort of admission procedure, where you get your ritual bath and an inspection of all your orifices in case you had anything secreted there, which I'm sure that they – they must have chosen people who'd enjoy this kind of work [laughs], 'cause they were brutal, absolutely brutal. And I was issued with my prison kit and I was taken to the hospital wing because .I'd been using drugs, I'd been injecting. I had needle tracks on my arms. So I did cold turkey in Ashford in the hospital wing and then I was put in C wing, where – because I kept getting hammered by some other lads who'd been arrested at the same time.

*How old were you?*

Oh, I was seventeen.

*And how did it feel, being seventeen and suddenly left care –*

In prison.

*In prison.*

Oh well, a bit of the feeling was it's a bit more of the same, 'cause, you know, I'd had plenty of it. It was an education. I learned an awful lot in prison, from other people and – ah, the other thing is ... there was a prison visitor who was a vicar, or a priest, and he used to come and he used to come – I think he was a volunteer. He used to come with a library trolley and go round and you could choose books. Well, I wasn't very good at reading books and I told him, you know, 'Not for me, I can't read.' And I told him I can't read. I could read a little bit. He said, 'Will you have a go?' I said, 'Well alright then, I'll have a go,' but with no intention of really doing anything, just to get rid of him, really, sort of sod off with your trolley and leave me alone, you bastard, was the attitude at the time. But I took a book and it was a book – I can remember the title of it. I can remember the content of the book. I can't remember the author. But the book was called *Oblomov* and it was about a Russian, set in Russia, and the story was about this man who just kept putting everything off. He was like a compulsive procrastinator. He would put everything off and he would avoid things. Anything that involved any kind of confrontation or effort, he would avoid. And it was the story of his life and it was quite a depressing sort of story, and I pretty much made the decision, I wasn't going to be an Oblomov [laughs]. Er, I was there for three months. It took me three months to read this bloody book.

*But you read it.*

Read some of it, yeah. I can't – I'm not sure that I actually finished it. And this fella kept coming back to see how I was getting on with my book and he'd asked me what

bits I'd read and we'd discuss it and stuff. And in the end I told – stopped telling him, 'Piss off, you bastard, and leave me alone.' I used to engage with him.

*How long did you stay in prison for?*

I was there for three months and then I got eighteen months probation afterwards. And I absconded from my probation order. I used to go and see this probation officer, a very nice woman. I was living in London and her office was on Old Street, next to the magistrates court in Shoreditch, and I lived down the road in Dalston, and I used to have to come and see her. After a while I absconded. I went hitchhiking with a mate of mine, called Bart, and we decided to go to Holland. And we tried to get – so we managed to get across on the ferry, but we didn't have any money and the Dutch immigration people said, 'Well, how are you going to support yourself when you're here? How much money have you got?' And we had bugger all. So they said, 'Well, we're not letting you in. Off you go.' And they put us on a ferry and sent us back. So – with a bit of sort of – a mixture of judicious thieving and a bit of work, we managed to get some money and go back and they let us in. And it was a sort of hippy flower power time. So I left school in 1968 and left the care home then and I left prison in 1969. And then we went bumming around Europe. So I suppose I'm still on the run [laughs]. It was another bit of running away. I didn't like the probation thing at all. I thought it was absolutely pointless and useless. The woman was a nice sort of woman, in a kind of do-gooder kind of way, but totally ineffective. Couldn't really help me. I don't know why I went to see her. I found it oppressive, so I stopped going. I went and told her I wasn't coming back. I said, 'I'm going to bugger off now. You won't see me again.' And she said, 'I'll see you next Thursday.' And I just said, 'I don't think you will.' She said, 'I'll see you next Thursday.' And she put this sort of threatening tone, as if to say, you breach your order and you're going back in. So I thought, sod this, I'm going to bugger off, and I did. And the following Thursday I wasn't there [laughs]. Oh dear.

[1:35:34]

*What was the draw of the Netherlands?*

Erm, well, partly it was because they'd – the liberalisation of street drugs, and for the first time in the first place that I had access to, there was – there was a supply chain for cannabis that didn't involve criminality, which means that you could smoke dope and you didn't get busted. You could have some dope and you didn't get busted. You could even – yeah. And I slept in the Vondelpark in Amsterdam during the summer and then I found somebody who wanted me to help him renovate a boat on a canal, so I used to sleep on the boat and I used to scrape all the wood and paint it and that sort of thing. And then I met up with another bloke who taught me how to repair bicycles, so I had a little job repairing bicycles. And then I went travelling. I lived in a commune in Denmark called Christiania, just outside Copenhagen. And I met up with an American bloke called Job, who was a draft dodger. The Vietnam war was on, so Europe was awash with people with long hair and beards and bangles and their little bags of dope, and they were just sort of trolling around the place, trying to stay clear of the law. And it felt like quite a revolutionary subversive thing to do. It was very attractive. And so he was dodging being sent to Vietnam and he was living in Copenhagen in this commune, and I went to live in – he taught me how to bake. I became a baker. And we used to bake sort of organic bread and cakes and stuff like that. And another bloke taught me how to do leatherwork. And Christiania was full of couples who had children and babies, and I learned to play. And it was bloody gorgeous 'cause my childhood hadn't involved a lot of playing, you know. I learned to do horsey rides on the floor with children on my back and stuff like that. I really enjoyed it. So I got a chance to have a bit of childhood that had been missing from before and it was immensely healing ... probably the best therapy I've ever had [laughs], learning to play. Bloody brilliant.

[1:38:14]

*Did you play at all in the children's homes that you were in?*

No, there wasn't much opportunity, really. I was in children's homes – some of them were run by religious people, who were very structured and very strict and very controlling, and vicious, to be honest. And I'd been in another children's home, sort of on the sort of Barnardo's model, family group children's home, and what they did there was that the older children became responsible for the younger children and got

pushed into being, if you like, the sort of pseudo parents very, very early, and that kind of takes all the playfulness out of it. And we all had jobs in that children's home, so my job was cleaning all the shoes ready for school the next day. So I'd get home from school, everybody would take their shoes off, put them in a big pile and my job was to polish them, 'cause you couldn't go to school without polished shoes. So I used to polish all the – put newspaper down in the hallway, get the brushes and the stuff out, clean everybody's shoes, put them all in pairs, and then by the time I did that it was teatime. We'd have our tea. And then my other job was doing the washing up, helping them with the washing up. And then they'd park us in front of the telly.

*How many of you were there?*

There was about seven or eight. That used to change. Some – I mean, the maximum was ten for the unit. And we shared bedrooms. I shared a bedroom with Anton and he was a couple of years older than me, and he was a bit more rebellious and experienced than I was. So yeah, it was an education, being with him.

*What did you get up to, apart from running away?*

He's – I got an interest in motorbikes through him. He was always building and dismembering motorbikes and I used to help him. And then when I – years later when I had a motorbike of my own, I rode down to see him because it needed a bit of fettling and we took it to bits, put it back together, repaired it, stuff like that. I saw him quite recently, this year. Where are we now, May? This would have been around about February or March. My brother being – my youngest brother has been in hospital and he had cancer of the throat, so he's now got a hole in his throat and a tracheotomy and he has to put his fingers on the disc, [croaks] and he talks like this, 'cause his voice box has gone. His vocal chords have been removed. He's got a scar right round there. And he's still in touch with Anton and Anton became a friend of all of my family, really. So when I used to do visits home he used to come with me. And when he did visits home to his family, I used to go with him. We just became mates. And [laughs] I remember, he gave my mum a joint [laughs]. Oh dear. So I learned to smoke dope through Anton. And he gave my mum a joint and it really did relax her, and for a little while all that tension and edginess that was always around

being around my mum was gone 'cause she was just, like, stoned. A wonderful experience. She really liked it.

*Did she know what she was smoking?*

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Anton dared her. He said, 'Go on then. Have a go. Have a go.' [Laughs] I don't smoke dope anymore, haven't done for years. I think it was a kind of self medication. If I had – if there hadn't been cannabis, I guess it would have been alcohol and I'd have been an alcoholic by now. But it was self medication. It was ... it was a way of moderating mood so that I could survive without being angry all the time. Being angry all the time is really quite crippling and I suppose there's a bit of my life where I was a really complete emotional cripple. I couldn't express any of the other feelings that I had except anger and I did it very destructively, and a lot of it was self destructive, 'cause it was self sabotaging. It was hurting me more than it was hurting anybody else. And that is crippling. And the effect that it had – well, I had lots of jobs. It was at a time when there were quite a lot of jobs to be had, unskilled jobs. It's different from now. You could start a job. If you didn't like it, you could pick up your cards on Friday and move on and do another one. And I did. And mostly I moved from place to place 'cause I used to get angry just about everywhere I was. I was really booby trapped. I had little – kind of little spiky bits sticking out of me and if anybody rubbed up against me and kicked one off, you know, that was it, me gone. All rational thought and functioning would disappear, the red mist would come over my eyes and I'd kick off and lose my job [laughs]. It's another reason for becoming a trade unionist is I was – got expert at the disciplinary interviews and assisting other people ... anyway, what was good about the Netherlands is you didn't get busted. And it was also in Copenhagen, in Christiania, there was a very relaxed attitude to smoking dope. It was quite a gentle sort of society, that commune. It really was a commune. It really was a community. Now it's a tourist attraction but back then it was revolutionary. It was very subversive. Like talking about children, we used to look after each other's kids. Every child in Christiania had about 250 parents, you know, which was brilliant. Everybody looked out for each other's kids and everybody looked out for each other. It wasn't – then there wasn't, you know, hardly – there was no crime at all. It was a self regulating sort of society. I went back to visit it years later and it's completely changed. It's still

there but it's a tourist attraction. And I lived in communes quite a bit, even up until quite recently.

[1:44:47]

*What's their appeal to you?*

It's a bit like a children's home [laughs]. The last one I lived in was called Hallehuis and it was in a little city in the Netherlands called Amersfoort. And Amersfoort's sort of halfway between north and south and halfway between east and west. It's really the sort of dead centre of the Netherlands. It's a tiny country. You can get anywhere and find a border within about three hours [laughs], so it's a very tiny country. I think they – there's a form of society that evolved there. It's under attack now but there was a form of society that evolved in the Netherlands with a lot of solidarity. And I think it's partly because it's a country below sea level and they're always fighting to keep the North Sea in the North Sea. And the – historically there was the necessity to preserve the dykes and there was all kinds of folklore about putting your finger in the dyke and all that sort of stuff. True folklore based on true facts but still a lot of – and there's a lot of solidarity about, you know, we will keep the North Sea in the North Sea and we will look after ourselves and we will preserve ourselves. And so they've preserved a lot of their culture and history. And in rural areas the Netherlands is still back in the 1950s, especially the bits that are close to the sea. And I quite liked that, that people would look out for each other. I think they've got a very enlightened way with children. I – when I lived in the Hallehuis, again we looked after each other's children, and I used to collect kids from school, or take kids to school, and then they used to go to this school called the Free School. And it was based on a sort of anthroposophic philosophy, the sort of Steiner philosophy, where children are important and valued, respected. Their dignity is respected. They're treated like they're precious and important and lovely and loveable. So I used to take the children to school and the teacher would stand at the door of the classroom and greet each one, shake them by the hand or give them a kiss and say hello by name, 'Hello, how are you? Thank you for coming to school. Off you go, in the classroom.' And I'd pick them up from school and the same teacher would stand at the door and say farewell to each child personally and by name, and with some kind of touch, you know. Those

that didn't want to be kissed and hugged would get a handshake, you know, but they'd get some kind of contact and they were valued. And ...

*Is this very different to your experience growing up?*

Oh yeah, yeah. I grew up feeling that I was a fucking nuisance, pardon my French, and I was treated as though I was just an encumbrance, a nuisance, a hazard, a burden. That's – and internalising all of that is a sort of sense of worthlessness. So I grew up feeling worthless. And that drives another kind of pattern as well, a behaviour of trying to prove my worth and striving, and being really very driven about that. In every job that I've ever had, I've always been promoted [laughs] and usually sacked [laughs]. Oh dear, isn't it funny? But I think, because I couldn't read and write very well, in most jobs I could find things that needed to be improved that would make my life easier, that I wouldn't have to work so bloody hard. Because for – up until about the late 1980s, when I started to really push and try and learn to function in a – in a world where there's a lot of text and reading and writing is quite an essential thing to be able to do – and my godsend really was – when they invented computers and computers got cheap enough for me to have one, with a spell check and with a text reader, and I learned – I think up until that point I'd mostly been doing jobs that involved a lot of driving. And I was made redundant, went on a TOPS course that was about learning to drive a computer, and I learned I could drive a computer really well, and I learned a lot about computers and it started a career. And so late on in life, I moved from doing manual work to working with computers and got good at it. And every job that I – I started – 'cause I didn't have a CV with computers on it. I had a CV that said dead end jobs, really, so I couldn't really get an entry into that industry 'cause I didn't have a CV that positioned me. So I worked as a temp, as a contractor, really. It's really glorified temping. I did three months here, three months there, a week here, a week there, and – but in every job that I ever did, I always tried to find a way of improving it to make it less hard work, and that became a pattern. And it's a sort of driven behaviour that kind of evidenced itself in trying to make my life easier and to prove my worth. And I – I got a job with a company called Digital as a contractor and I really improved the work that I did. I've – and they became very interested in what I'd done. And I really only had short term contracts but they kept renewing them and kept giving me more difficult things to do, and I liked that. Then

they were taken over by a company called Compaq, who kept me on as a contractor and I worked for them. And eventually they offered me a job, a permanent job, as a project manager in the Netherlands, because they wanted me to do what I'd been doing as a contractor – they wanted me to do it for their customer base, to improve the IT systems that their customers had, which they managed as a sort of outsourcing deal. So I did that. And then I got to be the services principal for Hewlett Packard, because Hewlett Packard acquired Compaq, about 2002, and I managed all of the post merger integration of the company's systems. So Hewlett Packard had systems, Compaq had systems, I knitted them all together. And part of that post merger integration was – they had two of everything. So they had two finance departments and two sales departments and two of everything and it all had to be kind of integrated and streamlined and I did all that. And then they made me – they gave me the job of doing similar things for their customer base and I became a sort of – like a solution architect. I would create architectures for Hewlett Packard's customers, so that their systems worked better. And I learned, with this kind of driven behaviour that was driving me, that it started to drive my projects. And I got very good at doing something, which was understanding the customer's business aspirations and trying to make systems that would be enablers for them to get to where they wanted to go. And I think a lot of that comes from children's homes, you know. A lot of it comes from self preservation, trying to keep myself out of trouble, which I didn't have a great deal of success in, but it certainly did drive what I was doing all the time. And the sense of worthlessness, of being sort of cast off, cast aside, parked in a – parked in a humane place where I'd be fed and watered until I was sixteen and then turfed out, which is what happened essentially.

[1:53:37]

*Where did that sense of worthlessness come from, from who or from what precisely?*

Well, I think it's the fact – I suppose from ... I suppose I felt discarded by my mum. And that's where all the emotion – the emotional investment is. I really wanted my mum to love me enough to keep me at home. And so another thing that's kind of driven me is ... it's to do with love and it's to do with humanity ... and so really I suppose I'm on a mission to love as many people as possible [laughs] and to be loved.

And that's another thing that drives me. It's been immensely useful and also a huge encumbrance [laughs]. So it's been immensely useful because I make friends quite easily and I'm quite explicit – I claim people. So I've claimed you, you're my sisters. We're sisters under the skin, you and me, 'cause we share something and we're sharing this. I make friends quite easily. I learned how to do it. It's a way of keeping me safe, you know. I learned to be a sort of chameleon. And another thing that happens to me – 'cause I moved around such a lot in my childhood to different places, to different places where they had different ways of speaking and different accents, and so I can acquire an accent wherever I am, or an approximation of it and I'll attempt it, and it's a way of sort of blending in, becoming one of them, being accepted. And it's about learning to make friends. But I did it to keep myself safe.

[1:55:28]

*And were you always safe, growing up?*

No ... no. No, I wasn't. I'll tell you a little story. It's a true story and I won't embellish it or anything like that. I think it's – and it's a – it's a little anecdote to demonstrate something that I – or to evidence something that I think happened. I think I lost my defences by ... oh, what's the word ...? [Sighs] Well, by being taken, which is a rape. And all I can remember about that is that I passed out and a lot of it's blocked out. I can remember the pain. But it's like when you've experienced something as invasive as that, your defences against it are gone. And the little anecdote is I used to – I loved swimming. I was a real water baby. And on my visits home, when my mum wanted to get me out the way, she'd give me my bus fare and sixpence to get into the swimming pool and I'd go to swimming club. And I learned to swim and I became a really good swimmer. I could swim two miles when I was about ten. And the swimming pool used to close in the evening for the swimming club to take place. So the general public were evicted and swimming club would take place. And I always used to go early because there was always a period when the swimming pool was completely empty. And I made friends with the lady at the swimming baths and I gave her my sixpence for swimming club and she says, 'You're a bit early.' I said, 'Okay, can I swim?' And she'd say, 'Yes.' And I'd go in and swim with the general public and then when they got out, I'd get out with them so that

they'd all get out, 'cause if I stayed in the pool of course they wouldn't get out. And then while they were getting changed I'd go back in the pool and swim until it was time to start swimming club and then the lessons would start. And I'd practise, I'd just do lengths up and down, up and down, up and down, or diving or trying to improve my technique of turning my head and breathing and all that sort of stuff. I'd practise so that I could be really good. One day we were in the swimming pool and I was doing my lengths and there was this chap and he said, 'You're a really strong swimmer. You're doing very well. That's great how you do that.' And I started talking to him and I started showing him how I could dive and how I could swim underwater and all that. And he kept saying, 'That's brilliant what you're doing. That's great.' You know, he was appreciating my skill. But he was also – I didn't know it. He was grooming me. It was time to get out of the baths and so the attendant would always make sure I'd get out as well, even though she knew I'd go back in afterwards. And I went into the changing rooms and this man got me to masturbate him. I had no defences against it and I had no idea what I was doing or what he was doing. And ... something really horrible happened afterwards, which is not to do with me being sexually violated or my innocence being exploited or me being used for somebody else's gratification. It was something about – it was about the internalising of it, is – I was a little boy then with a little boy's penis and I used to show – I went – in swimming club we used to use the communal changing rooms and I demonstrated to these other boys how you could masturbate yourself and get a stiff willy. And I had never done that before and I didn't know anything about it before. I learned it from this man. And these children would go home and tell their parents about what I showed them in the changing room and then they suddenly stopped coming to swimming club. And then the swimming club said they don't want me there anymore and they wouldn't let me in, because the other parents had complained about this inappropriate sexual behaviour in the changing rooms, which was me. And I didn't understand any of it. And then the swimming club said they don't want me there anymore and they wouldn't let me in, because the other parents had complained about this inappropriate sexual behaviour in the changing rooms, which was me. And I didn't understand any of it. Hmm ...

*Did you tell anyone about it?*

Hmm?

*Did you tell anyone about it?*

Couldn't tell anybody, really.

*Who was at home?*

Well, my mum was there. I couldn't tell her about it. I did tell her one thing and I didn't get treated very well about it. I told her I had a pain in my bum. And ... her answer was, 'You are a pain in the arse. You're just like your bloody father.'

[Laughs] So there was not really much point. I didn't have a refuge or a resource at all in my childhood, no. Figured out a lot of stuff since, but at the time it was really hard. Very, very confusing. And running away was the answer, mostly.

[2:01:17]

*The following section is closed for 10 years until 24th October 2023: Track 1*

*[02:01:19 - 03:01:43]*