

INTERVIEW: BRUCE

Q1b. Have you always lived in Milton Keynes? (When did you arrive? What was your first impression? What reasons prompted your move?)

BRUCE: No.

INTERVIEWER: When did you arrive.

BRUCE: To live here permanently... 1991.

INTERVIEWER: Had you visited here previously

BRUCE: Yes, with my job. just briefly, Stony Stratford particularly

INTERVIEWER: What was your first impression of Milton Keynes

BRUCE:

The city as a whole, Milton Keynes as a whole, obviously coming to the railway station and being driven to Hanslope Park or Stony Stratford where I had been staying, I thought yeah the concrete cows and roundabouts give you a good flavour of what it's all about, a bit of a mocker. Of course, at that time all the saplings were saplings, so you saw a lot of suburban stuff, and it wasn't particularly attractive. Then you came to Stony Stratford and thought now this is a place I could enjoy, and in fact I stayed here for several weeks, going home at weekends. And when I'd knew my job was going to move up here, so I thought Stony Stratford was the place to live, so there were the two sides to it really. Certainly, that was my first impression.

Q2. What do you feel has changed the most in Milton Keynes?

BRUCE:

As I say as someone who lived in London for nearly 20 years at that time, I was a bit of a Milton Keynes 'on the bandwagon' scoffer, red balloons, and concrete cows and all that. So, I was prepared to see the worst if you like of Milton Keynes. Not Stony Stratford. Then when reality kicked in, and I had to move then I thought OK actually one of the things is travelling about Milton Keynes is a doddle thanks to the roundabouts as much as anything it's an oxymoron. Over the years obviously the trees have grown up, five minutes away from the centre of Milton Keynes shopping and station you're into almost countryside in terms of passing through. And then, of course, the cultural side built up the theatre, and everything and I thought 'ah well, hush my mouth'. You should have given them more of a chance and the now I think it's a great place to live.

Q3. What, if any, qualities make Milton Keynes unique?

BRUCE:

Unique? I'm not sure there is anything unique because again because of this division the centre is pretty much the centre and it's full of corporate stuff. Looks like every other centre in some ways accept newer but then when you get to the old established suburban areas like Newport and Stony Stratford and Bradwell and all that, then you see it (or what) has been incorporated and it makes it a very pleasant place to be. As for unique, not sure there is a uniqueness about it but on the other hand it's not the same as everywhere else, so I suppose it has.

Q4. What would make you proud to live in a place? (Do you experience some of these elements in living in Milton Keynes? What could improve your pride in living in Milton Keynes?)

BRUCE:

I think of good social life and a good community spirit which of course is what Stony Stratford has got. It is quite a mixed town, but then it is quite an arty and social town because all the facilities in it. Well used to be anyway. With a lot of independent shops and pubs and restaurants and it's also got

things like its own health centre and a library, just about. That to me is what a place to live should have, particularly the buzz of the community spirit, so you try something, I've tried lots of things in Stony and almost entirely got terrific support from large and varied swathes of the community. So, it's not just the musicians or artists it's the whole community.

INTERVIEWER: Do you experience any of these in Milton Keynes?

BRUCE:

Yes, I think, I probably would. Which may be unfair because I've not lived in any other part of Milton Keynes and so I can imagine that places like Newport and stuff have got some sort of similar things going on and even some of the newer centres may have, but I don't know. I don't think it will be on the same scale or as the same type as Stony. I think Stony is just... they call it the jewel in the Crown, and I think for good reason.

The reason I'm struggling a bit is because of the word pride. I don't have a particular sense of pride about anything really, other than it's a pleasure. Some things are a pleasure some things are not. Okay, some things you achieve because you made an effort, you think 'well yeah I did pretty well there' so I think this is a bit of pride, but as a community I'm not sure.

INTERVIEWER: Well, instead of pride, happy about living in that place.

BRUCE:

I'm happier with happy as it were. Really am not sure there's an awful lot they can do because although it's got its problems. Milton Keynes as a whole has got its problems, the balance that you have to accept comes with a big city with the centre and all the commercial business and all that sort

of stuff. And the little local centres including the old ones and the new ones, it's a pretty good balance really in what they've got. What else could you do? I think sometimes; one little criticism would be, I think sometimes the Milton Keynes Council perhaps, and perhaps the other authorities including the arts authorities, are a bit centre focused. And you sometimes feel well okay. It is like the literature festival that they've got going on at the moment is, with one or two exceptions its city centre. Which in some ways is fine but why not invite others? We had to correct them by the way when they said it was Milton Keynes' first literature Festival about three years ago, and we said you mean other than the one that has been running in Stony for ten years. So, I just thought we'd get a dig in. That would be my only suggestion other than the economic factors, but then that's national anyway.

Q5. In your opinion, what element of Milton Keynes is: The best. The most exciting. The hardest. Lacking. The most culturally significant. The richest in heritage?

INTERVIEWER: Best?

BRUCE:

I think it is this balance, really, because you've got the convenience if you want it of the commercial sector. It's very prosperous in terms of job creation and things like that. So as an economic unit it's great stuff, and that means there's a knock-on effect for the whole of Milton Keynes because if you live in reasonably prosperous healthy high employment place, relatively, then everything steps up a little bit. Once it starts to go down other problems occur that drag it down even more so I think the best thing is that it has this balance between being economically attractive viable city and also it's got its social things going on within the individual little units.

INTERVIEWER: The most exciting element?

BRUCE:

Again, although I banged on a bit about the local centres like Stony Stratford being more of the cultural scene, I have to say that Milton Keynes itself, despite my comments about they are a bit centre focused, actually provides a terrific amount of good stuff that is available. The theatre, the art galleries, all of the things that happen, the Park trust walks that I don't go on, but nevertheless they are there. I think it's just the buzz of the place says there is so much going on, it's not in the doldrums and so that is the exciting bit without picking out an individual thing. Otherwise, I'd have to say Stony Stratford again.

INTERVIEWER: The hardest?

BRUCE:

From a general perspective, obviously it's got its economic difficulties, and it's got its struggling and poor areas. What Milton Keynes Council and other authorities locally can do about that I'm not sure because I think it is symptomatic of the national situation. You've got rundown areas, and they're always going to need that bolstering and sometimes I'm afraid the bolstering doesn't work no matter how much you try to bolster it. There are attitudinal problems in some cases for example.

INTERVIEWER: Lacking?

BRUCE:

Seaside. I don't know I'm not sure it is lacking much at all in terms of making it attractive to live here, other than like everywhere else in the country, it would be nice to see the whole economics prosperity was on the rise so that people are happier. You don't have the crime which Milton Keynes like

anywhere as even Stony Stratford has got some level of crime be it drug peddling in the background but doesn't tend to affect you or the knock-on effect of that which is burglaries and vandalism. A lot of vandalism in Stony, car scratching, stupid stuff like mirror breaking. I don't think there is [a lacking] I think it's back to this word balance. I think they've got the balance of a commercial city centre with a reasonable amount of culture. I can't think of anything that there is more of a demand for that is not already catered for, maybe I'm wrong because the theatre is overwhelmed every time then maybe we need two theatres, it could do with a bigger hospital.

INTERVIEWER: The most culturally significant?

BRUCE:

I'm going to be really boring says this balance again. I think they, certainly in the time that I've been here, and it's natural anyway for a new city, the attempt to create something for the arts and for a community thing and so on and so forth throughout the area. Sometimes it is done locally, and sometimes it is done from the centre, I think they've got a good balance.

INTERVIEWER: The richest in heritage?

BRUCE:

You mean Stony Stratford? I think it benefits from the fact that although some people don't like it, the whole city has expanded to incorporate a lot of old villages without, in my opinion anyway, really destroying that village feel from the start. Now maybe there are some people have been here before Milton Keynes and lived in a centre of Newport or Stony or Bradwell or whatever it might be, well say absolute nonsense we are just swamped by rubbish. I know there used to be fights in the street

between people from Milton Keynes, the new people, and the locals down the pubs. The carrot crunches as they were known to the foreigners. This is what friends of mine who have lived here for donkey's years say there used to be pitched battles in the high street of Stony Stratford coming out the pubs. The resentment. That seems to have gone away now, so my impression is from only having been here 27 years is there has been, sorry I'm using the word balance here all the time, they've managed to incorporate the old local centres without too much disruption. And the biggest problem is the centre is good from one point of view and the shopping side and other facilities, like pubs and so on, restaurants, but it is helping to destroy local high streets. And the focus seems to be to continued promoting the centre as a wonderful place that people should come to. Whereas you've only got to travel 30 miles up the road and there's another centre exactly the same, with the same shops, same cafes, same whatever, and you think you know...

Q6. Has Milton Keynes played a part in helping you gain any achievements which you might not have been successful in if you lived elsewhere? Has it aided any failures?

BRUCE:

Well, I think so yes. I mean for a start when I first came to Milton Keynes it was because of a job, I worked in Hanslope Park and settled into Stony. And suddenly my local pub, that I enjoyed very much, came up for sale and I thought I could buy this and run it with the manager, so I did. I couldn't see that happening in London where I lived before, or in many places. I think you need the small-ness and the contained-ness of somewhere like Stony to be able to do that type of thing because there was that sense again. You immediately got a sense of not only an attractive place to live in terms of the physical side of it but a community thing there. All the pubs had darts teams, and skittles teams and a bit of music and all sorts of good stuff and people go from pub to pub, or you see people in restaurants and you think okay these people are forming a community and supporting the whole town and that gives you the inspiration to say I can do something. So, following on from the pub where I organised things like music and silly food evenings, and quizzes and made it a social club type pub. One of my

regulars called it a youth club for the over 40s, which is a classic quote - it is just a gem that one.

That's what I tried to make it. And it worked because of the support.

And spinning off from that would be the fact that that it meant I got involved in other things like the festivals that go on like StonyLive! and StonyWords which I started, Milton Keynes first literature festival by the way. And other little things, I was on the Christmas lights committee organising the Switch-on fun-day and all that kind of stuff. So, I was inspired to do that because I knew there was the support there. And then when I sold the pub and retired, I came to help run York house, and my contribution has been a lot to do with 'here's an idea' project management, that's what I enjoy let's do it, and that's what I've done.

INTERVIEWER: has being Milton Keynes added to any failures?

BRUCE:

Failures - only a couple of ideas that I tried and didn't, but that is only minor-league stuff. You look at it and say it might fail and if it does you think did anybody get hurt? Financially or otherwise. And the answer was no, not so far anyway, so failures no, I don't think so. On a personal level I came here having been divorced and so I had to build up a nice social life for a guy who is a stranger in the town. So, it's more the opposite of a failure. Then, of course, I met somebody which of course is not a failure.

This might sound rude but, if you are to interview somebody from, say our neighbours in Fullers Slade, where there is a lot of poverty, there is a lot of downtrodden-ness. There is an attitude there which has come out some of the things that I've been involved in which says that's not for the likes of us, that's the posh people, that's for people with money, the arty farty people. There is an attitudinal problem in society generally. If you could find somebody in Fullers Slade or Conniburrow the attitude might be different.

INTERVIEWER:

I am speaking to people across the city, Bletchley, Simpson, but specifically Broughton, Conniburrow, Stony Stratford and Wolverton.

BRUCE:

That seems to me a good, at a guess, a good representation from the most prosperous Stony Stratford, although there are pockets within each individual local centre, but as a whole town with facilities and so on then going down to the ones with the reputation for being a bit of a dump - sorry.

Going back to the failure side of things, I'm guessing, but the biggest problem is even if you went to Conniburrow, the sort of person, I'm guessing now, who would say okay I'd like to be interviewed possibly is the more positive thinking slightly more go-getter. As opposed - again back to the word downtrodden - well it's bloody awful here. Obviously, you get quite a lot of shades from just thinking, the person who came here with expectations of getting somewhere possibly having come out of an area that is even worse than Conniburrow. I used to go down to New Cross to see friends. I didn't want to live in New Cross in 1970s, I can tell you... 'sheesh!' But if somebody has come out of there with expectations and Milton Keynes hasn't lived up to them, provided those expectations, then it would be interesting to get that person's view wouldn't it. But are they going to be the people that you are going to be talking to?

Q7. If you were in charge of advertising Milton Keynes what view/image and/or tag line would you give it?

BRUCE:

In terms of a vista it would have to be a sort of composite which showed the expanding new dynamic futuristic commercial centre with potential for economic prosperity for all, but with the little historic local centres that somehow transpose or mingle in with it in an artistic way. Just to show it's a city of,

I'm going to use the word balance again, but also a city of contrast and I think that's what would sell it and in terms of well... contrast is a good word, in terms of the tagline just to say 'yes it's a modern city but be surprised it's got all sorts of goodies'.

Q8. If Milton Keynes was a person could you describe them and the type of 50th party they might have?

BRUCE:

Yes, okay. My first reaction would be to say Donald Trump, but that's just a sarcastic remark, so ignore it.

I think it probably would be male, which I'll get shot down for saying, why would I say that? I don't know why I said that but seeing as you asked. I think in general it be a well-intentioned person of reasonable education but not necessarily the top-flight but reasonable education and a 'thinking outside the box' sort of person. A terrible cliché that. Somebody who is prepared to try stuff, think about it carefully but try stuff. Like some project management, what was going to stop it working, and if there isn't enough to stop it working then you say let's even give it a go, and you get other people on board with you. So it's not just one person, a Donald Trump, then you know 'I like this idea'. I think that would be it. It's a pretty dynamic place is what I'm saying. I'm sorry it has to be a male, probably white as well, but you probably don't want to know that do you.

What type [of party]? Well I think it would be if am going to be honest, it would be possibly a bit cheesy, or certain aspects of it would be a bit reality-television focused. This is showing my snobbery perhaps. I think it would be balanced to be fair. It would say we've got to cater for everybody's tastes so there would be all sorts of stuff going on, but there be some twaddle at the bottom of it. Joking apart, I was slightly joking, but I think it would actually have all elements some of which I wouldn't be interested in in the least. I probably wouldn't go to it just for fear that the balance might not be, balance might be tilted, I'd be busy reading a jolly good intellectual book with lots of words and no pictures.

Q9. Please watch this clip from the BFI archives, 8 mins

(<https://player.bfi.org.uk/free/film/watch-milton-keynes-a-village-city-1973-online>). It shows the early days of Milton Keynes. Does this evoke any memories or thoughts you are comfortable sharing?

BRUCE:

Surprising they chose an area with good farmland to build on.

That's Mason Edwards artwork, isn't it?

Well, I've seen quite a lot of that sort of thing but not that particular film. That was somewhat before my time is the obvious statement, it was well established, well most of the local centres were established by the time I got here in 1990 for first visit. So, it was 23 years by then surveyed got all that organised. I'm suffering may be from the fact I've seen variations on that film a number of times, and so I knew quite a bit of what was going on, so that didn't make me go 'Oh really'. For me what might have been a suggestion is something that moves on from that. So for instance the first minute of that was 'this used to be fields and tractors and all that', then the Milton Keynes Development Corporation, and this is what it's beginning to look like now; or over the years it has become this, this and this with more and more centres. And the centre itself has developed the theatre so that might stimulate people who are not entirely aware of what Milton Keynes has to offer. It is amazing. There are people who are born and bred in Stony Stratford and who live here and don't really know what goes on they think that York house is still Milton Keynes Council youth club. You think wake up.

Q 10. Do you think Milton Keynes has a good reputation a. Internally with its residents, b. Externally with the rest of the country? (Why do you think it has this reputation? How does that make you feel? What could improve it?)

BRUCE:

That's a difficult one. There is a lot of dissatisfaction. You've only got to listen to people talking.

Well, listen to me talking in fact. There is dissatisfaction. But again, is that Milton Keynes fault or is the dissatisfaction what you would find with everybody, too much crime, not enough policemen, not enough facilities in the hospitals too many queues, too much unemployment, too many drugs floating around and all that kind of stuff. There are problems, but I don't think they're specific to Milton Keynes. I mean you can criticise the council, but then you could criticise Northampton Council even more for example.

I think it's overcome, in my impression, whilst there is no doubt pockets of it it's overcoming the concrete cows and roundabout joke city that it was. Simply because it's on the news quite a lot. In terms of creating employment and the level of unemployment and stuff like that and the opportunities and the style that you can live in mostly in Milton Keynes is getting through to the rest of the country. So if I was me of 30 years ago with my London job and my London house and all that kind of stuff and sort of going 'pooh-pooh to the red balloons, concrete cows and roundabouts'; then by now even if I still lived in London I'd be convinced that was rather false sneery, too early in the day picture.

Looking back, you can see what it was trying to achieve [the initial advertising] the children cycling through the countryside down by the canal's and all that sort of stuff and then the busy city centres the commercial stuff and that kind of thing. And then the serious stuff like the fact that it's half an hour from London by train so a lot of good stuff but I think the jokes slightly backfired on them. The jokes about we've got 183 roundabouts, two for every day of the year, or half of one for every day and the concrete cows thing which again you can see was a humorous attempt to say we were combining the countryside with the future. But that backfired didn't it whether that was due to their mistake or the cynicism of the people is not for me to say.

[The reputation] It doesn't really worry me because I'm not a patriot in any way I can see good and bad in everything I've travelled all over the world and seen some places that I've wouldn't want to live in if you paid my entire existence. In luxury as well. But at the same time, you know, England Britain

has got a lot of faults. So, I just think Stony is a good place to live in the same way that Milton Keynes is generally a good place to live, but Stony makes it a better place to live in. Without being patriotic if you know what I mean. But Stony's got its problems. The road I live on, cars and buses and farm vehicles belt down there like the clappers and if you could do something about that it's a residential area. Stick it 20-mile limit on it, while do you need to go faster than 20 mph in a built-up area? Because you are an idiot!

Q 11. Do you know any stories, jokes, or urban myths about Milton Keynes? Can you share them?

BRUCE:

Not jokes no, I don't think I do really! Myths and anecdotes? Well the one thing about Stony Stratford as you know it is the home of the Cock and Bull from the two pubs that are down there, and it said to be the origin of the phrase, 'Cock and Bull story'. Which as it turns out is a cock and bull story in itself because there's lots of references that kind of thing preceding the existence of those two hotels. But generally Stony Stratford, one of the fascinating things about it is there's a lot of history that may or may not be true. Did Dick Turpin really belt along the old Roman road when being pursued by the law? And did he go down the little alleyway that you can no longer see from the High Street between the Fox and Hounds and the shop next door coming into town which used to be a pub called the old Talbot? And there was an alleyway there you can see it from the back. The theory was that it was a safe house for him they were pals of his, so he would go down the alleyway there, and his horse would be winched, Black Bess would be winched into top window and hidden in the bedroom, and he would be hidden until such time as the law pissed off.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard the same story but about the White Horse.

BRUCE:

The White horse the same one that is still, well it must be the only one because it is one of the oldest pubs in Stony. Right okay, I might have to research that because as you know I was involved in writing a book about pubs and inns in Stony Stratford. I know the element of truth in that is that the pubs on that side of the road, is that they were too near the river to have cellars it would be flooded all the time they've all got something to winch up.

Date: 11/9/2018

Location: Office Space, York House Centre, Stony Stratford, MK

Observation: Bruce has a background of management and although retired still manages and organises events in his community. Perhaps due to his background Bruce often focused on the wording of the questions, critiquing the process as well as answering the questions. When answering the questions, he readily picked up on the theme of balance and referred to this often, especially when he showed signs (umming' looking around the space) of thinking about his responses or unsure of his response. This could be another cause for focus on critiquing the process, to bide time while he thought of a response to the question or reacting to establishing a suitable answer (he seemed to be concerned with giving a good answer).

Due to the critiquing, the interview at times felt somewhat awkward although Bruce remained jovial throughout. He focused on his home area (Stony Stratford) suggesting he does not interact with other Milton Keynes areas as much.

The interview was transcribed verbatim, however when sent for 'member check' Bruce refused to believe that he repeated or tailed off mid sentences, so these factors were corrected and altered at his request. The content remained intact.