

## **INTERVIEW: CHARLES**

### **Pre-interview**

CHARLES:

Well I'll talk about this, because this is very important, this is the film I've most recently done. You've seen it- Make No Little Plans. That is precisely the purpose of that. Somebody asked me yesterday who is the audience for that and I said well it is a general audience; it is the people who live in Milton Keynes. It's to try to get the people who have committed their lives to this place to understand what was it that the founding fathers thought. What was the vision for this place, and what was the spirit in which it was created?

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

CHARLES:

No came here in 1971, and I got a job with the Development Corporation, and I was a community worker initially on the first corporation estate Galley Hill, then Fullers Slade, then Greenleys. In '71.

The reason for coming... two jobs came at the same time - you know how you apply for jobs - and one of them was the East End of London, and at that time my wife was heavily pregnant, we didn't have a great deal of savings. Well, Tower Hamlets where I got the job had 12,000 on the council house waiting list back then - God knows what it is now. So, there was no chance of getting a council house. The only house we could afford was a first-floor maisonette in Hornsey. I was offered that job but then along comes the Development Corporation with this job offer and of course in those days you got a house with the job. The job... the house was in Galleon estate in Old Wolverton. So, Wolverton was where we became most familiar with, and of course in those days it was very, well it's not physically different to what is now, it was still the Works dominating the town. Two or 3000 people

still working there in the '70s. There wasn't much in between. There was Wavendon Tower where the Development Corporation was based.

I started off working in the Lakes estate actually in Bletchley prior to being the one who was designated to do the stuff in Galley Hill.

Here were we in this old railway town basically and my wife found it quite a shock, to say the least. The biggest thing was within months our daughter Hannah was born. And my wife was, if you like, trapped, well I say trapped.

The other thing was, we found we could afford a four-bedroom house in Wolverton - £4100 at the time, with a cellar, for the same price as the one in Hornsey.

So, we moved in into this terrace house in Cambridge Street. My wife was at home, didn't know anyone, had a new baby, and she was very miserable for quite a long time. In the middle of a community in which when she went down the street curtains were twitching, we were very different: this was a very working-class community, and here we were young and kind of a bit liberal and hippish in terms of length of hair and that sort of thing. So yeah it was very alien place for her. Meanwhile, I'm meeting the new residents, certainly after 72 when Galley Hill started to be occupied. But it was very different. I've been brought up in Southampton. We'd been at university in Brighton. It was a very kind of different place. Not what we were used to.

To be honest, Roger Else, we'd known him and Monica down in Brighton, and I don't know whether he told me about this thing or whether I'd seen it when I came up for interview. Roger and Monica lived in Willen.

And Jill stayed for the day with Monica while I went had my interview. I didn't really know anything about it, I had a Diploma in Community Development from Manchester, and my special study, the extended essay, dissertation, had been about settling in new towns. It was Skelmersdale which I'd visited, but I didn't really know anything particularly about Milton Keynes, it was just the place where they offered you a job, and of course the other thing was the real attractor was that they offered you a house if you got a job in the area and a house to rent.

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

CHARLES:

I always tell people that the one constant about Milton Keynes is change. 'Change has been a way of life' is one of the phrases that I've said in Milton Keynes. In fact, particularly in those early days, when people first moved in, they were moaning quite rightly so - particularly if they came from London. The nearest hospital was 20 miles in either direction. There was no hospital. There was no Central Railway station. There was no shopping centre. There was no this; there was no that. They would arrive. There will be these things you know, just as in the same way that a new estate would appear. That is the constant about Milton Keynes, and I don't know whether it makes people more adaptable, where people get used to that. Or you could say the other problem is people are saying 'where's the next big thing?'. It has changed dramatically. Wolverton, prior to the arrival of Milton Keynes I think had more allotments per head of population than anywhere other than Birmingham. So Greenleys were allotments. Stacey Bushes was farmers' fields and part of Stacey Hill Farm. So just around Wolverton physically things have changed so much, and it was always about new roads opening up or new bits, there was always something that was changing about the place. That has been the constant about it.

But on the other hand, I love Wolverton. I wouldn't want to live anywhere else. I've lived here all the time. We've moved from Cambridge Street up to this house - a much smaller house but with a very big garden because my wife who was brought up in a first-floor council flat with a balcony and no garden at all. But she got into gardening, so after five years in Cambridge Street, she'd done a Wolverton terrace house garden. And she saw this place was empty. It was in terms of interior space a lot smaller, but we had the big, big garden. We've always lived here and honestly if we won the lottery, we wouldn't want to live anywhere else.

I actually, together with Cleo Laine, opened the seat outside of Waterstones in their intu building, you know the book seat. And I gave a speech there, and I said one of the things about Milton Keynes that

you do not get in more established places is that we have been able to write our own history. In more established places you talk about traditions. We've been able to create what had become traditions, the lantern festival in Wolverton which we set up, is now 30 years old this year. And you've been able to have a real influence, I feel. This is what is unique about living in Milton Keynes, which you don't get if you live in Leeds or Birmingham or Brighton or anywhere. And we've been in the very early stages of it, and we've been able to write our own history. There is that thing which you don't have all that 'So-and-so does that' - there hasn't been that. But within Wolverton what I did love, was that you're coming into a place that had did have a strong sense of community with the people working in the Works, lots of petty snobberies. And there were two tennis clubs there was one down the Park and one up here, and this one was really for the managers and managers' children, and so on, there was all this kind of thing, but they all work together with the very paternal employer in the works. Whereas in Stony, Stony has not got many clubs or societies relatively, because the leaders in that community, their time is devoted to running their own businesses. In Wolverton that was taken care of. You were employed by the Railway, so your energies went into the community. We did have our own Light Orchestra and drama groups. That kind of tradition for me coming in, I bolted onto that. A lot these people were older, but then people like I and my wife come in and give another boost to it. They did the carnivals, and now we have the Lantern Festival and so on. And then this community becomes more diverse. The Pakistani community came to Wolverton - obviously a big upset to the mildly racist, for they hadn't had many strangers in. It was bad enough with these people coming in working for the Development Corporation and whatnot.

I gave a TEDx called 'What Makes Community', and it talks about what makes Wolverton a special place. It is for example when you walk down the street here, they all look the same but, in those houses, you could have a university lecturer, somebody who works in Tesco's, or retired railway worker. People who live in Wolverton are not about keeping up with the Joneses, are they? You're living in the shabby end. Most people think and feel sorry for you living here. The people who come here, the new generation, the younger generation, they are committed to making it a special place.

It's a bit like culture. Some think it equals opera, but culture is actually the living breathing thing of any place really. I think the word 'culture' has got wrapped up with things like grand opera and having a big theatre and all that kind of thing. The best thing about Milton Keynes was not having a theatre for 25 years. Because the Development Corporation was eager to help build community: that's why they employed community workers and people in the arts and sports, to get these activities developed. And they had money obviously to do that. If we'd had a theatre and a gallery from day one all of the money would have gone into those things instead it went into things like Stantonbury , They gave money to employ Roy Nevitt at Stantonbury to stimulate drama - - as well of being the head of drama in the school, having a role to develop community drama. Hillary Daven-Whetton, the head of music but also ended up with the city Orchestra coming out of it. All of those things happened at grassroots and giving money to help with things like the documentaries, which led to the Living Archive and giving people the chance to get actively involved in things brass band festivals. If we'd had a theatre, we wouldn't have had that, in fact in many ways I feel the arrival of the theatre has done a lot to kill a lot of what I call the home-grown stuff. When Roy and I started working together, we would do ten nights at Stantonbury sold out. There's no way you could do that now. It was a smaller place. Once the Theatre arrived, now when people go to the theatre it's to see a national show. We enquired about doing a revival of the very first play that we did together, to celebrate the anniversary of the First World War. And we were looking at doing it at the Theatre. The Theatre have this thing that they give a concession to community groups supposedly. But it's like the second week in August - that is not a concession. In those early years is where culture developed, I feel, the unique thing, those documentary plays we did, 12 in all, more than anywhere else, using primary source material so that the only words are the ones that were either spoken were from recordings or the words of documents. They also inspired original songs and music.

All in all, over a hundred songs have been done. We would never have got chance to do that if we'd had a theatre here, a professional theatre. In a way there's a legacy of that kind of creativity and the other stuff that the Living Archive do, it wasn't just plays obviously, but any creativity like sculptures, textiles, dance, all inspired by local lives. We two mottoes at the Living Archive, one is 'everyone has

a story to tell', and the idea is to collect those stories and then the important thing is to share those stories. And the other one is 'Dig where you stand' in terms of stories to collect you don't need to seek out the rich, the famous or the notorious, or the football stars or whatever it is. The people with the story to tell are your neighbours, and their stories will inspire all sorts of things. In terms of that transformation from the original stuff into the art form, there are within your community people with the most amazing talents whether they are choreographers, filmmakers, web designers, whatever they are there.

Another thing, if it's going to be relevant, when we talk about Living Archive, we don't talk about it as community art we talk about is documentary art. There was a time when we were setting up, there was a lot of community arts around, but community arts had, I want to say, a flaky reputation, you'd work with people with one leg or these little children who were disabled, and it meant you got away with crap basically in terms of your product. We wanted to set an example. Our philosophy was when you're dealing with people's life stories and people giving you that information. They deserve the best you can do in terms of giving it back to them. Also if you're going to get involved in the play, and the plays we do, the cast would be assembled in September there be all day Sunday rehearsal and a mid-week rehearsal and the play wouldn't be performed until December. You're giving up a lot of your time for that, and you deserve, you need to be involved in something really good.

We formulated a five-step process. First of all, there's the inspiration, you see an old photograph and want to know more, or you hear somebody talking in terms of the story, you see a diary or a letter or whatever. And that's the inspiration. Then you have the research. You go and collect the primary source material, the stuff that was recorded at the time -the newspaper articles, the diaries, or people that were eyewitnesses. You then make that research accessible and usable. You transcribe it. You digitise stuff; you get it into a form that is accessible. It's no use having this recording on there without the transcript. And then you turn into an art form - you edit it basically. And then the final step of the process is to give it back to the community that inspired it and use it as a focus for community celebration and pride.

Looking at this being a new town, we often said, in retrospect, that Living Archive was the child really. On the one hand you had the people of Wolverton, Stony and whatever whose lives were literally being bulldozed by this change that was coming, and with scant regard for what had gone before. In come these trendy architects and community workers, planners, whatever. On the other hand, you have people arriving here who have left their family and kinship networks behind and come to this place. What the Living Archive did was to celebrate and give worth to the stories of what gone on before this new city came. And through things like plays and textile projects, it gave excuses for people to come together and make friends and connections and so on. These documentary plays had three generations all there together on the Sundays when they were people making costumes, and there were dance rehearsals and play rehearsals, and there were the lunch breaks, it was a place to make friends, and that was an important element in what it was all about.

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

CHARLES:

I would say is the poor man's Australia. We're all immigrants. I think that's very important. There is a patriotism about Milton Keynes like people get patriotic about America. One of the big things about it is, if you're born in Portsmouth and you grow up in Portsmouth, you have not made the choice. We made the choice in coming here, driven by wanting to have a place to live and so on, but we made a conscious action to come here and make this the place where we live. And that's important: when people went to Australia to make a new life or America, it means you're taking that risk, leaving the family and everything behind. I always remember Jack Trevor Story was the first Writer in Residence who lived up the road here at Stacey Hill Farm. And he made a series of programmes called 'Jack on the Box', for... I think it was ATV - that shows you how long ago it was, in which he basically poked fun at Milton Keynes. He'd come from living in Hampstead, and he pokes fun at it. In fact, Roger Else's wife, Monica, was pictured... He had her with a pushchair going along muddy streets and empty roads and all these half-built estates. People who we became friendly with, Sylvie and Brian,

they were living in the East End of London, and they had made the decision to start a brand-new life in Milton Keynes. These programmes were on the telly. Well their friends laughed at them, 'Oh, the place you're going to ha ha ha'. They had never met Jack, but Brian and Sylvie hated Jack Trevor Story because he'd, if you like, not shattered the dream, that's probably wrong, this was the place they were going to go for a new life, and this person was making it look like a terrible place. And you know how much Milton Keynes in those days was joked about by people like Noel Edmonds and Terry Wogan, and all that lot were making fun of the place.

So, in that sense we're all coming together, we are all strangers. In the midst of it are these poor people who have lived here all their lives whose life is turned upside down and it's ironic now I think that people like us who came here 40 odd years ago are now complaining because Milton Keynes is doubling in size with all these people coming!

There is this patriotism to them, and in this new book we printed literally on Monday, 'People stories of Milton Keynes' there is a wonderful bit by Anna Skelton. If I can summarise what she says, she talks about the fact that people in Milton Keynes have got quite sensitive to criticism from outside. She uses the analogy; we are a bit like a dog that wants affection, wants to be patted, that sort of thing. She thinks we should be a bit more brave and we should be a bit more like cats, like sod them, we are here. I think that's a good analogy. In that sense, Milton Keynes is very different. Obviously, people like me and others have now been around a long time, and my son lives in that house across the road there, my daughter lives over there. They went off to university, and they came back. I'm not sure we can use the word 'local', we've not been here 50 years yet, but something like that.

But all of these people have come into Milton Keynes are not necessarily aware of its history. It is not taught in school. Why is Campbell Park so called? Why is there this shopping building in the middle of what were bean fields, three times bigger than it should have been? Fred Roche gardens, who's Fred Roche? What's all that about? We should share the story of the foundation of this place - what was it, why is it like it is, and the kind of spirit it was built with, partly because I feel that that

boldness, that can-do attitude that the planners had, we mustn't lose it. The people that are coming afterwards need to keep up that kind of boldness and spirit of optimism and gung-ho attitude.

It's also about whose stories are told, who gets to tell the story and who gets to be believed. Derek [Walker] was a very good self-publicist, and when Derek died, there were obituaries saying he the man who did the plan for Milton Keynes, he designed the shopping building. I know when we interviewed at least one of the people who were involved in the design of this shopping building, in fact he got out the RIBA certificate to show that it was his name on it and not Derek Walker's. I'm just using Derek as an example. What's being quite interesting about people telling their stories is a consciousness, I think, that this is going into an archive and this is the chance to tell their story and cement their place in history. When the historian, the future PhD student is coming looking at that, they've got to pick amongst all the stuff to try to steer a course to say, 'where is the truth here'? To be fair, it's not the people necessarily telling lies; it's the way that memory works; the thing about memory is it tends to reinforce our own sense of self. There will be things that we forget, not deliberately forget, to tell future interviewers, it's just that not all events we took part in reinforce our sense of self. You get people saying, 'I was the person who was responsible for the Parks Trust or the theatre, and then the obituarists come looking through go okay so and so did such and such but it ain't quite as simple as that, is it? That's the way stories get told and embellished, and in the end become urban myths.

**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?)**

CHARLES:

I think Milton Keynes has a very good reputation, well, good. God when you think about it, do you want to live in London? When you think of the quality of life that is here it's extraordinary really. It's been incredible. And getting those parks, getting that 20% of the city as parkland, I mean wow, and

the way that they have been managed, wow. And the jobs and the lack of high unemployment: that isn't to say there aren't homeless or problems, but for the most part Milton Keynes has been an incredible success story. In terms of satisfaction, people are very positive, this is part of Anna's thing, that we've made this choice to come here and it's been a good one and these people on the outside bristle when anyone dares to criticise them. But I think it's been a fantastic success. It's going to have to confront some of these issues, some practical things like traffic. These roads were built for 200,000 people, we don't quite get gridlocked yet, but we do get traffic jams in the morning, and it's interesting that planners are looking at driverless cars in the future as the solution to this. I think people are very positive about living here. Interestingly one of the things that has come out of this 'Milton Keynes' 50th' project is the number of young people who have come back and are committed to coming back here. The place that their parents brought them to, unwillingly perhaps, you know, 'Dad's got a job in Milton Keynes we are all moving', or they were brought up here and left here thinking, 'What a crap-hole this is I'm off' to Oxford, Cambridge, London, in my case, my kids' case, Brighton, Nottingham. But they have ended up back here. Now as I say, particularly kids in their 30s have got problems in terms of their affordability of housing. But what came out of the people interviewed for this project, was the number of young people, whether it was, MK11 music venue, and artists, Anna Skelton - lots of young people are coming back and committing themselves to Milton Keynes and want to make it an even better place. I think it is partly because they know their parents' experience 'they know what the planners did - they did build a shopping centre that was three times bigger than the experts told them to build. They did do this, and they did do that. That's in the DNA of Milton Keynes, young people think we can make this place great, and to be fair they have got to be given the space to do that. People like me have got to move over darling and let these people do it with our encouragement. The pioneer thing.

Bill Billings, he was a lorry driver. He was shifting earth around, and he got to meet Liz Leyh, who was building the concrete cows. He was a very practical man himself, and he acquired some building materials. He lived on Netherfield at the time, and there was a place on the map that said, 'play area', and he went and built a train and I forget what else he built in the play area. Lord Campbell got to

hear about it. He turns up with his wife in his Bentley and knocks on Bill's door and says, 'Bill come and show me this thing'. Then Bill, emboldened by this, starts building his dinosaur. He then goes into a field, a blank field and starts, and 'No, you can't build it there, that's going to be Bleak Hall'. Finally, he gets permission to build the dinosaur at Inter-Action, and he's given some money to build his dinosaur there. So, there is that wild west, and people had to deal with it, there was mud everywhere, some people didn't survive that, they thought it was going to be the land of milk and honey. But in those early days, particularly in those early days when there was mud on the roads, the hospital wasn't there, it was tough for people. But it was a place where they could bring up their families; they got a house of their own, they had probably been living with their parents or living in crummy accommodation somewhere in London, and they grabbed it.

CHARLES

Date: 13/9/2018

Location: Interviewee's home, Wolverton

Observation: Having a background in conducting interviews, Charles began the conversation by noting the antiquated equipment I was using and gave some recommendations of better equipment. The interview was pleasant but formal, and slightly rushed as Charles had an appointment he needed to get to, therefore the interviewer was selective about the questions to ask as it was obvious that we wouldn't get through all the questions. The responses were a heartfelt mixture of personal interest, personal experience, and enthusiasm about the local area. When talking about the opportunities that Milton Keynes has afforded him his face lit up at remembered events and sat forward in his chair when discussing the importance of heritage in the area or telling a reminiscence.

The transcription was verbatim with Charles' member check correcting a misspelt name and removing repetitions.