

**TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH VAL KEMBALL BY DAVE WELSH ON 12  
JANUARY 2012 AS PART OF THE BRITAIN AT WORK 1945-1995 ORAL HISTORY  
PROJECT**

(Val graduated from Swansea University, in her native Wales, in 1969, and took up a position as a microbiologist with *Glaxo* Laboratories in Cumbria. Having worked there for 3 years, Val came to London, initially undertaking voluntary work at *Blackfriars Settlement in North Southwark*, as part of the Community Action Team. From there, she trained as *Social Worker*, and worked for the Social Services department at *Hounslow Council* for 10 years; both as a social worker and a community worker. Having taken a break from employment to look after her child, Val re-entered employment as part of a co-operative venture running the *Red and Green book shop* in Acton, remaining there for 6 years. Val then re-trained to gain the Chartered Institute of Management Accounts qualification (intermediate level) and her return to employment saw her make a venture back into the private sector, working for a commercial motor repairs company based in Park Royal. Val undertook some agency work in other private companies before securing a position with the peace charity, *BASIC*. She remained there for 4 years before leaving for an 7 year stint at *North Kensington Law Centre*, until retiring in 2007. Val was an active union member – belonging to *ASTMS*, *NALGO* and *UNITE* – throughout most of her working life and also took part in a variety of community campaigns and organisations.)

*DW: Val, I wonder if you'd like to start by giving me some idea of your background, where you came from and how you came to be in London?*

Well, I was born just after the war [WW II] near Swansea. My Dad was from a Welsh-speaking mining family and my mother was a farmer's daughter. Her father had a small farm in North Gower. My Dad, of course, had been through the war and before the war he was quite a bright and up-and-coming young man. His parents had managed to put him through a small business college in Swansea and he learnt shorthand and typing and bookkeeping, which was quite usual for boys to do in those days; and he set up a small insurance firm. Then the war came and, of course, he was conscripted. He was in the RAF and [went] through D Day then Northern France, Holland, and into Germany. He was at Belsen [concentration camp], a few days after Belsen was liberated [by the allies], and he came back, eventually [1945]. He was married by then [and] I had an elder brother. After the war, of course, there was no work for anybody, really; let alone in South Wales. Also, because of the war, his insurance business had gone. There was no insurance business because there were no cars on the road, so he then got a job as a Bus Driver. He was working as a Bus Driver in Swansea for quite a few years, which he quite enjoyed. He was a good driver. Then, after that, I think he did some office work [as office supervisor attached to the factory for several years] in ICI; there was a big ICI factory there [Wanarlwydd, Swansea]. They [carried out work with] titanium, aluminium and various[other] metals and then they [ICI] got taken over by an American company – IMPALCO, the Aluminium Company of America. He left there eventually [because of redundancy] but, anyway, getting back to myself, I failed

the 11 plus, so that wasn't a very good start, even though I was quite bright at that time [at school].

*DW: So did !!*

But I was lucky enough in that I got a free scholarship to a small private school in Swansea. There were quite a lot of them in those days because most people – people forget this now – failed their 11 plus, and 80% went to Secondary Modern schools. Now, I don't know what they [Secondary Moderns] were like in London, but in our part of the world, near Swansea, they were absolute rubbish, to be honest. People left there with no examinations, no qualifications; nothing. But there were jobs around, though; for boys, anyway. There were [more manual] jobs ; [and] apprenticeships. I suppose that wasn't too bad. Eventually, I did quite well at my O Levels, then, and I went to the local Grammar School – a girls' grammar school, very strict, you had to wear ankle socks and berets in the 6<sup>th</sup> form. I got my A Levels there and went to Swansea University. I was lucky because, at that time, this is in the mid 60s, there was an opening up of the universities in the UK generally, which actually benefited young women and, certainly, working class young women because their parents wouldn't have dreamed of sending them to university [previously]. The situation is reversed somewhat now. There were grants available, so I had a grant. I was able to go and, actually, that changed my life, really. It opened up opportunities that just would not have been there [before].

*DW: This is part of that expansion of universities in the 1960s.*

Yes, in the 1960s, under Harold Wilson. There was a Labour Government then. They also set up the Open University then. There was a lot of expansion in education, particularly women benefited. But even at that time, [there was] only 4% of school leavers ever went to university; a tiny percentage, really, compared to now. So, I'm all for the opening up of Higher Education to young people.

*DW: Swansea, then, was the university that you went to.*

Yes, it's part of the University of Wales. There were four colleges then.

*DW: People often talk about it being a bit of a culture shock, the ways that universities were then. A very different class intake on the whole, wasn't it? Was it [a culture shock] for you?*

Yes, it was, actually. Well, partly, I'd never really met English people before. I know that sounds strange! Also, there were people from all over the world at Swansea [University] because it had a strong engineering department, because it was linked to the industry in South Wales – Port Talbot Steel Company of Wales, and I think there were oil refineries there. There was still quite a lot of industry, mainly to do with metallurgy, in Swansea then. I actually did Biology and we had quite a close link with the Swansea Valley Project [SVP]. I don't know if you've heard of that but Swansea was the metallurgy centre of the world in the late Victorian days, really. As a result of which, because of all the smelting works and things like that, it was 96 acres of derelict land; and I mean derelict, nothing would grow there. I remember visiting one tip there which was a zinc foundry from [in] the 1790s, which closed down sometime [in the Victorian era], I don't know when, but nothing had grown on it since then. Our department, which was the Botany department, actually had close links with that [SVP], doing projects there. Now they've reclaimed all that land. It was [due to the] very

close links between the university and local industry and local projects. So that was quite interesting to me; but also, over and above [the work], we had [a lot of] international students: people from Africa, India, the Middle East, there were quite a lot of Middle Eastern students then, including Iraq, because of the engineering subjects that they were doing at Swansea. In fact, my best friend at Swansea was a woman who called herself 'Mary', her proper name was Maheranissa, and she was from East Africa. So, it was a great opening up [and meeting] of cultures and one of my boyfriends there, at the time, was a Sikh from Uganda. That sort of thing [opportunity] would never have happened if I hadn't gone to university. It [Wales] was very nice; a very cultured place, South Wales, anyway, but we just didn't meet anyone from outside much. It was very inward looking. We looked to ourselves, really, to provide education and culture. That was very strong when I was [living] there. They [local villages] had choirs and brass bands and music. I wasn't musical but there were lots of [other] people that were. They said that [communities in] South Wales was very good at setting up committees. They would set up a committee at the drop of a hat! So those kind of fields [skills] were around, which I don't think existed much in working class communities in London; but, I don't know, having said that, the unions were very strong in London; strong unions, although my father wasn't particularly pro-union. But, generally, they [trade Unions] were just around [in South Wales]. Anyway, it was an opening up in that way [educationally]; for women in particular. Some [English] students thought we were quaint because we spoke differently. It was an opening up for them as well because lots of them were from London, and hadn't really moved out of there. Londoners don't move out all that much, actually. People come to London. Very few Londoners go out of London [to live] but they [some] did come to Swansea University.

*DW: Why did you choose Botany? What made you choose that? A Science subject.*

Yes, I was quite interested in doing Sciences. In school I was quite good at Mathematics and, also, we had an excellent Biology teacher. So there was the influence of the teacher, I think, and I did my A Levels in Biology; Zoology, Botany and Chemistry. I didn't like Chemistry much, but you had to do it [to do Biology]. So I got a place at university on that basis really [my A levels]. I didn't go far because there were personal reasons which I won't go into. It was a good university, I enjoyed Swansea.

*DW: So you did that and then, at the end of university, what did you do then?*

Well, there was not much work in Wales, in Swansea, anyway, for graduates, generally, let alone Biology graduates. So I got a job up in the north of England working for *Glaxo*; Glaxo Laboratories as it was then, doing research and development on penicillin in the micro-biology Unit. So I did that for a few years, which would have been unheard of for a young woman to have done that, even 10 years previously I think. I was very homesick. It's up near Barrow-in-Furness; Ulverston. It was a completely different culture to South Wales. There were problems with understanding each other. That might sound strange now but they still spoke in a broad Barrow accent, they had the old dialect [Cumberland] around Barrow and Ulverston. There were quite a lot of young graduates there; *Glaxo* had one of their main laboratories there at the time. My husband, who I met there, was a chemical engineer, and there were quite a few [other graduates] in the microbiology and biochemistry [Units]. There were about two or three hundred young graduates there, so we tended to mix together because I think that young people tend to. They were probably all under 30, most of them. They were from all over the country; some from abroad. The Barrow people were very nice

but they spoke with a different accent and they thought that we were a bit strange! I talked to a group of Barrow High School girls one day, they actually thought that I was German! I'm not sure if these things still go on in the UK. Because [then] there wasn't so much travel and regional accents and regional dialects were still quite strong. I'm talking about in the late 60s now, which is [was] a good time really. Anyway, so then I moved to London.

*DW: What prompted you to move to London?*

Well, I wanted to travel [and change jobs]. I wasn't all that interested in doing that kind of research and development [at Glaxo]. I wanted a change of career, really. I wanted to something that was more involved with working with people. I joined a trade union while I was up there. I was the first graduate to join. It was the *ASTMS*, Clive Jenkins' union. I think that the [Glaxo factory] supervisors were members of it. There was the factory there [at Glaxo], the fermentation factory, making penicillin and various antibiotics; a big factory. It's still there [although much reduced in size]. They [factory supervisors] were in the *ASTMS* and the Shop Steward recruited me. I then recruited my husband, we'd married by then, and then he recruited a few other graduates. It wasn't the done thing for graduates to join a trade union [then]. Also, at *Glaxo* then, they had a very paternalistic management and they didn't like trade unions; they didn't want trade unions in there. They thought that they looked after their own staff and they had a Staff Council, I think, [something like that].

*DW: What was it that made you join, then? Were there any sorts of grievances?*

There weren't any actual grievances as such. I think it was coming from South Wales, I think [thought] that it was normal to join the [a] trade union. I'd been through university and I suppose we [university students] all got quite different ideas and looking at [questioning] values in society. I suppose I'd become quite left wing at that stage. While I was at university, I lived through 1966-1969 there were quite a lot of occupations throughout the country [in universities], wanting change. We weren't all that clear what change we wanted but I think we just wanted it [society] to be less paternalistic, and [with] more involvement; a different society, really. There were a lot of social changes in the 1960s. Students were not as foremost [in the UK] as they were in France and Germany but in Swansea we had an occupation at the registry office, which I joined in. Then we had a Student Action group (SAG) there [in Swansea] and I think I went with them up to Bristol University, when they had a "Sit In" in the Senate House. I think that was 1968. We went in solidarity. There were always demonstrations, including when Harold Wilson visited Swansea in 1968. During that week, I seem to remember, we [had] Rag Week. We turned out to demonstrate against Harold. I can't remember the exact reasons but, basically, because we didn't think that he was all that left wing, I think. But he was Prime Minister, and he did actually do quite a lot for us students but, anyway, we didn't quite see it that way. He was very good natured. He waved at us all as we were chanting '*Harold Out!*' and those kinds of things. Ted Heath [Conservative leader] visited Swansea University and that week we were having a 'sit-in and Be-In' there. This is all strange now, [but] it seemed quite normal at the time! He came there and we all demonstrated against him. I think we refused to let him speak, I'm not sure if I did. But the students were against [what he represented]. I can't remember why he came there actually. Anyway, there were demonstrations against Ted Heath and people walking across the stage and being generally disrespectful.

*DW: So you were part of that first generation of students who became radicalised.*

Yes, well I was on the margins really. I used to join in on these things, just to find out [more]; and it was an interesting time. It opened up your mind. It [challenged] traditional ways of thinking, which were very traditional in South Wales at that time, especially for a girl. [My] mother never worked, well, she worked at home on her father's farm, but she never worked outside the house. It wasn't the done thing in South Wales [for a woman to work outside the home]. In other parts of the country it was different. My Auntie Greta actually was the first one in our family; she did go to Grammar School; [she was] my mother's sister, who was also [lived] on the farm. I think she did secretarial studies there [Grammar School]. She could do shorthand and typing and actually wanted to do a job, and got a job lined up in the village that I lived in, in the Steel Company. There was a steelworks there and [she had secured a job] in the office but her father refused to let her go. He was a very traditional farmer and he refused to let his daughter go out to work. Times have changed. She's still alive, she's got dementia now, but she still resents that.

*DW: Yes, stopping her developing a career. So you came to London from Glaxo.*

Yes, 1973, I think.

*DW: What happened?*

I was looking for a change of direction. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do, to be honest. So, the first thing that I did, I got a job as a volunteer at Blackfriars Settlement. It wasn't a job, it was as a *volunteer at Blackfriars Settlement*, which I knew nothing about. I'd seen an advert and I got an appointment there as a volunteer. I didn't get paid. I think I was on the dole, so I wasn't really supposed to be doing that, but I did, anyway. So that was quite an eye-opener to me [being on the dole and Blackfriars settlement].

*DW: Where was that based?*

It was based in Nelson Square in North Southwark . At that time they'd got a new director there, Jim Radford, who had been involved with Ron Bailey in setting up the Family Squatting campaign and, I think, [and previously] involved in CND [Committee of 100]. I didn't know anything about Jim then but, anyway, he [had] started about a year before I started, I think, and he was trying to change *Blackfriars Settlement*. The settlements were Victorian institutions set up by academic women, I think, from Oxford and Cambridge, in the poor parts of London, and they did lots of projects and social work type things [projects] from these settlements; and education schemes. They had been going a long time [since 1887]. I think there were [still] a few settlements round and about. There was certainly one in North Lambeth.

*DW: Toynbee Hall, probably.*

Yes, Toynbee Hall's one. That was in East London. There's quite a number of them, I can't think of all of them now but, anyway, at that time, instead of doing the more traditional [activities] – doing the good works and visiting people, ([although] they still did a bit of that, they had a blind club there, blind people would come along and they'd have weekly activities, which I helped out on for a while) – they'd set up a Community Action Team there, [and] BIAS – Blackfriars Information and Advice Service, so I joined the Community Action Team. They were all young graduates, actually, I think mainly. I did one project which was down on the Elephant & Castle. I think that they [local residents] approached us; the local

community worker approached us to see whether or not we wanted to get involved. There was a street down there called Munton Road, which was basically a slum landlord [situation] like you had in North Kensington. I actually went and visited people, knocking on doors and talking to people. Conditions, even though I'd been brought up in South Wales where we're used to poverty, were absolutely appalling. I've never seen anything like it. This is in the early 1970s. There was sewage coming down through the walls, there were rats about, and it was just terrible, terrible living conditions. So, with the team, we helped set up a tenants group there; a tenants action group. A lot of the tenants (there were people keener to get involved in those days) came along to the meeting. I think it was over a hundred. They formed a tenants action group and we gave them advice and support about how to go about it. They had a march on the Town Hall and talked to the Planning Officer, [and] Housing Officers there. They had press coverage and there was a picture of the chair of the tenants association in the *Evening Standard* holding up a couple of rats that had been found in the street. The people were very active there and we used to help them set up their meetings. They used to meet at the *Blackfriars Settlement*. We put them in touch with councillors; normal community action type things. Eventually they did get re-housed and the area was redeveloped; council housing, [blocks of flats] which wasn't the greatest but, anyway, they did get re-housed eventually.

*DW: It was very much like [the movements in] West London - community action; not all of it was new, but much of it was drawn from what students had been doing, demonstrations and the like.*

Yes, and I think a lot of it grew out of the 60s and the Peace Movement, and the committee of one hundred, they're [activists] used to doing that (Jim Radford was very involved in committee of 100), and the squatting movement. They [community actions] became widespread. There was a lot of community action going on in North Kensington. There were links between various community activists, I think, around London at that time. There was the *Housing Action Centre in North Kensington* which I did a placement in, underneath the motorway. That was post the activism that was in North Kensington [in the 1960's]. That was all based around the motorway as I remember; late 60s I think it was; coming through this area and dividing this community. I think there were lots of play groups, nurseries set up, summer play schemes and the Housing Action centre, which I did a placement in, that was set up; and the Law Centre, of course. North Kensington Law Centre was set up, I think in 1970. That was the first one in the country, who I worked for later on. It was a time [for community action groups] – this was around the late 60s, early 70s- and I got caught up in it, really. It was different really, partly at university and then working at *Blackfriars Settlement*.

*DW: So, you say you learnt all sort of skills? You don't often realise that people who have been through all that, the community activism, and even political parties, you actually learn all those skills like public speaking, writing leaflets, how to work a Gestetner, all those things.*

All those things- [Gestetners] dreadful!

*DW: You actually learnt them. No one sat down and taught you. You learnt as part of the process of doing the stuff and for a whole generation it was an important way to [learn].*

It was very good developing [personally] and, also, a [lot of] new people got on board; all new [including] working class people. It was partly to do with these various community action

groups and tenants associations and things like that, and also through the trade unions as well. Trade Unions were a bit top down, then, and I think people wanted them to be more bottom up. They wanted to get involved.

*DW: Rather like now, you've got the Occupy people, and the unions now are responding to that and, I guess, in the 60s and 70s it was the time when that was also being done. As you say, unions were very top down.*

They were much more rigid, I think, and a bit stuck in the past, and not seeing the young peoples' [perspective]. Don't forget that, in the 1960s, a quarter of the population was under 25; a very young generation. A bit like in North Africa now. So young people always want to have different ideas; they'll always want to move away from their parents. Of course, in the 60s, looking back at it now as an older person, because my parents' generation had all been through the Second World War and that was an experience we wanted to put behind us. They [parents] were still suffering directly as an after effect of the war. I know my father did. He did suffer, from nerves basically, because he'd been through fairly horrendous experiences. I suppose now they call it Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, and a lot of the men came back with that and got no help or treatment; although they [the government] did build new houses. I think we had the Welfare State as a result of the men coming back and voting for a Labour Government. Some would argue it was the best Labour Government we'd ever had. It certainly changed things enormously, actually, not least on Health and Education. The way my father and my mother were brought up, there was no Health Service. People did used to pay into various Friendly Societies and they paid into insurance schemes and that sort of thing. People used to pay insurance but they didn't get first class treatment. A lot of people used to die; children used to die, just of ordinary diseases; Scarlet Fever and Measles, and things like that.

*DW: So really, your [mother and] father's generation was scarred by the 20s and 30s and the war. As you say, they obviously didn't want to go back and you were the type of group who were saying, 'we're not going to; we're going to build on that; equality [and fairness].*

Yes, very much so. I don't think that we actually thought like that at the time, we were much more interested in not looking back; we didn't want to hear about the war again, because all our childhood had been talking about the war. We were interested in popular culture and music. Music was a very big influence in the 60s and dances. London in the 60s was a very creative time wasn't it, for young working class people. A lot of photographers [emerged] and women – it was a bit more sexist, of course – were the fashion models. Then you had young Welsh girls coming up to London like Christine Keeler [not Welsh] and Mandy Rice-Davies; Mandy Rice-Davies, I'm not sure it was one of our best claims to fame. She was a character, I think. They exposed the toffs to some extent. It was a time of moving back and forth. A lot of young Welsh people came to London, actually, in the 60s and 70, it was quite a movement [of young people]. There was work here and it was the place to be. I'm not sure that's why I came to London but it did offer more opportunities, there's no doubt about that. Things were happening here that weren't happening in other parts of the country, so it was a trendsetter.

*DW: What happened next? You were at [Blackfriars Settlement as a volunteer].*

I was at Blackfriars then I went to work for *Hounslow [Council]* as a *trainee social worker*. They trained you, actually sending you on a training course for two years. So I was working in Hounslow and it was an interesting area. Even then, it was quite an Asian area. It had quite a large Asian population. Two years prior to that [1972], all the Ugandan Asians had been expelled from Uganda by Idi Amin and a lot of them had come to Britain because they had British passports. Quite a substantial community had established itself in Hounslow; presumably in Southall as well. In Social Services in those days, it was quite different to what it is now, I think. I don't suppose you remember *The Seebohm Report*, which was one of the major reports that came out in the late 60s, and this was regarding the organisation of Social Services, which I think, at that time, was seen [by many people as] very much along the lines of Lady Bountiful, workhouses, and most working class people didn't want anything to do with Social Services; certainly, in my family, we never had anything to do with Social Services. It was [very much] 'deserving poor' and all that. But they did have children's services and mental health services, and services for the disabled and the elderly. They were all separate [departments] and the idea of *The Seebohm Report* was to bring the whole thing up to date, amalgamate these services, which they did, and make Social Services much more accessible and a proper part of the Welfare State to local communities. In Hounslow, they set up four offices in the borough: one in Feltham, one in Hounslow, one in Brentford and one in Chiswick. Their job was to serve the local community; to provide Social Services to the local community. That was a much wider range of services. It wasn't just seen as intervening in difficult cases. It was actually providing services to people, like giving information about child-minders and nurseries; giving information and assessing people for aids and adaptations. It did mental health work as well and, obviously, it dealt with children and young people. It still had the powers to take young people into care and there were various statutory obligations which we had to do, like [with] the disabled and children and the elderly. There were quite a lot of statutory obligations but there was more [to the service], over and above that. The idea was to do much more preventative work with families and young people and, where possible, with [people with poor] mental health. It was quite progressive, really; it's moving on [from previous organisational set ups] and the idea is to try and break down stigma. Of course, we could never actually do that [completely]. It also recruited quite a lot of young people at that time, the early 70s. So that was the kind of work that I wanted to do. It was doing useful work.

*DW: So you were drawn to that rather than, say, teaching?*

No, I nearly went into teaching twice. I don't think it was my cup of tea, really. Maybe now; I wouldn't then. I prefer working with individuals and directly trying to help people, so I was drawn into that. It wasn't the easiest of professions to go in to, actually, looking back on it. It was quite good in those early days; quite [a] different [organisation] now.

*DW: Did you join a union there?*

Yes, I joined *NALGO*, which later on merged with *NUPE* to become *UNISON*. I joined *NALGO* and, I think, while I was there, there was a dispute. I can't remember the details but it was to do with social workers' pay conditions, anyway. We went out on strike and we were working to rule. There was quite a lot of evening work, as you can imagine now, we had meetings and stuff. I did get into a bit of trouble with some of the senior management, because I refused to go to a meeting in the evening. I was quite young then and feisty.



*DW: How was the union run? Did you go to lots of branch meetings?*

I was the union rep for a while.

*DW: You were a rep?*

Yes, for a while.

*DW: So that meant that you were able to hold meetings in work times or lunchtimes, or was mainly outside [of working hours]?*

I think it was mainly outside, in the evening. We were quite a large NALGO branch. I think it was about 1600 in our branch and they used to have very large meetings, actually. You're talking about a few hundred at a meeting. It wasn't terribly accessible but we did used to have various rep groups in the Social Services.

*DW: What was your typical role as a rep? What did you find yourself doing?*

Not a lot, really. I used to go along to meetings sometimes and criticise what was going on, and I put in several suggestions. It [there]wasn't any of the representation in quite the same way as in *UNITE*, I seem to remember. My main role was putting forward suggestions at meetings and that sort of thing, really [representing members views]. I can't remember the details.

*DW: So you didn't really so much deal with members who might have had grievances?*

I'm sure we did, it would have been a more senior rep than me. That was part of the role but I wasn't actually directly involved in that.

*DW: I think NALGO, alongside NUPE, the blue collar workers, was growing rapidly wasn't it, in the 70s and becoming quite militant, partly because of the Government policy to hold down pay.*

That was it, we did have quite a long running dispute on the Social Workers' pay [national negotiations], because it was quite a difficult job and pay was [had] being frozen for some years. Then we did have one day strikes and [working to rule] that sort of thing.

*DW: That did seem to be a pattern across the whole country, actually, where you've got strikes. For a union like NALGO, which in the past never really engaged in strike action [this was a new departure].*

Actually, we were quite active looking back at it now, we did have a few one day strikes. I think we had one strike which was when some of the local authority elections were on. I think we picketed Hounslow Town Hall, where they were holding the elections. I think we got into trouble with the Chief Executive. We were a pretty feisty lot, especially the Social Workers, because we were all quite young, and quite idealistic. We were pretty active. There was another side where there were running battles in NALGO. Some members [Masons] were actually quite strong [vocal] in NALGO. They were quite active in the branch and I had regular fall outs with them.

*DW: You wouldn't have thought they'd actually be in a union.*

You wouldn't have thought so, no.

*DW: Presumably, they must have created quite a right wing and reactionary [atmosphere].*

There was a little [right wing] clique. It [the Branch] was divided. There was quite a left wing grouping; and there was a right wing clique. I can't remember if it was any particular departments. They were always trying to undermine what was going on, really. They saw it as a running battle against the younger element. They [right wing clique] actually joined the [local] Trades Council. I think it was a [Ealing] Trades Union Council. I used to go along. They'd readily speak out against anything they saw as left wing.

*DW: Were you involved with the Trades Council at all?*

Yes, I used to go along as well. I used to speak out against them. I can't remember exactly what the issues were but I was more feisty in those days.

*DW: Where were you living then?*

Chiswick. We had a flat in Chiswick. Chiswick's now a very upmarket area. It wasn't so much then. We were renting a flat in Chiswick. There was much more accommodation available in London at that time, as well, for young people. Then, they [Hounslow Council] paid for me to go to college for two years, which was at Chiswick Polytechnic, as it was known then. It has since merged. There is still a college there but I think it's an Art college now. That was quite an active time as well, looking back on it.

*DW: So when was that?*

It was between '74 and '76.

*DW: So this is the time of things like the Grunwick dispute.*

Yes, we used to go up to Grunwick. My husband did as well. He was a Factory Inspector at that stage. Everyone who was that way inclined [Union activists] used to go and support that dispute. My husband was a member of a trade union as well. It was a long-running dispute and we used to go up regularly.

*DW: For the picketing?*

For the picketing, yes; to give support.

*DW: It was an important strike wasn't it? Although they were defeated, it had a long term effect.*

Yes, it opened people's eyes about what was going on in various industries, and the expectation of the mainly Asian women workers there. They were the brave ones; terribly brave, coming out against that [employers and establishment]. Also, because we had been through the 60s and the Second World War, the idea was that we were fighting for a better society and certainly not to have fascism, and that kind of way of thinking in this country; and for people to have freedom, the freedom to have trade unions being one of them. So it was a great shock, I think. A lot of us [thought we] had won quite a lot in the 60s, it changed [things], generally collectively. Legislation had changed on a number of women's issues, like the Abortion Act came through, and Gay Rights, because it used to be illegal to be

[homosexual]; people were imprisoned. There's the famous case of Alan Turing at Bletchley Park. He was forced to [undergo chemical castration and it drove him to] commit suicide. That's become known now, of course. Also, we had lots of rights as students. They never persecuted us; we were never sent to jail or anything like that for going on demonstrations. We weren't shot at on the streets for going on demonstrations. The older generation didn't approve of all these things but they never put in [legislation to outlaw our protests]. Mind you, the police were very strong against CND.

*DW: Yes, and at Grunwick's. There was also the murder of Blair Peach [at an Anti-Nazi protest in Southall in 1979]. Nothing was done at the time. The police tactics were atrocious. They were outrageous, weren't they?*

Yes, that's true. It was an eye-opener to a lot of us, really, who actually personally experienced that, that the state would do these things, especially as our parents' generation had fought against that very strongly, not to have a police state, really. So we all felt very strongly against a police state.

*DW: Also, another thing that you have to think about is that there was the rise of the National Front in the 70s; Rock against Racism and various festivals. The outrageous thing today is that now we've got those who were saying about racism and fascism at that stage, were saying it in the 60s and 70s. They were treated as though they were crazy!*

A lot of people were anti-fascist. Don't forget, our parents' generation, that's the first thing they fought against and they were pretty anti-fascist.

*DW: But then if you raised the question of racism in the police you were regarded as a loon, whereas now with Stephen Lawrence. Now the establishment's falling over itself backwards to say, 'Oh yes, oh it's terrible isn't it, murdered by these racist thugs.'*

Common-or-garden racism was commonplace, not least amongst, I must say, the old trade unions in South Wales, and in my own family. It was quite common that people would make racist statements and you wouldn't think there was anything wrong. For a number of years, I don't know why, I was always against that [racism]. It seemed wrong. I think, partly, because I was growing up post-war, and I listened to all the reports that were coming out at that time; the Nuremberg Trials and the reports about the concentration camps. I was aware of that and, I was a quiet little girl, I always used to think about things quite a lot. It seemed so horrendous what they [had done] to Jewish people and other groups; gays. Although I didn't know about gay people, I was 8 or something. There were a few Asian people in Swansea. I remember a cousin of mine made a racist comment about an Asian woman because they looked different. I remember feeling really angry about it but it was commonplace in working class communities, anyway, to make racist comments and to look down on people because they were different.

*DW: You were trying to find ways to combat that. You're beginning to do that. I think even the trade union movement by the 70s was beginning to realise that it needed to change its approach to racism and racial discrimination, which had tended to lag behind. It doesn't come from governments and those above telling us how we should behave, it comes from people saying, 'this is wrong, you can't treat people like that, you can't speak to people like this.'*

I don't know where people got this racism from. I sometimes think it is partly from our colonial heritage. It was a justification, wasn't it, for colonialism? I remember my father saying to me, and he was an intelligent man, that the reason we were there was to help these people, to educate them. So people were very vulnerable to this kind of thinking, and the class system; the class system was still around. It was very much around then and everybody had to have somebody to look down on, to me. Somebody else is much worse than you were and I think there was that mentality as well. It is interesting, isn't it?

*DW: It is just that it's incredible to me to watch this phenomenon, with the Stephen Lawrence case. So what we can do, we can conveniently say we've got these two white guys, white working class men, who obviously were racist. But it's very easy to just say, 'oh, look at the Daily Mail'..... 'we've got 'em, we've done it, we've sorted it', whereas the racism and discrimination that runs through the establishment and media, and has done for the last 200 years, is not even mentioned, and the use of it as divide and rule by those groups. You see it now with travellers, Roma, and it's perfectly OK to say, 'oh we're going to evict these people', the travellers.*

That's right and it's not even race.

*DW: Again, all it does is transfer it to a new group that they can target and scapegoat. So in that sense, I suppose, capitalism constantly generates new scapegoats.*

Scapegoats – I know the Welsh were at one time, when they first came to London because they were seen as a threat for jobs. People who were desperate in the 1930s would take low wages and it's the same with Irishmen, too. It was terrible, the Irish had it much worse than the Welsh. We could blend into the background a little bit more for some reason. There were fewer of us. Polish people have had it now and, of course, Afro-Caribbean people are still having it, to the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> generation, and Asian people.

## PART TWO

(12/03/2012)

*DW: Val, would you just like to re-start with what you did and went on to do?*

I went to Chiswick Polytechnic for two years and gained a Social Work qualification and that was quite an active two years because it was 1974 and the students acted as if it was 1969; not least me. So we had lots of protests there. The content of the course was one of them but also many of the Social Work students occupied one of the empty houses that was owned by the Polytechnic. There was also a dispute with Hounslow Council. This was all in the local press. We were all sort of feisty then, I think. I think that got sorted out, anyway. They only used it for accommodation for the college. You could put a family in there. Those were the kind of issues that were foremost in our minds. Homeless families was a big issue then, as it is now and will become so. There were lots of empty properties around London at that time. The other thing that suddenly came back to me, when I was a social worker in Hounslow, trainee social worker, is that I was still involved with Blackfriars Settlement and, of course, they [hosted meetings and the Director and several others] were behind the occupation of Centrepont, in 1973 I think it was. I was involved in that. So we all went in and Jack Dromey who's now [a union leader] was also one of the organisers].....

*DW: He went into Centrepoint?*

Because I was part of the [group from] Blackfriars Settlement, a few of us were involved there. Various people, activists throughout London [were involved]. Jack Dromey was a [leading] figure in that as well; Jim Radford, Ron Bailey and Jack Dromey, who was then a [member of Brent ]trades council at the time.

*DW: How long did that occupation last?*

Only for a weekend but I think it was iconic in a way. Basically what happened was that Jack Dromey got a job with Group 4 as a security guard and one of his duties was on [at] Centrepoint. We did have one abortive occupation but the police knew that we were all coming and that was aborted because they were waiting for us. The second time [Jan 1974], we came to Centrepoint, Jack Dromey was on duty, and people [occupiers] were congregating in cafes around that area and, at a certain time, we all converged on Centrepoint and Jack Dromey let us in. We stayed there for the weekend.

*DW: I remember on the Sunday a lot of people turned up and assembled outside.*

There was a big demonstration on the Sunday. There was [also] a lot of support from motorists because, at that time, there were a lot of empty office blocks around London for tax reasons, apparently. Harry Hyams was, I think, the owner of this block and we had terrific support from people, just going around beeping their horns, people turned out just generally to support us. They didn't like these business people, capitalists if you like, just making money by doing nothing; just owning buildings and leaving them empty whilst people were still sleeping on the streets and were in a lot of very poor housing conditions. We made a big poster, *'I'm Just Wild About Harry'*, he didn't like that. Yes, it wasn't all that pleasant inside because they turned off all the water and they turned off all the electricity. So it was very cold and there were no loos. We had buckets. So we really couldn't stay in there longer than the weekend. We did want to stay on longer but people were working, you see. I did it on my weekend, as I was still working for Hounslow Council. I went back in and my boss called me in, and he said, *'Congratulations'*.

*DW: That's quite unusual, isn't it, really?*

Well, he said it confidentially. People were quite sympathetic to those kind of social movements; community action; they were non-violent, cleverly done and they made a big input across the press. We did that and things were different in those days.

*DW: Your job was as a Social Worker.*

Yes, as a Social Worker. Then I did my two years qualification and then I went back into the Chiswick area office, where I was a Social Worker for two years; and then just doing a generic social work – generic, you did a bit of everything really, you worked with children, the mentally ill, the disabled, the elderly. I did mainly assessments, if you like. So people would come into the office and we'd see them. It was like an open door. People could walk into Social Services offices in those days and ask for things, like a disabled badge or aids and adaptations for their parents, or somebody might be having problems with their children, all those sorts of things. That's what I think Social Services should be: talk to people, assessing the situation and then refer them on to the appropriate service; or give them the appropriate

service. I did that and quite enjoyed it but then Social Services started developing even more, getting into the community [development] way of looking at things. They appointed Community Workers to each area team. I got the job as a community worker in the Chiswick area team, which was very open-ended. It [there] wasn't a clearly defined way of doing it[community work] but obviously it was to do with a new way of approaching Social Services so that it wasn't just statutory work. It was trying to do more preventive work, if you like. So there's four things I got involved in: one is Hounslow Law Centre, so I was on the steering group with that and helped bring people together. That's been going until fairly recently. It gave legal advice to disadvantaged people in the borough and others. Then we [area team] helped set up an after-school and holiday play scheme for the children of working parents, mainly single parents, which was quite new in those days. We had a full day conference' with [other]Social Services [units] and other agencies and the public, on children's services. We called it ' *Give kids a break*'. It was [a consultative conference] really assessing what services were available [and what were needed], there was quite a lot involved in that: it means [working with] nurseries, playgrounds, a whole range of things came up. A report came out of that.[Also] we did some local work as well, in one of the estates in Chiswick. There were quite a lot of people [placed ] from Homeless Families [Department] on the council estate and we [helped them] set up a tenants association. They met locally and they got their own community centre [eventually], which they ran themselves. That's still going, I think. [community work included]those kind of things, the idea was to involve local people, to set up more autonomous self-help groups, to look at new ways of providing a service. It's quite interesting work. I did that for about four years. Some of it was successful, some of it wasn't. It was quite good work. Then I left after about 10 years, mainly because I had a child. In those days there was no child care, so I actually stayed at home in the day for about 3 years. There was child-minding, I suppose. I wasn't all that happy with the child-minding services. There were no [affordable] nurseries or anything like that. Then, eventually, I got together with some friends and we opened something completely different but related, a community bookshop in Acton; a workers' co-operative. We called it '*Red and Green Books*.'

*DW: When would this have been?*

This was in the mid-80s.

*DW: Where was it?*

In Acton. We ran it for about 6 years. We actually started off as a book stall, which we set up at Watermans Arts Centre in Brentford and then the offer of this shop came in Acton, which was this [an] existing book shop and we took over the lease there. Unfortunately, none of us were business people, so I did learn a lot about business and finances [on the job] there. We ran it as a co-operative and the sort of books that we stocked,[the name] red and green gives you an idea, we wanted to do [sell] Socialist books and Environmental books. We did have a section of those, they weren't big sellers. The sections [that], book shops were doing at the time, the radical bookshops, was a Gay section, we had a Black section, we had a Woman's section and also we had a multicultural children's section, as well. It was very popular, actually, there weren't many multicultural children's books at the time. A lot of the local schools, and from all over West London, used to come there to look at our books and place orders with us. Lots of people were interested and we did quite a lot of conferences and bookstalls [at] anti-apartheid meetings and various community events.

*DW: Did you have space there for a cafe?*

No, we did talk about having a cafe. I think it would have been quite a nice idea. I don't know if you remember at the time, I think we got the ideas from other bookshops, including *Silver Moon*, which was the feminist bookshop on the Charing Cross Road. Now they had a cafe there. I think it's closed down now. A lot of the radical book shops closed down in the early 90s. The reason that we closed eventually is that we were not making a profit and then the landlord doubled the rent and there was just no way we could do it [anymore]. We were working ever so hard. We were paying ourselves very little money and we were working long hours. It was very hard work and it comes to a point where you just have to say, well, it's not viable anymore. But we did do a lot of stuff. We had a shop window full of banned books. If you remember, in the 1980s Margaret Thatcher banned a lot of books including *Spycatcher*, which was the most famous one; several other books to do with MI5 and MI6 were banned; and we had a shop window full of those books. The police used to come. We put them [extracts] on the [bookshop] noticeboard. They even used to come in to read extracts – *Spycatcher*. We used to have lots of readings in the bookshop. It was a quite interesting project, including a *Spycatcher* reading [and on] lots of International Women's Days, we used to have readings there; we had some miners' wives came along to read in the bookshop. In fact I put them up in my house after the Miners' strike of 1984. One of them had written a book. We put on as many interesting things as we could think of.

*DW: Where was this in Acton?*

In Churchfield Road. It was under Ealing Council at that time. We had a Labour council in and they gave us quite a lot of support as well. I think they had an economic [development] team there to support local businesses. They gave them grants for various things. And they had various committees, they were mirroring what Ken Livingstone was doing at the time at the GLC, so I think Ealing Council were doing that as well. So we got a lot of support from them.

*DW: Did you have anything much to do with the GLC in Livingstone's era?*

No we didn't, although we did have a lot to do with the local council. We were aware of what was going on then. People supported what Ken Livingstone was doing. If you remember, they had a huge banner across the front telling what the jobless totals were for that week or that day, on County Hall facing the Houses of Parliament when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. People say that's one of the reasons that the GLC was closed down. I think it was after that time that a lot of local councils then set up similar groups. I can't remember when the GLC closed down.

*DW: 1986.*

'86, right. So we were still going then and, I think, Ealing Council almost had a GLC-in-waiting, as they called it. They had a woman's unit and a race unit; economic development unit and various other things.

*DW: Almost a GLC in exile.*

Yes, there were quite a lot of people [in Ealing] who were involved in the GLC at that time.

*DW: Yes, because there were 26,000 people who worked at the GLC before abolition. Some were redeployed but a great number took redundancy. So you were at the bookshop until when?*

We actually kept it going for about 6 years. We opened up a place in the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith as well, selling books there as well. So we expanded. We had [regular] bookstalls at two of the local arts centres – Waterman's in Brentford and the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith; and temporary] bookstalls all over the place. We were selling to schools. We had regular readings in the bookshop. It was going quite well but for economic reasons we had to close.

*DW: So it was run as a kind of co-operative; a collective venture. A lot of you were trying to do things like that.*

It's quite easy to do. To us it just seemed a natural thing to do because we were of that generation. You have to get a consensus but everyone has different interests and different skills. That was [quickly] found out. I went along because we needed to have some bookkeeping and that kind of stuff, and this is what I landed up doing in later life; and that's what started it off, because we needed someone to do the books. So I started doing the books there and I didn't know anything about that beforehand. One of our members, she was better well read than the rest of us, she also used to do the ordering of the books and meeting book reps and so on. We had to learn new skills, really, and we did have to specialise a bit but, at the same time, we had to get some kind of consensus. I think, in the end, the consensus was around the bookshop [policies] rather than the day-to-day running of it. But we were accountable to each other. Ideally, that's a good thing to do but it's not so easy when you have to confront things. It takes up time but, also, if someone's not pulling their weight, sometimes you have to tell them. It's not easy with colleagues, really; it's probably easier to have a hierarchy in some ways but, at the same time, if you've got a co-operative or collective structure, it's a better thing to do but the thing is to bring [train] everyone up so that everyone is feeling equally responsible.

*DW: Rather than have a hierarchy.*

Yes, you can be specialised within a co-operative, I think; in fact you need to be because skills are very specialised these days. You can't really be a Jack of all Trades. You need to have an overview, though. You need to do both things at once. Some of the trade unions weren't all that keen on collectives and co-operatives at that time. I think they've changed their minds now. Because we worked as a co-operative, we didn't have a boss. We were our own bosses; self-employed to a large extent. So I could see the argument.

*DW: Were you all paid the same?*

We were all paid the same when we paid ourselves. Now that was the issue, you see: because it was our own business, we had to work by business standards. We had to make money to pay the rent and pay ourselves. So, if things weren't going right, if your marketing wasn't going right, then we were the ones that suffered. It was always an internal conflict.

*DW: Did you all belong to trade unions?*



Well, we didn't at that time because who were we going to negotiate with? I remember trying to join the Labour Party at that time, the local Labour Party, and they wouldn't let me in because I wasn't a member of a trade union. I said, *'I'm in a workers' co-operative and we're promoting socialist literature and feminism, and progressive ideas.'* It was ridiculous! They wouldn't let me in [join] the Labour Party because I'm not a member of a trade union. I mean, I could have joined one[but] It would have been meaningless. I would have joined now in solidarity but trade unions were still very active [but] actually needed changing, especially in their attitudes to progressive ideas and towards women, I think.

*DW: Through these years, have you belonged to other political groups? Were you ever drawn to joining other groups?*

I didn't join; I'm not a great joiner, actually, because I don't like being dictated to. But I was always attracted to groupings on the left and action groups on the left. So I would have been a member of CND and Anti-Apartheid and various other groupings like that; those two in particular. A lot of my friends were members of these; left wing political groups, of course. The SWP was everywhere at that time and some of my close friends were in the SWP.

*DW: But you were not drawn to joining them?*

No, because I was feeling anti-authoritarian; I think that's the reason why.

*DW: And these groups are quite authoritarian in their own way.*

Yes, because I'd been [brought up] in South Wales, I was a member of the church and the chapel, of course. I was quite religious until I was about 12 or 13, then I stopped because I didn't like being dictated to. I didn't want to substitute God for a leader of the 'party', really; basically, it was sort of that. I think dissent is a good thing, by and large. I think that people who can go along a certain line [ don't always think for themselves], well if you look at the Soviet Union, they weren't allowing any dissent [but] they were in the beginning. It was very fruitful, lots of artists flooded to Soviet Russia and there were lots of progressive things going on, human rights; all issues were being discussed. They were discussing a genuine society and then it all changed. If discussion and dissent had been allowed I think it would have been more fruitful, and still around today if it hadn't gone down that route, it seemed to me.

*DW: When did the bookshop come to an end?*

I think it was about 1990. The last recession, if you remember, the early 90s, lots of bookshops closed down; lots of things changed. There was a major housing crisis. There was all this talk of negative equity; a lot of unemployment. It was at that time. The reason that we closed in the end was because we couldn't get enough sales to make it worthwhile, basically, and we couldn't make enough money to actually pay a decent wage, or to pay the rent, even. It was when the rent doubled, that was the crunch, and it happened a lot to the book trade. Our rent had been quite reasonable [before]; affordable, anyway. So that's why we closed. It was very sad. It was difficult in the end and I wouldn't wish that on anybody, to be honest. But looking back on it, we did a lot of interesting things and people still remember us in Acton,[because of us] going to various events.

*DW: So where did you go after that? What happened next after the closure of the shop?*

So what did I do now? Obviously, the book trade was not a very good thing. I didn't really want to go into a small business and small co-operatives again. So I thought that what I'd have to do was to get a useful skill and to work in the agencies that I'm in sympathy with. So I re-trained and studied for the Chartered Institute of Management Accounts [intermediate level]. From my experience, I'd found out that one of the real reasons that things don't succeed – co-operatives – was because there was no financial expertise there. You do need that, actually, even if it's [the organisation] on the left, because the same rules apply [to you] under capitalism (or whatever). You still need to generate enough income in order to pay your workers and to pay your overheads – as simple as that, really. We weren't doing that, obviously, because it's not that simple. Very few people [on the left] knew about business ideas then. It [left organisations] was just restricted to people who generally didn't approve of, capitalists and [accountancy], stuff like that. I think that on the left and in the voluntary sector, the idea that you have to have good financial controls is actually a pretty good democratic thing, really. So I studied that for a few years. My son was still quite young. I gave me some time to [be with] him. I was also looking after my Dad, who was very ill at the time. Then I went out into the big wide world and had to get a few crummy jobs. I did one, working in Park Royal, for a company a commercial motor repairers, so that was a good experience! I had to walk up the rickety stairs to the office – there was a garage underneath – and I had to learn how to do their books. I had to learn how to do [operate] computer packages. It was quite a good learning experience. It wasn't very good working conditions there. At that time, I remember the boss, Ivan, said, *'Call me Ivan the terrible.'* This was a bit of an eye-opener to me because I'd worked in Social Services and Local Government. It was a completely different environment and he said, *'do you want to pay tax, or don't you want to pay tax?'* I said, *'what do you mean?'* He said, *'well, most people don't want to pay tax, so you go self-employed.'* It's quite illegal now, but this is what a lot of small businesses were doing at the time. So, he's paying me something like £5 an hour and I had to sort out my tax. It was an eye-opener, it was quite interesting in some ways. I quite liked him in some ways but they [the company] weren't very good. He was my introduction to the private sector; very poor management and the workers were exploited. They were quite a nice bunch downstairs. They used to play music all day long, which was quite nice. Some of the music was Tom Jones. But I don't think they ever had lunch breaks and I don't think they were paid very well. There was a government-sponsored apprenticeship scheme at the time. A lot of small businesses took advantage of that. They'd take on young people on low wages. They'd get sent to college once a week. They never had lunch breaks or anything like that. So there were quite a few of them, then; and the other thing I learnt about him was that businesses don't actually pay their bills [when due], because I used to do credit control and a lot of people never paid him and then he never paid other people [on time]. The worst people were [delaying payment for] three months at a time. Their policy was that you don't pay for three months, or something like that. You could put people out of work. But the worst people of all [were], government actually, local authorities, they're probably [still] doing that now. Their policy usually was that you don't pay your suppliers for three months or something. They can get away with it because they're [powerful], you see, but in the meantime people are put out of work, aren't they? He'd made his company bankrupt [because he couldn't pay his creditors], I think, they'd gone into liquidation at least twice and been renamed so he could get rid of his debts. It was an eye-opener to me. Then another company I did a bit of work for, [through] a friend of mine was [working] there, now they were an IT company based in Richmond, and that was an eye-opener as well. They were quite a nice lot. I was just learning my trade there. I was just going along and helping, learning about accounts and

bookkeeping. They took us all out for Christmas lunch to a posh hotel, which was very nice, and I talked to the boss. He'd sold out [his original company] to an American company called the Dodge Group. His business model wasn't actually making money [from the original company]— I was always told [learned] about the profit model, you generate enough income to pay your wages and commitments – his business model was actually selling on the company [to make money]. You'd get [start up] an IT company, you'd develop it up to a certain point, and then you'd sell it to somebody else; and that was the business model. It [the original company] wasn't actually making anything [profits]; it was actually selling on the company [to make profits]. But that was an eye-opener to me as well and actually quite a few companies do that. If you can remember Waterstones – Tim Waterstone – he opened up the *Waterstones* book shops, which none of us small book shops could compete against because he had [a huge stock with] books piled sky high. We could never [afford to] do that with stock. Well he never made a profit. He made money [when] he sold off his company to *WH Smith's*. It was quite an interesting introduction to capitalism and how capitalism works, if you like. It wasn't like anything that I imagined and the working conditions, the attitude to staff in the private sector was much inferior; much worse. There was a lot of bullying. Another agency I went into, there was quite a lot of bullying going on there in the sense of '*let's scapegoat people*.'; laughing at them, making jokes at their expense. This was a recruitment company and the recruiters attitude towards their clients [was shocking] – because I'd been brought up [worked] in the Social Services and they had a code of conduct about how you should behave and your attitude towards your clients,[was] one of respect – they were so disrespectful to the clients. They used to make jokes about them. It was just totally unpleasant, I would say. I only stayed in the private sector for about a year or two in order to get experience. I wanted to get back into the voluntary sector because that's where my heart was. Then I eventually got a job working for a peace charity called *BASIC* [British American Security and Information Council]. It sounds like the CIA but it was actually set up by one of the vice chairs of CND. He set it up. There was an office in London and an office in Washington[ DC]. It was an interesting concept. It was a completely different business model. The idea was that [because] you had the Freedom of Information Act in America and they {BASIC} would get information from America on [weapons and] military activities. They were campaigning against the arms trade and nuclear weapons. It was a think tank, if you like. So they'd get information about details on military strategies and nuclear weapons in America. Because we had the Official Secrets Act in the UK we couldn't have access to that information here. So we'd get the information from America, they'd e mail it to the UK to our office, and they [London] had an e mail network to individuals involved in the peace movement throughout Europe – Germany, France, Spain. So we'd [send] information and they [used it when they] did their own newsletters. I was doing the bookkeeping. I stayed there for about 4 years. It was very interesting. They were a difficult organisation to work for. Then, after that, eventually I came to work in *North Kensington Law Centre*; [doing] finance work. I was there for about 7 years or so, doing some work for them.

*DW: You coped – were you trained a number of times?*

Yes, twice, actually, which was unusual in my day, but it's more common now. The reason was because I wasn't satisfied with what I was doing. But I did stay in Science. People say, '*Oh, you keep moving around*'. I didn't move around that much, actually. I was 3 years in Glaxo; I was nearly 10 years in Social Work; and then the bookshop was 6 years. In 1995, I

started working with *BASIC*, so since '95 until I retired in 2007 I was in finance work in the voluntary sector; different jobs [organisations].

*DW: There were also a number of changes across that time, for example the advent of computers and new technology.*

Absolutely! When I was doing Sciences, at Swansea University, we still had to use Log books, we didn't have calculators. The pocket calculator was introduced in the 1970s and we all had to train how to use it. They actually sent people to the moon in 1969, yet they didn't have proper computers and they didn't have calculators. They still did it! I mean, that's why we all had to learn our times tables because the calculator was in our heads, as opposed to computers. We had our first lap top computer when we were at *Red and Green books*, and I think one of our colleagues, Meredith – she used to work at *North Kensington Law Centre* – she was very into computers and I think they'd introduced them at the Law Centre, so she got one in the book shop and she set up the stock control system on the computer, and I didn't have a clue, really. It was *Amstrad* computers; Alan Sugar's *Amstrad*.

*DW: Of course, in the pre-computer [era] there were typewriters and the like.....*

Yes, and index cards; all the stock would have been on index cards, for instance. Log books – we still did statistics and everything like that. We used log books, basically, and worked it out; all on paper. So, we were very good at multiplication on paper and long division and things like that, I didn't do calculus[then] . But children, I think, have difficulty withthat [manual calculations] now. Obviously, they don't have to [use them] now. I didn't have a clue about spreadsheets. I didn't learn to use spreadsheets until I started doing management accounts . I couldn't work without a spreadsheet now. I can't imagine life without it and computerised packages for accounting. I couldn't imagine doing all those cash books and ledgers and all the rest of it.

*DW: And through all these years you've also been in contact with the trade union. You've both [Val and her husband] been involved up to the present day.*

Yes, actually, since my days at *Glaxo*.

*DW: Right through to the present day. I suppose the trade union movement has changed. It has become less top down in some ways. There's more openness about what they do and they're not as paranoid about what people are doing in local workplaces and the branches; although I say that, there are still some unions where the old mentality still persists; feudal control.*

It was quite good in Nalgo, despite the masons that I was talking about. We actually had pretty progressive people in there. I think a lot of people became active in the trade union movement and actually moved on into politics then.

*DW: You've got the [situation] where the unions have become much bigger; they've amalgamated. So you've now got UNISON and UNITE.*

Yes, I have to think who these unions are now. *ASTMS*, which I was in originally, I don't know what it's landed up as now. It might have landed up as part of *UNITE*.

*DW: I think it's part of UNITE. It became MSF and then that was swallowed up.*

I think it became AMICUS.

*DW: And then that's gone into UNITE.*

And NALGO, of course, has become UNISON, which makes much more sense because it was ridiculous to have two unions. Also, it [there] was a bit of snobbery then between the officers and the ordinary workers. I can understand why they had to amalgamate, for financial reasons because of dropping membership. I'm quite sure that dropping membership and the anti-trade union legislation, the end of closed shops, [had an impact on the unions] but also the nature of work has changed in this country. Manufacturing has declined in West London. I remember various manufacturing companies, all those that were along the 'golden mile' of Brentford. In Chiswick, for instance, my husband worked for *Reckitt & Coleman*, and they used to have a big factory, [the old *Cherry Blossom* site], in Chiswick, which employed a few hundred, I think. It was closed down in the 1970s and they moved the production to Hull, where they're originally from. There were lots of manufacturing jobs in West London and they've all gone. They've been replaced by retail and office work.

*DW: It's completely changed the profile of working.*

Yes, smaller companies where they don't have trade unions. It was mainly the big industries that you were either fighting for [improved pay and conditions or trade union recognition], as in *Glaxo*, they didn't have trade unions but they do have them now . So it's much smaller [workplaces] with the small employers now, and also [it's more difficult] to get the same [trade union] service into the [small] offices. Most people don't [have trade union] experience of these things;[such as] negotiations.