

**INTERVIEW WITH JOHN GRIGG BY RIMA JOEBEAR ON 28<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 2010  
FOR THE BRITAIN AT WORK PROJECT**

*RJ: I'm here with John Grigg. It is the 28<sup>th</sup> of June. Monday afternoon.*

*RJ: OK, John, so, would you like to start talking about your working life in west London after the war?*

JG: That's right. Because I was born in 1935, I left school when I was sixteen and went to work for the Westminster Bank in Earl's Court. I went there because my father was an adding machine mechanic and he used to go around the banks and other places mending these machines and he thought that working in a bank was a good, safe job, with a pension and all that sort of thing. I had been to grammar school and I managed to scrape up five O levels, which you had to have to get into a bank. So I went to work at Westminster Bank at Earl's Court. Knocked on the door, a man opened the door, peeked around the edge and looked very suspicious, I said, 'I come to work here today,' and he said, 'Oh yes,' and I went in. And I worked there for two years until I was eighteen and then I did National Service in the Air Force. And when I started with the bank, it was a branch with about twenty-four people in it. Some had been born before 1900, there was quite a lot of men not far off from retirement because apparently the bank mechanized in the 1930s, which meant they no longer did all the ledgers and passbooks by hand these machines that my dad was servicing were introduced. So they stopped recruiting for a long time. Then the war came and I think they started recruiting again just after the war. What did I do when I first started? I was on the post desk. I looked after the post. I had to enter in a big book by hand the name and address of everybody we sent letters to. And we used to have to balance the stamps, make sure nobody had pinched any stamps. And what else did I do? I had to take the post down to the post office, escorted by one of the senior members of staff. They took it in turns to do that. Some of these guys actually didn't like working in a bank and they'd been there all their lives. There was one chap there, well, he must have been dead for years now, his name was Mr Walters and he did what they call the Income Tax. He sat on a high stool and worked out people's income tax. And he never said a word to anybody. And every day at five o'clock, no matter what the situation, he used to go downstairs, get his hat, and as he walked along towards the front door he would slowly put his hat on and he would be off. He was taking the post down with me one day and he just said to me, 'Are you glad you've come to work for a bank?', and I said something noncommittal like could have done worse and he said, 'I've only got four years to go, thank God!' Few years later, I bumped into somebody who had worked at that branch and said, 'What did Mr Walters do when he retired?' And he said, 'Oh he went

downstairs and got his hat and put it on, went out and that's the last we saw him!' But what I remember particularly is I was definitely the junior. I was called by my surname. And more senior members were called "Mr". Hardly any women worked there apart from the manager's secretary, the junior typist and a couple of machinists. All the other people were men.

*RJ: And what year was this?*

JG: 1951, when I started. There were a few women but they were machinists. They used to do the ledgers and the statements and things like that. But that's as far as women got. Women were not allowed to be cashiers. They didn't go on the counter and of course --

*RJ: Why was that?*

JG: Oh, dear, I didn't know why then. Discrimination and tradition, I suppose. A very traditional institution were the banks then. Men were on a higher salary scale than the women and the women had to leave when they got married, but they used to get a marriage gratuity, and the longer you worked there before you got married, the bigger the gratuity, you see. So as I say, women were not allowed to move up the scale at all. The highest they could get was working on these machines. Which eventually I started doing.

*RJ: What are these machines?*

JG: The adding machines my dad used to look after. They were called Burrough 78s.

*RJ: So you knew how to use them?*

JG: Every day all the cheques would come in, that had been drawn by customers and you had the pile of cheques and you were sitting in front of this machine and you would look at the cheque on the top of the pile and you would have to decide who it was, because the cheques didn't have any names printed on them, they were just signatures. But you got to know the signatures. And you looked at the cheque and you got a ledger sheet out of the tray and you'd slide it into the machine, and you looked in a tiny mirror and you picked up the balance on the ledger, then you'd type in the actual name of the institution or person that the cheque is payable to, North Thames Gas Board or Mr Smith or whatever, and then you'd type the amount, press a few buttons and then the machine would go rattle-rattle, type a line, and you'd pull it out, put it back in the tray and then get out the next one. And there was an error key on the side that you pushed horizontally with your thumb and after about ... I suppose I was on these machines for eighteen months, I had a flat end of my thumb because I made so many errors, you see! And really, anything --

*RJ: Any serious errors?*

JG: No, no, no, you would know what you'd done. You put in the wrong amount --

*RJ: Too many noughts.*

JG: -- or you'd made a spelling mistake.

*RJ: And what do they do now? What's the equivalent?*

JG: That's a good question. I left the banking twenty-three years ago. And it's all done by computers now. When you go into the bank and pay in cheques they seem to sometimes make the entries into a computer on the counter. Didn't have account numbers when I started. No one had an account number. Just had a name. pay the cheques in. So things have moved on a bit. Sometimes I'd stoke the boiler when I started out.

*RJ: What's that, the general heating?*

JG: Yeah, they had central heating there and we had to stoke the boiler with coke. They had a chap they called a messenger. He used to take messages up to head office and he did the cleaning, stoked the boiler and got rid of the waste paper and all that stuff. But when he wasn't there, on holiday, if they couldn't get a relief messenger, I had to stoke the boiler. It was quite good fun, actually. I didn't mind doing that. In many ways, the people that went into factories, well, used to, 'cause there aren't many factories now, would work at a machine of one sort or another, and really, it was very much like that, working in front of these adding machines, except that you wore a suit instead of overalls.

*RJ: Yes. Where were you placed? In an office in the back?*

JG: That's right. In the back. You go into a bank now, well, it's all changed now. It's all modernised. But until quite recently, there would be a screen behind the counter and we were all behind that.

*RJ: So you were visible to the public?*

JG: Yes. Usually. Some branches you weren't. In some branches had a second floor, or a first floor, rather, and you were up there because they only had a small frontage on the high street. But usually you were working in the back there and people could see you. But sometimes they had a screen behind the counter. They didn't have any security screens by the way,. All they had was a very wide counter and that was it. Nowadays, of course, it's like Fort Knox, reinforced, bullet-proof glass and stuff.

*RJ: Actually, the new Barclay's on Ladbroke Grove, they just refurbished it and it's gone back to an old-fashioned situation.*

JG: Oh, that's great!

*RJ: Yeah. It's quite strange because you can touch the person, the bank teller.*

JG: Things go in in circles, don't they? Perhaps it's going to go back --

*RJ: Friendlier.*

JG: That's right.

*RJ: Because I always used to remember someone telling me that there's an automatic shut-down thing ...*

JG: Oh, is there?

*RJ: I don't know whether it's a myth or not, but if you put your arm across too far --*

JG: Something comes down and chops your arm off? Excellent health and safety, that stuff. What happens if you do it on your side? if you're the cashier and reach too far? if you do it by mistake ...

*RJ: I don't know if it was true. I never saw it happen, anyway.*

JG: It would be interesting. You had to work long hours --

*RJ: So the security ...*

JG: Security? There wasn't any, really.

*RJ: No security guard or ...*

JG: No.

*RJ: And were there any problems? Security issues?*

JG: No. A woman there who had been working there during the war, told me a story about a so-called bank raid during the war. This one chap came in and said 'Stick 'em up,' or something, and had a toy gun ... But I won't go in to that. It's a long highly amusing story, but there were bank robberies, I suppose, but I never heard of any then.

*RJ: In your whole banking ...*

JG: Oh, later on, yes. Once they had put up all the security screens, that's when all the bank robberies started!

*RJ: Interesting.*

JG: Well, maybe it just seemed like that to me. Of course, there's always been bank robberies every now and again, so they put up these screens and I think whether the bank robberies increased after that or not I don't know, but that's what it seemed like to me. I was never actually in a branch where there was a bank robbery but I had to go to a branch once because there had been one the day before, and they needed extra people there. Willesden Junction branch. By the Harlesden clock.

*RJ: Funnily enough, I thought it might be there.*

JG: Yeah? What happened ... Wall's Sausage Factory used to draw lots of money out of there on the same day every week for wages, and these chaps came in and pinched the money after it had been paid out. And they actually fired a shotgun into the wall. But I wasn't there then. I went to work there later on.

*RJ: Oh did you?*

JG: So I heard all about it.

*RJ: Westminster Bank?*

JG: Westminster Bank. Later amalgamated with the National Provincial Bank, which is now the NatWest. NatWest are now owned by the Royal Bank of Scotland, I think? Or one of the Scottish banks, anyway. When I first started there you sometimes worked very long hours. You might be there at nine in the evening, which of course is about an hour or two later than a factory day shift, but you had to stay until the work balanced, you see. Which sometimes it didn't. So you might be there sometimes six o'clock, seven o'clock. A really bad one, you'd be there until nine o'clock, maybe.

*RJ: Did you get overtime?*

JG: No. Not then. You worked Saturday mornings as well. You had every fourth one off or something like that. I used to go home and fall asleep on Saturday listening to the football commentary on the radio. It was quite exhausting in many ways. They did bring in overtime payments later on but that was after many years, certainly after I'd left the Westminster and worked for the Midland (now HSBC).

*RJ: Was it regarded as a good job to have?*

JG: Oh, yes, yes. It was, yes. Because you've got a pension and you could get cheap mortgages for house purchase, it was two and a half per cent you'd have to pay on the interest. So yes, it was regarded as a good job. But when I first went there in 1951, my first month's pay, I think, was twelve pounds and

I didn't have a suit. I couldn't afford to buy one before I started. After about a month the manager said, 'You ought to get a suit, Grigg,' so I went to the Co-op in Hounslow with my mum and we bought a suit with my first month's salary. But shortly after that they changed the salary scales and my salary suddenly shot up to about twenty-three pounds a month.

*RJ: Quite a leap up.*

JG: Well, it was, yes. They were saying at the time they were completely reconstructing the salary scales. I think it was something to do with the labour shortage after the war. Nobody could get anybody to work for them and I expect twelve pounds a month was quite low compared with elsewhere. So I think that's why they put up the salaries to attract more recruits. I think after a month my salary shot up to twenty-six pounds and perhaps that's when I went to the counter to draw out some money to buy my suit. And the cashier was so horrified by the amount of money I was drawing out, which I think was about fifteen pounds, that he went to check that I had the money in my account!

*RJ: What were the other banks around at the time?*

JG: There were loads of them. More or less next door to us, there was Barclay's bank, on the other side there was a Midland Bank, and that was in the space of about forty yards. Hounslow High Street had six banks on it. That would have been the Westminster, the Midland, the National Provincial, Barclay's, Lloyd's and a bank called the National Bank, which was right up the end. There were banks everywhere. Every high street had several banks.

*RJ: Why?*

JG: Well, the banks had so much money. The banks were awash with so much cash that all they did was open branches all over the place.

*RJ: And how would they attract customers to bank with them?*

JG: That's a good question. Not many people had bank accounts. I can only imagine that the banks made their money out of big companies having bank accounts and the money used to come from them and international transactions and so on. There didn't seem to be much competition either. They didn't give house mortgages. That was done by building societies. Building societies didn't issue cheque books as they do now. And there were regulations as well on what you could borrow for a mortgage. And there were exchange control regulations as well. You couldn't take abroad what you wanted to for a holiday. There was a special allowance you had to have, and it was entered in the back of your passport. That's an interesting question, what they did to gain customers, because I don't think they did anything! I

don't remember any advertising. They just sat there and people came in and opened accounts.

*RJ: Yeah.*

JG: Very, very profitable business because there were so many of them.

*RJ: What would people come to in the bank for, apart from ...*

JG: Well, to pay in their money and draw some cash out, really. And they might come in for foreign exchange. Richer customers, and there were a few of them in Earl's Court, used to buy shares and things like that. And some of the staff were called security clerks. There was a box there and about four elderly blokes in there doing the Securities. That was buying and selling shares for people and taking collateral as security for loans, as well. If you had a house, the bank would have a mortgage on that, or if you had shares, you'd put the share certificates down and borrow money against that, if you had an insurance policy, you could borrow against that. You could get somebody else to guarantee the loan. So there was quite a bit of that going on. Then there were the larger businesses. Lending money to them was quite complicated and involved detailed application and sanction by Head Office.

*RJ: Of course these days, everyone's expected to have a bank account, aren't they?*

JG: Most people have a bank account now.

*RJ: You can't do a lot without one.*

JG: No. But then my ... I think my dad did have a bank account ... He used to go around the banks and he thought it might be a good idea to have one. I mean, I come to it later, when I was working for an oil company I was paid cash at the end of every month. A lot of people were just paid cash.

*RJ: Put it under the mattress.*

JG: Yeah. They'd save it. Where would they save it? In the Post Office, perhaps. They'd pay everything by cash, if you got an electricity bill, you'd go down to the electricity office in the high street and pay it in cash.

*RJ: No such thing as cards!*

JG: Cards?

*RJ: Yeah.*

JG: No, no cards! Never heard of them!

RJ: No credit cards.

JG: No credit cards.

*RJ: Difficult to get into debt then, was it, as compared to today. You can borrow money that you haven't even got.*

JG: It's so easy to get into debt now because the credit card companies just go around and say, 'Would you like to borrow another thousand pounds from us?' Yes. The bank was quite strict on giving overdrafts. You had to be pretty certain the person was OK, you know, before you lent them any money!

*RJ: And would they turn people down who wanted to open bank accounts?*

JG: Oh, yes! To have a bank account ... Actually, it was easier then to get a bank account than it is now. You try and open a bank account now, because of money laundering and drug money shifting and that sort of thing, they do all sorts of checks on you now. Then, you had to have two references from people who already had bank accounts. You'd give the two names and the addresses and we would write to them and say is this person trustworthy and a suitable person to have a bank account and they would write back and say yes ... and we would also ask them where they banked. And the answers would come back and they'd say yes, this person is trustworthy and my bank is so on and then you'd write to the bank and say is this person a suitable person to introduce a bank account? So you get the reference from another bank in reality. It sounds a bit old-fashioned.

*RJ: Right. Yeah. It could have taken awhile as well.*

JG: It could have taken awhile.

*RJ: Writing letters and waiting for ...*

JG: About ten days or so.

*RJ: OK. Not too long. But a lot less rigorous than today.*

JG: Yes.

*RJ: It was more like a character reference.*

JG: Yes, a character reference. You're quite right.

*RJ: Not even a passport ...*

JG: Well, maybe you did have to identify yourself, I can't remember for certain. The main thing was getting the references.

*RJ: Yes. And because it was after the war and a lot of immigrants had come over, did the bank hire immigrants? Were any working ...*



JG: 1951, I don't think a lot of immigration came until a bit later. They were quite sensitive about hiring people from the subcontinent. I can't remember because ... I did my National Service, worked for an oil company and then I went back to work for the Midland Bank, a different bank. And I was at Kingsway branch at the Midland Bank and I was called the branch accountant and ran the administration of the branch. There were about thirty people there. Regional Office staff department phoned me up one day, and they said, 'We want to send someone to fill the vacancy at your branch, a Miss Ahmed (or maybe it was another Asian name), who is a light-skinned Asian. Is it all right if we send her?' [Laughs] So I said, 'Yes, that's all right.' Some managers were not very happy at all to have Asians or black people working for them.

*RJ: And of course there was no Race Relations Act passed then.*

JG: No.

*RJ: So it was up to the manager?*

JG: Well, yes, he had some say about who he took. When I was at Willesden Junction Branch near the clock tower in Harlesden, it was my aim was to get as many different people of different nationalities in there, and it worked all right. Now, of course, a lot of Asian and black people staff the banks.

*RJ: Yes.*

JG: There was also early on, there was prejudice against men who had beards! One manager I had would not let a man serve at the counter, a man who had a beard.

*RJ: He had to be clean-shaven.*

JG: Oh, yes. That's what he insisted upon. These guys, these managers, as I said, they were born in 1880s, 1890s.

*RJ: Yes.*

JG: Living in the past, really.

*RJ: Yes.*

JG: Yes, I worked at the Westminster Bank Earl's Court for two years, then in September 1953 I went in the RAF to do National Service and I was in there for two years and I went to Malta for six months during a summer. A bit of a holiday, really, there wasn't much to do. It was quite entertaining. I think National Service is a good thing to have done but it wasn't a good thing to be doing when you did it!

*RJ: Where did you do it?*

JG: I did training at West Kirby, which is near Liverpool, and Credon Hill, near Hereford and then I went to Biggin Hill which was a fighter aerodrome. And then in 1954, during the summer, I was in Malta for six months and then I came back and I was working at Stanmore Bentley Priory, which was the headquarters of fighter command. I was there for twelve months and then I came out. I went back to the Westminster Bank for a few months, but I really couldn't stand it very much. It was much like it was before.

*RJ: Did they allow for you to come back?*

JG: Oh, yes!

*RJ: So that was a policy?*

JG: Yes. Oh, yes. In a way, you were still on the staff while you did National Service. And if I had stayed there with the Westminster Bank, that two years I was away doing National Service would have been counted for the number of years they use to calculate your pension. But I was there for a few months and I really thought I wanted to do something else. I went to work for the Gulf Oil Company in their fuel oil sales office in Grosvenor Place in London. And they were just starting up selling fuel oil and they had thirty customers! [Laughs] Salesmen or the representatives used to go around firms and factories who had coal-fired boilers, saying you ought to convert this to oil fire boilers because it cost much less, much cleaner and all that sort of thing. What I had to do when they came back with all this information about the size of the boiler was work out how much oil they would consume and do all the calculations and send them a quote. That's what I did for a while. But that didn't work out very well. They transferred me to another department which I wasn't interested in, really. I was quite interested in this fuel oil, but the other one was lubricating oil or something. Also, I got married in the meantime and I wanted to buy a property of some sort to live in. And I only wanted to do that because that was what my parents had done. They had bought a house in 1937 ... I thought well, if you're going to live somewhere, you go and buy somewhere. You don't rent. I thought if I go back to work for the bank I'll be able to get a mortgage. So I left the oil company and went to work for the Midland Bank, who are now HSBC. And --

*RJ: When was this?*

JG: Let's see. I believe I was about twenty-three, so that would be 1958. Maybe '59. I went to work for the Midland Bank and the first branch was in Gloucester Road, by Gloucester Road underground station. And I went to work on the counter after a bit of training. I was a cashier there.

*RJ: How was the training?*

JG: Well, they had a thing called training branch and you used to go to this training branch for a fortnight and they had a mock counter and the tutors would pretend to be the customers and you played with real money.

*RJ: That serious?*

JG: And then you'd go back to the branch and go on the counter. That's what I did. What did I do then? In the same branch I ended up working on the foreign desk. Sending money abroad to people, currency and so on. And where did I go then? I think I went to Haymarket branch as an assistant accountant. And then I moved up fairly rapidly. Because they kept coming to me and saying, 'If we send you to this branch and made you assistant manager, and give you an extra £500 a year', 'Oh, yes, OK'. So I was obviously quite useful. But I never wanted to be a bank manager, in fact, for some reason. I was quite happy to run the branch --

*RJ: Branch manager.*

JG: When the manager was away, on holiday or something like that, I would be the manager and see the customers. And I would see some customers about lending them money and that sort of stuff as well. In the main, my job was to run the admin in the branch.

*RJ: And why didn't you want to become a bank manager?*

JG: Well, I became a Labour councillor in Hounslow, and really right from an early age, from sixteen, when I first started, I was very much involved with politics. The Labour League of Youth and I toyed with the Communist Party for a little bit. And that was my main interest in life, really. Apart from girls, and the bank was a good way of earning money so then I could do this stuff in the evening. I think I was quite good at running a branch, the admin of it, because it was mainly chaos. Thousands of cheques and bits of paper flying around all over the place and things getting lost ... Anyway, just like running a local election. Complete, absolute chaos! Everything not working properly and that sort of thing. So I was quite used to that.

*RJ: There is a lot of responsibility, isn't there?*

JG: Yes.

*RJ: Being a bank manager?*

JG: Yes, more than running a local by-election, yes. But anyway, I did quite well, I got promoted and they said ... well, I told them at some stage that I was not interested in becoming an actual manager. I was content to do what I was doing. I ended up at West Ealing branch for ten years and then I took early retirement when I was fifty-two, which was quite good.

*RJ: Yes!*

JG: By that time, you see, the computers had come in and they were trying to cut down on the staff, so --

*RJ: When was this? Year?*

JG: About ... right at the end of the 1980s. Probably 1988 or '89. Something like that. So when someone comes along and says to the bank , 'So what are the terms for early retirement?' they were quite eager to offer you good terms, So I was very lucky, wasn't I really? Retired at fifty-two!

*RJ: Yeah! Absolutely! I'd say so.*

JG: From quite early on, the first thing I did when I joined the bank when I was sixteen was join the National Union of Bank Employees. NUBE. Which was affiliated to the TUC but not to the Labour Party. I think I was probably the only member in that branch, Earl's Court branch, who was a member. They had a thing called a staff association, a Spanish trade union, which was because the union, NUBE, used to accuse them of being in the pocket of the employers. Actually, the bank was a very paternal institution. They treated their staff pretty well. You can't really complain about it.

*RJ: The bank?*

JG: The bank did.

*RJ: And this was ... what bank?*

JG: The first one I was in. Westminster. Anyway, I joined the union there and I think it eventually became BIFU, Banking, Insurance and Finance Union. I think I went to one branch meeting but I was quite often the branch representative and when I was the assistant manager at West Ealing, they had a ballot, the union balloted everybody because every Christmas Eve, the bank usually shut at 12:00. And the bank decided they'd stay open for normal hours, which was 3:30 or whatever it was. So the union said, 'Oh, you know, we're not having this,' so they balloted all the members and there were several members then in the branch where I was. I was in charge of the branch. Anyway, I thought it was quite reasonable to stay open to 3:30 on Christmas Eve, so I voted against going on strike. All the other people in the branch were very keen to go on strike, you see. When the result of ballot came out, it was in favour of going on strike. This was the national ballot. So there were all these people that had voted to go on strike getting second thoughts about this, you see. And in fact, when the day came, I was the only person to walk out at 12:00, even though I'd voted against going on strike! All the people who'd voted for it stayed there!

*RJ: How bizarre!*

JG: So I lost half a day's pay, apparently, for that. But by that time, I think the bank accepted that I wasn't just a normal type of bank employee. I can imagine people up at head office, 'oh no not him again'.

*RJ: Did you ruffle feathers?*

JG: I did ruffle feathers actually! One of the things when I was a councillor, I did all the work in the evenings, sometimes --

*RJ: Councillor for where?*

JG: Hounslow. London Borough of Hounslow. I was on the borough council there. All the meetings were in the evenings. Sometimes something cropped up during the day and I would say to my manager, 'Can I have the afternoon off?' 'Yeah, yeah, that would be all right.' Anyway, there was one manager who put his foot down. 'No. What's it for?' 'Council.' 'No, can't do that.' Well, I discovered there'd been some Act of Parliament which entitled people who did public service of some sort or the other, including being a councillor, they were entitled to have so many days off a year. So I said to the manager, 'I am entitled to it, this Act of Parliament ...' So I got on to the union and they advised me to put in this application, which I did, and all I wanted to do was to have what I'm entitled to. So he said, 'You've got to make out a schedule of how many days a year you want off.' I only wanted the odd afternoon off every now and again. But I had to write down all these things that could possibly happen --

*RJ: In advance.*

JG: National conferences, and it came to about six weeks. So I put this in. And he said, 'This is outrageous!' I said, 'It's what you asked for. You asked for all the possible days that I might want to have off. In practice, I probably only want a few afternoons off a year.'

*RJ: And is that how it worked out?*

JG: Yeah. They had to concede because it was --

*RJ: The law.*

JG: So I had the odd afternoon off. Hardly any time off at all, really. Sometimes when we were doing job interviews at the council, Hounslow Council, for directors and so on, and these would take place during the day, so that was one of the occasions I needed time off.

*RJ: So you were quite a young councillor then?*

JG: I think I first went on to ... it wasn't called Hounslow council, it was called Heston and Isleworth council when I was twenty-three. And then I lost my seat and I went back on again when I was thirty. And then I was on for quite a while. And I lost my seat again for four years which is when I became interested in doing local history work and labour history and so on which is why I'm here talking to you about it! And I went back on the council in 1986. And I became a leader of the council but I found that a bit too much to do so I stopped doing that after twelve months and I finally came off in 1990, which was a year or two after I stopped working for the bank.

*RJ: So what started you on this political path?*

JG: Well, the 1945 General Election. My father was in the Labour Party and he used to deliver leaflets and I just enjoyed going round with him stuffing leaflets through letter boxes, if I could reach the letterbox, and I just got fascinated by the whole political thing. So I joined the Heston Labour League of Youth and I went through the usual and I became secretary and so on, ran elections. I just enjoyed doing it. And my family were all Labour people. And they either worked in factories or sometimes ran small businesses which failed. One of my grandfathers, he ran a music shop in Beeston near Nottingham. He was basically a piano tuner. And when he first started work, he used to work at a piano factory in east London. My mum and my sister and I went to stay with my father's parents during the war to get out of the way of the bombs. And what my grandfather was doing then was mending bicycles in the shed in the back garden and tuning pianos for a living. But at some stage he had had a music shop which didn't do very well and I don't think he actually went bankrupt. He nearly did. And my mother's father, he did go bankrupt. He had a fish shop in Nottingham. That's a long story about that particular grandfather. Nothing to do with work and so on but he was quite a character actually. I'll tell you about him afterwards! Anyway, the whole family were sort of labour family. My grandmother who came from Cornwall once said to me, 'When I was down in Cornwall, I would always vote for either the Liberal or the Labour man, whichever was the best man. But I would never vote Conservative!' So it was the family background that pulled me into it. But I got fascinated by the whole thing. About politics. And I was aware of the inequality. Working for the bank showed me a lot about it, actually. Because I used to see these very rich people come into the bank in Earl's Court, which is Kensington, isn't it?

*RJ: Yes.*

JG: And of course I used to see everything that went in and out through their accounts, you see. So I knew how they lived and what they spent their money on and where the money came from and some of it was pretty dodgy to me! And people getting in enormous dividends from unearned income and

this sort of thing. That showed me the inequality of the world and I'd been up in Nottingham during the war and seeing the factories up there and so on. There was quite a bit of poverty about. So that was another thing that brought me into the politics. One can not be certain what you can do about it but I thought something should be done about it and the Communist Party in my view wasn't ever going to get anywhere so the Labour Party seemed the best option. Which I think it was, it did an awful lot after the war, that first Labour government did a tremendous amount to fight poverty.

*RJ: The NHS?*

JG: They brought in the NHS, didn't they, in 1948. And social services, education, they all came from that first Labour government after the war.

*RJ: We still have those things today.*

JG: We still have those things today. Remember, the Conservatives in Parliament voted against the National Health Service in 1948 and voted against the independence of India.

*RJ: Don't think they'd be against the NHS now, would they?*

JG: No, I don't think they would but they opposed an awful lot of the social legislation which went on then. My working life provided me money to live so that in the evenings I could do all the political work. OK, I was never an active trade unionist. I always believed in it and joined the trade union as soon as I left school. I think I said earlier, when I went to work at the Westminster Bank at Earl's Court at the age of sixteen, I was the only union member in the branch and that was frowned upon by other members of the staff. So I've always been a member of the union and one amusing thing is that later on in life when I was working for the Midland Bank and was then a member of BIFU, Banking, Insurance and Finance Union, I always imagined myself with a t-shirt saying BIFU Man across the front of it. Staff Association, which was the favoured representative body of the employer, eventually for some reason had to wind up. And I think it was because of some legislation. What they did, they had to become a proper trade union of some sort. Now what they could have done of course was join up with BIFU. But they hated BIFU so much because BIFU had been telling them for decades they were in the employers' pockets and they hated BIFU so much that they joined up with ASTMS. I can't remember what the initials stand for. The Associated something, Technical Staffs or something like that. And ASTMS was a left-wing trade union that was affiliated to the TUC and I think to the Labour Party. Maybe I'm getting in a muddle here. I think BIFU then wasn't affiliated to the TUC but ASTMS was, so the staff association joined up with ASTMS rather than join up with the hated Banking, Insurance and Finance Union. So I then left BIFU and joined ASTMS and I had a phone call from BIFU and they

asked, 'Why have you left us?' And I said, 'Well, because I joined ASTMS.' 'Why'd you join them?' And I said, 'Because they're affiliated to the Labour Party and you're not!' 'Oh, I see, that's OK!' Because all the guys that ran BIFU were on the left so they understood absolutely why somebody would want to do that. Where BIFU is now, I just don't know. They're probably amalgamated with some other union. I don't know where they are now.

*RJ: So did you find in your later working life, when you were in Harlesden, for instance, was the trade union membership higher?*

JG: Yes, it was higher there. In fact the longer I was in the bank, the more people in the branch where I worked were members of the union. I don't think it got to fifty per cent, but it might have done. When I started out I was the only one!

*RJ: So there were issues?*

JG: No, because what I used to do, being a mischievous sixteen year old, I used to leave this union literature lying around. And some people thought it was absolutely disgraceful! They absolutely hated trade unions.

*RJ: It does seem quite a career choice that would conflict with your own ideals.*

JG: My dad put me into it. I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just wanted to leave school at sixteen. None of my family had ever been to university. We hardly knew what universities were! I thought universities were Oxford and Cambridge where people of the aristocracy went! We didn't know anything about universities at all. And also I was a bit fed up with school and I just wanted to get out of school and get a job. My father thought it was a good idea to go and work for a bank because he'd been unemployed a bit before the war and security was his main aim for his son. I had an uncle, my favourite uncle called Uncle Jack. And he lived in Nottingham. And I used to go up there and see him sometimes. And he said, 'What you going to do, John, when you leave school?' And I said, 'Oh, I don't know, Uncle Jack.' 'Well, whatever you do,' he said, 'get a job where you don't have to take your jacket off!' Because he used to go around mending weighing machines. Tracking weighing machinery, you put lorries on them. In fact, when we used to deliver this fuel oil, when I worked for Gulf Oil Company, the tanker would go into the factory and it would go on this huge weighing machine and they would weigh the tanker, and it would go off and empty its oil into the tanks and then they'd weigh it again to work out how many gallons of oil had been delivered. And he used to mend those machines.

*RJ: So do you think that your dad gave you good advice then?*

JG: Yes. Yes. I think he did, he did the best that he thought he could for me.



*RJ: And of course you retired at fifty-two, which ...*

JG: Yes.

*RJ: ... is a great plus.*

JG: He was so pleased with how his son became not exactly a bank manager, in charge of the branch, in charge of thirty people, this sort of thing. We were called appointed officers, if you became the second-in-charge in a branch, you were an appointed officer. And I think that was his ambition I should become one of those. He was very pleased.

*RJ: Very proud.*

JG: Oh, yes.

*RJ: Socially at work, did you mix with the other colleagues?*

JG: Not when I was at Westminster Bank in Earl's Court. Once I went with the messenger to watch Chelsea play – saw Stanley Matthews there. I was the only person of my age there apart from the girl typist. I used to spend quite a time chatting to her. Later on when I was working for the Midland Bank, we used to socialise a fair amount. It was mainly the young men getting up cricket teams and football teams and going off in the evenings to play other branches. But as far as personal friendships are concerned, no, I never made any personal friendships with anybody in the bank. But as I say, they were nice people, I just didn't do it.

*RJ: Do you think you were quite separate because of your position maybe?*

JG: I was a political person and nobody else was. And a lot of the people, perfectly nice people, had the everyday prejudices that lots of people have got against ... black people, for instance. And that's an interesting part of my life, actually, this thing about prejudice. Because from a very young age it never occurred to me that people of a different race were any different. When I was at school, I think it would be probably 1949. And the West Indian cricket team were over here and it was a boys' school and we were chatting about cricket and I was saying this batsman was very good and that bowler was very good and this boy said, 'I think Stollmeyer is the best player.' Well, he was OK. And I said, 'Why him?' 'He's a white man,' he said. And I think that's the first time I can really remember coming across any prejudice. And I would be thirteen or fourteen at the time. And then in the bank ... I was at Knightsbridge branch for a few weeks once. Some parade came by, some demonstration, and they were all black people protesting about something going on in the Congo. They had banners and were shouting out and we were looking down from the first floor into the street and some of the remarks that were coming were absolutely outrageous about black people - "fucking

wogs” I’m not saying for one moment that everyone in the bank was like that, but there was an example of the difference between me and most people because most people aren’t political anyway. I was more a political person. We had some good times playing cricket and football, I must say. We had some laughs doing that.

*RJ: And of course you said it was much more ethnically mixed later on.*

JG: Yes, they were --

*RJ: Was there any racial tension between workers?*

JG: No. I never came across that in a branch where I was. As I say at a branch you had about twenty people, you had about half of dozen Asian or black people there and the rest would be white. No, I never came across any of that in branches. Rather curious, isn’t it? I think the people who are most racially prejudiced are the people who’ve never come across people of a different race or ethnic group. Once people mix it begins to fade away. When I was at West Ealing, some of the Asian girls got married and the whole staff would be invited to the wedding. All the white staff would turn up at 10:00 like they were told to and nothing would happen for about three hours! Yeah, it was OK. It was OK later on. And you made me think about that, actually, because there was far more colour prejudice when there weren’t any people of an ethnic minority working in a branch than there was when there were! Interesting.

*RJ: So your political life sat quite comfortably ...*

JG: It fitted me, yes. I don’t think the bank approved very much in the early days. One of the points I made when I was applying for time off for Council work was that the manager of Ealing Broadway branch was a justice of the peace and he was always having time off. And they said, ‘Oh, yes, but he’s a manager, isn’t he, you see!’ ‘So are you saying’, I said, “that only managers then can have time off voluntary public service?’ There was, still is, a sort of mind set that people have got about some sort of hierarchy in society, and people higher up the ladder have got some privileges that people lower down are not allowed to have.

*RJ: And so how long did you remain a Labour councillor for?*

JG: I think either twelve or fourteen years. I can’t remember where there’s a gap in the middle of it for four years when I lost my seat, and that’s when I started to do this history research work. I’d done a little bit before that. And it usually entailed going down to the library and going through the old newspapers and picking out all stuff to do with trade unions and the Labour Party. And the earliest newspaper I could find was 1895. So during that four years I started doing it an awful lot more and then it faded away a bit because

I got involved in CND. And I got involved in saving the GLC campaign. I ran that in Hounslow. So that took up time then.

*RJ: And you were working full-time?*

JG: I was then. And then in 1986 I went back on the council, still working full-time, and I was leader of the council for twelve months but that's when I really found you couldn't do a full-time job during the day and be a leader of a London borough at the same time.

*RJ: And did you continue your councillor work?*

JG: I stopped being a councillor in 1990 I think because I ran out of energy, really. I think when you become a councillor, I suppose the same thing applies when you're an MP, you start off ... the things you want to do and get done, you battle away to get these things. After a while, you either achieve them or you haven't and you realise there's some things you're not going to achieve. You still help people out in housing cases and things like that but you run out of this reservoir of energy and I think that's the time to give up. Maybe you come back later. Of course, we didn't get paid as councillors then, you got things called attendance allowance, travel allowance and things like that. Now they're paid around £10,000, leaders of councils get about £30 or £40,000 now. When I was leader of the council I didn't get anything that I remember! So if you got fed up and if you ran out of energy then you could give it up. I think there are councillors now who want to give it up but they can't afford to do so. So that's one disadvantage of paying councillors. On the other hand, I suppose they deserve to get more money than I got when I was a councillor, so ... I forgot what your question was! What was your question? You've forgotten as well! Oh, you were saying how long was I a councillor.

*RJ: Yes! And it sounds like you stopped working and stopped being a councillor quite around the same time.*

JG: Well, yes. How old was I? Born in '35, so 1990 ... What's 35 from 90?

*RJ: I think you were about fifty-two, weren't you?*

JG: Fifty-two. That's right. I think there was a time in life when I wanted to change things an awful lot. I just thought that it's time to change, so I gave up working for the bank, I gave up being a councillor and in fact what I did was an awful lot of this history research instead. And I've been doing that ever since. I am now ... I'm secretary, or was until last week, secretary of the Hammersmith constituency Labour Party, so I'm back into the politics quite heavily now. But I won't go back on the council anymore. I'm now treasurer of the Hammersmith Constituency Labour Party and I'm very active in my ward. Things like that. So I'm back into the politics quite heavily now.

*RJ: And you studied local history?*

JG: I'm still doing that. I was at Chiswick Library this morning and going through the newspaper for 1933. The reason I was going through 1933 is because a year or so ago someone phoned me up and said, 'You don't have anything about the Firestone factory strike?' and I said, 'No ... when was it?' And they said, 'In the early 1930s,' so I found it was 1933 so I went to the local newspapers to find out about the strike. I gave a talk here a fortnight ago about the Firestone strike. Having all the information about the strike, having got the 1933 binder up, I might as well go through the rest of 1933 and that's what I was doing this morning.

*RJ: The rest in context of ...*

JG: Well, looking for all Labour Party political trade union history in 1933 locally. Quite fascinating stuff. Obviously the bits about the Firestone strike and that. There's all sorts of bits about trade unions and local elections. Conservative Party reports as well. In those days, the local newspapers were actually quite useful, whereas now they have a load of rubbish. And somebody in fifty years' time looking at a local newspaper today is not going to get much of the local history. But the newspapers then used to report all that happened at borough council meetings. All political meetings and there were a lot of them going on. All sorts of stuff. There was a lot about 1933, a lot about Fascism and a lot about the Peace Movement as well. So quite interesting. I'm up to November now. So when I finish 1933 I can go back to 1909 which is where as far as I got before.

*RJ: So in that period, those Firestones and those factories in that area, was there a lot of politics permeating through the factories?*

JG: Yes, there was. Especially the Labour Party, a lot of people on the constituency general committee were trade unionists and a lot of them worked in factories on the Great West Road, including Firestone's. And several other factories. Trico's is another one. Pyrene factory was there. There was lots of factories there then.

*RJ: Yes.*

JG: But they're virtually all gone now. They've either been turned into head offices of major international companies or huge retail units.

*RJ: Have you been there recently?*

JG: I've been on the Great West Road, yes. I drive up and down there sometimes. There's a big computer retailers there, I've forgotten their name now.

*RJ: Are there any of the old buildings ...*

JG: Well, yes. I mean the Firestone factory was shamefully destroyed. It had a --

*RJ: It was lovely.*

JG: -- one of those 1930s frontages --

*RJ: Yes.*

JG: But when that happened I think there was quite a rush to put preservation orders on lots of the other factories. So a lot of the original buildings are there but they're not used as factories. They're used as something else. Mock-Egyptian architecture. They're still there. But anyway, as I said, trade union movement in west London was quite strong. Because there were lots of factories, not only on the Great West Road, but in Park Royal and various other places, factories, lots of blokes working in them. A lot of women as well. Acton was another place with quite a few factories and the trade union movement was quite strong. The reason why the trade union movement is not so strong now is all the factories have closed! What was health and safety like? I'll tell you one thing, health and safety wasn't a big issue in the bank. You couldn't easily fall into one of these adding machines like you could in a factory making cars. One thing I had to do when I was on the post - some customers used to have cash sent to them by post in registered letters. And we used to have special envelopes, quite thick envelopes and you had to seal these with sealing wax. You also had to do the same thing if you were sending valuable securities such as bearer bonds. You had to ... a little gas jet coming out here, you had a stick of red sealing wax and put the letter under it and the red sealing wax would drop on to the envelope and then you had this metal stamp which you then put in the wax that said 'Westminster Bank, Earl's Court'. Sometimes you'd run out of sealing wax and you only had little bits left, so you'd burn your fingers. And if the wax actually fell on to your fingers sometimes, that was quite painful.

*RJ: Blisters.*

JG: I got a few blisters from time to time.

*RJ: Part of the job though.*

JG: That's right. I can't think of any other health and safety issues in a bank branch particularly. Now, I suppose, the place is riven with health and safety issues, nobody's allowed to lift anything in case they hurt their back. I sometimes think it's gone a bit too far.

*RJ: Break a fingernail.*

JG: That's right.

*RJ: Would you have foreseen the recent banking crisis?*

JG: I was astonished. The recent banking crisis, several things I've learned about since ... I mean, I didn't know the American banks were going down trailer parks in America and say to these people who are unemployed, 'Why don't you buy your trailer?' 'I haven't got any money!' 'That's all right, we'll lend you the money.' 'How am I going to pay it back?' 'Don't worry! The value of your trailer is just going to go up and up and up. If you really get into trouble you can just sell it and you'll make a profit.' Of course, it didn't happen, did it? These people could not afford to pay it back. The value of their trailer did not go up because so much money had been pumped into it. And the prices were going up not because there was an increased demand but because there was so much money being lent to these people buying something they can't afford, and the banks were packaging these mortgages up together and selling them to each other. I didn't know this until after the crisis, I should have known it. People in the UK were getting mortgages for 110%, 120% the value of the property they were buying. Now when I got mortgages, you were only allowed to borrow 90% of the cost of the property you were buying. Going back a long time, if you bought a house for £10,000 you had to have saved up £1,000 and they would lend you £9,000. You could only borrow 2 ½ times your salary. And of course, going back even further in time, it was only men's salary that they took into account. And women weren't allowed to have mortgages.

*RJ: So single women couldn't buy properties?*

JG: I don't think they could. I'm not saying it never happened but it was rare. Perhaps a very rich single woman could. Going back to the current banking crisis mthe UK banbks were lending too much money to people. And in the far east a developer would come along and build a block of flats and he would sell options to buy these flats to certain people and then the value of the flats not built yet would go up so the people who had bought the options would sell them on to somebody else and then the developer would decide oh, I'm not going to build this after all! And I did not believe when I heard about it that these things were happening. And who had to sort it out? We, as taxpayers. The government, the Labour government was running an annual deficit of about 3% because there was a bit of a slump on. Tax income dropped. So during the slack times you run a deficit, during the good times you might make it up. 3% is manageable. Along came this banking crisis and somebody from the NatWest phoned up Alistair Darling and said, 'Look, if you don't do something by lunchtime we're gonna have to close the doors.' So the government lends the banks billions and billions of pounds to stop them closing so people like you and me don't lose our money that we've got in the

bank so the deficit goes up to 10%, which is quite serious but 7% is nothing to do with the government, to do with the banks. What's that got to do with my working life? I worked for a bank, I suppose.

*RJ: Well, I'm just kind of comparing the power that the banks had in those days compared to now. It's hugely different, isn't it?*

JG: It is. In those days for quite a long time, the banks would not issue their accounts. No one knew what their income was, what their expenditure was and what their profit was because there was a theory was that if people knew and if in one year the profits of the bank went down only a penny, everyone would rush in and draw out all their money. That was why there was all this secrecy about banks. So things have changed an awful lot, when you think about it. Both as far as it being a workplace and the practices of banking. I suppose I'm getting a bit old now --

*RJ: The way they treat their customers.*

JG: Yes. I know that. How do they treat you then? What do they do badly?

*RJ: Well, they can be quite unethical, I think. And you said before, trying to lend you money --*

JG: Oh, yes. Yes.

*RJ: It's not very personalised. I think --*

JG: No, it isn't.

*RJ: -- in those days you'd know your bank manager's name, they'd know your name.*

JG: That's right. That's one thing about ... I had an advantage working in a bank. You were meeting people all day long. You were lending money to help them get out of trouble. And you'd hear amusing stories from people. Had a letter once from somebody in Sri Lanka. I took a copy of it. He wanted to borrow some money to finance a shrimp farm in Sri Lanka. I can't remember --

*RJ: Did he get it?*

JG: No, we didn't even know who he was! How he got ...

*RJ: He's probably Bird's Eye now!*

JG: He must have got a copy of the London telephone directory, and picked out one bank and written to it!

*RJ: Trying his luck.*

JG: Yeah. But you did meet people and it was quite interesting. There was this Indian guy who worked in an Indian restaurant across the road. Really nice chap. He was a waiter over there and he wanted to start his own restaurant. He wanted to borrow money to go in with two or three other blokes to open a restaurant. And we couldn't do it. Whenever we looked at it he just didn't have sufficient income or no security ... I wanted to help this chap. This went on a couple of years and then they introduced credit cards. And he qualified for a credit card because he'd had an account for several years and that counts toward the points you get towards whether you qualify for a credit card or not. And then I worked it out and in order to get a credit card limit, you go through all the circumstances and award points, you get a certain amount of points for how long you've had an account, certain amount of points for how long you lived where you live now, and a certain amount of points for where you've worked, for how many years you worked there. And these added up to giving him a credit card with a limit of £2,000. So I lent him £2,000 on a credit card to open an Indian restaurant down in Weybridge.

*RJ: He must have been satisfied.*

JG: Slaving away on one of the machines, to start with, but later on it could become quite interesting.

*RJ: Interacting.*

JG: Yeah. And there was always the pleasure of needling the bank over trade union activities and so on.

*RJ: Did you have to do that often?*

JG: No, I did it out of fun, really.

*RJ: But you were obviously a respected employee because you moved high up.*

JG: I think I might have done quite well, I must have been useful, quite good at the jobs I was asked to do.

*RJ: So even though you might not have been appreciated for your politics you were still highly regarded.*

JG: Maybe I exaggerated that a bit. I don't think they were too ... Once I was asked if I would go and be the accountant ... this is towards the end ... at Park Lane branch. I didn't want to go because I was on the council and settled in at West Ealing and it meant going there and finding out about a new branch and so on. There'd been a bit of trouble at the branch. Apparently the manager ... is this confidential information, I wonder?

*RJ: No names.*



JG: Well, maybe it wasn't Park Lane branch. Perhaps another West End branch. Maybe it was somewhere else. Well, there were some rich customers there from the Middle East and they'd been introduced to certain ladies through the bank - through the manager! And the bank frowned upon that, a little bit. It was quite flattering in a way that they chose me to go there to sort this thing out.

*RJ: To clean it up.*

JG: Yeah. I turned it down. They weren't happy about that. They thought I ought to do what they wanted me to do.

*RJ: What, you mean with the turning it down?*

JG: They didn't like me turning down ...

*RJ: Park Lane's vastly different, isn't it?*

JG: Yes. One thing I said was, 'I'm prejudiced against rich people. I would not be suitable for the branch.' And they said, 'What about rich people in West Ealing?' 'We haven't got many of them down here!' I said.

*RJ: Few and far between!*

JG: We lend people money on credit cards to open restaurants down here!

*RJ: I suppose finally, have you got children?*

JG: I've got three children. Yes, I've got three children. My daughter lives in Portland. She works for Dorset County Council, social services. I've got a son down in Ashford in Kent. He works for British Telecom. I've got another son who's unemployed at the moment in Wales. He was a teacher but he got fed up doing that.

*RJ: So they didn't follow your footsteps.*

JG: No, they didn't follow my footsteps. I often think I should have ... not put them into the bank, but I often think I should have been more directive in putting them into some career or the other. But I was always all about freedom of choice and let people find their own way and that sort of stuff. Maybe I'm wrong, but I'm not absolutely certain that that's the best way. I don't know. Because when I was sixteen or whatever it was, that's what fathers did. People used to think rather seriously about what they were going to do with their children. We don't now. Maybe we should.

*RJ: You didn't recommend banking to them?*

JG: No. My advice was to find something you liked doing and do that.

*RJ: Of course now you don't get jobs for life, do you?*

JG: No, you don't. There were jobs for life in those days.