

John Simmons

AM: What's your name and where were you born?

JS: My name is John Simmons and I was born in 1945.

AM: And what was your first job?

JS: I was an office boy at the head office of the London Co-op in Maryland Street.

AM: And what did that job entail?

JS: sorting out post, and later doing inter-branch transfers, and then stock control and data processing.

AM: And did you enjoy that job?

JS: Yes I did very much. I enjoyed it, at the time it was mostly young people it was like one big...we used to have firms outing and all sorts. It was a good job at the time.

AM: And how long did you stay there?

JS: I stayed there about fifteen years I think. Something like that. About fifteen.

AM: And what did you do after that?

JS: Well I took another job in stock control and data processing for a chain of shoe shops. I used to travel all over the country with the buyers, which was another good job, but the hours they expected me to work – day and night more or less – you know it was one of those jobs, and I wasn't prepared to do that so I took a job on a freight terminal at Temple Mills called LIFT (the London International Freight Terminal). And there I worked...I used to get things out for the Customs Officers. I used to drive a fork lift truck, Vanoppen Transport was the firm. There were ten sheds in London and ten in Liverpool, and we used to deal with everything you can imagine, and the customs Officers used to ask me to get the stuff out. And I used to open it up in what was called the cage. Which the Manager couldn't get into or the Governor couldn't get into - we dealt with anything. All TIR's, forty foot lock containers; we loaded and unloaded off of railway trains. Anything imaginable. And then I made a tragic mistake and I took a job working for Steetly Bert Chemicals which was loading acid and it was shift work and it practically killed me - the work. I

was like an old man of 90 in doing the work. I don't know why I took it but it was a job. I worked for Pontins holiday camp in kitchens at Lowestoft. I even sold badges and scarves at football and pop concerts. Yes.

AM: So going back to that job at the chemical works...

JS: It was very hard, heavy lifting.

AM: And did you have a union in that place of work?

JS: Well there was supposed to be a union but they didn't do anything. And then...

AM: What do you mean?

JS: Well the money we were getting I don't consider was high enough, and the safety equipment – we should have had breathing apparatus I think because it affected my lungs. A canister of acid is about that big [indicates about a metre high] glass packed in straw with a wire frame. We used to stack them three high on the Lorries. What we used to call sack barrows. We used to wire them together three high and load them together for security because if one broke on a motorway it would cause a lot of trouble – that was nitrate, sulfuric, hydrochloric and so for about five or six years I was just breathing in acid and it practically killed me...And I've never recovered from it properly I've done other work.

AM: So there must have been people there in your situation.

JS: Yes, some of them are dead, yes, yes. I don't know how I'm still here actually, but I'm not questioning it. There must be a purpose and a reason. There's a reason for everything you know. But it's closed down now I believe. But it was very hard work. Very hard work. I prefer to put it out of my mind. But I can't sometimes. People say to me what's wrong with you? Cheer up what's wrong with you but I have got all sorts of things wrong with me. I've got diabetes now all sorts of things arthritis's; I've got a lot of things wrong. And the only time I feel anywhere near free of pain is when I'm sitting on there [points to disability motor scooter]. So it's rather difficult, it's rather difficult. When I was younger we used to go train spotting and all sorts of things and a lot of freedom we were always over the nets at Westham Park playing cricket. You know I was very very fit. When you are young you feel indestructible, I thought I could do anything you know. And when I was 17 I went on holiday to Italy. I learnt bits and pieces of different languages. We had French at school for two years. We did a year's French then dropped it then I did another year's French. I'm not able to read and write my French but I know bits and pieces of French. I learnt a little bit of German, I went all around the Alps with a mate. I got stranded in Milan and had to make my own way back.

AM: Going back to working lives what jobs did your parents do?

JS: Well my mother worked at Plessey's as far as I know. That was somewhere around Carpenters Road she used to work. She was evacuated during the war, and then she became a housewife. And my father worked on the railway (he wasn't in the forces neither was my mother). My brother wasn't in the forces he worked for the council.

AM: And what did your mother do at Plessey's?

JS: That was souldering mostly, mostly souldering – electrical equipment.

AM: And are there any other jobs that stand out in your mind?

JS: The best job I had actually was working with the customs. I wasn't a Customs Officer but I was working with them and they said 'Why don't you train to be a Customs Officer you have every thing it takes to be a Customs Officer. But I've always been silly changing jobs and always looking for something and I don't quite know what – security perhaps. But changing jobs doesn't bring security. I worked for the post office one Christmas getting the mail bags off of the train and stacking them. That's very hard work. I was always able to work hard. Then I got a job working for Stephenson Shuttering, and I had an accident.

AM: What happened?

JS: I don't know I was working up high and I signalled to a crane driver to pucker something up and something hit me on the head. It knocked me silly. I split up with my girl friend, I had a big bust up with my dad, and I don't really know to this day what did happen. I was rushed into hospital and I don't know what happened. I'll never will know I don't think. I can't bear thinking about it you know. I can't bear thinking about it.

AM: Sounds like health and Safety was a real big problem.

JS: Yes. Health and Safety all the time. Yes, because the ground when I was working at Steetly Bert Chemicals in Abbey Lane the ground was contaminated with the acid dripping through the loading bays. The loading bays were made out of railway sleepers. It was like walking back 300 years. You know starting from an air conditioned office to labouring in a heavy loading gang, it was like walking back 100 years.

AM: And what about the other men who worked there?

JS: Well when I got there I said 'You all look grey'. Their faces and I think that that was the work, and there was a mercurial plant there and mercury can send you crazy you know and I think that's half my problem now. And mercury is very dangerous and I was working near the mercurial plant and they used to put mercury in your fillings for teeth but later in life they took them out because they thought they were dangerous. But I have been exposed to a lot of chemicals dangerous

chemicals – the lot. A great deal. I spent some time in Goodmayes Hospital where they said ‘Do you want to go in for some rest?’ And I didn’t get any rest in there, didn’t get no rest at all because I was frightened of the other patients (you hear rumours don’t you). And at that time they’d give people electric treatment. They used to wire their heads up and put a charge through their heads. I never had that I was given tablets.

AM: Was that after working at the Chemical Works?

JS: Yes

AM: Was that related to that?

JS: Yes partly, partly through my mistakes at choosing jobs that weren’t suitable. Partly because of that. It was work that was necessary but I didn’t have to do it. I could have been far better employed somewhere else. But when I got there I was very positive and the men were very negative. They were saying things like ‘lost outside them gates, as soon as you leave here you’re dead’, ‘as soon as you finish up and crack up’ – this sort of talk. And it got me down to a terrible amount; it got me very very depressed. It was depressing to listen to them after a time. It was very depressing. From starting off in an air conditioned office (I’ve got qualifications in accountancy and book keeping and all that, and an RSA(1) in computers) I should have really joined the Navy or worked with the Customs. Two things I could have done. But you can’t turn the clock back; you can’t turn the clock back.

AM: So when you were in Goodmayes Hospital did you have a job after that?

JS: Yes.

AM: What did you go on to do?

JS: Well I was selling badges and scarfs around the football and pop concerts and I think I also worked for the post office for one Christmas. But now, well now I’m older, a lot older and I don’t think I could do or pass the...I don’t think I’ve got today’s qualifications to get a job now, and officially I’m passed retirement age – I’m 73 and I’m wondering what to do with my life. I’ve got a vast work experience and all the rest of it. Over the park I do things there, but that’s just one day a week and for the rest of the week I’m lost and just filling time. I feel like the men that I worked with. You know that negative attitude as they’d been there all their life. As then people did stay in their jobs all their life.

AM: What about your dad?

JS: He passed away with Cancer.

AM: But what job did he do, again?

JS: He was on the railway. And when he left the railway ...I forget what he done then we kind of lost contact for a long while when I was travelling. I think he told me at one time he worked on air fields during the war, but I don't know what he done and I don't know what he done on the railway. He wasn't a train driver, but he worked on the railway and of course when the second world war broke out he was except because of the job – he didn't go into the army neither did my brother, and my mother wasn't in the forces. The forces didn't appeal to me. I thought why I should go in the forces I don't want to travel around the world, but I had to travel around the world I'd been to a few places. I've been to France, Spain, Portugal, Jersey, the Channel Islands; I've been to a lot of places. But half of it still seems like I'm trying to recover from loading acid –

AM: Really -

JS: That's how it seems and my doctor at the time said 'don't go into Goodmayes as you won't like it', but I insisted.

AM: Yes. What about your mum and dad were they working in Stratford?

JS: Yes.

AM: Whereabouts?

JS: My dad was working on the Great Eastern which would be Temple Mills Great Eastern Street, all around there. My mother as I say she worked in Plessey's and then become and house wife when me and my brother came into the world. It wasn't particularly good times, it wasn't particularly good times, but I was young, I was ambitious I wanted to travel. I wanted to do everything. I was quite good at cricket; I was quite good at cricket. I played for the school at cricket, football and all that sort of thing. I was never a brilliant swimmer for some reason I don't know why, and they say swimming is really good for you. I used to cycle quite a bit but I've never taken a driving lesson in my life.

AM: So where did you, what were your other jobs?

JS: What when I was shoe buying.

AM: Yes.

JS: I was working in a buying office in Cambridge Heath Road, Bethnal Green and I used to work with the buyers on stock control and data processing. I used to travel around the country with the buyers and they'd look at shoes and things and decide what they were going to buy and all the rest of it. So it was kind of office work and shoe buying. You know it's a mixture. It wasn't a bad job – the pay was reasonable. We worked for the Justice of the Peace one time we worked there, and he was a church warden and everything and I worked with him, and I thought I'd better behave myself [laughs]. And that was a reasonable job. I've always had reasonable jobs.

When I was working for the post office I was sorting out mail bags for the different areas when they come in on the trains. And let me say...it was so cold one winter we were doing it that we were bringing out heaters to keep us warm as we were freezing you know. And I've been through quite a lot actually; I've been through quite a lot. I worked in a holiday camp – Pontins at Pakefield near Lowestoft as a kitchen porter, working with the cooks and all that sort of thing. As I said I worked with Customs at the Freight Terminal.

AM: Have you ever worked for any company where there was a union in place?

JS: Yes.

AM: Which was that?

JS: The Co-op.

AM: And was there any union activity there?

JS: Yes, actually the Co-op went on strike and it was the first time the Co-op had ever gone on strike, and that was mostly because we didn't think the women were getting equality. We went on strike for equal pay for women. I was quite adamant about it cause I said 'Why are they doing the same job as us and getting half the pay for it?' I spoke to the Governors and the bosses and I said 'Are you going to sack me if I go out?' And they said 'No'. And I went on strike and a lot of people went on strike. But because they were married and had responsibility and I was single, I was very young and single, they slowly drifted back to work because of finance and feeding their families you know. (2)

AM: And when was that?

JS: What year was that...let me work it out I left school at 14 I was born in 1945. I think it was the late 60's. (3) A lot of memories a lot of memories...

(1). RSA (Rivest–Shamir–Adleman) is one of the first public-key cryptosystems and is widely used for secure data transmission

(2). 1963 Equal Pay Act. The Equal Pay Act 1970, as amended by Equal Value Regulations of 1983, and the Sex Discrimination Act of 1975 and 1986, superseded by the Equality Act 2010.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Equal_pay_for_equal_work

(3). The Womens'