

Name: Bill Griffiths
Date of Birth: 1944
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Interviewed by: Maya Dunn
Duration: 00:29:10

(00:00:00) My name is Bill Griffiths and I was born in 1944.

When did you come to Milton Keynes?

I had been a lecturer at University College Cardiff and I got a job at London Zoo. I started looking around Primrose Hill for a place to live. Honestly, that was much too expensive, so we then moved out to Rickmansworth and we found a place and they wouldn't give us a mortgage on an old property. We then looked at a place in Aylesbury but it didn't have a building certificate. At that stage I think we thought well, we'll go out as far as Milton Keynes and we came to Milton Keynes and it was very little more to get a season ticket in from Milton Keynes to London than it was from Watford. So that really clinched it and we thought, well, we would look around Milton Keynes and we bought a house in Bletchley.

When was that ... when did you come to Milton Keynes?

That was 1974 and I got married later on that year so it was really looking for a house where we could settle down.

So what made you come to Milton Keynes? Was that the actual ...?

The reason for coming, quite frankly, was that it was easier to get into London and also, we could afford a place with a garden and that was what attracted us best of all.

So how did you come to the Museum? How did that happen?

Well, if we go then to about 1990, end of 1980s, the Zoo was going through a very bad patch; it was on television quite a lot and I was involved in launching a bid to government in which we brought in people from all over the world. We brought in Disney and so on and we had about ten days brainstorming. At the end of it the CEO for Zoos said would I write it up, which I did and we

had five years to turn the Zoo round financially and we didn't quite achieve it and so virtually, all my level of management were made redundant. There I was, living in Milton Keynes and being a zoologist all my working life, aged 47 and what was I going to do? And opposite me was John Napleton, lived opposite me, who was the chief executive for the Commission for New Towns.

And you know, when you're out of work, redundant at that age, you start looking round at what you can do and John said, "Well, why don't you think about the Museum up at Stacey Hill?" So, I came up here and looked ... well, the first time I came up as everyone will tell you it was closed! I came up a few times until it was open and wandered round the place and I really felt that this was something I could really put some effort into.

So, when did you get the job? (00:02:47).

Well, what happened then ... I mean, I should have said that my expertise at the zoo ... I started an education department and then I set up information designing it, so I had designers, photographers ... I had the printing unit and various people in my department but we put on all the public information, so all the exhibitions, all the public information, including the guides and so on ... so I thought that's what I could offer to the museum. But the first thing that I got involved with once I'd sort of got my feet under the table and being a volunteer and going through all the usual bits the volunteers do, was writing them a report for a future plan, which we also submitted to the Commission for New Towns and having written that, that was accepted and I went back and got a job with the DFE so I was travelling back to London.

And then The Commission for New Towns had quoted me my salary for three years should come back and want to be drawn into operations, which is exactly what happened. So that's how I started off at the museum.

And so what year was that?

That would be about ... well, it was between '91 and '94, that sort of time.

So when you ... your first day at work, what did the place look like?

Ha, ha! Well, when I first came back to look at it, it was very difficult to find your way around. If you were doing a collection ... and a lot of it still was a collection ... so things like sewing machines and radios and cameras were all arranged either on

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shelves or in rather dusty cases, in the main. So that's what most of the collections looked like and then there were a few rooms that had been done very, very well – over in the cottage there was a room which was very like our parlour now, with a small version and the kitchen that we use now, the small kitchen, was very much as it was then. So some parts of it really had been done very well. But people had concentrated on elements and you couldn't really see it as a whole and it was very difficult to find your way round; so you came in where the waterwheel is now and you'd wander down ... the street of shops weren't there ... that was still the cowshed and it still had the smoke dividers in but each stall had been arranged with a different theme. But the themes really, to my mind, didn't hang together, so there wasn't any thread to it there.

And then you had to come out of the museum, usually through where the forge is and then go back into a barn and the barn really was higgledy-piggledy and I used to say in the shed ... the steel shed that was in front of it, so the buildings weren't as they are now, they had another huge steel shed in front ... and I used to say that if you didn't know what a seed drill was when you came into the museum you certainly wouldn't know when you went out because they were all pushed together so closely and interleaved, that you couldn't really make one out. I think that was a lesson for me then that it wasn't just a case of cramming everything in that you had and we had to try to give some things some space. We still probably don't give them enough space but that was one lesson.

So what was your plan when you arrived?

The plan really was that we should try and rationalise it so that there was a way round; that we would remove that steel building that was in front of the thrashing barn, so that the buildings would return to how they would look when they were built in 1847; that we should look for a series of themes, if possible starting off here in the farmhouse because that put the whole museum into context, that it had been a farm; that we should tell important stories like the story of John Radcliffe which had not been told before and people just didn't know they came to the museum and looked at, mainly in artefacts.

So we were looking for themes, we were looking for stories and we were looking for a rational way round as well. So I think that was the overlying thread of what we were trying to do.

Where did the support come from for you to carry out these plans?

We got them, once we had written the development plan. It did involve moving that steel shed to be able to house what had been in that steel shed; we had to put up another building and that became The Hall of Transport and we could remove that shed and we also had to put the new reception building in, so we had a new entrance; we needed a new car park! The funding at that stage all came from the Commission for New Towns because they were stopping being a Development Agency at that time and so they had to ... they either had to close the museum and the land would have been used for development or it had to develop.

That was the stage they were at really when I came and I think, you know, really what's happened depended upon so many people but it was just tipping it over in favour of the fact that the museum should continue.

It had been viewed, I think, very much as a 'bit of a club', which is a little unfair but you can imagine once people have gathered a collection, but really ... a lot of which was in the hedgerow, the old barns, the old buildings and so on, what needs to happen to it needs to be up to a condition where you can put it on display. And that's what a lot of people spent their time doing.

Really, to that group running a museum wasn't the priority, I don't think and then there was almost another group which were trying to run a museum and I think bringing those two groups together, again, was part of the challenge. It was a community problem because they didn't get on. They had employed two people before me to run the museum, both museum professionals and both had given up after a time. So yes, I knew it was quite a challenge and I took it on!

So what fascinates you most about the museum? Is it the history, the social history, is it the artefacts or ...?

It's ... I've got to be completely honest with this ... I always loved history but I also loved zoology which is why I went along those lines but in a way, it's ... both of those were trying to make sense out of a lot of information. And so history has always interested me but here I think it was the challenge of making something work that I thought was important for Milton Keynes. I think what had been shown here ... because the museum had been started by people, in the main, that lived here before Milton Keynes was built and they wanted to look after their heritage. Now, if they felt that was so important I think that it was important and it needed preserving; it was a story that needed telling and it could easily have been lost but also, what could have been lost, of course, was the story of those early days of the development of new Milton Keynes.

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So we were at a period of change, of great change and it could all be lost unless somebody, or some groups ... and there were other groups as well (and I think Living Archive) but groups really tried to capture what was going on at that period.

But also, I think, we quickly realised ... I mean, to start, we were very poor; we lived from hand to mouth for quite some time and we depended upon our volunteers still doing everything. So they were the interpreters and when I came here I thought we would put up labels and have glass cases ... I mean, I saw museums in a very conventional sense, even though I had been involved in interpretation but I think very quickly we ... well, first of all, we realised we couldn't afford those things but then we realised the value of immersive environments but also, of volunteers doing interpretation. And they got so much from it and it seemed great that people were putting in a lot ... but getting a lot from it as well and the whole thing was developing; I mean, you sort of pressed the button and then it just worked and then they just carried on doing it in their way and I think that is what is fantastic about this museum!

What worries me about retirement, which looms, is that other museum professionals who get in will say, we can make this into a proper museum and I think they've got it all wrong; because I think there are lots of museums that are all very similar and this is rather different but we've still got a long way to go. We should all be wary of developing the equivalent of shopping malls, so that you have one that looks very much like another one and you would visit a New Town and it is very much like another one and I think this interaction with the actual artefacts and the interpretation by the volunteers is a real strength and we've got some fantastic stories to tell as well.

So, visitors seem to like it and it seems to be going somewhere. It's purely by accident – it's not by design.

It's grand to see your convention is quite diverse, isn't it, because you've got the ... can you tell us a bit about the BT collection, how that came about?

Yes, you've picked on the one, almost the favourite part of the museum for most of our visitors. It epitomises the interactivity; so we know people love it, so why should we get rid of it? But again, it was almost an accident and people don't like me to say that it came really because of Bletchley Park but in a way, it did! One of our volunteers here, Brian Egan, was the storekeeper at Bletchley Park, so if anything was surplus to requirements or redundant, or damaged, he said could it go to the museum and we built up this collection of artefacts to do with what was then

the GPO, but to do with telephony, and after a while it became apparent that it would be much better if it was working. So a group ... and we really put out the word ... and a group that had been GPO engineers, or BT engineers came and got it all working in what now is the Living Archive hut.

And that's how it was for quite some time and people loved it and in a way, some people say that what we've got now is less homely and I always get that. But it really is there because Bletchley Park was a BT training school and it was also a local centre, a distribution centre for BT. So people knew about that before people knew anything about what Bletchley Park had been in the past.

Because Bletchley Park wasn't a museum things came to us and it did have local relevance then. It has sort of, in a way, got less significance now but it just works so well, so why not keep it?

And what is your biggest challenge in all the time you've been here?

Gosh! That really is one! I think the biggest challenge now ... I think there have been different challenges as we go along ... I think the biggest challenge is keeping the volunteers ... keeping their form of ownership! Because they do own it; they have done it ... but sometimes they forget that and also, like any organisation as you get bigger, it tends to split up into different groups who see their purpose ... their role as being of prime importance and in a place like this we really do depend upon each other but it is getting everybody to understand that. So education needs to have ... if you are trying to give an educational group a background, you really try to create a bit of magic! You try to take them into a different world and the last thing you need is a group from the maintenance team walking through with some ladders and talking to each other because it destroys the whole thing. But getting it so that each group understands what we're trying to do and the relevance of what we're trying to do and to work together, so you retain that common aim, I think is the biggest challenge. And in a way, it was the challenge that met me when I first came here with the group that were doing the restoration and the group that were trying to run the museum. It is still the same problem.

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But what that broke down to then was that the group that came to do the maintenance usually worked, so they came at weekends and the group that maintained the museum and were running the museum tended to come during the week. So, there was this big split between the weekend group and the weekday

group and that's one reason why I think it's important I work both at weekends and during the week.

And what is coming in the pipeline now?

Yes, well in the pipeline it's the dream that we've always had. From the start ... well, from very early on this used to be called 'The Milton Keynes' ... no, it was 'The Stacey Hill Collection of Industry and Rural Life' and then it became the 'Milton Keynes Museum of Industry and Rural Life' and then we took off the name 'Industry and Rural Life' and then called it 'Milton Keynes Museum'. And from that time ... and that was over 20 years ago, from that time we have always wanted to tell the whole story of Milton Keynes. We were quite aware that people came here thinking they would find a Milton Keynes museum that would tell the story of the new city and would tell the story of ancient Milton Keynes and we weren't it! So, that's what we've been striving to do.

The Council, or Milton Keynes, was always meant to have a museum, it's always wanted to have a museum. It was going to go on the back of the library where there is a pink wall but they've never got round to it, so from Development money and mono six money there has always been money set aside for heritage and they were looking around thinking that our 50th year was coming as to where they could put a museum and they bought in external consultants to see where they would put the museum. And they looked at a city centre site, a site at Bradwell Abbey and they looked at a site here and for various reasons they thought this was the best opportunity to build their museum and of course, that fitted in with our plans brilliantly, as well!

And so the ideal is that we will be telling the whole story through two new galleries, one of which will tell the ancient history of Milton Keynes because Milton Keynes has had more archaeology carried out on it than any similar area in the country. So we've got very good archaeological collections that we can put on show and we've got very good stories.

And then the story of the New Town; after 50 years, if we go back to when the museum started there was no history of the New Town. We couldn't have told that story because it was just being built. After 50 years it's just about right to tell that story too. So we want to tell that story as powerfully as we can and we will take people through the whole series of development and then talk about what's been achieved and we hope that the bit that will be about what has been achieved will be like an 'expo' and will be changing. So we've got Red Bull and Marshall Amplifiers and so on involved with us and the OU but we do

hope that section will change and we also hope that section will be particularly interactive. So we are trying to encourage our partners to have bits that people can press and touch that aren't just a case of pressing buttons but where they can discover things for themselves.

The other thing is, I mean, I think we're even looking beyond that; we are a [??? – 00:18:19] and we will shortly be trying out a small science centre because I think sometimes science gets overlooked and that's no way of saying we ought to do it. I don't mean that; I think its great fun and we do some experiments during half term. But we have a nature trail and we'll start interpreting the nature trail and then we'll go on and do more science and if that works we will develop a science centre here.

And before the new galleries are open we are going to before ... because we can't at the moment fit them out but until we can afford to fit them out we're going to trial the space as a temporary exhibition space and if that works, our next phase of development will be a temporary exhibition gallery and so, we've got plenty to think about.

Mmm, thank you. So when is the new building opening then?

Well, that's a difficult question. We hope it will open, the first part on the ... in 2019, in April 2019. We thought we had all the money for that section by about £100,000 but of course, building costs go up and up and up and there are always bits that you want to make better and what we've been determined with, with the buildings, is first of all, they would be buildings that would make a statement about Milton Keynes, which is why we've gone for quite expensive cladding and so on but we also want what goes inside to be of top quality as well.

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But because the building costs have gone up and I should have mentioned the environmental conditions in that we have made sure that we could have exhibitions of any sort from anywhere but to do that has been an added expense and that means that we have not really got the money at the moment for fitting them out and putting in the exhibitions. We have got to work on that. So we hope we'll be ready with the first gallery, which will be Ancient Milton Keynes in 2019 and the other will follow as soon as we raise the money.

Now is there anything that you would like to say that you won't have the opportunity to say again? Let us have a question about Milton Keynes. So, you've lived in Milton Keynes for quite a while now and you've seen some changes; what are your views about Milton Keynes?

Oh, I'm a real fan. I love Milton Keynes and I really, in a way, I didn't know it. I was commuting to London all the time and I would sometimes work at weekends when I was going to London as well, so I didn't really get to know it until I was working at the museum. I knew it by repute but mainly from my daughters; my daughters went to Stantonbury, which actually they loved ... and not everybody does but they did ... and they love Milton Keynes and my family love Milton Keynes and I do. What I like about it is I think its vitality, its vibrance, that it has been this young growing town or city which thinks it 'can do'! I think the danger now is that we might become settled and I hope to goodness that we don't! I really think that we want to keep pioneering and changing and developing for another 100 years, if we possibly can.

We need so much; a lot was put in and the flexibility that was built into Milton Keynes was amazing in those early days. The planners were fantastic in allowing for that and I think all of us that were here in the early days have recognised that. We might have liked more resources and all the rest of it but the opportunity ... really, this museum came from the community and so much else has come from the community. But we're nowhere near it yet – so we've got to get those other branches of the community working in the same way, so that they're contributing to Milton Keynes ... not in that worthy way but because this is where we live, this is so much of our lives that we want it to be good. My brother used to live in Bath and said that it was 'the graveyard of ambition'! But that's because everyone's so content and happy there, not so ... it's always nice to be a little bit edgy so that we keep moving and working on ourselves.

So, that's what I hope can't happen in Milton Keynes but obviously, the structure I think is great, the green spaces I think are fantastic. I actually love the grid system and the roundabouts and a lot of people don't. I don't like when they're putting more and more lights in – I'd much prefer to have roundabouts, they work really well.

I like the idea, I think it's very clever, to keep the pedestrians away from the main roads, just as you'd keep them away from the railways. So I think some superb things have gone into it and I think a lot of them work; because we don't think about them we don't think of them working but they do! We're just about beginning to get some locking up of the traffic at rush hours but it has been pretty good for most of the fifty years it's existed.

So again, I suppose the fear is the expansion, so many of us and I wouldn't say ... I know some people say, look, you

shouldn't expand much more; I don't think I do think that but I do think we need people of vision to say how it would expand and also, particularly to look at transportation, public transport. The dreams were killed off to a large extent by deregulation of public transport because it meant that everyone's gone into ... you know, you need to have some form of rapid transport through the city and that's not been developed. And it will have to be a clever way of developing that but I think what's brought the problems with rush hours, very largely on the expansion areas where we've got people going into the centre at the same time and that wasn't anticipated in the planning and I don't think we've had people who've sorted that out yet.

So, a lot to do but to me that's exciting and I'm sorry I am not going to live long enough to see it all through. In fact, I think as long as we keep saying we want our city to be great, we want to keep building it, we want to keep developing it and as long as people feel involved, particularly the young, see that they're involved in it and that will mean it's going to be a great place in the future.

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(General conversation not relevant to topic)

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So the Council Culture bid went in yesterday, what are your thoughts on that?

Well, yes, the Capital of Culture bid has gone in. I hope it will be successful, I think we have a long way to go with culture in Milton Keynes. Yet, I think, as I said, that the community has given an awful lot to culture but if we compare ourselves with most of the established cities they have got large numbers of museums, large numbers of theatres, large numbers of cinemas and a large number of venues that can be used in other ways and 'Free Trade Halls', or whatever they might call them. And I don't think we've got those yet and I also don't believe that we've yet got ... you might call it a 'coffee culture' but we've not got people meeting and discussing politics and various places all over the place for discussing culture. So, I think we've done incredibly well for the time we've been in existence and obviously I hope the bid's successful.

But I think we've got a long way to go and whether we get it or not, I hope that's the attitude that we take, that we are still building them, that we will make this into a great cultural centre but it's not just buildings, it's not just community; it's all sorts of things and that's going to take vision and planning material and resources.

End of interview: (00:29:10)