

**Name:** Henry Cleary

**Date of Interview:** 8th February, 2018

**Interviewed by:** Dave Harris

**Duration:** 00:29:40

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*OK, my name's Dave Harris, I'll be doing the interview and today is Thursday the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2018. If you can say your name, please?*

I'm Henry Cleary.

*So, for the record, Henry, when did you first move to Milton Keynes?*

Right, so, sorry...

[Technical conversation about filming]

If I say... when you say... because I didn't move to Milton Keynes, what I was doing was sponsoring the Development Corporation from London. So just to give you the synopsis of this...

*Ah, so when did you become involved in Milton Keynes?*

Yes, yes, maybe you're gonna edit the questions anyway, the question bit anyway...

[Technical conversation about filming]

*So when did you first move to Milton Keynes, or get involved in Milton Keynes?*

I was a young civil servant who'd had four or five year's general experience in the Department of the Environment and I was promoted to Principal, which is the head of branch role in the Civil Service. And I was offered a job in the New Towns Division. New Towns Division was the bit of the Department that sponsored all the new towns development corporations. So not just Milton Keynes, but Telford, Peterborough, Northampton, Warrington, and about ten others at that time.

*Oh sorry, I've got a car.*

*Road noise yeah. That should stop now.*

[Technical conversation about filming]

*If we could just go from wherever you left your phrase?*

[Technical conversation about filming]

The job was quite tricky, because the new town development corporations were very important players in development. They controlled hundreds of millions of pounds of expenditure every year, and they owned vast amounts of land, and they had really far-reaching powers which allowed them to consent to development without it going through the local authority. And those powers were used to attract investment and to attract people. And the problem was that we'd just had an election and Mrs Thatcher was running a real rod of iron through Whitehall and she did not believe in state enterprise. So the new towns were having to justify themselves, and the natural reaction of all Conservative ministers was: "Let's get rid of state enterprise, if there are some assets there, let's sell them to the private sector." And not only that, but the Labour Party, which had lost power in 1979, did not really believe in new towns either. They had wanted to shift the focus back to the inner cities. So the new

towns had a real job on their hands, particularly Milton Keynes which was only established in 67 and only got going seriously in the 1970s, and it was still going at quite a rate when I moved to become the sponsor of Milton Keynes, alongside Peterborough, Telford and Northampton.

*So what year would that be?*

*Sorry to pause. Would you be able to direct your answer [technical conversation about filming]*

Tell me from where you want me to start again.

*So if we carry on from where you were.*

So, I moved to New Towns Division in 1983 and there were some very big questions facing the Division. How long should the new towns be allowed to continue? Should all the assets be sold and, if so, to who? What would happen to the housing? What was going to happen to all the employment and investment activity? And also what would happen to the huge programmes of development that were under way? Because all these new towns were running at quite a serious rate of development, producing thousands of houses every year, in fact in a way that you'll often hear referred on the news now. People look back with envy and admiration to the housing programmes of the new towns.

*(00:05:00) So what did your role involve?*

We were really there to act as gamekeepers, to control the poachers. And the poachers were the new town development corporations, because they wanted to do the best for their towns and they wanted to stretch the government's rules on investment as widely as they could. So if they could find a way to attract impressive business from Japan, or from Korea, they would want to bend the rules as far as possible to do that. And our job was to make sure that, while we allowed a bit of bending, it didn't go too far. And there were disasters every so often, where rather dodgy customers had sold a very good pitch to the development corporation, but when it came to delivery, they proved to be men of straw. So it was not an idle job, it was actually quite important. But at the same time, we were there to help the corporations do their job of attracting investment and attracting people and business to make these towns a success.

*So how difficult has it been to do these things to help Milton Keynes to progress at that time? How difficult was it to do that role?*

Milton Keynes had many virtues, because not only was there a visionary plan for Milton Keynes, but of course it was brilliantly located, right in the centre of England on major communication routes, and that gave it a huge commercial value. It was also very successful in having an idea of development which was sufficiently bold to attract the private sector.

*Yeah, if we go from the beginning of the same question, once the children have cleared?? Sorry about that.*

Yeah, no, no, no

Hopefully, I was doing a bit better on

[Unrelated conversation]

*So, how difficult was it to... for Milton Keynes Development Corporation and yourself to get this done at this time?*

We had to work closely with the corporations and we had to learn to be sympathetic to what they were trying to achieve, while at the same time telling them when something was out of order. There used to be stories that people would get summoned up to Milton Keynes to see the latest piece of development, and because the grid pattern system was one where it's quite difficult for an outsider to tell which grid square you were in, there were cases where an official was taken to one bit of the map, shown something, thinking he'd seen something else, and that was used to justify an extra bit of development. I mean that's a story that's told, but more seriously, we did work closely with the corporations. And Milton Keynes was the flagship, Milton Keynes was the most impressive of the new

towns in term of overall investment and expenditure, even though the others would not readily admit to that. It was very successful, I think, also because the leadership in Milton Keynes played a very canny game when Mrs Thatcher came to power. Instead of saying "we are new towns and we do state development", they more or less banned the word "new town" from every day use, and instead, they told Mrs Thatcher, the person who did this was Sir Henry Chilver who was the second chairman, and he was really good at this. So he would write to Mrs Thatcher: "Mrs Thatcher, Prime Minister, would you come and open the 100<sup>th</sup> Japanese enterprise to have invested in Britain, would you come and open the largest shopping centre", or whatever it might be. In other words, he identified what she was interested in which was enterprise, growth, private sector, and he then invited her up to do that. And she came to Milton Keynes innumerable times, as long as he didn't mention the word "new town". (00:10:00) So it was a little bit like being a catholic in the reign of Elizabeth I, you were fined heavily, but as long as you didn't tell people who you were, and what you were doing, you could get actually away with quite a lot. And that's really one of the successes of MK. Another one, I would say, was that the Corporation was extremely successful in reading the political signals and changing its policies to suit. So it's well known that when the Corporation started, it built huge volumes of housing as conventional social housing for rent. But when the government policy changed and particularly after the Conservative election, they realised that that wasn't going to work as a future investment strategy, so more or less overnight, they switched, the emphasis was switched to shared ownership. And that was hugely successful, because shared ownership and home ownership were key conservative goals. And of course, Mrs Thatcher was invited to open the, whatever it was, 5000<sup>th</sup> house. And the other thing that people don't always appreciate is that the Milton Keynes assets, along with the other valuable new town assets, were hugely important financially to the government and to the Department of Environment in particular. Later in the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the new towns asset sales made up for something like half the total budget of the Department of Environment. Because what would happen is, the Treasury would say: "We'll give you so much, but you can spend a bit more if you can raise it through receipts by selling off assets." So the Permanent Secretary would get on to the head of New Towns Division and say: "How much more can you raise, go and speak to those new towns and ask them, can they sell off a bit more land, bit more development, and then we will have a bit more money to spend on good causes." So the new towns of course realised after a while that they were actually really important to the department. And they said, well we can raise a bit more money for you, but in return, we'd like you to do this, or like you to do that." And a very health trade developed, but as long of course there wasn't a fuss, a public fuss, or any great statement about socialist enterprise.

*So I think you've answered some of the questions. So that's good.*

I've got one more, one more sort of big... I'm just checking through my... Yeah

*So the questions I've got written down here, I mean, anything you can think of? Can you give any examples of the difficulties MKDC face that you were involved with? What tactics did MKDC, and you've obviously answered some of those already. Any more examples on that? So if there is anything else you can add to those things?*

OK. One of the issues that I remember was that the local authority at the time was very much following in the shadow of the Development Corporation. The Development Corporation was a very powerful body. You sensed that as soon as you came to MK for a meeting. Because I can remember walking up from the station, and if you spotted something that was amiss, like a mess in an underpass, under one of the roads, the General Manager was so powerful that he would have sorted it by the time you returned to the station, later in the day. You got the impression of somebody who just lifted the phone, and could immediately cause a problem to be solved around the designated area. And of course there was a reason for this, and that is that MK above all was seeking to attract investment, and attracting investment in terms of business, jobs and people was the *raison d'être* of the Development Corporation. The only time this really caused trouble, in my time, was that all the development corporations had a healthy advertising budget. And this used to surface on ITV News at Ten and unfortunately, our ministers, when they got home in the evening, they would start to unwind, and the programme that they turned on was ITV News at Ten, and in the commercial break, you'd have a commercial for Milton Keynes, followed by a commercial for Peterborough, followed by a commercial for Telford. And they would come in the next morning fuming, and saying: "Why are we spending public money on advertising on ITV." And they got very het up about this. And Milton Keynes were able to handle this one, because they had (00:15:00) an agent in Japan, who I think did

very well for the Corporation. And they said: "Minister, no relax, it's very much aimed at overseas investors who have representatives in Britain, and we need to get through to them and we need to keep our image up for that reason." But in reality, the overseas investors were only a small part of the people moving into MK.

I'll do just one... one of the other big things that really caused a lot of headache in my time, and I did play some part in this, was what would happen to all the good things the Development Corporation had done? What would happen to all the landscaping? What would happen to the housing? What would happen to the business spaces, the employment land and so on...? Now with the employment land and the commercial premises, it was not too difficult because there were people in the market who would take space, once it was mature and you'd established a rental level, because we tend to forget now that actually development corporations invested a lot of their money and time investing in employment space, so that they could say to a business, come to MK, we'll have the unit ready for you, it is all ready for you. Very few places could do that. But of course over time, they amassed a lot of premises of that kind and they needed to be sold off into the private sector. And one of the dilemmas at the time of course, was that you'd have ministers and the Treasury saying: "Sell it all off, sell it all off." And the Corporation quite rightly said: "If you sell it now, you'll get very little for it. Wait until it's established itself, and then sell it." Unfortunately, there was a tension here, and in some cases there were forced sales which would have been more profitable if we'd been able to hold on. When you came to the housing, it was politically more difficult, because there were a number of possibilities: housing associations, the local authority and so on...

*Sorry, yeah? An article...? I think it's a natural break... a natural break yeah? Housing. I'm on tenterhooks today.*

So when it came to housing, it was a bit more straightforward because you had housing associations, you had the local authority. Local authority, very often, wasn't in minister's good books, but quite often, the people in the area preferred going to the local authority than to something they didn't really know. The aspect that I was most involved in and I had to produce the original ideas for was what we call community-related assets. Now these were all, if you like, the good things the Development Corporation had created, the landscaping, the footpaths, the public amenities, parks and other facilities. And the question was, who would run these, how would they be run after the Development Corporation had been wound up. So we came up with the idea of inviting people to come forward to do this and offering them commercial assets such as a row of shops, or a business development which would produce income and saying, the deal is, you get the park you get the footpath in this area, you get the other amenities in this area, to pay... to keep those up, you get the following items of property. Is that a fair deal? And the deal would then be offered to a variety of people. To begin with, the assumption was that only the local authorities would be willing to take the land on that basis. But over time, the voluntary sector, the third sector started to become more lively, and one of Milton Keynes great successes was the creation of the Milton Keynes Parks Trust. And the Parks Trust was established on exactly that principle: that they would look after the parks and the other amenities of that kind, and to do that, they would be given the funding, the income stream from a set of assets which would be transferred over to them. And indeed, I think that principle has a lot to commend it in the kind of new settlements that we are talking about today.

*So do you think Milton Keynes is a success?*

In many ways, when I come back, and one of the great things about having been involved all those years ago is that I come back every few years, I come back every two or three years, for different reasons, and so I can see the changes perhaps more than a person who lives here all the time can, and I would say it has been far more successful than I thought possible when I finished that job in 1986. And I think you can see that, certainly in the central area. (00:20:00) But the issue that gives most cause for concern are the outer areas and how well integrated they are with the centre of Milton Keynes. Because as most people know from the history of MK, the big issue all along was transport. How do you manage transport within the city, particularly how do you create an attractive public transport option? And this is really acute, I would think for the outer areas, and I think MK has to address that seriously in its current expansion.

*So what do you associate...? When you first came to Milton Keynes, what was your first impression of Milton Keynes?*

I think like most people, I was amazed. Nothing on this scale existed anywhere else in England, and it took a while to piece together in your mind what this was all going to look like. Because of course, in the 1980s, the early 1980s, it was only 15 years from the original designation. You only had had a decade of development, so there were huge areas that were still green fields, and the station had only recently been opened, the business build-up was still to happen, so it required quite a lot of faith, and I have to say I did come to admire the faith of the first generation of MK board and officers, because they gave it a degree of push, without which, you know, it would never have survived. If you look at the other new towns, there was much more of a compromise, where the old town was made part of the centre, so people would say: "Come to Peterborough." But of course, the Peterborough centre is in effect the historic centre, and the same is true in Northampton. And even in Telford, you have the Ironbridge Gorge, and you have the existing old town. So MK was by far the bravest and boldest and therefore high risk, but I think it's pulled it off.

*So what do you associate with Milton Keynes, and what does it mean to you personally?*

In simple terms, it means growth is possible. I always remember that, later in my career, when I had responsibility for the growth areas under John Prescott, we were looking around for partners to take... for the next round of growth that he was piloting, and when he came to Milton Keynes, I remember the then leader of the council saying: "Growth is not an issue here, people grow up seeing the cranes on the horizon, there is always development, we are not nimbies." Now there are other issues, there were issues of how well public services would cope, but Milton Keynes is the place that you bring people to to see how growth can be achieved.

*So what special memories... have you got any special memories of Milton Keynes?*

I enjoyed my time dealing with the Development Corporation and all the officers, many of whom were really strong characters. I remember one finance officer who was a part-time farmer, and he was a great guy, you could have a really good laugh with him. But he was really good at his job. He was really expert at knowing what could be done within the Milton Keynes budget. And I think the... all the officers I dealt with were inspiring people. The person I spent a lot of time with was John Walker, who is still around, and he went on to become chief executive of the Commission for New Towns. And the, some of the people who were doing jobs that are not well known now, people who were running the social department, and Frank Henshaw whom I always found to be a very courteous and easy to get along person.

*So if you were to go back in time, is there anything that you think would benefit... what would you have done differently? What changed? I know you mentioned transport.*

(00:25:00) Yes, you know, as I said earlier, I think transport is the biggest continuing issue. I suppose the only other point to make is the greatest challenge that new towns face is the need to be adaptable. Because very often, the initial idea is a very bold one, and it works for that time, and the problem is, how do you change it, as people's lives change. I mean, a good example is shopping. When Milton Keynes planned its shopping centre, they planned it on a scale that was unrivalled in the UK. And it's still doing pretty well, but we all know what deep changes are going on, on shopping. How do you cope with that. The way in which people collect their goods, where they go to enjoy themselves, these things are changing, and you need to be very adaptable to cope with that. And that's not easy when the Development Corporation has been long departed.

*So the following question then, what do you think the next fifty years has got in store for Milton Keynes. What do you think is gonna happen in Milton Keynes?*

I think the greatest thing Milton Keynes has is its capacity to grow without worrying about growth *per se*. It will have to experiment to find the right type of growth. And it may be going up more, higher density of development, which would justify better transport services. It may be going into different types of development. But the important point is that Milton Keynes can do it. It's shown it can do it. It is our greatest experiment in building from scratch. OK?

*Hang on where you are though, because Mark could you come and make some shots of this historic notebook. Yes of course.*

OK,

*Let's just [unclear] I really like the [unclear]*

OK

*I just [unclear]*

*Doesn't make a huge difference?*

*Cos then when we cut your speech down, we can go back? My favourite shot?*

*Let's get this muck out of the way so it doesn't look so cluttered?*

*So if I ask a question, you can [unclear]*

OK

So looking back through the notes of when I first went to New Towns Division in 1983, I talked to my predecessor and I said: "What are the biggest challenges?" and she said: "Well you've really got to watch what the development corporations are doing and the investments that they are bringing forward." So I've got notes here on who I had to speak to in the four development corporations I was dealing with. The financial applications that were coming in, which were the ones to really focus on. There was a lot of worry about how could we dispose of the land, the undeveloped land within the designated area, because of course the... the planning powers that the new town development corporations have were extraordinary, and couldn't have just have been handed over to a private body. We had... we did have experts to advise us. We had a property advisory group. I see notes here about health, about health authority wanting more support to deal with the new population. That was an issue that kept coming up and it's still around. Who was the housing gonna go to and the community related assets. Yes, those were the main issues I was... that were on my plate when I arrived

*Thank you very much.*

*I just want to have a little shot of that.*

*So I need to reset that, sorry. It's lovely, it's just a lovely... That's wonderful... thank you. That should be...*