

**Name:** Paul Griffiths  
**Date of Birth:** 1952  
**Place of Birth:** Bletchley  
**Duration:** 00:39:04

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00:00:05

*Thank you very much Paul. So, just nice and easy to begin with: would you mind introducing yourself and just explaining what your relationship is to Milton Keynes? What comes first into your head?*

It's a fine place for everybody to live. My children live here. I was born in Bletchley, late '52, and we saw the expansion of West Bletchley with what was then termed London overspill, which probably categorised that it was London that needed to relocate families. And I think mostly they were welcome because they brought prosperity, they...we ended up with new facilities as a result of the influx. We learnt to swim in the gravel pits near B&Q and, when the town grew, we ended up with a swimming pool, which was a treat. The shops developed and I think the people who came here were intending on making a success of wherever they were going to settle, which guaranteed the success.

*So, it's wonderful, it's so nice to have you sort of right back at the beginning of this city's growth and...*

Well it was, because Fenny Stratford, which is where I lived – Bletchley was three settlements really: Fenny Stratford, Water Eaton and Far Bletchley, towards Newton Longville, so it was small-town; it was small-town. Probably sixties, West Bletchley, including Whaddon Way, none of that was there when I was a child. And then, probably late sixties, the Lakes Estate, again, but that was a bit more of a mixed bag. And we got to know the incomers very well because we went to school with them and I think, to some extent, it turned the local people into this mix and it was good to be a part of the mix.

*That sounds...and do you mind me...because there's a lovely story that you told me from right at the beginning and what I'm really keen to do is talk about, you've been involved all the way through, it feels like to me, the growth of Milton Keynes but there's a particular day that I'd really like us just to touch on now to kind of set it as our marking, our start point, for your growth and journey along with this amazing city. Would you mind taking me*

*back – I think you know the day that we're talking about but if you wouldn't mind sort of describing to me what that day was and tell me a little bit...set the scene. If somebody wasn't there, tell me about the people that were there or the...were there crowds? Was the sun shining? Would you mind giving me a little kind of taster of what that day was and how it felt to be part of it?*

This was the bath tub race. *[Laughs]* Completely forgotten until the pictures started to appear on Facebook. I will admit I'm not on Facebook but my wife Marion is and this picture appeared with me in the middle of it, which...probably '67, '68. It was Bletchley Week; it was a big event with carnival processions and traditionally a bath...a pram race with mainly rugby players pushing each other around the town on prams. But then they decided one year it would be a bathtub race along the canal. So we'd all built canoes in school, so it was just another vessel, a bathtub.

*Can you describe your bathtub to me please?*

Oh, so sleek, so sleek. It was a galvanised bathtub with a piece of wood across it towards the back of the vessel, with two oil drums either side to support me sitting on the bar and then another can on the front: all my own design. There were some pretty special ones there because I was at school but there were people from metalworkers and all sorts, so some really special craft.

*How old were you, if you don't mind me asking, Paul?*

I was probably fifteen or sixteen, must have been '67, '68. It might be on the records – maybe the Bletchley Week, if not the bathtub race. And it all started in...on the bridge in Water Eaton, the mill bridge over the canal in Water Eaton, and we set off heading north towards the – what is it? – the Watling Street passes over in Fenny Stratford and that was the finishing line. And it was fun. Keeping the water out of the bathtub, it was paddle, paddle, bale; paddle, paddle, bale...

00:05:32

*How many people took part? How many of you were there?*

How many vessels? There may well have been ten or twelve. There is the picture you've seen, which... It was mostly one-man craft, some two-man craft. In fact, no, think it was one-man, to make it fair – or boy. And then we set off, all paddling like mad, and baling, and as we came under the Manor Fields bridge – I was born in Pinewood Drive so I was on home territory, you know, people knew me...*[laughs]* – but just past the bridge over the Manor Fields, there was a fire engine either side pouring the water up to the middle and, where they met, it was like a rainstorm so

of course you had to come through this. If you were on the Titanic you would have panicked because the water was just looking like sinking. Anyway, managed to keep going, past what used to be Nagels in Fenny. I should think it probably was about three quarters of a mile, maybe. Seemed like more. And then, as you passed under the bridge – the Watling Street goes over the bridge over near what used to be the Bridge Hotel – they sunk you. You're absolutely bushed and there were guys on either side of the bridge with buckets of water and they sunk you. But you'd finished the race, so winning/losing didn't matter but they told me I'd won the race, which was really good. But then they said that the first prize is a barrel of beer and we can't give you a barrel of beer 'cause you're still at school, so they gave me a superb medal, which...

*Yeah, I'd like us to have a look at that in a minute, actually. We're set up sort of just on your face at the minute so we might sort of change it slightly because it is the most...seriously, that is like the icing on the cake for me.*

Well, I didn't realise that it might become so valuable this medal. I mean, it's a one-off. You've seen it; they'll never make another one. It weighs a lot. So, basically, all the grown-ups in the picture shared the barrel of beer and I...but the beer's gone but I've still got the medal.

*Such a wonderful story. Were there many of your school friends in the race? Was it...were you..?*

Oh, there was a good friend of mine sitting next to me. We've lost touch but I couldn't tell you where he came. I think he finished. There were several who didn't finish. But everybody could swim so it was never... But it was a one-off; it didn't happen again. I'm not sure if Bletchley Week continued after that but... Bletchley Week: it was probably July, August. It replaced the small-town August bank holiday show, which was down the Manor Fields near where we lived, but...

*It's such a lovely starting point. I love the, kind of, where we start there and I've got this vision, with the photo as well, of you as a fifteen year old boy, paddling away in your bathtub on the canal. And then the growth of this amazing city from that and all these new people coming in and you had a great line that you said...you said to me a couple of times on the phone but also when you were submitting what you said first of all, about when people from London first moved to Milton Keynes and how they might have struggled a little bit with the space because they weren't used to it.*

Oh, and they did.

*Can you remember what you said to me?*

I think that it was fear of open spaces. I suppose it's corny, but their spirit seemed to expand into the openness. I watched that happen; there's no going back. And I don't think I know anybody who has gone back, not for reasons of not liking living in Milton Keynes, but...

00:10:10

*And then you've been part of this whole journey of this whole...from that day, you've been really involved.*

Well, we've seen a lot and probably most of...we're still loosely in touch with old friends but I think all of our circle of friends now are people who came into the city, which speaks volumes for the way it works. Good friends.

*I just love the fact that there's this new kind of...you know, you're really good with words and when you add in this factor that, you know, people were incomers, they were people not from the area.*

They were pioneers, always going to make a...always going to make a success because, when those people were coming here, other people were sitting back in their towns losing industries, just saying, "Well, you should make jobs for us." And it didn't always work out and some of those areas continued to have problems. But the people who came here were here to make a go of it, which they did.

*Can I just interrupt..?*

*Yeah, of course.*

*I'm going to ask you to say that again but to answer it to Sarah because you said it in a really great way and I think, like, we kind of just need sort of the context of it a bit more. So, what you're basically saying is that you were like an original resident and you got to see what it was like, how it changed the whole city, new people coming in.*

*Yeah.*

*And you got to see, also, that these new people, how they went from an overcrowded environment and how it changed them too. So you saw two things: how your environment changed and how they changed. Can you just tell me that, in your own words, 'cause it's what you're saying, I'm just sort of saying it back to you to try and get it into a bit more of a nutshell, I guess. But can you tell Sarah? [Laughter] Have a think about it. Have a think about it, 'cause I...*

I don't know if my voice is getting shaky.

*Can I...do you need some water or anything? Are you okay?*

No, I'm okay, yeah, it's just I'm not used to...

*No, you're doing amazingly, it's just that I...you'd just be...I know you've said it already, it's just so that we can use it in a shorter kind of nutshell.*

Yeah, I think the success of the whole city was the determination of the people moving here to make new homes for their families and futures for their children, compared to sitting at home asking for things, instead of sitting where there came from. I mean, this is UK and across the world. Milton Keynes is full of people from everywhere. And the generation you come from are now Milton Keynes people; my children are Milton Keynes people: that's their pride. They'd probably tell you where their parents came from but they consider themselves Milton Keynes people.

*Do you have...do you want to have one last go with that?*

*Yeah, do you want to try asking a question, to get it?*

*Yeah, I think so.*

Yeah, I'm sorry I'm a bit...

*I think what I'm struggling with, Paul, is that every time you start a sentence...[all talk at once].*

*You don't want to go back.*

*No, exactly. But I think I can...I get exactly what Fay's talking about. It's this idea of when – and you put it beautifully – when...how exciting it was to have these people moving into the area and how that changed you.*

It invigorated the people here. It brought a lot of things... I mean, the shopping building, leisure centres. We used to see coaches from Southampton parked at the shopping building. I mean, from Yorkshire – this was before Lakeside, Thurrock – I mean, it was the biggest in Europe. Going back to our teenage years, we used to go to Watford, Bedford, Oxford, for nightlife but it seems they all come here now, there's so many...so much to do here, so...

*How did you feel, Paul, when you suddenly saw, you know, your small area that you'd grown up in and suddenly all of these people*

*were wanting to move to your city and your town? How did that make you feel?*

Well, it didn't necessarily expand the small settlements. Fenny Stratford, where I lived, all the expansion was done in open spaces so it didn't crowd the existing populations. And if you look at places like Linford, those villages still exist but the new buildings in farmland really. I suppose, as houses came onto the market in Linford, people would buy them. So you end up with a mix within the existing settlements but these whole new areas full of all people from everywhere just determined to make this place work.

00:15:39

*It must have been quite exciting actually to see, sort of, a new influx of people with this, like, you describe them as pioneers. Tell me a bit about those people that came in.*

Well, I...some came with their jobs – people like Coca-Cola, Trustee Savings Bank, Abbey National – they actually came with the company. They might have been forced to relocate but even those people sometimes coming here from London, selling a place in London, they could buy a mansion in Milton Keynes, with land, you know, with space; and a lot of public open space and lakes. So they might have been forced to come but...so you did have people who were forced to come because their company's relocated but a lot of people volunteered to come here, to work for the new companies setting up here, so... It was a good mix; social engineering at its best. *[Laughs]* Almost accidental but I think it was planned.

*We've talked a little bit about that it's no coincidence that the people in Milton Keynes are...well, not on their...I can't even remember who does it but I think it's an official survey that when they've looked at the happiness rating (how you measure happiness I'm not sure) of people all over the UK, if you're in Milton Keynes you're right up there; people in Milton Keynes are really happy. Why is that? What do you think that is? What's made those people so happy here?*

There's always been plenty of work, people don't worry about work. I believe a lot of the new schools have contained new teachers, have contained new ideas. I think the health centres have been filled with newly-qualified...again, they are people coming to Milton Keynes to make a go of it. Maybe it is just the newness but of course now it's fifty years since it was designated, probably forty-five years since it really got going.

Now the second...the next...they're actually generating – regenerating – some of the old estates, so it's gone full-circle. But they must be confident that the regeneration is going to continue

to do...and of course, the expansion now across here, we've got four and a half thousand new houses – which of course there's an irony there because a lot of local people objected to the new developments but I did go along to one of these meetings and all of those people are people who moved into the city, saying we don't want any expansion. Now, if my parents had have said that in the sixties, they wouldn't have had their new city built that they moved into. But once they move here and are happy with it they start objecting to the further expansion whereas, myself, I'd say welcome, the more... – provided they build doctors' surgeries – bringing them in, which is what we said in the late fifties.

*Such a lovely, lovely, lovely sentiment and that's what I mean when you're so good at like just having an old sideways look at things and observing and commenting on what's been going on. If you don't mind, just 'cause you've touched a bit on infrastructure there, and I know that you were very involved, from quite an early age, actually, in the infrastructure of Milton Keynes, and you know my favourite area of the infrastructure, Paul, and it's the most glamorous area – I do love a good sewer. [Laughs]*

The sewers.

*Do you mind, can you tell me a little bit about the sewage system in Milton Keynes please Paul?*

00:19:57

The sewage system that nobody sees but so much hard work went in to create; massively deep sewers, all taken to...well, to junction 14 on the M1, by gravity; by pumping; by lorry in some cases, where cesspits have to be emptied. And nobody really...the engineers and technicians and draughtsmen don't get a lot of credit. But then they work so they don't get credit, whereas architects design buildings and if people don't like them then they get criticism, which... But there's oil interceptors, taking the oil out of surface water run-off to ensure that the water courses are clean and it's almost as if that's been invented by the green brigade but this is forty-five years ago. They were cleaning everything. And I believe that the water that leaves Cotton Valley – I couldn't be sure – but it's almost drinking water. Bearing in mind that what comes into the sewage treatment works but...they never mention pollution in Milton Keynes. It's...that's for the dirty old towns. [Laughs]

*And there's a beautiful symmetry for me, Paul, and we talked about it a little bit, and actually Fay brought it up, the idea of you being in this bathtub on the canal one day and then actually being involved – and I'm so sorry that I'm fixated with sewers –but being involved with the sewers later on. Can you describe to me how that happened and what was it like the first time you went down underground and you saw what it was like under there?*

Oh, I was a civil engineering technician for the Development Corporation, so we designed some very large pipes for individual grid squares. The whole centre of...the whole of Milton Keynes is divided into a kilometre grid, some grids for housing, some for industry, and the whole central area for retail – oh, and offices. So we would design the sewers – the foul and surface water sewers – for the areas but before that, in the very early days, the massive sewers were laid right across the farmland, right across the whole city and then buried, so nobody knows they're there. But the fact they work is tribute to the engineers who put so much time...

*That must have been so [unclear 00:22:48]*

Oh, they tunnelled some of them through Linford Wood, I believe. I'm sure it was fifty metres deep. We actually walked...just as an educational visit. Took a lot of ladders to get down there but we actually went to the heading where the miners were actually working – mining in Milton Keynes, but they did... The water had to be disposed of by gravity, which meant going low in some places.

*Can you describe that for me a little bit, Paul, because I'm still just adamant that we're going to..?*

Oh, it was tall enough to walk through. This was a major pipe.

*Can you, for the benefit of me, just humour me – and you're really, really kind in doing this – can you describe... – I did think...a week ago I'm not sure if you thought you'd be doing this today, Paul – but can you describe your school visit, going down those ladders...*

Oh no, it wasn't a...no, this was a...I was working for the Development Corporation at the time and it was educational, to let people see what was going on, so we were allowed to go down into this mine – it was a mine – and the heading moving forward. There was lots to talk about. They found a crashed Second World War aircraft, probably near – that's probably recorded in the archives – where McDonald's is now and that was a big buzz: "Let's go and see this aircraft," but it was just the engine, the engine with the bent propellers. It buried itself in the ground, the main structure of the aircraft; gone to smithereens. But I was there when they exposed the old World War II engine. I'm not too sure what happened to it but it was an American aeroplane, during the Second World War.

00:24:56

*[Break in interview]*

00:25:03



*So, if you've got any kind of little facts that you could put in there, any kind of, you know, those numbers where you go: "Well, they had to bring in such-and-such number of trucks," or "They laid..." – I'm going to make some numbers up here. We could make this up, Paul; you and I could do this – "...they laid a hundred thousand kilometres of pipes in an afternoon." But if you've got anything that will really help our audience...*

The only...I am a civil engineer, a civil engineering technician, I wouldn't want to be too misquoted on the facts and figures but it was obviously the biggest building site in the world for many years. Probably, some of the alternative claddings, I believe was because they simply couldn't make sufficient bricks to build this number of houses so, on some of the early estates... – they won prizes, these new designs. They've been criticised since for various reasons but, well, I believe they couldn't do the brick...they couldn't have made so many bricks to do it all in brick. But I'm not an architect so the new ideas were welcomed.

It was in the...and the big initiative that I believe started in Milton Keynes was the shared-ownership, when the government decided that they wouldn't build any more rental housing; it was virtually stopped. So private money came in and you could rent part of the house and buy another part and some of those estates were superb because they were designed by Corporation architects, with brick arches and architectural features that probably didn't appear in developers – I'm not being unkind to developers but obviously they build to a pattern – but I'm pretty sure if you went across the city you could identify shared-ownership, not because they're rental housing but because they've got such architectural detail.

*So we've looked at fifteen-year-old you. What about the twenty-year-old, Paul, I mean, you know, weeks ago? How was it like for you, watching what was going on there? Do you remember like twenty-year-old Paul and what he thought?*

Well, we weren't the only couple that did it. We decided to get married early '74. In those days you rented a house until you could afford to buy it so Milton Keynes Development Corporation were building houses – rental houses – for people coming into the city, not for locals. You were told to go to the local council but there was a big waiting list. So I left Milton Keynes Development Corporation. I think we went to Welwyn Garden City; I think we got married while we were in Welwyn Garden City; again, in the new town movement. And then we moved to Harlow, working for the Development Corporation and then we came back in '75, '76 as outsiders and we were offered four addresses to go and look at as rental housing. And we actually bought...we moved in and rented one of these houses on this private estate because I

believe the Corporation didn't like to think that housing estates were being built and not selling – maybe that's misinterpretation – so they used to buy houses on private estates. So they offered us a three-bedroomed detached house, which was...*[laughs]*.

00:29:17

*What did it feel like to come home?*

00:29:29

*[Break in interview]*

*It's interesting that you went from being in insider to an outsider.*

I did, I came back as a newcomer. Well, Marion was born in Leighton Buzzard so theoretically she's an outsider but it's only seven miles along the... I mean, it was big business in those days but Bletchley and Leighton Buzzard they didn't mix, you know, there was lots of fights but...

00:30:16

*So I think I've got my corker – and I think this one's a gift for you Paul – so, I want you to imagine that we've got one sentence (and we haven't, we've got absolutely loads here and thank you so much for your time) but imagine we had one sentence and that was you summing up your kind of personal journey with Milton Keynes but, most importantly, how that makes you feel. And we've got to do it in one sentence. I like setting you little challenges Paul.*

It always was a great place. It's an even greater place now and everybody's welcome. This goes for the existing designated population of two hundred and fifty thousand and the anticipated possibly fifty thousand on the flanks. But everybody has to make the newcomers welcome or it doesn't work.

*Such a beautiful sentiment, thank you.*

I don't know, I was literally...just a few hundred population when I was born and now I'm part of a two hundred and fifty thousand population and growing and I really feel a part of it. And all the benefits we have. We can either drive to Central Milton Keynes in seven minutes or jump on the bus in twenty minutes, have a meal, see a...go to the theatre, go to the cinema, go bowling and then come home to the outskirts where we've got the Ouse valley and the river and I can be a country boy again, *[Laughs]*

*So we are unfortunately coming to the end of our time here now. I'm mindful that...I think we could sit and talk for hours 'cause it's...(a) it's really enjoyable and (b) it's really interesting. Is there anything that just for now, at this precise moment, that you feel like you really want to have added or are you okay for us to move on in a minute?*

Oh no, no. Yeah, I mean, I don't know if my voice is...*[laughs]*.

*Oh, it's fantastic.*

...come across. It wobbles a bit but...

*No, I think it's been very clear and very...*

You know, I get sentimental. I'm one of six children. I think they probably all feel the same. They all enjoy the facilities of the new town but they live in Bletchley. Unfortunately my older sister passed away but I know she enjoyed it. Who wouldn't, with the biggest shopping building and the most cinemas and...

*Okay, cool. So we'll stop there. Great.*

*[Break in interview. Change to outside broadcast]*

*So take us back to that day, fifty years ago.*

Fifty years ago, yeah. While all the best planners in the country were making plans to build a new city with this as its southern tip, we were just concentrating on how we could get a bathtub – a galvanised bathtub – from here about a mile north without drowning, without sinking, without any major mishap. The picture that seems to becoming famous was actually taken down here of all the contestants and we started from this bridge, heading north from here, and that's where it all kicked off.

*And can you describe the day for me there? Were there a lot of people there? Were there..?*

Not so many...not so many at the start but along the towpath the crowds just gathered. Maybe an exaggeration but it was Bletchley Week, it was the culmination of...the end of the week, I think it was a Saturday or Sunday, and the curiosity of...was, what is a bathtub race? We didn't even know ourselves. All we knew, we were hoping we wouldn't sink between here and the A5 a mile away.

*[Break in interview]*

*...get to the finish line. Victory or failure is yours. Can you describe those last couple of minutes where you're paddling away?*

We were absolutely bushed, we...from about half a mile from here north, there was a fire engine from the local fire brigade...

*[Break due to traffic noise]*

Oh, it was a plain – not sail – a plain paddle, from here to the next bridge and just beyond the next bridge nobody knew what to expect but there was a fire engine either side of the canal, shooting their hoses, forming an arch, and the inevitable downpour that you had to paddle through. Fortunately we had buckets on board so it was paddle, paddle, bale; paddle, paddle, bale. I almost sunk, I will say. Some did, some did. But, after that, then it was a dash for the finishing line. It was the finishing...whether you had a finish in you. My barge wasn't...my boat wasn't particularly built for speed, it was more just for floatation but we got there and, as you know, I'm not bitter about the final result...*[laughs]*. I actually won the race but I was at school and the first prize was a barrel of beer and they couldn't give a schoolboy a barrel of beer so they gave me a medal – but more about that later. And everybody else in the picture, all the grown-ups in the picture, enjoyed the beer. And the beer is long gone but I've still got my medal.

00:35:54

*Beautifully put sir, thank you very much.*

*So Paul, would you mind introducing me to this beautiful medal you have in your hand. Describe it and, yeah, say what you got it for please.*

This unique medal, I think it's one of a kind. It was second place, as can be seen: second, Bletchley bath race. I made the shield in...

00:36:25

*[Break in interview due to traffic noise]*

00:37:00

*So Paul, would you mind introducing me to this object you have in your hand and explaining a little bit about it for me.*

This unique piece of crafted lead was for second place, which I was awarded, because I was too young to receive the winning prize, which was a barrel of beer, but I'm not bitter. I was chuffed to be holding this while all the grown-ups in the picture were enjoying the barrel of beer but, I keep saying, I'm not bitter.

00:37:32

*[Break in interview]*

00:37:45

As you can see, it was hand-crafted. I wasn't given the shield; I made the shield in woodwork at school – I think somebody made the medal in metalwork at school – but it's still here and the barrel of beer is long gone. They didn't have gold, silver and bronze and then lead, this was the only medal awarded. I'm not sure if there was a third place; I didn't stay to find out. We had to go and retrieve our bath from the bottom of the canal, which was probably the biggest job because ten bathtubs with sunken...had to be removed so that the – I was going to say the shipping – but the

traffic could continue to use the canal, which of course, in those days was, it was used commercially, so that was another challenge when you're in a bathtub with a barge coming straight towards you, the bow wave can be unnerving when you've...your bath is half full of water from soaking from the fire brigade and... But I think everybody had a really good day and I'm sure the spectators had some fun seeing our antics. And it's really quite nice to talk about it.

*Wonderful.*

00:39:04

END OF INTERVIEW