

Name: Tim Skelton

Date of Birth: 1954

Date of Interview: 14th December, 2017

Interviewed by: Dave Harris

Duration: 00:29:05

(00:00:00) I'm Tim Skelton. Today's date is the 14th December 2017 and I was born in 1954.

OK. So when did you first come to Milton Keynes?

The first time I actually came to Milton Keynes was in 1977, when I went to the British Grand Prix at Silverstone and we were looking for somewhere to eat for the night. We actually came into Milton Keynes but ended up in a Chinese in Northampton. But I came here for my interview in January 1979.

Who was the interview with?

Em, ... it was with Milton Keynes Development Corporation.

So, where did you live previously?

I've moved about a bit, basically in East Lincolnshire and in Peterborough. But at the time I was actually ... well, my parents were living in East Lincolnshire but I had a job ... I was living in London because I had a job in the middle of London?

Do you still live in MK?

Yes, yes, I still live in Milton Keynes. I have always lived in Milton Keynes. When I was at the Development Corporation I thought it was ... not quite an integral part of the job but it was important to live in the middle of what we were creating. And I love it so much I am still here.

What were your first impressions of Milton Keynes?

Interesting, big! I came ... I think it first struck me after I'd started work here and my only other previous experience of new

towns was Peterborough, where I had worked since my sandwich year from Trent Polytechnic and that was the reason I ended up in Milton Keynes because I wanted to work in a new town. And at Peterborough the development was happening in one or two places and when I came here and got my job somebody took me out for the morning to look at all our sites and we were travelling all over the place and I couldn't believe how big it was.

What do you associate with Milton Keynes?

Modern, a grid, concrete cows, roundabouts, the usual things ... just a relaxing place to live. I think it has a lovely pace of life, lovely quality of life.

So, what does it mean to you in person?

I think it means its somewhere different and personally, I am proud to be associated with it and to be a very small part of the creation of it and the continuing running of it through work I undertake with various organisations.

So, what special memories do you have of Milton Keynes?

Both my children were born here, I was married here, I met my wife here, so it is intricately bound into my family. My particular memories I remember ... I guess the highlight would be the Queen coming in 1979 and standing as close to her as I am to you and the camera but that, I suppose, is the most potent memory but lots of memories of people I have worked with ... you know, the houses I've lived in, people I know. It's a complete mixture.

So, what part have you played in the development of Milton Keynes and how do you feel about your role in the development of Milton Keynes.

When I was at the Development Corporation I was originally in the private housing unit, so one of my key responsibilities was for self-build housing, which was one of the largest schemes in the country, probably *the* largest scheme of building plots. That was something I enjoyed. I was extensively involved in The Energy World Exhibition in Shenley Lodge in 1986 and then prior to that in The Home World Exhibition and involved in other development schemes. Probably one that left the biggest impression in my family is that I sold the site near the National Hockey Stadium to McDonalds, so my children think I'm a hero for first selling a site to McDonalds! Not so much selling it to Burger King afterwards but selling to McDonalds! I was heavily involved in the development of the National Hockey Stadium.

Can you elaborate on that then, sort of how you were involved in that?

(00:05:00)

Yes, it's quite a long story actually; it goes back to 1984 when the British Hockey team got invited to the Olympics at the last minute because the Olympics were held in Los Angeles and the Russians withdrew because four years previously the Olympics were in Moscow and the Americans had withdrawn. So, this was retaliatory measures and British Hockey team were invited at the last minute and they completely unexpectedly won a bronze medal and one of the team was someone I was at school with, which was rather nice! After that hockey became more popular and I was the secretary of Milton Keynes Hockey Club, at the time being a keen hockey player and after that the next event was the World Cup for hockey which was held in London in 1986, which England won ... sorry, they didn't win! If only! ... We got the silver medal and as a result of that, hockey was becoming very popular. The profile of the sport had been raised and the Hockey Associations, because there were separate associations for men and women started looking around for a site to develop a National Stadium. They put an advert in one of the property magazines, which I responded to because at the time I was at the Development Corporation and by this time I was working in the Facilities team of the Commerce Department. I looked at all sort of strange requests and things that came over our ... doormat and I thought there was an opportunity, having seen the advert for the hockey stadium to promote Milton Keynes because I thought it would be a good location for a hockey stadium. We ended up having a meeting with their steering ... hockey had a steering group and we made a proposal to them to use the bowl. The drawback was they wanted to lay two artificial pitches because hockey by this time had been played on Astroturf, rather than grass. We were slightly worried that Astroturf would not quite fit with the bowl but we put it to Hockey and it kind of ... Hockey hadn't really got any money and so it drifted away.

But they had woken up to the fact that Milton Keynes was a potential venue for hockey. The Development Corporation was keen to promote it and we had a hockey event at Stantonbury Campus ... I think it was an international and we ... the Development Corporation part funded the event and we put up temporary seats at Stantonbury on the new Astroturf that had just been laid and as a consequence of that ... and I think there was another event that Hockey realised that Milton Keynes could be a good location and by this time, I think I'd left the Development Corporation.

Then I had a call from the Chief Executive of the Hockey Association that they had been approached separately afterwards by the Development Corporation, who had always had a vision for a multi ... well, they'd always wanted a football stadium in the city centre – dates back to Luton Town, etc., and that hadn't come to anything but there was a proposal floating around for a national indoor arena and Milton Keynes made a pitch for that but the Sports Council chose Birmingham as the location, so that was built. But Milton Keynes was still keen to get an arena so they had conversations with the potential developer but nothing happened and I'd been involved with that at the Development Corporation ...

Can you move your chair a little bit forward?

(GENERAL CONVERSATION) (00:08:58)

So, yes. If I just recap: so what had happened was the Development Corporation was keen to get the arena here, then they had discussions with the potential developer but nothing happened but what I knew was from discussions that we knew that basically the arena wouldn't be self-funding. So it had to have commercial land or land that can be developed for commercial purposes alongside it that would pay for the funding of the arena. And the site that had been chosen was the site north of the station, in the corner by the railway line.

(00:10:00)

By this time, as I say, I had left the Development Corporation and the Chief Executive of the Hockey Association rang me up one day and said can I have a chat with you because we've been offered this site by the Development Corporation but we don't know what to do about it. So we agreed to have a meeting down at our Sports Club at Woughton and I thought ... we'd been offered this site and I said I know that there was the opportunity to sell part of it for commercial purposes to cross-fund the construction of the stadium. And I said I think what you need is someone to write a report for you, which I did. I said have you got an architect in mind that you want to do it and he said no, have you got anybody you would recommend who would design a sports stadium and I knew somebody from a company called YRM, (who are no longer in existence) but who were very good architects and particularly had a very strong structural engineering branch and my view was that stadia were more about structures than about buildings.

And so, YRM did a feasibility study for the stadium and we made a proposal to the Hockey Association, which they thought was good and they then commissioned us to do the work. We made a proposal to the Development Corporation then for the site because we had some discussions with them and on the basis

that we could build a stadium as long as we could sell part of the land for commercial purposes ... so, that was the McDonalds, Burger King, there were a car show room ... we were going to have originally a petrol filling station and a hotel. That was the idea. So, we made this proposal to the Development Corporation and we hadn't got any money and this was a 20-acre site, so we offered them £10,000!

And one of the final acts of the Development Corporation was to approve the sale of the site to us, so we had a celebration on site and so it must have been the end of March 1992, by which time the Hockey Association had 20 acres of land in Milton Keynes and a bill for £10,000. So that was that; we then had to make it work. The difficulty was, it was the property recession. Fortunately, McDonalds were very keen for a site and their property man came in to see me one August Bank Holiday Tuesday and said, "I've had my people on the phone. McDonalds ... we've had the figures in for Bank Holiday and this weekend Milton Keynes was second to Kuala Lumpur, worldwide and we are desperate for a site in Milton Keynes."

So, we did the deal with them and subsequently, we could not find a developer for the hotel but we developed the retail warehouses ... or, we sold land to the retail warehouses. The car showroom went to Mercedes Benz, who had headquarters in Milton Keynes but they did not have a dealership and they were keen for that ... that's now Cotswold Outdoor and the petrol filling station fell by the board ... by the wayside and we got the Burger King. So that provided the money, together with Grant Aid from the Sports Council and the predecessor of ... well, somebody called the ...

(00:13:40) (MAJOR EQUIPMENT FAILURE)

(Laughter and conversation)

(00:15:00)

It's a very long story, this ... do you find it interesting?

(Conversation regarding the equipment)

(00:15:31) So, the funding of the stadium was paid for by the sale of land to McDonalds, some ... where the retail warehouses are ... don't recall the place ... which was the site originally for the hotel but we could not find a hotelier ... the Burger King, which was originally going to be a petrol filling station but the people dropped out for that and then a car dealership for Mercedes Benz, who were somewhat embarrassed because they had their headquarters here but not a car dealership.

That was topped up by Grand Aid, there was £1.5 million from the Sports Council and £1.5 million from an organisation called The Foundation for Sport and the Arts, which was something set up by the Pools promoters in the days before the National Lottery to show that they were providing money for charitable purposes, to try and I think, prevent ... or make people appreciate them and deter the National Lottery from happening but they failed completely. So that was the funding Hockey was required to raise half a million pounds itself. So that was the basic deal.

I went along to the ... the whole proposal had to be approved by the two governing bodies for Hockey because at the time there was separate bodies for men's and women's hockey, so I went along to the AGM of the Men's Association to present the proposals and to the Women's Association, so I might be, probably the only man ever to have addressed the Women's Hockey Association AGM, which was good; everybody was very enthusiastic about it.

Milton Keynes scored because it was in the middle of the country and so it was equally accessible to people. The difficulty was that the Sports Council had insisted that Hockey had to raise half a million pounds itself to show its commitment. It was a bit of a hostage to fortune because in trying to get the proposals through the AGMs for the two associations the Hockey Boards said, "Well, we will employ a fundraiser so it won't cost hockey ... it won't cost the individual hockey players any money."

So, that's how it all went. Because there was a focus on hockey in Milton Keynes, we actually had the pre-Olympic tournament, the Barcelona Olympics, at our ground in Woughton on the Green, where our club hosted six countries in the pre-Olympic warm up tournaments; there was Britain, Spain, Egypt and I can't think who the other three were ... France, I think.

I remember thinking ... we had a big reception in the atrium at Saxon Court on the ... a couple of days before the tournament started and I thought, ... I thought to myself, "It's really a lovely evening," I thought, "probably all these people are here because of work I've done." which was quite nice to think it had all happened.

So, anyway, it was ... we had the tournament which was shown on Sky TV, so it got Milton Keynes more publicity and our Hockey Club.

In the Barcelona Olympics unfortunately the players didn't win the medals this time but it all went very well, so hockey was still

doing very well and we got the money in from the commercial developers, we went out to tender but unfortunately, the price came in a bit more expensive than we hoped for, so the stadium had to be cut back a bit. There was also a difficulty raising money from Hockey, as the fundraiser hadn't been as successful as hoped. So that was kind of put ice while the stadium was built and it was designed to be extended, so it was originally a 6,000-seater stadium and the ability was to ramp it up to a 20,000-seater by extending it if necessary in the future.

(00:20:00)

The tender price came in too much so it had to be trimmed back. There was going to be a lovely fabric roof on it which got removed but with ... it eventually all went ahead and opened and was initially successful. The great shame was that hockey having had to raise half a million pounds because the fundraiser hadn't been successful, the hockey bodies then said to the clubs, "Well, you will have to pay this half million, so the money was then levied on all the member clubs and I think that didn't help and really Hockey fell out of love with the stadium. There were changes within the Hockey Associations some of the key people left, one actually died and so the new people weren't quite as in love with it as the people who were there originally.

There began talk of Britain looking for the Olympics around the end of '99 to 2000. I can't remember quite the chronology now because it gets a bit muddled but it was still being used by the local clubs and hockey tournaments as well but not in quite the manner we anticipated and then when the Dons came on the horizon, or Wimbledon as they then were, they were looking for a venue and they have been thinking about using The Bowl but that required temporary seating, knowingly, so the Hockey Stadium was basically a ready-made solution for them. The only problem being that it didn't have grass, it had AstroTurf, so the Hockey people did a deal with them to put down the grass and so it wasn't used for hockey again.

Then by the time the Dons had their own stadium the AstroTurf ... they could take the soil away because the AstroTurf was still underneath it but it was worn out, needed replacing; it was expensive and I think by then the Olympics had come along, or we knew we were going to host the Olympics and the Olympic Games in 2012 had a purpose built hockey stadium, which was a temporary stadium but part of the deal was that the legacy for the Games would be a permanent hockey facility and that ... can't think what the name of it ... Enfield Manor ... I think it was called? Lee Manor, Enfield? Anyway, down at the Olympic ... just on the fringe on the Olympic Park. So that is where national and international hockey games are played now, in something that is far less grandiose than Milton Keynes. So that matter is basically the very long involved story of the hockey stadium.

But there is an end piece because the ... all these developments have to work legally and the deal that was done was that the land was bought by a new charity called The National Hockey Foundation and to get tax back, because VAT was, I think, at the time, 17½ %, to get that off the building cost it had to be developed by a charity and the charity was called The National Hockey Foundation which was for sporting and educational purposes ... no, educational purposes ... sorry, ... because sport is not, or wasn't at the time, considered a charitable activity.

So the National Lottery Foundation was set up as an educational facility and its charitable aims were for the benefit of hockey in England and sport in Milton Keynes. When the time came for the Dons to leave, I don't know quite the mechanics of what happened but the land was sold to Network Rail for their headquarters; the money that was paid ended up, or some of ended up, in the National Hockey Foundation which still existed and that money has to be used for sport in Milton Keynes and hockey in England. So there is still a legacy coming through to sport in Milton Keynes from the hockey stadium.

.....indecipherable..... thank you. (00:24:27)

That was very long so ... I don't know if there were any questions to that ... sorry, it was...

No, no, I think it was quite self-explanatory.

So how do you feel now it's been demolished?

(00:25:00)

It was quite sad to see it go and I did ... I sent some pictures of it in its half demolished state to the architect, whom I was still in touch with. I think it was sad but inevitable - that's development, that's life! Perhaps without it you wouldn't have got The Dons, so Milton Keynes has benefited. It's a shame but it's not the end of the world ... but these things happen. The consequences were not only did we get The Dons but we got Network Rail. They might not have come without such a site. That's a fine building and it's a good employer for Milton Keynes, so...

So what do you think has made Milton Keynes a success or a failure? What would you think to that?

Good question! At the outset a fantastic plan and vision. I think the Development Corporation was a fantastic success and it had the right atmosphere, it was set at the right degree of "Chutzpah" in wanting to be big, bold and brash! And I think, I was talking to somebody about this the other day, that ... I think big plans get big people! And Milton Keynes attracted big

people! And I think it's not really talked about but the legacy of that is that the people it attracted, because you have a big project, you get people who are really enthusiastic about it and people who, like me ... and I'll be perfectly honest, I don't class myself anywhere near a big person but I came here above all the other new towns – I wanted to work in a new town and it could only be Milton Keynes. And all the way through the Corporation we had people with that passion and enthusiasm and people like that are still here and they are helping driving the city forward, in their own way.

So, if you could go back in time, is there anything you would change, in transport, infrastructure, community projects? Is there anything you could think, well, we could have done that better?

Good question! I think it would be naive not to look at places like the estates now being considered for regeneration. I think the mass estates of rental housing, when you compare the great success of Great Linford and Neath Hill with some places like Netherfield and Beanhill. But the difficulty is that we were in a situation where we needed a lot of houses very quickly, so if we'd spent more time fiddling around Milton Keynes might not have happened in the way it did. When you go back you realise there were a lot of pressures on Milton Keynes. It wasn't a guaranteed success from the start.

So no, I think mistakes were made but I think they were more than outweighed by the successes.

Thank you. So, last question: what do you think the next 50 years has in store for Milton Keynes?

I don't know! Hopefully, some of the people will be able to generate the enthusiasm of the first 50 years and it will be able to roll over. Part of me is quite worried about what will happen ... part of me ... I think I'm an optimist by nature, so I think in 50 years' time it will be bigger, better ... hopefully, it will still be as bold but ... yes, I think that's ... good question! It will be OK! It will be OK!

END OF TAPE (00:29:05)