

Name: Tod Cody
Date of Birth: 1950
Place of Birth: Northampton
Date of Interview: 23rd February, 2018
Interviewed by: Roger Kitchen
Duration: 01:28:24

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Today is Thursday the 23rd February, 2018. I'm Roger Kitchen, it's for the MK50 project and we're talking to Tod Cody. Tod, if we can begin by you just telling me a little bit about your, you know, when you were born, where you were born, a little bit about your family and so on.

Circus family; Cody's, so it has quite a history of Wild West shows and stuff like that. Born in 1950, Northampton. My parents wanted to be sure that my upbringing was going to be okay so they bought... – this is strange; traditional circus – “We need to buy somewhere as close to the hospital where he was born.” I don't know what that's to do with. So we bought a farm at Silverstone, not far from Northampton. By the time I was five – so, 1955 – my dad bought where we're at now, which used to be the Black Horse Café and filling station, to house his circus during the winter; so it was to be a circus winter quarters. So, really, I've been here since I've been, you know, five years old.

Tell me a little bit about, you know, the family business.

Family business: when Dad first came over he'd done very well in Ireland with the Wild West show type of thing – trick riding, bucking broncos, stuff like that. Even in the early days of the 1950s, when he came to England, there was concern by the general public as to how these horses were being treated. Some of them would break a leg...[unclear 00:01:42]...would have to be shot. So there was some concern about animal welfare, the rough riding and treatment and so on. And they didn't really buy into the cowboy image; it didn't really work here. So Dad was determined to put roots down here and so converted more to traditional British circus. So, instead of thirty horses, we went down to four horses and they were trained at liberty to do ring displays, like dressage type of stuff, and then, with the money that was left from...instead

of carrying covered wagons and stagecoaches and what have you, then went to buy lions, tigers, an elephant, a monkey act, to make it a traditional British circus. And that made a big difference, you know, that...that's what the British public wanted.

So how much of the year were they on the road, doing the show?

We'd be out...well always, traditionally, would start on Good Friday, obviously in April or whenever it is, and we'd finish – which we called the 'back end' – normally pretty much within a few days of the last day of September, so April to September. Thereafter, we'd come back to winter and during that time we'd do re-rehearsal and we would take out a stage show, so it would be a stage circus – so we'd do four weeks Birmingham Hippodrome, or Glasgow Empire, with the elephant and the lions and the horses, so it was a indoor circus. And we'd have a few weeks off, of course, and then prepare again for the next season. So Dad liked to try and keep things pretty much on the go, you know.

Let's go back...I mean, when you, if you like, when you first came here and when...and he was doing it. Over winter, were the other people who were the performers living on site as well?

Yes, yeah, that was the whole idea of it, except my dad purchased the property mid-April/May-time; it was delayed; we were already on the road. He had signed four retired circus people to come in, run the café and run the petrol station. That kept *them* going because they were no longer could be performers and it provided Dad with an income, which it did until the end of September, when Dad intends to bring the circus back, during which time the...

[Phone rings. Break in interview]

...when you came, you know...

Yeah, so until Dad comes to return in September he didn't know that the council had been down to the retired circus people and said, "We understand that this has been bought by the circus. They can't come onto this property without planning permission, so when are they due back? We need to contact them." Of course, you couldn't in those days, you had to write to a post office a route ahead and Dad would go, "Is there any mail for us?" Or you sent a telegram. So I think he got a couple of telegrams. In the meantime the council weren't taking any chances. So Dad takes a drive on a Sunday to here to see what's going on and they'd placed concrete blocks and metal rails, welded, what have you, to block the gates at the side of the café which gave us access to this area of land with our stables and sheds. They were determined that no circus vehicles were going to pull onto the

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premises that my dad owned, had paid for, and was paying rates on.

So he got wind of this and he said, "There's a lot of stuff there; we can't clear it." So he arranged it... – didn't contact the council – they're ready to pull in, the trucks carry on and they park at Market Hill in Newport Pagnell, where the Newport Pagnell RDC offices used to be. Parked the trucks up, a dozen trucks with the beast wagons, dropped the sides down so people could see the lions and tigers; elephant out, shackled to the lamp post, buns and things were brought for the elephant; the crowd was going...he dropped the keys into the RDC offices, and it was just the poor secretary receptionist in the...said, "You need to find somewhere for my circus because I can't access my premises and until I can they're your responsibility." And Dad just left everything, came back to the café, sat and waited; the police arrived: "You've got to collect..."

And he said, "Well, I can't. I'm waiting for this to be moved."

So within about four hours the council then made phone calls, council workmen came with, whatever, lifts and things, moved everything and then Dad did battle with them for about a month to obtain permission. But it wasn't planning permission because Dad was a member of the Showmen's Guild. If you purchased land and there's stabling there and there's running water and stuff, you're entitled to have your animals. They were talking about wild animal licences; they were petrified: "What if lions escape? People in the village of Linford could be terrorised," you know, and of course this did happen in later years; we did lose animals and things but we tried to keep it down. So the Showmen's Guild had a meeting – or it was a hearing – with the council. They were invited to the RDC offices. The Showmen's Guild brought three Rolls-Royces, just to show their power. Said, "We insist that this meeting take place on Mr. Cody's premises." Dad had built some circus seating and they were seated like a jury and our solicitors presented it to this audience. It was done and dusted there and then. So that was a...so, from then on, there was no planning permission and we were registered and accepted as a circus winter quarters.

So how many people used to live on-site then?

In the winter, about thirty, thirty or so; thirty, forty people. And then they'd come and go and we'd still use it as a staging post. Circus people know they can still pull down if they need a week's rest. It's, you know, that was traditional. You'd give shelter to other circus people if they're in trouble, or they're recovering from a leg injury or something and they need somewhere to park up: that's a given.

Before we move on to you talking about your role in all of this, you mentioned about animals. Let's get...any interesting stories about animals escaping, you said?

Yes, animals escaping. Well, we certainly lost a bear – a Himalayan brown bear – for about three days, I believe it was. It was sighted over by Mr. Gurney's field – farmer Gurney, next door. Dad had a quiet word with him and said, you know, "We are up all night, we're out tracking, we're trying...please don't shoot it. You might make it angry." So it was sighted there, and then it must have gone across the canal and was spotted by the lakes, which were much more, you know...and they were being operated at the time as sandpits, so some of the dredger people said, "I've just seen...it looked like a bear."

And Dad's trying to keep everything calm, he said, "No, no, it's just a...it's a very large dog. It's a rare dog which is...and we're trying to catch it but don't go near it."

So I think it was day three before we got it back because it loved the lake because of the fishing; it was in its natural habitat.

And then my dad used to take the whole show once a week to the Electra Cinema in Newport Pagnell to treat us all to going to the pictures and there was one time, we were all in there, the film flickers to a stop, the lights come on, police sergeant who was well known to us because they were always involved with things going on: "Mr Cody, could you remove your elephant from the Black Horse bridge please? It's blocking the traffic and it's frightening people and nobody can move anywhere."

Dad said, "I'm sorry about that. I don't know how that happened," you know.

And because the elephant knew that we'd all gone it wasn't happy, so it worked on its shackle chain which had just let...you know, broke loose. Got to the bridge; car lights [in its face? 00:09:54]; so: 'Wait a minute, I'm not going anywhere.' So he's walking down and there's cars behind him. So Dad: "Yeah, we're on our way," you know. So there was little things like that, you know. One lion out but we kept her contained here within our compound. But nobody hurt in any of those stories. *[Laughs]*

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So when did you... When did you and how did you get involved in the circus itself?

Just born and bred into it. I had...you know, there was no choice. That was it; that was my life; that was, you know, the family tradition for years. Not just, you know, on our side of the family but in America too. You know, that goes back, I don't know, five generations.

Oh really.

Yeah, yeah, so that's what we...

So how...you are related then to..?

Yeah, well it probably doesn't...it might show here, but you can see it's the sort of Western memorabilia. We used the Buffalo Bill thing because Buffalo Bill – William Frederick Cody – was the best known Western hero of the Wild West but his third cousin, Sam Cody, who we are more directly related to, was an aviator, American, emulated Bill Cody, wore the same outfits, the same beard, the same hair, did a Western act. He was a sharp-shooter; he did knife-throwing and rope-spinning and whip cracking; a trick rider; wrote plays, stage plays, in this country too. But called himself, initially, something like Wild Bill Cody, instead of Buffalo Bill. Buffalo Bill was earning big money and he said, "We've got to get Sam out of that because he's trading on my image. They think it's me." So they were at loggerheads. And that really was the story; you had two Codys. But we are really, directly...more directly related to Samuel Frederick who became an aviator; he invented the Cody War Kite; I think he's the only civilian to be buried at... – oh dear, dear, dear...main army camp. He died there, crashed a plane there – so the only civilian in this country to be buried in a military cemetery. Yeah, so that was the connection, so it's been a tradition that we've always tried to uphold, whether we've really wanted to or not, you know. I mean, I never wanted to be a cowboy character but it was expected and I did try and keep that going.

(I'm just going to do a little slight adjustment here.) But you actually, if you like, being in the ring and doing things, when did that start?

As soon as I was able; five years old I think I was put on...dressed as a cowboy and put on a pony. Seven years old, I'd be a boy clown, which was a good way of learning. So, cheeky little kid clown; you couldn't go wrong because the audience loved you; the other kids, your age and older, wanted to be like you 'cause you were like a naughty boy. And you'd get involved with different acts. You'd work with the monkeys, the monkeys would be running up a slide, you'd go up and then one of the monkeys would hit you on the head and, you know... And you were learning skills even though you could mess up because you were a clown and you were a kid. So you're in the ring, you learn how to take a call, you learn how to present. And then they'd usually wait for you to either choose or for them to spot a particular talent and then you're in hard training. But I think for me, being the only son, I was the boss' son, so the idea was, have a smattering of all this 'cause you will be running the show when you're older, you won't have time to do a trapeze act or walk a wire, you'll be managing

the show. So I had a smattering of stuff but, you know, as soon as you can you, you know...

Was your dad the ringmaster?

Ringmaster, yes, and then sometimes he loved to clown, so some...he would maybe do the half of the show as the ringmaster but couldn't resist. So the ringmaster would disappear, 'cause... And he was a very good clown. Everybody in the business said so. He loved that. So then he became the clown, so you lost the ringmaster half way through. Nobody wondered where he'd got to, you know. So he was a very good clown and then also, because he'd learned the same skills, there was a couple of times I remember clearly, our lion tamer, [Captain Yank Miller? 00:14:13] – you know, the epitome of a lion tamer, the big moustache – lions in through the cage; go to the door. Very occasionally he just sort of went straight back through the ring doors, he said, "I'm not going in, Harry," to my dad he said, "They'll have me. I just know it. They're waiting for me."

Dad said, "They're in the cage; the music's started; the audience are waiting; now what are we going to do? Try and get them out now and... What are we going to explain?"

So Dad would go in and for some reason – I think because the lions said, "Oh, this isn't the one we were after. This is the other guy we've seen before," – he would handle them and run through the act. So, you know, it was kind of a bit iffy to be able to stand in for other people if their nerves were shot, or they were injured.

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But did your dad...you know, the team of performers, were they a regular, almost like, extended family, or did he, you know, for different years, get different people in?

You would bring in... – it was a bit of a luxury 'cause they wanted a little bit more money – but you would bring in what they called a 'continental act'. So it was an act from the continent, so it could be Hungarian foot jugglers or a teeterboard act from Germany or some French musical clowns or something. And the British public could see that these were international performers; they were introduced as such: "All the way from Budapest..." So that was a little bit of a luxury and we changed that every year. But the rest, the kind of, you'd almost call it a rolling stock company, were, strangely enough, made up from two families, basically Fossetts and Yeldings, and they'd been in British circus – and in Ireland – for hundreds of years. So you always had at least two or three Fossetts and two or three Yeldings on the show and they were diehard, old-school circus – could do juggling, could do clowning, could do a wire act, could do a bit of trapeze. But, with all due respect to them, you know, they were multi-talented and the tradition of old circus, particularly, catering for the masses that really, before television, when the circus came to town this was

like a theme...you know, Disney coming to...you didn't have to go anywhere; all this glitz and glamour and death on the flying trapeze and all of that. So the English public were very easily entertained and so British circus performers said, "Shall we try this bit of knife-throwing?" you know.

"Yeah, that'll do." Like: 'They'll fall for that. We don't have to be...we're not competing with anybody else.'

So it was a lot of, you know, 'We'll get away with that. Let's put that in the show.'

And did you have the same kind of route every year?

No, no, no, you always had to change the route. There were one or two little pockets that you could get to, if business was bad, but it was always a long journey. But you had to change routes 'cause you were dealing with about another twenty shows. So you had to find out who was on which route. A lot of them would hold back. They were waiting to find out what route you're planning to take next year. So, you know, Dad may say, "Oh damn it," you know, "we're going to have to go up to Scotland because the south of England's going to be...there's four shows down there, Wales is going to be busy..." or we're going to have to go over to Ireland because they've, you know, taken the best route. And some shows would jump ahead of you so they would have played your route two weeks before you've arrived, so they've already seen a circus. So you try and jump ahead of *them*. These were long journeys through the night so there was a little bit of friction there.

And then there was this one place, if business was really bad, it didn't matter where you were, you'd drive to the Rhondda Valley in Wales, just this valley, strong mining community. They were so starved for entertainment they...you would pack the shows out every night. Even if four shows went there in one season, everyone did business, so that was like, 'We're running low on money; let's head to the Rhondda.' You'd do eight days, one-day stands, and back; we've got enough money. They were always the best audience and they would visit every show that came to town, which was great.

But did you say eight one-day stands?

One-day stands.

So you're putting the tent up?

Arriving early in the morning, could be a hundred miles, tent up at daylight, take four hours to put the show up, you'd have show at four forty-five and seven thirty, finish at nine thirty, show down, pull down, away at eleven through to the next one. It was the only way of really being sure you're getting money. You didn't...if you

were stretching a three-day stand, you might have one good house the first day, or the second day, and then it would dwindle. So, if you needed the money, you had to hit and run. So you'd say, "It's only for one day only. Come and see this extraordinary sight that will never be seen before, never will be seen again if you don't come and see it now." So you would push them to say, you've got to do this now.

My god, though, that is...

Oh hard, yeah, yeah.

And, the animal bit of it, were they, like, your dad's animals or were, again, they specialists who came in with the, you know, with the lions and the...

No, no, pretty much you'd buy an act; you'd buy an act and then that was your act and it was up to you to befriend them and make sure they're going to befriend you. So you adopted them. I don't think we ever raised any animals, you know, from birth and then made...although we did have very young animals and they were always in the wagons with us. So they lived as a member of the family, whether it was a lion cub or a monkey, or particularly Capuchins: very intelligent monkeys. So they'd be part of the family. And so you'd buy an act and, again, for trading, which had gone on for hundreds of years, all different circuses, Hagenbeck's, Germany, whatever. All animals were trained in German so, when you bought a lion act, they'd only respond to German commands. And so it was also adopted that circus people would all speak German as a given language. So if you had an act from Japan, doing a sway pole act, they learned German rather than English. That was the circus-speaking language. I don't know why they chose it but that's how it was, yeah, so...

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So you're doing this, does that mean to say that, as you're growing up, you're not going to school regularly during the...those...that kind of...

Oh yeah, you had to go to school – other than the one-day stands; not possible – so you'd have a week or two weeks of those and then everybody would be totally exhausted. So I had to take an exercise book – I've got one somewhere but not here – present myself at the nearest school to the circus ground – didn't matter what it was: it could be a senior school, it could be a girls' school, a Catholic school, whatever – present my book and of course, didn't really help, my name – and I'm christened Colonel Henry Cody, ready for the Colonel Buffalo Bill and Colonel Samuel so, you know, it's a given – from seven on, "My name is Colonel Henry Cody; I'm with the circus and I'm here to attend your school

for the next two days. Please look at my book and stamp it, you know, to say that I've registered with you."

"What? Okay."

So that was it. I'd have...and my dad made sure I went on my own, he wouldn't...I wouldn't have anybody with me, he thought it would toughen me up. It didn't help.

So where does Tod come from?

My dad used to like to dress me much like himself so, circus boss, he used to wear jodhpurs, riding boots, hacking jacket and he had a set made for me and I used to toddle around in these and my dad told me at an early age, "You see anybody doing anything wrong and you know it's wrong, you see anybody stealing anything or tampering with anything, you can sack them. You're the boss' son, you can sack them." Well, I soon made that known. I said, "I can sack you if I want."

"Yeah okay, Toddles."

"What did you call me?"

So that was like a thing that would...and then it stuck, so from Toddy to Tod, so that was...

Oh right. How long did this go on for?

Business was going down, I think. I can't quite remember but I think I sensed it when I was about fourteen or fifteen, mid...coming to the mid-sixties...(sixteen, I'd be sixteen in '66; seventeen...yes, sixteen)...1966, Dad wasn't getting any younger, business was getting harder and he decided to cut his losses, that he wanted to stay in circus, and any circus in this country would take him because of his reputation and the family connections. So he said, "I'll make it easier. I'll go, earn a salary, be part of a show." So he worked as a ringmaster and as a clown and then did his Western act and left Mum and me here running the café and petrol station. So...yeah, I think it was '66; I'd be about sixteen, yeah.

And just getting...I mean, this was a significant kind of time because a year later they decided this area was going to be the site of a new city. Can you remember what your initial reaction to all that was?

I was pretty excited about it because there were...there were sort of drawings and things around and artists' impressions and talk of...I saw...from what I heard, it was going to be a space-age city. There was going to be this monorail that was going to be silent and...you know. So there was a lot of talk going on and, yeah, I was excited because this was very, very rural, you know, and there really wasn't much to do, we just had the youth clubs and the cinemas, you know. So you had Newport Pagnell cinema; Wolverton had a cinema; New Bradwell, which is now a little...still

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a tin hut, that had its own cinema, you know, I mean. So it was the cinema and Wolverton had a theatre which occasionally did stuff. So yeah, bring it on. How long is it going to take? This is what we all wanted to know, you know, we can't wait. So there was a lot of...I think a lot of excitement, with the younger generation. Of course, farmers and things were, you know, they were worried.

And when your first contact, you mentioned Cindy Hargate coming and having a meeting at the youth club. Is that the first kind of contact you had with anybody?

No, the...yeah, I joined the youth club because I missed circus and I was a short order cook in the café and I wasn't happy and I wanted to perform. Went to the youth club to see what activities they had and then someone said, "Well, we occasionally do a play at Christmas," or whatever. So I thought, 'Well, I'm interested in that. I'm not interested in football or anything.' Joined the youth club; made my interest known to Bill Smith, the leader – wonderful man. He said, "Well, we can give that a go. Maybe we can do a poetry evening," or what have you. So I really spent a lot of time there. We also had lots of props and costumes here, left over from the circus, so I would deliver props and everybody said, "Oh, this could be good," you know. And then I think Cindy Hargate had sent a round robin round to youth clubs: 'Would you like to send a young person to have a meeting with us? It'll be a picnic, or whatever it may be.' So I think I'd be about seventeen and invited to Wavendon Towers. It was a hot, sunny day, very nice picnic all laid out and Cindy...I don't know if Peter Waterman was there but Cindy certainly was in charge of everything, playing hostess and just asking us what would we like from the city, what are young people missing today, and so on and so forth. And then I think I was invited back on another couple of occasions to meet with, like, more of an adult kind of panel, which was, you know, I think: "Okay." And I think Cindy just remembered me and so, within a couple of years later, I was invited to do other things and establish a bit of drama for the youth clubs. Yeah, so it was just...

So what were you invited to do? So tell me about this. You were invited to go round and stimulate drama?

Yes, for the youth clubs. There was talk – I don't think it happened – that Cindy said, "Well, we could provide kind of flats and scenery and lights. It could be like a store that you could access to help create a play," because, you know, there really wasn't anywhere like that, you know. The Jennie Lee hadn't been built, the leisure centres weren't really happening. So that was going to be an idea – there was going to be a store we could all participate in and so on; creative writing things so people come up with their own ideas. So yeah, I think that was the start of it but then I've also still got a

bit of a business mind so I want to do my own show and earn some money. So I think it was...I was twenty, so 1970. Without help from the Corporation but they were watching. Cindy came and a few other people. I did...at first we called it 'The New City Show' and we had it at Great Linford so it was close, with a farmer friends of mine, the [Leavers? 00:28:14], so they provided the fields. I had saved some money; I borrowed a little bit of money. We had a steam engine rally, fairground, circus acts, but outdoors, and it worked. A two-day show; a lot of rural stuff going on; a lot of local participation, local talent, the town bands and stuff like that. It worked and the money was good; I made a nice profit. Did it again. The second year: good again. Then I think the Corporation were taking over the fields so I said, "I've lost a showground."

They said, "Well, why don't you move to..." (I think) "...Mount Farm in Bletchley?" So at that point – it was almost like compensation – said, "And we'll fund you if you need some more money to make the show bigger."

So that's how it started, so the Corporation funded me for Mount Farm. From Mount Farm we went to Simpson Showground for two or three years – which wasn't a showground; we called it Simpson Showground – and so that's how I got on and then the Corporation liked what I was doing and then offered me an entertainment consultancy and then I think I was with them for about another seven or eight years.

What were you doing as, you know...well no, let's...if you can tell this story because I was trained by you and, in fact, Don Ritson remembers this as well...

Oh, is this the circus?

This was the circus. If you could tell that story.

I thought you would have known...I mean, that was one thing...well, sort of like the jobs, I mean, the thing that Fred used to say – and, again, this was Sue Malleson was my, you know, best bloody person I could ever have – she said, "Tod, any problems, 'cause they see you as a maverick; not everybody likes you; they think you're full of yourself," (and, of course, I was) "Any problems, go straight to Fred. You don't have to talk to Brian; you don't have to talk to...go to Fred. He's been keeping an eye on you; you can talk to him. His door is not always open but he'll book you in and you can have a quiet word with him." So then it...so I saw him a few times and he said, "Tod, we want to have a Christmas do. So can I leave it to you to put stuff in?"

I said, "Yes."

He said, "But I don't really want to know what you're doing but I would like a few surprises."

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And he mentioned that on several...well, we did get some surprises, some of them weren't the best ones. So, you know, that circus thing, we did that twice really; we did that twice. Yeah, the...I think it was to...somebody came up with the idea, probably Social Development: 'We should do something for underprivileged children or something.' I think we were two days there or it might have been a bit longer.

It was the leisure centre.

Bletchley Leisure Centre, yeah. And yeah...

There was escapology...

Yeah, we had escapology, knife throwing.

I think I was a monkey trainer. There was [Tim Simons? 00:30:56] was a gorilla...

In the gorilla...

Yeah, yeah...[laughs].

[Gerry ? 00:31:00] was a clown; Peter Howard was a clown – some old clown routines I rehearsed them in. John Sharkey was like, "I really don't think I can do anything. I don't feel I can be seen." So he was in the back of a comedy cow presented by [Jean Hawes? 00:31:15], so she had to milk him.

Jean, that's so embarrassing.

[Laughs] And who was there? Rosemary Fortune was my human target. Yeah, Don Ritson. Did he do the comedy...[unclear 00:31:29]...thing and then he'd suddenly unicycle. I can't remember who else. There was quite a gang of us; it was quite...it was fun.

Tell me, did...talking of Christmas things, is this story apocryphal about you holding a party in the AFU, you know, the one with the yellow colour? Can you tell that story? If that is the...[laughs]...[unclear 00:31:51]

Yeah, I was...you know, I was asked. I was asked to, you know, stage something in there and, again, in those days with John Sharkey, and this AFU, they were all saying, "Oh, it's got a design award," - well, I think it had – and it was yellow as I remember, everything was yellow. The desks were yellow, the seats were yellow, the carpet was yellow, the walls were yellow, the phones were yellow: everything was yellow. I think it was after a week, people were in this... "We can't work in this. We need some

extra...we know this has got an award but we cannot keep seeing yellow everywhere." So it was very pristine condition, or whatever. John Daggart, John Sharkey's friend, he loved making gadgets out of things so he made some gun that fired ping pong balls by the hundred or...over the crowds – it was on two layers. We had some dance girls in there, we had a comedy stunt fight and then we had Mountie [Jobe Roberts 00:32:42] dressed as a Mountie on this wild horse that was all amongst the crowd and, of course, it did its business all over these bright yellow carpet, you know. And it all got a bit out of hand, that's all it was. And I, you know, I said to Fred, I said, "You did say a few surprises."

"What's with the fire foam now everywhere?"

I said, "Oh no, that's nothing to do with...that's the guests have been getting carried away," you know.

So yeah, it did go...[laughs]...it became a sort of den of iniquity; a rave. It was one of these rave places within about two hours.

Oh amazing. So what other...you talked about, you had a special kind of friendship and relationship with John Sharkey. What was that all about?

Cindy Hargate introduced him to me. We met for lunch, with Cindy, and I think he was a conceptual designer or something. I don't think he was really working on the Bowl yet, he was working on other things. She said, "I think, you know, you'll like John. I think he's a very interesting chap." And we just hit it off, within the first lunch and he said, "I wonder if you'd like to come to tea on Saturday?"

I said, "Sure."

So I did and he had an office connected to his large, stone cottage that he had.

"Would you come into my office? I'm working on something like...on here and I'm producing a paper. If I read it to you, would you tell me what you think?"

And I'm thinking, 'Why are you asking me?' you know, 'I'm a circus boy still. I'm trained not to have much to do with outsiders. I don't socialise easily, you know, it's us and them. And you're coming up with all these big plans and things...' And I think, because I wasn't college trained and I just thought, 'Why would you, you know, say that? Or what's the point of that?' And we just gelled, I think, as two very different people. And so John would then say (bless him), you would go to a meeting, you know, "Well, I'm thinking of building a fountain," or whatever it may be, "but I'd like Tod to see what he can do on the [water? 00:34:56]"

And they said, "It's got nothing to do with that...it's the..."

"No, no," I'd say.

So, you know, he'd...and then he loved being involved and then, when we come to the Bowl, of course we're both on it, you know. I remember seeing the first drawings and his drawing, I know it's a conceptual design, you'd have to wait for him to tell you what it

was he was thinking about because you couldn't recognise it...[unclear 00:35:19] He says, "This is going to be a bowl."

"Like a rice bowl?"

"No, no, not a..."

"So like a horseshoe?"

"No, not a horseshoe."

And it went on, all these different drawings. So we finally got to where it was at. It was only when the detailed drawings came out I thought, 'So that's what he's talking about.'

So we had so much fun on the Bowl, you know, that was great. But there is a story to that and not many people know it.

00:35:45

Go on.

The first person to realise was John. We staged the first event at the Bowl, which we did ourselves – Corporation money; a stage show. We called it 'Soul in the Bowl' It was a dry run so we could test the car parks, hopefully earn some money, present it, New Musical Express, Melody Maker, [unclear 00:36:08]. So 'Soul in the Bowl' because Soul had gone and we thought it might be a revival thing. So we had Geno Washington and the Ram Jam Band, Jimmy James and the Vagabonds, Desmond Dekker and the All-Stars, Light of the World, some other older acts, and we interspersed the acts with Legs & Co. the dancers – went on to be Hot Gossip – again, theatrical, to give time for musicians to change over, tune up and stuff, to keep it flowing.

So things were going well; not as many people as we'd hoped for but a good few thousand – but we were hoping for thirty or forty; I think we had about fifteen – John and I were standing at the top of the Bowl, looking down on the stage, it was just coming to whatever it was, eight o'clock or whatever, and the sun starts to set behind the stage and it's a beautiful night and John, who never used a bad word in his life, just looked at me, looked back and said, "Flipping hell," (or words to that effect).

I said, "Excuse me?"

He said, "It's the wrong way round."

"No," I asked, "What's the wrong way round?"

He said, "The Bowl is the wrong way round."

Of course the sun would set behind the stage at [unclear 00:37:25], you couldn't see the acts. You were...the sun was glaring at you. And of course the sound is going over, hitting the city, and of course it's curving so, I mean, even Sue Malleon in Bow Brickhill would enjoy the concert. It would just float over. If it had been round the other way, it would have hit the A5, missed Stony Stratford, and gone into the country and the sun would have been behind the audience onto the stage. So not many people knew that. So I said, "No one will ever know." And I don't think it was ever picked up on, that the Bowl is the wrong way round.

[Laughs]

But you got involved in terms of other events there then? Did...the New City Show happened there, didn't it, as well?

Yes, so we kept changing the name, so we were New City Show when I started it, then we changed it to Milton Keynes Show, while we were at Simpson. While we were at Simpson I was the only entertainment consultant so the budget, which would be presented, you know, we'd have to allocate, I'd have to do...but with John's help – well, everybody was very helpful – “Well, you have to put this down; you have to allow for that; you need a contingencies.” Present it. One year my budget is nearly half. I said, “Oh?”

David Christmas who was like secretariat, was often at these meetings...[unclear 00:38:44] “Ask where the other half of the budget is.” He knew. He said, “Oh no, we have another entertainment consultant now and he's going to be working on another event.”

So I said, “Right. Okay, fine.”

“His name's Gerrard Neale and he was the mayor of Milton Keynes,” – he'd been the mayor of Milton Keynes – “and he's going to be doing an event for us, perhaps several.”

I said, “Oh,” I said, “well I look forward to meeting him.”

I don't think I did.

The upshot was that, yes, there was another event and it was called the Milton Keynes Horse Show. So the Corporation, or Gerrard Neale, wanted this other event. But they don't have the experience – you know, experience of the grounds and things – so they said, “And we're going to couple it with Milton Keynes Show.”

I said, “Sure, not a problem.”

So we were given a horse secretary – a horse show secretary – and the big names there, you know, Harvey what's-his-name and...but I just couldn't see it working so it was a mix: the horse show, the funfair, my stunt acts, the usual stuff, all mixed together and it was pretty clear after the first event that the people of Milton Keynes didn't want a horse show. So then it was...there was a bit of an argument afterwards. I wasn't happy with the horse show people; certainly, you know, would have liked to have worked with Gerry Neale, so I'm not quite sure what his involvement was but anyway. So anyway, it was afterwards I said, “There's just something that doesn't work. Your horse show, you know, features saddle soap and sashes; my job is providing shit and sawdust: that's the two things. It's like mixing circus with the Royal Ballet: it doesn't work. So it didn't go down well. So the following year we're doing our own event, you know, and we're...and: “Can we use your suppliers?”

“By all means.”

It only ran for one year.

00:40:43

So from there we changed the name again because it had brought everything down. So then we were the Milton Keynes County Fair. So we were the County Fair for about four or five years. Then we did a hot air balloon event there. I did a thing called the 'Air Day', which was balloons, gliders, Frisbee-throwing, kite-flying. That's about all we did at the Bowl there and then we started to get into the events so then it was my job as Bowl event manager to oversee, just keep an eye on things like the Queen concert and Police. I didn't do Michael Jackson. We had somebody else; I forget. And it was just keeping an eye and watching things and then reporting, from my knowledge of the business and meeting many people in the business.

So yeah, the Bowl could have worked 'cause Blackwell of Island Records, you know, very successful young businessman, he offered to buy the Bowl, in the early stages, "We'd like to take it. It'll be our little showcase and we'll bring our new acts." It was mostly reggae but the big names. And John said this would be a good opportunity because, with all due respect, we knew that, sooner or later, it was going to go to the council and that was the last thing they wanted. They did not want the Bowl. So the deal was being set up; goes to our finance department, legal department who, you know, are then going to make a deal with Chris Blackwell. He's a businessman, he's a trader. With all due respect to the Corporation employees, they had never done a deal, a personal deal, I don't think, before in their lives. They just represented big company. So they pushed him and pushed him up and pushed him up until he finally walked away. Then they went back and said, "Okay, we've had other meet...and we are prepared to accept your first offer."

He said, "No, I think I've learned my lesson."

And that was it. So we lost it and from then on we couldn't, you know, the Bowl was never really going to be taken again. I mean, it was in recent years but it was, you know...

Was it on a short term...you know, 'cause didn't Sony...

He had an option on it.

Didn't Sony..?

Yes, Sony took it later years...in later years for, again, another short option, yeah. That was sad but...and then again, the council getting involved and the Corporation..."Were starting to lose the car parks."

So: "No, no, we're building..."

"Well, we're losing, you know..."

So, yeah, it was sad but it did have a good run in its time; it did have a good run.

Yeah. And...I mean, yeah, they still haven't...what is it..? I don't know who owns it now.

I don't know either.

No, it's...

I think it would be unlikely if there's going to be one concert there a year. It's...

We're talking...was it the Police concert where it rained? Where people were sliding down the slopes?

Oh yeah, absolute mudslides, yeah. I mean, we had it a couple of times on that but, yeah, and they had more fun on the...you know, queues had been set up. And I think we arranged for something like sawdust, or something, to at least give them a walkway up – not to stop the slides but to...so they could access...because there was nothing you could do so we kind of encouraged it, you know, let them get on with it.

And the other thing at the Bowl, too, the council were getting involved early, you know, "We raised concerns about the number of car parks and we are sure that there were more than forty thousand people in on the Police concert." Well, I knew the management. I had two partners from another business – circus business; used to rent the big circus tents to...for the Police concerts in London, Wandsworth and stuff like that, so we knew them well. And, even on the day, all I can do is oversee them but I'm reporting back to Brian. The police said, "Tod, we need to register this with you. We're calling an emergency meeting. We are convinced that there are more than forty thousand people in the Bowl." And I'm getting used to the numbers now, you know, I can see when the Bowl is packed and I'm thinking, 'I'm thinking fifty.' I'm thinking it but I'm not saying fifty. [Unclear 00:44:46] "Oh," I said, "Probably. We wouldn't be surprised. Shall we show you why?" [Unclear 00:44:55] "There's the ticket, it's been printed. And there's another. Can you tell the difference? Well, we'll show you. There's a watermark or something there. These are copies; these are fraudulent tickets. What do you want us to do? Do you want us to try and hold ten people out of that main gate? What do you think will happen? We're losing money. This place can still hold more. Do you want riots? Do you want your fencing down and people getting hurt and injured? We've been letting them in because we haven't got time to check each of these. They're pounding at the gate."

And the upshot was then, of course, the tickets were printed anyway, prior to the event, by the same ticket company for the promoters because they thought, 'No, we need more than forty

00:45:53

thousand. Print ten; just put them a little bit off centre.' Tricks of the trade.

Didn't it actually go up to sixty in the end, or not? Did it change?

Well no, it went up and up but, you know, nobody really...everybody was scared, you know, the police were petrified, the council: "There's cars parking on the verges." "But yeah, you're lucky they're not blocking all the streets." "Well, we're going to run a bus service." "It won't work." [Laughs]

So tell us the story about the red balloon advert.

I was still event Bowl manager. I think I got wind that there was going to be a...there were going to be a couple of adverts, or two or three, in the offing – whether it was all going to be the red balloon theme or not... – but the red balloon thing came up, which sounded great. The stuff in the shopping centre, I was also doing entertainment for the shopping centre, so we had dancing waters in Fountain Court and street entertainers, a regular thing there. There was going to be a couple of shots in the shopping centre, the balloon thing was going to do its own thing around the city and then a big finish, crowd, lots of kids, loads of balloons, the Bowl in like the frame. Fine. Two days' setup, of course it's on my sheet: event manage; see what they need; provide electrics and a safety gate, security...[unclear 00:47:14]...during which time attending one of these meetings so, you know, we're thinking about auditioning for stilt walkers. So I said, "Well, you don't need to audition for stilt walkers, you know, they're all going to look the same and what have you." I said, "We have stilt walkers here so you'd be providing local employment and, you know, three of them are professional anyway so they have their own insurance. It's not like local kids from a circus school."

"So can you provide..?"

I said, "Yeah, sure, sure, fine," you know.

And, of course, it was. So one was my girlfriend at the time and the other one was a clown who didn't live in Milton Keynes but spent a lot of time here travelling. Young clown: Laurie Temple. So [Gail Gordon? 00:47:56], Laurie Temple and we needed a third one and I thought, 'Well, why not me? I'm a qualified entertainer, I'm a stilt walker.' So I was the third one. Now, my immediate boss, Brian Salter, wasn't aware that...he was aware there was going to be stilt walkers, he wasn't aware that I had booked them, although it was my job to do so. He certainly wasn't aware that I was going to be one of the stilt walkers. It was only when the ad came out, I was called into the office and he said, "Can we remind you that you...we do employ you as the Bowl event manager. Your sole responsibility is taking care of health, safety, security at the Bowl, providing whatever they need and yet you were seen

on stilts, within a crowd of thousands of children, in clown makeup. How do you explain that?"

And I said, "Well, I was fully able to oversee the whole event."

He said, "But surely that means you've been paid twice."

I said, "Yes, I believe it does."

I got into trouble.

Tell us about the actual day itself, you know, that scene in the Bowl. What...I mean, it just...

Well, it looks great and, again, bless the kids, you know – I forget where they came...several school groups and stuff, so not as many as you'd think – and we spread them all out, got them through...and again we had to provide some light packed lunches for them, make sure everybody's taken care of, toilets had to be available, you know, make sure..."Has everybody been to the loo yet 'cause we're ready to go again?" you know. So there was a lot of that kind of stuff. And then we slowly went round with the barriers and just moved them in and moved them in so, although you see the whole thing with all...we corralled the kids, you know and they all kind of like...*[laughs]*...we're slowly pushing them, out of shot. I think we did it in three takes, it wasn't long. And, again, it couldn't be because we couldn't hold onto the kids too long, so no, it was done really quite quickly. The shopping centre took longer, that was a bit tricky and we had a bit of issue with the floor. We had to fit special things on the stilts and stuff but yeah.

00:50:00

What about the actual...you know you said there were three takes. Was that...does that mean to say there were three balloon..?

No, I think we had two runs; there were certainly two of them. Yeah, we had two sets of balloons go up, yeah. And we were ready for that. Big nets, yeah.

Sorry, say that again. Big nets?

Big nets for the balloons, so we had backup. I think we had two and we said, well...yeah, I'm just trying to think...I think we did...we were doing a close-up one and that wasn't...and again, for anybody but Gail, bless her, who'd only spent a week practising – because she wasn't a stilt walker when I sold her to the, you know... – and of course, all these kids are so excited and they...you know, they're looking and of course they're bumping in and you've got nowhere to fall other than on children, you know because it's tight. So...but we were lucky, nobody...no child was injured in the thing. So yeah, I think we lost one set of balloons and we had a second backup, yeah.

And what were your thoughts when you actually saw the whole thing put together, as an advert, as it were?

Oh, it was neat, it was very neat and it just reminded me...I would have liked to have seen more of...which it was really, like the red balloon, the old movie, you know, with that balloon just doing its own thing a little way, you know but...[unclear 00:51:21]...to do with me. No, it was neat and it really got the attention. I think it was the best thing we did. It was the best thing, you know, for the Corporation. It was a good image. And we could have kept that going too. I know we used to give red balloons for a year or two after, at events, but that red balloon, you know, I'd suggest we have our own red balloon, hot air balloon, which would have been fun but they didn't go for that. We sort of could have kept that going a bit, I think.

You say about a hot...where did that hot air balloon come from? The silver one with Milton Keynes on it.

It would be made in Bristol. The Corporation I don't think owned it. We would have rented it and it would have had the logo put on, I think. Yeah, I'd forgotten about that one but we could have had our own.

When...you were saying about the Corporation and so on, you know, you'd been brought up, if you like, in like a family business that was totally independent. Did you see yourself as a member of the Corporation?

No, no. It could never be. I was always uncomfortable in...even working in the Corporation, you know. I think they gave me about five offices because I couldn't work in the Corporation. To the point that, once I became Bowl event manager, they bought me a mobile unit which we also used as an office and I lived at the Bowl. So that was my office. I would very often stay over there for...during an event I'd be there, sleeping there, for a week before and a week after, to get the clear-away. I loved that. [Unclear 00:52:59]...I should be: green grass; in circus terms, the tober, the circus ground. This was the biggest circus ground I'd ever been on so that was, you know... And the Corporation, Brian used to come...love to come for meetings there. It was just away from the Corporation, you know, wide open windows, just open field, as it was, literally, a field. So yeah, that was my favourite workplace but, no, never did fit in. But I was so grateful for people like Sue Malleson, [Karen Higgins?], [Jean Hawes? 00:53:30], John Sharkey, John Daggart, Cindy Hargate, of course, because they were all creative people, from different departments, but loved to be part of generating things, you know, creative things and seeing people being entertained and being happy and being wowed and stuff. So, very grateful to those.

I mean, this film that I've made, it's very much, you know, there was this incredible atmosphere, incredible kind of wanting to do something very special in those first ten years and this is when you were around, isn't it?

Anything was possible, yeah, anything was possible. And, for me, I believed it because I'd been given money to play with. You know, I mean I had to justify it to the penny, of course, you know but I'm thinking, 'I can't believe...what am I, twenty-two and I've got a fifty thousand pound budget for this event,' you know and all the...the whole thing was which, even having to prove my...was almost like, every year I'd be reviewed, you know: "So, do you have any thoughts for next year, Tod?" and "We just want to see how you think things have gone," you know, so it was a little bit... I said, "I'd like to continue with you as...but until I mess up. So as soon as I make a mistake please get rid of me," you know. So...but a lot of them said, "Oh yeah, we're going to...just wait...just waiting for you, you know."

But I think, because of my friends and people in the Corporation, I mean, I'm still running my own business, doing shows at weekends and doing escapes and stuff. *[Laughs]*...it was only when I took a fall on a Saturday – nobody knew I was working – escaping from a straightjacket, hospitalised for nine months, "No, I can't be doing any..." *[Laughs]*...I disappeared. The Corporation's still getting calls to them. I won't say who but people within the Corporation did a letterhead and had set up an answering machine: "Circus Product....we cannot take your call at this number at the moment. However, if you'd like to ring..." – whatever it was – "...seven, four thousand – the Corporation number – extension 351 or 459 or 642, someone there will help you." And then a couple of times you'd get whoever it was, maybe even Brian Salter, "This is not Circus Productions, this is Milton... Don't ring this number." So I ran my business out of the Corporation with my cohorts, you know.

00:55:45

But could you tell us the story about that, you know, horrible accident? How...just give it a little bit of background. You say that, there you were, like the consultant for the Corporation, but you still had this kind of other side of you, like... What was that? What was that other [business? 00:56:01]?

Well, I had three days a week with the Corporation so plenty of time. Other than when we were doing events, I knew I couldn't work weekends but we had...we were part of an outdoor entertainment circuit, so fêtes, galas, carnivals all looking for spesh acts, as we called speciality acts. So it had to be something different. So I would either do my Western act or we'd do an escape act; we also had giant inflatable wrestlers, twelve foot characters: anything that was unusual. And we'd be busy. So I'd

only really just started doing escapology, so I get a contract come through and I thought, 'This is a joke. I've got to take this one...' – I was ready but I could have put somebody else in – 'I've got to take this one because it doesn't sound right.' It was for me to escape from a regulation straightjacket, suspended by the ankles from a burning rope at the top of a hundred foot crane and I had three minutes in which to escape: that's the stunt that they're paying for. It's an open day at Fulbourn mental hospital. So Fulbourn mental hospital having an open day, want to see somebody escape from a straightjacket from a burning rope. And I thought, 'This can't be right. This has got to be the worst possible taste.' I thought, 'I've got to do it because I'm going to have to frame this,' you know: "Guess where I've been working." So, to cut a long story short – or cut a long act short – the rope burnt through far quicker than expected and I was on my way up, felt there was something wrong in my ankles, another give and then just went into freefall, so I just had to throw myself around and...[clap]...well, that was it, just hit the deck. It was about a, I think, seventy foot drop and, yeah.

But how did that happen? I mean, presumably there is a technique in an act like that which we, the general public, don't know.

Timing's helpful. [Unclear 00:58:02] No, it was simple. Again, I could have put a steel core through the rope. I was young – what was I? Twenty-five I think – and I wanted to push the envelope, I wanted to prove...afterwards I used to put a knife through the rope, afterwards, and say, "This is what could have happened." And I had a glamorous lady assistant, which is necessary sometimes for magic, to just misdirect, and so if they don't quite see, if she's wiggling enough or whatever it may be, it can just give you a little moment just to do something. Not that we needed it in this. And she wasn't happy being glamorous, she said, "Look, I just stand there being pretty and I just light the rope and then I just...[unclear 00:58:42]. I want to get my hands dirty, I want to help. Surely that's..."

"Well, you can set up the props," you know.

And it was her first day...well, first day setting the props. I said, "There's a bucket of paraffin and petrol mix with some meths – that gives colour to the flame – there's a bucket of water. You soak the rope in water, we add this wick, which you soak in the paraffin and petrol mix, attach the wick, tie it off with wire and wash your hands. It's all set to go. And bless her, she soaked – I mean, it can't be helped but I mean...[laughs] – she soaked the rope in the petrol and paraffin mix and the wick in water so the...it just reversed it so...and of course, as I'm going up, I can't see the flame 'cause I have to be vertical and then she hits it with the torch but I can...all I can hear is this...[imitates the noise of the

flames]...which sounded more than it was but by the time I'm trying to work out what could be, I'm out of earshot now, the crane is a heavy mechanised thing, you know, and I thought, 'I can't even get out...' and then just feeling it, the thing was...so I just thought, 'As soon as I go I'm just going to have to make some turns and hope for the best,' you know. So that was it, so...

Yeah, so nine months and then, during that time, bless them, the Corporation again gave me a job of producing a... – what was it? – ...a social recreation consultancy report. So that was another check round all the SMPs – the small meeting places – the youth clubs, the sports centres, the swimming pools, the cinemas, youth clubs again, just checking on how popular they were, what was the footfall and so on and so forth. And events that are making comparisons with Woburn and other sort of local things. And that was very good of them, they didn't have to do that, you know, so they kept me on the payroll.

01:00:36

But let's just come back to this, 'cause isn't there a story about Bill Smith and not signing a form or something? Can you tell that story?

Well, again, you know, my mother didn't know I was doing this, you know, she was very nervous, you know, she'd lost family members doing stunts and things, so I didn't tell her. In fact, nobody knew. The Corporation certainly didn't know I was doing this and they just said, "Who fell?" [*Unclear 01:01:05*] The Great Zucchini or somebody – I can't even remember who I was. [*Unintelligible*]...to cover me, probably for tax purposes – "The Great Zucchini?"

"It's Tod."

And of course it was in the nationals, it didn't help. So I just had this lady assistant and had a young lad from Newport helping too but I was the only driver so he phones...he daren't phone here so he phones Bill Smith, our youth leader, "Tod's in hospital. He's smashed up and it doesn't look good."

So Bill drives. "How is he?"

They said, "We're trying to stabilise him but we can't do anything more at the moment. We think he's going to have to lose his right arm at the elbow," 'cause I think I must have landed on that so it was pretty much apart.

So he said, "Right."

"So somebody's got to sign an amputation form," you know, "Are you family?"

And he said, "Yes."

So he signed... [*Laughs*] As it was, they managed to save it. I was lucky.

Oh sorry, I thought the story was that Bill refused to sign it.

No, no, no, he signed it. He was...no, he was panic-stricken, no, no. No, he did sign it. And he said, "Have you seen the form?" I said, "No."

He said, "[Unclear 01:02:18]...to take your arm off."

"What!" you know.

No, no, no, he did. [Laughs] Yeah, it was just...it was on the next agenda because there was a series of ops. I mean, you know, I broke my back in two places, fractured pelvis, tib and fib, femur, broken ribs, punctured lungs, I mean it was, you know, it was pretty much, you know... But I was very fit fortunately, you know, but no, it shouldn't have happened. So yeah, took a while but the Corporation kept me going for nine months, 'cause I was nine months in recovery – before I get out of hospital, actually. So they were very good.

And that carried on, did it? Not the burning rope stunt...

No, I didn't do...no, I got my girlfriend to do it after that...[laughs]. The one that I put on the stilts the week before for the balloon ad. '[Gail Gordon?], the world's first female escapologist.' But I did put a core through the rope. I thought it was only fair.

And that... – the act bit about going and doing stuff in clubs and that, and events – ...that continued?

Oh yes, yes and I...and when, finally...there really wasn't anything for me to do at the Corporation, I was trying to find things – do you know what I mean? The council were taking over; I was still doing the fun fair, I think, at the city centre and the fireworks; the Bowl, we weren't doing that anymore for the carnival-type thing. And the novelty was wearing off too. People didn't want to supply trucks for the carnival parade even though we had the parade around the Bowl for safety. I started the first Miss Milton Keynes beauty contest – can you imagine now? – and that wore thin, you know what I mean. So the tastes were going, they...you know, people were getting more big screen TVs and you know...and even the concerts were going down, even the big names, they weren't getting the money.

So you were involved in the fireworks, the city centre fireworks, were you, to begin with?

Yeah, from the beginning, yeah.

Oh right.

First of all...

Because I thought that was...

Keith Emmett?

Yeah.

I sold it to Keith, as a side deal, when I realised the writing was on the wall...*[laughs]*. No, the first one we did was Lloyds Court and...when the Corporation had offices in Lloyds Court and we had it literally just on the other side of the road, which hadn't been adopted yet, so it was just on waste ground. That was a relatively small...we had a pig roast so you can imagine how many people turned up – about three thousand. That was our first one. Then we moved again around from where the shopping centre is now, round that Midsummer area. Then we moved over to Campbell Park and we did a couple of those.

01:05:03

But I was...I think I told you, I was getting a little bit older and the fireworks were getting a little bit hairier. We used to do stuff with Ron Lancaster – the Reverend Ron Lancaster; famous firework man – and we would alternate years. He'd still supply the fireworks. He'd call the shots one year, I'd call them the second year. And he would have three assistants, I would have three assistants, but Ron was always with me and, of course, Ron was very exact and you would hear, you know: "Rocket firing, over to you Giles."

"Thank you Ron."

"Number four gone, fountains now, mortars, Jeremy."

"Thank you. Back to you, Ron," you know.

[Unclear 01:05:47]...and I said, "Right, you've got your bank of mortars there, just one after the other...*[unintelligible]*...and then, after ten minutes, send everything you can...*[laughs]*. And Brian would call me and he'd say, "Tod, this firework spectacular,"

[Laughs] "Yes, Brian."

He said, "It was spectacular."

I said, "Thank you. I think it was better than last year."

He said, "We kind of advertised it as a thirty-minute show. It was like eighteen minutes."

I said, "But it was spectacular though."

I was always getting in trouble. *[Laughs]*

But Ron and I put a twelve-foot crater – I mean, we can't say who's fault...it wasn't our fault; we were in it at the time – Ron was firing – this was at Midsummer – big steel mortars, he's loading his homemade big...like paper onions they are. We're doing very well, we're getting ready for the big finish and we just hear this, 'BOOM', and something happens, we don't know what. We're on our bottoms in a crater and all around us it looks like mincemeat and it's smoking soil that's been minced up – like mincemeat – just this smoke. And the mortar's missing, the steel mortar. It had blown the bottom out of this four-inch steel mortar and exploded

underground. Again, Ron, a vicar...[unclear 01:07:03] "What the..."

I said, "I have no idea."

And he had to report it. They were down...they fenced it off the next morning, health and safety, came from London I think...[unclear 01:07:15] measuring it...[unclear]...and then they're digging down for the shell.

So we started to have one or two real iffy times on the fireworks and then sometimes the wind would blow dust into the viewers' eyes, particularly on Campbell Park, they were all around it. People are panicking, they're sure that they're burning cinders, they're yelling out for ambulances. St. John's Ambulance, bless them, were insisting on putting blue lights on and rushing up and down these lines, which didn't help, you know, it was causing panic, so I said, "Until there's a problem, can we please not have lights and sirens going on." So it was getting a bit iffy. But then Keith was involved with me with the very first thing in 1970, at Linford: he put the funfair in. So we'd always had that connection. And Keith said, "No, I'll take it away..." And he was getting on better with the council because always the council, with the Corporation meetings, they were always pouring cold water over everything, questioning everything, and we just...I didn't get on with them anyway but Keith had established a working relationship so they were happy to, you know, work with Keith.

Yeah, I must say that, you know, I was down at Inter-Action at this time and we had these much smaller fire shows but they frightened me and I, you know, they...yeah. I mean, phew. But interestingly though, those firework displays, which I myself never liked, I've always liked the ones where we've had a kind of...where we did an interaction with them, almost like a story in those...

Yes, yes.

But they were incredibly popular, weren't they? I mean, crowd control must have been just a problem, with those.

Yeah, and again, with the police and... But they understood 'cause I said, you know, "If anybody's going to be in trouble, it's going to be me."

"You can't hold them. We can't hold them."

And the same when the bridges...the walkways over: "We've got barriers."

"Well, they're storming the barriers and they're filling the bridge. We can't shift them. They won't move."

"Let them fill it. Once it's full, there will be no more."

The same when we did dancing waters in Fountain Court and they... "They're pushing on the glass doors." – this was early on

when we opened up the shopping building – security holding the doors against them and I said, “We can take another three or four hundred in here. Let’s pack it so they can’t get in, the doors won’t open any more, they’ll be in.”

And the police would say, “We can’t do this, it’s over the...”

I said, “If you don’t, things will get broken, glass will be broken, people will be hurt. Let them, like – with all due respect – like sheep, let them find their own level and then it will stop.”

So, yeah, that crowd control around Campbell Park was a tough one.

But presumably, I mean, this again was in...you know, we’re talking now early eight...late seventies, early eighties, [unclear 01:10:06]

01:10:06

Eighties, yeah, yeah.

You would not get away with it. You just wouldn’t be allowed to do it today, would you?

No, no.

No, I mean, this health and safety thing has really kicked in, in a very big way.

Yeah, yeah. We would...I mean, nobody got...you know, we were careful but now they don’t...you know, assess the bridge and say, “We’re shutting that road off,” before anyone even gets near the bridge. So there’d be lots of road closures. The shopping centre didn’t want that, they kept wanting flow for the parking. So now, yes, you know...and I don’t know...I haven’t been to see the fireworks at Campbell Park so I don’t know what crowd control measures they take now but I also think it’s not as popular as it used to be, with all due respect, nothing wrong with the firework displays but, you know, the novelty wore off, in those days.

Well, I was going to say, there’s more things...they’re getting more to do...

There’s more to do.

...you know, I mean, that was the...I mean, that was the point, wasn’t it, that when you were first doing these things, there was not much else around.

No, they were new experiences, you know.

Yeah. I mean, yeah...and there were other things that happened, weren’t there? Things like...I was just wondering whether you

were involved in any of those. Was it like cycling and other kind of things?

No.

Grand Prix cars?

No.

You weren't..?

No, no. It had to be entertainment really, you know. I mean, you had people like [Norman Jennings? 01:11:22] which was a bit more sport interested.

Didn't Norman do stuff to do with the Bowl? Was that before you or after you, or what?

He did, no, he did. We didn't get on very well. He came in as an observer. Brian said, "Norman's going to be working with you this season at the Bowl."

I said, "Fine." – It didn't help that I said that would be like losing two good men. (With all due respect to Norman; he was a nice guy.)

So he said, "Why?"

I said, "Because I think that's what he will be doing: observing."

But he did and for the right reason because he then took over the last remaining event at the Bowl the following year, so he'd had enough experience to see what was what. And that was, again, just at the time when the council were taking over so I think Norman helped that transition. But yeah, I just couldn't relate because he wasn't 'show business', do you know what I mean? So it was...

Now, your dad kind of carried on...I mean, he was...you know, he carried on as the ringmaster, you know, till he was a lot older.

Yeah.

Did you feel, you know, you were saying about, "Oh, I was a bit older now," did you feel this was very much a young man's game then, you know, the kind of stuff you were doing?

No, I saw the opportunity, I think, that I could still do what I had been brought up to do, with maybe in the back of my thought, being a circus boss. Well, I knew I wasn't going to be that because I wasn't interested in circus anymore. I knew it was a dying game at that time, certainly as far as *our* family were concerned. So here was an opportunity to stage my own show, you know, which I did at twenty and I got a taste for them, thought, 'No, I can do this; I

can communicate with people; I can get things done; I can do deals.' And then to be given money to play with by the Corporation, I think I was extending a bit of circus. And, as I said, you know, it's the term, 'shit and sawdust', you know, that's a term for circus. I think I provided a lot of that to the Corporation for some of their posher events and I think it helped, so I got a kick out of it, you know. That was the...yes, it sort of...it was really what I wanted to do and I had a wonderful opportunity, you know, with a wonderful bunch of people to work with, you know.

But at, was it, sort of twenty years old? And when do you...do you think that was based on, like, just observing your dad in action then? Where did it come from?

Yeah, yeah. No, no, it was, yeah, you know what I mean, I was brought up to kind of...and no, I wasn't really aware of the age, I was just full of myself, a lot of confidence and I was persuasive but again with lots of people also interested. So: "Do you want to do a show? What sort of show?"

"Well, with this and a..."

"Yeah, well we can supply this and we can do that."

So in the early days, you know, you didn't have to pay people commissions, they wanted to be a part of it. And because it was a local thing, you had so much help: farmers turning up with tractors, pulling people out of the mud; you know, the wives coming and doing teas and what have you. Great fun; just a very creative time, you know, it was... Yeah, I think everybody enjoyed it and the same with the Corporation, they loved...so many – I won't mention how many – so many Corporation staff loved coming at weekends and dressing as clowns and doing a comedy car act and moonlighting. They just loved being part of the...bought the showbiz bug, kind of, all be it, you know, the outdoor one, you know.

Oh, so you had them in your sort of other shows did you, yeah? I mean, the trust...you said about Rosemary being your...

Yeah, bless her.

How you can...I mean, that takes guts that does, to have you standing at the other side...I know that, you know, that you can do that...

01:15:00

It takes guts to throw them too...[laughs]. [Whispering] "I will not hit her; I will not hit her." It's just as bad...

Have you ever had accidents?

No, no, I haven't. No, I think my dad put one in – a Bowie knife – in my leg when I was about fourteen I think and I think that was a good lesson, so I, no, never had an accident, no.

So how do you...you know, it's interesting, you've been around Milton Keynes for the fifty years, haven't you? You've been around, you know, round about fifty-one?

Yeah.

What do you think of it?

Now? It's not what I expected it to be. I don't think, from the meetings and conversations after work – very often we'd go to the...whole gangs of us would go to the pub in Wavendon or we'd go to Woburn to the wine bar, or whatever. We'd all meet up there; that was a regular thing. And there'd be talk and ideas and particularly because my work was social development and social recreation and what have you, you know, this is the people that I was getting to talk with and stuff. And I think then maybe they had high ideals but I just think it's too big. I'm pretty sure I'm right in saying that when Fred knew he'd got this ready to go, he committed the outer roads and things first to make sure: 'I'm committing this designated area. You're not going to shrink it on me when the budget starts to go.' I'm pretty sure he did that 'cause I think there's still one or two roads that go nowhere. So that was a neat move. I had a lot of admiration for Fred; he was a very good businessman. So no, for me, now, it's sort of...it's sprawling. In the early days you could see, yes, this is a different area and that's good for this and this is good for that, you know. And the redways: oh, what a nice idea. But now, you know, really the redways aren't really what they're cut out – or were cut out – to be. I mean, you know, they're not the place you really want to go cycling around and all these cycle routes and that, I mean, it's... So yeah, I just think, I don't know, it's just not what I expected. I expected much more of a social thing, much more...so many more events going on, so many more carnivals, so many more self-build events instead of, you know, the occasional international festival where everybody is international, you know. I just thought the people would come together a bit more, you know.

But is it... 'cause I've been here almost as long...you know, I've been here since '71 and I've had that same kind of feeling in some sense. You know, I live in Wolverton but we do...I mean, actually, within our...within Wolverton there's a lot going on and is it the fact that, in those days, I mean, it's like, you know, when you went up the city centre in those early days, you'd almost inevitably bump into someone you knew because there weren't that many

people around but you go up there today, you don't know a soul and I think, is it that that...you know, you were...

It's possible, yeah.

You know, if there was something happening in those days, you would know about it.

Yes, yes, it was fun...

Because you were part...

Yeah, it was fun while it was growing and you're contributing to help that grow and creating...you know, let the people come and see this now, this is new...but now that it's grown...*[laughs]*...I don't, you know, I don't know... – and, more important for people like me, with my kind of ego – and nobody knows me, you know...*[laughs]*.

There was a festival at Linford and the juggling and the, you know, circus skills. I was sort of looking and the guy sort of thinks...I'm thinking, 'He probably recognises me,' so I said, "Hello," I said, "I like what you're doing. I'm Tod Cody."

"Tod Cody? Oh. Guys, this is Harry Cody's dad," you know, it was my son who was the one... I thought, 'Right,' you know. And, you know, it's very funny sometimes. But, yeah, I mean, we...and again, the local papers have nothing to do so they're always going to be covering events so, you know, there was always stuff in the paper.

Looking back, what are you proudest of? What, you know, in terms of that contribution that you've made to...

To the Corporation? I think the first Bowl events and establishing the county fair, keeping it of the people, by the people, for the people. I think we had about three good events when I thought this is really, you know, what I'm proud of. The Corporation have got to be pleased with this and the people have got to be pleased with that, you know. So those are probably the things but then...I don't know, no, I've been proud...occasionally I'd do a show for the Corp...like some of the circus-type things and I'd be proud of the people that I had to work with briefly, you know.

01:20:16

I mean, we mentioned, I think, earlier, the circus we did at Bletchley Leisure Centre for underprivileged kids but we also did a...we had a Christmas party – again, Fred's instructions, 'Going to have a Christmas party,' – you know, I said, "Gerry Cottle's Circus will be in town during that period. I can get him to stay on a week, we can put in circus acts and we'll have a circus Christmas party only for MKDC and we'll put our own acts in

again, like we did for Bletchley.” David Crewe was up for it this time. I said, “Right Dave, these are the skills that, you know, we can teach you.” Of course then David was, you know, again – he reminded me of Noel Edmonds, I don’t know why; similar personality – so he said, “Put me down for stilt walking.” I said, “David, this isn’t, you know, standing on things...” And he said, “They’re strapped to your legs I understand.” I said, “Yes.” He said, “Put me down for that please.” I said, “It’s going to take you a week, David, and, you know, you’re going to have to listen to me for a change.” [Laughs] Well, he did it, I mean, he really did, you know and it was about seven or eight foot high. He walked...and people kept saying, “That can’t be David Crewe.”

Then, I forget, it wouldn’t be Lee Shostak, but then somebody...we did a double...same costumes but blindfold knife thrower switch on the board, so they thought it was whoever it was – I forgot who it was; Lee Shostak or somebody like that – and they were convinced that he’d thrown knives. Again, I think, round [Jean Hawes? 01:21:47] or somebody, you know. “What! The danger.” So lots of people...Don Ritson came back and did something and what have you. Fred saying again, “But I, you know, whatever you do, I’d like a few surprises.” So, on this predominantly male planning committee: “So yeah, so it’s a Christmas party with drinks and what about strippers?” I said, “Well, I don’t like to but if you...if you, you know you can have a...female strippers or something.” He said, “Well, can’t they do like circus things and take their clothes off?” I said, “They can,” I said, “but really, you know, you need a male stripper to balance it. We’ve got to...” You know, I’m trying to, you know.

So a male stripper was include...a female stripper was included, I don’t think we even got to the male afterwards. And I think she was fresh from the Reeperbahn, you know. So I said, “It has to be tasteful. You understand English?” Anyway, her understanding of tasteful, well... We couldn’t get her off. She’s in the ring and she’s got three, I think (I forget) but they were like officers of the Corporation laid down on...training them with whips and so forth. To the point that I had to get Mick Hancock – another good friend, along with David – to get a blanket and throw it over her and drag her out. We couldn’t stop her; she was determined to do the full act. That was on the Friday night. In News of the World on Sunday morning: ‘Sex Orgy in the Circus...’ something like ‘Roman Orgy in the Circus...in the Sex Circus of Milton Keynes Development’. Direct call – I was in Bournemouth doing another show again – direct call to Bournemouth – they’d tracked me down. Fred: “Tod, just make

sure you speak to nobody. David Crewe is dealing with this. You do not answer the phone; you say nothing. And we'll talk...when are you back from Bournemouth?"

"Look, you said a surprise. This wasn't my idea, you know, it's all minuted." [Laughs]

So yeah, it was so much fun.

And then, of course, kidnapping Fred, you know and he had another surprise, you know, "There's a party coming up, you're invited."

"We understand; we'll do that. What's the theme?"

I said, "We've no idea," I said, "but you did say you always like surprises. So it was St. Valentine's Day Massacre we chose as a theme. I had stunt guys in there ready to do stunt fights; machine guns; we rented vintage cars; we had four 'heavy' actors, two of them were stunt guys, given the address, with somebody with them and we kidnapped Fred from his house, big spotlight on the thing, megaphone: "Come out Roche, we know you're in there," or something. And of course the family knew, they knew that he was going to be collect... He said, "What!" – and shining on the window.

They said, "No, you really need to go. Just put a coat on because there's a..." [Laughs]

That was at Woughton House, that we'd commandeered...we had to buy it, again, because...to use it and it had been left but Karen Higgins had to do a...sign a thing so we had to purchase it to do the event and then we had to sell it back. It was whatever it is, you know like, yeah...so we had to, yeah, we had to get...Karen remembers that so well, that we literally had to buy the house for like three nights only and then sell it back.

01:25:00

But that was the spirit, wasn't it?

Yes, everybody wanted more of that, you know, what's going to happen next? What are we going to do? It's got to be fun, you know. And again, when we'd book, I'd book acts and even before [unclear 01:25:16] we'd have something like John Chilton's Feetwarmer or Melly or whatever come and if we were doing any of them at...have them at Stantonbury, that became more my thing, booked them at Stantonbury, booked them at Bletchley, the Jennie Lee Theatre, just get it all sorted. But then do a side deal – not for me but for the Corporation – "When you...you know, when you come in, before your rehearsal, can you entertain in the canteen for lunchtime?" So you'd go in Wavendon Tower for lunch and you'd have a string quartet or you'd have a comedian or John Melly or, you know, Melly's Feetwarmer, you know and – I've forgotten...George Melly – so George Melly's playing in the canteen, just for half an hour; it's part of the deal, a little bit of extra money. So the Corporation were used to being entertained and fun and, again, I didn't have much to do with the social club

but, you know, the events that they used to organise there at the club were great.

'Cause it was essentially a young team, wasn't it, you know?

Absolutely.

I mean, you were incredibly young but, you know, there were people doing big deals who were aged thirty.

Yeah, absolutely.

You know and I mean, Stuart Mossdrop, asked by Derek Walker to come to Milton Keynes, he'd never heard of it, and then he said, "So, what do you want me to do?"

He said, "Well, I'd like you to design...take charge of designing the city centre – thirty-two. I mean, it...and that was...I mean, that was...[unclear 01:26:40]

Yeah, I think it, you know, rubbed off on everybody, you know, everybody was going...and it was very social, you know, I think any other...well, can you compare it to Milton Keynes Council, bless them, with their secretaries, you know: "Good morning Mr. Somebody. Yes Miss... Shall I take..?" You know, everyone was on first name terms, you'd see sometimes a desk and thing go outside on the grass where they said, "Oh, it's a lovely day, we wanted to..." you know...[laughs]...plugging electrics in to...wonderful. Great time; great time. And it was...it shared it; it did spread, you know, there wasn't...we didn't have a particular department that was just, "Oh, you know what they're like," you know, that sort...no, great.

Just one final thing. You mentioned your son. Does he live in Milton Keynes?

No. Well, he has been living here but no, he's not really interested in the business. Trained him with circus skills to try and keep the tradition going for the sake of the family. He's converted that into flair bar work, so he does the cocktail thing, so it is still kind of the business but...so he's currently working on Crete but he does fly around. He's been to the Davos thing doing his flair stuff, so he's sort of sought after. So it is kind of still, you know, show business.

Show business but not the shit and sawdust.

Not as we know it, not the sawdust, no, no, no.

Tod, anything else?

Not that I can...not that I can remember, bring to mind, you know, but...no, I mean, other than gossip stories, which we really don't want to have to get into 'cause it probably was just gossip.
[Laughs]

01:28:24

Lovely, thank you so much for that.

END OF INTERVIEW