

Name: David Crewe
Address: New Zealand
Date of Birth: 16/12/1942
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Interviewed by: Roger Kitchen
Duration: 00:41:59

(00:00:04) *Today, well, where are we at? Today, over here in England is Tuesday, March, er April 6th, 2021 and over there it's Wednesday the 7th 2021.*

Yes.

Could we start –

Correct.

Start with your name and when you were born?

Yes, my name is David Crewe, and I was born on the 16th of December 1942.

Okay. What was your job at the Development Corporation before Homeworld was announced?

Yes, my, my job at the Development Corporation was originally as Information Director, responsible for basically, public relations and dissemination of information both to community and to the world at large about, about Milton Keynes. And subsequently, I became Property Management and Information Director to take over the running of, basically, the Corporation's built assets, including housing [unclear-connection failure].

(00:01:16) *Ah, sorry, we've just – things have frozen for a second. Sorry, you were saying, you were, you were responsible for...?*

All the Corporation's built assets and, and physical assets. The management of all that.

So –

Basically, that was because...the Board realised after a while that they were building so much but no one was actually specifically as a director looking after it. It was rather spread over different departments. So, that was all brought together to one department. But I still maintained the responsibility for the information side of the Corporation's work.

So were you overall in charge of the Private Housing Unit as well then?

No, I wasn't. That was not in my area. The Private Housing Unit, as I recall, was within the Commerce Department. But I worked very closely with – and I can't remember his surname –

Brian, Brian Brookman and Bob Clark(e)?

Brian Brookman, yes, Brian Brookman was a supporter for Homeworld.

Whose idea was Homeworld?

Mine. It was my idea for Homeworld. You, you have to bear in mind that at the time we were faced with a significant change of government in terms of their view of life. Margaret Thatcher was coming in with a very strong view about the importance of the private sector and less government. And we had been as a, as a group of directors, been considering closely where we would go in terms of demonstrating how Milton Keynes could properly support commercial and private sector development. It was in that context that we were considering how to increase the activity of private sector housebuilders. And as I say, within that context, I came up with this idea of a – based on a historic situation which I had found in Letchworth Garden City. They had, a long time ago, did very much the same thing, built a demonstration site of what at those times were cottages to show the different range of houses that could be built. And I can't remember exactly the date, I should have done the research on that but –

Well, David Lock claims – in an earlier interview that Lee and I did a few years ago, David Lock claims that he gave you the idea because – I think it was kind of when he was at TCPA. It was in 1905, wasn't it? The Cheap Cottages Exhibition or something. And he said –

That's the one.

And then he said 'But David took and run with it and he deserved all the credit for this'. [Laughter]

Well, I suppose, yes, actually, now I come to think of it, I do recall a conversation with David Lock about it. But the fact is that turning, you know, ideas are cheap. [Laughter] Turning them into something that actually happens is a hard job. And it was, it was an extraordinary situation in terms of the level of support that I got from both the Board and EMC and individual officers to make this happen. Particularly, I think in the case of Nigel Lane, who was Executive Director for Northern Milton Keynes at the time, was a very strong supporter.

(00:05:03) Yes, I think also, the genesis of this in my view, when I think about it, was the away-day that EMC had in ... Broadway? ... before the Thatcher government came into power, where we , Lee and I, were asked by Fred to do a paper which we did, called, 'Here comes Maggie!' Where was [unclear-distortion].

(00:05:35) *Sorry, sorry David, just when, sorry, the connection's frozen a bit. Could you just say that bit again. Yeah, about the paper. The genesis of the –*

Yes, the genesis of that paper [unclear-distortion] that Lee and I presented to [unclear-distortion] in Broadway, on the eve of the Thatcher government, where we were considering, we were asked to consider what issues the Corporation would be faced with if Margaret Thatcher was elected – with these sort of political views. As I say, it was called 'Here Comes Maggie!'. And in that we definitely saw that we needed to shift away from the major provision of social housing into encouraging private sector housebuilders to basically, do the work for us.

And, in a way, the other thing was, the other thing that David mentioned about the Letchworth thing was that it was doing two things: it was, on the one hand, it was the housing, but on the other hand it was publicising Letchworth as a potential destination. You know, your, your job fusing, you know, the, the property and the, the publicity, did you see that as one of the other side-effects of it, besides attracting the private housebuilder, the bit about publicising Milton Keynes?

Yes, very much so. The, the outcome of [unclear-distortion] was that we brought I think, I forget exactly the number, 140, 120,000 people through the show. And yes, I mean, I mean, that was my job really, was to find different ways to put Milton Keynes on the map. And that, so Homeworld was partly that as well. And it was very successful from that point of view. We, EMC supported it, they did a house. The housebuilders themselves promoted it as well, so it was, it was, it was really effective from the point of view of [unclear-distortion].

And, it's interesting. I'm hearing your voice all right, but your image is, is fairly frozen. One of the things that I want to do with

this is, in fact, on Friday, I'm taking Jon Muncaster, Giles Charrington and Tim Skelton – they're kind of going back to Homeworld and looking at it 40 years on as it were and, and going round and telling stories and commenting. But I'm just thinking, I don't want my voice, or a voice-over in this at all. How would you sum up Homeworld in a few words – what Homeworld was all about in a few words?

How I would sum up what Homeworld was about in a few words, was a two-fold ambition: one, to encourage private housebuilders to come to Milton Keynes to build houses and secondly, to put Milton Keynes on the map as a place that's an attractive place to move to and live.

And when you had that idea, when, you know, when you took up that idea and started to run with it, how easy was it to, if you like, to get the, the money and everything else to make it happen, because it must have been quite a costly exercise?

It wasn't, it wasn't that hard. The hard thing was to get the whole idea through EMC and the Board. I mean, there was a, there was a, there was a wave of support for the general idea, but the practical side of it, to actually set land aside, to provide the infrastructure, the road, you know, the usual underground infrastructure as well, was all quite a significant issue. But in the end, because these were houses that the intention was to sell, and put on the market, the view that was taken by EMC that it should pay for itself in terms of the, the major physical costs. The exhibition costs were part of my overall promotional budget, promoting Milton Keynes.

(00:10:23)

And that was the way, that was, that was the way in which we managed it financially, by saying, 'We're just doing a housing development at the end and these houses will sell', which they did, mostly.

And in terms of getting the team together, who, you know, how did you do that? How did you kind of recruit the key people for it?

[Pause]

I'm, I'm having a, I'm having a problem trying to remember how we got the team together. I think it was typically Milton Keynes Development Corporation: here is a project, you have a project leader, and the project leader uses the skills of the people in different departments to come together and make it happen. So, we had a, we had a projects team from various departments, from Commerce, Private House Building, from Infrastructure, from the North Milton Keynes Group. So it was a typical Corporation project [unclear-distortion] and it worked.

And in terms of, you, you had this big launch where you say that's where, where your wife saw you and met you. What, what was done prior to the big launch of the project? What would, was, was there, I mean, the site was chosen, was, was there much done beyond that, actually choosing the site?

The choice of the site was basically because that was what you might call today 'shovel ready'. It was, it was in a good location. It was – there was nothing complicated about the site itself. It was in, it was a good location in terms of thinking about visitors arriving, access from and, and the provision of parking arrangements.

So no, the main thing was to begin to talk to the private sector house builders who were already building in Milton Keynes, but also those who were not necessarily yet building but might be interested. So, there was a lot of pre-talk before the major launch that took place at Wavendon Tower. Yes, where I won't pass on my wife's view of the event [Laughter], but, if you wanted, if you wanted a different sidelight to it she'd be quite willing to tell you her experience sitting in the audience.

But you attracted 150 people to that launch.

Yes.

Was that right?

Yes, it was packed. It was packed. Because I think there was a high degree of curiosity about what the Corporation intended. That was one of the reasons. And also because, bearing in mind at the time there had been quite a big drop off in house building at the time. And I think builders were looking for where they could get reasonable access to land. So, I think there was a combination of factors then.

But it went further. I mean, you know, I've interviewed Roger Walker and it was the New Zealand High Commission who told him about this, this thing that was going. How, I mean in terms of your marketing, how far out did you go? Did you, was it launched internationally?

No – we did launch it internationally as well because we were hoping that we would get some overseas builders bringing different things and of course, we were successful in that. We had some – I can't remember exactly how many now, but there were at least two or three overseas builders who came to demonstrate their style of energy conscious building using different materials. So, yes, we, we marketed it very hard internationally as well as nationally.

And, yes, I think, I think from all, well, all the way round I think, Homeworld was very successful in its endeavours.

(00:15:00)

How did the Money Programme get involved?

I don't, I actually, actually don't remember. I'm sorry. I can't help you on that. There were lots of surprises, there were a lot of surprises to me about, about Homeworld and what happened there. A lot of surprises. I think it was somehow we were tapping into a sort of bit of a zeitgeist at the time in terms of people thinking about the future of housing and energy and construction methods. And so, I think there was, yes, the word was out about it and that's why I think we had so many people wanting to build there and so many different approaches to housebuilding as well, which I think was the great success.

And the Sunday Times, the Sunday Times, how did they get involved?

Well, the Sunday Times got involved because we were advertising quite heavily at the time with the Sunday Times. I won't – well, I'll tell you the story. I was obviously responsible for the advertising budget for the Corporation as well, working with the advertising agency. And we started a big advertising campaign particularly aimed at attracting business to investment into Milton Keynes. And it started with a, a Sunday Times colour supplement double-page spread of advertising one Sunday morning.

Fred – I was, I was just getting up on Sunday morning and Fred rang me and said, 'David! What, what have you done?' I said, 'What do you mean, what have I done?' He said, 'I've just had Jock on the phone to me saying you've got two double page, full colour advertisements in the Sunday Times' I said, 'Yes?' He said, 'Well, we didn't know anything about it!' I said, 'Oh sorry!' I said, 'But I'm just getting on with my job!' [Laughter]

Anyway, I was at a, I was asked to go to a meeting with Fred and Jock on the Monday [Laughter]. And they said, 'David, you know, they're great ads but we didn't know anything about it'. I said, 'Well, I'm sorry, but I'm, I'm not going to take creative advertising ideas to EMC because people will have too many different views about it. So, you either let me get on with this job the way I consider it best in the interests of Milton Keynes, or, you know, if you want it to go to committee, then it'll never work'. So they said, 'All right then'. [Laughter]

Anyway, so we had a relationship and we then carried on with these ads in the Sunday Times for over a month. They were part of also changing the image of Milton Keynes. They were quite a successful series of ads. And I think it was out of that

that we had established a relationship with the Sunday Times, in terms of their editorial interest in what we were doing as well.

Aha! How brilliant. Just as – this is nothing to do with this particular topic, but I understand that later on – and this was I think again, was it, when the Ministry, when the Tories were in, that weren't Milton – when, weren't you were rapped across the knuckles for the amount you were spending on advertising?

Er.

By the Ministry, as it were, the later –

By the Department? Yes it was a bit. But it was only a, it was only a comment, it wasn't a serious, wasn't a serious rap across the knuckles from that point of view. I mean, we argued that in the context of the overall amount of money we were spending, that it was an important part of actually making Milton Keynes [unclear-distortion]. And we were able to demonstrate that interest in businesses coming, interest in coming to Milton Keynes. [Unclear-distortion] national companies, you know, [unclear-distortion coming. So, I think we were – our argument in, in defence was very strong.

Okay. Yeah, you're frozen again – image. I can hear the sound. Ah, it's all right now. It was originally billed as Homeworld '80. Why, why wasn't it Homeworld '80? Why was it Homeworld '81 in the end? What, what were the delays?

I don't recall any specific reason. In the end it was being realistic about our abilities to get to where we wanted to be and to the level that we wanted to achieve. I don't think there was any particular problem with the date, it was just recognition of the scale of the, what we were attempting at the time.

(00:20:01)

Yeah, Okay. How was the project managed on a day-to-day basis? I mean, you, you were a man with a lot of other responsibilities, how did you, you know, do the overall management of the project? Was it a weekly meeting, or ...?

It was a weekly meeting, particularly with Brian Brookman, who was really heading up the, the level of contact with the, with the help of others. And I can't remember who else. But certainly from, there'd been representatives from Northern Milton Keynes, from Nigel's department. But I can't be, [unclear-distortion] my memory is not that good on the, the detail, but –

Yeah. And the opening ceremony. Any memories of the opening ceremony at all?

I think the only thing I really remember about that was that Jock Campbell hated John Stanley.

Sorry, if you could say 'The only thing I can remember about the opening ceremony'. Yeah, sorry.

Yes, what I, what I particularly remember about the opening ceremony was that Jock Campbell, the Chairman, hated John Stanley; couldn't get on with him at all. So it was a very frosty – I mean, he did his best, but it was a very frosty relationship. And John Stanley was not a very friendly character in terms of the tour we did in the opening. He was all right, but he was obviously looking for a, a criticism if he could find it. And I think was probably a bit disappointed he couldn't find anything to, to criticise. [Laughter]

Because the relationship between Jock Campbell and John Stanley got off very badly when the Minister, after he was appointed, first came to Milton Keynes for a meeting with the Chairman. And his car pulled up outside the, outside Wavendon Tower and he sat reading papers in full view of Jock Campbell waiting in the office to meet him. He sat, purposely it felt, being late while he sat and read papers. So Jock, who, as you know, was a stickler for time was really, really annoyed. And that was, that meant that they never got off, they always – sorry, they got off on a very bad start.

Was that the meeting where he came and told Jock that there would be no more rental housing built?

Yes.

As well.

[Laughter]

That was the meeting.

[Laughter]

What, what are your, what are your memories of the public reaction to it? When you were going round and seeing what the public, how, what was, what, what impression you were getting from the public?

[Pause]

The main impression I was left with was that the people were fascinated by seeing different approaches to aspects of housing. It wasn't all in one house. But the, but I think it, it revealed the fact there were opportunities for moving into properties that were, were energy efficient; were built in, with different

materials; were – offered different ways of living. And I think that was the main thing. So it was significantly different to, for example, the Ideal Home Exhibition, where you went along and found different ways of peeling potatoes, for example. But this was, this was actually going into houses; understanding different ways in which they were put together; finding out about different ways of heating or insulating your house. So that was really the, the difference.

But I think in, on top of that, people who'd never been to Milton Keynes before, who thought it was a joke – just based on the concrete cows – were finding that Milton Keynes was a really interesting place, despite the unusual road layout; were actually finding it was a very different sort of place to live in.

Okay, you, you're slightly freezing on all this. Doesn't matter. Your best memory of the Homeworld project?

I think my best memory of the Homeworld Project was actually that launch at Wavendon Tower and the, and the subsequent effect of it. It was, it was actually an extraordinary meeting to have all those housebuilders in one room, looking at doing something quite different. And that's my best memory. And the fact that I think that it was my first, my first experience of my, my wife. [Laughter]

(00:25:20)

Yeah, and were there, why were the housebuilders there? Because, I mean, you went on to, to work for the UK Housing Forum. I mean, you must have realised that housebuilders are – and they still are – very, very conservative. Why were they in the room? Was it because of what, potentially, you might be able to offer them in terms of future work?

Yes, I think that was the case. As I said, I think – why they were there? Because what we were offering in Milton Keynes was a completely different set of opportunities from fighting their way through the NIMBY-ism in the south-east. You know, we had land. We had service land. We had a plan. We were not, we were a planning authority not subject to democratic processes of local authorities. We had a, we were a different, we were a different body altogether. And in, I think in the context of that it was a very attractive potential from a point of view of housebuilders.

Yes, they are very conservative, there is no question about that. But, but at the time, this was an opportunity that Milton Keynes offered that [unclear-distortion] suddenly realised was, was a big opportunity. And in particular, if we were moving away, as we were saying we were, from simply the provision of social housing as the major activity in Milton Keynes, this also begins

to look, began to present a very different picture to a housebuilder.

Do you have a worst memory of Homeworld, the Homeworld project?

Do I have a worst memory of Homeworld? No, actually, I don't, I'm afraid. Oddly enough, all my memories of Milton Keynes are very strong and very positive of my work in Milton Keynes. It was, it was an, an extraordinary project to be involved in as an individual. So, no, I think I don't have a worst memory. I mean, there were difficult times, but not that I think – from a point of view as a Director, I had one or two issues to confront at times but nothing that was, nothing unpleasant.

Okay. Any, any stories, funny or sad about the Homeworld project?

[Pause]

Actually no, Roger, I'm sorry.

Don't worry.

It's all other, it's all rather in the dim past as far as I'm concerned. You know, we used to, I mean it's, how many years is it – 40 years ago?

Yeah, well it is. Next, next month it's 40 years ago. What, how successful do you think Homeworld was and, you know, in, in the different areas, you know, how, as a project how successful do you think it was? I'll ask you that question on its own first and then we'll look at various areas, but –

I think Homeworld was successful in both it's ambitions, which was to put down on the ground a range of different approaches to house construction and the contents of houses in terms of insulation and energy. I think it was successful in attracting a very wide range of people to Milton Keynes. I think it was successful in interesting some important groupings of people to Milton Keynes in terms of both media interest, international interest and designers – not just housebuilders but designers as well. So, in many ways it was a significant project in terms of the way Milton Keynes was developing.

(00:30:01)

How important, I mean, when you look back on it, was it, I mean, you know at this point we still had a socialist peer as the Chairman, at this point, of the Corporation. It was, in a way, a kind of almost like socialist utopia up to 1979 in terms of what it was trying to do. How important was Homeworld in terms of

convincing a Conservative government about what Milton Keynes was now, Development Corporation was now all about?

Homeworld's importance politically I think can't really be understated. It was at a crucial time when there was a significant change of governments, from Labour government to Margaret Thatcher-led government with very strong political views in terms of the market and private sector and less government. Homeworld demonstrated politically that the Corporation was agile, was able to take a view and shift. Because yes, there's no question that up until the mid-70s Milton Keynes was able to be viewed as a place which was experimenting with social housing and was providing, basically, mainly social housing as a public act. Private sector housebuilding was negligible at the time. So Homeworld was a marker that the Corporation was able to change with the political times. And as you know, as you may recall, subsequently Margaret Thatcher became quite a fan. She came to Milton Keynes on two or three occasions and spoke very highly of it. So, yes, I think it was important, it was – one can't underestimate the political importance of Homeworld, I believe.

And what about the other aspect of, in terms of, you know, as you say, Milton Keynes, it was like: Noel Edmunds making fun of it; it was the concrete cows jokes and so on. Did it, do you think that Homeworld had any effect on people's perception of Milton Keynes?

Did it have any effect on people's perception? I, I can't say specifically. I think a lot of the things that we were doing at the time: in terms of our advertising; in terms of the, in terms of things like Homeworld; in terms of the opening up to the public of the city centre development – all these things in my view were ways in which we were building the image of Milton Keynes as a, in terms of its different aspects. So, I don't think it was the one thing that might have changed it, but I think overall ... I'm afraid my recollection of dates is rather poor. When did the shopping centre open, Roger?

1979. The shopping centre opened in '79.

Yeah, yeah, exactly. So, the, the shopping centre itself started bringing people from near and far into Milton Keynes as well. So, I think all these things were beginning to change the image of the, of the, of the city.

And how important was it in relation to future projects, like Energy World and Future World and so on?

I think it was. I think it was important because it demonstrated that the Corporation was able to put together that sort of

exhibition. It had the wherewithal to do it. It had the foresight, I think, to do it. And I think foresight was important and I think the Corporation was about foresight. And these things were able to show that the Corporation was moving along all the time. It wasn't stuck, if you like in that new-towns-social-housing position. So, I think all those things were important. But did Homeworld show that it was possible to put that sort of thing together?

(00:35:01)

The other thing that people have commented on is, in a way – these, these people who worked for the Corporation, as it were, in the Private Housing Unit and so on – is the disappointment that this was about homes for the future. This was, you know, and, and things like the, you know, the energy saving and all this kind of thing, and the timber-frame and everything else, that it was, that –

[Phone rings]

I do apologise. Hopefully my wife, Jill, will answer it downstairs.

(00:35:38)

[Recording paused]

Oh yeah. Oh right. The, the, it didn't, that the builders didn't, if you like, take up the kind of innovation that was, was demonstrated at Homeworld. John, I interviewed John Daggart and he said it took 20 years for building regulations to insist on things that, you know, Homeworld had been doing in 1981. And it wasn't until, you know, the next century that things changed. You know, was that, was that a disappointment, or was that, you know? You know, were you hoping to do anything about the quality of the housing that would come to Milton Keynes?

The, I think, you have to – was I hoping to do anything about the quality of housing in Milton Keynes? Well, to be candid with you, Roger, that wasn't the hat I was wearing. To my view, Homeworld was specifically about encouraging more private sector housebuilders to come to Milton Keynes; demonstrate politically what we could do as a corporation in terms of the political shift; and attract more people to come and see Milton Keynes. So, I think those were, those aspirations were, would have been with other members of the Corporation, perfectly reasonably, but it wasn't the hat that I was wearing.

Okay, good. Of all the things, looking back over 40 years, what are you proudest of about Homeworld?

The fact that it happened, that's what I am proud of. The fact that we actually made it happen from a, from a, from an idea to turn it into reality is the thing that I am proudest about. And everyone who worked on it and made it happen.

Great. Anything else that you'd like to say? Anything which I haven't sort of covered in my questions at all?

Not really. I think – not really. I, as I say, I, some – quite a lot of what happened and how it happened, probably other people can remember better than I can. So, yeah, No, I can't think I can add anything to it really, Roger.

The one thing that I forgot to say, was that following that paper and that discussion, 'Here Comes Maggie!' with EMC, Lee and I were sent to America. We were sent to America to look at the private sector new towns that were being built by the private sector in America. So, we were there for I think about three weeks and we went from the East Coast to the West Coast. And we looked at places like Columbia on the East Coast, outside Boston. Don't ask me to remember any of the others. But that was, that was a fact-finding mission to see how the private sector actually went about building new communities with all the associated facilities, not just houses. But that was, that was interesting. And we came back with, and we did a report on that. You'll have to ask Lee whether he can remember what the report was and where we put it, but it was –

Oh no He'll have a copy of it. Don't – believe me. One of the things was, he hired, when he, when he retired he hired someone to sort his papers out. He'll have it. He'll have that somewhere. That will be there, don't worry. That will, that will be there. But what, what was the lessons that you learned from that that actually impacted on the way the Corporation worked?

Well, I think fundamentally, we came back and said, 'Hey Guys, we can do this. We, we can do this.' And it's, in America the private sector big developers ... use different housebuilders to build houses in their new communities; they put up the facilities; they build the shopping centres. 'We can do this! We can be private sector; look, we can look private sector and do what they do in America and achieve exactly this effect.' That was, I think, the lesson.

(00:40:08)

My problem with this, Roger, is that I can't remember the order of events –

Don't worry.

Everywhere we went. Lee, Lee, Lee will remember. I'm probably a bit thin on detail because it was, you know, I was sitting on top of quite a complicated project and I'd, and a lot of people were doing a lot of things that I wasn't in detail aware of. But, you know, that was, that's it.

The other thing I think also, was that – I can't remember his name – the, an architect who was in the Central Milton Keynes team. Anyway, he and I were sent to America as well to look at shopping centres before the opening of the shopping centre in Milton Keynes.

Yeah.

Whoever, whoever it was, we were, we went, we were sent, we were sent, we were sent to America to look at shopping buildings. And particularly the, the animation, particularly from my point of view, you know, to bring them to life. And what, what we did, the things we did in Middleton Hall, all those things were important lessons that I learnt from what they did in America.

So anyway, that was just, that's just another, that's another thing.

Okay, well –

I can't –

Thank you so much for this David. What, what I'll do, is I'll, I'll have a word with Lee and I, if, if, if you're up for this I, I will send you a list of questions –

Sure.

Which you can then do as though you are talking to me or 'A N Other' interviewer.

(00:41:59)

[Interview ends]