

Name: Giles Charrington
Date of Birth: 1944
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Interviewed by: Mel Jeavons and Roger Kitchen
Duration: 00:29:40

00:00:00 *Today's date is 31st March 2021. My name is Mel Jeavons, and I am interviewing for the Homeworld Project. Can you give me your name and where you were born please?*

Giles Charrington and I was born in 1944.

So, what was your job at the MKDC before Homeworld?

Before Homeworld came along I was the senior surveyor in the Private Housing Unit which existed to promote private development in Milton Keynes and balance up the situation with the rental and ownership. So, with Homeworld, I became the project manager, yeah.

So, when did you get involved with the Homeworld Project?

I think my initial contact with the Homeworld concept would have been 1979 for an opening two years later.

And so, can you tell me what your role was in the project, what did you do?

Well, I was project manager for Homeworld and that involved first of all, overseeing, if you like, the housing layout, dividing it into building plots where individual houses could be erected. And beyond that, marketing the plots to punters, who might be developers such as Laing or Wimpy and trying to create a rich tapestry of different types of projects. But the main concept initially was to promote private housing in Milton Keynes.

Was it easy to get the builders involved at that stage?

That's a good question. Getting the builders involved is always, I am afraid we don't exist in a very imaginative situation for building. They wanted to build their own boxes more than anything else and we were trying very hard to get them to build

something interesting and of good quality. And history is now telling us that we, at least, partially succeeded in that.

So, could you go on to what the aims of Homeworld were?

So, the first aim would have been to promote private housing, overall to promote Milton Keynes itself so the marketing had to be national and thirdly, through it promote innovation. So, whereas private housing was seen as a safe option homes for people we wanted something a bit more exciting; we wanted also to highlight things like energy conservation, and I think we were very, very before our time in that. So, to promote innovation.

And why would MKDC invest so much into Homeworld?

The pattern of Homeworld, of Milton Keynes up to that point had been dominated by public sector housing. The designated area was designated in 1967, I think, and at that point there was a Labour government anyway, who believed in the public sector. When I came along there was already this, I was just brought in as an employee to promote private housing but the, the Development Corporation was divided into sectors of which there were surveyors who dealt with the land and there were architects who dealt with construction and design control. We started the Private Housing Unit and that would have been in 1978, I guess, perhaps '79, and that was directly to counter the balance to say, "Hallo! We are not all about public sector housing, we are a place for people to come and live, whether they are and live, whether they are, want to have a luxurious big 3,000 sq. ft house, or something modest. They will be welcome in Milton Keynes and will feel at home there.

And why was the site chosen at Bradwell Common?

Yeah it is a good site, isn't it? Bradwell Common is one of the grid squares right in the centre of Milton Keynes, so you can walk within five minutes from the Bradwell Centre site to the shopping centre. And I think that says it all, that we were prepared to put private housing right at the centre of planning and indeed, to encourage people to live near the city centre, instead of having a cold planning situation of housing in one area, retail in another and industrial somewhere else.

So, what preparations were made prior to the public call-out to the housebuilders?

The first thing to do is to get the structure of the actual site right, in terms of access, views, density, landscaping structure; all those details which are which are what goes to make good town planning, which is very often really overlooked. Here we are in a

suburb of Oxford and most new development is a sprawl! Milton Keynes, you know how to navigate in Milton Keynes because first of all, you've got the famous roundabouts but also, within the roundabouts there is structure so that houses feel at home. They bed in properly.

And it was originally billed a 'Homeworld 80'. What was the delay?

Ah, well! You've tickled my memory there! I do kind of vaguely remember some sort of crisis during 1980, when we thought we were going to be having the exhibition then and it took longer. And that came through again in Energy World! We had to get it right in Energy World; we didn't have to delay it. But the experience of Homeworld must have been really helpful.

And how easy was it that you were able to attract the builders to the site? Were there incentives given?

The main incentive for a builder was that if he produced a really good house in Homeworld there was a better chance of him getting a development site somewhere else in the city. It wasn't all done on for that, it was done partly on whether we thought a builder was going to fit well into Milton Keynes generally. And the Private Housing Unit was always developing that theme of trying to make housing more interesting, more important, more acceptable, and more high quality.

And how did you cope with the fact that not all the fifty plots were taken up?

Yes, there were a few empty ones. Well, that was all right in terms of the exhibition itself, because there is always a lot of space needed for retail, conferences, and demonstration of things, little stalls, you know. You could make a huge difference to an exhibition, by really using those spaces. It didn't all have to be housing.

And of course, it meant also that there was still some development to be done after the exhibition was closed and everybody had gone home; there were plots still ready to be developed.

And what oversights of the builders did you have?

That wasn't quite my department. I was more the planning and the entrepreneurial negotiation, but you would have to talk to Keith Revill, who managed the site from a construction point of view and getting the drains in the right place and all those things below the ground.

And can you tell me about some of the issues that there were getting everything finished before the opening ceremony?

Well one challenge was the weather. I can't remember what the whole of April was like in 1981 but I can remember on the 3rd of May, because it was my daughter's third birthday, there was a huge snowstorm which collapsed one of the marquees and that was a lovely panic! That was what happens when you try to put on an exhibition.

Generally, otherwise, yes, the business of getting everything ready in time and you know from experience with landscaping that if you're going to landscape a site for an exhibition, the trees are expected to go into the ground semi-mature and that is very expensive but of course, it does completely transform the site and make it immediately lush with green and the only thing that may be a bit of an unintended outcome from that is that the landscape goes on growing; so if you went to Homeworld ten years after the exhibition could hardly move for overmature landscaping.

(00:10:34)

I think it is like that now still, isn't it!

Yes, I think it is a bit, yes.

What are your memories of the opening ceremony?

Absolutely none! Perhaps I wasn't asked, I don't know! Sorry!

And do you have any memories of, like, the public reaction, or did you get feedback about the public reaction?

Yes, I think that it varied quite a lot that within the Development Corporation there would have been two folds, really. One, lot would have been the architects who thought it was all rather 'whacky!' and then there would have been the builders who thought it was more than they would have normally spent on a house of that size or price! But there was also an appreciation of the innovation that went in. So, some of the, I am not saying that all the houses are interesting but some of them were very interesting and...yeah, that come through in some of the critique that was immediately after the exhibition. Slightly different from Energy World which was much more specific. Homeworld was designed to be a little bit outrageous in some respects, although the 'Roundhouse' in Energy World was even more exciting than the roundhouse, the 'Pyramid', for instance, you know, which you wouldn't go and build a site with lots of pyramid housing on it. So, that was an interesting one.

I mean, do you think in terms of the Homeworld site that more houses were built like that in Milton Keynes with that innovation,

or it didn't seem to be carried through, you know, if you look at forty years ago when that was built?

I think it was carried over into reality in a lot of small projects, you can probably tell me more quickly than I would know about, ...there was the Fieldman and Clegg site somewhere in...not in Bradwell Common but...somewhere near the A5, which demonstrated particularly energy efficient techniques.

So we were ahead of the time and I think that Homeworld gave us the confidence to do Energy World, which was much more focussed on energy.

And what was your proudest moment in relation to Homeworld?

My proudest moment, I have not got one single proud moment, but I have a sense of achievement that we really produced something typical of Milton Keynes with it's innovation and it's intelligent attitude to planning and development.

So, how successful do you think it was?

I think it was very successful. I think it did exactly what it was intended to do, which was to highlight more innovative better designed private housing in Milton Keynes and actually, in the wider world! I think that one large part of its importance was, it sounds rather as if I prefer Energy World, which perhaps I do, but its lead into Energy World which was a much more ambitious project. There was a guy called Steve Fuller who was very keen on the Energy Park generally, (must be one of the conceivers of the whole idea) and he said that Cambridge has a Science Park, Milton Keynes has an Energy Park. And the point of that was again, you had a site for an exhibition with a backdrop of housing developed according to the examples in the main exhibition. I think there was a sort of direct relationship between what had been exhibited and what then was built more widely across central Milton Keynes.

(00:15:00) So, how important was Homeworld? I think very important, and especially as paved the way for Energy Word.

Roger Kitchen: *The Executive Director, who was overall in charge, was David Crewe, why was it, you know, was that just like publicity?*

Marketing, yes.

So, could you explain that because on one hand you have got private housing unit, but you have also got this marketing. Can you, you know, why was it, was that the kind of set up?

That's a very interesting point because yes, David Crewe was Marketing Director or some such title, very important role in the

city which is always promoting itself and I think it is no coincidence that he inherited the task or the responsibility of making that whole exhibition work. Because marketing is what it was all about. Marketing is something a little bit unusual and therefore, needing a bit more innovation in the way you market. And you know, there were things like the Money Programme house, which was going to market us to the City, no less.

So, yeah, I think it was quite correct that David Crewe was the person to lead on all of that and make sure that we were giving proper emphasis to marketing.

Roger Kitchen: *The other thing I wondered about, you know, part of your job was to attract builders, but did you have any that you had to say no to and if so, why?*

Again, yes, at Energy World there was one site which got developed by a Scandinavian, (let's be no more specific than that!) a Scandinavian builder, and it went okay; quite demanding he was but we had a good relationship and then when it came to the next stage when the exhibition was over, he and his wife came to see me in our offices, very fully expecting that he was going to be offered a housing site for twenty-odd houses and we had to disappoint him; because first of all, because what we had didn't match with his desires but more particularly, he wasn't really quite up to the job.

Roger Kitchen: *But you were saying before...Mel was saying about this thing about, you know, forty years on some of the features in those houses are not even in most bog-standard houses. John Duggart was talking twenty years of building regs to catch up with this stuff.*

Yes,

Could you talk a little bit about that, about the British, well you know...That must have been a bit of a disappointment in the long-term, that you were showing what the future could be like.

I think what we hoped, amongst other things, and it wasn't a forlorn hope, it was quite a calculated hope, was that we would innovate and produce an exhibition which showed what you could do if you're an imaginative builder and we hoped that the building industry would pick that up and run with it and we would end up with an overall enhancement of housing standards in the UK. That didn't happen because the builders were not so interested in that aspect, they just wanted to sell houses (sorry to be rude about our building industry).

I think that yes, also of course, we don't always get given the credit so that two years after Homeworld along came Energy

World with the Milton Keynes Energy Cost Index. And that was our own invention, which was an algorithm basically, to persuade, show you how the energy efficiency worked on any particular house which you subject it to.

And that became the National Energy Cost Index with absolutely no immediate sort of 'thanks to Milton Keynes.' But there it is, ... so we did get some benefits like that.

Do you think the general public, the house buyers were interested in energy conservation at that time?

I think they were more interested in it than the builders were but yes, perhaps we were a bit before our time, that's why Energy World happened, I think perhaps, to sort of get it all right the second time and the houses were just as innovative in Energy World, but they also had this extra focus. In Home World you could build anything you were likely to get past Jon Muncaster. It didn't have to be orthodox energy conservation.

(00:20:20)

Which was your favourite house there?

I think I rather liked, well, there were a couple of good ones, Dominic McCauley's house, I very much liked. I think that was well worked and interesting, relevant, and well-detailed and then to go to the other scale, one of the New Zealand houses which was wonderfully ad hoc. I can remember them building it just by tapping pieces of wood in place. It was how an ordinary New Zealander could build a house out in the wilds. So, they were my two favourite ones, I think.

Roger Kitchen:

Was that the [unclear], the one that had no nails?

Yes, yes. Actually, that was a bad...

What was it called then, the ... not the A-framed house?

There was an A-framed house, wasn't there? I can't remember what that was called.

Roger Kitchen:

It was called the 'A-framed house', I think.

Was it?

Roger Kitchen

I interviewed Roger Walker in the, it was called the 'World House', any thoughts on that at all? Any stories around that?

The World House? Oh, was that the Tudor,

Roger Kitchen:

It was the one with the kind of wooden tower.

Yes, yes.

Roger Kitchen: *There were two New Zealand homes, two New Zealand Houses next door to each other.*

Yes, yes. One was called Lockwood.

Roger Kitchen: *Yes, the 'Lockwood No Nails' house. That's the one you're talking about.*

Yes, yes. That was a good example, the Lockwood No Nails house was a good example of a rather crazy idea to build a house with no nails, which gets put into practice and works and that is what we wanted to happen; and did happen in that particular instance and in one or two others I guess, as well.

Roger Kitchen: *If you could talk a little bit about the private housing industry because obviously, one particular thing. If you could talk about the successes and problems with the private housing conditions in development.*

Well, when I arrived as a young surveyor to work for the Development Corporation in 1977, '78, private housing was the poor relation of public housing and the process of getting it to happen was typical of any, sort of, public bodies; there was an architects department, a planning department and surveyors department and so forth, and clearly that wasn't going to work because it didn't give enough emphasis to the project of getting private housing on the ground. So, in 1979 the Private Housing Unit was formed and there were two managers, there was Brian Brookman and Bob Clerk(e), Brian being a surveyor and Bob being a planner/architect and I was effectively the head of the surveying part of this multi-discipline organisation, which was such an effective and enjoyable place to work. It was much more interesting working alongside architects and planners and programmers than having a running battle, which is quite often what happens in that situation.

So, the Private Housing Unit found its way into success really quite quickly. We did some good deals with developers; we got, ...met our targets and were I felt a very business-like and quite a sort of dynamic place to work, fifty or forty-five years ago.

(00:25:11) So, the Private Housing Unit really started to make a difference. It almost produced an academic off-shoot, which was put together by a contact of Fred Roche, called Richard Parker.

(00:25:33) So the Private Housing Unit provided a platform from which quite a few exciting things could happen; Homeworld, Energy World and also under a David Parker, a, if you like. an academic piece of work, looking at how private housing is financed, especially low-cost affordable housing, and we introduced as a result of that project, we had to write a full annotated report,

which included the early version of How to Finance First Time Housing, First Ownership housing.

And I think that was one of the successes which I remember, working on that with huge enjoyment, really trying to understand how the private housing sector works and I think we cracked it.

Roger Kitchen: *Didn't you develop shared ownership?*

Yes, yes. So, one of the things that Housing Project put together under David Parker was the first shared-ownership schemes in the country. And that was very necessary because we were about exactly at the point where the rental sector was being cut right back by the Thatcher government. And yet there was no immediate alternative to it, so our shared-ownership scheme was a good one and worked very well and a lot of people got their first house through it.

Mel Jeavons: *I did!*

Did you?

Yes, I had to queue up, at the city centre, there was an office where you had to queue up, and I just remember we got there really early and got our plot and nothing had been built but they said you can have this one or this one; we didn't really want a three bed roomed house, we wanted like a two bedroom, or one bedroom. And they had only got three-bedroomed left. So I said "we'll have it then", and it was £16,000 for the half-share! But I was only twenty-two at the time and you know, nowadays you wouldn't get one.

You wouldn't be even in the queue, would you? Interesting, yeah.

It was a good thing.

Roger Kitchen: *Anything else on the private housing, because the thing that struck me was that you, because you were the Development Corporation, you could put down standards of density, landscaping, play areas, things like that which, you know, because you owned the land the, if you like, when we look at what happens today, the way that houses are put together and you know, there is not the same kind of, I don't know, effort and creating a really decent place to live. It's almost like building a house, do you know what I mean?*

Yes. Another of the outcomes from Homeworld was Tim Skelton's contribution of building plots and he was full of enthusiasm for it and managed not to just sell plots but get co-operatives involved of various sorts and that has now been

picked up without giving credit to us! There was a scheme in Bicester, run by Grand Designs, and he didn't mention Milton Keynes once, and he was showing them getting the plots being built as if it was something nobody had ever done before! We did it forty years ago!

(00:29:40)

[End of Interview]