

**Name:** Jon Muncaster  
**Date of Birth:** 1945  
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**Interviewed by:** Mel Jeavons and Roger Kitchen  
**Duration:** 00:39:45

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00:00:00 *Today's date is the 30<sup>th</sup> of March 2021. My name is Mel Jeavons, and I am interviewing you for the Homeworld Project. Can you tell me your full name and the year you were born please?*

Not telling you the year I was born, that's cheeky! 1945, is the answer to the last one, that's when I was born and my name is Jon Muncaster.

*And what was your job at MKDC before Homeworld was announced?*

Before Homeworld was announced I was just a lowlife in the architectural team in Central Area Housing and doing, doing housing jobs and I had just finished the Information Centre, the Information Bubble, ... don't know if you remember that when this came along? So, I was just a project architect.

*What other projects did you work on then in Milton Keynes?*

In the course of my subsequent involvement with Homeworld as well?

*Before Homeworld.*

Before Homeworld I was, ... well, I had only been here a couple of years. I'd been here, I arrived in 1976, ... April Fools Day, of course! And the first job I worked on was in a local centre in Conniburrow but that didn't materialise. That got transferred down the road! And then I did a couple of housing schemes in Conniburrow, Conniburrow 3 and Conniburrow 2C I think they were called at the time. And the Information Bubble and then Homeworld.

*So, when did you get involved in Homeworld?*

Right at the very beginning. I was in the Central Area Housing Team. I was plucked out, ... must have been twiddling my thumbs, or something, ... and I was identified as somebody who could do it. I think the way it happened was, there was I was looking after Bradwell Common at the time, just drawing up the first plans for the layout for Bradwell Common and there was a debate going on whether Homeworld would be in Oldbrook or Bradwell Common. They took a look at the options and they went for Bradwell Common in the end and I think that's why I was involved in it.

*Why did they choose Bradwell Common?*

They chose Bradwell Common I think because it was, ... it lent itself to a large, a large event, if you like. There was plenty of open space there because it hadn't been developed, for one thing. But Homeworld was going to take some time to develop in that the site that was selected was next to the school and it was next to, right next to the grid road, the H4. And, there was an opportunity - because of the availability of it and the access to it, and the fact that it had this large school site, really large school site, that had playing fields and everything in those days. That could take, they could house, put the car parking on there and house the big exhibition centre in tents and so on forth, ... temporary exhibitions.

*So, talk me through your role in the project. What did you do?*

Well, I did the design and technical coordination, I think that's how my work was described, as it says on the tin. That's what I was dealing with so we started out with a kind of development plan for how it would go, sort of tested it for its feasibility and flexibility; that's very important to be flexible because we didn't know what we were going to get and whether we could get the accommodation in and also the circulation was a big factor as well, large numbers of people circulating around. We had to test all that and get the master plan for it right if you like. That was the first thing we did and then started taking it forward then.

*ROGER KITCHEN: Jon, could you tell Mel when did that work start? Did it start before the whole thing was advertised?*

Well, it all started before the news was available to the wider world. It was in 1979 the first seeds were sown. I think it was a chap called David Parker, who was an American but who came in as a housing adviser to Fred and I can remember shortly after the general election of 1979, that was in May, and sometime after that, ... two or three months, and I can remember a lot of technical staff being summoned to the Tower Pavilion and Fred said, there's a political wind change here, or something of that order and private housing is going to assume a much more

prominent role in what we are doing and we have to respond to this political pressures and influences.

(00:05:17)

And shortly after that, ... I think, ...again, remember, I was pretty well down the pecking order and so I didn't get all the ins and outs of what was going on in Wavendon Tower itself and in the corridors of power.

But I think what happened was this new adviser that Fred had got had seen these housing exhibitions in the past in America and Canada and they seem to have been successful there and he sold the idea to Fred, who said, "Well, we'll have one!" I think and I think that was how the germ started.

Now, that was in 1979, probably towards the end or middle of 1979 and Keith Revel, who was the Director of, .... Chief Architect of Central Area Housing at the time, actually, the Executive Director of the Central area, I think he was, Keith Revel came and said to us and said, "You know, we're doing this job and we've got to look at a couple of sites where we've got, ..." we discussed it and thrashed it out and that is how it came to be Bradwell Common and me doing it.

*And so, what were the aims of Homeworld?*

Well, I think, ... from my perspective, ... what I remember of the main aim for Homeworld was to stimulate the idea of private housing in Milton Keynes and I think the by-product of it would have been that it could have been sold as private housing is now doing a job in Milton Keynes, it could do a job everywhere, I think. I do not know what the political selling was but to me that was an important angle of it.

But going back to the reference about Fred having a meeting with all the technical people, it was very much in line with that, that this would be a stimulus for the private housing in Milton Keynes. And approximately at the same time, I think the Private Housing Unit was created.

*And what preparations were made prior to the public call for housebuilders to the site?*

For the site? Right, So, the preparations for the site before the public call were to do with getting it, getting it in shape really, getting the infrastructure in so that they could... they've only got to build a house. Come in, build a house, connect it up to the infrastructure

00:08:28 (incoherent)

Where was I?

*Sorry, talking about the site.*

The preparation activities for the site were to get the infrastructure built in advance, so that we'd have the road laid out, the principles of landscape – permanent landscape – in the main areas, the roundabouts and things could be installed and get a head start if you like on the planting, and obviously all the planning that went into it before that, because you know engineers were involved and landscape architects were involved and it was, you know, it all had to be brought together.

*Things that had to happen before the builders came on site*

OK, I'll start again on that. So, before the builders came on site it was important to have things in place so that all they had to do was just put their building up and connect up to the utilities. So, we had to have the roads in place, the squares in place and the general infrastructure and layout clearly understood. And that was about it really, ... landscape as well, of course, I forgot to mention that, but if you get advance planting in, give it a chance, you might get another season's growth and all that sort of thing, and it might look better. So, that was kind of thing, all the physical preparation of the site but on the other hand, there were all the other administrative things going on as well to get them there.

*It was originally billed as Homeworld 80, so what was the delay?*

Well, I don't think Homeworld 80 was really a starter. It was, I don't think it lasted very long as Homeworld 80. I think they soon came to realise that the preparation time was going to take far too long to, to get it done in a year, so 18 months was a maximum I think. I mean, those... I think it took about 18 months from the decision being made to change it, ... yes, about 18 months.

(00:10:25)

So, I don't remember much debate about it actually. I just think there was a discussion and they said, "Right! We'll delay it to the following year!", because it was ... I don't think it was a starter, Homeworld 80.

*And what oversight of the builders did you have when the buildings were going up?*

Well, we had a character called George McKenzie, who was a Glaswegian, I think, and he was the kind of onsite marshall, making sure that the builders didn't fall out with each other and when, he was a programmer in the Central Area Housing Team and he was keeping a keen eye on how progress was going according to the plans that they were submitting to them.

But I have to say, probably this is a good point at which to say it, there was a really good relationship with Milton Keynes Council and the Building Control Department there under Graham Allsop, who we briefed before, before it all started, and he was aware that there was going to be an avalanche of little applications coming in which needed prompt attention. And some of them were quite tricky because the theme of it was innovative housing and he had people in place to support us. And he took an interest in it himself as well, some of the tricky things that came along.

But the building control exercise in those days was done by councils, it wasn't privatised then, and it was a free service, I think, to all intents and purposes. And they did the supervision from a legal point of view, you know, structures that were being built, structures were being built to the standards that were required.

*ROGER KITCHEN: On the actual day to day thing of the houses being built, they were all individual houses and normally, you know, it is a housing estate built by one builder. Were there any particular issues around that, ... you know, with all of these people getting in each other's way?*

I don't think there were any particular issues that were deal-breaking, or I think, nothing critical. Nobody walked off-site, nobody stomped off and left the project. I think there were niggles, probably, ...you know, about somebody being in somebody's way and wanting to unload, or something, all things going on like that. Very often it would be George who sorted them out on site between the parties.

But no, I don't remember anything being terribly, ...outstandingly difficult, ... you know, insoluble, ... Insoluble problems. I don't remember anything going on like that.

*Competition is to get the best house, ... quickest house built!*

Well, that might have been going on but I don't know, ... some of them just, some of the developers just got on quietly with what they were doing. You know, I think, the Mowlem house, for instance, I don't remember anything cropping up about that! They were one of the first to take on board for us. They had been doing work in Milton Keynes just down the road in Conniburrow for years and years and they just kind of just got a design sorted out quickly, got the building regs for it, started building and they were one of the first to finish I think and just went away, and we didn't hear anything about them!

Others, it was right at the other end of the spectrum, which it was just a constant battle to get them up to speed and compliant and all the rest of it.

*Which is your favourite house?*

(00:15:00)

Oh! That's a difficult one. I think one of my favourites was actually a pair that was done by a small start-up company actually, called Autarkic and there was a sort of four-bedroomed house and two bedroomed house which would be for social housing kind of thing, using passive solar technology and it was just very neatly packaged pair of units that came on there.

I had a lot of respect for the BBC house; got involved with John Duggart on one or two occasions with that. I remember going to a meeting with John Duggart and a potential builder, or the funding for the BBC house at the BBC. I was asked to leave the room at one stage because it got down to commercial items, then and ... I wasn't allowed to hear it! But we got through the technical stuff and I left, and they got on with it. But it came out well and it got a lot of publicity for the event.

ROGER KITCHEN: *What about the Vintage Home?*

I think the two New Zealand houses were object lessons in the opposite way of doing things! We had one, Lockwood Homes, which is another one of these quiet ones which I never heard any trouble from Lockwood Homes, whatsoever! The house arrived on a container and they got a crew to sort it out and they put it up in no time at all and connected things up and went away and it was done and dusted. If you like. Right next door to that is Vintage Homes with Roger Walker and a totally different approach to building here! I think all that arrived from New Zealand was a joiner and his toolbox, ... got off the plane and then he had to find his way to Milton Keynes, get some accommodation, (which my wife fixed up for them actually), ... and then set to finding materials, getting wood bought and the rest of it, I do remember him being on site, there was a staircase with a spare tile which was kind of sticking up from the building, and he was there with his hammer and chisel notching out the recesses for the treads to go in and the risers to go in, and he went round this thing and then putting up the frame piece by piece! ... I mean, he did get some help, ... I think he went down to New Zealand House one day and hired a few helpers and somebody came up!

But I mean, it ended up a very attractive house and probably the most distinctive on the site, to be frank! But it was nail-biting stuff getting it to that stage. But interesting!

*What were the issues in sort of finishing in time for the opening ceremony?*

Well, it was just a mad panic! You know, the day before it was due to be finished and George was going around exhorting people to get a move on and telling me there's a problem here with this and can you, ... blah, blah, Blah!

And I think eventually the site closed about six o'clock or something like that and there was a meeting, ... I can't remember where the meeting was to be honest, but David Crewe was chairing it because he was the Executive Director for the project and the technical and PR people were sitting round the table and going through a checklist, ... we've done this, ... done this, ... done this, ... have you finished, Jon? You know, everything. There was just one tiny thing that needed doing, ... I can't remember what it was, ... could be a lock for a gate, or something like that, you know! And I said, well there's just this thing that needs doing but it will be done about 8 o'clock in the morning, well before the opening ceremony.

And then there was quiet, and I got this steely-eyed look from David Crewe and his eyes closed! But he didn't say anything, actually, just shook his head twice, very slowly! So, I excused myself and got it done that night! (laughter) But then that was it. The next morning everything was done, it was fantastic! Everything was cleared away, it was clean, ... cleaned up! Yes. It is amazing how these things come together.

(00:20:00)

I found that a number of times with exhibitions and stuff, there is this mad panic before the end of it but somehow or other it just, everything gets done!

*What about the landscaping! Can you talk me through that? How important it was, any issues with it?*

Well, the landscaping was always important in Milton Keynes, it is one of the bedrocks of the city planning I think, and we always applied good standards of landscaping and we never stinted on it. Mike Usherwood was the landscape architect delegated to oversee the landscaping on Homeworld and we worked very closely together; I had a good relationship with Mike, and he did the kind of master plan for the landscaping, if you like, which was all about very strong junctions and corners, emphatic they were and then there were the two open spaces which were landscaped gardens; they were like little pocket parks really. Those spaces were important in the layout of the plan because it was all about circulation of great masses of people and there was also the aspect of settings, that you wouldn't get in a street of just two lines of buildings going down. You don't get to see

that eight different houses as something in one vista. You need to have that kind of circular scope, view.

And it worked out very well, you know, there were highlights like the nice specimen trees. I think everything was done a little bit further mature, the planting, than it would normally have been for a new estate. And so, when the exhibition was in full flow the landscape was noticeable, even though it was quite newly planted and put in there. It was a very strong feature unifying the disparity of the housing.

It's one of the things we used to think, try and include, was the fact that you could have all these different things in a housing scheme, but something has to hold them together and it is usually the landscape and the infrastructure that it ties them all in. And that came out well I thought in Homeworld.

*What are your memories of the opening ceremony then, after your mad dash to finish?*

I don't have any, to be honest! I can't even remember where it was, I can't remember if it was in the marquee, or if it was outside, or who was there, or who gave speeches! We were talking before and I think, I'm sorry I'm going to stop there, I didn't say anything about the opening ceremony when I started my answer, do you want to go through that again?

*It's OK, it's alright, we can have other people talking about it*

The only thing I can remember about the opening ceremony was basically ... I have just got this image of the Housing Minister, Tim Stanley I think he was called, with sleeked back, shiny hair, sort of reptilian-like, going round shaking, glad-handing people and then buzzing off! I don't know what he did, apart from the opening ceremony. I don't know if he saw the houses or anything like that. But that is just the vaguest memory. I think in some ways I was, ...I might have been glad to get away from it! (laughter)

*And what about the public reaction to the exhibits? Were you aware of any of that, did you get any feedback?*

I was aware of a lot of enthusiasm by the public for visiting the site, the exhibition and what a great idea it was; they had never seen anything like it before and that was, that's the public reaction as opposed to the professional reactions, and I was disappointed to a certain extent with the public reaction because, we didn't mention this earlier, but

*(brief pause due to interruption from traffic noise)*



So there was great enthusiasm from the public for the exhibition as an exhibition piece, place, they'd never seen anything like it before and they went, you know, in their hundreds of thousands, I think, and enjoyed their day out.

(00:25:13)

But to me they were all kind of voyeuristic in their approach to it, they wanted to see what the décor was and what the bedrooms were like and furniture and stuff like that! "Oooh! This is a nice house!" ... "Ooh, look at that kitchen!" ... that was the kind of the level at which the mass public seemed to take it. They didn't even consider, I don't think, the technical innovations that were on display there and to that extent I was a bit disappointed. They just didn't have this vision about the future and what the possibilities are for house building in the future.

But I think the professionals did. I mean, they were sort of looking around the more adventurous houses with keen eyes and a learning frame of mind.

*And do you think that is why, some of those ideas that happened in Homeworld, the energy efficiency, ... didn't really continue into every house that has been built since. You would think that something that was so good at that time, forty years ago, would have been widespread now! But do you think the public just didn't really care and they perhaps still don't care now?*

I think that's very much the case. It's difficult to sell to them... no, I won't go on with that, because it's digressing... In the paper yesterday there was the results of a poll where, ... it was not to do with housing, it was to do with public buildings, local authority headquarters, civic buildings. And I think they had a top twenty, or least favourites and favourites and all the favourites were Georgian style or Edwardian grand buildings set in certain places, and all the modern ones, which this survey, mistakenly in my opinion, called 'brutalist' - but that sort of makes a good headline - brutalist buildings did the worst, even though they probably worked better than the old ones!

But I think that very much reflects the times. One of my, ... way after Homeworld, ... sort of twenty-five years after Homeworld, ... I was working for English Partnerships, and I was involved in promoting sustainable development and energy-saving housing and all developments really. In 2006 the then government set out a programme which was enacted in law to make all houses built by 2016, that's ten years, zero-carbon, zero emissions. And that was plenty of time to do it but of course, it just got lost; the next government came into power and despite David Cameron's first visit of any of the ministries, was to the Department of Energy, saying that this was the greenest government that there had ever been, ... he just chucked all that

and apparently it was back to basics and they are still arguing about it now! If that had been the case then every new house that has been built now, in the last four or five years, would have been carbon neutral! But they just abandoned it!

I don't know what the politics of it was, I've got my ideas, but I don't know for certain. But the public didn't even notice any of that. That's a source of sadness to me, really! Most of my working life was trying to get these things in front of people and it didn't work out!

*Do you think it's time for another Homeworld Exhibition then?*

I don't know about another Homeworld Exhibition! (laughter) I think things have changed so much now. There was another thing I was reading, ... saw it came on the radio yesterday ..., the Best House Type for energy efficiency and for social benefits, as well, is the terraced house!

(00:30:00)

And of course, everybody aspires to a detached, four-bedroomed detached house! Things like that, the individual homes; it's a difficult one to justify in many ways! (Says he who lives in .... isolated splendour!). (laughter)

*What's your proudest moment personally in relation to Homeworld?*

Well, getting it done really! (laughter). Surviving it! The proudest moment I think, I am not sure if it is the proudest thing but the proudest moment I felt for it was on that opening ceremony day, when I was on the site before, ... not before everybody else, but before the visitors, before the dignitaries and stuff, and just walking around and having a last look, and it looked good! The streets were cleaned. The planting was out; another thing about the landscaping which I didn't mention before was that Mike Usherwood and his team of landscape architects, designed and implemented every garden of the houses that were in there, you know. Some gardens were looking good; they had managed to bring in flowers, which were in bloom and like a lot of architectural projects, I suppose it is good to see in that state before it got ruined! (laughter)

*How successful do you think Homeworld was?*

Well, I think it was successful on a couple of different levels. I don't think it was successful in the sense that innovative housing was suddenly understood and implemented, and people were getting excited by it. In terms of the original aim, which was crudely political, I suppose, I think it was successful because housebuilding in Milton Keynes took off, the private housebuilding sector and they were forever building, ... I mean,

we are in a housing crisis at the moment in this country, relating to planning and issues and non-banking and stuff like that and the answers here in Milton Keynes, to that and following from Homeworld and the private housing unit, you don't have a 100-acre site for one builder, and he just built it out, you have time limits on it and you have like eight developers working on it and they are all working against each other in competition so prices are down.

There are so many exemplary methods that were used in Milton Keynes' development and the housing unit was, ... private housing was one of them which we could learn from now.

So, I think politically it was very successful. It did inject a boost into private housing development in Milton Keynes and we have seen the results and from that point of view it was successful.

*And how important was Homeworld in terms of future projects at Energy World and Future World?*

Well, Energy World and Future World were done by two different organisations, corporate organisations and I think Energy World was successful. Now, I wasn't directly involved in either of those, but I was kind of in the building, like Elvis, (laughter) and saw what was going on and people did talk to me about it, you know, who were involved in Energy World and learning from it but it was still the same outfit, it was still the Development Corporation that was doing it. And it was that kind of corporate understanding and corporate continuity which could be tucked in and I think Energy World was a success in the same way as, ... in its focus, as Homeworld was.

And the focus is another good point about Energy World. You knew what you were going to see when you went to Energy World and there were ideas for saving energy in the future. And to that extent it worked.

And I think also in Energy World there was a bit more confidence in the housebuilding industry and a little bit more respect for the needs for energy conservation and taking that bit forward. So, I felt Energy World was a successful exhibition. You could say a lot of the lessons were learnt from Homeworld for that.

(00:35:05)

Now, I wasn't involved in any way with Future World, although I was working in the building at the time. I wasn't consulted very much about that at all. But Future World didn't have the same impact from my point of view. I can remember one building from it; it was very futuristic, but I can't remember being excited by it, but it was a great success. It made a big difference to what was going on in the city at the time. And it was a different

organisation, of course, so they didn't have the collective memory to call upon.

ROGER KITCHEN *Are there any other things that you thought and said, "Ah, yes, I must mention that!" Anything that has come up that aren't on the list of questions that you might want to mention?*

I don't think so! They might emerge when I'm walking round the site to be honest. I think the only thing I want to say, from a personal point of view, is that my family suffered when this was going on! I was in the height of activity when it was going on between Christmas and Easter of 1981. Every day I would go home and have my dinner and the whole family would pile into the car and we would have to go to Homeworld because I would have to walk round and see what they'd done that day. During the day I would be in the office most of the time, sort of fielding issues and coordinating things and on the phone. Unless I had gone out on the site I wouldn't have any idea what was going on. There were always things I was picking up there, and that. And my long-suffering family all came with me! (laughter)

I think they knew every word of every song of the Mamas 'n Papas Best Hits! (laughter) and yes, so, ...

*Did you feel a big responsibility to get it right?*

Yes, that's the way I operate. I am sort of scared of getting anything wrong and being held to account! (laughter) Like interviews really! (laughter) I don't think there is anything more which came up.

There is one thing which I've left out, actually, which was when you asked about the issues leading up to the opening ceremony and getting it ... there was a snowstorm the Sunday before the Friday it opened and the marquee was half erected, ... and it was totally dis-erected by the time the snowstorm had finished and so, there was a great panic over that and the marquee. And obviously, there was Sunday working, which was very difficult, but they got over it OK. But that was a real worry actually whether everything was going to be put back because of that.

*Was there any worrying about people not turning up? I was just thinking about the Jock Campbell thing in the city centre where they gave each family £5 to go and spend because they thought no one would come to the city centre! ... (laughter), was there any ever fear about that do you think at Homeworld?*

I think inevitably there was a worry that there wouldn't be a large turnout. People wouldn't be turned on by the idea of just seeing a load of houses. And a lot of the justification for the financial input was that a lot of it would be recouped. I don't think it was

ever going to be self-financing from visitors. And so, in a situation like that you are a bit on edge until it actually happens, you know. Yes.

ROGER KITCHEN: Brilliant, *lovely!* *Thank you very much indeed!*

(00:39:45) [Interview Ends]