

[0:00:00]

Kieran Connell: So can you remember how you actually ended up at the Centre?

Bob Willis: Well what it was, I'd finished my first Degree and as I was saying earlier, I'd – I almost dropped out, because it was the 60s and I knew people who did drop out, you know just not take their Degree and go off and do alternative things. But I didn't make a decision to do that; I was sort of you know torn a couple of ways.

Kieran Connell: So were a lot of people – were they like turning up and dropping - ?

Bob Willis: I don't know that there were a lot of people doing that. I mean some of the people I knew – I mean there were people from London who were sort of alternative, but not alternative in a kind of political way. I mean they'd wear hippyish clothes and smoked dope and that kind of thing, but there were some who took it more seriously. And some weren't necessarily political, but it was very much about you know a major commitment to some alternative lifestyle and I didn't do that but I didn't want to just get a career type job. I think what I was revolting against in a very minor way, was the idea that when you had a Degree, what you should do is get a job in industry and get as much money as possible and go wherever it was necessary to pursue that and just try and advance yourself in terms of basically financial terms. And I really didn't want any of that and so my Sociology tutor at the time, Julian Nargel, who was a man who was suffering from multiple sclerosis, he... and he was kind of a radical Sociologist – I think Hungarian and in fact if you went to his room, I mean it was even more disordered than my house is; I mean there were just piles of books on every table and all over the floor. And he said, "Oh why don't you go along to the Centre – there's this new Centre being set up not all that long ago; why don't you go along and see them and see if you can attend some of the seminars?" In fact I'm not even sure he said, "See if you can attend", it was sort of just go along and join in kind of thing!

Kieran Connell: Just go (laughs).

Bob Willis: And so I did. I don't remember how I actually got access; I don't think there were a formal interview or anything like that. It was, "Oh yeah just turn up!" (Both laugh).

Kieran Connell: Turn up! What was Sociology at Birmingham like at that point in terms of like what you were learning and how you were learning? Was it quite a conventional university experience would you say or - ?

Bob Willis: Well I'm not sure what a conventional university experience is or was really, so (inaudible 0:03:15) Atkinson who I referred to – who, he was the Sociology lecturer in our first year and he was actually – I mean on a good day he could actually be genuinely inspirational you know and say, "Oh yes, go and see lots of films" and so it was – Sociology was about more than just reading the texts. I was doing a Sociology Degree in Sociology and Psychology so that was a bit of a funny mix in a way; potentially a very, very useful mix. I wasn't a very good student; I mean I was always kind of doing other things and I regret now that I didn't spend more time on some of the courses. There was a brilliant one done by a guy called Martin Kalinsky that – amongst other things, I mean he did a very good course on Sociology Theory, but amongst other things, he looked at – there was a historical analysis of Western Europe I think after the First World War and so it was all about the risk of Fascism and all of that and so using Sociology in a very interesting way and a very useful way to increase our understanding of current events in effect, because there's obviously still a big legacy from all that period. So I just – I turned up and I can't remember all that much about the detail to be honest, it's quite a long time ago and a lot of things have happened since. But what I do remember is a total sense of liberation, excitement, of taking part in these seminars and it was a very, very egalitarian set up and so every week we would discuss a text like Sartre's "Problem of Method" and everyone would have read it and everyone's views were equally valuable and that was so liberating compared to undergraduate seminars where you get one bloke, and it usually was a bloke, who would be sort of showing off to try and carry favour with the tutor, by showing how much he'd read and it was – it was light years away from that. You know this was genuinely participative and really everyone's views mattered and so it was quite intoxicating. It was bloody hard work, because I was

supporting myself by either being unemployed and being on the dole and mixing that up with periods of teaching General Studies part time and so I remember reading "The Problem of Method" while travelling – I think where the hell I would have been teaching but I can't remember the name -

Kieran Connell: Was it Hall Green?

[0:06:41]

Bob Willis: No, no it was – I remember, to go there I was on the number 11 bus, so I remember reading Sartre's "Problem of Method" when I was on the number 11 bus (both laugh). It was (inaudible 0:07:00) -

Kieran Connell: Oh right Okay.

Bob Willis: - so a bit of distance and obviously I didn't have a car at that time and I didn't have any money. I couldn't drive anyway so...

Kieran Connell: What was it like – because obviously reading Sartre on the number 11 bus was it – I suppose it was – what would now be called "General Studies" – what was that like, going from that really theoretical stuff to this – I presume the General Studies classes were a slightly different kettle of fish?

Bob Willis: Oh yeah it was – yeah basically I mean it would be people who were doing some kind of technical training. I mean so you could get brick layers or electricians, people like that. I mean I wasn't very good at it – genuinely, I wasn't very good – I'd be much better if I was doing it now, but I wasn't very good and even if I had been good, there was a huge amount of hostility amongst the people doing this course because they didn't see the relevance of it and it was just a totally new position on -

Kieran Connell: So these people would be doing like – the main reason why they were in college was to learn a trade –

Bob Willis: To learn a trade, yeah.

Kieran Connell: So why were they -? What was the idea behind - ?

Bob Willis: Well it was just part of the deal; if you went to college, you had to do General Studies. You know it was the way the thing was set up – probably some Government proclamation. But there was always a huge amount of resistance. I remember Dick Hebdige who was also doing General Studies, I remember him saying that it – in this one class, which I think must have been from something like 11.45am to 12.45pm and he said he went in this one class and this big guy wrote on the blackboard, "Home at 12pm" (both laugh). 12pm the whole world gets out!

Kieran Connell: Must have been pretty challenging to operate in that kind of...?

Bob Willis: Well yeah... although I mean they were actually – you know a lot of them were really good kids, you know?

Kieran Connell: Working class kind of...

Bob Willis: Yeah, yeah so I always regret that I didn't make more effort at it and try and find ways of actually relating to them or... because they were actually very interesting. Yeah this one group at (inaudible 0:09:27) I remember this electrician who got a job working in the coal mine and I remember him coming back and saying how fantastic it was working in a coal mine because of the camaraderie and that's always stuck in my mind ever since. So I learnt stuff off them – probably much more than they ever got off me and so I – you know, I genuinely wasn't very good at it. Although once or twice it actually did work with a few groups that were – you know, doing slightly more intellectual stuff or were a bit more curious or whatever and you know – but generally no, it was just a way of making money and it was...

Kieran Connell: Going back to the Centre and you talked about the collective kind of egalitarian approach to – everyone's opinions are equally valid, I mean by this point Stuart Hall was Acting Director I think

because Richard would have left to go to Unesco. Did he try and relinquish that role as kind of the authority or was he still kind of leading the debate?

Kieran Connell: Yeah... well he kind of – he kind of certainly led some of the seminars in terms of he would have done a lot of work on – I remember there were a series that he did on Structuralism and so he would have basically spent a lot of time and effort in knowing that stuff inside out and so he would do presentations on that, but then there would be the discussion. But it wasn't – you know, it still didn't – so I suppose there was a hierarchy in the sense that (laughs) he was like the cleverest most knowledgeable person – certainly the most knowledgeable person there, who also I'm sure worked incredibly hard to do that. I mean I remember him saying once – because I think I'd complimented him because I'd seen one of his I think TV performances, about how good he was in doing a presentation and he said, "Yeah – but I spend hours preparing that so that I know it inside out and it flows", you know so it wasn't just a thing about, "Oh he's a naturally good presenter" although he might also be, but it was because he'd put a huge amount of effort into a lot of that, which wasn't always apparent at the time, you know?

[0:12:05]

Kieran Connell: You just see the end product but you don't actually see what went into it?

Bob Willis: You saw the end product, so I think he must have been going home at night and just working very, very hard, you know for years.

Kieran Connell: Was there like a politics to it? I mean I think you talked – I think you talked previously about like the various protest movements that you were involved in. How important was that to the appeal in the Centre or to your own kind of politics?

Bob Willis: (Sighs) Oh I don't know, it's a bit... it's quite hard to describe it in a way and it depends exactly what period of the Centre you're talking about because I think one of the things that happened over time was that the Centre gained like a very good academic reputation and so there were a lot of bright young people from Oxbridge – Oxbridge in particular coming along and joining the Centre and they might well have been kind of radical with a small "r" -

Kieran Connell: Yeah...

Bob Willis: - but it was also – the Centre was also the road to a brilliant academic career and so the politics didn't really sit very well alongside that and I remember going along on a demonstration and I forget what the demonstration was about; it might have been something to do with Ireland (laughs). And there were a whole lot of – and I was almost kind of "rent-a-mob" you know – I mean I'm being facetious; I used to go on anti-fascist demonstrations primarily and I went on loads and loads of those (laughs).

Kieran Connell: So that sort of (inaudible 0:14:10) what would become - ?

Bob Willis: Well yeah, but I mean it was even before that. Yeah going down to London with coaches with the Indian Workers' Association and they'd have a big – a huge metal cauldron thing with curry in that they'd give to everyone (both laugh) and being involved in that kind of thing. And so some of the – some of the politics seemed – I'm not saying it was dishonest, I'm not saying it was an act, but to me, some of it seemed superficial.

Kieran Connell: Because of this notion that clearly there was a sense of careerism amongst some people?

Bob Willis: There was a sense of careerism and the sense that it could – but I mean I suppose that's – you know I think Stuart always managed to keep – I mean Stuart was very much about fighting the intellectual battle, a battle of ideas, but he was actually, certainly for a period he was – and I hadn't realised how much he'd been involved, but he'd been involved very much in terms of campaigning activities and going out and doing stuff. So he wasn't purely someone in an ivory tower thinking his brilliant thoughts that were then going to transform the world. I mean he did – I think both he and

certainly the Centre went very much in that direction later on and it kind of left me behind (laughs) because it wasn't really where I was at.

Kieran Connell: So would you say that you were more interested in the kind of like – getting out, the politics of the wider world and those kind of protest movements like anti-fascism or what-have-you that were kind of outside of the Academy?

Bob Willis: Yeah... that and I got involved in doing some – for a period of grass roots stuff involved in Claimants' Unions. The set went up and also he – which didn't last all that long but it was that kind of politics. Because there was that kind of – politics was also very strong at the time.

Kieran Connell: Community politics kind of - ?

Bob Willis: That kind of community – well there was the radical community politics. The Claimants' Union Movement was part of that.

[0:16:41]

Kieran Connell: Was that similar to kind of – you know – I think (Chas Kutcher?) was involved in Handsworth, like a Collective that was set up called – I think it was at 40 Hall Road in Handsworth.

Bob Willis: Yeah well that was working in a slightly different way; that was an Advice Centre primarily. I think they did similar stuff but that was an advice centre, but yeah that was closer to where I was. But at the time, there were also things coming out of the Counter Culture Movement like there was a paper called, "Nedgate", well it was alternatively called "Nedgate" and "Nelgate" (both laugh).

Kieran Connell: "Nedgate"?

Bob Willis: Yeah.

Kieran Connell: Was that similar to – I think "Birmingham Free Press" and "Birmingham Street Press", those kind of publications?

Bob Willis: Yeah I think this one was – it was like a national publication. I think it was produced in London, but there were people you know who were kind of more kind of sort of anarchists. I mean not violent anarchists but people who were into kind of de-centralised organisation and so on and that was one of the roots of the Women's Movement as well. It was very much about going out there and doing things. I mean I've got a friend who was involved in the Women's Movement and one of the things that they did was occupy a disused hospital in Birmingham just as a refuge.

Kieran Connell: Was that Priory Road?

Bob Willis: Yeah.

Kieran Connell: I mean that actually had, as far as I know, some Centre involvement and I think for example Tricia McCabe who was in the Women's Studies Group was also involved in that occupation and she's mentioned it to me as well, so that's interesting.

Bob Willis: Yeah... so... yeah so there were those kind of tensions.

Kieran Connell: What about class? How did class function? Because you mentioned like the Centre began to attract lots of really bright Oxbridge students you know, so did that kind of – and there's obviously a strong Marxist commitment in various forms in the Centre -

Bob Willis: Well yeah –

Kieran Connell: - so how did class play with it? How did class come into that?

Bob Willis: Work it out! (Both laugh). Well... I don't think there were – I don't think it was very overt; I think it was probably underneath the surface more. Yeah I'd say it was – it was that way round.

Kieran Connell: Was it a case of you know if you had a working class accent then you spoke with more authority than if you had a middle class accent?

Bob Willis: No I don't think it worked like that, no, no... I think there was another sort of division which was between people like Paul Willis – I mean in fact maybe even mainly Paul Willis, who were out there doing sort of research, ethnographic, really good quality ethnographic research in the community. When I went to the Stuart Hall Project and the discussion; I went to the discussion before I saw the film -

Kieran Connell: Okay yeah.

Bob Willis: - there was no mention of Paul at all and I thought that was actually really interesting because he was a very important part of the Centre. I mean he was like the Centre being grounded in the real world.

[0:20:17]

Kieran Connell: Whereas I guess some of these more kind of high theoretical discussions –

Bob Willis: Well a lot of it just went up into the stratosphere and at one point I... I was very kind of anti-intellectual in that sense, you know in terms of intellectualisation of issues, so that they just become so detached from every day life that it seems to be pretty irrelevant.

Kieran Connell: So it that in a sense more of a Humanist tradition, rather than a – a Humanist Empiricist tradition in fact.

Bob Willis: Yeah I suppose, I mean it depends what you mean by "Empiricist" because "Empiricism" can also be – is often used in a sense of quantitative research. I mean where I'm working now, I mean it's – the default is quantitative and I tear my hair out, you know because...

Kieran Connell: Did Gender come into it at all when you were there? Because I know it came in –

Bob Willis: I'm sure it – I'm sure it did. I wasn't fully aware of some of the battles that had gone on, except that I became aware of at the discussion.

Kieran Connell: Yeah.

Bob Willis: You know after or in my case, before the film.

Kieran Connell: So what the – and you subsequently found out that all these kind of battles were taking place.

Bob Willis: Yeah there were other ones – I mean I must have been a bit aware of it, but I think I was – I mean I was getting all that stuff anyway because I was living in a shared house and -

Kieran Connell: Was that like a commune or was that just more - ?

Bob Willis: It wasn't exactly a commune, I mean we certainly didn't call it a "commune", but it was – we'd take it in turns to do the cooking and stuff like that. And there were a lot of feminists, radical feminists in that house and (laughs) so I think anything that went on in the centre was probably small beer compared to -

Kieran Connell: Compared to what you were experiencing outside it, yeah.

Bob Willis: It was like you know – it would probably have been done at such a level in such a polite way that I would have sort of not – missed that it was any kind of argument or dispute going on.

Kieran Connell: Yeah (laughs). In terms of the collaborative approach though, what do you think were the benefits of that? And what do you think were the - ?

Bob Willis: Sorry, say that again?

Kieran Connell: You know the kind of collaborative, egalitarian approach that was adopted that was slightly different to what you were saying about – you had as an Undergraduate of Sociology –

Bob Willis: Oh yeah.

Kieran Connell: What was the – what would you say were the benefits of that approach and what would you say were the sort of negative sides of that approach?

Bob Willis: I think the benefits were – I mean at a personal level it was just very liberating and I've always valued that period in particular in the Centre because I suppose it gave me partly the confidence in my own ideas, in my own judgment, with regard to ideas. And that – you know that's what I do in my current job, I have arguments with people about ideas and they're like, "What are you on about? Where's the data?" And clearly it is about data as well, but it's not just about data, it's about different perspectives and so that is just immensely valuable. I think at its best, it involved collaborative working on a particular project. I think the fads and fashions was actually probably the main – maybe the only piece of collaborative work that I was engaged in, but that was fantastic because we would – I mean you clearly know about it.

Kieran Connell: Yes, but can you just give us a bit more of kind of the context really, if you can remember it?

Bob Willis: Well it was funded jointly by what was then the Social Science Research Council and the Sports Council and they were interested in new kind of styles of – which involved some degree of physical activity and so I suppose I can't remember if skateboarding was included, but it would have included things like skateboarding.

Kieran Connell: I've seen – I've seen it, because it came out as a sort of semi book didn't it I think and Chas showed me it.

Bob Willis: Yeah, there was a booklet produced.

Kieran Connell: Darts or something as well –

Bob Willis: Probably darts. There was someone had done a thing about – which were about images which were – because it was in that analysis of a film, "Downhill Skiing" amongst other things in it. Someone might have done squash, but it was the meaning of those activities and so it wasn't just obviously looking at the activity – it was looking at the social meaning of them and what their – and why they'd come into prominence, because squash has obviously been around for a long time, but it developed a particular prominence as a – I suppose a particular type of middle class professional identity. And so it was about – so it was -

Kieran Connell: The signs in a sense.

Bob Willis: - the signs, yeah. I think it was like the Sociology of it; it was the meaning of it; the meaning of it for those people and for others - yeah, the signs in terms of signifying that they were a particular type of person. It was about identity. But what was brilliant about the way that we did it, was we were all working separately but we'd meet up once a week and just bounce ideas around and it was – you know, that's always been – that's been one of the best pieces of work that I've ever worked on in terms of being enjoyable and stimulating. Because it was fantastic – it was a fantastic way to work you know and it's - and now if you read Management books, they say, "Oh yes, team working" (both laugh) but I don't think they usually mean "team working" in this sense. But this is – that was the power of it, because it would be everyone's – again, because it was very democratic, it wouldn't be about – it wasn't about putting someone down, "Oh that's really stupid", it would be like, "Oh what about looking at it this way? Have you thought of this?" And so it would be genuinely contributing

towards the development of people's ideas and so that was – that was a very, very positive thing to do.

Kieran Connell: Were there any drawbacks to that collaborative approach?

Bob Willis: I'm sure there were (laughs), I mean at the moment I can only think of the positive ones. I suppose the potential drawback is you're not critical enough; you know that you just want to be nice to each other...

Kieran Connell: I suppose it depends on – perhaps a lot of it depends on the relationships you have –

Bob Willis: It depends on the relationships and it depends on the nature of the piece of work as well and so working in that way isn't suitable for everything. Sometimes you need someone to go away and produce something and then maybe other people can critique it in a constructive way and do it that way around. But I just remembered working on that was – because it was – there was some degree of crossover, because I think we were trying to work out how to analyse these phenomena and so that was the crossover bit and so each individual's perspective would be of some relevance to most of the others.

[0:28:24]

Kieran Connell: So there's kind of an overarching kind of ambition within the individual -?

Bob Willis: Yeah probably, I mean I'm not sure we would have necessarily phrased it in that way. But I mean maybe it just happened to be the mix of people as well. You know, maybe it was just a group of people who were fairly laid back and you know they were – maybe there weren't too many primadonnas in the group, so I think it's about that as well; it's about people having the right attitude to work in that kind of environment. But that was absolutely brilliant. I mean at a certain point, I mean I – so I'll tell you about my history of involvement; I mean – so for a while and I forget how long it was, maybe it was six months, maybe a year or maybe longer (both laugh), I was just attending these seminars and then I was very interested in mass media, partly because I think during the sit-in, I'd been – I mean I've been a bit interested in media coverage I think for quite a long time anyway, but during the sit-in, I think I was kind of outraged by some of the coverage which was just untrue and this was national press – untrue, unfair, made-up stories, all that kind of stuff. And so I was very interested in the media and it was a time when there were a lot of strikes going on and so I did – I was encouraged to do – and so I did this analysis of coverage of strikes and sort of basically I mean it wasn't anything very great; it was just looking at the kind of metaphors that they were using which were basically military metaphors. Yeah I think Michael Green asked me to do that and on the basis of that, they suggested I do a Masters Degree by thesis and I started off doing that on – in terms of a media project, but then it changed and so the eventual title of it was... "The Ideology of British Counterinsurgency and its Reverberations", because what happened – what was happening in the period was it was this period of very intense industrial struggle and there were some people on the Right – not the Far Right, but kind of Conservative – "conservative" with a small "c" let's say – people from a military background who were saying, "Look what we've got here is the first stage of a revolutionary war and so we need firm action now to stop things getting any worse". And so basically – so there were a number of texts written by people like Brian (Crosier?) and Robert Moss and so basically I analysed those and put them in the context of the British approach to Counterinsurgency, which had developed in the End of Empire military campaigns you know Malaysia, Kenya and so on and so I put it in that context and that's basically what I did and it took me forever to write the damn thing.

Kieran Connell: Were you – was Michael your Supervisor formally?

Bob Willis: He might have been by Supervisor – no I don't think Michael was my Supervisor. Richard was my Supervisor for a spell and then Stuart was my Supervisor (both laugh) because it went on for several years.

Kieran Connell: So can you remember what year you actually enrolled to do the Masters?

Bob Willis: I can't remember the year I finished – I can remember the year I finished yeah, because that was '78.

Kieran Connell: You can't remember? So you finished in '78 and...

Bob Willis: Yeah, so I must have been doing it for at least seven years, but part time and it was – (inaudible 0:32:45) you know it's really, really long.

Kieran Connell: Almost like a PhD probably.

Bob Willis: For a Masters thesis - yeah, but clearly it wasn't a PhD; you know it wasn't all that well written. I've looked at it since and it was badly written and I wish I'd made – but I wish I'd made more of that because the external supervisor was – made noises about saying, "Oh yes he should be encourage to publish it" and – you know, I didn't do anything with it.

[0:33:20]

Kieran Connell: Was that because just life kind of – it sounds like, from what you've been saying previously as well, unlike perhaps some other people, you kind of didn't have that same kind of notion of being an academic? Was that never – you didn't want to go down that –

Bob Willis: No... for various reasons. I mean, I suppose one would have been about – something to do with confidence and I was talking with some friends about this kind of issue, oh quite a while ago and we were saying when we went to university our kind of expectations in terms of you know any possible kind of career would be like, "Oh teacher or social worker" (both laugh), so being an academic was like way outside those horizons and I was also actually very shy which I've managed to overcome to a considerable degree now but it's taken me a hell of a long time to do it. And so you know I think being an academic is partly about bluffing your way through isn't it? It's about saying things with supreme confidence (both laugh)...

Kieran Connell: Sounds familiar.

Bob Willis: And so I don't think I would have had that at the time. And so I think that's the other reason why I didn't pursue that, so that's a very personal reason.

Kieran Connell: Yeah but also perhaps connected to what you were saying about your politics as well?

Bob Willis: Yeah there was – yeah there was partly that...

Kieran Connell: I was going to ask finally just a kind of general question really about what you think that time at the Centre – the influence you think that might have had subsequently on your kind of intellectual development or your "career" – to use that contemporary phrase. You know, did it have an influence on your subsequent life or - ?

Bob Willis: Yeah I think so, yeah I think it – I mean as I intimated, it's had an influence on the way I approached my (laughs) work in my current job, which I see as it's about – I see research as being about, as much as anything, about ideas. It's about having different ways of looking at the world and seeing – looking at things through different perspectives and it's about that as much as anything. I suppose also a kind of confidence, a certain type of confidence in terms of arguing about – "arguing" in inverted commas about ideas; you know that there is a debate to be had about ideas, it's not just there is one truthful version.

Kieran Connell: And nothing else...

Bob Willis: So – so I have lively discussions in my current job. I mean I'm not very far up the hierarchy, so I can't push things very far, but I do make points as forcefully as I can and then I gracefully kind of back down, as necessary. So it's influenced me a lot in that sense. I mean I think the things that I've done since have been quite relevant to my time in the Centre. I mean I'll tell you a very brief potted career history.

Kieran Connell: Yeah, that would be good.

Bob Willis: So... after the Centre, what did I do? Oh just various bits and pieces. I worked on – I did some work for Aquarius which is an alcohol problems agency. I did some research for them in the law courts, so that was interesting because you know working in the context of the law courts was interesting. So I did that – oh and then I'd registered for an OU Research Methods Masters, so I was doing that. Oh and I'd also done quite a few OU courses just out of interest, in various things. And then I got a job working in Wolverhampton as a Research Officer.

Kieran Connell: At the polytechnic - ?

Bob Willis: Sorry?

[0:38:06]

Kieran Connell: Would that have been at what was then called the "poly" or would that have been - ?

Bob Willis: No, no I was working for Wolverhampton Council.

Kieran Connell: Oh I see, Okay.

Bob Willis: Yeah – oh I did another very short piece of research as well, which was through – yeah, what might have then been the poly – I can't remember when it became a university, which was about the ending of the Community Programme. So I did a bit of research on that and then I was like the researcher for Community Play and Youth. And so I had some contact with Paul Willis during that period.

Kieran Connell: Yeah because he was involved quite heavily at one point.

Bob Willis: Yeah he did – he did a major piece of work, a survey of young people. But basically yeah I was doing that for quite a long time, only – and I forget how long now; I hate to think how long actually – over ten years – 15 years something like that? A long time, a big chunk of my life and I did some interesting pieces of work as part of that and amongst other things I did some focus groups – I did some really good high quality focus group training in London and then I did some focus groups in the community and that was fantastic; that was one of the best things I've ever done. Oh and when I did my Masters Degree through the OU, I specialised in qualitative methods. You have to do quantitative as well and so I had to do a project on multiple regression (both laugh) – I still don't know what it is! But I did it – well I do know what it is in principle. But I specialised in qualitative methods and my supervisor for the project part of that was Martin Hammersley -

Kieran Connell: Right.

Bob Willis: - whose – he's written one of the kind of textbooks and I mean I think Paul Willis didn't like his approach very much but I thought it was really good. I also did some oral history interviewing which I got paid for, for Birmingham Museum.

Kieran Connell: Interesting.

Bob Willis: Yeah it was about the Home Front during the War and so I'd go and interview these people and they'd be like – and on this one occasion there was this wizened old man you know and once he started talking about the War, he'd been in the Auxiliary Fire Service in the War and once he started talking about the War he really came to life. Because clearly it was one of the most important parts of his – his experiences of life and he was telling me about things like, "Oh yeah you know when Coventry was bombed, there were a number of really bad raids" and he said, "There were fire tenders that we sent down to Coventry and they just disappeared; we don't know what happened to the fire tenders or the people on them" and so – so there were things like that that were also very powerful and as – yeah and I had to do another bit of work for this Masters Degree; it was a very good course actually, which was – I did it on – it was about a life history approach to people's working lives and I did it on the BSA. Do you know about the BSA?

Kieran Connell: The BSA - ?

Bob Willis: Factory -

Kieran Connell: Oh right Okay.

Bob Willis: - being demolished – been demolished quite a long time ago. And I knew a guy through Birmingham Museum, who'd actually worked on Management there. So I had his perspective but the idea was you'd get multiple perspectives and so I went round where the BSA Factory used to be knocking on doors. And I – and it was – you only needed a couple of people, because it was only a small... And so I managed to find someone who'd worked there and the contrast between -

Kieran Connell: Management and workers – wow.

Bob Willis: - yeah, because the workers' perspective was, "Oh it was fantastic working here, we had a big happy family, it was a wonderful place to work" and the Management guy was saying, "Oh god the management was appalling". He was saying they did things like they'd carry on making machines even when there was a design fault. He said there was one type of motorbike that had a map carrier on it and he said the military version, they had a number of bad accidents where – because if you put the brakes on you'd slide forward and he said there were a number of men who were castrated! And he said – so they modified the military version but they didn't change the civilian version! (Laughs)

Kieran Connell: God!

[0:43:15]

Bob Willis: And so I got a little bit of a kind of an ethnographic perspective through doing that kind of work. Oh and what I've done fairly recently was I did a certificate in counselling which is also highly relevant to doing qualitative work.

Kieran Connell: Right, so it's all kind of had a rough kind of like corollary I guess or an echo of that kind of engagement that you kind of first did in the early 70s.

Bob Willis: I think so; I think it's of relevance yeah because I think – I'm trying to decide what I'm going to do with my life now, because I mean I'm 65 and so I could retire except I won't be on much money and I want to do something that involves working with ideas and so I'm trying to find a way of actually doing that and to do some small scale pieces of research, either in terms of like kind of museum's work which I'm very interested in; I'm very interested in – one of the contexts I'm interested in is how people – or the meaning of "museums" to people, particularly say from industrial communities, what the relevance is of – particularly of kind of museums with an industrial theme. In South Wales there's an ex working mine called "Big Pit", so you can go down the mine and it tells you quite a lot about the working life and whatever and my kind of hypothesis was like, "Oh people from the Valleys would be taken – particularly grandparents would be taking their kids along and saying, "Oh this is what it used to be like in the mines"". And I think some of that happened, but I think there is – there is – there's some interesting material around that and the kinds of meanings that are embodied in Museums, and what people read into them. And so that's one area I want to pursue and I'm very interested in hate crime.

Kieran Connell: Well it's very much in the news isn't it?

Bob Willis: It's very – yeah and there's – there's some very interesting work on hate crime. I mean there are some really good people in Britain and there's a fantastic – Barbara Perry who's Canadian – she is fantastic and she came over last year and I met her and so there's a few themes I would really like to carry on doing some work on. Well you know do work on because basically I've just been doing it as part of my job up to date.

Kieran Connell: Yeah, well Bob thanks very much for sparing the time.

Bob Willis: Okay.

[End of Transcript]