



Oral History interview with Ian & Stuart Shields

Date: 7 June 2017

Interviewer: Sonia Cooper

© Museum of London

Q1: This is an oral history interview with Ian and Stuart Shields, by Sonia Cooper on June the 7th at the Bargehouse, Oxo Tower Wharf, also present at Jeremy Crump and Bea Moyes from the Thames Festival Trust. Could you please state your full names?

SS: My full name is Stuart Alexander Shields.

MS: And mine is Ian Maurice Shields.

Q1: And would you like to tell us about where you were born and where you were brought up?

SS: I was born in Eynsham Hall in Oxford, in the borough of Witney, this hall was--, during the war this hall was let out, oh, opened up rather for expectant mothers, and for also as a rest and recreation place for American air force personnel. And it's--, yeah, it's quite a substantial place, I mean we went back there and as soon as I--, I mean I don't remember any of it, you're not going to believe that [laughs] but I don't. And then the next thing I can remember is being in North Wembley where our parents had moved and from there we moved to Wembley itself where I started my apprenticeship at aged 15, after leaving school, that's what we did in those days, people left school at 15 years old. And I stayed at that yard at Brentford for just under, under five years, and in 1961 I went to sea with a company called the Port Line Limited.

Q1: And how come you--, what was the yard that you were apprenticed at, where did you...

SS: Well the official title was...

Q1: Where was it located?

SS: Oh, it was located on Lots Ait at Brentford, Brentford was a pretty grubby place in those days because you had a big gas works [doorbell ringing].

Q1: Just going to pause. [Pause in recording].

SS: Right, yeah, in those days when I--, we went there, first went there in 1956, Lots Ait as I said Brentford was a grubby place, it was quite--, because in the--, just off the--, on the high street further out of the centre of the town was a massive gas works, and that has long since gone, and of course that had an effect on the whole area. And but we--, it was a barge and tug repair yard and we were a--, put in the--, we were apprenticed fitter and turners, that's what they called us, and that's when we got our first experience with working with marine equipment and marine diesels and that kind of thing. And the yard built a couple of tugs whilst we were there, and but that the other thing that they did there was to dry dock all these barges that used to go up to the Grand Union--, 'cause the entrance to the Grand Union Canal is at Brentford and they used to dry dock the barges for, I don't know, painting and--, we never had anything to do with that as engineers. That was carried out by the labours staff out in the yard.

Q1: So you were apprenticed to do what, to be a fitter at...

SS: Well fitter and turner, that...

Q1: What is that, if you could maybe explain a little bit about what a fitter and turner is.

SS: Okay, we would be apprenticed and work with a tradesman, a fitter, and we would be working on the diesel engines of the tugs, we would--, any machinery, that we worked on that. Later on when we built, they built the tug and one is still running today, we put the engines in it, put the stern tube and the propeller and everything like that on, and the rudder, everything like that, we did all that. And there were various--, mainly it's overhauling stuff, and occasionally what they would do is they would ask us as apprentices, as we sp--, you know, got older and more experienced, they would send us down to the docks in London to board various tugs to do repair jobs to keep them going.

Q1: And would this be later on in your apprenticeship, how did it sort of build up your sort of involvement with the...

SS: In--, they--, you know, as you gain confidence they--, we--, you learn it from the fitters, they teach you everything, and that was including using machinery, lathes and shaping machines

and various--, all sorts of other machinery. And but they would pull these tugs into the dockside there and we would just board them and pull them all apart, do overhauls, the same sort of thing that they do on ships really.

Q1: And did you work alongside each other as apprentices 'cause you were...

SS: Oh yeah.

Q1: Apprenticed at the same...

MS: Oh yes.

SS: Yeah, Ian came after me.

Q1: Apprenticed at the same boatyard?

MS: Yeah.

Q1: 'Cause you had a family connection with another place didn't you, why did you have--, how did you end up at the...

SS: Oh, you mean Silley Weir?

Q1: Yeah.

SS: Well Silley Weir was based in the--, in--, right on the King George the Fifth dock in London and it's quite a way to go [laughs], in fact my father did that, or our father I should say did that because at that time he was living in Harrow and he used to cycle all the way from Harrow to the Royal Albert--, sorry the King George the Fifth Dock every morning to go to work, and I don't know if you're familiar with that area, those docks, but they had the swing bridges that used to move out of the way to let ships go through it, if he arrived and a swing bridge was out he would be late for work, what do you think they did? They sent him home, so he'd cycled all that way from Harrow, I mean to be told to go home, I don't know how many times that happened but he did tell us.

Q1: So it was a practicality that you--, partly?

SS: Yeah, because by this time dad had finished his apprenticeship there and he started working for the Thames Steam Lighterage Company Limited, which eventually turned into the Thames and General Lighterage, and the repair yard was at Brentford, so that's closer to where we lived than the Royal Docks here, so that's where they put us, they put us in there. We were guided solely by dad, we were...

Q1: Yeah, do you remember as sort of younger boys, sort of did you ever visit your dad at work or do you have any memories of your dad working there, yeah?

SS: Oh yeah, yeah, because dad used to work, it--, dad used to work 12 hour shifts on the Thames, on the tug, 'cause he didn't work in the repair yard, he worked on the tug itself. On the Thames the engineer aboard the tug is called the driver, and dad was a driver, and that he was a--, obviously that--, you must be aware that the tides used to come up the river, I forget how was it, an hour between each side, an hour later?

MS: Yeah, yeah, an hour later if I remember.

SS: An hour later, each tide is an hour later than the previous one so consequently he would do a 12 hour shift, so he'd join the tug at Brentford, and the reason Brentford was chosen is 'cause that was the entrance to the Grand Union Canal and they used to shoot the barges, I say shoot, because they'd bring the tow of six barges up the Thames, and they would then tie off, I don't know, five of them I suppose, and they'd get one barge alongside the tug like this, head straight for the entrance to the Grand Union Canal, full speed ahead, whoomph, and then full stern up that and then the guys on the--, the men on the tug would just go up there with the ropes and the tug would just--, the barge rather would just keep going, all the way up to the first lock in the Grand Union Canal. And then he'd go around and pick another up and do that. So that's why they changed the shift there. And occasionally, I mean dad, I used to borrow his car sometimes, but it meant that I had to go down when he finished his shift to drive him home, that was it.

Q1: So did you overlap with your dad, were you apprenticed at the same time?

SS: Did we ever, what?

Q1: Did you--, were you at the same yard at the same time?

SS: Oh yeah, yeah, yeah, everybody on the river knew dad, oh him [all laugh]. Yeah.

Q1: So what--, what sort of memories do you have of working in the yard, were there many--, I mean did you feel kind of looked after and...

SS: Yeah, yeah, I mean most of the time we were either in the workshop itself with the fitters working on a bench, where we'd be overhauling various bits and pieces, or making things in the machines, or we would be working aboard a tug which would be berthed alongside there, doing all kinds of different jobs that need to be done.

Q1: And did you--, Ian did you find sort of a different between your apprenticeship, I mean how--, 'cause you came later didn't you? You said your apprenticeship...

MS: Yeah, so I was, yeah, I was born at [inaudible 00:09:38] Road, North Brentwood.

SS: Yeah, he were, that's right.

MS: And Sally told me I was born when a doodlebug went over [all laugh] with the British Oxygen Company the other side which--, or Wrigley's chewing gum people were there.

SS: Yeah, that's right, yeah.

MS: I started there in 1959, and the only trouble was is actually getting there at a certain time, if you didn't get there on time, you only had to be one minute late and you'd lose what they call a quarter.

SS: Quarter of an hour.

MS: Quarter of an hour, but if you were 15 minutes...

Q1: Did you kind of punch in was it, or did you...

MS: Oh yes, we had the clock-in, and if you were just over the 15 minutes you got clocked an hour [laughs], so and it is difficult trying to do this, 'cause Stuart would be here there, 'cause he eventually ended up taking me, he's had a motorbike, but it didn't always work out, Stuart might be here and then I'd have to use transport modes, yeah, it was sometimes very difficult. But all in all, I would--, I'd like to think that we were given a very good grounding in engineering.

SS: Oh absolutely.

MS: And I couldn't fault them on that.

SS: No.

MS: And it's served us well all our lives, so yeah.

Q1: Did you combine it with college, or is it--, you were sort of, was it practically based in the yard and then some study or...

SS: What the apprenticeship?

Q1: Yeah.

MS: Yes, yeah, over certain night schooling in Alperton is where I went, I must admit that academically I was never good at that sort of thing, and mine was in--, with my hands.

SS: Ian was a better engineer than me...

MS: It's just--, yeah, a lot of times, you know, on any of these sort of things you got on, you learn by experience, and common sense, and unfortunately there's a lot of people out there with all sorts of qualification without common sense, take it from me [laughs].

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: And I've had some of them with me [laughs].

Q1: Do you remember the people who trained you, the...

MS: Yes.

Q1: Obviously you were saying that you kind of learnt by doing and so you're very much beholden to the kind of people who are training you, I mean did you have any memories of people who really influenced you?

MS: Oh yes, I mean we--, I think I explained this to Bea, whereby yeah, our workshop foreman, Bill Tapp.

SS: Oh yeah?

MS: T-a-p-p, oh [sighs], he used to have a nickname for everybody, we had a storekeeper in there, his name was Plastow so he got called Sticker for Plasticine [all laugh], there was Bill--, there was Frank, who was a fitters mate, there was Bill Jones who was one of the labourers, he used to bite his nails so far down they was right down to the quick.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: And he would still be picking at them, and the skin would be growing over, oh terrible. We had one guy there he used to sit there all day long grinding in valves like this.

SS: Charlie?

MS: Taking them out, cleaning them all, Charlie Heaton, putting a bit of grinding paste in there, you know, taking all the marks out of the valves, and all day long he'd sit there with a fag hanging out of his mouth, [all laugh], still see him to this day. And we had one guy there, who unfortunately I always used to end up, was Kipper.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: Oh, he would teeth like you wouldn't believe, I mean...

SS: Row of bombed houses [laughs].

MS: Oh, kerbstones, you know? Oh. State. And he used to stink of this pipe, I mean really stink. And go--, he used to come back, go with him, do this, oh, no, get in the tight spot and he used to stink, it was terrible with some of them [laughs]. But, you know, coming back to names, if he wanted anybody, he'd stick his head out of his office, which is a corner slot inside the workshop, and open his door and for Stuart he'd be, "Stuart!" for the storeman it was, "Sticker," called them--, he never--, he was too lazy to walk up the other end of the workshop, and we always had to go to him. Yeah, [laughs].

Q1: So what kind of boats did you work on in the workshop?

MS: Well but it wasn't a question of working on boats or tugs in a workshop, we were in the workshop preparing and making parts for the tugs if they wore out, or bits of machinery were taken off the tugs, brought into the workshop where they could be and overhauled.

SS: Overhauled there.

MS: And then they were put back on-board and reassembled, that there wasn't--, there was a sort of planned maintenance system there whereby so many hours for this, and so many hours for that, but they never really stuck to that did they? Their attitude probably quite rightly was, yeah, if it ain't broke don't fix it.

SS: Yeah, yeah.

MS: And then that is the right attitude to have.

SS: I think probably one of the amazing things about that, that island, was you know, it's maybe spring tides that come up really high, and we'd be in the workshop, the workshop all had

wooden floors, wooden, you know, and [laughs] they had to put sandbags against the doors to stop the water coming in, but it didn't make any difference because the water used to come up through the floor.

MS: Come up through the floor [laughs], yeah, it's the spring tides, you get those spring tides and it really is high, very high.

SS: But not very often, but it did happen, and of course the wildlife outside, then, once the water had come up you'd see all these rats scurrying about all over the place.

MS: Like rats leaving a sinking ship they used to say [laughs].

SS: Yeah, honestly, you'd never see that there, yeah.

Q1: So you'd just get on with it with...

SS: You just had to get on with it, that was it, and I mean in--, there was--, what they did to get over that was all the machinery was all belt driven from an electric motor so what they did was they figured out how deep the water comes into the workshop sometime and they just raise the motors a little bit off the floor to stop them going underwater, and yeah [laughs].

Q1: So but you always felt--, did you feel kind of safe working where you did?

MS: Oh yeah.

SS: Yes [all talking at once].

MS: Well you didn't have a...

Q1: There weren't works place injuries and that kind of...

MS: A health and safety executive breathing down your neck.

SS: No, there was none of that in those days.

MS: Or, you know, a--, one of these forms you make out, risk assessment, no no no, nobody did any of that sort of thing in those days, but be quite honest, I mean they do it nowadays but to me it's a load of old rubbish, if you're careful, and always think beforehand is that dangerous to do that, perhaps I ought to get this, or get that, as a safety procedure.

SS: That's it.

MS: But to me it takes up too much time.

SS: Yeah, oh yeah.

MS: Nowadays takes up far too much time, the man of lost hours through it is quite incredible.

Q1: So you weren't around sort of workplace injuries or people feeling unsafe but...

MS: No, never, only--, I never felt unsafe there.

Q1: Was it noisy in there, what was it--, what was the noise like in there?

SS: No, it wasn't too noisy in the workshop was it?

Q1: [Inaudible 00:16:49] no.

MS: Beg your pardon?

SS: It was never too noisy in the workshop was it?

MS: No, no.

SS: Not really, except the singing [laughs].

MS: No. No, we were put...

Q1: So have you made--, did you make sort of friends for life there, I mean it sounds there was quite a nice camaraderie.

SS: No, they'll all be dead now.

MS: They'll all be dead, but no, I think they were more like ships that passed in the night really, because we were there for--, we were always friendly with them, don't get me wrong.

SS: Yeah.

MS: But never really what I would call lifelong friends were they as such?

SS: No, well we lived a long way away.

MS: They were working colleagues, that's all.

SS: Yeah, the--, it was--, out, especially out in the yard where there were boilermakers and people that worked on the steelwork, it was all heavily unionised, you know, and there was one incident where this chap that he was talking about--, Bill Tapp the foreman said to me [doorbell ringing] [pause in recording], yeah, Bill Tapp said to me, "I think you really ought to learn how to do electric welding you see," so I said, "Oh yeah, okay." I mean foreman tells an apprentice what to do, okay, so he sent me out into the yard, running a weld all up and down a piece of steel plate, and next thing I know he tapped me on the shoulder, he says, "You better come in, they're all threatening to go out on strike," [laughs], 'cause they feared that that was their job, you know, and why is there a--, why is an apprentice fitter and turner doing welding. So I never ever learnt to weld whilst I was there because of the union business, but...

MS: What they referred to is demarcation.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: And to be quite honest, this demarcation ruined all the shipyards in Britain.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: Ruined them all, because of that.

SS: They did have one strike there though didn't they?

MS: Yes, I can remember, of course it didn't affect us, because we worked for the company, and apprentices were exempt.

SS: Yeah.

MS: The other thing we were exempt from was with the intention of joining the merchant service, we were exempt from call-up, we weren't called up to the army, but a few of the lads in the yard were called up weren't they?

SS: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Who were apprentice barge builders, or metalworkers or whatever, they were called up.

Q1: This was for National Service?

SS: National Service, yeah.

MS: National Service, yes, we were exempt.

Q1: Okay, so did you do National Service at all like later or?

MS: No.

SS: No no.

Q1: You didn't have to do any?

SS: No, no, I mean I...

MS: No, we didn't fancy getting up to our eyes in muck and bullets [laughs].

SS: No, that's right, I always used to say that those people are there for the glory, we were there for the money [all laugh].

MS: Oh dear!

SS: Yeah.

MS: It was--, there was lots of instances, there, which were amusing, and sometimes weren't so amusing, but then it's like any job, you just do it and go, oh yeah, I don't want to do that like, you know, so you try and disappear and let somebody else do it.

Q1: So how did things change at the yard as your apprentice years went by, did you...

MS: I would say what happened was, when we were there, we had quite a workforce, in the workshop, and then within, oh, six months after me or maybe eight months after I'd joined in 1959, I think we lost about half the men, were made redundant. Then it got--, as time went on, by the time I finished my apprenticeship we'd gone from something like around about 20 fitters and various fitters' mates, I think we were down to around about three or four fitters, and about three fitters' mates, and a couple of labourers, and one storeman and that was it. We'd gradually lost all the workforce, the things had got tighter and tighter and tighter, and I think a lot of is brought about by workload was gradually tailing off within the London area, for the use of tugs, barges, anything like that, and more was going by road.

SS: Yeah, containers.

MS: Rather unfortunately which is why you--, in this day in age you have so much pollution everywhere, through that reason. They don't use the waterways that like they should do.

SS: No.

MS: If they used the waterways you wouldn't have any big heavy trucks going through London or anything, take it to Brentford or wherever, and then you'd leave the roads clear, no, it's speed, it was speed took over from volume, where a very foolish thing that, they should have kept the volume and stopped the pollution, who am I to turn around and say, you know?

SS: No, but in those days Ian it wasn't even a consideration, was it?

MS: No, no, it didn't ever...

SS: All they were looking at was how cheap it was to get those goods from there to there, and you know, I mean that destroyed the river traffic really.

MS: When you consider the likes of Rotterdam, [inaudible 00:21:45], Antwerp and the old Germany, they use their waterways to the full, not here, all it is pleasure craft out there, absolute stupidity.

SS: Yeah, that's all you see out there, you don't see tugs towing strings of barges out there do you these days?

MS: No, you'll see the odd tug here and there, towing rubbish barges, all of--, yeah, all the stuff that's going to go somewhere to go into a landfill site, or whatever, that's all you're seeing nowadays, you don't see [inaudible 00:22:17] of any type.

SS: No.

MS: 'Cause everything in those days when we were there, was unloaded from the ships direct into the barges over the side, as well as going onto the land which we had warehouses and then transferred to trucks, then you'd be going over the other side and that then there would go into the barge and then they would take the other--, it just died.

SS: The other thing as well though Ian is the fact that the number, the amount of labour that was involved with this type of vessel, you know, that the ship arrived with cargo onboard and immediately all the dockers, there'd be a big gang of dockers come onboard, of course these days container crane will come down and pick up a container weighing 40 tonnes, boom, that's it, straight ashore, that's it, onto the back of a lorry and on the lorry goes out, straight out of the gate, off to the customer.

Q1: So late '50s, early 1960s that's something you saw happen quite quickly and quite automatically?

MS: Yes, it started--, yes, it started to shut down.

SS: When I left the yard in 1961 to go to sea, the decline hadn't really been noticed then, and in fact I wasn't in the workshop by then because towards the end of my apprenticeship they sent me across to the main office where the drawing office is, or was, and I had a six months in the drawing office working on and doing drawings, and again that--, when I had to do my seagoing certificates that helps me a great deal 'cause I knew how to read plans and stuff like this so...

Q1: Was that sort of after your apprenticeship, or was that an additional thing then that they...

SS: That drawing office was part of the apprenticeship, I don't know if you ever went over there did you?

MS: No, I didn't, what had happened was the--, because the yard was shutting down quite considerably, there was only three apprentices left, there was myself, Keith, and [inaudible 00:24:17], we were the only three apprentices left within the workshops and they were shutting down more and more. And they talked about moving [laughs] me to [Campbell Aids? 00:24:31] in Liverpool, 'cause that's what they could do you see, they could--, you went where you were sent, so for example if there was no more time for me to complete my apprenticeship in Brentford, they would send me to wherever to complete my apprenticeship. And...

SS: I know where [Campbell Aids? 00:24:50] is a shipyard.

MS: In Liverpool, so not that they're very good in any case, been in there a couple of times [all laugh], but consequently I said, "Oh, I'm not going to blooming Liverpool, looking out for a suitcase or some grotty little blooming room in some boarding house, no way," so yeah, I spoke to my dad, I said, "I don't want to do that," he said, "Leave it to me," and he had very good contacts in Port Line.

SS: Yeah.

MS: And I left in October the 11st in '63, and I was away on my first trip to sea on the 5th of November, to New Zealand.

Q1: So they released you, is that...?

SS: Yeah.

MS: They released me, what happened, what they used to do was they used to send you up to the Board of Trade to get a--, what did they used to call that now? Can't think of the word. An assessment, to see if you had enough time in.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: What they did with me is they took into account my, you did six months before you were apprenticed, which is like a period where they'd see if you could do the job, they included that in my apprenticeship, which means I had a minimum of four years and they accepted that, grading, that was the word, they used to send you up for a grading, and I got, I think mine was 2B which allowed me to go to sea, and consequently, well it was done so quickly that I had to get uniform, I had to get this, I had to get that. And but all sorts of odds and ends [laughs], go get a discharge book here, bit of paperwork here, bit of paperwork there, round Town Hill area all that's because where the shipping offices were wasn't it?

SS: Yeah.

MS: You know, so...

Q1: And the other, so there were three apprentices at that point, what happened to the two apprentices that were left at the yard?

MS: The last I heard, years ago now, Keith ended up at a company called Nicol & Andrew, he's quite good with his hands Keith and they used to do--, go out to the--, they used to overhaul this, and bits and pieces for all sorts of machinery, and then--, and the engineers there would be sent to ships for grinding crankshafts, things like that, and well Keith, he was the same age as me now, so he'd be long retired I would have thought. Amery did go to sea, Keith didn't, he stayed and continued working here as a lad, and Amery went to sea and apparently he only did one voyage, I think it was 11 months, and he didn't like it.

SS: Ran after that.

MS: And he left, well he was an Anglo Indian and nice fellow, Amery, but they would have given him a hard time, just 'cause he was an Anglo Indian which I find a little bit deplorable, because there were some good blokes amongst them, and he was alright.

SS: Yeah, well I didn't--, when I came to the end of my time, I didn't even know I was going, because I was in the office just clean, whereas in the workshop we'd be black, [laughs], we--, I went into the--, I used to go to lunch with the office girls you see, used to annoy me 'cause they got luncheon vouchers [all laugh]. And whilst we were out at lunch, when we got back from lunch it was on a Friday, that the girl that used to--, that, you know, would stand by the telephones, she said, "Oh you've had a phone call from Port Line, please phone this person," I didn't know anything about this, it had all been fixed up by dad. So I phoned them up and they said, "Oh, we're looking for somebody to join the Port Alfred in Belfast next Wednesday, are you alright for that?" that was it [laughs].

Q1: And were you alright for that then?

SS: Well I had to be didn't I?

MS: He didn't have a choice [laughs].

SS: That was the Friday in the afternoon.

MS: Same for me.

SS: I was hauled in front of the managing director of the yard, and those--, that papers that you saw earlier.

MS: Yeah, that was Colonel W Johns wasn't it?

SS: Yeah, and I had to sign those, signed off, off, boom, Monday I was into London to see these people that he was talking about, Tuesday I got measured up for a uniform, I didn't get the uniform, it had to be sent to Belfast, and by Wednesday I was on a train going up to Liverpool, and I'm thinking, I wonder how long this takes [all laugh].

Q1: So what was your dad doing for a living at that point?

SS: Dad was still on the river, but in 1966 I think it was, am I right there?

MS: No, I think it was later than it.

SS: Was it?

MS: I think it might have later than that, they were laying everybody off, and they'd dangled redundancy money and all sorts of things and so he'd took that, and he left the tugs. Then what he decided, he didn't know what to do with himself, so he decided that he would go back to sea, but he felt he was too old to go back as an engineer officer, so he went back as what they call a senior mechanic on board, which was under the auctioneers.

SS: With Port Line.

MS: With Port Line, and he stayed there until, oof?

SS: It's a shame actually you haven't got his discharge papers.

MS: Yeah, I couldn't find it.

SS: Because the discharge book, it gives you the--, when you sign on a ship and when you sign off a ship, sign on and sign off, each voyage, and dad last, I think dad's last voyage was in 1938 wasn't it?

MS: No, he left in 1937.

SS: '37, okay.

MS: Yeah, 1937, what had happened with him was he first went with--, if you looked at those [inaudible 00:30:48] you'll see Fred Townsend and Company, which is who he was apprenticed with first, 'cause they used to shove you around here and you'd do six months there, a year there, six months there, so you'd got a broad spread of engineering knowledge. He worked at a laundry.

SS: He did, Clacton Laundry.

MS: Yeah, that's right, he worked at--, he was in Silley and Weir, he was at Townsends.

SS: They wouldn't talk to him when they found out that his mother, our grandmother...

MS: Was Silley..

SS: Was Silley, the workforce refused to talk to our dad.

MS: Ostracised him.

Q1: Why is that then?

SS: Because they thought he was a spy for the company.

MS: Well Uncle Jack was [laughs]--, Uncle Jack that was his uncle I should say, so he'd be my great uncle I assume, so he got him in there and he was apprenticed there for a while, and

consequently he was the boss of Silley & Weir in London, Silley & Weir in London wasn't just there, that was at another place called Silley & Cox down in Falmouth, which is no longer that name, it's still a builders yard and repair yard in Falmouth. But...

SS: Dad didn't get any favouritism, no, he didn't get him...

MS: No, no.

SS: If he was late for work, they'd send him home.

MS: And in actual fact he used to say, he'd got given a hard time, because of the relationship, which deplorable really, but there you go, that's the way they were in those days.

SS: But when he reapplied with the Port Line, he told me that he went up, 'cause they used to have a shipping master, as everybody signs on, sign your name here, boom boom, and each crew member would go through this, and there's your discharge book, let's have a look, they saw dad's discharge book and of course his last ship was, you said 1937, and here we are in 1967, he said, "Jesus, where you been for the last 30 years?" [all laugh].

Q1: So did many people do a similar thing and go back to sea, 'cause obviously as a business with the Thames was shrinking...

SS: I don't know, dad...

Q1: Was that sort of a common move from the boatyards to off to sea or...

MS: There were a lot of guys who did that, but not within the company that we worked for which is Thames Steam Tug and Lighterage Company, which eventually got merged with General Lighterage, and then they called Thames and General Lighterage Company. The general lighterage used to tow all the coal barges up, right the way up to Brentford, and the coal would be moved from there to that gasworks and so on and so on, before it was all shut down, it used to make [inaudible 00:33:30] more than anything else, as well as the, you know, gas, so...

SS: I think dad missed it didn't he, he missed the life, I think he missed it, and that's why he went back to sea, when in fact, you know, we went to the Port Line reunion over there, the guy that I met there, he said to me, "Your dad, your dad was really good at his job but he couldn't take the heat."

MS: These engine rooms you've got to remember could be anything up to, invariably around about 107 to 110 degrees, and if you got on the likes of [inaudible 00:34:04] it was about 128.

SS: Yeah.

MS: And you could go in there with a crisp white boiler suit and you'd come out and it'd be grey, and you could wring it out.

SS: Oh, look, I've come out of engine rooms where the sweat's been dripping off the bottom of the boiler suit, soaking wet.

Q1: 'Cause even now there isn't a maximum working temperature is there?

SS: Oh no, they don't worry about that.

MS: No no, no.

Q1: There isn't a maximum.

SS: No.

MS: The only thing that was a problem, was noise.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: Consequently both Stuart and I have industrial ear damage.

SS: I've got tinnitus in this ear now, it's very annoying.

MS: And, you know, one of the vessels I was on there, one of the guys come around 'cause everybody had been kicking up about the noise, and he went down [laughs] and my cabin was up there and the crew's was down there, so he were about similar, my cabin seemed to be quieter. But down the crew cabins, it was 110 decibels.

SS: Oh well.

MS: Wow! And that was when the cargo engines were going, which were, we had these two men engines which they drove hydraulic gear boxes, which supplied hydraulic power to all the cargo pumps, this is for the tankers. And the racket, wow!

SS: Yeah.

MS: Well some of them, a couple of those, you'd go to bed at night and you'd have to have your earmuffs on, but [laughs]...

SS: It's only in later years, I mean whilst I was with this company, 1961 to 1971, we weren't provided with any kind of safety equipment at all.

MS: Nothing.

SS: No ear protectors, no working shoes, or anything like that. We had to, you know, pay for our own.

MS: They didn't start in giving you ear defenders or anything like that [all talking at once] until around about 1982 to '83, thereabouts. Of course by then you've got screaming turbines going all the time, it's done damage already and there's not much you can do about it. I mean I've left my what's names off today, I can hear, but it's certain levels, and funny enough I've had to put one of mine in for repair, it's damp or something has gotten in, don't ask me how that happens. But it was just part of the job and you just accepted it, or you didn't have a job, simple as that.

SS: The noise can be so intense that the hair on the back of your neck rises up [laughs], I'm not kidding, oh yeah.

MS: Yeah.

SS: Screaming turbines going, you know.

Q1: But presumably that was, you just, you were used to it weren't you, or you were unaware at the time that it was kind of...

SS: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Yeah, yeah.

SS: These days of course you've got the ear protectors, and but there you go. We've accepted that now [all laugh], in fact if I had hearing damage, really seriously, there'd be nobody I could sue, this company is no longer in existence [all laugh].

MS: Might add that Port Line was part of Cunard, which is still going but even then again saying that I believe it's owned by Americans or Arabs or somebody else like that.

SS: I think it's Americans isn't it?

Q1: So you were at sea for a good, about...

SS: Myself?

Q1: Yeah, yeah.

SS: About 40 years.

MS: Yeah, I'm the same, 40 years.

Q1: Yeah, and how did things change, like I mean obviously there was a lot of change in this 40 years, what were the positive changes, I mean?

SS: We got paid more [all laugh].

MS: Positive changes, well I wouldn't say they were positive, what they did was more and more automation was coming into it, into the fore.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: And consequently for example, when I was working for Andrew Weir and Company, which is referred to as the Bank Line, which I might add Stuart's company that he used to work for and now owns.

SS: They own Bank Line.

MS: And they are starting to build ships again, so I've been told, but you had, you know, about eight engineers on there, and they had, you know, up to 20 crew, engine room crew, but nowadays it got cut back, and cut back, got cut back as automation took over. To the point whereby all you would end up with on board is, so example of myself as chief, and a second engineer, and one what we referred to as a motor man, or a greaser, and that was it. So all those men were gone.

SS: Do you know what they do on a modern ship today, you know what they do, engineers do at night time, five o'clock when everybody finishes work normally, they come out of the engine room, they shut the door and turn off the lights and leave it all running, it all works on its...

MS: Automatic.

SS: Nobody down there at all, nobody.

MS: No, I might add that everything is alarmed, it's alarmed everywhere. And for example, you could be sort of, you know, it's your--, used to do 24 hours each, on the bells.

SS: Alarm bells.

MS: On the alarm bells, so they weren't loud, wouldn't wake up the whole shop, they'd be just in your cabin and usually above your bunk or something like that it'd be a buzzer, that would disturb you, my god, I've got to go down there and find out what is wrong. Invariably it was a load of rubbish, but once I just--, where was it?

SS: You were given a certain amount of time, and it's usually three or four minutes to get from laying asleep on your bed to getting into the control room to find out which alarm it is and accept the alarm and then go and fix it, if it took you longer than that then the whole alarms all went off and woke up the entire ship [laughs].

Q1: So I mean, you know, so just thinking about what you were doing then, if we could maybe sort of summarise that sort of journey from when you first started apprentice, as apprentices, to through when you kind of finished your kind of working lives, how would you kind of summarise the detail of that, as a--, with regards to sort of what you were actually kind of doing and how that changed?

SS: Would I have changed it, would I have changed it, would I?

Q1: Yeah.

SS: No, I don't think so.

MS: I don't think so, no.

SS: I don't think so.

MS: I've been asked this once before, you know, would you, you know, do that again, and I--, you know, sat and thought about it, quite probably, yes.

SS: Yeah, but not in the way they do it--, not in the way they do things today.

MS: I don't think direct I would do what we did.

Q1: So you think, talking about the specific companies, 'cause you've worked for like very specific companies throughout the...

SS: The best company I worked for actually wasn't the--, Port Line taught me a great deal because I was green, you know, I just came straightaway from apprenticeship and...

Q1: So you started off your apprenticeship?

SS: Yeah, at the yard, at Brentford. And then went with the Port Line, and then after the Port Line I went, because the last ship I was on which was that one in Port Line, no, it wasn't, it was Port Montreal, but the one before that we were on the Japan New Zealand, Japan New Zealand and I found that Japan is a very interesting place, so different from anywhere else that you go to in the world. And I thought, you know, I rather like coming here, so when we--, I was doing a certificate, 'cause engineers have to--, so the deck officers have to pass certificates, soon as I passed my second engineer certificate, I got a letter from the China Navigation Company, based here in London, or they have an office here, yeah, they've still got an office here in London. And Swire House, and it said, you know, "Will you come and work for us?" so work for us, and then they started talking about tax. We weren't liable for UK income tax, I thought blimey.

MS: Let's be honest, you've got to have what's in it for me?

SS: Yeah [all laugh].

Q1: So this was the Chinese...

SS: The China Navigation Company, they're actually a British company, they're based, the main office is in, or was, I don't know if it's not--, it's not now, in Hong Kong, but they show how old they are, the Swire Group Post Office box number in Hong Kong is number one, PO Box 1, Hong Kong.

MS: That adds that they own [inaudible 00:42:26] Airlines.

SS: [Inaudible 00:42:27] Pacific Airways.

MS: They own Coca-Cola.

SS: [Inaudible 00:42:29]. Well they don't own Coca-Cola.

MS: No, they own some of it I saw?

SS: No no, what they do is...

Q1: And did you move onto that company as well?

SS: No, no.

MS: No, no, no, I...

Q1: Were you Port Line?

MS: No, what I did was I was with Port Line for just over three years, and then I'd had a bit of a falling out [laughs], I can't remember over what it was, but Stuart knows that I fell out with one particular chief engineer quite badly, so I left there and I went with [inaudible 00:42:56], and have been for a while, I didn't like them, I think what put me off was that it kept me in, for want of a better word, rock dodging, all around the United Kingdom, which is in and out of ports, never went very far, until they asked me to go on a--, 'cause they owned Royal Mail as well, and they asked me to go on this...

Q1: They owned what sorry?

MS: They--, this [inaudible 00:43:17] owned Royal Mail as well.

SS: That's the shipping company, or what was...

MS: Yeah, and they wanted me to join this partic--, the vessel, and it was what they called, the main engine on there was a double acting [Harlen Wolf? 00:43:28] and an engineer's nightmare that thing, and I got onboard it and I was working by, and then they said, "Oh, we'd like you to sail on that, it's going to River Plate," it was a wreck, a total wreck, I said, "I'm not going there," [laughs].

SS: That was it.

MS: And so that was it, so I thought, no no no, I've had enough of that, and then I joined the Andrew Weir and I was with them for just over seven years, and of course in those days you signed a ship's articles, for two years, now you could be on there two years, and if the vessel was its way home, after two years, it might take six months to get home, they could keep you there for that six months, oh, it's on its way home via here, here, there, everywhere. I bumped into some ships figuratively speaking, and I knew some guys on board there, and they would have been out two years and four months, away from United Kingdom and their families. This was a common occurrence, nowadays, most you'll do is a couple of months, there are still some companies which will get you to do all sorts of time, if you're prepared to do it, that's entirely up to the individual.

Q1: So you were at Andrew Weir in the '70s, and you were at...

SS: I was with the China Navigation Company?

MS: Yeah, then after I got married and then I left the Andrew Weir Bank Line, and I joined a coastal company which was [C Roebotham & Son? 00:45:04] which is coastal tanker company, and I joined them as second engineer. And then in 1975 was it, I was promoted to chief, and I stayed with them for many years. They got taken over by P&O, and that was disaster, I left there, and I went to Stolt-Nielsen, Stolt-Nielsen [inaudible 00:45:35] used to call himself, biggest chemical company in the world, it's got more ships than anybody, based in [Helvisand? 00:45:44] in Norway. And I stayed with them for three years, I was chief with them once, the rest of the time I was first engineer, which is second engineer really, but I was earning more money as second engineer there than I was as chief on the other one so I wasn't complaining. And then from there I got fed up with being first, because it was dead man's shoes to get the chief's job full time back, and I got a phone call from James Fisher who had taken over P&O tank ships, they are still working today, they are based in Barrow-in-Furness, and I said, "Well same conditions, rank, this, that, money?" "Yes," "Seniority?" "Yes," so I went with them and stayed with them till I retired.

Q1: Till you retired.

SS: After the China Navigation Company I got a job ashore, I was working for a company who put computer programs on ships that form maintenance programmes, they sent me all over the place, and even I went to--, I had to go to Iran, and join a ship there, a tanker. And what did they do, oh yeah, I don't know, I can't remember why I left there, but it wasn't very good, I didn't like it at all.

MS: You don't think it was that time when you were in Egypt and that guy, when you went out there and that guy tried to--, said he fancied you [laughs]?

SS: Well he didn't put in those words, [all laugh], yeah, I had to leave a ship on the southern end of the Suez Canal, and the first thing I had to do for this agent was to smuggle cartons of cigarettes ashore for him, I said, "Look, I don't even smoke," "Don't worry, don't worry, don't worry, you take," like this you see? Okay, so there we are, we walked down the gangway, I've got bundles of bloody cigarettes, and I said--, and there's the customs man, and I'm like [laughs] this, I thought, I'm going to end up in jail here, needn't have bothered, because when he got as far as the gate, the few, I don't know what, Egyptian they were speaking I suppose, and a carton of cigarettes went like that under the counter and we were through [all laugh], oh dear or dear. And then he said to me, "Where you go now?" I said, "I'm going to Cairo Airport to fly home," "Oh," he said, "well I thought you might like to stay here for a while," I'm looking around this place and it was dreadful and I said, "No, I think I would like to go home," anyway he said, "Well how about a hotel for a couple of hours?" [all laugh], I said, "You've got to be kidding?"

MS: Do you know, some of these guys you had, stewards especially, I mean some of them were very very funny, I'd come back from New Zealand on that [inaudible 00:48:42] and [laughs], and they had this two stewards, they were married to one another see, and he had a big blonde bouffant hair, you know...

Q1: And where were you working then, was this...

MS: I was a junior engineer on board the [inaudible 00:49:01], and I'd been on watch with the junior second engineer and he said to me, we were coming up the River Thames you see...

Q1: Can I just ask, just for a layperson, what are the differences in the roles of second engineer, first engineer, chief engineer and [all talking at once]...

MS: Yeah, second engineer is in--, yeah, second engineer is in charge of the whole engine room, and the chief engineer is in overall charge, and the second engineer reports to the chief engineer.

SS: That's it, and I do all the paperwork.

MS: And there's piles of it, take it from us.

SS: Yeah.

MS: Piles and piles.

Q1: And what was the sort of career progression like, would you have to--, you were back to college to do a particular project or...?

SS: All you had to do to do certificates, but the progression was who do we know, you know, who do we need to fill this position, oh I know, he'll do, and the next thing you know you're in a different rank, you know, you've moved up the scale a bit.

Q1: And you talked about dead man's shoes it was, people took a habit...

SS: Yeah.

MS: In some companies, yes it was [all talking at once].

Q1: People would have those jobs for a--, until they retired?

SS: Yeah.

MS: Whenever.

Q1: Did you have to retire kind of early oh?

SS: I got thrown out of the Swire Group, I was trying navigation at 55.

Q1: That was their policy?

SS: Well yeah, that's right, 55, they figured you were too old.

MS: Mine had a policy in my last company was 62, but by the time I reached 60, I'd reached the stage whereby I was totally fed up with the reams and reams of paperwork, and it wasn't just paperwork, 'cause there's only two of us there, it was also maintenance, and standbys.

SS: She won't know what standbys is.

MS: No, standby means when you're going in and out of port, you always have to have an engineer standing by in the engine room, it didn't matter that it was automatic, that had nothing to do with it.

SS: You just stand there and watch it.

MS: Because the vessel is manoeuvring its engines and you had to be in attendance in case any fault occurred, and it didn't work, then you'd got to...

SS: Jump in.

MS: Jump in quick, sort the problem as fast as you possibly can, there have been instances whereby, never happened to me, but whereby something didn't work and they've hit the lock gates and things like that, you know, so [laughs] and damaged the lock gates and the ships. And in actual fact you go into some of these places, you'll notice that all the docks, all the edging on them is all sandstone, now we always thought that they'd done that purposely, because if a vessel went in there and they're so careful, you always had little bollards out

there, cushions to go against so you didn't damage anything, but the slightest little chip, ooh, and you had to pay for it. It was to me it's a racket.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: It's a way of making money out of the ship owner so they were very very careful. All the docks you'll notice that it's always sandstone.

Q1: So now you're no longer at sea and what's your sort of relationship with the water, and the Thames now?

SS: Only--, in my case it's only that we try and--, because I'm the secretary of the Old Boys' Association, we try and organise an outing every year, something to do with water, and we get all these people together. A lot of them are deep sea master mariners and some of them are company directors and they all belong to--, we're quite famous in my association, you can see it on the website, have you seen the website, yeah, see I'm there aren't I, I'm mentioned there.

Q1: And what's the name of the website?

SS: It's called www. as they all are, swiremariners, one word, swiremariners.com. Unfortunately, the site's in trouble at the moment because some hackers have got in there and we can't add little messages to it like we used to be able to, but there's photographs, loads and loads of photos in there, loads of personnel and people that we all knew. Anyway, after I did that stint with this, with computers on ships, I then was asked to operate with a company who did marketing for various yards and services to do with marine industry, here in London, and they sent me all over the place, I went everywhere from Norway to blooming the Isle of Man to where I can remember, loads of places. And they moved offices and they said, it was last man in, first man out, so I was suddenly out there with no job. So I wondered what to do with myself and I saw our local paper and there was an advert in the paper for somebody to do inspection of engineer for marine, for not marine, for insurance inspections for these various companies, I went around to so many different factories looking at all their equipment and doing reports on how good it was and all the rest of it, and it was to do with insurance companies. I found I was driving around about 4,000 miles a week around the UK, nearly falling asleep at the wheel, and I thought, they're not paying me enough for this [laughs].

Q1: So life on the road wasn't for you?

SS: Oh, terrible, I don't know how lorry drivers do it. And then I decided, I know what I'll do, I'll go back to sea, so I got a job with a company called Hoverspeed, you must have heard of them, they run between--, this wasn't hovercraft or anything like that, it was a roll on roll off ferry they used to bring lorries from France, from like Bologna to Folkestone, I did that for a while. Then they sold the ship so I was out of work again, so I got in touch with a company called Hebridean Island Cruises, and they run, I don't know if they've still got two ships, but they run one which is called Hebridean Princess, I was chief engineer on there.

Q1: And what were the routes on that, on the...

SS: All around the Scottish Isles, and across to Norway, up the Fjords or Norway.

MS: The Queen hired it didn't she?

SS: The Queen hired, the whole Royal family were on there, not whilst I was there, but whilst I was there they had Lady Bird Johnson as a passenger, Lyndon B. Johnson's wife, she's dead now. And I had a long chat with her, she's a nice lady she was. And...

Q1: So really, apart from the time when you were apprenticed, most of your relationship with the water has been at sea has it?

SS: At sea, yeah, the apprenticeship lasted in Ian's case four years?

MS: Yeah.

SS: I was just short of five years and then the rest of the time we were at sea, or marine related.

Q1: Yeah, and what would you think you took from that time with you, sort of that time in the '50s?

SS: Oh you mean my apprenticeship?

Q1: You know, what...

SS: How to use these, and this, [shows items], you know, later on, but we were told how to...

MS: You can fix most things with these, and common sense.

SS: Yeah, that's it, that's what it taught us.

Q1: So how are your hands, how have your hands served you, are they okay?

SS: [Laughs].

MS: How are mine?

Q1: How are your hands?

SS: Oh, Ian's are ruined, Ian's hand's ruined, look at that.

MS: That's got to be repaired [inaudible 00:56:23], I saw the doctor yesterday, they're going to--, but they did that one, and...

Q1: So what's that, that's carpal...

MS: Yeah, it's carpal tunnel or whatever they call it, yeah, it's got another name for it, but...

SS: A lot of engineers get that.

MS: A lot of engineers get that, but it is in families, dad had it and it is, but a lot of engineers got a bad habit of using their hands as hammers, you'd have a spanner there and it's really you should use the hammer but used to go like that to do it and do something.

SS: It gets damaged then you see.

MS: Yeah, I mean you've got as well haven't you Stu?

SS: Only a little, that one there, yeah, it's tight.

MS: It's just starting to come, but...

Q1: But you would never have been warned against that when you were...

MS: No, no.

SS: No, there was no such thing as...

MS: No, never, any of it [laughs].

SS: No, but Hebridean Island Cruises gave me the sack! Because I had the cheek to ask for the winter off, they only worked between, I think it's March and, the ship only runs between March and October I think it is and the rest of the time is spent in the shipyard waiting for the next season to start, and this time my wife was very sick, and I said, "Do you mind if I have the winter off and I'll come back in the spring," I got this letter back saying, "By asking for this you have effectively resigned," I thought, well I could tell them why, but I thought, no no, why should I, I just walked away, that was it. Oh no, I did do one last thing, and that, my last seagoing thing was delivering a luxury 70 foot motor yacht from Nova Scotia in Canada, across the Atlantic to the Azores, then Gibraltar, [inaudible 00:58:13] and Monte Carlo, and this was a private guy who owned the yacht wanted it delivered there. And I was sick as a dog all the way [all laugh], I was, can you believe it, after all those years at sea, as soon as I get on this 70 foot thing, mind you it was December, North Atlantic in December is not a good place to be and I was really bad, never mind.

Q1: So you'd found that you had sea legs only for certain big boats.

SS: Well it's a different sort of motion, and if you're not used to small boats, then it's, yeah, I was seasick. Should be embarrassed about that shouldn't I?

MS: I was on the building of a luxury yacht.

SS: Yeah, Ian was.

MS: In [inaudible 00:58:57] in Italy, and the person who owned Robotham Tank Ships was an American named Ingram, and he decided that he wanted a yacht, and it was built in [inaudible 00:59:18] and it was 65 metres, so fair size, I think it was £10, £15 million, something like that, and I find it was boring, because you weren't allowed to touch anything, you just had to stand there watching these people, you know, I mean and there was some terrible mistakes made in the building of this, I mean the bit that got me, it was up inside these, the building, you know, big covered over area.

Q1: And whereabouts was this built, what was the...

MS: In [inaudible 00:59:55] in Italy, in Tuscany, and just down the road from another place called [Forto Dimarmi? 01:00:03] where in actual fact I think [inaudible 01:00:06] was born or...

SS: Who did he play for [all laugh]?

Q1: And how did...

MS: Yeah, what group's he play for, yeah [laughs].

Q1: And how did you end up being there and being involved with that?

MS: Well what happened was, and the ship owners on, they'd been on it for some time, the vessel, [inaudible 01:00:25], chemical carrier, and they decided that they were going to send this out to the Caribbean, and they were going to move me onto something else and then I got called up to the office, he said, "Look, we're having this ship built, it's been going on now for about three or four months, would you like to be on the engineer on that?" and I thought, hmmm, well I've said before, what's in it for me, oh they offered me this--, oh, you'd get lots of leave, and it's this money, and that money I said, "Oh really?" and when it comes down to the nitty-gritty it wasn't a lot of money, if anything I was losing a bit, but it was the fact I was getting away from the tankers more than anything else. Anyway I went out to [inaudible 01:01:10] I was out there for almost six months, on the building of this, and Fitz Ingram, nice chap,

billionaire, met him a few times, flew back on his private plane, I got on very well with him, but not so well with the naval architect there, oh, I won't go into him, just he's no longer here in any case. But at one time Fitz Ingram wasn't there and his girlfriend decided that she would visit this yacht and go around it. And the master...

Q1: So, what was your involvement with the actual...

MS: I was actually involved with the overseeing of the engineering department, there's things that were built correctly, and now I might add that when they--, I hadn't really noticed at first and then one day I'm walking into the yard, I thought--, into the back of the yard, I thought, that doesn't look right, oh my eyes are pretty straight, so when I got a tape measure, and it's a twin screw vessel, right, there's the centre line.

SS: Two propellers.

MS: Yeah, there's the centre line, there's the rudder you see, and I measure from the centre line, to one side we had the stern tube come out, and then other side, and it was over a foot out, a whole 12 inches out, between from that one to that one. So one was further out than that one [laughs].

SS: How did they come out with that?

MS: You tell me, well of course when I passed a remark about it, this naval architect said, "Oh, you don't know what you're talking about," blah blah blah, and I said, "Well either I'm going stupid or something, go and have a look," and he come back, "Oh we won't say anything about that," and [laughs], I said, "You've got to be kidding," anyway, this lady, Pixie her name was, she came down and she's walking around, seeing, and [inaudible 01:03:06] passengers and the owners was luxurious, and she went into the owners suite and [coughs] she opens this wardrobe, a walk-in wardrobe, and she says, "Oh my god, I couldn't even swing a pair of ladies knickers in here," and so I said under my breath, and she'd got damn good hearing, I said, "Ooh, bigger than my blooming cabin," you see, she sort of looked at me like that, didn't say anything. So we followed her round, me and the captain, went on the bridge, and it was all beautifully done, the consort was all blue leather, I mean this vessel was costing millions, everything was beautiful up there, and she said, "Oh what a lovely place to play," so I turned around and said to the captain, I said, "She'll have to ask your permission to come up here won't she?" she overheard it, next thing you know, oh must have been next day or day after, apparently she'd gone back and she'd complained, "Nobody's going to turn around and tell

me where I can god damn go and where I can't go," next thing I know had the engineering director out there...

SS: You're sacked?

MS: That--, well basically [laughs], he says, "You can't stay here," now Fred Row is a good friend of mine, I said, "Well what do you mean?" so he turned around and told me, and I said, "Oh, well I'll go back to the tankers," he said, "No, they want to pay you off," I said, "What do you mean pay you off?" he said, "They'll give you two years' salary just to go," and he said, "tax free," and I said, "Well at my age I'm not going to be hunting around, no no, I'll go back to tankers," "No," I said, "What do you mean, alternative, I'll go and see the union," [coughs], "But you're supposed to have left the union," and I thought, stupid I'm not, tapping my head, "Oh oh."

Q1: So what union would that have been.

MS: That would have been the Merchant Navy and Airline Officers Association in those days.

Q1: Were you in that union as well?

SS: Yeah.

MS: Yeah, well it was there, we were in that mainly for legal reasons, but if there's anything...

Q1: For insurance?

MS: Well exactly, if anything went wrong and you were liable to be blamed for this or that, they're going to pay for the barristers.

SS: Yeah.

Q1: When you were apprentices were you in a union, how did that work?

SS: Well no.

MS: No, no.

Q1: You were talking about the demarcation in the yard and...

SS: Yeah, we weren't--, it wasn't necessary because we were employed directly by the company, and we were company servants if you like, and so we didn't have to belong to a union at all.

Q1: What was your--, I mean talking about that boat there and things not being even, what was your relationship with the actual boats in the boatyard because I mean you were kind of doing the fitting and turning for...

SS: Yeah, we would just work on machinery, that was all.

Q1: Would you have any involvement with the actual vessels themselves?

MS: Oh yes, yeah, we'd be working on board them.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: We would have manufactured something or we'd have got spare parts that had been worn out.

SS: And another thing...

MS: And we would fit them to the engines, that was our job.

SS: And another thing that we would do would be that as I explained before, the engineer on the tugs would be a driver, and I don't know what they get for holidays these days but in those days everybody got their two weeks, so they've got to have somebody to be the engineer on the tug, so the company would say, we want you to do, go down to this particular tug and join that for a couple of weeks, and what that taught us was not only the maintenance and

overhaul of the various things on the tug, but also the running of it, or operating machinery, diesel, big diesel engines, well they weren't big but they were big to us in those days [laughs].

MS: In actual fact, we had a better grounding than nearly every one of them on these ships, by virtue of the fact that we would be manoeuvring these vessels, we would be doing bunkering, we would fill them with fuel, water, everything. Everything, we would be doing, whereas the majority of the engineers who went to sea, who'd been in building yards up in the North East or Scotland or wherever, they never actually operated any of the machinery, consequently, I would for example--, I joined one vessel at Port Wyndham, I'd not been with [inaudible 01:07:34] before but I knew how they operated, and Bob Morgan who's still out in Australia, was the chief engineer, he said, "Oh you take that because it's two engines, you take that one," it was no problem to me.

Q1: Because of your experience on the Thames?

SS: Yeah.

MS: Yes, this is what we've got...

SS: On the tugs.

MS: Actually, the training we got on the tugs, and I might add, some of them are manually operated on the tugs, air start, like the [inaudible 01:08:02] one, the Mamba.

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: Yeah she was, oh what, British Polar, British Polar engine and that was a stop start, you--, what you would have is you'd have on the bulkhead there, a telegraph, and they would go, start...

SS: Ding ding ding.

MS: Someone on the stern, whatever, and we would control it and give them what they wanted, and then when he said stop stop the engine, and then he'd go stern and we'd do that. A lot of

the engines were also bridge control completely, the likes of the [Roberts Bridge? 01:08:38], and the [Frankfield? 01:08:39] which were what they call electric boats, whereby you had two engines, and they would be driving a DC, direct current generators, and then there'd be another set which was for auxiliary machinery on board, water pumps, etc, etc, and lighting, and electric steering, that's what the auxiliary bits would do, the main bits would be driving an electric propulsion motor, and it's what they called a double commutator, you had this side, and that side, with brushes on, and one way was to go ahead and the other way was to go astern. They were all fully automatic, the switchboards on them were quite something, even by today's standards and they were built in 1935, and they was still going in 196--, well when I left they were still going in 1963.

SS: Well they certainly were, yeah.

MS: And they carried on longer than that, I should imagine nowadays they're scrapped, you know, saying that, you know, but...

SS: Yeah.

Q1: You use the term bunkering.

MS: Bunkering fuel.

SS: Taking fuel.

MS: Bunker fuels as they call them, they were all diesel or gas oil, whatever you want to call it, the vessels at sea were using heavy fuel oils, up to about, ooh, blimey oh riley, I think some of them were 3,000 seconds weren't they which is bigger...

SS: These heavy oils.

MS: Which is like pure tar.

SS: If you had a glass and they were cold, these oils...

MS: 190, 200 degrees.

SS: If you turn them upside-down wouldn't pour, wouldn't pour, and this oil on the--, it makes me laugh, they go on about pollution today don't they about the aircraft in the air don't they and they say, "Well the pollution those aircraft are causing," a ship can burn, I don't know, about three or four hundred tonnes a day of this thick black muck and it doesn't stay thick 'cause all the fuel tanks have heating coils in them and you heat it up and well you heat it up to about 190 degrees centigrade, in fact if it got on your skin it would burn you.

MS: Burn you badly. If you can imagine, you've seen them use it on the roads, tar, really thick, like that.

SS: Yeah, that's what it is, yeah.

MS: That's heavy bunker fuel, heavy fuel oil, and you had to be very careful with some of these fuels we picked up around the world, you always got samples, so if there was any problem with these fuels, you'd got come back against the people who supplied it to you. One of the worst things I think was catalytic fines, which is kind of like a, it came more from the Gulf region than anywhere else, and it'd be like bits of silicone.

SS: Like grit.

MS: Grit and silicone actually in the fuel, now we had purifiers, which were centrifuges which would spin most of the stuff out, but it never got rid of these catalytic fines, they was too fine, but you injected it into the engine to run it and it would rip the engines to pieces, well 24, 36 hours, ruin them.

SS: Yeah.

MS: Your piston rings, you'd have none left.

SS: What a lot of people don't realise is, you know, when you take your car down, oh we're going to have an oil change don't you, on a ship the oil that's in the engine, assuming that you've no problems, stays with that engine for its entire life, its entire life, they never change the oil.

MS: It could be 20, 30 years old.

SS: Yeah, that's the lubricating oil.

MS: You'd only replace it if you've lost it through leaks or this or that.

SS: Yeah, that's all.

MS: I might add that BP invented--, not BP, two guys invented a lubricant oil system that left the oil golden and clean all the time, and they did tests on it and they ran a car for 100,000 miles and it was still golden at the end, guess who bought up the, all the paperwork and everything to do with it.

SS: Who?

MS: BP and then it was forgotten.

SS: Shut it down, yeah.

MS: Shut it down, for obvious reasons.

SS: Yeah.

MS: It's naughty, but...

SS: Yeah.

MS: When you go to refineries, everybody seems to forget that you get a, say for example, a ton of crude oil, and out of that crude oil you don't just get petrol and diesel and aviation fuel, you get every type of chemical you can think of, now when I was on the chemical, I happened to know at that particular time when I left there were 860 different chemicals, all come from crude oil.

SS: That, plastic, yeah, is that plastic?

MS: Yeah, crude oil.

SS: Crude oil.

MS: Nearly everything you've got in here, crude oil, this is what people don't understand any of this, you know, and if you buy any fuel for your car for example, and I was on these tankers for, what are we talking about, 29 years, never worry about where it is, all the fuel that's delivered to any garage, right, they're all the same, they've all got a British Standard, never mind this business, oh gov, got a bit in my car, BP--, load of rubbish, if it's diesel stick it in, doesn't matter whether it comes from the supermarket, anywhere, if it's petrol anybody's make, go for the cheapest, this is the...

Q1: Can we just go back to sort of the shipping, the finishing your life on the sea, I'm just curious about how in--, back in the boatyards there was a lot of kind of father son traditions of kind of going into the boatyards, have you--, so the next generation, have your children or any of your extended family...

SS: No, my youngest son works for a company called [Optoma? 01:14:57], they make projectors, you know the ones that you hook up to a computer and put on the big screen.

Q1: So life on the water is finished with your generation?

SS: Yeah, he won't go to sea, he's in management with that company. And the other guy is, he--, what would he call himself, I don't know what he is, he tests various things, he works in laboratory testing stuff, bank notes, he does bank--, he's just finished, I said, "What were you doing today?" he said, "I was working on Nigerian bank notes," they test all kinds of things, I haven't got a clue what the tests are that they do.

Q1: So it's a bit technical though, it's technical kind of link.

SS: Don't ask me, I mean I--, computer is a mystery to me, if my computer goes wrong I just ring my youngest son.

MS: Yeah, I think you ought to understand, that when we was lads, even from a very early age it was drummed into us you're going to sea.

SS: Yeah, dad did didn't he?

MS: Dad did that, and I--, you know...

SS: All we did was said, "Oh yeah, alright dad."

MS: Because that's what you did, you followed what they said, from that point of view he didn't do us any harm whatsoever.

SS: No, not at all.

MS: I must admit at one stage, you know, originally I wanted to go in aircraft engines, but saying that, I don't regret going with marine diesel systems, or even steam turbines, it doesn't bother me like...

SS: Yeah, so there you go, that's it, got any more questions?

Q1: So have you got anymore memories you want to share, with the yards, so particularly Lots Ait

SS: About the yard?

Q1: You were talking about that you'd been to Lots Ait recently you were saying then, how it had changed?

SS: I've been doing, I've been in the shipyards right around the world, and...

Q1: Yeah, but Lots Ait now, have you been--, are you familiar with it now and how it's changed?

SS: No.

MS: No no.

SS: No, you know, it's quite amazing when you reach a certain age you get put out to sea don't you, get put...

MS: [Laughs].

SS: Which is why I started that club, well I didn't start it, but you know, this association that I'm the secretary, treasury of the association, can you imagine you're on a vessel in the middle of nowhere, we were thousands of miles from land, and I was sitting in the dining saloon with the captain, he was sitting opposite me and he's still a good friend of mine, and we'd heard that a chief engineer in the company had committed suicide, as I already said, you know, things get on top of people in the middle of the ocean. But anyway he'd apparently committed suicide, we never ever found out of any truth about that and I can't remember who said it, whether it was him to me or me to him, said what a shame, you know, if only, if he had problems that he couldn't get together and...

MS: Yeah, mental problems, yeah.

SS: And talk about it, you know, with his old shipmates and but it's too late, he was dead, so I think it was Graham the captain said, "Well why don't we start a club, it doesn't matter if it's just you and me turn up," I've got 150 names on the list now [laughs], at least 150, from all over the world, 'cause when they finished and went they all disappeared, from everywhere, to USA, to Canada, to Australia, New Zealand, France, got one bloke in Switzerland I think it is, they're all over the place, oh Sri Lanka's another one, Japan, they're all over, and twice a year we have these gatherings, where we get together, now this cruise we're going in the end of this month, they'll, there's it's the members, their wives, family and friends altogether on that. But in September our old personnel guy in Hong Kong, he's living in a nursing home in Oxford, so you won't believe this, we're having our annual reunion in Eynsham Hall where I was born, yeah.

Q1: Oh, so you've come full circle.

SS: Yeah, we're having that in Eynsham Hall, you can find that on the internet, you'll see that.

MS: But you know you didn't see many, fortunate I suppose to all of us really, we didn't see many deaths at sea, we had on one of the vessels I was on, this engineer didn't get on with his--, with the second, and it got that unpleasant 'cause he was on watch with him, he's a fitting engineer, that he turned around and said, "I can't stand you I'm going to go and jump over the side," and this second said, "Yeah yeah, okay, you do that," and he did.

SS: And he did it.

MS: And he did it in the wrong place, Saint Lawrence Seaway, just at the start before it froze over, he wouldn't have lasted as long as that.

SS: As soon as he hit the water, yeah.

MS: Boom, and then another time we had a guy, an Indian crewmember, was on the [inaudible 01:19:54]--, the, oh [inaudible 01:19:57] the name of the vessel and we'd left Calcutta and we'd gone to Bangladesh and we'd had a crew change in Calcutta, and then we've got to Bangladesh and this cook, second cook I think it was, when they saw the captain says, "Captain, I can't stay here, I've got to go home," and the captain turned around and said to him, "No, well I tell you what, we'll get a doctor out to see to you," and so doctor come out, went all over it, come back and said, "Oh, nothing wrong with him, he's malingering," so this cook was crying everywhere, outside his cabin, in the finish he said, "We'll get another doctor and get a second opinion," same thing, "Oh nothing wrong with him, he's malingering." He said, "You don't need me captain, I go die now," two days, gone.

SS: Blimey!

MS: And we went to land him, in Bangladesh, right, a place called [Chalma? 01:21:01], way up the river, [laughs], and we went to land the body to send it back, booph, no no no, you know, back to India, "No no no, can't do that, he's an Indian national, we don't allow Indian nationals to come off."

SS: What, even dead ones?

MS: Even dead ones [laughs].

SS: Blimey.

MS: So we talked about upping anchor and going out to sea and doing a burial at sea, and then we'd--, they'd put him in a shroud, right, on this plank, with his face uncovered and all the crew [inaudible 01:21:37] [laughs].

SS: Oh never, oh never, oh dear, how could they do that?

MS: Anyway eventually the Bangladeshi authorities relented and he got sent off in a coffin like, but we had a second mate there, John, he's second mate used to look after medical side of things, and anything, anybody who got ill would go to him for medicines, 'cause he had a key to the medical locker and every day the second mate would be there, outside, get a queue of the crew come up, "I'm hurting here, hurting there, oh, my leg!" here we are, black strap.

SS: What do they call it?

MS: Black strap, it was a black liquid and really it was for stomach complaints, so [laughs]...

SS: He gave them the same stuff?

MS: The same stuff for everything, and I might add it makes you go [laughs], and I says, "But you can't do that John," he turned around and says, "Why not, they don't come back the next day." [Laughs]. And he was also looking after this guy, who was saying he was going to go die, and it was him who found him, he'd died, and after that he turned around and said, whenever we saw him, "Killer!" [laughs].

SS: You know, I mean I had one chap came up to me...

Q1: Jeremy, I think you...

Q2: Yeah, do you mind if Jeremy asks a question.

SS: Oh sorry.

Q2: Sorry, because he hasn't before, yeah.

Q3: Sorry, I wonder if we could go back to your early days, you said quite a lot about the role of your father in your choice of your career and something, you haven't said anything about your mother, I mean what did she give, and how did the family work and what was her view of you firstly going to work on the river and subsequently going to sea?

MS: I think my mother was more than happy that...

SS: Just accepted.

MS: We were apprenticed, that we'd got into a situation where we were employed, of course in those days you could leave that job and get a job next day, not like it is now, where we had problems, but no, she was stoic.

SS: She accepted it.

MS: She was always there for us.

SS: Yeah.

MS: I have to say that, I might add I didn't get on with my mother, but that's neither here nor there, but no, she was always there for us. The only thing I think that she used to do that used to annoy you, she used to make sandwiches every day.

SS: It was always the same thing.

MS: And I tell you what, what was it, liver sausage?

SS: That's it.

MS: I used to hate it in the finish, I never touched it ever since, that was in the sandwiches every day [laughs].

SS: Every day, yeah, poor old mum, I was with her, you know, when she died, she was in Northwick Park Hospital and I'd been across to the US to see some friends over there, and when I got back I thought, well I better go around and see her and I went around there and she just said to me, she said, "Oh I feel so unhappy," I said, "Oh come on mum, shake out of it," and she--, anyway, I went home and the phone went, I arrived home, phone went, my wife said, "We better go back to the hospital now," went back there, there she was, she'd died.

MS: Yeah, she'd gone.

SS: That was it, it was as though she was sort of waiting for me to come back from America, and that was it.

MS: I was in Norway, and...

SS: Yeah, very sad.

MS: On drydocks.

Q1: And your siblings, where were they?

MS: Pardon?

Q1: Where were your siblings, you've got a big brother and a big sister?

MS: Oh Stuart--, Roy and Pauline, well I was away at sea, so and I might add it was the same thing for when my father passed away, I was in the middle of the Bay of Biscay I think, when I went to Portugal, so...

SS: Well our sister...

MS: This is an occurrence with all seafarers, you're going to lose somebody and nothing you can do about it, all you can do is sit down in your cabin with a couple of mates and have a couple of beers, and drink to their health as it was.

SS: Yeah, that's true.

MS: That's all you can do, and memories, nothing else you can do about it, and this is an occurrence for all seafarers. Now my mum was, no, she was stalwart, she was there for us all time.

SS: Our sister married her boss, she used to work in a place on the Great--, on the North Circular Road was...

MS: Electro flow meters.

SS: Is that what it was?

MS: Yeah, electro flow meters it was called.

SS: And she--, her boss there, he was quite a lot older than Pauline.

MS: Yeah, Bill, he was 17 years older than her.

SS: 17 years older than her, and he was in bomber command during the war, he was a flight officer in bomber command and a smashing bloke he was, a really good guy.

MS: I tell you what, funny.

SS: Funny guy, yeah. They lived up in the Lake District and whenever you met him, the first words out of his mouth every time, was, "Do you fancy a noggin?" [all laugh]...

Q3: Were there any women working on Lots Ait when you were in the yard?

MS: Yes.

SS: Sorry?

Q3: There were women working?

MS: Yes.

SS: Yeah, yeah.

Q3: And what did they do?

MS: They were painters.

Q1: They had luncheons vouchers [laughs].

SS: Oh yeah, there were two, two painters, one was called Flo, and I can't remember the other one, what was her name?

MS: Oh god, blimey, I can't remember.

SS: Big fat women, I think they were left over from during the war, when they couldn't get, you know, all the men were away fighting, and they used to do all the, a lot of the outside maintenance for it.

MS: Yeah, painting, would paint the barges.

SS: Used to get covered in this muck, oh god, oh dear oh dear.

MS: Tell them about when they were going back across the [inaudible 01:27:29].

SS: Oh yeah, the island, now they've got a permanent bridge goes across to the island, it's only a footbridge, and but we--, I was, when the tide went down on the Thames, that side of the island used to go dry, it was just mud, and the river goes down this side, and I was going across there, just arrived from work.

MS: Yeah, these punts would sit on the...

SS: Just like these floating pontoons, you just walk along, and as I'm walking across Flo was in front of me, and the barge, the pontoon was over one side like this, and I thought what's going on here, and I looked over the side and I said to her, I said, "Here Flo, there's a pair of boots for you," didn't think much of it, she looked over and let out this enormous screen, she said, "There's a body in it."

MS: Yeah, a couple of feet in there [laughs].

SS: Yeah, honestly, this is true, so okay, carried on to the, well I went into the workshop, and a police launch came up river, and beached themselves, and the cops came and they said, "Oh we've been looking for him," the body and they had to get this big lever, 'cause quite heavy, to lift this thing off the body and they managed to pull him out.

MS: We won't go into, suffice to say not very nice.

SS: Yeah, not very nice. And they eventually they eventually took him away, but I did notice they had it on a board this body and for ages the shape of the body was still on the board, you know, wet, you'd think that it would dry out but there you go, no.

MS: It was the fat I think coming off.

SS: Could have been, could have been.

MS: That's just another.

Q3: On a slightly happier note, when you're talking about life in the yard, you mentioned singing.

SS: Oh yeah.

Q3: Can you tell us a bit more about that?

SS: Yeah, what--, well what happened was in those days, in the '50s the popular thing in the media of course was skiffle groups.

MS: Oh, I can remember this [laughs].

SS: So when we had our lunch break the apprentices that were there would stand...

MS: Yeah, teach us, I can remember them teaching us.

SS: Horrible noise, we did, terrible, just as well nobody could hear us and that was it, we'd be singing away there.

MS: Thought he was Lonnie Donegan [laughs].

Q3: Did you used to hang--, outside work did the apprentices all used to go out together?

SS: No, because we lived so far away you see, and I don't know if you're aware, but Wembley to Brentford is about seven miles I think it is, and between Brentford and Wembley you've got the North Circular Road which goes over the top of what they call Hangar Lane, over the top and down the other side, I had an old, wasn't an old bike, it was a fairly new one, dad got it for me, heavy thing though. And I used to push this bike all the way to work, seven miles in a morning, get the other end, didn't we used to start at half past seven in the morning?

MS: Yeah, half past seven, yeah.

SS: Yeah, half past seven we started, and then in the evening not every night, but I think about three nights a week I had to go to night school, they used to in the previous apprentices they used to release them on day release to go to school, but they stopped that 'cause these guys were goofing off rather than going to school. Anyway they said, "No, you've got to go to night school," so I said, "Alright, okay," so I was not only driving, well cycling seven miles to

Brentford in a day, doing a day's work, seven miles back home, get cleaned up 'cause we used to get filthy in the yard, there were no proper...

MS: There was no cleaning facilities there, other than just wash what--,

SS: Yeah, no showers or anything like that.

MS: Yeah, wash your hands, that was it.

SS: But in the workshop was a coal stove where you'd see, during the day we'd have our tea made on there, you know, the old boiled kettles up for the tea, but during the day, towards the end of the day the guy that was in charge of that lot used to heat up a couple of bucketful's of water, so consequently if we ever had to go on public transport we never used to have to worry about being surrounded too closely by people, you'd have a big tide mark around here, so you can imagine can't you, coming home, and to Wembley, and then having to get all cleaned up, changed and everything like that. Then mum would give me a bite to eat and then I'd be back on the bike again, I had to cycle all the way back to Brentford, to the night school, I was sitting in a night class like this, falling asleep. And then when that was over, cycle all the way back, so I was cycling 28 miles a day, per day.

Q3: In [inaudible 01:32:14] papers, which are based on a very old model, I think the--, you--, that you have to sign up, or somebody had to sign up to the fact that you wouldn't play dice or [inaudible 01:32:26].

MS: Oh yes, yes, that's...

SS: Oh yeah, yeah.

Q3: Now was any of that taken seriously by the [inaudible 01:32:30]?

MS: Oh, I don't...

SS: Blimey, in those days, I mean I never even said--, I never even had any...

MS: I don't--, never really thought about it.

SS: I think Coca-Cola was the strongest drink I used to drink [all laughs], so no no, we never--, put it this way, we were never in a position where we had to get reprimanded for anything like that.

MS: No, never, I think it was a pro forma that had been out for probably couple of hundred years or maybe even longer, but it was never enforced as such.

SS: Well you know the guy who gave me this, [Chris Triffit? 01:33:03] his name is, he's got--, showed me his [inaudible 01:33:07], not--, from the Port Line, and the format was exactly the same.

MS: Yeah, not changed.

SS: Whereas on our [inaudible 01:33:13] it tells you that your wages will be a percentage of a fitters wage, okay, on his I couldn't believe it, [laughs], couldn't believe it, his, it was written in old money, it gave exactly what he was paid, I can't remember what it is, but it was something like £1.60 a day, that was it. Or was it a week, I can't remember [laughs].

MS: Probably a week.

Q1: Yeah.

SS: Yeah, it was, yeah, £1, can you imagine?

MS: When I first started I think I was on two pound, 19 shillings a week I think it was.

SS: Yeah, that's what you got.

MS: And a pound of that was fares, backwards and forwards in those days, yes.

Q3: And were you expected to give some of it to your parents?

MS: Yes.

SS: Yeah.

MS: I used to give my mother a pound, which left me with 19 shillings, that was it.

SS: Yeah, that's it, yeah, that's right.

Q3: What did you spend 19 shillings on?

MS: Well usually something frivolous [laughs].

SS: Yeah, well we thought we were--, eh, look, we thought we were doing really well, we thought, well done, [inaudible 01:34:10].

MS: I think I was quite lucky in this, because what happened with me as far as those sort of wages were concerned, is that like Stuart says, we got sent out as the engineer on the tugs, and I joined one particular tug, and the captain on there, a bit of a union guy, turned around and said to me, he said, "Do you belong to the union?" I said, "No, I'm an apprentice," he said, "No, you should belong to the tugs man and bargeman's and light man's union," I said, "Well as an apprentice I'm not really allowed to," he said, "Well you'll have to be," so I went and joined it, only about two shillings a week or something like that, he said, "How much are they paying you?" I said, "Oh it's made up with this and overtime, this and that," and so on and so on, "No no no." I think it was altogether I ended up with about ten pounds about at the time, and which was very good money, but then he turned around and said, "No no no, you're an engineer here, you get paid his wages," so at that moment in time I think I was 18, and when I relieved my father, for his holiday, I had to have his wages, so I was getting, I earnt 28 pounds a week, when you consider at that age and that sort of money is quite considerable.

SS: Fortune, yeah.

Q2: So you were paid overtime as well?

MS: We were paid overtime, yes, time and a half, something like that, if you've--, I suppose--, I never--, I can't remember ever getting double time unless it was a weekend, if we were called out or requested, but I can't remember ever doing that.

SS: But we didn't stay in the yard all the time, and then I thought--, we--, you know, Brentford dock where they used to unload these barges, or some of the barges they'd unload them in there, used to have to go down and work on the cranes in there, check all the wiring, all the wires and everything like that, and I'll never forget one of the warehouses they had, was full of raw sugar, and we--, I was with a fitter and we had to go and look at this thing, and there was a, I'm not joking, this deep, a pile in one corner, dead bees, dead bees, they'd been gorging themselves on the sugar.

MS: This is now in Brentford dock which was owned by [inaudible 01:36:37] Company at that time.

SS: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Which is now still a dock area.

SS: Yeah, just luxury yachts.

MS: It's all luxury yuppie overlooking it, and yachts can go in there and so on [doorbell ringing].
[Pause in recording].

Q2: Yeah, can I ask, just a couple of questions, follow up things, first one is, you mentioned the two women painters and you said one's called Flo.

SS: Flo, yeah.

MS: Flo.

Q2: Do you know the other one's name?

SS: I can't remember.

MS: Oh, what was it, it was a--, in those days those sort of names that, was it Mavis or Daisy or something like that?

SS: Yeah, something like that, I can't remember.

MS: I can't remember the second name.

SS: All I remember is Flo 'cause she was enormous [all laugh].

Q1: And you were there when you found the body, I mean that was...

SS: Yeah, that's it, yeah.

Q2: And this is like in the '50s, so were they working from the war, they'd been working there?

SS: They must have been.

MS: Yes, they were...

SS: I think that's what happened, that's when they--, when the war was over I think they felt like--, you know, they didn't want to say, right your time's up now, you've got to go, what do you want to do I suppose.

MS: Yeah, they allowed them to finish their working life there.

SS: Yeah, that's it.

Q2: And lots of the guys you were working with, you mentioned some of the guys who were teaching you, were they kind of the older generation, had they been there during the war as well?

MS: Some of them were, that I might add that during the war years, 'cause my father was--, the tug was pulled in there during the war years for changing, in letting the exhaust out on these two engines, these ones, not like you didn't have to take the cylinder head off like a motor vehicle. These were in pockets, you could pull them out and just fit new ones, now the tug was alongside and my Uncle Dave was working in the yard, [inaudible 01:38:25].

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: Yeah, Uncle Dave, he was working in the yard, and there was air raid warning, everybody had to leave the island because there was no bomb shelter or anything like that on the island at all, you had to go across the mainland, so they were running across in the punts and Uncle Dave fell in, and 'cause there was a bit of a, you had to jump and he fell in and it was mud, and he went down the mud [laughs] and as everybody else is panicking and getting over to the mainland, they were using his head as a stepping stone [laughs].

SS: Oh my!

MS: That's true, but dad turned around, this is what my dad turned around and told me, and he said that, he was down in the cabin on this, the, I think it was the [Frankfield? 01:39:15] and of course these tugs the holes and the metalwork, like that, I mean they were very very heavy indeed, and he was down there, the coke fire going, and he thought, oh I can't be bothered to go over there, I'll stay down here like, you know? I'll be alright. So he's sitting in there and he could hear two apprentices apparently running around on the deck and they were supposed to have gone across to the air raid shelter, so he said, "What are they doing here," I said--, this is what he was telling me, I said, "Well didn't you go up and tell them to get over off the island?" he said, "No, I thought I'd teach them a lesson," so they had some old bits of scrap iron and so he stuck it in the stove you see, warmed it up a little bit, and then threw it on the deck, and he could hear these two scamping around saying, "Oh look, a bit of shrapnel," and picked it up and got the burnt fingers, he said he never did that again [laughs]. Yeah, oh dear, he was a character.

Q2: And I wanted to ask you another question which you mentioned briefly there was a strike on the island when you were apprenticed.

MS: Yes.

SS: Yes.

Q2: Can you tell me a little bit about the strike and what happened?

SS: What was it about, I can't remember what it was about.

MS: It was to do with money more than anything else.

SS: Yeah, we had to walk past the pickets.

MS: We had to walk, but they never said anything or were unpleasant to us.

SS: No, we weren't abused in any way.

MS: As apprentices we weren't allowed to go on strikes because we worked direct for the company, the other guys were employees, but we were company servants for want of a better word, so you couldn't sort of turn around and say, oh, I'm going to go on strike with them, and not unless your name's Corbyn or something like that [laughs].

Q2: How long did the strike last for?

SS: I can't remember, how long was it?

MS: Oh, I think it was about, only a couple of weeks I think it was, something like that.

SS: There wasn't going to be any trouble anyway because where the entrance to that yard is, on Brentford High Street, in fact the address is 41 High Street, Brentford, okay, where that entrance to that yard is, there's 41 High Street, Brentford, that side of the yard, on this side this is looking at from the river behind you, was the police station, yeah.

MS: Yeah, and no trouble there. No, oh they were there, and the pickets were there, you know, we just walked past and nobody said anything, anything, said it to us.

SS: No, I never got one...

MS: No unpleasantness going towards us at all.

SS: No.

MS: Invariably I think we got on pretty well with all of them didn't we?

SS: Yeah, we did, I think so, although I was quite astounded that when we went back to the yard, John Watson, the owner now, he took us sort of to the far end of the yard, past the docks, how many docks are there, three is it or four?

MS: There's two double wet docks, and there was two dry docks.

SS: Two dry docks, that's it, anyway...

MS: Of course all these doors and everything's gone now, you know, so...

SS: We went down to the very end and he was starting talking about this slipway that's there you see and we thought he was talking about the one across on the north shore, that's where we built the tug on that slipway, and oh no, he said, "This one," and we didn't even know it was there, because when you're apprentices and we went out there, you definitely got the feeling that you weren't really welcomed down there.

Q2: What was down there?

MS: Well it was a slipway for the other end of the island, we didn't knew nothing about it.

SS: It was at the end of the island, and that was...

MS: Right next to the blacksmith's shop.

SS: Yeah, and occasionally we would go down there but we didn't spend too long down there in case we upset anybody.

Q3: But it was the same company?

SS: Beg your pardon?

Q3: It was the same company that had that slipway as well?

SS: Oh yeah.

MS: Yes, it all belonged to the same company, all of it.

SS: They had a barge there that used to, I think used to fill up with water.

MS: Water that's right, and it was used for...

SS: When the tide went out the two wet docks you can call them if you like, the type of--, of course it'd leave a load of silt and mud behind, so the water that had collected in this barge every time the tide came up they'd have a hose collect, you know, pump, and they'd spray this down and push the silt back out into the river, see, that's what they used to do, that was it.

Q2: If--, I mean going back to when you first came, if you were going to walk across, you said there was sort of landing stations across the Thames?

SS: Yeah.

Q2: Across there, can you describe what you'd see, what the different workshops were, what was there?

SS: Well there was our workshop which was as you're coming across that would be on the right hand side at the head of the--, going up river that is, of the island, and then I think it was two were just storerooms weren't they?

MS: Yeah, but hang on a second, the first thing you got when you came up the steps, you had a little hut and that was the electrician's place.

SS: Electrician's place.

MS: That's his own domain and he would basically be in there all the time.

SS: Listening to the radio.

MS: Usually listening to the radio or reading the newspaper and having a cup of tea, waiting to be called if there was a problem.

SS: Yeah.

MS: And then you had the workshop there as Stuart says and then you had the timber yard, as it is to this day.

SS: Yeah, that's still there.

MS: And then that then branched, that's quite wide that, then that branched into an area where you had big flat lumps of steel with holes in and that was for putting plates on for drilling and also putting pegs in if you had to shape pipework around anything, and then further on then you had the blacksmith's shop with pneumatic hammers there and so on, and electric driven ones, and big furnaces there to heat up anything. A lot of the stuff that was used on the barges was wrought iron you see, so or the steel which is there to be shaped into whatever.

Q2: So the furnaces were always running are they [all talking at once].

MS: And they would put into the furnace, heat it up and shape it to whatever was required.

SS: Yeah, that's right, yeah. The actual--, it used to be quite noisy out there because they would have these pneumatic hammers for, 'cause they had rivets, all these barges had steel rivets.

MS: Yeah, rivets they weren't the--, not like the old...

SS: It wasn't a common thing there.

MS: All riveted, and you'd have a guy there with a coke stove and had a load of rivets in it and he'd have a pair of tongs and he would throw it like that and they would catch them with the other tongs, that would go through, right, if they would put new plates on these things, the holes would be drilled, in-between the plates there was kind of like a felt material, and that would go through, you would hold it and the other side a guy, when it was poked through 'cause it was still blowing, and then it would have a pneumatic riveter and he would go like this and shape it like that so it flattened it out, right, and say for example it had been sticking out like that, it'd have been down to that by the time it's flattened out.

SS: Yeah, and then the steel plate, the joint between the steel plate, like two steel plates that go like that and a rivet through here and here, then they'd go along, they'd have it on the end of the same gun that they rivet with, they have a different thing on the end and they'd run along the joint, and literally squeeze it, so that the steel plates were pressed together, and of course then you didn't get any leaks then you see.

MS: Yeah, if there was some, for example some of the barges, not all of them, some of them, if they were shaped plates what some of them would do, they would get them roughly the shape they had to be, there would be riveted, that bit there, and then that side they'd weld two pieces of metal shaped like that, in wedges, and then bang bang bang and push it into where it needed to go and then rivets would go through, that's the way they did it.

SS: When you came down from the high street, going down the hill towards, you know, the island's there in front of you as you come down off the high street, on one side they had a ropemaking...

MS: Yeah, ropemaking, and tarpaulins because...

SS: And tarpaulins.

MS: And tarpaulins used to make their own ropes.

SS: And in the loft of that they had a pattern shop, if they wanted to have a piece of steel plate that they wanted to cut they would first make it out of the wooden frame, only very flexible wood, obviously...

MS: Like ply, yeah, marine ply.

SS: Yeah, they squeeze it onto the shape that they wanted, so that when they let it go it would go flat of course that's how big the plate had to be, see what I mean, got it, and then they could shape it and of course it would fit exactly where they wanted it to go and that was on the left or the right as you went down the hill.

MS: That was on the left that was.

SS: Is that on the left, yeah.

Q2: Were all these materials being carried across those, that kind of across the water to get to the island?

MS: Yes.

Q2: How did it all get there?

SS: Yeah.

MS: Yeah, usually, because on the left hand side where the yard foreman and the fellow called Norton, he had a house there, but eventually they did away with that house, and but it had cranes and what not there and a gantry and that used to pick up bits of steel and all that, put into a barge or a punt or whatever, and they'd be pulled over and then chain blocks with them and then we lifted up onto the island.

SS: In fact that place where the yard foreman used to live, this--, what was his full name?

MS: Dick Norman.

SS: Dick Norman, that's it.

MS: Richard Norman.

SS: Richard, yeah, his house that they had, they demolished it and that when I went there in 1956 as an apprentice, the first job I had to do, I think I may have told you this before, we went across to the island, the foreman sent me across rather to the mainland with a fitter and we had to strip out all the lead piping from the house, because we reckoned that Bill Tapp our foreman was flogging it [all laugh]. They pulled the building down and then when it went down then they built the new offices, where the drawing offices where I went, they built the offices and of course the slipway alongside it, that was it.

Q2: Can I ask you just one last question 'cause I think we've got to wrap up, so when you were there and you said that, you know, even in the '50s there was guys being laid off and half of the workforce [inaudible 01:49:38] was diminished.

SS: That was in the '60s that, when they started laying people off.

Q2: '60s?

MS: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

Q2: And so...

MS: It's '62 it started to go down like that.

Q2: And what did you see happening, I mean at that time, in terms of the decline of the yard and...

MS: I beg your pardon?

SS: What did you see, the decline of the yard, what did you see?

MS: Oh the decline of the yard, we were still doing our repair works, as far as apprentices were concerned. And it was around about that time that it merged with General Lighterage, because it was finding it difficult to continue running.

SS: Yeah, well the managing--, old Johns, he was out there looking for extra work for us to do, you know, the yard could do.

MS: I think it was--, the main problem was, the decline of the shipping was--, and everything taken to the road and that was the death nail for the river workforce really.

SS: Yeah, it was end.

MS: And like we've said, just a shame that we don't use our waterways like we're supposed to, I mean all those Victorians who built a lot of our canal systems to take barges of all sorts of shapes and sizes, [inaudible 01:50:52].

SS: Yeah, but these days, you consider it though...

MS: It's gone.

SS: If you go to German--, you know, where they use the river, the traffic is a lot bigger, and I mean our waterways, they're Victorian...

MS: Oh, they weren't taken into account, it's like our roads isn't it, you know, like that, when they should have been like that.

SS: You imagine the cost of largening our waterway system, be huge because you don't only have to widen the canal you've got to think about widening all the locks so I'm sure that in Victorian days they must have thought, hey, you know, this is the way to go, and...

Q1: They had narrowboats.

SS: The narrowboats.

MS: They were very narrow-minded, they weren't far reaching, they didn't look ahead and say, well I think we ought to make it bigger 'cause what's going to happen in future years, something's going to change, no, they stuck in their mind and that was it, and they're not going to do this and that. And really not very blooming far-sighted was it, when all said and done.

SS: I think the closest they got really was the invention of what they called the LASH ships, it was American company.

MS: Yeah.

SS: And the LASH ship, whereas things like--, and that picture of mine, it was all bits piece by piece to discharge a cargo out of a ship, the LASH ships the whole barge would be picked out of the water and put inside.

MS: Put inside, that's what they used to call LASH ships [inaudible 01:52:11].

SS: And they were quite successful because they used to go to ports where there was no docks facilities or anything, as long as it was calm water they'd stop, it had its own crane on the thing and it would lift the whole barge, the whole thing, boom, into the water and it'd get towed away, that was the closest I thought that would have been the way to go in the UK, the waterways system, it never developed, it was lorries beat, you know, the containerisation, that beat the whole thing, and river traffic died, as simple as that. That's it.

Q2: Well...

SS: Now we start crying [all laugh].

Q2: Well thank you both so very very much.

MS: Not at all.

SS: I hope we didn't bore you.

Q1: It's been interesting, thank you [all talking at once].

END OF RECORDING – 01:53:00