Interview Len Dawes

Present:

Claire Sexton, interviewer for From Docks to Laptops

Len Dawes, interviewee

Transcriber: Stephan Schulte-Nahring

C: Ok, Len. Thank you for joining us this morning. Can I just ask you to spell your surname.

L: D A W E S.

C: Brilliant. Can you tell us when and where you were born?

L: Yes, it was in Bermondsey, I think it was Rotherhithe New Road. And it was on the 6th February 1931.

C: Brilliant, ok, we know that you worked on the Docks? Could you tell us how you started, when you started.

L: In the Docks?

C: Yes, please.

L: Right, well. When I left school, I was an apprentice to a firm at Penge, that was architectural modellers and decorative plasterers. At this particular time, men were coming out of the services at the end of the WW2 and were being given a six-month course and going on piece work doing bomb-repair work. I had served in an apprenticeship and they were earning four times what I was getting as an apprentice. I was one of what at the times was referred to as the angry young men. An opportunity came up. My father worked as a stevedore in the Surrey Commercial Docks. At that particular time, the only way you could work there was to be a member of the union. And the only way you could be a member of the union was if you had a direct blood relative that worked in the docks. And the reason for that was because working 100% piece work, it was a very good living. You made about double the national average at that time. My father said: “you’re not making any progress, Len. Give it up now, get yourself in the docks.” And that’s what I did. And I was the 5th member of my father’s family, the Doors family, to work in the Surrey Commercial Docks.

C: Wow. You had to have a blood relative?

L: That’s correct. Yes, you did. How it was, my father was the first one and he got there because my paternal grandfather who was a galvanizer at the time. He believed that all working people, all working men, as it was mostly men at that time, should be members of the trade union because of the exploitation that was rife at that time. So there was no union relating directly to what he did. So he joined the Stevedores’ and Dockers’ Union. How he managed that I’m not quite sure. He was able to get my father into the union. And because my father was then able to get into the union, he then worked in the Surrey Commercial Docks. He was the first of the five of us. There was my father’s four brothers and me and I had a cousin who actually came after me. So there were six of the family that worked in the docks at one time.

C: Wow. And did you all work in the same gang or did you split up?

L: No, no, no. We all sort of split up. I worked mostly on timber. That was what I specialised in. It was because when timber was imported into the Surrey Commercial Docks at that time, there was no containers. So they used to load it into the ship’s hold and onto the deck and they were doing it as economically on space as they could, which meant packing up long legs of timber against short legs of timber and keeping the thicknesses together. To discharge it, it was a cross between playing tennis and chess. You had to know which piece of timer to go for in order to get them out without a struggle. Otherwise, because the ship’s hold ran one into another, the 4rth and the 5th hold were all connected, then sometimes if you got it wrong, you’d be struggling to get a piece of timber out. So in that sense, it was quite a skilled job. Like I said, it was 100% piece work. There was no hourly rate worth talk about. We had day work rates but that was really only a way of having a normal sum for which they could make compensation. If you had something that wasn’t normal working, you got extra hours day work on top of your piece work earnings.

C: When you worked on the docks, can you describe a typical day? What was a typical day like?

L: You had to be up ready to go to the call at a quarter to 8. If you were there after half past seven early in the morning you were considered to be cutting it fine. And at a quarter to eight precisely you’d walk across the road where the call was. You would go to the appropriate place along the road where the foreman would stand in the road and he would call the men out. When a new job started, it was a new contract, he would call the men out for the first time. He would call them out by name. But you worked in gangs so he would call his gang out. If somebody for any reason wasn’t there he would take somebody else.

C: So the foreman would call his gang?

L: Yes. It was a hard way to earn a living in those days.

C: Did he always call his gang?

L: Yes. He called his own gang. You worked in a gang for the foreman. A good gang made a very good living. That was really what it was about.

C: Can you tell me about the gang that you was in?

L: Yes, when I first started there, I was called out by a chap called Joe Hubby. He was the foreman. There were six of us that worked in the ship’s hold. And there were four other men who were barge hands. And the barge hands were called by a separate foreman. We all worked together most of the time. Working 100% piece work gives you a certain state of mind and a work ethic, a motivation that most people just don’t get. I’ve never forgotten it. My father, when years later after he’d retired, we went and visited him. And when he made a cup of tea, he couldn’t get out of the habit of cutting from the kitchen to the sitting room where you were with a cup of tea because everything had to be done at the double at the docks.

C: Ok so it’s like his body remembered what he needed to do?

L: Oh, yes. It was a state of mind you got into. They were a rough lot. There was a lot of bad language and often quite short-tempered. But as a point of interest, the finest compliment that I had ever heard made to the London dockers occurred ... When I first started, my father bought a house in Sidcup. We used to travel from Sidcup to the docks. And we went up by train. And it was early in the morning. It was half past six in the morning, we’d catch a train to get up there. And there was a young girl, a young teenager about 16 at the time, always used to get in the same carriage as us group of dockers and stevedores. And over time, one of the older men got into conversation with her. He said why do you come up so early? Where do you work? And she explained that she didn’t actually start work until 9 o’clock. He said: what on earth do you come up at this time for? And she said: My father is a senior policeman and he was very worried about me travelling up to London at that sort of time and he told me to come early because I could get my breakfast in the Canteen. And he said: Get into a carriage where there is a lot of dockers and stevedores. He said because you might hear a bit of bad language but those men will never molest you, and not only that, he said, they will never let anybody else molest you either. And I thought that was the finest complement I’d ever heard.

C: Can you explain what a stevedore is?

L: A stevedore is a specialist that loads and unloads ships. Dockers generally worked round the docks as a whole. Lightermen were in charge of the barges. But a stevedore is someone who handles the ship’s cargo.

C: Ah, so there was a difference between a docker and a stevedore?

We generally speaking belonged to the same union but yes, there was. The dockers did different work.

C: Ok. So if the dockers worked generally around the docks, what was the atmosphere like? What would it look like?

L: Oh there was a right sense of humour. The men were often a little bit short-tempered, fierce and when we got a lot of criticism when there were strikes because the public at large had no conception of what working in the docks on ship’s cargoes at 100% piece work actually involved. And when we used to knock off for rain, it was once said to me, well, surely you can carry on. You can put a raincoat on. And I had to explain if somebody was playing tennis at Wimbledon and it rained, they couldn’t put a coat on and carry on playing. And it was very much the same in the docks. But people didn’t realise that.

C: And piece work was... what was piece work?

L: Piece work was where you get paid for what you do. There is no hourly rate. For discharging timber, you got paid per standard of timber that you handled. And that’s the whole gang. And it was split between the gang, split between thirteen men.

C: Wow. And how was a standard measured?

L: A standard is a measurement of bold timber. Now the average sort of a bound of timber a man would discharge would be about 45 to 50 standards for a day’s work. And that’s a lot of timber. To put that in perspective, it would be about the quantity of a normal haystack if you can visualise that or perhaps half a semi-detached house.

C: Wow, in one day?

L: In one day, yeah. Just for the record, the men who worked on sugar ... this was... Sugar came in 200 weighed sacks. It was imported into the country. It was bagged up here and a lot of it was sent abroad again. It was considered to be the hardest work in the dock. The men that specialised in that kind of work were called sugar eaters for doing the work. They were nicknamed sugar eaters for doing the work. There was one incident that I remember that illustrates this. There was one gang who specialised in this work. And one particular individual there was a bear of a man. He had almost as much round his chest as he was high. He had huge hands. And obviously he was phenomenally strong but like a lot of men of that calibre, he was very quiet and inoffensive and gentle. And he was coming out of the docks one day. You know there was police on the dock gates all the time back in the 1950s. There was one young policeman and he was searching one particular individual and this chap and his mate walked past and walked out of the docks. And this policeman dismissed the guy he was searching and shouted after this young chap: “Oi, you, stop, come back here” and he took no notice, he kept on walking. And this young policeman ran after him, got round in front of him, and grabbed him by the shoulders and said: “when I speak to you stop and do as you’re told”. Needless to say this chap was pretty offended. And he just gripped him on his forearms where he [the policeman] was holding this chap by the shoulders and he pulled his arms away. But he gripped him so hard, he crushed the copper’s forearms and the copper collapsed. And other policemen from other gates that were visible came running over. One young policeman drew out his truncheon and one of the older stevedores who was looking on said to him: if you use that, that will go in the dock and you’ll fore it. The older policeman who was with him said: “put that away, you don’t need that”. It went to court but the case was dismissed.

C: It sounds like there was some solidarity amongst the dockers?

L: Solidarity absolutely. Oh yes. We all tended to stick together. Yes. It was a family atmosphere in that sense but like all families they occasionally fell out.

C: You were saying that the piece work, the wages would have been shared amongst the gang. Did that have an effect on the relationships on the men in the gang?

L: No, you got equal. Working as a single lad in the gang I paid a lot more tax and for some jobs you had a regular mate in the gang. You worked together. You worked in pairs. And my regular mate was a chap with five children and I used to resent the amount of income tax that I was charged because he didn’t pay any and I had to pay and we did exactly the same work.

My wife has just given me a note. The other thing I ought to mention. Working in the London docks at the time was a very, very dangerous way to earn a living. There was a very high accident rate, probably in the region of about one serious injury or fatality per calendar month. It was a dangerous way to earn a living.

C: Was there any safety precautions when you were doing your job to prevent some injuries?

L: No, quite the contrary. I remember one job that I got sent to. They were discharging bulk sulphur and they had a grab that went and grabbed it. And the two holds ran one into the other. And we were in one hold and we had to shovel ours into baskets. And the grab was still coming down into the other hold and it made a terrible smother and the sulphur got into my eyes and I got serious conjunctivitis and I went sick and I got disciplined for going sick with sulphur.

C: You got disciplined?

L: Yes, by the trade union because I was on a job. Once you start a job you weren’t allowed to leave it. And because I did leave it and I went sick I was called up before the union and was asked to give an explanation. I produced a medical certificate which I handed into the National Dock Labour Board, the employers, but obviously I didn’t take a second certificate and I got disciplined and was told that in future if I got sick in those circumstances, I should get a certificate.

C: This was for the trade unions? This wasn’t for your employer?

L: No. I had to get a certificate, yes, I had to do that. I got a medical certificate saying I had conjunctivitis. The doctor wrote probably, it was caused probably by the sulphur dust that got in my eyes. I had to get somebody else to drive my car home. I couldn’t drive.

C: That’s very interesting. Your employer didn’t discipline you but your trade union did. Why was not allowed to go off sick once a job had started?

L: Because it was against the rules. Once you start a job you weren’t allowed to leave the job. It all sounds a bit 1066 by today’s standards but that is a fact.

C: The role of the trade union. What was the role of the trade union?

L: You were ruled with a rod of iron. They had a set of rules you had to comply with. You weren’t allowed to go board the ship before 8 o’clock but the call off was at a quarter to. So you would go and walk to where the ship was birthed. And you would wait on the quay until it was precisely 8 o’clock. And then we’d go aboard. One time with a dispute, there was an overtime band. You were required to work right up to 5 o’clock and then you had to down tools immediately and come off. You were not allowed to go a minute after five o’clock.

C: And these rules were set by the trade union?

L: Yes.

C: Was there tension between the trade union and their rules and the employer’s rules?

L: I think that the trade union argued that they had fought to establish these rules. You see, you’re going back a long, long way. In earlier times when the trade union was started, the employers were all small individual firms and there was a lot of exploitation. A lot of the employers were also republicans. In earlier times, if men didn’t spend half their wages in the pub that was owned by their employers, they didn’t go to work the following day. The unions negotiated so that once a man was taken on for a job, he had to be allowed to finish it. The employer hadn’t got the right to sack him and take somebody else on. That’s one of the concessions that the unions had won. You have to go back a long, long way to understand why things happened the way they did.

C: In regards to the republicans having that power, when did that stop or when did it become that the trade unions started to rise against it?

L: Long before my time I should imagine about the 1930s or perhaps going back to the twenties. It was a long, long time ago. When I was working in the 50s, a lot of the ships were still steam-powered, which is a relict of the past. I worked in the docks for a number of years until I got married and left at that point.

C: And where did you go after that?

L: Right, the lady I was due to marry was quite a high-flyer. She was earning about double the national average. Now working in the docks, you’d also get double the national average. My wife had what today must seem some very old-fashioned ideas. She didn’t believe that women should ever earn more than their husbands. The husbands should be the principle bread winner. Now the difference was that she needed one more promotion, which she was virtually certain to get in the next few years, and her earnings would have been out of sight as far as I was concerned whilst I, getting older, earning less and less. We decided at that point that the only answer to this problem was if we both give up our jobs and we went into business. I bought a retail shop in the Blue Market in Southwark Park Road. First of all, I still carried on working in the docks just to get started while she ran the shop. During the very slack times, because dock work was seasonal, you worked mostly in the summer but there was a period of a couple of months when there was very little activity. During this time I worked in the shop. But then it happened the shop was getting busy and the foreman that I was working for at the time decided that ... I was sacked from the gang because I had a second income and he concluded that my heart wouldn’t be into working in the dock. So at that point I was sacked from the docks. I was a full time shopkeeper in the blue market.

C: What was your shop?

L: We had a domestic hardware shop. We sold all sauce pans, all cooking equipment. At the bottom end of the range there was at that time very little demand for quality items because the whole area, when the docks was functioning, was a poorer area than it is today. So yes, it was very interesting working there. A complete contrast to the docks of course.

C: Could you explain a little bit of the contrast? Because now you were your own boss.

L: It was dealing with the public and running your own business, was quite interesting. We had a few adventures there. We stayed in the shop until the local council started the redevelopment programme. We were next to the Co-op, which is still there I believe. The old shops that we had are all gone now. I had a young woman that came in and she worked locally and over time we stuck up a conversation. She bought a few items but then sometimes she came in just to talk. One day she came in and she was obviously on a high. So I asked what happened and she said her boy friend had asked her to marry and I said “oh yes and are you going to?” “You bet I am.” After that, ... I wasn’t invited to the wedding by the way, ... but she continued to come in over time. And then probably about a year later, she was still working there. She came in and there was obviously something the matter. So I questioned that and she said she thought her husband was going off her and she was dead-worried. What could she do? When I think of the conversation we had it makes me blush to think about it. She continued coming in for a few more months and then I didn’t see her anymore. The people were very interesting. Meeting the public was great. People in Bermondsey at that particularly time didn’t have the camaraderie they had in earlier times. My parents lived in Bermondsey where I was born and there was a family atmosphere there. Sadly, at the time, I had the retail shop that was gone. And it all came to ahead. I was there for about five years and it came to ahead when the Southwark council, which at that time was very hard left. And they blighted the property because they wouldn’t say whether it was involved in the redevelopment scheme or not so the business was unsellable. We had planned to move on. We had planned to put the business on the market and we had planned to buy another, a similar business, in a country town. But the council’s redevelopment programme blighted the business. So this was no longer an option. The council tried to proceed under an Act of Parliament, which would have meant that the property was all classed a slum clearance so they wouldn’t have had to pay any compensation to the businesses. One of the recollections I had was there was a meeting and one of the traders asked permission to address the council. And it was granted and he said to the council “do you realised that if you go ahead with your redevelopment programme on this basis, the shop keepers will be deprived of all their capital and there will be no shop keepers to serve the developing area”. And the leader of the council got up and said: “You shop keepers should go out and get a proper job like the rest of us”. And that was it. But there was a court case and the judge slated the council for attempting it. In the end they had to pay proper compensation to the businesses. And that enabled us to go and buy a property up in Derbyshire, which is how we got up here.

C: Was there tension during those years in which the redevelopment was happening and the way in which the council was trying to orchestrate that?

L: Yes, oh very much so. It’s a different place all together now, I know, but in those days the council was run by nothing short of communists.

C: In terms of running your business, can you tell us a typical day?

L: Oh yes, I can. We had two small children by then. I would get up and go down. We had a display out in the front in the forecourt being a hardware shop. A lot of the stuff was bulky and I used to put cups and things outside on display and I would go down at half past eight to get it all put out. My wife would get the two children ready to be taken to the nursery pre-school that they went to at that time. That was over at Catford. At nine o’clock she would come down with the boys and take over the shop and I would take the boys to nursery school and then having put them there I would come back and she would go up and do some work perhaps in the flat above the shop. We had a very tiny flat above the shop. It was really, very poky. When it got busy, I used to pick up the telephone and make the telephone DING, DING, DING up in the flat and she would come down and serve in the shop. And then, at busy times, in the evening, I would go out to the wholesalers, cash and carry wholesalers that we had at the time and buy stock and bring it back. And I would probably go out at about 7. I’d be back about 9. And then the two of us would work, unpacking it, pricing it, putting it out, and sometimes, at really busy times, I would go to bed at midnight and she would stay working until sometimes as late as 3am, just to work on the windows display. It was interesting sometimes. On one occasion, when she was working at 2 o’clock in the morning on the window display and the police came because somebody reported there was somebody in the shop.

C: So it sounds you worked like as hard in the shop as you did in the docks?

L: Oh, yes. Much longer hours, yes. And then when we were finally compensated... We had a small, tiny flat. My wife had said that when we’ll finally move, she wanted a house with a kitchen as big as a barn. And when we did move, we moved up to Winster and we bought an old decommissioned pub so she did get a rather large kitchen after that. Yes some of the things that we sold in the shop, we sold all domestic stuff, we sold a lot of garden stuff and flower pots and the reason for that is, because all the lounders, they were knocking down little terraced houses and building blocks of flats and people that had been used to have gardens found themselves in flats with no garden. So they bought flower pots. And we sold lots and lots of them. I used to get them delivered on a Thursday afternoon when the shop was closed. I used to buy them direct from the makers up in the Midlands by the lorry load. And that way I could buy them very, very cheaply and I sold them quite cheaply but with a good margin. On one occasion, it was a Thursday afternoon, and we were outside. I gave the lorry driver a hand to unload all these flower pots that we used to cart right through the shop into the yard at the back. And some of them were quite big. I mean they went up to sort of 18 inches across the top. And they were heavy. A policeman came up and told us that we would have to move the lorry over the side of the road. So I picked up one of the flower pots, handed it to him and said: Hold that”. He just took it. I said: “Do you want to carry two dozen of these from the other side of the road”. And he just put it down and walked out.

The other thing that happened to us, when we had the shop, we sold paraffin because in the flats they were all centrally heated and during the severe winters of 1963, we were there. And people were coming in and buying paraffin because the central heating didn’t heat their flats and they were getting cold. So we sold a lot of paraffin. And I had two 600 gallon paraffin tanks in the yard out at the back. One day, a yob climbed over the fence and under these paraffin tanks which were up on stands ... I used to throw out a lot of debris, packing cases and this kind of thing... and he set it on fire. And I rushed out with a fire extinguisher first of all to try to get it out but it was too far gone, the fire extinguisher wouldn’t put it out. And I got a hose trying to get a hose pipe on it from the tap. One thing that remains a family memory. A very conscientious young policeman came running into the shop. Now, he wasn’t concerned about putting the fire out or rescuing anybody that was there. He was concerned about whether I complied with the regulations and had a fire extinguisher because if I hadn’t he was going to book me. I said I had got a fire extinguisher. So he looked around and the fire was burning underneath those tanks and he said: “what’s in those tanks?” I said: “Paraffin”. And he said: “What? It’s going to explode. Everybody out. Women and children first. Follow me.” And he ran out of the shop. I will never ever forget that.

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C: Len, just going back to the docks, you were saying about the sugar eaters, they would fill the sacks up. So did the cargo come in loose? It wasn’t already in sacks?

L: Oh, yes, it was already in 200 weighed bags. The men were nicknamed because they handled so much sugar. They were nicknamed the sugar eaters. They didn’t eat sugar though.

C: Was there any perks of working on the docks? Was there any perks?

L: Because people like myself who was quite seriously dyslexic and couldn’t earn a lot of money in any other way, could earn double the national average. By the standards of the day, for manual workers, you could make a lot of money.

C: And you said that when you were working on the docks, when you got older, you’d earn less and less.

L: That’s right.

C: Did older dockers earn less?

L: Yes, yes. What they used to do, where you had a deck cargo, the men that were working the winches because you used the ship’s gear... They had two derricks on the ship. The employers at that time... although there could be perfectly good cranes available, the employers would not pay for the hire of the crane because they got the ship’s gear for nothing. It was cheaper to use the ship’s gear. But the winchmen couldn’t see the foreman who was, say, lowering the timber into the barge over the side of the ship. So they used to employ a much older man who would relay the foreman’s hand signals, you know, for up, down, that sort of thing. You had hand signals which the winchmen could interpret what was required. They used to employ the older men. They used to call them call-boys. Nothing to do with call-girls. They used to relay the signal to the winchmen. It could be quite dangerous actually. On one occasion, you had what was known as a union purchase where you used two derricks. One derrick was over the ship’s hold. The other derrick was over the side of the ship. You would have a cable so that two cables went down into the ship’s hold. And then it was brought up to the derrick that was over the ship and then it was swung across with a taught cable to the other derrick and then lowered into the barge. There was a bad accident with two men that I knew very, very well. Where the winchman that was controlling the winch, he stopped the winch prematurely which caused the second timber that the men were about to push out to swing violently inwards and it pinned two men against the side of the barge and they didn’t survive. That’s what I meant when I said it was a very dangerous way to earn a living.

C: Yes, definitely. What did derricks do?

L: The ship’s derrick ... you know we have cargo ships. And you have a derrick which swings down over the hold and you have a cable that goes from a winch to the end of the derrick and lowers the hook down into the ship’s hold.

C: It’s like a piece of machinery.

L: The ship’s derrick is a long arm that reaches from the mast, and goes out at 45 degrees from the mast right out over the hold so that you can lower a hook in, heave up and some derricks swung out over the ship’s side and lowered it down. It’s like a mobile crane and it was part of the ship.

C: You had huge amounts of timber just swaying off the ship onto a barge?

L: They used to make them up in sets. So you’d make a stack of timber, which would be five pieces of it, 4 inches wide. You would have about five of those across and it would stack up and when you got to about waist high you’d start stepping them in so there was one piece on the top. You’d have a chain with a hook on, which you threw under the set, the set was build up on a piece of two by four timber usually, and you’d throw the chain underneath the set, bring the hook up, hook it on, and then the winchman would heave it up tight so it was only on one chain and it would be lifted up, swung over the side of the ship and lowered down into the barge.

C: Once it got into the barge, where would it go?

L: You’d load the barge, get the barge up, and the barge too had a deck cargo. It would go right up. Then it would be towed off to wherever it was going to get stacked. Sometimes you would stack it directly onto the quay. But most of the time it went into a barge first.

C: Do you know where the timber was exported?

L: Yes. Most of it, when it was imported, would be stacked in sheds within the area of the dock to season. And the dockers did that. That was the work the dockers did mostly. The barge would be unloaded by the dockers and they would stack the timber and it would be left there perhaps for a year to dry out completely for a season. They don’t do that now, these days. It’s all cured and dried. It’s a relict of the past I’m afraid.

C: So you said the timber would be kept in a shed.

L: Yes. There were lots of sheds there.

L: So are you happy with what I told you Claire?

C: Yes.

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