**John Bryan’s Story...**

**Okay, I’m Catrina Hage; the date is February the 22nd 2013. We’re at London Bubble Theatre and I’m here with John. Erm, John, could you just spell your surname for me please?**

**John:** It’s er – B-R-Y-A-N.

**Okay and can you tell me where and when you were born?**

**John:** Er, I was born, er lying in hospital in Lambeth. And, er, 1951. June 26th.

**Okay, and –**

**John:** They had a big festival when I was born.

**Wh-what festival was that?**

**John**: Festival of Britain.

**Okay and how was that?**

**John:** It was great, er, celebratin’ my birth.

**Wh- (laughs), okay. And can you tell us about your work please?**

**John:** Erm, when I left school, I-I left school in the summer of, er, sixty-seven. In June. And I went to work in the metal box factory for a couple-couple a weeks, six weeks. Then I went to work in Fleet Street, er, in a firm called Firmaprint—little printing firm in-in, er, Fleet Street. Stayed there for two months, and then October, I got a job as an apprentice, er, at Hay’s Wharf in Tooley Street. So, in sort of fi-four months, I had three jobs.

**What was it like in Fleet Street at that time?**

**John:** It was, er, a very hectic group, busy, all the pubs were full in the evening, and, er, there’s loads-a stuff goin’ on. ‘Cause we was right opposite the-er, the-er, the law courts, the high court, and I was actually at work on the morning that Rolling Stones was on trial.

**Really?**

**John:** Yeah, and that was, er, was-er, really busy, the street was full of journalists, and fans, and people fallin’ to see ‘em – to see ‘em comin’ out.

**So you were you were only there for a short time though?**

**John**: I was only there for six weeks, yeah.

**Yeah, so then, could you tell us about what you did afterwards?**

**John**: Yeah, and then I went to work – I got an interview at Hay’s Wharf, er, to be an apprentice, and er-er, and I started work there in, er, on November the 1st, erm-early November.

**So what were you doing there, exactly?**

**John:** Well, i-there was, erm, we-they had so much different things to do. I was an apprentice, started off-er in the refrigeration department, working in the warehouses, er, repairing and maintaining their-er, refrigeration equipment. Which was huge, big warehouses, cold rooms. Er, I spent a year doing that. And then I spent, er, another six months, er, repairing the cranes and lifts. And, er, I ended up, er, on the building department, er repairing th—all the brick walls, and quays and jetties. And, er, the warehouses, and er, and installing equipment.

**Yeah, so what company was the refrigeration?**

**John:** That was Hay’s Wharf.

**Hay’s Wharf, okay. Everything was—**

**John:** Everything was Hay’s Wharf.

**And then you worked in the various departments?**

**John:** Yeah.

**Was there one that you liked more than the others?**

**John**: Yeah, the building department I liked the most.

**Why was that?**

**John:** Er, j-it-it suited me better, more out in the.., yeah. The refrigeration department was, was-was interesting, but after a while it was-er, mainly an ammonia plant. And-it- it was quite smelly, and-er…

**Wh-what was the smells like?**

**John:** Very strong. It was dangerous as well, yeah.

**Was it dang-? Okay, yeah, so how-how many men were you working with, in…?**

**John:** Oh, i-well, the, Hay’s Wharf stretched from Tower Bridge, u-u-up, a wharf called Mark Brown’s, it was known as Tooley Street Docks at the time, and it went all the way down, er, past London Bridge, there was a couple of other whar– Hibernia Wharf, and there was another one, just, just by there. Erm, so down-almost down at a place called Winchester Wharf. Where St. Mary Overie’s Dock is now is where the, er, the Frances- the model of Frances Drake’s Golden Hinde from there, right up to- back to Tower Bridge was all Hay’s Wharf.

**Okay.**

**John:**  And, there was another wharf on the other side called New Fresh Wharf, by, just by the side of London Bridge. Which is all-also part of Hay’s Wharf.

**So how long were you there for?**

**John**: I was there three years.

**Three years. So what did you do afterwards?**

**John:** Erm, well we-it started closing down then, and I-I got made redundant. And-er ended up working for, for various different companies. And, building went on to building sites.

**So from the period when you started ‘till it closing down was just three years?**

**John:** Three years, yeah.

**Did you have any clue it was going to be closing down when you..?**

**John:** Well, er, I-I knew that the docks was in decline at the time. ‘Cause there, there was just at, just at the beginning of containerisation, and it was always in the news. There was always, er, disputes, er, legal disputes and, about containerisation, so you could see it was comin’.

**Yeah, what was the feeling like within the docks at thi- at this time?**

**John**: Erm... it was, erm, one of... it seemed concerned about their-their job-their way of life, and it was a way of life. Er, not just, i-i-i-it employed a-a, a lot of people in-in a lot of different jobs. A lot of the clerks, office staff, engineers, building workers, and dock workers as well, i-it was erm, lots of-lots of jobs there, so it was employin’ a lot of people.

**So was there much interaction say between the builders, and the clerks, and various departments? Or would you mainly stay contained within your little communities of...?**

**John:** Well, erm, obviously you would see and talk to, er, talk to various people. But, I actually, when I first went there, I was surprised at how many people that I actually knew. Er, there was a lot of, lot of the dockers were actually, I went to school with their sons. And, some of the women who worked in the canteen, I went to school with their sons, or played football with their sons. So, there ‘as a lot of people, er, lot of people there I knew.

**So it felt like a community?**

**John:** It was part of, yeah, I was, part of, it felt like it was part of a community. Although, the further apar—the other end, sort of the London Bridge end, Hibernia Wharf, a lot of ‘em where from – seemed to be from Lambeth. And it was-er, the Mark Brown, Tower Bridge was, boxing was a big thing at the time, amateur boxing, so the-the Hibernia Wharf, London Bridge end was mainly Fitzroy Lodge boxing club, and the Tower Bridge end was mainly Fisher. So there was a bit of rivalry.

**How would the rivalry, like, manifest itself?**

**John:** Oh, it ‘as all friendly, you know, yeah. The-there would be boxing shows and er, the, ‘our lads are gonna beat your lads,’ and ya know, that kind of thing, it was good.

**Would you all socialise together? In the evenings or at the weekends?**

**John:** Well, er. On Fridays I suppose that was the big-big day, because if the-i, dependin’ on when the ships ‘ould come in and been unloaded, and-er, gone on the barges, usually Fridays and Thursday afternoons the pubs along Tooley Street would’ve been pretty full with-er, people, because if they’d finished their job, finished their work, they’d be goin’ home, you know. Nothing would come in on a Thursday or a Friday. They all- all the ships would come in over the weekend on the tides. Erm, so, that was pretty lively th-you know, Friday evenings along there, Friday afternoons. Erm, we used to join in as apprentices and go in, have a few beers on the way home from work or at lunchtime. But, you know, obviously people don’t drink at lunchtime anymore.

**(Laughs) It’s in decline. Erm, so could you, like describe for me your average day at work?**

**John:** Erm, well de-depending which department I was in, we, erm, we would go and check, it would’ve been sorted out with- they would, in the refrigeration section, there would be, er, all the warehouses would have been –there would’ve been planned maintenance, goin’ on, so that one-one section of the whar- of the, of the- wharf would’ve been taken out, shut down, and you’d take apart the machinery, check it all, put it back, grease it, oil it, make sure, check all the pressures an-and all the parts.

**So how many men would be doing each job?**

**John:** Er, there would be, er, one engineer and one apprentice.

**Okay.**

**John:** Maybe er-er, an engineer’s mate as well, so if it was big machinery, big plant.

**So that was the refrigeration department?**

**John**: That was, yeah, refrigeration.

**What about when you were erm, in the building?**

**John:** Erm, in the building there’d be one, one bricklayer or carpenter, and-and one apprentice.

**So would you do in particular?**

**John:** I-I would be helpin’ carry- may carryin’ the stuff around and-and holding stuff and being told, ‘this is what you do, this is it,’ and tryin’ to listen. And-but, it was-it was good fun, the people were pretty friendly.

**So did you get on with everyone that you were working with?**

**John:** I got on with everyone, yeah, especially the older f-the older fellas, they would- they had a good sense of humour.

**So they’d been there for like a long time?**

**John**: Mmm. A lot of ‘em, a lot of ‘em ‘ad worked there for – a lot of, well, being the late 60s, quite a few of ‘em had-had come back from the war and gone straight to work there. Yeah.

**Did they tell you much about their experience at war?**

**John:** They did. It was the-er, the older guys, especially, ya know they would – about – the music would start ‘em off, because they didn’t like The Beatles or The Rolling Stones or The Who, ya know, start talkin’ about Bing Crosby and that kind of stuff. And then it would start, ‘We didn’t fight the war for this,’ ya know.

**(Laughs) Yeah.**

**John:** (Laughs) we’d start laughin’.

**Erm, so, when – you said you enjoyed yourself…?**

**John**: Yeah, I did. I used to look forward— it was one of the few jobs I’ve ever worked in since, ya know, that-that I actually looked forward to goin’ to work there…

**Really?**

**John**:...on a Monday mornin’, it was re-very interesting. And it felt like it was in an interesting part of London, just by the river. There was always something going on apart from the work. There was, there was being filmed,‘s always, erm, som-some film crew would be there and usually towards the end of the week, Thurs-maybe it was Thursday it would start to quiet down, the ships mainly had gone. But sometimes if I-I remember, erm, Blue Peter was, the-the T.V. program was there at Mark Brown’s, and they were filmin’, they-they had-this, er, they was going on safari to Africa. But, of course, none of the ships from Hay’s Wharf ever went ta- didn’t go to Africa, they went-they went to Poland, or, ya know, or Demark. So, (laughs) but of course, I suppose it looked better on T.V., so they filmed, I think it was The Baltic Sun, they filmed, er, the-er, Range Rovers being loaded on the crane, going over onto the-onto the ship. And can’t ‘mem-ya know. And, I-I actually met Valerie Singleton.

**Oh, did you?**

**John:** (Laughs) yeah.

**Claim to fame, that, isn’t it?**

**John:** (Laughs) She was very pleasant, she didn’t say something’ say, how Val! (Laughs)

**(Laughs) So what, erm, what time would you start on a Monday morning?**

**John:** I used, I used to get there for, er, eight o’clock.

**Okay, so was it far for you to come from home?**

**John:** Er, no, I lived, at the time just off the Old Kent Road. So I just get the 78 bus.

**And how long did that take?**

**John:** How long’d it take? Well, it depended on the traffic. Monday mornings it would-it would take about fifteen minutes I suppose.

**And would you get the bus with other people that were working with you? Did you see other dockers on the bus?**

**John:** Oh, sometimes, yeah, and-and they’d, if I was standing at the bus stop in the Old Kent Road to get the- some of the dockers would be drivin’ by and they’d stop and give me a lift.

**Oh, that’s good.**

**John:** Yeah, take me, so, which‘s good. We’d have a little chat and, and- er, that would be it. Go off in the car park and then go off to work, yeah.

**So what time would you finish then?**

**John:** Er, we-we used to work ‘till six o’clock.

**And was it always six?**

**John:** It was always six, but it-wou-it-, from five ‘o clock to six o’ clock was overtime.

**Okay, and would you alway--**

**John:** Yeah, the official hours were ‘om eight o’ clock ‘till five, but I always done an extra hour.

**So would you always do?**

**John:** Some, that was the apprentices, worked ‘till six. Engineers worked ‘till – well, they, they would work ‘till seven.

**Yeah.**

**John:** Whether they stayed, of course, was another thing, but if they finished before, obviously, if they finished before they would go home. But we always stayed ‘till six.

**So, was there ever a day that you wouldn’t stay ‘till six, or would you mainly always do the overtime?**

**John**: Oh, well I needed the money, yeah, ya see. Er, the-the only – I-I used to work Sat-Saturday mornings on the, on the engineers, repairing cranes ‘cause it was a very quiet day. So if you was, the cranes had to be – whether they were broken or not, every week, there would be a different crane that would be taken out of- out of action, taken apart, looked at, repaired, greased up, oiled, er, check the cables and everything, test it. Er, so, that would be done on a Saturday morning, start at eight o’clock, and you would be paid ‘till one. But you-you-you, depend, I mean, you got away at half eleven.

**Did you mind working on Saturday mornings?**

**John:** Er, well, it depended on what I’d done Friday night.

**Yeah. (Laughs)**

**John:** (Laughs) No, it ‘as, I liked the money, ya know it was, it made my money up from 6 pound a week to 9 pound a week if I remember rightly.

**Okay**.

**John**: Yeah, it was three pound for a Saturday mornin’.

**So, did you find the money was good or did you find that you were- felt like you always needed to do the overtime?**

**John:** Oh, well, the overtime was there and it wasn’t – I quite liked working there, so I didn’t really, er, it wasn’t far to go home. So it was, was no big deal really for me and, and the money was, was always handy.

**Oh, that’s good. So –**

**John:** It was only; it was only one of six for a night out, then. So, y’know, a pound ‘ld buy ya a night out.

**Erm, so how physical was your job, then?**

**John:** Er-it could be, yeah. It could be some of the-some of the parts were quite heavy.

**Did you find it took a toll on you, at all?**

**John:** No, I was young, fit…

**So you found it fine. Did, er,…**

**John:** Some of the older guys, that’s why I would be, a lot of ‘em, now some of ‘em were, in their late 50s, early 60s at the time so th-they would have been a bit…

**You could notice…**

**John**: Yeah, some of ‘em were as old as me, were as old as me now, and er, they were…

**Still doing a very physical job?**

**John:** They’d been through the war, and some, ya know they. Because they’d worked for the company before they -they were guaranteed a job when they came back and- y’know, for those days they were quite well looked after by the company, they-- Hay’s Wharf was very good-er, in a lot of, in a lot of respects to each employ. They had a kind of paternalistic attitude to its-er, employees. Especially if you played football at a good level, or you was a boxer, er, they’d give you time off, and the-the-they had a good sports ground and facilities.

**Did you ever play football?**

**John:** Not for, not for the company. I played for, er, local clubs – Fisher and Downsiders.

**So when, erm, the docks were in decline, were there television crews around a lot?**

**John**: Yeah. It was, it was usually, it was-er, kind of almost, Thursday Fridays it was almost like a permanent film set there, there as always someone filming something. Well, sometimes it was Japanese, er, film crew, y’know there was-er, ‘cause of, because of the Tower Bridge and the Tower of London on the other side, so it was a good-great backdrop. Ya know, you’d get T.V. series like *The Saint* or something like that would film there weekends and so..

**Did you ever find yourself on T.V.?**

**John:** No I got, I got photographed with some models once for a German magazine. We-er, the-they was filmin’ this (laughs) by the river, by-by, erm, erm, Mark Brow—no, Fenning’s Wharf, which was near, London Bridge end. A-And they were-so we was all standin’ ‘round, these models, all these models there, bein’ filmed, er, and er, photographed, and-er there was, I dunno know if, d’you remember? There was another one, where there was a Nimble advert. There- there was a fam-famous advert for Nimble where a girl was sittin’ in an armchair?

**No, I don’t know.**

**John**: …In a chair, and London Bridge is in the background, but she’s bein’ hoisted up by a crane. But she didn’t get hoisted up very far, but the way it was photographed, it made it look as if she was really high and the Tower Bridge, yeah. So all that was goin’ on. ‘S a lot of these, things like that.

**So it was a really lively atmosphere then?**

**John:** Yeah I just, er. I did, I, er, worked a day. ‘As, er, enjoyed it.

**So what about other days when you felt like it wasn’t enjoyable or it was takin’ its toll?**

**John**: I cannot remember, in the three years, I cannot remember any-any feeling like that. I did quite enjoy it. It-it was, even if I was workin’ outsid-sometimes on a Saturday morning if we was up workin’ on the-on the cranes, we’d be in the cradle. So you-you’d be i-i-in this cradle, hanging from another crane, repairin’, working, erm, on-on another one. And sometimes it was my job to hold that crane while they would be pullin’ the nuts and bolts off and oiling it, and erm, checking the cables. Erm, that got quite unpleasant I suppose, ‘cause it was, we’d be cold and then I remem-- a few times doin’ it in the snow, when it was snowing. And it was col- it was, it was always colder by the river, (laughing) than it was away from it.

**So would you say then, so, in terms of summer and winter, which months were like the hardest?**

**John:** Well definitely, er, December, and January, February’s pretty bitterly cold.

**Did they provide you with any extra warm –**

**John:** Yeah, no, they gave us overalls and Donkey jackets.

**Yeah. Did you wear gloves and stuff?**

**John**: Yeah, we’d, they’d give us gloves as well.

**So they prov-they provided everything?**

**John**: Oh, yeah, yeah.

**Was there ever, in summertime when it was really really hot, I know it’s not very often in England, but was that ever unpleasant?**

**John**: Well, erm, the summer of 1969 was a particularly sum- a warm summer.

**Summer of ’69.**

**John**: Yeah, it was-it was, it was a very warm summer. And, er, we used-to do sunbathing on the roof at lunchtime.

**Oh, nice.**

**John:** Yeah it was, it was good. And-er, oh especially by the river, it was, it was wonderful sittin’ by the river wo-wo-the dock, Hay’s-where Hay’s- do y’know Hay’s Galleria?

**Yeah, yeah.**

**John:** Well that used to be a dock there, so there was a lock, and the warehouses either side, it was sort of, kind of a walkway around it, but inside was a dock. You could get some, mainly barges, y’know it was, but it was, used to be a little trans-, er, I think it was Dutch, the Jan-the Jane E., it was only a small boat, but it‘d come in and be unloaded there. That was great, and er, that always reminds me of, you know the ‘Dock ‘o the Bay,’ Otis Redding?

**Yeah**.

**John**: That was a hit record at that particular time and in that summer, and that was bein’ played a lot, so I – every time I hear that record, I always think of Hay’s Wharf.

**Did you get-did you get to play music while you were working, on a radio or anything?**

**John**: Er, no not really. There was- y’know, we had transistor radios in those days, but-er, you couldn’t take a radio around.

**Okay, so did you—so in terms of lunchtimes, where would you go?**

**John**: Oh, in lunchtimes there were canteens where you could go. There was a, ya know, along-in Cotton’s Wharf, in Cotton’s Wharf area there was a big canteen there. Er, really big one. You could go in there, and it was, ya know, pretty cheap for a-a, it was about a shilling, five pence for a bacon roll, and two pence for a cup of tea or a coffee.

**Sounds good.**

**John:** Ya know, it was, subsidized by the company, you know. But-er, obviously, that had to be argued for us by the- it was mainly for the-the d-dockers, you know, wouldn’t’ve gone on with that, if they tried to put the prices up, the dockers would protest, y’know, in the mitable fashion. So that was good, we had, the engineers, used to have their own lobbies, they’d be in, at the bottom of some of the-er, the wharves. They would go down, had a little, er, cookin’ area, where you’d-and a big long table; you could sit and cook or eat your own food and sandwiches. There would be a radio in there. And you could sit and listen to the radio if you wanted to, or read ya-read your newspaper or generally just chat amongst yourself. We only used that, really, in the winter months, y’know, so.

**What would you normally eat for lunchtime? Would you cook for yourself?**

**John:** No, my mum always made me sandwiches.

**Always, every day?**

**John:** (Laughing) Alway, yeah.

**What would be on your sandwiches?**

**John:** Erm, ham. Egg and tomato, yeah, cheese, yeah, yeah. If-basically had the-the, bit of nice, good bread. Erm.

**So that would – you would always have sandwiches made by your mum?**

**John**: Mainly, yeah. Som-except Fridays, ‘cause I-we’d, I’d -I’d go out with some of the other apprentices and go, go to a caf sometimes, maybe, or a pub.

**Was that like a Friday ritual?**

**John**: Usually, yeah.

**Would most people do that or was it just you and your friends?**

**John:** Most people did that, yeah. Tooley Street pubs were packed. But I used to go, we used to go, to couple of some pubs in the er, Borough Market. They had, er, one – particularly one, The Harrow, which is called something else now. They’ve changed the name of it; I forgot what it’s called now. But-er, they used t-they had a particularly good juke box so we used go in there. And there was always lots of girls usually in there as well.

**Where would these girls be working?**

**John:** Er, United, at Friendly, er, insurance, er, company had a big-er, office near Southwark Bridge, so they would wander in. And-er, oh, if we was, used the King of Belgium. There’d be, there was a factory just off-off the river, i-i-in Tooley Street, it was called Swifts. And erm, it was behind, erm, behind St. Olaves, er, warehouse, and they used to take in all the rotten cheese – or, rancid, not rotten, rancid cheese, and they’d process it, and you’d get the – you know like the tubs with the soft…

**Yeah**.

**John:** They-they would turn rancid cheese from the docks into, y’know, package the processed cheese. And there was a lot-lot, and that employed, know must’ve been sixty, seventy wome- young women from the area, y’know as well as office staff.

**It was like a meeting point for you all then?**

**John:** Yeah.

**Were they good times?**

**John:** Oh, oh, yes I thought so. At the time, yeah, it was very good.

**‘Cause obviously if you look at Borough Market today and Hay’s Galleria it’s all, ya know, done up. Do you find it odd to walk through there now?**

**John**: Yes-er, it-I, I do. Especially Hay’s Galleria. I always, just, can’t help but think how it was.

**It’s quite-it’s quite, I think it’s quite an odd building, Hay’s Galleria, I don’t quite und-understand its purpose really apart from just a few restaurants. But do you ever look back and so-look back to the old days?**

**John**: Yes, if I, whenever I walk through that way, I always er, everything, every sort of brick is almost a memory, sort of thing, yeah. But, I was only there for a year, but it’s stuck in my-my, er, psyche.

**So out of your life’s work, those three years stand out as three pretty good years?**

**John**: Yes, yes.

**Do you, erm, keep in contact with many people that you worked with?**

**John**: There was-there’s one guy who’s he’s-he’s-er, Dave, he’s a very good friend of mine still. Er, I-I started there and I met him there. Although, he came from the Silwood Estate, so I didn’t know him ‘till I went there. We both, er, he’s a couple months older than me, but both of s-s-similar age, and er, he worked as-er, in the clerk at Hibernia Wharf. Trainee clerk, and I was apprentice, and, and I’d seen him around, I’d just seen him on the bus, I didn’t know him. And-er, we’d nod to one another, and just, one day we got to talkin’ and-er, and we’ve been, y’know, great friends ever since. And, er, went to his, his-er, fortieth wedding anniversary last March, yeah.

**Really?**

**John:** Yeah, things like that there was othe-other friends that I made there that-that I saw, kept in touch with for many years afterwards, but ya-y’know, gradually drifted apart, yeah.

**You slip apart, yeah, that’s understandable.**

**John**: And there was one-there was one lad there who I still see now and again, er, that I went to school with, we was in the same class in secondary school all the way through, and he-he went there. And I didn’t know, we left-we left school at the same time, he went-worked for some other company, and by the time I’d c-c-come there, in November, he’d started there, he ‘as an apprentice electrician there. And we-we, I still see him now and again, but you know he’s not; he’s still a friend, obviously.

**So in- when you’re in school, what was the general kind of jobs other classmates used to get?**

**John**: Er, a-at school, a-my school, there’s not one time any teacher or anyone ever said anything to us about goin’ to university. Now, er, everybody wants to go to university.

**Yeah, Yeah.**

**John:** No one ever mentioned that to any of us.

**So— were they, sort of gettin’ you geared up for a physical job, or…?**

**John**: Yes, that-it was always-always, do well at school and you could be a bricklayer. Do well at school and you could be an electrician.

**So was that something that you actually wanted to do, though?**

**John**: I sup’, yeah that was-er, what-what we aspired to.Was bein’ an electrician, or, a carpenter. No one there, no one, no one I knew ever went to university.

**So where did you go to school?**

**John**: St. Michael’s Dockhead.

**Okay. Erm, going back to the docks, erm, could you tell me about health and safety? Was there health and safety?**

**John**: There was, there was health and safety, er, mainly from the workforce. I can’t, there was-there was pers-there would’ve been a personnel officer, the company started getting personnel officers. Er, they call that HR now, but in those days they were personnel officers. And the kind of their remit was also health and safety. But really health and safety came from the workforce. Er, you-ya know, if you was feeling you were unhappy with something, if you didn’t complain then they wouldn’t do anything about it and it depended on how many of you did complain, or-and-and how forceful in your complaint, whether they ignored you or-or not. So therefore if you, if you was worried about a certain thing, then it’d be best to get the dockers as well on your side. Er ‘cause, w-y’know, they had more-more, er, say.

**Did you ever complain about anything or take part in a group complaint?**

**John**: Er, not there, no. I wa-no, I don-can’t remember ever bein’ worried about that. You-‘cause there was also, the thing as well as kind of a- I suppose me hangin’ onto the train-er, the crane, er, wou- you wouldn’t see that, holdin’ the cradle and that-that would never happen now. Lookin’ back on it, that’s kind of unsafe, isn’t it? Work practice. Ya know you-they would say, if you complained about that you’d-you’d get called names, yeah.

**Yeah. So did you feel there was, like, bravado amongst all the do-like, the dockers?**

**John**: Most of ‘em were just tryin’ to get on with their job, get their money.

**Yeah. Did you feel like you had to look out for anyone, like anybody else?**

**John**: Well you always looked after your-looked out for ya work mate, your friends at work.

**What about the older dockers was there ever a sense that you felt you had to look out for them?**

**John**: No-no-you, they looked after their selves. No, never looked out for them. They in fact, they-y’know, if there was a-a slight smell of ammonia i-i-n the cold rooms, they would down tools and walk out. So you would get called in, the engineers would get called in-called in straight away ‘cause them not workin’ was costing the company money, and you had to make sure this-there was no leak and you’d test, test for the leak, and, er, and repair it if it was a leak.

**So, did you feel like with the older dockers, they sort of ran themselves in the sense that they-if they weren’t happy they would, they would just walk out?**

**John:** Well there was always that-that feeling that, er, they had more say than anyone else.

**Yeah.**

**John:** Er, obviously the management had more to say than they did, and ‘cause they used to do some things that I used to think was slightly provocative, er, but. Provo-sometimes, ya know for their own aims they would provoke, a, maybe a dispute.

**Could you give any examples?**

**John:** Erm, I-I-I remember there was this one particular dispute-at Mark Brown’s, we had this ship came in. And it was all, it was full of, er, hides, skins of animals, And-er, they wanted it unloaded and they wanted it unloaded in a certain time, they needed it. And, and, the dockers went on-on the boat, and they looked at it, took one look and walked off. They refused to unload it, and wanted, er, extra money for unloadin’ it in the-in the time. And they were, they-their excuse was it hadn’t been treated, it was full of anthrax, they could get anthrax off the, off these hides. Well, obviously there might-there may well be, there might have been something in what they were saying. But they wa- the gu-, the-erm, the company wanted it done and turned ‘round and wanted it out, wanted ‘em out of the way, double quick. So there was, there was something goin’ on. In the end they paid ‘em the extra money, and got ‘em some clothe-got masks to wear, they demanded masks and-and gloves. And so they-they got ‘em that, got ‘em the extra money, got- and it was unloaded and the ship had gone. There was something going both, boat sized there. So y’know it was in-, interesting.

**Interesting, yeah. Were the older dockers welcoming to you when you went in? Was there ever like an initiation for you at all?**

**John**: No, no, no. No, it was just, you got a-a say, I knew one or two of ‘em. They was always pretty friendly, but really busy. Because, y’know, they were on bonus and piece work, really to get the ships or barges unloaded and turned ‘round. So they would-they would be, they would be mainly, generally they would be working earlier, start work earlier than us. Er, depending on, when the, y’know when the tides were runnin’. So, you’d go in on Monday morning, and-er, the whole of the, the quays would be, there’d be ships from Mark Brown’s down to Tow- down to London Bridge and couple on the other side. But by say, Wednesday morning they would nearly all have gone. So they’d work like, er, get ’em turn around and go. So, and they’d be workin’ on barges and stuff that’d been brought down from the royal group of docks, or, y’know, West India Dock or something and unload the barges. So th-that, I always liked to see, or go in on Monday, see what ships were around. There was a f-funny ship once u-u-used to come in there, and I didn’t realise what-what it was, and it had a swastika on the front of it – big old black ship, it was. And it would come in once a year, the three years I saw it three times, three summers runnin’. But it was an Icelandic, er, cruiser. Erm, cruise, a liner, but only a small one, but i-i-it’d come from Iceland and come for, like the weekend, just to see the bridge open up. There’d be tou- er, Icelandic tourists on there, y’know, not many, it was a small, small one. But it had a, it wasn’t a, it wasn’t a Nazi emblem (laughing) the swastika, it wa-it was, it was a-an Icelandic rune, and It looked-but it was a swastika but it was in a different position than the Nazi one had twisted it ‘round for, not a peace sign, for a war sign. Yeah, so. Yeah, that would be, come in, one-and stay for about a week every summer and then-then like we wouldn’t see it again ‘till the next year.

**Were there any other ships that you’d notice, like on a, different periods of time?**

**John**: There was the-the ship that went to Poland and back, th-there were three of ‘em. There was The Baltic Sun, The Baltic Star, and The Baltic Moon. And-er, The Baltic Star would be there one week, er, on a Monday, and stay ‘till about Wednesday morning and then go. Then the follow-the following Monday it would be The Baltic Star-The Baltic Sun, and they seemed to alternate, comin’ back. And there was this, er, big old ginger tom cat was, er, used to prowl around the-the-the Mark Brown’s Wharf and St. Olaves Wharf, er, it was a huge thing, a huge big head, all scarred, half his ear missing, but a really big old cat. And-er, and where-where the-er, the bonded warehouses were, where th-there was wine vats and there’d be all these wine barrels, and-er, underneath there’d be a little tray underneath, where-where the, the tap would be on so they could take samples, and-er, but it was a drip. So when they turned it off it would still drip and little trays would catch the drips. And that cat used to go around and drink the drips. And you’d see ‘m up there (laughing) he would, and you’d see ‘em up there, staggerin’ from side to side. Drunken old tom cat! Apparently he was-he was good at killin’ rats as well, but he-he-he wandered onto The Baltic Sun once, and-er, sl- to sleep it off. And it ended up in Poland! (laughing) And, er, they had to keep it on, th-the-the sailors kept it on board because if it got off, they’d’ve, er, killed it I suppose, or put it been in quarantine. But so they kept it on board, and like two weeks later came back!

**(Laughing) Had a holiday! So, there was always something going on where you were working?**

**John:** Yeah, yeah.

**So you were constantly entertained?**

**John**: Yes. It was, er, it was a nice place with main-m-mainly really nice people. Plenty of, er, characters there. There’s a, they used to have these, in the older wharves, at Hibernia and Cotton’s Wharf, they had these-er, big old coke boilers that would-er, it was-they had really old-er, refrigeration plant, er, which would-er, pumps that would pump brine around, er, so, and there was boilers that would pump this, almost like steam up, pumpin’ it ‘round. And-er it was, like all the old men-the really old boys i-i-in their 60s, late 60s, there was men there who were past retirement age, they, but because they’d worked for Hay’s Wharf for a long long time, they let ‘em stay on, give ‘em, found jobs for ‘em, gave ‘em these jobs and you’d go down and talk to ‘em. They were quite nice, good old fellas. Talk about-talk about the first World War, not just second.

**So did you feel like in these three years, you learnt a lot about life, heard a lot?**

**John:** I certainly have heard a lot of stories from other people’s lives, and existences. One, one old fella there Fred, he was one of those old boys what worked in the boiler, come from Dockhead. And, er, he was an interestin’ man. Liked to-liked to drink, er, liked to be a---and he, his brother was a Catholic priest and married him and his wife. And, er, her, and he-he-he told me once, how he go in, he was on The Somme survived The Somme, and he was, er, I think he was about, he was sixteen, yeah, he was sixteen, seventeen. And, er, he was playing football in around Dockhead, er and with his- with a mate, with his mates, and, er, he got captured by the police, ‘cause one of -few of the windows got smashed so he went up before the magistrates, and the magistrate said ‘Why aren’t you in the Army?’ So, he was-he had the choice of either goin’, joining the army, or going to prison for, y’know vandalism, criminal damage or whatever, breakin’ the peace or whatever they used to charge ‘em with back then. So he went to the Army-had to join the Army. About 1916. And, er, yeah. But he survived, yeah, and got married, and had a few-four kids I think, yeah.

**Must’ve heard some things then.**

**John:** Oh yeah, yeah. He was a nice man, old Fred. Good guy.

**Did you keep in touch with any of the older dockers once you left?**

**John**: Er, I-well only the ones I saw around. I-I still played football for, for the Fisher and Downside. So, a lot of the-the guys who helped out at the club and then they’d run the football clubs. There were football teams, work a-a-at Hay’s Wharf, so I still saw about at least four of ‘em.

**Did you..?**

**John**: Wait, no, more than that, ‘cause a couple of boxing coaches worked there as well.

**Did you feel like where you lived and your community there was, did many of those in that community work within the docks?**

**John**: Yes, er, there’s quite a lot of worked on the docks, whether along Surrey or-or in the Wharves along the river. A lot of ‘em were, so it, w-I was surprised how many people, when I started there, I was surprised at how many people there were there that I actually knew or-or-or had seen, or had some connection with. ‘Cause, you know, goin’ to school with their sons and daughters, or, or living down the street with, sort of, their relatives. It was-er, I was surprised about that, but there was a lot. And, as I say I worked-at the Fisher Club and Downside, a lot of guys who helped out there, they worked at-for Hay’s Wharf. The football managers for the junior teams, and, and they-they all worked there.

**So when the docks shut down how did that-first how did that make you feel?**

**John:** Well I-I-I was sad about it, and-er, but it was ki-I suppose there was this-this, they keep tellin’ you it’s progress this and progress that, but it’s the rate of progress, and who’s interest this progress is in? I don’t-I certainly didn’t think that a lot of it was in interest of the people from here. Erm, seein’ us all go like that, but it was certainly in the interest of the-of the company because that land was worth a lot of money.

**Yeah.**

**John:** Er, wh-wh- and I noticed every year, everyone, er, got a-a bonus, er, at Christmas from the company dependin’ on how many millions of pounds they made in profit, you would get a pound. So if they made five million pound profit, you’d get five pounds Christmas bonus. Which is quite a good thing for a, for, ya know, for-er, ordinary working people, but the company would do that. I don’t think that happens anymore, I don’t, I don’t know of any company that I’ve ever worked for since then that ever did that. Erm, I thought it was quite a good thing. But, obviously if they’re only making three, four, five million pound a year profit, but that land is, y’know, worth billions – what’re they gonna do, ya know? They’re gonna find some excuse, and say, ‘Well we can’t, this is too small. It-he roads are too narrow.’ Obviously, the wharves mainly were built for horse and carts when it was first built, so it had to be modernised.

**So, was it a sad atmosphere as it was...?**

**John**: It-it was a gradual process, and the last year I worked there it was startin’ to go. Parts of it were bein’ shut down, and a lot of, in that last year I was w-worked, it was mainly helpin’ to close stuff down, shutting the plant down. And then they said to us, er, y’know, you gotta go. I was six-sixteen, seventeen, eighteen – nineteen. Yeah, and I was made redundant. And they gave me fifty pound redundancy money. (Laughs) In fact, by law-law I wasn’t entitled to anything.

**Really?**

**John:** No, in those days, yeah.

**So, did you feel...?**

**John:** ‘Cause as an apprentice, I wasn’t cl-if I’d been a- a work-if I’d been a-an engineer or work-or a worker, then I’d been entitled to two years,er, redundancy money, at least. Er, or something like that, yeah two weeks wages. So they didn’t have to give me anything, yeah, but they gave me fifty pound.

**So did you feel, among the older workers, how did they feel about the docks shutting down? Or indeed the younger workers as well.**

**John**: Er, well I think it was, er, the older ones were pr-were, er, were rather sad, the younger ones i-i-i, gradually getting laid off were kind of excited that there’s a inter-, missin’, they would miss their friends and that, but it-there was reasonably full employment around at the time, so they all thought they would get another job fairly easy, most of ‘em did.

**Yeah.**

**John:** Erm, course it, that’s not the case now. Erm, so, they-they left with-y’know, sad ‘bout leaving but, ya know it was a new start somewhere else, as I said, most of ‘em they was leaving, they had already got jobs, to go to, so there was all that.

**What did you move on to afterwards?**

**John**: I-I went to, er, I went to an engineering firm, er, went there. Transferred over to there.

**Was that a pretty instant transfer, or..?**

**John:** Yeah, I-I got; they’d given me a couple of days off to go and find a job. Yeah, and they’d give me all the time. Soon as they told me, er, in a group of us, called us and said, they gave us. They-they actually, they was almost like-like three months notice, they-they told us, and er, so they – more or less I never did any more work at all and it was, I spent most of the time lookin’ for another job. And got one, y’know ev-everyone got a job.

**So did you work in engineering for like for the rest of…?**

**John:** No, I-I-I stayed, I stayed in it for a little while, for about a year, and then I-I-I got a job on a building site, and went-went back to building work.

**Did you ever miss engineering?**

**John:** No, I-I, when I was at Hay’s Wharf, the-it was the engine-the-the building part was what I preferred. Just, that was just me, I liked better bein’ out in the open air. I liked that.

**Erm, in terms of what you saw on a daily basis and the smells and the general atmosphere, could you explain some of that?**

**John:** Erm, the general atmosphere was, er, very noisy.

**Yeah.**

**John:** Lots of people. Talking, shouting, calling one another, silly names and all. (Laughs)But it was, but it w-not in a bad way, y’know, yeah, ya know. And there was tannay that would c-they would be callin’ out all the time, say ‘come to this part,’ and they’d-- There was loads of tannay noise goin’ on, telling people where to go and be careful, or warning, or asking for the lorry drivers to come and move their lorry. Erm, yeah it was just very noisy I remember it was noisy. Er, but I liked bein’ walking along the deck there along the quayside, and looking at the cranes moving, seeing all different types of stuff that was comin’ in. And I was it- up at Cotton’s Wharf there were-they used to bring in these barges with big bells of rubber, huge big, big as this, bell of rubber all tied up. And they’d have it in a net so they, now, imagine comin’ out the barge and there’d be a net, obviously they’d be just piled up with big piles of rubber. And sometimes, o-o-one of the bells would fall out, i-it would tear and one would fall out, and there’s, you’d hear someone shout, ya know, ‘Look out!’ know, look up and you everyone would run ‘cause this thing would bounce, and ‘cause it was square, you just didn’t know where and it was half, ya know, it was half a ton ‘o rubber, it would do you a lot of damage if it fell and it’d bounce all over the place hit the walls, bounc-take-take quite a while for it to stop movin’, you’d have to hide in-run into the buildings to get-keep away from it.

**Were there any really bad accidents when you were there?**

**John:** There were quite a few, but I-I actually never saw any. I never saw any bad, but there were a few. A few things had fallen on people. Erm, but y’know, I never saw any. Erm, no I only remember really good things about it. Know, as I say, hot summers we’d be up on the roof. The-there was, erm, the cooling towers on the roof, and the-the water would drip down, there’d be tanks around the bottom, a lot of the lads like-like would, they were keen fishermen, go fishin’ on weekends. And, er, they’d bring back fish, and there’d be dace and rudd, swimmin’ about in these cooling tanks (laughs). And you’d go up-go up on your lunch time and feed ‘em. You’d pitch a sandwich, bits of bread.

**You would give ‘em your Mum’s sandwich?**

**John:** Yeah (Laughs).

**So you said, like, erm, the rubber coming in, were there any other exciting things that you’d see or, you’d look forward to, or?**

**John:** I would, there was all kinds of cheese and butter, erm, I saw-I-I-I saw, erm, some of the Danish ships would obviously bring in big sides of bacon and I saw ‘em there all the time, but I saw one of ‘em roll off and it come down the quay with a big slap-slap. Erm, but it didn’t hit anybody, would’ve done ‘em a lot of damage if it did. Erm, yeah, bacon. Loads of these big, being stored in the cold rooms, they used to call ‘em hat boxes, and they would, er, fifty-five pound of cheese, er, Black Diamond Canadian cheese. ‘Course you could, there was always someone had a slab of it you could have with ya, with your lunch, and get the, yeah. And I-I every time I see, you don’t see it very often now, Black Diamond Cheddar Cheese, Canadian, it’s absolutely lovely I recommend it to anyone, Black Diamond Cheese. Really strong, nice cheese.

**So you got to try some of this food?**

**John:** Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**What else did you get to try?**

**John**: Erm, sauerkraut, used to get-well the Polish ships used to bring it in, jars of sauerkraut, I used to like that, still do, still buy it now. Got-got quite a taste for sauerkraut (laughs).

**What is it?**

**John**: It’s, er, pickled cabbage.

**Is it?**

**John:** It’s stripped white cabbage, pickled, really nice.

**Is it? Can you get it from the supermarket?**

**John**: Yes, yeah you can now. You can get it now, but you couldn’t get it anywhere then.

**So, would-how would it work try-like trying the food, would you just take a bit?**

**John:** Yes you could tak-you could take a-a-a-a sample of it, and-and-and well but you couldn’t take it out-out of the, on the roads coming out into Tooley Street, there would be police boxes.

**Really?**

**John:** Yeah, security box-the-they weren’t, they were sort of, the wharf police. They were, they were wharf police, they was like they weren’t security guards, they were above them, they were, they had no jurisdiction out in Tooley Street, but on the-on Hay’s Wharf they were the coppers. So you-you-youcouldn’t take anything out. I mean, people did, I suppose, there was quite a bit of thieving went on. Er, but, er, you could sample the, but you could sample the nicest butter and the best cheese on there in your lunch time, I got quite, I got quite, er, flavour for a, taste for Canadian Black Diamond Cheese and, er, sauerkraut. And also, you-the-the Polish seamen used to bring in, erm, monkey boots.

**What’re they?**

**John**: The-the-they’re, erm, sort of brown boots that ‘re high, very supple, they were lot like boxing boots, they were lace ups, they were, er, you-used to call ‘em monkey boots, but they used, everyone used to wear ‘em, buy ‘em, ‘cause they used to charge a-a pound for a pair. And I, I remember that the government devalued the pound one, one week, ‘cause it-there was- it-it wasn’t afloat, I think government’s either re-valued and devalued then, it was a government decision, and they devalued the pound, and the Polish seamen put the price up to thirty bob, y’know, one pound fifty, for a pair. And, er, when the- when The Baltic Moon came in on a Monday they, the dockers used to go and buy ‘em off. ‘Cause they were Polish boots, er, made in Poland and the Polish seamen would bring ‘em over and-and sell ‘em to the dockers, and the dockers would sell ‘em, put their bit on top and-and sell ‘em to everyone else.

**So was there a lot of that going on?**

**John:**  Yeah, there was, there was a lot of that, yeah. They-they would sell these boot, and they’d, they’d put for- another ten bob, ten, know another fifty pence on top, so it was one pound-fifty, like today’s money, thirty bob then. And-er, and the dockers all walked off and refused to b-buy it. (Laughs) None of ‘em would buy ‘em, so they had to drop the price back down again!

**So, erm, you’ve got these, erm, wharf police, and you said there was thieving going on, did you know anyone that would actually steal things, and was it much?**

**John**: I, I didn’t know anyone who was stealing anything, bit of pilferin’ maybe. But- er, no-I-I didn’t, I didn’t know any, really anyone who, who would steal like, like that. But the-the-there would have had to’ve been, there was so many people there, and you’d hear stories that, y’know. There ‘s, er, bottles of the brandy goin’ missing or tea, and-but, er, the, er, in the-in our lobbies, the tea was always the-the tea from, er, off the wharf, no one bought any tea, no one bought any cheese, but it came from, from there. Off the barges or, and-and the the tea, ‘cause where, erm, where, er, the Galler-the Hay’s Galleria is, those warehouses around it were mainly tea warehouses, that’s where the tea was stored in b-big-big ch-tea chests. And it was all go-, y’know, tea leaves, it was all good tea. Good, good tea. So, yeah, good cheese and good tea.

**Oh, that does sound good.**

**John:** For lunch, yeah.

**So you said the Polish seamen, obviously brought these monkey boots, would you talk much to these other seamen, would there, would you get on well?**

**John**: Er we never use-, being in the maintenance staff we wouldn’t’ve, really had much to do with ‘em, it was the dockers who worked on the ships would’ve, would mainly, er, had dealings with ‘em. So, we used to-, know there’s Polish ships down there, we used to get Dutch ships, anything that woul-sort of ships that wasn’t too far away, just across the North Sea mainly. Them Danish ships bringin’ in bacon, erm, and the Polish ships, Dutch, Dutch, and er, yeah, they were the mainly-main ones.

**Would they, would they spend much time? How long would a ship be in the dock, or…?**

**John**: Well they, it would-they would probably come in, say, Saturday night, Sunday morning, or Mo-or Sunday night and they’d be, mainly gone by Wednesday morning. There’s, y’know, so, it’d be backwards and forwards it would be to, say from Poland, they’d be about, they’d be gone for, once they left on a Wednesday, you wouldn’t see ‘em the following Wednesday, they’d be Wednesday after that, or the-the, say ten days, yeah, ten days.

**So, would the Polish seamen stay on the ship while they, while it was here, or would they get off and stay?**

**John**: Well, it- I think they stayed on the ship, I never- never saw any of ‘em —might see ‘em on-on-onthe quayside, never saw any of ‘em in Tooley Street. But, bearin’ in mind it was, Poland was part of the-er, the Communist block then, Sov-yeah, Soviet block, so there was, there was that kind of, er, friction I suppose. Between but gen-but generally they would, they, they got on alright with the dockers as far as I can see-can tell, apart from that incident when they put the prices up for the monkey boots. Other than that, they was, er, alright. Er, I know, er, although in Southwark Park, where I used to, when I was a-a-a real small kid about ten, I used to go in Southwark Park and watch football and you-you would see Russians, and I knew they were Russians ‘cause they smoked these big black, er, cigarettes with these, erm, they were-they weren’t plastic holders they were, erm, vegetable, made of vegetable matter. Er-er- you, real smelly cigarettes and they would smoke these at halftime ‘cause they’d play football against the Swedish or the Norwegians from Surrey Docks, or indeed the dockers, and that’s where I was ten years old, nine years old in Southwark Park, first saw international football. (Laughs)

**Russians and the Swedes, yeah.**

**John:** Yeah, playin’ football in Southwark Park. Proper matches, you know eleven aside, they weren’t kick abouts, they meant it. They had half-time and the Russians would walk off and smoke these funny cigarettes and they’d, and the Norwegians and Swedish wouldn’t be smoking. Well-not-they’d probably have a drink of vodka, or-or-or the Polish would, y’know (Laughs.)

**That sounds amazing. So, they-you said they’d come in, would they ever socialise in the pubs in the weekends, or…?**

**John**: I’d sometimes see, er, Dutch sailors, or a, Danish sailors bu-know, see ‘em in the pub sometimes, not often. Never saw, I never seen Polish ones, they might not’ve been allowed, ya know, off-er, out of the dock I don’t remember ever seein’ them i-in the streets, in Tooley Street anyway, in the pubs.

**Do you feel---**

**John:** Yeah, the-they probably wouldn’t’ve been able to afford it, either. ‘Cause their wages would’ve been a lot, their money was a lot lower.

**Do you feel like, erm, with some, say like the Polish, Russians, do you feel like with the dockers here they felt there was more animosity between certain groups of people?**

**John:** No, er-- (CUTS)

**Thank you. Okay, so, could you tell me, how did work affect your home life?**

**John:** Wh-erm, well, i-the main change I suppose was that-er, my parents stopped buyin’ me clothes and I gave them money for…

**Rent money.**

**John:** ..yeah. Not a lot, ‘cause I wasn’t makin’ a good deal, but it was ,er, I think I was p- giving me mum a pound a week, which was quite a lot of money I suppose, yeah.

**So did you stay at home then, while you were working there?**

**John**: Yes, yes. I was staying with, at home with me mum and dad and brother and sister, and I gave me mum a pound a week. Er, it went up every year, so, the following year it was one pound fifty, thirty bob.

**What job did your brother and sister do?**

**John**: Well they was still at school, I was the oldest, yeah.

**Oh you were the oldest? Okay, so were your mum and dad- what did your dad do? Did he have any…?**

**John**: My dad was, er, was a docker as well.

**Did, did he introduce you to job that you had, or…?**

**John**: No. No, he-he, er, he-huh – when I was in school, he-there was two things he didn’t want me to do. One was join the Army, and the other one was work in the docks. He wanted me to do anything but that.

**But that, well there you go.**

**John:** But that, well I suppose I wasn’t a docker, but I was but I worked in there…

**So he was a docker?**

**John**: He was, yeah.

**Where did he work?**

**John**: He worked in the Royal Group, the Albert Dock, Victoria Dock, over there.

**And what-what was he doing, just…?**

**John**: Sorry?

**Was he unloading…?**

**John**: Yes, ye-yeah.

**Did, why did he say to you he didn’t want you to be a docker?**

**John**: Well I suppose it was because, er, parents always want their children to be better than them. And to, er, for me just to be another, er, another docker in a long line of dockers would, er, er, would a, I suppose a failure on his part, y’know; he wanted me to do something else. Be an engineer, or-or, some-a skill, y’know like a plumber or something, that would’ve been-would’ve been an improvement than bein’ a dock labourer or a stevedore. Although, stevedore do-do-is a skill, un-unloadin’ a ship is, especially if you’re a ganger in charge, quite a skilled job, the-there’s an art to it.

**How long did he work in the docks for, then?**

**John**: He-he worked, er, I suppose about thirty-odd years.

**Yeah?**

**John:** Yeah, erm, then he, wh-when the docks started closing down, he got a job in the city, er, doing messenging. Y’know, taking, courier-courier. There was loads of ‘em went to work over there in the city doin’ that the-the ex-dockers got jobs in the city doing messenging and courierin’, courier stuff takin’ parcels around from bank to bank, office to office. And he worked for a-a-a-a- a big bank and his, couple of his brothers worked over there as well, my uncles worked over there. There ‘as a lot of dockers, ex-dockers, went to work in the city. Course that all ended when, er, computers and email came in, they didn’t need, y’ know so they, that stopped that, but they. So, so for about ten years, ‘till his retirement that’s where he worked, in the city.

**So, do you know why they all got those jobs over there or was it just a, just a trend of the time?**

**John**: Well it was a trend as the first ones left, started being made redundant. A few of ‘em bought pubs I suppose; it depended on how much redundancy money they got. Or, er, if y’know they got a chance at buyin’ a pub at they had some other money and bought a pub. But a lot of, as they started leaving, the-the banks and, insurance companies in the city started needing people to go and do that. It was-wasn’t very well paid, but they got involved, got over there, and started unionizing those jobs, and-er, and in the end they was getting the wages pumped up a bit.

**So were, your uncles, were they also dockers?**

**John**: Yes, yeah.

**So, a large amount of your family have been dockers or worked in the docks?**

**John**: Yeah, all – dad, my dad had, er, four brothers.

**Yeah.**

**John**: So and a-all-all of, my dad and his four brothers all worked in the docks.

**Erm when you were working at Hay’s Wharf was he a docker then or was he working in the city?**

**John:** Er, he was still working in the docks, but he’d become a tally clerk then.

**What’s that?**

**John**: Er, it-he’d be clerking cargo coming off, checking it off, addin’ it up, making sure that everything tallied with, y’know what-what they was expecting, what’d come off. And-and-and, y’know he’d have to do a report, he was a tally clerk. Ocean Ste- Ocean Steam tally clerk, er, big, in the Royal Group, had big-big, very big ships over there.

**Yeah, did he say, when he was actually a docker, did he say it was physically --?**

**John:** Well he, well that’s why he became a-a tally clerk, ‘cause he could earn more money as a docker, but it was a long, physical, hard, y’know. Er, he worked on gangs that did, er, piece work, er, cement, unloading cement, unloading meat, er, from a, y’know, Argentina beef and…

**Would they, er, --?**

**John:** And that’s where his big-big money was, in cement and meat.

**Would they say to the dockers, if they obviously looked like they were struggling, would it be the company that said to the dockers, ‘I think you need to move on,’ to say tally clerk, or would you-your dad’ve said I can’t do this anymore?**

**John:** No, he, it was my dad he-he-he; he knew he couldn’t do it. ‘Cause he’d had an accident at work, some cargo’d fallen on him, er, damaged his back. He was out of work, was in a plaster cast, ya know, but, obviously they getting treated differently now, but he was in a plaster cast for, er, what’s it four months or something like that, yeah he had the support, back support, ‘round him. Kind of a girdle kind of a thing that which he di- (laughing) he wasn’t happy about! He wasn’t happy about that. But, er, so then he took-he had to take an exam, yeah, to be a tally clerk, Ocean Steam, OST is what he was. Er, ‘cause they were, it-it- at Hay’s Wharf they had docker checkers, which were dock- but ‘cause they couldn’t do the other, the unloadin’ they’d be, because they were smaller cargo, smaller ships, they were checking, and, er. But, in the big docks where there was big ships, ocean steamships, the-er-er- massive cargoes comin’ in and out, so it was a bit-bit more complicated.

**Do you know what the test consisted of?**

**John**: No, I can’t remember now. But-but it was a obviously about mathematics.

**Mathematics, yeah. Erm, when, how long was your dad off for when he had this injury?**

**John:** About eighteen months he was out of work, he was, er, off work for, yeah.

**Did, erm, erm, what was I going to say, did your mum find it hard, both of you working in the docks, or did she-did she mind, or?**

**John**: Er, well she was happy I was working.

**Was she?**

**John**: Yeah, happy I was working.

**Erm, in terms of the cargo that would come in, obviously a lot of it was seasonal, what would be coming in at what time?**

**John**: Well, i-i-it would depend on; I know it di- the cheese and the butter, there never seemed to be any, er, stop to that, and the tea. ‘Cause they was comin’ in on barges. So, that always unloaded, erm, huh. Well this-the-the-the Polish ships, they used to bring in Polish bacon in the boat, and yet, and sometimes they would bring in absolute rubbish. Like coat hangers, I remember standin’ around looking at, they-they was unloadin’ coat hangers. I used to look- what’s goin’ on here, we can’t? –y’know but obviously they can make ‘em a lot cheaper. That was just bizarre, but it was, all this old rubbish that they used to bring in, y’know they must’ve bought ‘em. Erm, but sometimes, you’d get, they-they would, er, some of the ships, would take away, in the summertime, they would take away cars, go back out. Erm, they’d all be waxed and covered in a film of plastic, and they’d unload, put cars on-on, not many, you know, about ten cars would go out, maybe to Poland, I don’t-or Denmark, it was maybe to Poland they, sold cars.

**So where would the tea be coming from?**

**John**: The tea would be, it- it was comin’ from, certainly the tea we drank in our lobbies came from Salon. It was good stuff, lemme tell ya. I got a flavour for Salon tea. (Laughing)

**(Laughs) Sounds like you got a flavour for a few things. Do, er, so like the tea, do you notice a definite distinction between that tea, and say the tea you can buy in a supermarket?**

**John:** Oh, yeah I noticed that, there’s no comparison, the tea I used to get there to tea bags, it was, it was, er, orange pecan was my-my favourite tea.

**So, can you buy any of this stuff, at the supermarket?**

**John:** Now I, I don’t know. I’ve not seen any orange pecan, er..

**What, where was the furthest a barge or anything would come from?**

**John**: Well, the-they would come down from er, the barges would come down from the Royal, know the Albert Dock, or, er, the West India Dock. They would be brought down in tugs, and, y’know for that stuff, yeah. And they’d be unloaded.

**What about, erm, the ships, where is as far afield as they would go?**

**John:** The far, the-the furthest ship there that I can remember was that, I think that one from Iceland. And the other ships would come from across the North Sea. So, as I say Denmark, Holland, and Poland.

**They were the majority like?**

**John:** Yeah, majority of-of the ships that came in.

**Did you get any from, like the Mediterranean?**

**John**: There was, er, on the other side, er, New Fresh Wharf, on the other si-by London Bridge on the other side opposite Hay’s Wharf, which was part of Hay’s Wharf, it was called, our side was called Tooley Street Docks, but I think, there was two wharves on the other side, New Fresh Wharf and Metropolitan Wharf, er, Metropolitan was right by, er, the Tower of London, and they-they would get ships in. And New Fresh Wharf, that-that was owned by Hay’s Wharf so it was called the Port of London, between Tower Bridge and London Bridge. And, there were-the-the-the, er, the ones over there, they would come from the Canary Islands, so the-they-they were a lot bigger, and they would come for further, and the ones at Fresh Wharf was, er, yeah-was these big, big white ships they was the biggest ones that came into the pool. The Baltic Sun was quite a big ship, for that i-i-it was about the biggest ship that came in on our side, The Baltic Sun. But, the one on the other side, they was from New Azores, from New Azores in the Canary Islands, bringin’ in whatever they brought in from the Canary Islands, tomatoes I believe.

**Tomatoes. Did you ever get to try any?**

**John:** No, ‘cause I didn’t work in that site, yeah.

**Just had your tea.**

**John:**  We stayed on our side; we didn’t mix with ‘em over there. (Laughs.) But I-I-I would, remember, right it was, I saw it-I saw this happen, it’s just comin’ to me, I did see this happen. There was this ship came-come up, bein’ towed up, come through, it was on a Monday, and it, the bridge opened up and it brought it in, and-er, the tug, like would turn and the ship would swing ‘round to come in at Cotton’s Wharf. And it, the-the back end, the aft end of the ship hit London Bridge. And that-they had to close London Bridge down for a few days to check if everything was alright. Er, I don’t- but of course, then just-it wasn’t long after that they started knocking the bridge down, but there was nothing to do with the ship hittin’ it I don’t think, must’ve been hit a thousand times, over the years. But, y’know hit and sho-a really big thud, the bridge shook, and you-you feel it-feel it. Where we were on the quay, went, ‘what’s that happened?’ I thought it was gonna hit it, and it did, ‘BOOM.’ Yeah.

**It’s like it happens in slow motion.**

**John:** Yeah, and then, er, well a few months later they started dismantling the bridge and sent it off to America.

**You know, you were saying obviously they got the tomatoes, erm, did you like interact much then with other men from other docks? Or would you just be in your own little unit?**

**John**: Er, some-er,er, we didn’t, no, the maintenance staff, but the dockers I know did. Although they were mainly based i-ii-in Tooley Street, if there wasn’t any work or anything to-, they would sometimes get sent to the Surrey to work er-or-or to, erm, to the West Indies-India Dock, and sometimes that would happen in reverse. Sometimes they’d come from the West Indies over to the Surrey, or s-from the Surry down to Tooley Street to work. Er, but we- it had nothing to do with us, y’know we were employed by Hay’s Wharf.

**So, erm, how many men were working at Hay’s Wharf when you were there?**

**John**: Well, seemed-it seemed like thousands at the time, yeah. But probably not, but it was-it was- it was a, a large work force, and maintenance, security, dockers, office staff, canteen staff, it was, it was massive. Big employer.

**So do you think it was quite shocking then when it all got shut down, I mean obviously it happened slowly, but…**

**John**: Yeah, it-it-it was, erm, when it started to go, it was a bit, bit of a shock I suppose, a bit of a surprise. But, ya know, people’d been talking about it for a while, and then it started. And then it was gone. And then it was all closed up. And I went, I did go back couple of years later, just walkin’ through there, and all there was was se-security guards, but there-they’d kept on a small skeleton crew of maintenance guys. Er, one of whom, one of the engineers I’d worked with and a couple of the electricians I-I-I wo-, I’d known and worked with, and they was still around, so that would have been about six-five ye-six years later, they were still there. ‘Cause it-it laid fairly empty, you know, it was derelict for about ten years before it, all of a sudden they started developing it. Got done the deals and the wheeling dealing. But when I was there, I used, every Easter from-er, I think it was Thursday night, Good Monday Thursday, all the way around, er, Easter Monday, they’d shut it off. They’d rope—not shut it off, rope all the roads, and the entrances all the way around, er, Hay’s Wharf, er, area. Apparently, ‘cause there’d been-there’d been there for three-hundred odd years, er, been on it, and so, if they didn’t rope it off and lay claim to the land, then they would lose it, it would revert to-to the city or to the bar. So every year they had to put these proper gilded ropes all the way around, across the entrances to st-to lay claim, restate their claim to the land.

**So when, erm, it was obviously shutting down and there was talk of it, initially was there talk among the men, or were you also hearing a lot about it on the news, how did it, like transpire that it was all…?**

**John**: Yeah it was, you’d hear it on the news, but mainly it would be the-the-the, y’know, the-er, you’d hear it from the dockers ‘cause their-they would have meet, the-their-er, union reps would have meetings with them the managers, and then the managers would have meetings with the higher up managers, we’d-we’d have our meetings with the chief engineer.

**So did you have a union as well?**

**John:** Yeah, we-we-we was in the, er-erm, in the union, but we, main-it was mainly two unions, we was in, we was in the AEU. Obviously the electricians were in the electrician’s union. But it was also, a lot of ‘em was in the TNG at the time as well, which was the same union as the dockers, but mainly, erm, although, some of ‘em were in the stevedore’s union. But-er, so they would have their meetings, and sometimes they would, they would get organised, the officials’d come down,and, and-er they’d give you a report of what was goin’ on, what was likely to happen.

**Did you have much involvement with your union, did you go to meetings and…?**

**John**: Lo-I’d got to general meetings, as a-as a young kid you weren’t expected to be a---

**Involved, yeah.**

**John:** Which was probably a mistake, should’ve been, I think should’ve been encouraged to go, but they never did because a-a-a apprentice, it was seen as kind of neutral. Yeah, to keep out of it.

**Would you say the dockers union was the ones that were quite forceful, or were all unions quite similar?**

**John**: Er, we-well the dockers as a workforce were fairly vociferous, and-er, and organised better. Erm, which er, led them to get more maligned run do-criticised for it, but, ya know.

**They were criticised in the news? Yeah.**

**John**: New-new-newspapers would, e-e-every chance they got they would say that, they brought this on theirselves, and docks are closing ‘cause the dockers wanted too much money, and r-absolute rubbish of course. It wass cause containerisation ‘as comin’ and Hay’s Wharf wanted to flog the land, the land was worth more money than what they could make runnin’ the docks, so…

**Newspapers always do that, don’t they?**

**John:** Well, they. News-newspapers are owned by very rich people, so their-ya know, the news is always slanted in newspapers towards the interest of the wealthy. So the likes of, er, us haven’t got control over the news, you can only do your best to get the information. But of course, most people don’t ‘cause they’re too busy getting’ their head down tryin’ to get on with their lives.

**Did you find that the docks were on the front pages much then during this time?**

**John:** Erm.

**What kind of headlines were there?**

**John:**  Well it was, er, there were, there was the local, the local Evening News and Standard and sometimes in-in the national press. There was, er, I can remember , I was watching T.V. once, when I was-before I started work, and I-and there was a dock strike on, and there’s a march on the television, and I was watchin’ it was all rain-rainin’ and they was all marching along. And I saw my dad on the T.V.! (Laughs.)

**(Laughing) There he is.**

**John:**  (Laughing) He was, he was soaking wet, rain was running down his face.

**Now you’ve got another claim to fame on T.V. Erm, do you have any last anecdotes or anything that… or any last bits of information you could add on for me? About daily life in the docks or anything?**

**John**: Oh, I don’t know. I can’t think of anything. Is there anything-anything you can think of asking me?

**I think, I think we’ve actually covered everything, to be honest. That’s been really really good, really helpful.**

**John**: See the school, St. Michaels School where I went, and St. Josephs, the primary school was right on the edge of-of the dock, of the dock area, and-and it, we were surrounded on both, basically on both sides, three sides with wharfs and the river. So, we, you’d look out your classroom and you would see the cranes moving. So, you’d be, and-er. So, you’d get the sounds and the ships hootin’ and –er, and you could get the smells of-er, well mainly, mainly the smells would be of Courage’s Brewery, that was just down the road. So, you’d get that. Some-if the wind was blowing you’d be in the playground and you’d get the smell, quite a-a fairly unpleasant smell sometimes.

**What was it?**

**John:** It was the-the malt and hops bein’ mixed and it was not a pleasant smell, you’s out in the playground playin’ you got this smell blowing from depending on what they were brewing I suppose it-or how they was brewin’, what they was doing that day. You’d get that, er….

**Did you ever feel like when you were younger, when say you were looking out the classroom at the docks, did you feel you wanted to work out there?**

**John**: Well I-I-I, I always liked it. W-you’d go a-along the, lived just off of Jamaica Road when I was a child, and I liked playin’ around the river and getting’ on, used to climb on the barges and sit on ‘em, and…

**Would you get in trouble for that?**

**John**: Well, you-you-you the police boat would come along and blow a whistle. Y’know, run off and climb off-clamber off, you know. (Laughs.) But-er, yeah, I was just a.. we-as as child I-I used to get on these barges and you’d uncover ‘em and you could see, if they were loaded right up there’d be, sometimes’d be boxes of, boxes of-er, pineapple chunks or some, and if you had a pen knife, and break one open.

**Sit there eating pineapple chunks.**

**John**: (Laughing) But, erm, yeah. And also I, I-I-I-I do remember with me mates before I left school or just-just about leaving school we go, on summer’s day, you would-you’d see these American films where they’d, ya know The Beach Boys and all that, and that California singin’ and dancing on the beach, ya know and, yeah, Surfin’ Safari and California Girls and all that stuff. So, we, if it was a summer’s day, a hot summer’s day we’d er, have a whip ‘round, buy a few crates of beer, and go down on the beach, someone would bring a transistor radio, and go down and have a party on the beach in the mud until the tide come in. (Laughs) Surfin’ Bermond-sey!

**(Laughs) They sound like good times. Right so, so thank you John.**