Richard Freeman – Transcription

Audio quality – Good throughout, very slight interference at about 20mins

0:00:00

LMI: Right, I'm sat here with Richard Freeman. We're up in Baildon. Richard, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us how old you are?

RF: Yes, Richard Freeman, born in Halifax, born in 1940. So I'm a respectable 83 years old.

LMI: Looking very good on it, I must say.

RF: Well, I hope so.

LMI: So, Richard, you spent nearly all your working life in the textile industry, didn't you?

RF: I have indeed. I left school when I was 16 and had really no qualifications. It was just what we did then. And there's no direction in life. We never received any counselling in school, or any advice what to do after we left school. And when I thought about what I was going to do with no qualifications, I soon realised I'd got to pick up, or engage in something that would give me a further education, otherwise I'd just end up as a labourer.

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RF: And I actually went to see the Halifax Chamber of Commerce, having decided possibly the textile industry would be a good employer for me. And they directed me over to the Chamber of Commerce in Bradford. And they were very helpful. They had a few apprentice schemes, and they helped me to get an interview at Lister's in Manningham.

LMI: This would be in the mid-'50s, would it?

RF: Yeah, I was 18 then, it was the late '50s (I was born in 1940), so I was really green behind the ears, I'd not worked anywhere in particular. And the interview went pretty well. What they wanted was somebody to work through all the processing departments in the mill. And then, if they were considered able, to work in management, and particularly in export. And I took on that challenge even though I lived in Halifax.

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RF: So, it meant that I was leaving home probably 6.15/6.30 in the morning. The local buses hadn't even started running then. So I had to get to the Halifax bus station, walk down, take the Hebbel bus service to Morley Street in Bradford. And then get another bus up to Lilycroft Mills at Manningham. So… I had to be there for 7.45. And when I started to work through the departments, the first department I was put in obviously, was the scouring department, because through that you'd go through carding, top baking, spinning, cone hank winding, warping, weaving, burling and mending. Right through all the departments. And quite frankly to each department, as I went in, I was regarded as a bit of a nuisance. Because they

didn't really know what to do with me, despite the fact that the instructions were that I had to learn all the processes. And to learn it thoroughly. Not only how things were made, [but] how people were organised, and how to look after quality control.

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LMI: So was this like an apprenticeship? Was it called an apprenticeship?

RF: Yes, it was. Well, it was from the Chamber of Commerce. It was something completely unique to Lister's. Because people went to work in a department. They did spinning and weaving, and carding and combing, and that's where they stayed. So, for me to be able to do this was quite an achievement, to be honest, even though I'm beating my own drum.

LMI: That's alright.

RF: As I said I was looked on as a bit of a nuisance. Firstly, because I stood out. They didn't give me anything to work in, so I had to sort of wear a couple of boiler suits, which were brownish in colour. So I stood out like a sore thumb. But what I made sure was, in each department I went, that I never stood about waiting for something to do. If I could sweep the floor, clean a window, oil a machine, put bobbins on and off, - as a bobbin ligger off and on a machine, fill a cart, wheel a cart round, oil the machines, pick up, blow the dust off the machines, I did it. So you got at least some respect that you were busying yourself. And then slowly but surely, you'd be accepted by the overlooker, or anybody in charge. And eventually you could shadow them. And they'd tell you more and more and more about what they were doing. And in between, if they were busy, you'd leave them alone to do what they needed to do, [and you'd] go back, and slowly but surely, learn what they were doing on quality control; how many people they needed; how they move materials through the processing; and how they were accountable to their manager.

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RF: And the managers themselves were like gods from the heavens. The manager of each department always wore a brown coat. And they always came round each department at the same time every day. So as soon as everybody saw the manager coming everybody was busy as hell. The overlookers of those in charge always wore a blue and white check coat, and like a dark overall bottom. Some of the overlookers, frankly, were lazy and cut corners. Some were quite conscientious, did their work, as it was. They took me to their heart eventually. And I can't say I particularly enjoyed it, but I realised it was going to be a good stepping stone to a future life, provided I learnt from what I was doing.

LMI: And how many people worked in the mill at that time?

RF: Oh thousands. The various departments were absolutely enormous. Scouring…scouring wasn't so labour intensive because all you did was put greasy wool, that had been sorted into quality, onto a lattice; went through a scouring machine; went through squeeze rollers;

into a dryer; and then the wool would be then, as it was dried, carded into parallel fibres. Then it went into combing.

LMI: So that was getting it all ready to be spun into?

RF: Yeah, that's headed for that process. And once it hit the… what they call the roving - making it from top into a thinner roving for spinning… then they started meeting the workers, particularly spinning, who were bussed up from Barnsley, Woodwell, Rotherham, because there wasn't much employment there. They were mostly Italian ladies - Italian, Polish, Eastern European. And they couldn't speak a lot of English, and frankly, they didn't need to, because they lived in their own communities.

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RF: But one or two of them, as it was, learnt English. They worked on the spinning machines. And they took me under the wing, quite honestly, as a greenhorn. They made me life misery at times with sexual innuendo, I can tell you that. They'd bring me sweets or a sandwich. I remember particularly the noise in all processing departments. I remember the smell, the smell of the grease on the wools, the smell in the spinning.

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RF: I remember the fluff on the floors, the dirt. I remember taking bobbins on and off the machines myself, loading them into carts. I remember the fact that the immigrants, the people who worked on the mills who came from overseas, weren't treated as equals, quite frankly. I certainly did not like that. It was alien to everything I thought about working with other people and getting on with people. I also remember having to get there for 7.45 from Halifax. And you had to… you had a card which you put in a little machine, which stamped it with your arrival time And it made a little ping as you did it. You'd got to do the same as you left. You then went in, you'd a little cupboard for your clothes; took your coat off; put your working gear on; straight out into the department. I headed for whoever was in charge, eventually to shadow them round every day. And slowly but surely take over - to be able to do things for myself that they were doing.

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RF: It was also quite interesting, in some of the noisy departments, that eventually the women had actually developed a way of miming to each other, because of the noises. And I could never figure out what they were saying. And it was particularly prevalent in weaving, because the shuttles going across the warp were extremely noisy. And you couldn't talk to each other. You'd got to up to somebody and cup your ear to them.

RF: What else do I remember? I remember the morning break where you used to, you either had your own sandwiches, -nobody had a flask in those days - and they wheeled a little cart round with… you could have tea… And of all things, I remember they had toast covered with lard, which I didn't particularly like. They also had a canteen for the workers, for

lunchtime, which was subsidized. But all you could get was things like meat pies or mincemeat; peas and chips; or jam roly-poly…and rice pudding with jam on. And then straight back into work.

RF: I can also remember very vividly that the Bevered Holidays which were called Bowling Tide, probably the first two weeks in August, when the afternoon, Friday afternoon before the holidays, they'd let people go at lunchtime. But I stayed on with the overlookers and the managers, and we had to clean every machine. And we used to cover the machines with brown paper to keep any dust from settling on them over the two weeks. But the thing that I really remember was the silence. It was *absolutely weird* to be able to walk out of that mill in complete silence. To check out on your card and know that you weren't going back for two weeks. But with that I was quite ambitious. Despite the fact I worked till five o'clock, I, through the Chamber of Commerce again, I was introduced to the Bradford Technical College. And believe it or not, I went four nights a week to learn about textile raw materials and textile processes. So that meant four nights a week I'd be off out from home in Halifax at 6.15-6.30, back home at nine o'clock at night. I'm telling you now as though it was something fantastic. It's just what we did. I never thought it anything exceptional.

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LMI: But it makes for a very long day, doesn't it?

RF: It did, but I was… ambitious is the wrong word. I was determined to get on in life. My mum had died when I was a teenager unfortunately, of emphysema. Everybody smoked in those days. And my dad was working night shifts for Crosslees Carpets in Halifax. So without any sort of career advice on leaving school, it was up to me, as I've explained earlier, to find out where life was going to lead me.

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RF: Eventually, things didn't quite work out at Lister's. Although I'd accumulated the knowledge, the knowledge that I'd got meant that the promise of going into management, and particularly to export, wasn't fully kept. So every time there was a gap in the mill that needed filling with some overseeing or manager, I was sent back in, to cover that gap. Even though I hadn't quite got the total expert knowledge of those who'd worked there for months, it would work for two or three weeks. Or if I wasn't sure, I'd go and ask somebody else.

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RF: So I could see the future stifled, as far as I was concerned. And then again, with the help of the Bradford Chamber of Commerce, they found me a job with a smallish wool merchant called E. Rothery and Sons Ltd. And I worked in their sample room. Everything that was processed and delivered as wool, a wool blend, a waste blend, you kept a sample of. And you wrapped it up in sample paper and put it in a slot in the sample room, so that the next time you wanted to make the same delivery, you looked at your sample and that was a standard

you got to make it to. I didn't seem to get any further from leaving the sample room to be able to work in the management of the company.

LMI: And was it quite a small mill, compared with…?

RF: Yeah, there was only maybe 10, 15 people in the entire product.

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RF: It was run by a chap called Geoffrey Rothery. He'd inherited it from his father. And he always came to work in a suit and a tie, and he'd a handkerchief in his breast pocket. He never got his hands dirty. He was never out in the warehouse. He understood how to do a deal and how to make... sell wool or waste into Holland or Germany or Italy or France. And he'd oversee the blendings, said 'This goes into that, and you use this.'

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RF: He'd use measuring machines for blending it, he'd got packing machines, he'd get a sample. But he was never out and about, rolling his sleeves up, getting involved in the business. Which I found pretty strange.

RF: The Chamber of Commerce then once again approached me and said, 'Look, we've got a legacy from a gentleman called John Speke. And he set up a foundation to enable young people to go abroad, into Europe, to learn the language. And we think you'd be a good candidate, despite the fact that you've no qualifications as far as school's concerned. But we can see that you're hard-working, you want to get on in life.'

LMI: How old were you at this point?

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RF: I was 20 then. So, the idea that somebody aged 20 would go to work in Bremen in Germany, to work for a wool merchant was revolutionary. It was like saying you're going to be an astronaut. None of my friends, they just wouldn't believe it. And off I went, got the train to… I think Hook of Holland, through Amsterdam into northern Germany. Nobody met me. I didn't expect they would. I'd got an address to go to, to stay with a family. How I found them I don't know. It was fairly close to the city centre, and I went to live with an old couple. The lady was called Maria Hillen. And her partner was called Willie Krogman. They were in their 60s. I didn't speak a word of German apart from a little bit I'd learnt at school. They were very kind. They took me on, and it was quite a few months before I found out that the lady of the house, Marie Hillen, actually spoke damn good English! She would only speak German to me. And the first task I got (and it took a lot of explaining - I didn't know what I was doing) was to send me every morning to the bakers round the corner for fresh Brötchen, you know, little rolls, freshly cooked. And then I'd take them back and we had them for breakfast.

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RF: And I didn't even know where the woolbrokers was that I was working for. I got the address and I just had to find it. And I was made pretty welcome there, to be honest. One of the worst things was, I recollect, was it was the middle of winter when I got there, and it got a hell of a lot colder than it did here. When I went for the woolbrokers - it was lot bigger than any place that I'd been. Very, very well run. Owned by a gentleman called Kneath. And he ran a really tight ship. He'd got quite a few employees who worked as woolbrokers and merchants. They imported wool from Australia, New Zealand, South America. They scoured it in Bremen. They made wool tops out of it, sent it for spinning.

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RF: There again, I worked in the sample room, and I *made certain* that I didn't stand about doing nothing. I always found something to do. And as I learned a bit more English [German]…

LMI: Even though you couldn't speak the language very well, you still managed to find things to do.

RF: You look hopeless if you don't find something... I just felt that I was given an opportunity, I was going to take the most of it. And slowly but surely, I got integrated into the systems of the business. Slowly but surely, I learnt German. And you pick it up like a sponge, to be honest. And I worked so hard, despite the fact that I'd got a disbursement from the John Speake Foundation to tide me through (but only just), they actually started paying me a small salary! As a thanks for all the hard work I did.

RF: And then I got to know one or two of the people who I worked for; got invited to their homes; got to know a few people my age; went to watch football; went over to Hamburg on the train to watch football there. They'd a wonderful, famous centre forward called Uwe Seeler, who everybody will have forgotten now. Went out at night into one or two of the pubs, never drank much. And slowly but surely, got over the homesickness, which was absolutely awful. And eventually I really enjoyed it, and I was pretty sad when I left, after a year, to come back. But I had a job waiting for me with Rothery.

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RF: But once I got there, [I] used the German because we did export into Germany, so I could get onto the phone to people. But the opening wasn't there for me to progress really. I was gonna be sort of a… work in sales a little bit, do a bit of wool blending.

LMI: And which company was this?

RF: Sorry?

LMI: Which company was this?

RF: E. Rothery and Sons Ltd in Garnet Street, just off the bottom of Leeds Road. And I was... I knew one or two of the local wool merchants, obviously, because we dealt with them. And there was a wool merchant in Harris Street, which was next to Garnet Street. A small wool merchant called Stansfield and Walton. And Mr Walton…I was round for some reason, said, you know, 'How are you doing?'

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RF: I said, 'Well, I'm not all that happy really.' He said, 'Well, would you like to come and work for me?' I said, 'Well, what would you like me to do?' He said, 'Well, I buy wool. I'm a wool broker. I buy greasy wool. I value it, I appraise it. I go down onto the Wool Exchange. I'll sell… what I haven't got, I'll buy what I can't sell, and I'll teach you how to do that.' And said 'I need some help, there's only me in my side of the business.' The business was called Stansfield & Walton. The other side of the business was a guy called Eddie Stansfield, who was quite ill and died soon. But he'd a little export business into the continent for wool.

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RF: And they asked me, or Tom Walton did, would I be prepared, in addition to being an apprentice to him, or a shadow to him, would I be prepared to try and buy wool waste from the mills? And I said, 'Yes, I'll give it a try, but you've got to understand that it's something I've never done.' He said, 'Well, I'll give you an introduction to one or two of the mills.' And I'd go and see them, and I wasn't sure what to pay for the waste. But eventually I built up a knowledge. We'd take the waste from the mills into the warehouse in Harris Street, and I'd… me personally, I'd work on it, and grade it into different qualities.

LMI: So where did the waste come from?

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RF: Oh, from Listers, from beds and marble.

LMI: No, how did it end up being waste in the mill?

RF: Go and see, well, the sellers.

LMI: But it's stuff they didn't want to use anymore?

RF: Well, no, it was just a waste. It dropped on the floor. Yeah, downgrade. They couldn't process it anymore. Substandard. They simply dyed [it] the wrong colour, etc.

LMI: Ah, okay, so it could be anything really?

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RF: Yeah, threads, cloth, fly waste, noils, card waste… which you probably don't understand, but anyway, the trade did. And you know, we eventually (we could use Eddie Stansfield's connections, although he was very poorly) and [could] eventually find little markets for the

waste in Europe, where they'd reprocess it again into cheaper yarn. And as the business started being a success - not a raging success – but it was growing nicely, with a nice business. No claims. All the deliveries were good. People accepted them. They paid for them. But I soon realised that I wasn't going to be paid any more for this success. And there again, with a little ambition, I thought, 'Well, I can do this for myself.' And I left Stansfield and Walton, Tom Walton, on the very best of terms. He shook my hand and said, 'I wish you all the best. If at any time we can give you a hand and help, come back and knock on the door.' Which I thought was very nice. I hired a little warehouse in Bradford. I borrowed a thousand quid from my dad, and I set up a business in May 1965 and I carried on doing exactly the same.

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RF: We went to live in… from Halifax, with my wife to a house in Odsal, 17 Willow Drive. All the money we made was left in the company. We lived like paupers, I can tell you. My wife used to come with two children. Boy and a girl, toddlers. My wife used to come down to the warehouse and sort knitting wool balls out that… the waste I bought from Pins [Paynes?] and Baldwin's and bits of cloth. And she made clothes for the children.

LMI: Wow.

RF: Believe it or not. And that's what we had to do.

LMI: That's out of your waste?

RF: Yeah. And there was a little corner shop just by where we lived, grocery shop, and what I had in cash, or a few pounds I'd taken out from the business, we'd go around there every few days and buy enough to live on.

LMI: So, you were worse off in some ways than you had been in Lister's or in Germany?

RF: I had every faith that we would succeed. We never went out because we couldn't afford it. And by the same token, I lost contact with a lot of my friends in Halifax because I just couldn't afford to go out with them. But the business succeeded.

LMI: And how many of you were there working there?

RF: One.

LMI: Just you?

RF: Yeah.

LMI: Wow.

RF: And eventually I got a business partner, and we worked together. Did exactly the same. As it succeeded, we needed bigger premises, so I let the lease go and bought a small warehouse in Adelaide Street in Bradford.

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RF: But we bought it outright. With enough room for a little office, a sample room and a warehouse to crane bales in, sort it, load it out. And as the business grew, we needed bigger premises. And I bought a big warehouse, five floors, 125 Thornton Road. And there again, as the business expanded there, we needed some workers. But before then we did all our sorting. You'd load wagons, unload them. And believe me, to stand on the fifth floor and look down on a wagon, with the crane rope in your right hand, and put the hooks into a bale, and pull the rope down, and get the bale to come up to you, and then you got to swing the bale onto a sack cart.

LMI: This was all manual, there was no machinery?

RF: No, no, it was all manual.

LMI: No machinery, no electric motors or anything?

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RF: No. Well, there was the electric motor driving the crane.

LMI: Yeah.

RF: And then in the converse, when you got to load a wagon. There'd be the guy down there looking up at you, five floors, and you're loading a bale down, weighing 250 kilos, and it's got hooks in it. If you do it at the wrong speed and it hits that guy, you're going to kill him.

LMI: Yeah.

RF: But you've also got to liaise with him so that he can nudge that bale and drop it within a few inches.

LMI: So, you started learning every job in the in the trade, and then carried on?

RF: Yeah, and I did all the bookkeeping.

LMI: And then you ran the mill, and you did everything in your own business?

RF: Yeah, you got people in to do the waste sorting; started doing more export.

LMI: So what year are we talking about now, when you move to Thornton Road?

RF: Be about 1972-73. At that time you… word got around that you needed some workers, or you'd ring the Job Exchange, Work Exchange.

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LMI: So what was the textile industry like then?

RF: Oh, busy. Mountainous. So many people in it. We knew hundreds and hundreds of people in there, buying and selling wool waste. We had to get on with the people in the mills who we bought waste from. We had to get on with people, some of the people in the mills who we actually sold to.

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RF: We didn't have to, but we did. Some people were aloof and didn't particularly want you. Some were quite friendly. Some looked down on you, simply because you were a couple of struggling guys trying to get established in the trade. Occasionally somebody put the word out that you weren't paying your bills. It was a struggle at times. And sometimes it wasn't enjoyable, and at other times it was.

RF: Eventually we bought a big warehouse in Dudley Hill - huge place. And it was called Recta Mills, (R-E-C-T-A) in Factory Street. And it had been owned by a firm called Robinson and Peel, who were part of the Woolcombers Group. And they were top combers. They combed coloured tops. The tops had already been dyed.

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RF: But their business slowly faded away. We bought the premises for [from?] them. It was a huge place, on three floors, with an enormous warehouse, with a lot more space to handle things. Sorting, get better equipment for packing, because, you know, the denser your bills were, the more you could get onto a wagon, or into a ship, and it cost you less to ship it.

RF: We saw the textile trade slowly fade, for one or two reasons. The textile trade wasn't very nimble. People tended to go on tramlines.

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RF: What they'd done and what they'd learnt, is what they wanted to do. And they eventually got to face competition from people making the same product. From Japan, China, other continental places. And fashions changed. People didn't want to wear heavy worsteds anymore. You know, people eventually wanted to wear lightweights for sports activities, and so on. And people's attitudes changed. And eventually, the suppliers of wool… I mean, just to wind back a bit… sort of the 1890s, 1900s, probably up to about 1950, Bradford was the centre of the world's wool trade. In as much that all the greasy wool that was grown and sheared, shorn in South Africa, particularly Australia, New Zealand, some from South America, Falkland Islands, was shipped to Bradford to be sold.

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LMI: And then it would go on...

RF: You'd go down to the auction. There'd be 10, 15, 20 bales lined up as a sample out of, say, 200. With the tops open. You could appraise that wool.

LMI: This wasn't in the Wool Exchange, of course?

RF: No, no.

LMI: That was more like stock exchange.

RF: No. Those were in the warehouses.

LMI: Yeah, yeah.

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RF: There'd be a wool marketing board for it. You'd decide what that wool would yield. They were very astute people. You'd got to look at a bale of wool; decide what qualities were in it - because they were just fleeces. You'd got to be able to decide how much natural wool grease there was in it. So how much scoured wool you'd get out of it.

LMI: Oh right, because obviously if it was a lot of grease, you wouldn't get very much wool?

RF: Exactly. You'd get less scoured wool, or less weight of scoured wool. You'd got to figure out what the different qualities with it were. And you'd got to figure out what different qualities you could sort it into. It's what we call the yield. And then you've got to…

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LMI: And could you just be able to tell that by just…?

RF: Well, not exactly, it's a magic thing. That feel, you can't teach [it to] anybody. It's accumulated over a few years of...

LMI: Did you have to touch it, or could you just do it by [looking]?

RF: No, you'd open the fleece out, and feel it, look at it, look at the different fibres, fibre length, look at the different fibre qualities. Was it crossbred, was it merino, was it fine crossbred? But it wasn't a science, it was an art.

LMI: Yeah, how interesting.

RF: And the longer you worked at it, the more you learned. You couldn't... you could be taught it, but if you'd not got an aptitude for it, it would never work.

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RF: So you would work with… your boss would be able to do it, and slowly but surely, he'd show you how it was done, because it takes the pressure off him.

LMI: I suppose if you get it wrong, then you make a loss.

RF: Well then, you know, you got you got a reprimand.

LMI: Yeah.

RF: 'Look at this,' you know, 'What the hell are you doing? You told me this would be sixes quality, it's 58s.' Although they're a tiny bit off each other, they're a long way in quality from a wool merchant's point of view or a wool processor's point of view.

RF: But you know, as I saw the demise of the wool trade in the broader sense, from the bottom of the pyramid - i.e. from the people… the wool merchants, the waste merchants, the people who supplied the mills with belting, gears, oil and so on. All that was disappearing because the mills were disappearing. You've got to realise that eventually people in Australia, New Zealand, realised that they didn't have to sell greasy wool [and] send it to Bradford. They could scour it themselves, they could process themselves, and they could export it themselves. And also, there's a realisation in Bradford that they didn't have to process some of the stuff themselves. They could send it to where the cheapest labour unit costs were.

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LMI: I mean obviously, the wool industry in Bradford was very old, I mean you're talking about an industry that was nearly 100 years old by the time...

RF: Exactly.

LMI: And so was the machinery presumably…

RF: No, the machinery was renewed and refined and improved all the time. Because not only did you get high production, you got a high yield and high quality. So, you know, the entrepreneurs didn't sit on their hands, as far as that was concerned. Because at the end of the day, with better quality, better production and better investment, it made a better profit. Provided they ran their business as well. But eventually, it was inevitable that countries with their lower production costs, lower wages, would take over our industry and what we did.

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RF: You soon found out that the quality of the goods they produced were equal to what we could make here. And they're a bit more nimble, as well. They could alter production quickly, like we could in my business. And as I saw the demise of the textile industry, I realised that if I didn't think about the future of my business, I would end up... not being able to earn a living.

LMI: So, when was this? When did this start happening?

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RF: This would start in the mid-'80s. And... I sat down and thought about it. And I thought,

well, I've got to move into synthetic fibres. You know, there'd be nylon, polyester, acrylic, viscose, and a few more.

LMI: Which presumably was a very different supply chain?

RF: It was. But slowly but surely, we learned about processing, what the end uses were. And I found that people like ICI in Harrogate, Courtaulds in Grimsby, the Biscini Viscosa in Italy, Lensing in Austria, Monsanto in America, DuPont in America…they produced downgrade fibre which they didn't know what to do with. They'd occasionally…

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LMI: So it was still waste that you were dealing with except it was...?

RF: Yeah, we'd go and buy from them.

LMI: It was artificial rather than off… the factory machine.

RF: We bought processed machinery, our own processing machinery. And it was expensive. And our own packing machinery. And frankly, and it sounds a bit arrogant, we made a silk purse out of a sow's ear. And our market was the Third World countries who could not afford first grade. So we'd be selling into Far East, South Korea, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh; Some into Europe, Kenya, South Africa; Not really America, they were too sophisticated. And then one of the revolutionary things was, for us, were containers. United States lines in the, I don't know, probably '70s, introduced 40-foot containers for shipping.

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RF: Because up to then everything went what's called break bulk. You'd load a wagon with 50 bales, and often it disappeared into the hold of a ship. And you know, three bales got lost in transit to Karachi. But once the containers came in, I immediately saw what a benefit it could be. But our packing machines would only make a horrible old-fashioned bale with straps on, and we could only get 17,000, 18,000 kilos into a container. And they looked a mess. They were all disjointed and misshapen. I thought 'Well if we can get' -the load limit was 23,500 kilos - and I thought, 'Well, if I get another five thousand kilos in, and buy a really top quality packing machine, it'll pay for itself.' So we bought a machine from Germany, from a firm called Autefa, A-U-T-E-F-A. And it made what's called 'container profile bales'. So they fitted in into a container in blocks of nine, and you couldn't get cigarette paper between them.

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LMI: So was this, were you kind of a bit ahead of the game here?

RF: Well, I like to think so, we were very nimble. And in fact, a few years ago I was giving a talk on Shipley Glen Tramway - I've been a trustee for a long time -to… I don't know which…some gentleman's club in Bradford. And they had a lunch beforehand, and I was I

sat with a guy I had no idea who he was. Very distinguished, very well-spoken, very nice guy to talk to. And somebody came around and said, 'Do you know who he is?' I said 'No.' They said, 'Well, Sir James Hill, this is Richard Freeman.' So he said, 'Richard Freeman?' He said 'Did you used to run a textile business?' I said, 'Yeah.' And he said, 'You were a bloody nuisance.' I said, 'Why?

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RF: 'Well', he said, 'There's us with an enormous juggernaut that we couldn't stop. And you'd be running around, altering your production lines, not particularly on first grade, but to meet demand, which you could do immediately.' I've got….and he said I knew his directors better than he did. A really nice guy.

RF: One of the worries to me, was that with no real education and no background the business was growing. Possibly past my ability to run it properly. You know, we needed accounts…One of the first things I decided when I went into business, [was] 'Never run out of money. Never.' And I never did. But I got beyond being able to…had to make cash flow forecasts and had to employ an accountant. And the next thing I had to do was get myself a PA, to help me run things, and to protect me from other people. Everybody wanted to talk to me. And a bit of enjoyment went out of being in business then. And that was-

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LMI: You were more of a boss?

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RF: Yeah, more of a prisoner by then. And I'd leave… I'd be out of here - I lived in Kirkfields, which is only a few hundred yards away - I'd be out of here, half past six in the morning. I'd pick the mail up in Foster Square. I'd be up in the office in Dudley Hill for seven. I'd get calls here, at home, before I set off, from India and Pakistan, some mornings. I'd work through all day. Be there till seven, eight o'clock at night. Come home. Then I'd get calls from Canada and America because of the time difference.

LMI: Yes, I know that.

RF: To be honest, things caught up on me. And slowly but surely…

LMI: How old are you by this point?

RF: I'd be in my my 50s.

LMI: And what was that…so we're in the '80s? Late '80s, early '90s?

RF: We'd got into the '90s, then. And the thing is, I mean I was dedicated to business, because I had about 20 people working for me by then. They relied on me to run a business for their living.

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RF: Although… what can I say… we weren't bosom friends, (there was always the 'Mr. Richard' element about it),[but] I knew about their families, and 'How you're doing with so and so?' I'd always tell them if I weren't happy about what they were doing, you know, 'You've got to do this and think about what you're doing.' And frankly nobody came through my office door with a solution to anything. But by the same token if there were any problems, at home or personal, I'd always put my arm around them and help them. But you've always got to find this balance.

RF: And it was the same when we employed the first Asians to work in our business. You know, helping out, probably in the early '70s. You'd always got to keep this kind of working distance with them, even though I'd also… I'd always go down into the canteen, maybe once or twice a month, to sit and have a cup of tea with them. Their English wasn't too good. They were very insular. They'd take all the overtime you gave them. They wanted the best they could for their families. But slowly but surely, the next generation had to be sponsored to come in and work in the UK.

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RF: So they'd got to have a sponsor - a job to come to - and somebody to come and work for us. And they were completely different to their forebears. Nice people, don't get me wrong. Absolute pleasure to know, there again. But they'd learnt English. They'd learnt to go out. They'd learnt to have a bit of social life. And slowly but surely, they wanted to drift away from working in a warehouse, to be an accountant, a lawyer or whatever. And for their children to do the same, or to go to university. So those are all the strands that took me through my business life from being nothing into, dare I say it, a fairly successful businessman.

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RF: But then in 2000 I had a stroke. Not a bad one, I recovered pretty quickly. The specialist I was under said, 'Look, keep on working like this and you won't see another five years out.' So, very reluctantly, I realised that I was going to have to sell the business. Which I did.

LMI: And did you retire at that point?

RF: Yeah, I was 60.

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RF: And I thought, 'Marvellous. All the responsibilities have gone.' You know, 'I can sit down and join the allotment, read my Daily telegraph all day long.' And within a few weeks I was bored to tears, Alan, believe me. So I immediately started doing community work. And I've done it ever since. And I thoroughly enjoy it. I've been involved with lots of different projects, community projects. I enjoyed all of them. Some I've set up and got running, got

well financed, set them up with a good constitution, and moved on to something else. Other things I've worked with, and they're still running, like the Cellar Project, the Hale Project.

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LMI: Oh I know the Cellar Project, I know both of those really.

RF: Yeah, yeah. Well, I worked on both those, with a gentleman called Dave Rogers, who was one of the nicest people I've ever met in my life. And he and I, with the few others, rescued Shipley Glen Tramway from going out of business in 2000 with the help of Bradford Council. Oh, they wanted some help. I'm still a trustee there. So I enjoy doing that. I've got to have something to do. I can't sit about doing nothing.

LMI: I think that's very obvious from everything you've said about your working life in the textile industry, that you need to have busy hands.

RF: Yeah well, once or twice I've been a bit embarrassed through not having… People ask me, you know, 'Which university did you go to? What did you study? Did you do a PhD?' And things like that. And I'd just say, 'No it's a university of life as far as I'm concerned.' But then also, when you're running your business, and you've got to look at ways to export and the various export schemes like Export Credits Guarantee Department, which is a government run organization, which meant that if they vetted your customer abroad and approved him, you could ship to him in the knowledge that if he didn't pay you, or went bankrupt, they would pay you 95%. But when you went to see them, and they came to see you, they wanted to know your background. And of course, there's Richard Freeman sat there at one side of a desk, all covered in dirt from the warehouse, and fluff in his hair. And there's nothing to offer apart from honesty. But we got through. There were some tough times. And a lot of very enjoyable times.

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LMI: So, I'd like your view on what happened to the textile industry. You got up to the point where you knew it was sort of on the ropes, and you moved into artificial fibers.

RF: Yeah.

LMI: And so, and then so by the time we got to 2000, it must have shrunk a lot by that point. By the time you retired.

RF: Yeah well, the business is still going. It's started...

LMI: Your business is still going?

RF: Yes. I've no interest in it whatsoever now. I got paid out. But I must have done something right in 1965.

LMI: You must have done.

RF: Yeah.

LMI: But generally, the whole… the Bradford textile industry is like...

RF: It was complacence.

LMI: It was complacency?

RF: In my opinion, yeah. They wouldn't move with the times.

LMI: So, do you think it could have been a different story?

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RF: No. I think complacency is part of it. It was inevitable that production would go overseas. The start of it was that the wool producers in Australia and New Zealand didn't need to send greasy wool to Bradford. And it was inevitable that overseas markets would make the same cloth as we did, cheaper. And eventually, they'd accumulate the knowledge to make it as good. So, it's a combination.

LMI: It is interesting, isn't it?

RF: Yeah.

LMI: And how do you think that affected kind of, I don't know, the personality of Bradford if you like? You know, because it was, you know…

RF: I think it's, Bradford became quite… it was a city that had a lot of pride in itself because of its, it had a lot of heritage.

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RF: Its heritage was around the textile industry. And from my point of view the heritage was also the immigrants which came in. I found them to be super people. I got on very well with them. I got invited to Asian weddings. One of the best production manager I ever had, was a Sikh, a guy called Prem Singh, delightful man. I have friends within the Asian community. I hate this attitude of people not accepting that we're all the same. It's against my entire ethos. So yes, Bradford had an identity. Not only with the textiles. There was engineering, Jowett Cars, and things like that. But once the textiles declined, it lost the Wool City image. And I'm not sure what's replaced it. I'm really pleased to see the Bradford Culture 2025 come along. In my honest opinion it should be Bradford City of Cultures. With an 's' on it. But I wish you every success.

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LMI: Well, of course you know Shanaz, who…

RF: Yes, I do. Met her several times.

LMI: She's worked with 509 Arts many times over the past 20 years. But her father was a mill worker, as well. He worked in Salt's Mill for a few years. So she's...

RF: Yeah. Salt., Sir Titus, he was quite a guy. I can't imagine how anybody could build up an empire so quickly, but he did.

LMI: Extraordinary, isn't he?

RF: Yeah, well he saw the possibility of alpaca.

LMI: Yeah, exactly.

RF: And he made a great success out of it. I think Salts overreached themselves eventually. They went into mining in North America.

LMI: Really?

RF: I'm fairly sure. Or some, maybe another type of production, which sucked all the cash out of them. And that's when Consortium, including Sir James Roberts, took over.

LMI: Yeah.

RF: In fact, his son is still part of the community scene in Saltaire. And you couldn't wish to meet a nicer guy.

LMI: Oh right.

RF: Yeah, I've been doing some work for Shipley Glen Tramway Museum, on a timeline. And he’s been very helpful, gave me a lot of postcards and old photographs.

LMI: Well, listen, we'll stop the interview now. I may come back and talk to you some more at some point. I'm sure you've got a dozen…

RF: Well, we can embellish the bits you’ve got there.

LMI: But I'll stop… done 50 minutes here. And so, thanks very much for this conversation, Richard. And I look forward to the next one.