

Christopher Ackroyd – Transcription

Audio Quality: Background noise. A bit quiet.

Lots of anecdotes and soundbites about mill working and the importance of Keighley

0:00:00

CA: I don't like the sound of my own voice.

[SP2: Christopher, this is Gemma, I would like you to at least just look at the library space. If you just do an interview, they're just going to do it.]

CA: Actually, I'll just show you this. I mean, this is just textile mills that you're looking at?

LMI: It's textile mills, but it's also the mills that have... any factories that helped towards the contribution of the mills? So, if there were any manufacturing or engineering?

CA: Oh, well this wouldn't fit. This was an engineering work down Larkham Lane called Trico - the Rustless Iron Company. I think it did war work, you know, specifically. Not armaments. But I worked there. And by then I'd left college and that's why I've called it...

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CA: You could walk into most mills and factories around here and say, 'Do you need any labourers?' And they'd say, 'Yeah, start on Monday.' So I worked at Ondura, Tyreem Moulders, that was the worst job I ever did. Night shift. Trico was nearly as bad. And you have your lunch at two o'clock in the morning. And I would be sat somewhere around here looking, must have been a nice evening. I used to smoke in those days, so I'd eat my limp sandwich and cigarette.

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CA: And I was looking at the mill and I thought 'I could climb up there.' It's stupid, but I climbed to the top of the chimney. Two o'clock in the morning, looking around, beautiful view! But climbing down the ladder is a lot harder than getting up it. So it was a daft thing to do. But a great photograph.

LMI: So, you'll have seen all the chimneys of the mills from up there then.

CA: Oh well. I mean it was phenomenal. And Keighley was typical of so many towns. I mean that... from that book of old postcards. So...

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LMI: Oh wow.

CA: I noticed this. It's only up until... less than ten years ago you used to be able to buy postcards of Keighley in several shops, in newsagents, and that. And suddenly it stopped.

LMI: I know. They may come back with the City of Culture. I'm wondering if they might do a bit of a rebranding and bring some of those older photographs back. I hope so, because they are... The landscape's changed so much hasn't it, since then?

CA: Beech Mill went in the fire. And I think that was a genuine accident. 'Cos Hird's... partly because my dad... he was front production director. So there'd be six directors. There'd be a sales director... I don't know what the others would be, but my dad was in charge of getting the orders executed and out on time. Because you lose further orders if you delay.

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CA: So a lot of that would have had to do with him. And Hird's was a healthy company, which was why it got taken over. Asset stripping, which Claire said, that's what they were up to. So they would move in. They'd keep the workforce and put their own directors in. That was taken over by Thomas Tilley. Huge conglomerates which were just doing that left-right and centre at that time, 60s, and '70s. And of course, the textile industry was in decline. I'd been to Bradford Tech in the mid to late '60s. O&D and textile technology. And even while you were learning it... the common room was amazing. There'd be about 100 guys, there wasn't a girl in the place.

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CA: And they were from all over the world. Because of the respect in Hong Kong, Ireland, various parts of Africa... All over they came to get a technical education there. That common room was amazing. I was there when the six day war was on between the Israelis and Arabs. There were Israelis and Arabs in the room. The Biafra war was on. Extraordinary.

LMI: Oh, so they were trying to learn the skills.

CA: Yes, because it was a centre of excellence.

LMI: So, when I said asset stripping, I was meaning that people were trying to get the good machinery that they had in Keighley and take it to other parts of the world. Because a lot of that was going on as well, wasn't it?

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CA: Yeah, but I think by then, really, what had happened is... Again, they kind of cut their own throat, because... in fact Keighley is a prime example of this, it wasn't just the production of... it was more spinning than weaving that was done in Keighley. But it was awfully good at making machines, Hattersley's and companies like that.

LMI: They had really good engineering people there, didn't they?

CA: Yes, and really fine. And Shipley was this, the Coddor, Bradford Shipley, was the centre of fine engineering. Keighley benefited from that. So, we were very good at making machines and then going to different parts of the world, the Commonwealth, and what else they could

give us. Because it was good quality. So they sold them in India, or wherever. I mean this is what Gandhi was about, isn't it?

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CA: 'Why should Indians be wearing cotton fabric made in Manchester? We can make our own.' Well, if you learn how to make machinery, you get a car and you need to buy for the expense of a million half-pence did it, they were making it for themselves. And that's what killed it really. And also, their machinery was very, very slow. And... it's a huge irony this, but after the war, most of the countries that had lost the war, reinvested what money they had into industries. Because they bloody well had to, to get back up off their knees. So Japan, Italy and Germany were producing machines that would run 5, 10 times faster. And for 24 hours. And, you know a shuttle, that's the old-fashioned thing and it has a bobbin in it, and it gets to the end and it has to be replaced mechanically. It's slow. These were bullet loops. You know, the bullet carries, drives the thread. So you don't need to refill it at all. It's just bang, bang, bang, bang. And that's partly why they were forced into having a night shift. And this coincided with partition - India and Pakistan. And it was just so convenient to invite them to come here. Because white people didn't want to do night shift. That was still true when I was mill hopping in the '70s. What Pakistanis did was work very hard and pester the foreman, 'Can I get on the night shift?' And that's exactly what I did. But they were doing it for the duration. I just wanted two or three months to get some money to go travelling. That's what I was doing. And that's why I ended up working in mills independently of my dad. But I put a... the interesting thing in this piece... because that would be when I was at Bradford Tech and got next to nothing as the grant...because I was supposed to stay at home.

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CA: So my dad used to get me into Knowle Mill, usually. So I did different jobs there. This job is about... it must have been summertime. And this huge man who did the lift. And this might sound... I stood in for him for two weeks while he went to Blackpool with the missus, or whatever. Now, if you look at the mill - I think it's five storeys. And the shape of the mill reflects the processes. They take the raw material up to the top and then floor by floor it gets finer and finer. On the ground floor they are spinning fine, you know, super quality thread - worsted thread. And then it's out of the door. So the lift is the crucial central spine.

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CA: And while I was there... maybe not for the lift job, but one time I was there, I worked with people from Barnsley. Because they were bussing people... [there was] high unemployment in Barnsley. So we were starting at 7.30, clocking on. They'd been on a coach for an hour, being driven, you know, because there's so little employment in South Yorkshire they would come. That was amazing. And that was at the time when they were encouraging Pakistanis to come to do the night shift.

LMI: So how many different mills do you think you worked in then, over the course of your career?

CA: Including non-textiles?

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LMI: Specifically textiles, if you can.

CA: Well, I worked in all three of the Hirds.

LMI: You're so awesome.

CA: But yeah. And I've started writing a piece about that. Because I left school at 16 and worked in Silvers in Haworth. Now, people around here always thought of Silvers as dangerously near Lancashire. They're not quite thoroughly Yorkshire. And the kind of cloth that they made, and the Silvers in mills - we were talking about it yesterday - was a kind of imitation of kind of fine Italian baroque silk brocades. Which would be a satin grab with a kind of repeat motif. Quite large. Not like brocades.

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LMI: That's what I brought in actually from the Bradford mills.

CA: Well, except this was acetate rayon instead of silk and it was slubbed cotton for the weft. So you get these floral motifs that become the pattern. Usually white or off-white. And in fact, part of my story is... because I spent a lot of time writing out loom cards, which were only about that big, but they were divided up into columns like that. And each column meant a different thing on the loom. Threads per inch. Number of length pieces. All sorts of details that the weaver (usually women), would understand. And how they would know how to set up the loom. And one day in a sleepy drizzly Tuesday afternoon probably, on one column, because there would be about eight columns here and on both sides, in one column with a lot of dittos, one column I put '10753/ B' instead of '/A'. And they wove about 5 to 10,000 yards of cloth with black weft. And when I was being reprimanded in the director's office, at the end of it he said, 'That pattern doesn't go with black weft either!' Because they'd have to kind of plug it off, and there's a remark or whatever, a penance. But it was very kind of ...lot of stories to do with me and that job.

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CA: I did it for a year. So that could be a separate thing. But this is also because I'm interested in architecture, and I grew up with this. And...that thing that I said... Now somebody once, when I was at art college, eventually, pointed out as an aside on... 'Of course a lot of these Bradford mills are based on Italian Renaissance palaces.' And I'd never thought of that. I'd never made the connection. But when you start to look into it the...An Italian Renaissance palace isn't that florid. It's fairly... in a block, like. And that shape fitted the functions that were required. Whereas a weaving shed could be on a single level. The spinning mills, was top down.

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LMI: Ground floor, predominantly then.

CA: Yeah. Yeah. It's a segment. But the humorous bit of my piece is that... we were talking about the fine quality engineering. The spinning mills would run slowly till kingdom come. I mean, they were just indestructible. Brass, steel, really solid. Fine. And the women, amazing kind of handling, the kinds of things they had to do.. The lift, which I've described as the spine of the whole operation, was a big metal box, say from there to there, a cube, just a metal box.

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CA: There's no electrics in it, except a box or a lever. There were two basement levels and five stories above that. So I had to work out by sound, each floor. You think I'm making this up! They had a big metal knocker on each metal door, and I had to learn quite quickly, 'That's the fifth floor. That's the third floor. That's the basement.' There are no lights.

LMI: You'd think there'd be a more efficient way, wouldn't you, to organise it?

CA: ...surrounded by all this pine.

LMI: How could you hear that with everything else going on?

CA: It wasn't... inside that box, it was kind of insulated. And the noise was more or less localised. Spinning mills weren't as noisy as weaving. I worked in a weaving shed once for two weeks, in Silsden, after I'd left, but before I went to college.

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CA: And they gave me a job there for two or three weeks, at Easter, I think. Just to make a bit of pocket money. And I was a battery filler in the weaving shed and I used to walk home from Silsden to Riddlesden. And I'd get to Riddlesden before I could hear properly. An hour afterwards, every day. Now I was only doing that for two or three weeks. And again, it's mainly women who worked in those places. They were doing it forever.

LMI: It's the long-term damage from that.

CA: Yeah. And it affected the way they speak to each other, sign language and all of that. The humour...

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LMI: I could honestly talk to you forever. It would be different.

CA: Well, I do go on.

LMI: Honestly, it's amazing.

CA: You need to get off.

[I need to be somewhere at 4 o'clock. I just think that maybe all being touched is absolutely.
LMI: Al will be very keen.]

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CA: I'm interested in what you're doing and I'm more than happy to come back and pick up on points and continue.

LMI: That would be brilliant. We've got another one drop in like this next week in Bradford And we're also conducting interviews where we meet up with people one-to-one where we can dedicate time to chat through.

CA: If you now read this...and remember that what I've tried to do is my personal experience, but in relation to what I know about the textile trade as a whole. Because everybody knew it was dying on its feet. But nobody liked to say so.

LMI: It's really interesting how you knew all the politics of the international aspects.

CA: And the machinery, the way the trade worked. I know something, but I wasn't as steeped in it as my dad was. But yeah, because I worked in different places and [I have] different perspectives on it. I worked in a testing lab at, that was at Northern Mill too, that was a nice job.

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CA: Testing is a very important part because they're constantly checking for quality control and...you know, measurements. But that's the perspective I've taken: My experience of the thing as a whole. And also thrown in what I know about architecture and... like that.

LMI: Also all the different roles that you know as well. It's so helpful because we're hoping to create some interactive workshops with children. What we're focusing on is teaching them the different roles of the mills, with personal stories.

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CA: Yeah.

LMI: And get people to, either actors or actually people that worked in the mills to come and chat to them about that. Because a lot of the roles...I'll be honest, I won't know a lot of the different roles that were required, because the machinery is just not the same as it is now. And so, there is those parts of the things that get lost in history if we don't record them and everything.

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CA: There was a certain awareness at the time, and I picked up on some of that, but some things... time has to pass to give you that kind of perspective and hindsight, and so on. And really, as I said, countries that had lost the war had to reinvest what little they had and start rebuilding. But we'd just been through two world wars; one of which we're still paying off, I think. And a severe economic depression in-between. And for all that kind of post-war optimism, there wasn't the money.

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CA: The country was absolutely broke. So we couldn't reinvest, ironically, in the same way that Italy was doing. Sad. And I think my dad and people that... I mean, out of six directors, five of them had worked up from the shop floor. Only one of them had been to university. And he was the one that Thomas Tillings kept on. I mean, that was a slap in the face for my dad. You know, it's always fellow directors with his best friend.

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LMI: It's a dominant way, you started at ground level and you worked your way up.

CA: I think so, but that's why the Mechanics Institute was so important. And I could write a piece on that as well, because I wrote a lot of letters to the Keighley News, trying to get people to be a bit more aware of the importance of not just the Grammar School buildings, but the remains of the Mechanics Institute. And it's all bound up with this relationship between Sir Swire Smith who was interested in educating working men, night school. And he was so good at it that Keighley became a centre where people came from Europe and from America to study the teaching methods in that building. I mean, people have forgotten that.

LMI: That's quite a legacy.

CA: Well, because... I could see it was going to come down because that's what happens. Bradford Council and the rest, you know. They couldn't see what value... That could have been turned into an amazing kind of community... they're fond of this word 'hub'. They want to make it work really, instead of spending a lot of... I mean, they could have turned it back into something really good. And actually, that's... Now, I better check up about this before I give it to you. But I thought I'd mention it in case you've heard of a photographer called Charles Waller.

LMI: What does he photograph?

CA: Well, all sorts by the look of that card. I don't know him, but I had a long chat with him before they pulled the building down. Because, I mean, I'd read about Sir Swire Smith and became fascinated by him. It's because of him and his friendship with Andrew Carnegie that Keighley has [had] the first free library in the world.

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CA: Now I wrote a letter saying... because I found out to my surprise... that architectural listing of buildings doesn't just depend on architectural merit. It can be based on historical importance. And that library and the buildings across the road are like that, you know. Andrew Carnegie became a friend of Swire Smith. And Swire Smith used to go to... he had a Scottish baronial mansion, near Kirkcudbright, I think. But over dinner, probably cigars and port stage, Andrew Carnegie said... [he] had the biggest steel mill in the world in Pennsylvania, I think. And he said, 'You've got this institute, it's fantastic.' He was borrowing from that for his own steel mill. And he said, 'You could do with a decent library to go with it.' And Swire Smith apparently said, 'Well, we just don't have the money. We'll get round to it eventually, but the town has other things to spend on at the moment.'

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CA: This is about 1900. And Andrew Carnegie said, 'Would £10,000 do it?' Which was a lot of money. Now eventually, they spent 20,000 on it. And the library is the best building in this whole part of Yorkshire. It's a beautiful building. And so that network is born.

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CA: And I've forgot... Oh, this photographer. When they were beginning to demolish, they put boards round, like they do demolition or something. I used to have a drink in those days, and I'd go and sit in Wetherspoons across the road and watch them. I mean, I actually wept once. I went on Saturday afternoon; they were clawing this thing down. You know, those big claw demolishing machines. Anyway, this time I saw this guy and he was actually holding his camera above the board and walking around taking photographs. I'm sure it's him. I'll ring up and check whether it's him, because the conversation that then ensued was, he photographs mills inside and out, throughout this region. Now, if I could put you in touch with him that might be very good for both of you, if it's the same guy. But the only reason why I would have kept it, is him.

LMI: So, Charles?

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CA: It's a guy I met when they were demolishing Mechanics Institute. And he was photographing like this. I said, 'What are you doing? I'm interested in this building.' And he said, 'So am I.' So we then chatted. And he said, 'Well, I photograph mills.' And I said, 'You photograph Dalton Mills?' He said, 'Oh, yeah. Lots of times.' And he gave me that card. And he said, 'If you show it at the entrance, they'll show you round.'

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CA: So, he's that well known down there. And of course, that was shortly before I was ill. I never got round to it. And then the thing went up in flames. But if it's the same guy, he will have a *lot* of mills that he's photographed.

LMI: That would be fantastic. it's a pond and a lot of drones as well

CA: Well, I think they used drones to check out part of the Dalton Mills, before it went.

SP2: [I know that you want to get to the line as well.

LMI: I think... Gemma thinks...

CA: I'll have a quick chat I'll have a quick chat, but you can go. You're not really my carer. It's unpaid anyway.

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LMI: The care is the love. Ok, well...It's interesting. What I'll do, I'll end this one here.]