

Kim Sharp – Transcript

Audio Quality: Very good

Focuses on management and workforce, workplace culture and conditions and technical explanations.

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[LMI: Kim Sharp.

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Lovely to meet you.

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It's a rubbish clock that, isn't it?

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It's only a normal clock, that.

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LMI: Sorry. Too proficient. Okay, yeah, I'll just move that, sit down and you'll look at it.]

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LMI: Hi Kim.

KS: Hiya.

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LMI: So you started work in the textile mills, is that right?

KS: I did, yes.

LMI: And can you tell us a bit more about the role that you did and where you worked?

KS: Yeah, sure. So, I left school, I was one of the Easter leavers in 1978. And so I got a job at W.H.... sorry, W.J. Whiteheads at Laisterdyke. Yes, so I was 16 and I went in to train on the gill boxes originally, and then it was like a six week training session on them.

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KS: And then... I'd swap then with the other lady that joined, and I went on to the roving for six weeks. But after about three week, the lady who was training me says to the manager that I was qualified enough to change, if it was ok. So we changed and I went on to the roving.

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KS: So I spent most of my time on the roving. Now, the machines I was taught on was German ones. They are *big* machines. And there were three. We had three machines. Each machine had something like 64 bobbins. Yeah...er...

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LMI: So when you were training, what were you training to do? What was the actual role?

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KS: Basically, training... When I was on the gill boxes, the jobber lads, as we called them, they used to bring the wool in small packages, about that big, put them up to the first machine... So, it went through three different phases of a machines. And so that were left to us then. And so we'd cut open the bales. These bales would go from something like that, to up there. They'd just spring up. And as they sprung up you'd get crickets jumping out sometimes, because they got compressed into the wool.

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KS: That didn't worry me. They'd just scuttle off under the machine and you'd hear them until they eventually died. And then... that were alright. You needed to have a little bit of muscle. If you were small working on them, you'd have struggled. Because the drums that the wool went into on the machines were pretty high. So if you were like about five foot, you might have struggled a bit.

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KS: So I worked on them. And then I went over onto the roving. And the roving... When the wool had gone through the gill boxes, then it'd be transported over onto the roving. Because what they'd done is they'd taken, like wool that broad, and it narrowed down to like that when it got to the roving. So then we threaded it through into the machines. And I found out, at my cost, you shouldn't have long hair when you're working in the textile. Because I used to have my hair really long and it were tied back. And one day I were connecting all the threads up to go and I felt my hair pull. And what had happened was a piece of my hair had

got caught into the fibres of the wool and I was having to follow it. I couldn't stop the machine until I got to it. I don't know what would have happened but luckily I managed to hit the button to stop the machine.

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KS: And unfortunately, if you stop the machine suddenly, the chances are the ends on the machine will go slack and they'll break. And it's no fun if you've got to start tying up 60 odd bobbins. The machines I worked on were also, even though it were in the '70s, I would say they were of a good safety standard. Because the flyers that went round the bobbins to put the wool on as it came down, they were made of... I believe, lead and concrete.

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KS: And the safety gates, if one of these flyers broke... if you were stood at front of the machine, if these safety gates hadn't have been up, it'd have ripped through you at the speed it would have broken off the machine. So luckily, we had safety gates. But I never stood at front of them machines if I could help it, when they were on the go. I stood to the side. And if I saw a problem I'd stop the machine.

LMI: It sounded like it could be quite a dangerous place to work.

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KS: It was. It was. It was dangerous, but I mean, as long as you took precautions. I mean, I was 16, and I felt, for a 16-year-old then, I were a bit more level-headed, so I just thought, you know, 'I ain't gonna stand there and get my guts ripped out by them things so I'll stand to one side. There's buttons to it.' And yeah, I enjoyed it. It was noisy. It was smelly.

LMI: And what was the smell like?

KS: I believe that was something to do with... it could have been the combing side of it that...It's like a... I believe like a bleaching process, or something. But you got used to it.

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KS: When I went into the textile shed upstairs, that smell were there. It brought it all back. When I first went in at 16, I worked Monday to Friday. 2 while half past 9. We had half an hour for tea break, [for] which they wouldn't pay you, so you had to clock in and out when you went for that tea break.

LMI: And was that a canteen, that you had your break?

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KS: Yeah, they had two. I worked... when I worked at Whitehead's, I worked in what they called the New Mill. So they had a little canteen there. It was just machines, you know, giving you sandwiches and drinks.

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KS: But in the Old Mill, that's where you got proper food cooked. So sometimes I'd go over there and leave my workmates to chatter. And I'd have a decent meal over there if I was starving. The good thing about working 2 while half past nine is I got to have a lie in bed. Because I didn't have to get up early to go to work.

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KS: Wages... my first wage... Well, it was a few weeks I was put on emergency tax. So I was taking something like £27, £28 home. For working, what, 37 hours a week? Something like that. But when that emergency tax [was] paid back to me, well, at 16, all your Christmases have come at once. And then I was earning... I took home about £32 a week in my hand. And you just think, you know, I worked more hours than I got paid per hour.

LMI: And what were the people like that you worked with?

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KS: Yeah. The ladies that taught me the machines, the first lady who taught me, bless her, they called her Mary Wonwell. She taught me the gill boxes. And then when I went over onto the roving, I was taught by a lady called Rita Robinson. Yeah... There were a good camaraderie there, you know. That's it. It was noisy. It was stinky. But there were good people there as well.

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KS: The kind of wools that we used to get through... we had three machines. Sometimes we'd just get the normal run of the mill fibres going through. But we'd also get the yarn to go through for the military. So it's khaki, and we also used to get damart, which was pure white. And with the damart one, you had to literally *watch* that machine. Because if a speck of dust from anywhere got into one of the bobbins, they would have to class that bobbin as ruined. So you really had to be...

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KS: Sometimes what they'd do...and I'm sorry to say this, but there were some managers who were thick. They really were. Because they made us run...we had three machines, like I say, each one had 60 odd bobbins. And they were basically the length of the room that we had. And there were only two of us that worked those machines. And they'd have one machine with khaki running through. And one machine with the damart white stuff.

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KS: Well, the khaki's throwing off green fibres everywhere. And you're trying to keep that and...Ohhh, it were a nightmare. It really were. I actually...I mean I was 17-year-old, something like that by then, and I actually had an argument with the manager. I says..[Laughs] I was a bit outspoken then.

LMI: And were the managers men? Or did you have some female managers?

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KS: *Men.* The overlookers were men. The managers were men. We had the jobber lads... The male side of it - managers were men, overlookers were men, and then there were the jobber lads. Because they didn't feel that women should be lifting heavy stuff.

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KS: Well, they didn't tell us that when we were doffing those machines off, when you've got bobbins that big [demonstrates] coming off. Women were the ones that did all the work on the machines. It was a woman's industry that were there. You know, they were just being told what to do by the men. So...but this particular time I told the manager.

LMI: And what did you wear when you went to work?

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KS: I wore a tabard. I wore... yeah, it was a tabard. Just one of those that you pop over and fasten at the sides, and the pockets. So I had a tabard for my Stanley knife, because obviously we have to cut through any threads that get caught on the machine, and the brakes. So they just...they wrap around until the machine stops, and then you go and have to cut it all off.

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KS: And I also had a wire that I used to have around my neck, a little plastic wire. And you used to pop it down to push through, to attach your thread, to pull it through, to wrap it around the bobbin. So if one of those threads broke, the machine would switch off

automatically. The ladies in the spinning department, they were slightly different. They used to wear a lot of these pinnies like your grannies would wear, where they just had a waist pinny, because that were easier. Because they had the little tickling brush in there, because they had to keep cleaning between bobbins for old fibres. Yeah.

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LMI: And how did you get to work?

KS: Yeah, I caught two buses. It always involved two buses there, and two buses back.

LMI: That's a long day for you then, isn't it?

KS: Yeah, I mean I used to get in about quarter past ten at night. Bang on. My mother, because I lived with my mother, so she were always there with me tea ready. And then I could stay up as late as I want because I didn't have to start work till two o'clock. Sometimes they'd want people to work over on a Saturday morning. But you had to put your name down. But I never did. I thought, 'Nah, I've had enough, Monday/Friday's enough for me.' I did leave Whitehead's for a while, and then I went back. And this time my shift changed. And I went from half past six in the morning to two o'clock in the afternoon. And yeah, two buses again.

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KS: I was leaving home about five o'clock in the morning, and walking along a very dark estate because I live[d] near a wood, so, yeah, to get to the bus stop.

LMI: Did you prefer the later shift then, to the early morning?

KS: In a sense I preferred the later shift. Even though at 16 you didn't have much of a social life when you're working that kind of a shift. I suppose it was just swings and roundabouts, you know.

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LMI: And how long did you work in the mills for?

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KS: About five year. I went to Whitehead's first, as I said. Then I tried a very short stint at Fisher's down Idle. And that... I just don't know, like I was walking back in time. The machine I was on was a British-made machine, and it, to me, were a fire hazard.

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KS: I worked up in a loft. it was like a loft to me. There was me on these two machines, there was a couple of ladies in other part on their gill boxes but... (I've just seen one of the machines down in the museum here) ...And what it was with them machines, because they didn't have the bells and whistles, the lights, to let you know something's gone, the wool, if it broke, it'd just keep wrapping round. And the only time you knew there was something up was when you smelt the burning. So off you went. Shut the machine, get it sorted. I just, 'I don't want to set fire in here, in this attic.' So yeah, I didn't stay there very long.

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KS: Nice people, awful machines. I thought they were only fit for the scrap yard.

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LMI: And then did you go back to the other..

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KS: I went back to Whiteheads and that's when I did the morning shift. I went to see the manager who I'd told off, who I'd had words with at 17. And when they says, 'Oh, you've got an interview with Ernest.' I thought, 'Oh no...' So I went, and he actually, he says to me, he says, 'You were a good worker when you were here, you know.' He says, 'I like you.' I thought, 'Right, ok.' And I were in. I started the following week.

LMI: Amazing. And what made you eventually leave the textile industry?

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KS: Pay. It was the pay. It was very poor pay. And it just... and having a flat and everything to pay rents and stuff, it just... If I'd have been living at home with my mum, probably. But not when you've got to pay for your rent and your bills. No, it just wasn't enough. So I went and found other jobs.

LMI: And, so you left on your own accord, but do you remember when the mills shut? And did you know anybody that lost their job because of the mills shutting?

KS: I didn't know anybody personally that lost their job, because I think by the time the mills were going down that road, the ladies I'd worked with, they'd have been retiring. They'd have been ready for retiring, so I didn't know anybody. My grandad, he was actually an

overlooker at Whitehead's. He worked on night shift. And he luckily, when he retired the mills were not too bad then. So he retired out of the industry.

LMI: Oh, that's good. And one last question, it sounds a bit random, but we're collecting people's... erm.. sort of the music of the time. Do you remember any artists or anything that you enjoyed listening to? Not necessarily in the mills, because I know it was really noisy, but when you were working around around that time, are there any artists that jump out to you?

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KS: I can't remember his name at the moment, but the record I did seem to listen to a lot was War of the Worlds.

LMI: Amazing.

KS: There was just something about that, where he's talking, and then you've got that music. I'm sorry, I just can't remember who the artist was. But it was War of the Worlds. And I actually had a cassette recorder. So when I was... when I'd finished work and I were walking to go get me bus, I just used to pop the music on then. And it got me to my bus stop a bit quicker at that time of night.

LMI: Yeah. Oh, I bet that music really transports you back to that time.

KS: It does. It does. I mean there were others. There were others, there were like... you got your Saturday Night Fever and Grease, and all that. But no, it was the War of the Worlds for some reason. I was just hooked on that music for the time.

LMI: Amazing. Thank you so much for talking with us, Kim.

KS: Oh no, it's been a pleasure. Sorry, I might have gone a bit dry, or a bit rambly but...

LMI: Absolutely natural, honestly.

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KS: Right, thank you.

LMI: Thank you.

KS: Thank you very much. And good luck.