

**Interview with Chris Birch by Dave Welsh on 23 August 2010 for Britain at Work 1945-95 Oral History Project**

Dave Welsh: This is an interview with Chris Birch on Monday the 23rd of August as part of the Britain at Work Project. And Chris, I wonder if you'd mind starting talking about your early working life, and quite how you got into... and perhaps when you left school and got into it?

Chris Birch: Well, a wee bit of background, I was born in the West Indies and I went to school in Trinidad and Barbados during the war, and then I came to England to go to university because they didn't have a university in the West Indies in those days. And I went to Bristol University, and I read philosophy and chemistry, and botany and microbiology, and had a whale of a time, really enjoyed my university years, and I left with a wife, but without a degree. And I came to London in 1951 and had to find work. I was living in a flat in Pembridge Crescent W11, not all that far from here, and I think I probably saw an advertisement in the Times newspaper, because I used to read the Times in those days. And Abbott Laboratories were looking for what they called Medical Representatives, and I'd had a bit of medical background, I'd studied bacteriology at university, and I applied for this job and I got accepted. And I think I had a four- week training period at Perivale, four weeks of lectures on the drugs that Abbott sold, I mean they were very famous in those days for Pentothal which was the main anaesthetic used. I've no idea to what extent it's used today, Nembutal, which was one of the main barbiturates for people who had difficulty sleeping. Anyhow, after four weeks of training, I was sort of let loose on the medical profession of West London. I set off from home every morning with a small black bag, loaded with our leaflets and booklets and samples, and I called mainly on GPs but also on chemists and the pharmacists at hospitals, and my job was to seek to persuade these doctors to prescribe drugs that were made by Abbott Laboratories, many of which were very similar, if not identical with drugs made by other pharmaceutical companies. I mean there were one or two things that were unique to Abbots - I mean Pentothal was special, so was Nembutal - We also sold Abbocillin which was Abbots' brand of penicillin. I don't think it was any different from anybody else's penicillin. It was a really futile job, my heart was never in it. I mean it paid the bills, and I really don't know whether I increased Abbott's products or not, I mean I got friendly with some of the pharmacists and they sort of ordered the stuff I'd been recommending to the local GPs, and stocked up, and that all went down to my credit, but my heart really wasn't in it. And this went on from probably, Autumn of '51 until the Spring of '55, when I had the opportunity to escape from this, and I went abroad. So that really is the end of the first bit of my work experience in West London, for what it's worth.

DW: 'Cos this is when the NHS was not long set up, isn't it?

CB: Yes, the NHS was born in '48, and I started doing this in '51.

DW: What was the general perception about the NHS at this time?

CB: Oh Lordee. Well, I mean Nye Bevan had quite a battle to persuade the GPs and doctors in general to accept the idea. I mean, I think he would have preferred a paid service with all the doctors being... GPs being employed by the NHS, but he wasn't going to get that even though he stuffed the doctors' mouths with gold, as he said. So the GPs remained as private practitioners for the running of their own little businesses. I know I had a friend who was a medical student who qualified, and I think he had to buy his share of the practice in order to start practising as a GP in Notting Hill, but I don't really remember a lot about the NHS in those days. I know much more about it in recent years.

DW: And you got to know chemists. You went to local chemists, did you?

CB: Oh yes, yeah.

DW: Was that like it is today, or the chemists' shops were very different?

CB: I think they were much the same. I mean what their attitude to medical reps is nowadays I don't know. I mean, I used to call mainly on GPs, and I would go and speak to the receptionist and sometimes they'd say, 'No our doctor doesn't want to see anybody like you.' and I'd go away. But more often than not they'd say, 'Okay, wait here, and I'll catch him when he comes out, or take your place in the surgery and wait for him,' and I'd sit there wearing a smart grey suit with my little black bag. But I go to my doctor quite often nowadays, and I don't see anybody like that at all, so I don't know whether medical reps have died out or what. I can't imagine that they would have died out, certainly the pharmaceutical firms still spend lavishly on advertising in the medical journals and so forth. I would have thought they would also employ people to go round pushing their drugs.

DW: So you didn't really enjoy it?

CB: No, I felt it was totally futile, a waste of time, not socially useful in the least, and I had lots of other things to do which were more interesting and more important. I would often finish early, instead of going on and on and on, I did what I thought was the minimum number of calls that I could get away with and then went home and got busy with other things.

DW: And were you paid a standard salary or was it based on the number of calls that you did or...?

CB: As far as I remember, I was paid a regular standard salary. I don't have the slightest idea what it was now, but there were also bonuses, I mean there were targets, can you sell an extra £500 worth of... get your chemist to stock an extra £500 worth of products this month, and if so you earned... that sort of thing. I'm not sure I ever won anything! Anyhow, that's really about all I can tell you about that first period.

DW: Well, without jumping I'd like to ask... 'cos I think you went abroad, and I think you had some very interesting experiences. So whether you'd like to talk about that?...

CB: Yeah, it's not work experience in West London...

DW: Yeah, it's okay.

CB: I was sent to... I went to Warsaw in April 1955 to help organise a world youth festival. There was an organisation called the World Federation of Democratic Youth which was set up in the Albert Hall in 1945, with youth organisations from all the members of the United Nations, and it had a message of Greeting from King George VI, and it was set up there. And with the development of the cold war, splits developed in the organisation, and a lot of the non-political organisations in the West sort of split away and formed their own organisation called the World Assembly of Youth. The headquarters of the WFDY - it had been set up in London - were in Paris originally. Then the French government expelled it, and it moved to Budapest. And it started having a series of... every two years... World Youth Festivals. The first was in Prague in '47, the second was in Budapest in '49, and the third was in Berlin in '51, the fourth was in Bucharest in '53, and then the fifth was in Warsaw, and I went to Warsaw to help organise it.

DW: Could I ask how you got involved in all of this?

CB: Well, I was a member of the Young Communist League, and the Young Communist League was a sort of... together with the YMCA and the YWCA, and other organisations were initially members. The YMCA and the YWCA left the federation at the beginning of the cold war, and the Young Communist League stayed as a member, so I was really representing the Young Communist League of this country in Warsaw and then in Budapest.

DW: And then within all that, you'd gone...

CB: Well we organised this huge youth festival in Warsaw in '55. I think there were something like 2000 young people from this country, and god knows how many from 80 or 90 countries all over the world. After the festival I was asked to go to Budapest and work at the headquarters of the world federation, and that I did.

DW: Can you say a bit about that? What was your actual job?

CB: Well it was run very much like the United Nations. It had a secretariat, like the UN Security Council and I was the British representative on the secretariat. There was a French general secretary and an Italian president and also on the secretariat was myself from Britain and someone from the Soviet Union, and someone from China. I think that probably was the whole of the secretariat. And my wife worked in the publicity department. They produced a youth magazine called World Youth and so forth. But it's all in my autobiography (laughs).

DW: So, kind of fast forwarding a bit did you stay in the European context?

CB: Well, we stayed in Budapest for more than a year. I had decided to come home and then everything sort of exploded in our face, with the demonstrations which eventually led to an uprising.

DW: In Hungary...

CB: Initially it was just students, really, who wanted freedom of expression and wanted freedom of travel. Quite reasonable things to want. And they had a demonstration, and the government was extremely stupid and repressive and said, 'Absolutely not, nothing is going to change, go back to your universities.' And you know, the thing grew and grew and they went to the radio station asking to be allowed to broadcast their demands, and shots were fired in the air and they sort of backed off, and when they realised they were being fired in the air they sort of went forward again, mainly students. Then they fired into the crowd, and I think seventeen people were killed, and the thing spread. Other non-students joined in and anti-Communist elements began to... the whole thing became really very nasty. I was very much on the side of the so-called freedom fighters, and managed to get my wife and kids on a boat up the river to Bratislava, and I stayed back in Hungary because that's where my job was. I wasn't ready to come home, I hadn't packed or anything! But I eventually came home in November after the fighting had died down completely. So that was another story in itself.

DW: Another story, yes. So you came back and you continued to live...?

CB: I continued to live in Holland Road in West Kensington, and I needed to find a job. Initially, I wasn't working in West Kensington at all. I worked for a period in a bookshop, and then I saw another advertisement in the Times from the Iron and Steel Institute wanting somebody who knew a bit of English spelling and grammar and so forth, and so I went and worked in the editorial department as a very sort of primitive journalist, just correcting the spelling and the grammar, and the punctuation of these scientists who were writing articles for the journal of the Iron and Steel Institute, and a very limited sort of layout of pages, photographs and so forth. And I eventually escaped from that and went to another magazine called Cement, Lime and Gravel, and from there I joined the Municipal Group, and I eventually became editor of Municipal Engineering, which was a very highly thought of weekly news magazine for the technical officers of local government. That was closed down and I was made redundant, and I went freelance, and then we come to the London Lighthouse bit. Because a very close friend of mine called Mark Ashton was killed very rapidly by HIV in 1987. He was diagnosed as having AIDS, and twelve days later he was dead. And although I went to the hospital every night to be with him, I couldn't give him the love and care that I would like to have done. And I'd been made redundant six years earlier from Municipal Engineering. I was then freelancing, and eventually my freelance work began to dry up. And my wife was a deputy head at a school in Hurlingham, in Fulham, Hurlingham Girls School it was then, now Hurlingham and Chelsea, and she had retired and she had a reasonable pension, so in 1990 I decided I'd give up attempting to earn a living at journalism and go into what I really wanted to do which by that time was to work at London Lighthouse. I'd heard about London Lighthouse in 1986 I think. A guy called Christopher Spence lived in Lancaster Road, a little bit higher up than this with Andrew Henderson, and Christopher had seen a couple of his friends die in the early '80s in horrific circumstances. In those days there was an enormous amount of ignorance prevalent about HIV/AIDS and these two friends of Christopher's had been subjected to barrier nursing, and nurses and doctors wearing masks and wellington boots, and the door being opened and their food being shoved in on the floor and the door hurriedly closed and so forth, really horrific conditions. And Christopher Spence decided there was a need for somewhere where people with AIDS could die with dignity, and he had this idea in 1986. And he launched an appeal, he wanted to raise the two million pounds, he thought would be needed to convert the old Jewish board school higher up Lancaster Road. I remember hearing about it and sending a cheque for £5 and getting a very warm letter of thanks and saying that he'd put me on the mailing list to be kept informed - never heard not a word from him, didn't happen (laughs). But then he got it going. The idea was that he would persuade the government to contribute as much money as could be raised voluntarily, and he went along to the department of health and social security, and said, 'I want a million pounds,' and the civil servants were like, 'Oh Mr Spence, we were thinking of something like ten thousand.' So anyhow, he went away and then Mrs Thatcher called a general election in 1987, and he phoned the ministry and said, 'Look, unless I can be assured of a significant contribution from the government to my building programme, I shall have to halt it.' And within 24 hours he got what he wanted. That's what I've read in a book about the history of HIV/AIDS, by a chap called Simon Garfield, and I've no reason to disbelieve it. So he got the money and London Lighthouse was opened by Princess Margaret in 1988. And in 1990 I decided I would go and work there. I'd been there twice before. I was working as a freelance journalist, I went along to do an interview there in 1987, and I walked down Lancaster Road and went right past this building thinking it was a 5

star hotel! And I was looking for a converted old school. I turned round and went back and went in and had an interview with Caspar Thompson, their press officer. That was '87, and I came back a year later and did a second interview with him, in '88, the same year that it was officially opened by Princess Margaret, and then by 1990 I was ready to go and work there as a volunteer. And I wrote in, and I came in and I had a cup of tea with the guy who was the volunteer coordinator, I've forgotten his name now though I think it's in my book. And I was a volunteer immediately. I didn't have to have any training, I had a lot of training subsequently, but there was no Criminal Record Bureau check as I recently had to have at Westminster Abbey, and I became a volunteer. And initially I was using my car to drive people with HIV from their homes to Lighthouse, from Lighthouse to the hospital, from hospital to home, which was wherever they wanted to go, and I also did a certain amount of work on the reception desk which I liked very much indeed. But the driving became a hassle, with the parking problems, you know, St. Mary's Hospital in Paddington, you had difficulties parking there and so forth, so I eventually gave up the driving, and although I did a number of shifts on the reception desk, the more experienced volunteers, who had been there before me, they wanted to do that, and I couldn't get enough slots because I wanted to do two full working days a week as a volunteer. And I moved up to the residential unit which suited me fine. You know, that was the sort of cutting edge of the operation if you like, and on the residential unit I did a variety of things. I mean basically, anything I could do to help ease the pressure on, primarily the nurses, but also the doctors. I answered the telephone, I remember answering a call from the Royal Ballet, and telling them that Brian Shaw, who had been one of their principal dancers, had died that morning. But I was not always answering the phone, I would help with the nurses. I did a lot of training, they had a full-time training department and god knows how many different courses I went on on dementia, and lifting, and turning people on their hospital beds, all sorts of things, the different sorts of symptoms that HIV could produce, CMV and everything else. I've forgotten some of the initials now. I used to fetch the drugs that they needed from a pharmacy just round the corner here, or also from St Charles Hospital. Originally we got all our drugs from the pharmacy that we needed on the residential unit. There were two full-time doctors, it was a twenty-four hours a day residential unit, with twenty-four beds. And then we got a better deal with St Charles Hospital, and I used to go in my car to St Charles Hospital and pick up drugs from their pharmacy that we needed. I used to work in the mortuary. We had an excessively large mortuary, I think there was room for about twenty bodies, and I don't think we ever had more than five in it at any one time. Some of the nurses were a bit sort of nervous about going down to the mortuary, but I didn't mind, in fact I quite enjoyed it. There was a tradition, apparently, that when undertakers came and collected the body, they tipped you a guinea (laughs). None of the London undertakers did that, but if an undertaker came from Bristol or Reading or somewhere, he gave me a pound and a shilling.

DW: Well, I can corroborate that, because I worked in a childrens' hospital, called Queen Elizabeth's for Sick Children in Hackney. And I was assigned to the mortuary for a time, and you're the first person I've ever met who corroborated... I was very young, and the first time I let a body go, the undertaker gave me, I think it was two and six. And I didn't know what to say. I said 'Why?' He must have thought, 'Oh take it you silly boy!'

CB: It was a tradition. Tradition!

DW: And it was a tradition! It's interesting that it seems to have continued as well, right the way through in some cases...

CB: London Lighthouse, was an excellent organisation in many ways, its ethos was absolutely first class, and I was a member of a team, the volunteers were members of a team with the nurses and doctors. When I arrived in the morning at eight o'clock or whatever it was, I would be sat down, and the charge nurse would give me a handover, and tell me about all the twenty-four residents, or however many there were. What their problems were, what their symptoms were, anything I needed to know about them, and then the nurses allowed me to help them give a bed wash, turn patients, sometimes just sit with them. David Randall, who founded CARA, the organisation down below you, I nursed him when he was dying, and he had gone blind by that time, so I would read to him, just sit by his bed and talk to him, and so forth, and on one occasion, only one occasion, I was actually holding a man's hand when he died. And there was a lot of death, obviously, in those days, in fact I'd never done a count before, but I kept a number of albums with the orders of services of funerals I'd been to, and photographs of people I'd known who'd died. When I was writing my autobiography I totted them up, and there were I think ninety individuals that I'd known either slightly or well, who died while I'd been there. A hell of a number. But the sadness and the deaths were balanced by the love and the happiness, and the joy... it was a unique experience and I wouldn't have missed it for anything, I really wouldn't.

DW: And you finally left...?

CB: Well they closed the residential unit in 1998 because there wasn't the funding. It was a very short-sighted decision I think, and I think Christopher Spence was very angry about it, but the department of health argued, 'Look, people are living longer now. A diagnosis of HIV disease is no longer a death sentence, and the new drugs are incredibly expensive. We can't afford to pay for the new drugs and also subsidise a hospice when it's not really needed!' So the funding was totally withdrawn, and the residential unit was closed, I think, in the autumn of 1998, and I then went to work for the Kobler Clinic attached to Chelsea and Westminster Hospital which is the biggest HIV clinic in western Europe, not as big as in the States, but the biggest in Europe certainly. And I still go back to the old London Lighthouse, they have a volunteers' barbeque once a year, and I'm a sort of honorary ex-volunteer and I get invited. But it was an amazing experience, I wouldn't have missed it for anything. I made so many friends, some of whom I'm still in touch with...

DW: And reflecting back across your wider... journalism, writing...

CB: I very much enjoyed journalism, I mean the Iron and Steel Institute wasn't really journalism, and I had a lot of difficulty persuading the National Union of Journalists that I qualified for membership, but I was very persuasive and they eventually accepted me as a member. Cement, Lime and Gravel was a wee bit bigger, but it was a monthly magazine, and no way was it doing any investigative journalism or proper journalism. It didn't really carry much in the way of news. But when I joined the Municipal Group that was different. Municipal Engineering was a very small sister publication to the Municipal Journal which was very much better known and more widely read, and more influential. But we had a brilliant editor called Chris Cossey, and I was his deputy editor initially, 1965, and I learnt journalism under Chris Cossey, and it was real journalism. And after three years he got fed up with the management of the Municipal Group and resigned, and they appointed me editor, and I was organising the work of a small team of seven or eight journalists, and having to write a leading article once a week laying down the law on subjects I really didn't know an awful lot about! But I had experts I could turn to for advice, so I managed and I got by. Then the Redcliffe-Maud Commission reported on the reorganisation of local government in this country, and we had been planning this for weeks, we produced an absolutely magnificent issue, much better than any of our rivals, better than the Municipal Journal which was part of the same stable, better than the Surveyor which was an IPC publication, our main rival, better than Local Government Chronicle, more pages, wider coverage, recognisably very very good indeed, and we all went off down to Fleet Street to the Cock to celebrate, got the first issue, and I had a drink I'd never had before, but the publican recommended Guinness with a glass of port poured into it, and it's apparently called Velvet Pussy and I can remember the glow as this went up from my stomach (laughs). Anyhow, it was great, I enjoyed being a journalist and hob-nobbing with government ministers at their drinks parties at...

DW: Where were you based most of the time then?

CB: Originally in Clements Inn just off Fleet Street, by the law courts. Then we moved to Great Portland Street. They've moved since but it was still Great Portland Street when they closed the magazine down in '81 and I was made redundant. And we got a little obituary in the Guardian diary, about how the magazine, you know, it would be missed.

DW: And were you at all involved in the National Union of Journalists?

CB: Oh yes, oh very much so. In fact I succeeded in changing one of the rules in the rulebook. The rule about chapels, I forget exactly what it said, but when I went to Cement, Lime and Gravel, in fact there were only three journalists employed there, and I wanted to form a chapel. And that was contrary to rule, you know, you needed more than three people, five or ten or something, so I went to the annual delegate meeting when it was called and succeeded in moving a rule change, so that rule five now says, 'If there are three or more journalists at one place, they can form a chapel.' So we immediately formed a chapel, I was



made father of the chapel, and with the help of a guy called Percy Jarrett from the NUJ headquarters we negotiated a very good agreement, it laid down a minimum of £1,200 a year for a qualified journalist and it was the best in our field at that time. So yes, yes, I was on the branch committee of the old trade and technical branch and so forth.

DW: And where did that branch meet, do you remember...?

CB: The trade and technical branch? Well different places, it met in a pub in Holborn on occasion, for one period. It used to meet off Fleet Street... it is going back a while, you know my memory isn't all that good. But it is now the magazine and book branch and it meets in the NUJ headquarters in Grays Inn Road, but in those days it was meeting in pubs.

DW: 'Cos the NUJ was always quite a progressive union wasn't it? It was involved in a range of causes.

CB: Yeah, yeah, it wasn't affiliated with the Labour Party or anything like that, but it belonged to the TUC of course.

DW: And were you involved with it nationally? Obviously you went to conferences.

CB: I wasn't involved at a national level, I wasn't on the National Executive Committee or anything like that, but at branch level I was a very active member yeah. And I eventually got a life membership certificate which means I can remain in the union and go to meetings and vote, and I don't pay a penny. My wife's in the NUT, and although she's been retired for twenty years she still has to pay every year! (laughs).

DW: So were you still involved in the NUJ when obviously in the '80s, when we had Murdoch, and you had the Wapping... the huge changes to...

CB: Well my friend **name removed** who was killed by HIV, he was very much involved in the demonstrations at Wapping. That was just before his death. I mean it didn't affect me directly, I mean I was not personally involved in any way, though I stopped reading The Times newspaper and switched to The Guardian at that time.

DW: Okay, kind of fast forwarding, just to get you to mention your forthcoming book really.

CB: Yeah, well I've now written my autobiography. It's on the verge of publication. It would have been published last month only, first of all I had severe e-mail problems, and I was not receiving, or very intermittently receiving e-mails, e-mails being sent to me were being lost, and for a period of a fortnight nothing passed between me and my copy editor. And I assumed that he was just busy, and eventually I contacted him and it turned out that he'd sent me a number of e-mails that I just hadn't received. But I imagine that within a few days I will hear from him again and know what's happening. I am in the final stages of checking the very final proofs. I mean the main text is virtually all right, there are some problems with the index, which I'm working on at the moment now. I've got as far as B - Barbados - there's only one reference to Barbados in the index, but there are about half a dozen in the text, so I'm trying to crack that! So hopefully, early September it may see the light of day.