

Interviewed by Tom Vague 240 Lancaster Road North Kensington 28/5/09

Eddie Adams was a sheet metal worker on Latimer Road in the early 50s, then he worked at the Heinz factory in Harlesden, and as an electrician for the Ministry of Works and at Ford in Dagenham. As a member of the electricians' union (ETU), he became a shop steward and the west London convenor of shop stewards at the Ministry of Works. He later worked at the Law Centre on Golborne Road and set up the Gloucester Court Reminiscence Group. Since the 50s he has also been a leading community activist in Notting Hill. Eddie has published several local history books and is still active on various community campaigns in North Kensington.

Vulcan sheet metal works Latimer Road I started work at 15. My first job was at Vulcan sheet metal works which were underneath the arches in Latimer Road (now Freston Road). This was a small industrial unit which made colt cowls, which some people may remember, you can still see a few of them on chimneys. They were to draw off the smoke from the chimneys. The firm also made ventilators, and there were roughly 20 people working there. I was 15 in 1951, that's when I started work there and I probably stayed there for two years. It was a place where lots of young people started their working life in North Kensington. One of those fairly dead end jobs but it was an introduction to work and some skills. I can't remember exactly how much we earned but it was somewhere in the region of £3 a week – until I was 15, 16, and then I got a rise and there was some government measures in those days which said when you were 16 you could work so many hours a week, so I never worked on Saturdays until I was 16 and then I had to work Saturdays as well, I worked half-day Saturdays. I remember a lot of young lads worked there and older skilled workers were training them and working with them. I felt it was an interesting introduction to work. They weren't trade union organised and I hadn't come across trade unions at that point.

One incident I remember there which was I think quite funny; we used to have a break and stand in Latimer (Freston) Road for a tea break. One day we were there at lunch time and this fellow was coming down the road shouting at the top of his voice. We were all wondering what he was saying until he got right opposite us and he was shouting 'The king is dead.' He had died that day, it was true, and he went off down the road shouting it at the top of his voice. We were underneath the railway by the arches, the Vulcan sheet metal works. Next to the railway the other side of the road was the **Patent Carpet Steam Cleaning Company** which also employed lots of young people and was quite a big factory. I think also on the other side of the road was the **print works** that produced the local paper. In those days it was the **West London Times and the Kensington News**. There were a number of small enterprises around North Kensington, small factories, printing, engineering and motor works, very few have survived. The biggest place was probably **Rootes** on **Barlby Road**, where there were 600 engineers working at one stage. This is in the 1950s and early 60s. But gradually most of these small industries have disappeared. There was a whole number of print organisations or **print works** in **Exmoor Street** next to St Charles Hospital that employed a lot of people. I think most of those have now gone.

Heinz Harlesden After leaving that job I went to work at Heinz – I think was my next employer, Heinz in Harlesden, I might have had small jobs in between. I started work at Heinz when I was about 16. Heinz was an interesting place, a lot of local lads and women worked at Heinz. That's how I was introduced to the job. It was interesting from the point of view that they paid very good wages for unskilled work, probably one of the best wage levels in London at that time. They were an American firm, and because it was food production they provided you with overalls, they had a social club and a running track next to the factory, and you could go to the shop where you could buy damaged tins of stuff very cheap. I worked in the packing department and there was 20 of us boys and there was about 300 girls and the girls organised who was going out with who. Heinz was interesting from that point of view because conditions were much better than they had been in the smaller factory. They used to run a dance every Christmas, there would be

a Heinz dance at the Hammersmith Palais that we all used to go to and that was quite entertaining.

The boys that used to work in the packing department, when they got older some of them were offered jobs to be trained as skilled workers, like electricians or engineers, etc. I never stayed there that long, I stayed there a couple of years. I had a lot of friends there, there was a lot of young people, there was a snooker club, it was quite a good employer in that sense. But they were anti-trade union, there was no trade unions there, except I understand amongst the skilled workers like the electricians and engineers who were probably organised. But all the other people were not organised and they frowned upon trade unions. The wages were about £7 a week which doesn't seem a lot but compared with £3 it was quite a good wage, this is 1953, 1954.

I left there and then I did a whole number of jobs locally and I worked in the Channel Islands as a docker for a short spell of time, in general stores in the Channel Islands. I went to the Channel Islands and stayed there for about four months working, I went with a local lad who had been born there. There was plenty of jobs. One of the aspects of that time after the war was there was a shortage of labour and it was easy to get jobs. You could pack a job up on Friday afternoon and have another one to start on Monday morning, it was that easy, and you could usually improve your conditions from one job to the next. I might say that my father was an electrician and I had prior to leaving school worked with him at weekends when he was wiring houses and things of that nature, so I had some idea of the electrical trade and I eventually went into the electrical trade.

Talking about other industries locally there was a firm called **Fred Davis and Sons** and I actually went to school with Fred Davis the grandson and Frieda Davis the granddaughter of the founder of the firm. They had a depot in Roseland Mews and that's where Tesco's store now stands in Portobello Road. They had Roseland coaches which they used to hire out, they were storage and removal people, and they had lorries. I think one of the firms they worked for, they moved stuff around for, was **Ultra Radios** which was a local based firm producing electrical goods (on Latimer/Freston Road), and they were quite big. Fred Davis and Sons eventually moved out of London in the early 1970s, they sold the site to Tesco's who developed the mews – there was originally houses in the mews – into the store they've got now.

Great Western Railway Paddington Another job that I worked at earlier on, I was a bag boy for the Great Western Railway based at Paddington Basin, which was an interesting job though another dead end job so to speak for young people. We delivered and collected stuff in the west London area. I remember that used to have a big café where all the workers went to called the Drum underneath the slope which brought the lorries down into the depot, stuff used to come from Bishop's Bridge Road, the bridge as you come down. Now I've noticed that's all gone, it's all been redeveloped, all different offices and that.

Peter Eaton bookshop Notting Hill Gate I had worked with my father wiring houses before I left school. At that time at 11 I remember I went with some friends into a bookshop at Notting Hill Gate and I said to the man I'd like to buy a stamp album and he said I haven't got a stamp album but I'll give you a job. And he gave us, me and the others, a job which was basically clearing up and tidying, cleaning up in the shop and stacking up waste and things of that nature. After a few weeks most of them dropped off except two of us, there was Terry Hanrahan and myself and we continued working for him. Eventually Terry packed up and I stayed working for him from when I was 11 till I left school, when I had to pack up because the job I'd got at Vulcan sheet metal works meant I had to work on Saturdays eventually so I packed it up. But it was a very interesting, good job in the sense that it introduced me to reading books and politics – because Peter Eaton, whose shop it was, was a local activist in the Labour party.

I remember in one election I can't remember what year it was he had me leafleting Notting Hill Gate for the Labour party (1951?). His shop was an interesting place because on Saturdays people would accumulate there and political discussions would be going on in the office. I

remember on one occasion they were all looking at a book and I was working there and I said to them can I look at it because I was curious and they showed it to me and I was taken a back because it was the book about the concentration camps in Germany and Poland. It was photographs of the people who had been killed and it was quite a bit of a shock but I'm glad I actually saw it. I enjoyed working there and it was a good introduction to literature and to people. I was ashamed that I left when I was 15 because of other work. The shop was opposite Campden Hill Road, it's all been redeveloped, it's gone long time ago.

Talking about politics and introduction to politics that was quite an interesting introduction to politics but prior to that my teacher Morri Levitus at Lancaster Road Boys School (now Virgin Active gym), I always remember that when they used to send his tea down from the canteen somebody used to stick red stars on it. I found out that Morri Levitus used to do public meetings in Hammersmith and he was a member of the Communist party. I thought he was a very good teacher because he introduced us – a lot of roughnecks like we were – to poetry and reading. Before he had become a teacher he had been a plumber and I think he had been trained in the period just at the end of the war when they trained a lot of people to become teachers from the armed forces.

Electrician/Ministry of Works and Pensions/Royal Hospital Chelsea When I was working as an electrician I worked in a lot of different places. I worked for the Ministry of Works and Pensions and I worked at the Royal Hospital Chelsea in 1960, I was elected the ETU shop steward there and eventually I became the convenor of shop stewards for the whole of the west London area of the Ministry of Works. That was an interesting job. The Royal Hospital Chelsea was run as a military establishment, everybody saluted one another and called them by their rank. Once a year they would have this celebration for the founding of the hospital and they would parade all the inmates and if they couldn't walk they would carry them out and put them on seats around the parade ground. Somebody, a notable person, would come and would be the guest of honour, one of the years I was there the Queen came. The inmates used to complain because they didn't really want to go out but they had to.

Hythe House/Admiralty Building Working for the Ministry of Works, it came under the Whitley Council agreements, on the trade union side we used to have to meet with the management and we had these councils to discuss things that affected the job. I remember at one stage they were trying to force us to have certain conditions and I led a walk out at Whitley House of trade union representatives. The Whitley trade unions had a very strong organisation and we used to negotiate and try and improve conditions. As convenor of the shop stewards I was given working time leave. Our depots stretched all over west London and it would take me the best part of a morning and part of the afternoon to travel round to see all the members, mainly maintenance workers, in different parts of west London; like Hythe House in Shepherd's Bush Road was one of our buildings. The Admiralty Building down by Earl's Court, which was like a three cornered hat, was one of our buildings. I remember when I worked there I used to wear my Young Communist League badge. When I went in there – because it was the Polaris headquarters – I used to put it in my pocket but no one ever challenged me and I was only in there representing our members, I wasn't in there after any secrets that I could sell or anything. That was quite an interesting job for a while and while I was there conditions were changing. The Ministry were trying to bring in all different systems of working which were eroding the conditions and we had lots of battles against that but eventually the conditions were changed an awful lot, a lot to our advantage.

Ford Dagenham/ETU Then I worked in contracting, the nature of contracting is that you go to the job and then eventually as the job runs down and gets finished, if there's a lot of you employed on the job, they then lay off some of you and some would go on to another job of theirs but some workers would be laid off. For instance, when I worked at Ford's there were something like 300 electricians working at building the Briggs motor body works which was part of the Ford's complex. And of course when you got to the end of that job they were laying off electricians in batches of 50 because the work was dwindling. I went to work at Ford's and we were building the Briggs motor body works and the electricians had their own sort of enclosure

where there was about 300 of us working, we had our own canteen and stores and we used to have our meetings. It was all trade union, the ETU at that time, we used to have regular trade union meetings probably about once a week and I remember at that stage I was becoming more political. The shop at Dagenham I think it would be fair enough to say was run by the Communist party, all the main stewards and the convenor were Communist party members. And I found myself agreeing with them more and more and voting with the resolutions they put forward. I was approached to join the Communist party but I declined, I said I wanted to think more about it and I didn't join at that stage.

But while I was there I was working with another electrician and we were talking and he mentioned the World Youth Festival. He said there was the World Youth Festival coming up in Vienna in 1959 and that he'd been to the previous festival but he wasn't going this time because he'd just got married and he said would I like to go and so he gave me the material and I spoke to another friend called Tony Jones and we went to our ETU branch, Electrical Trade Union branch, which used to meet at the William IV just opposite Kensal Green Cemetery in Harrow Road. The branch there supported us to go to the World Youth Festival, they never gave us any money but they supported us to go to it. That was a very interesting experience. We went by train to Vienna, I remember going up on the big wheel which Orson Welles went up on and looked down on the people and said they looked like ants. There were 17,000 young people there from all round the world. All the big socialist countries sent some of their best actors and performers and had big pavilions. I must say the British delegation was much smaller, you spent your time visiting other delegations, taking part in the activities they put on.

I remember going to the stadium and watching Vladimir Kutz the Russian runner. I also remember visiting the American delegation and Paul Robeson Junior was there. There was two delegations from America, one of them was CIA sponsored and there was terrific rows going on between the two delegations. I think the CIA sponsored one was attempting to disrupt what was going on. The 1959 festival was the first one held outside of what we called the socialist countries and there was an anti-festival also going on as well in Vienna organised by people opposed to the festival and they were putting on their own events and trying to get people to go to them rather than the official events. A lot of them were countries sponsored by the US, there were Christian organisations and far-right organisations involved in that but it didn't have much effect, it wasn't disrupted. I think it was very successful, I learnt a lot there and when I came back to Britain I took a decision and I joined the Young Communist League and that was part of my experiences there that I done that.

Rushley Phipps/Third Tactical US Officers' Mess I'd finished at Ford's by then. The Ford's job was coming to an end before I went to Vienna and I got laid off in one of the groups laid off towards the end. We all understood that as the job ended we would lose the job because there was so many of us. A few went on to other jobs that that firm still had. I was working for a firm called Rushley Phipps which was an electrical contracting firm, I wasn't actually working for Ford's, they had a contract with Ford's to build the motor body works, and I was then generally working in general electrical contracting. I remember working at all sorts of places, too many to mention. One thing that sticks in my mind and I think I was probably working there before I went to Ford's, I worked at the Third Tactical US Officers' Mess at Lancaster Gate and we were re-wiring there. It was at the time when the Soviets put the Sputniks into space, so it must have been '56 or '57, before I went to Ford's, and I remember we took the opportunity to really have a go at the Americans there. There were a lot of young people there, we were pulling their leg saying the Russians had got the Sputniks up, what are you doing? They're beating you sort of thing and they took that very badly. All their meals were made up and put in a freezer, they were all pre-packed meals, they'd bring them out the freezer and heat them up which was a thing I hadn't come across prior to that.

Ministry of Works/Hythe House So that was up to the end of the 1960s really, I was working in contracting and had a lot of different jobs. Towards the end of the 1960s I went back again to work for the Ministry of Works and I worked at Hythe House which was in Shepherd's Bush Road which local people knew as the Labour Exchange. Once again I was elected a shop

steward and I acted as a convenor of shop stewards for some time there. That was an electrical maintenance job and we had a depot which stretched over west London and I used to have to go round and look after the members' interests during that time. I worked there up to about 1974 when my wife and I decided we were going to adopt a child. My wages wasn't as good as my wife's wages so we decided that I would stay at home and bring the child up and she would carry on working. So we adopted Rosie in 1974 and I stayed at home for the next few years bringing her up. Then towards 1979, Rosie was then about five years old and going to school and our other child was going to school, I started to look for employment again.

North Kensington Law Centre/Gloucester Court Reminiscence Group For a short while I worked as an electrician, I done a few jobs, not many, working for myself, doing private houses and that and then this job came up at the North Kensington Law Centre. I went to be interviewed for that and I needed a part-time job rather than full time and so did Susie Parsons, so we job shared, we got a job at the Law Centre and we shared the job, we done half a week each, and also in the other half we looked after one another's children, I looked after her child and she looked after mine. It was quite an interesting period because we were some of the first job sharers and we were featured in a number of programmes on television and magazines about job sharing. I stayed at the Law Centre as a part-time worker for about 16 to 18 years until I retired in '96. Because I was a part-time worker there during that period I was able to develop my interest in local history and eventually I was asked to run an exhibition on the wartime in 1989, which was the 50th anniversary of the start of the war, and that was held at the Tabernacle. To achieve that I had to run a reminiscence group for about five or six weeks, I contacted and got together a number of people I knew locally and once that was finished I was asked if I wanted to continue doing that, so I did and I worked for ILEA – the Inner London Education Authority – and I ran the Gloucester Court Reminiscence Group for the next 15 years. We produced a whole number of exhibitions and booklets on the locality during that time. So I was actually working on two jobs, for the Law Centre and working for the college, the Kensington and Chelsea College. I retired from the Law Centre in '96 but I went on to work for another seven years doing the local history, well I'm still doing it but not getting paid.

Young Communist League/Notting Hill People's Association I'd been active in North Kensington since about 1955 when I joined the Electrical Trade Union and I remember one of the first things we discussed there was a resolution to the local trades council relating to putting up traffic lights at certain places to make the streets safer. I was active in the trade union as a shop steward but I was always active in the locality from the 50s onwards. I was involved, and I've still got all the documents, from when we first attempted to get Powis Square opened. What happened is that somebody brought our attention to a small article in the Times which said about Powis Square being developed and we took this up. They were looking for reasons to try and develop it. At that time Powis Square was owned by an individual and all it had on it – it was growing wild – it had a goat, just a goat who used to wander round who belonged obviously to the owner. We had started a campaign locally, collecting signatures of local people to ask the Council to take the square over for the local community. We ran a number of campaigns around that, the Young Communist League, but we failed actually to move the Council, they refused. Then other groups came along as well and in the mid 60s a thing was formed called the People's Association which I was at the inaugural meeting of, which was in All Saints church hall, it was 1965 I think it started.

The People's Association was like a rainbow organisation, it covered a lot of political ideas and non-political ideas and brought these people together. They then started agitation to get the square open. That was not going anywhere but what happened eventually was there was an organisation called the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, people belonging to that organised a march from Portobello Road up to the square. In the People's Association we were going to have a sit-in on the square, it was all locked up and we went round and changed all the padlocks on the gates of the square. But we weren't aware that we had a police spy amongst our group and the next day we went round there and all the padlocks had been changed back again and we realised that somebody was tipping off the police to what was going on. But then this march came up from Portobello Road and they were angrily pushing the fence. What no one realised at

the time was all the steel bars in the fence had all rusted away and as they started pushing it all of a sudden the fence collapsed. What happened then, the police couldn't do anything because the people just moved on to the square, they couldn't do anything about it. That left the local Tory Council in a quandary as to what to do about it and they then decided they would purchase Powis Square.

But we had quite a lot of battles after then because they purchased it and then they wanted to just asphalt it all over and we said no, we don't want it just asphalted. What happened, they were saying they hadn't got any money etc, so what we done we went down to South Kensington and we picked out one of the squares in South Kensington and researched how much money they were spending on the square in South Kensington and we said to them you're spending all this money on this square, why are you treating us differently, why won't you spend this money on Powis Square, and they eventually collapsed and then they did spend money on it but even then they started to asphalt a bit of it at the top end there, and they went to cut the trees down so we called an emergency and everybody stood round the trees so they couldn't cut them down. There were lots of small battles about it but eventually we got Powis Square and we had the same campaign around Colville Square and they took over Colville Square as well. The one in between they didn't because what happened was the top half of Colville Square which is the other gardens the people who owned that block of flats reversed the entrances so that the entrances were through the square rather than in the road and they stopped it being taken over.

Seamen's strike Portobello street meeting I also used to speak on street corners, on Blenheim Crescent, on a number of roads that run into Portobello Road, we used to do often weekly meetings which would tackle these subjects. I remember speaking during the seamen's dispute, we were supporting the seamen and while we were there some seamen came along and they were pleased that we were doing that. But during that, as I was speaking, I remember this fellow was standing next to the platform and he kept saying to me are you a communist? I said yes I was and before I knew what had happened he had hit me and knocked me off the platform on to the ground and I got up and fought back. Then the crowd that was quite big blossomed out into over 200 people, on that corner of Blenheim Crescent and Portobello Road. The seamen disappeared and the next minute there was a policeman there and he arrested me. The person who hit me disappeared in the crowd and I was arrested by the police and taken to Notting Hill Gate police station. Eventually they charged me with causing an obstruction or something and I was bailed to appear at court. So I defended myself in court and I explained to the judge that I had been speaking and this fellow had attacked me and the judge gave me a conditional discharge. So in a sense I think I won the matter, but the inside of my mouth was lacerated and quite badly damaged from where this person hit me. During this thing we had a bucket on the floor and we were collecting money for the seamen which we sent off to them. It was one of the biggest meetings we'd had, soon as there was a problem lots of people were interested.

ETU meetings at the William IV Harrow Road The William IV meetings of the ETU were quite sizeable meetings and at one stage a number of us who were what you would term as left wing decided we would like to run for office in the branch. At that time the branch was run by a group that was called Catholic Action. Anyway we decided that at every meeting that we had progressive motions that we put forward had always been carried by overwhelming majorities. But we got to the night when they were going to elect a new committee and a number of us were running for the committee and when we got there it was a tremendous surprise because the whole hall was full of people, it was about three times the normal number of people. And just after the elections were over hands were going up and people were going Mr Chairman I've got to leave to catch my train to Kent and places like that. All these people lived miles away but were still on the books of the branch, so I think we learned a lesson there about tactics. The unfortunate thing was, people didn't know much about Catholic Action but Byrne who was a leading figure in the union, once the left were defeated, his name was printed and next to it was printed the Knight of St Gregory, which is a Catholic title, and they were quite active within the trade union.

But the branch committee who defeated us got their comeuppance because the new leadership which was elected into the trade union, which was anti-communist, decided to streamline the union to get rid of a lot of branches. But in doing so they closed down the ETU branch at the William IV, much to the consternation of the local leadership who felt they'd been kicked in the teeth. Then eventually they brought in this ban on communists holding positions in the union. This is interesting, because I was an ETU shop steward and I had to give up being a shop steward because the ban came in on communists. But what happened then, I was put up to be the convenor of shop stewards, which wasn't controlled by one union, it was controlled by all the unions and they couldn't stop me running for that office and I got elected as the convenor of shop stewards, which is a politically more powerful position. Though I was a member of the branch I wasn't aware of the catholic link straight away, but it came out eventually, it surfaced, and we found out that a lot of them belonged to this catholic organisation which was called Catholic Action but it wasn't a very vocal organisation, it was really a quite secretive organisation. And I think it was Gerry Byrne, the fact that he ran for office, he never mentioned that he was a catholic but as soon as they succeeded this catholic title was put next to his name.