

Transcription of an interview conducted 15 March 2018

Interviewee: SIMON JAKEMAN (SJ)
Interviewer: KEITH McMAHON (KM)
Kingston-upon-Thames, England

Transcription: JAREK ZABA

[00:02] KM: Good morning, hi. My name's Keith McMahon. I'm conducting an interview today at the Kingston History Centre in Kingston upon Thames as part of the Wheels of Time heritage - erm - project. Er - and today I'm interviewing er Simon Jakeman. So Simon if you could just introduce yourself - erm - how long you've lived in the borough, er - date of birth as well if you don't mind.
SJ: Right.

[00:29] KM: And er - what your current role is.

SJ: OK so as you said my name's Simon Jakeman. I'm a London firefighter. I've been a firefighter for 23 years now. But I was born and raised Kingstonian. Born in Kingston Hospital back in September n-1972. So I've lived here 45 years. Yeah always lived in the borough, I was south of the borough, grew up in Tolworth, attended local schools. Erm. Now live in Hook - so haven't gone too far. My current role is that I'm now up at headquarters - London Fire Brigade headquarters. And erm - on the sustainable development team the good - the green team. And I'm doing all the behaviour change bits and pieces. Getting people involved with recycling, green actions. And of course cycling.

[01:17] KM: Yeah. And err - does your role er - at the moment - er - with the London Fire Brigade involves you travelling around? Or are you just based in one place?

SJ: So I'm now er - based at headquarters. I still work out of Surbiton Fire Station one day a week so I was actually stationed there for a - for 10 years. And long time ago actually I was actually invested in the scouts at Surbiton Fire Station. So that's a great bit of history there. So I'm still there one day a week but yeah. Based at headquarters and I still go out to all the fire stations across London. There's er - 103 stations, [ball watchers] on each. So yes I'm out and about. This morning I was at Richmond Park station talking to two of the watchers.

[02:00] KM: And what does your involvement at the fire stations around London entail?

SJ: So it's - it's all like the behaviour change. It's getting people involved in green actions. Erm. Some of it is about electric vehicles, solar panels, recycling. Erm. Sustainable travel. So cycling. Gardens as well. So we're creating gardens a lot of the fire stations otherwise they're just concrete boxes. Trying to encourage biodiversity and wildlife back and yeah just greening them all up really. So that's my main role.

[02:30] KM: And what sort of reception has that initiative received from firefighters?

SJ: Yeah - at first we trialled it just in the southwest area. I was a bit worried maybe how it would be received so going round to all the watches but it's been great - so I ended up doing 430 presentations. A

few fire stations there in East London, I turned up and they thought what we talking about now, green issues. By the time I left they were showing me ponds, fruit and veg they were growing, electric vehi-all this kind of stuff so it's worked really well. Really well.

[03:03] KM: Fantastic. Fantastic. And erm - within - wh-when you talk to - er - firefighters around-er - around London. What's-what's their opinion of transport in London?

SJ: Er well lots of people actually work in London but live along way from London now. Lots of it due to property prices so people are travelling a long way in. Erm - but lots of people do cycle as well because of the fitness side of things and walk - public transport. Obviously in London needs to change otherwise we're gonna come to a grinding halt. There's about - I think it's gonna be 10 million within the next few years. So we really do need to sort out the travel side of things and obviously cycling is the fantastic way - especially with all the new routes. I travel up to London headquarters every day from Surbiton and from Hook.

[03:52] KM: And whereabouts in London are the London Fire Brigade headquarters?

SJ: It's just by London Bridge near enough, near the Shard. So really central London. So I cycle up there every day, it's 15 miles. Leave very early - 6.30 in the morning. Straight out the door. Usually takes about an hour, an hour and a quarter. All depends how the traffic lights are. Red traffic lights you just get caught. But erm - so I go up through Kingston Hill and then Putney [Bows], through Wandsworth. Clapham Common. Kennington. And then Elephant and Castle. So er - yes. Right in the city.

[04:26] KM: And - do you enjoy that? Or - what are the drivers behind your decision to erm - to cycle to work?

SJ: I-w-it's absolutely fa-it is fantastic. Obviously I used to work at my local station so I was only two miles away. So it was a - going up to headquarters was a big step but obviously I've always been in the sustainable development team, especially now so it's part of - not only fitness. But it's gonna help air quality, lower emissions. Erm. Traffic. Pollution. All of that. So - **[05:00]** and it also saves a lot of money, what a fantastic thing. Cos I think a season ticket from Surbiton to Waterloo is in the thousands, possibly 4000 now. So that's a big advantage as well. If you go up in the rush hour it's getting on for about 15 pound I think for a ticket, return. So that's an extra as well. Ah-but I just enjoy it. I really do. I mean it's great now that the - the days are getting longer. And it was a bit bleak during the winter. Leaving in the dark. Cycling back in the dark. Because I actually come back a different route so I don't hit Wandsworth on the way back. I erm go through Balham and then Tooting Broadway, Colliers Wood. So that was interesting. Through the dark night. The - you had to cycle - the way I cycled it was like I was driving a fire engine. Obviously not as fast that but reading the road and watching where people are coming out, pedestrians. Cars crossing over the main road. Er - so yes.

[05:56] KM: That's interesting you say that you're using the skills from er - from being a firefighter when a-when you're actually cycling. So transferrable.

SJ: Yes. That's it. Definitely driving the fire engine on the blue lights and the bells, er - you've just got to watch everyone. So even if you see a post box you're taught to read the road, so if you see a postbox someone could suddenly step out in front of you. So because London's so busy you do need to read the road you've got to be so aware and just watch. But other than that it's - it's fantastic, I'd recommend it

and now it's getting a bit warmer, during the summer you can't beat it. It is just brilliant. Birds were singing yesterday morning. Dawn chorus. What better way to travel than to cycle.

[06:39] KM: So fantastic benefits. Fantastic benefits.

SJ: Yeah it really is.

[06:43] KM: Tell me - erm - so that's your current role. And y-you're currently cycling er - a considerable distance every week. Erm. Is - is this the first time that you've used cycling as a - as a method of commuting or have you always er - been a cyclist?

SJ: I've always cycled everywhere. Erm. In previous college jobs, I worked at Chessington World of Adventures so I used to cycle to work then on a Saturday job. So - and then I was stationed at Walton Fire Station, what was actually Surrey Fire Rescue. Used to cycle there. That was about seven and a half miles. So I've always cycled. Mainly because of the fitness side of things. And it's quicker a lot of the time as well. I was stationed at Heston Fire Station, erm, out in Isleworth for a little bit. When I transferred it to London and it - if I drove on the odd occasion it would take an hour and half to get from Hook to Isleworth. Sitting in traffic through Twickenham, Teddington. So cycling was great for time because it-it'd cut it in half. It was brilliant, so yeah always cycled. Even from a child. Y'know we were always out on the bikes. Treasure hunts that kind of thing down the local park. Erm - I used to do a lot of athletics as well so I always used to cycle to training as well. So that was always good for cross training. Erm. Run round Kingsmeadow, round the track and then cycled back home. Back to Tolworth at the time, so yeah. Always been on a bike.

[08:05] KM: So over th-the 30 or 40 years that you've been cycling around the borough. What er - what changes have you - have you noticed?

SJ: Well the main thing is obviously the volume of traffic. Back as a child - back in the 70s we were always out on our bikes, just out down the road. Erm. There wasn't as many parked cars, I can just remember how everywhere seems a lot emptier. But we were always - we used to be allowed to go around the block. We weren't allowed across roads, we just went out on our bikes all day. It's a bit of a stereotype but we didn't have watches. We used to wait for the street lights to come on and that was time to go home. So summer holidays, out on our bikes from quite a young age really as well. Probably six or seven maybe just out, and we used to go out on our bikes and go with our friends. And bit older used to go down the park and all the local parks, Fishponds, Alexandra Recreation Centre. Not Recreation Centre, Recreation Ground. Yeah - we knew everywhere.

[09:02] KM: And nowadays?

SJ: In- in what?

[09:04] KM: In comparison. So er - so as - as a - as a child as a young person, you had that er - that freedom to go-go to go out and e-explore th-the local area.

SJ: Yes.

KM: Do you think that - that still exists today? Or are we in a different er-

SJ: I think it's changed a lot. Erm. We have three children. But we've always - probably not as young as that but we've always encouraged them to be out and about and go down the park and play tennis and

basketball. Erm. Cos I've noticed a lot of the parks seem to be empty. Maybe I'm just thinking back but it - there was always children everywhere. Everywhere just seems empty. Maybe it's because we've now got a lot more electronic gadgets. People seem to be in. Erm. From when I was younger we used to go and knock for our friends and everyone used to come out. You might get one or two, no I'm not staying - I'm staying in, I'm not coming, I'm [] interested. But it seems to be the other way now. Where there's only a [10:00] couple of children who might be out on their bikes, exploring. It seems to have spun right round. So there's a lot of fear out there. It's the same as probably back in the 70s. Erm. Yeah, we've just gotta let the children out there really. I've described it before as- as like holding a baby bird in your hand. If you hold it too tight, it's never gonna learn to fly. So you've gotta let the children out to explore so when they do become 18, adults. They know - if they see something what's not right, they know the difference. That's what I believe.

[10:28] KM: And-and do your children er- do your children cycle? Are they active cyclists?

SJ: Yes. Erm - my children are all teenagers now so, well - one's nearly 20 actually. Erm - so 2 boys, a girl in the middle. So my youngest son who's 13, he's out on his bike all the time. Just always out. And. And my eldest son has just passed his driving test actually, nearly 20. But he was in no rush because he had his bike. And he s-he always said it was actually quicker to get to Kingston, Surbiton on a-on a bike rather than even getting the bus. He said why do I need to learn to drive and sit in traffic? I'd rather have the bike, zip in, lock it up, straight back. Saving money yet again. Erm. Yeah. It was j-mainly the quickness to be honest. Used to come down and go along Portsmouth Road. Drive into Kingston. Do whatev-and then cycle back. So yeah. Yeah they were brilliant. Daughter as well, yes. Really good. We had-when they were younger we used to have cycling days out, and further into Surrey really as well. Into Claygate and all around there. So, yeah.

[11:30] KM: You mentioned earlier about erm - cycle - cycle lanes, cycle tracks, cycle routes. Have you noticed a significant difference around London over the - over the years? Over - in recent years - about what's been happening.

SJ: It's - it's fantastic. Cycling up to central London, it's amazing how many cyclists are out there. I mean even during the winter, there's still a lot. Erm. I'm often on my own until I get to Clapham Common. And then the people just appear from everywhere and I was thinking about it the other day. They do look like superheroes, the ways everyone different dress and all the yellow and orange it-it's really - it's like urban superheroes really and it - it just made me smile thinking about it the other day. But there's so many people th-that - cycle lanes are brilliant. I use erm - cycle superhelp highway 7 I think it is. It's great - the segregated bits are fantastic. Erm. Some of the - the blue lanes can sort of give you a false sense of security. Cos you think you're in a cycle lane, you're not really. There's a few bits where motorbikes and there are bus lanes as well. So you've just go to keep your wits about you really. But it's absolutely superb. I've been sat at traffic lights and it's probably 8 deep with cyclists. It's j-it's just brilliant. It really is good, yeah. So. Even since I've been cycling er - since last March to London, it's increasing every week. It's just brilliant.

[12:56] KM: Can you actually get from Hook or Tolworth to London Bridge on a - not on a designated cycleway?

SJ: Erm - I'm not a hun-the one I go, you can't I don't think. But you can go through Richmond Park - that's another way, I haven't tried it myself but that's another way. You can go through Richmond Park, then go through Putney, get on the other side of the river all the way up to the City and then cross back over Southwark Bridge. So I do need to try that. I was gonna wait for the spring, now it's getting lighter. Erm I might give that a go actually. Cos I used to cycle round Richmond Park all the time. Even at school - erm I went to local school, went to Southborough School and as we get older - I think it was the 5th year as it would have been then. We all had to do our own PE. The tu-like games that kind of thing. So a few of us used to actually go and cycle round Richmond Park, we'd cycle down from Southborough. Couple a laps round Richmond Park. And back - back to school. And that was brilliant. So - spent loads of time doing laps of Richmond Park. Erm. Done a London to Brighton bi-cycle ride when I was 16. Brilliant. And we trained round - round Richmond Park for that. And that was just brilliant. Er - since then done it with the watches I've been on. So we've gone down an-when I was at Walton Fire Station. Near enough it was the whole station except the ones on duty, it was probably 20 of us all cycled down. And Brighton Fire Station hosted us - let us share our and everything - we took a couple of vehicles down to bring us back. Erm - what was really good, Esher - I've done it with Esher Fire Station as well. We all cycled down. Erm. Sorry, all my memories are coming back now. I erm - I used to work at Chessington World of Adventures as a college job, I may have mentioned that earlier. But we actually done a Chessington World of Adventures to Brighton bike ride as well. Cycle ride, so that was all the staff - the rides team, I was in the rides department. And probably 30 or 40 of us all cycled down. And it was for charity as well. So we raised quite a lot of money. Erm. And we managed - we arranged for a double decker bus to bring us back. So we had all the bikes on the lower deck [15:00] and then the whole rides department, all those ones that cycled all up on the top deck. So great atmosphere. Brilliant. That was probably - that would have been back in the mid 90s. Erm. But yeah my wife at the time who was my girlfriend also worked in the team. We actually went by tandem. So that's quite a funny story. My parents had a tandem. They done the London to Brighton on an old tandem. So we decided that maybe we could buy the tandem. So from Chessington to Brighton we got to Reigate Hill. We went that way down to Brighton. Going down Reigate Hill was quite an old tandem. Brakes failed. Cos they were on like block brakes on the tandem. Erm. We managed to get down the hill safely. Erm. But the bike was going nowhere. Erm - so we managed to pop into a cycle shop in Reigate and we borrowed two bikes to finish the journey. Left the tandem there. Sorted it all out, y'know to pick it up the following day. My wife got a fantastic racing bike. Brilliant, top of the range. Come out for a bike with me, it was the biggest bone shaker ever. It had cow horn handlebars, I think the back wheel was buckled. It was a windmill on it. Everyone thought it was hilarious. But we managed to get it down to Brighton as well, so we actually arrived last. Turned up at Brighton and everyone was cheering that we'd made it. Considering we'd started on the tandem and turned up with two separate bikes.

[16:23] KM: So er - did I-did I hear you mention that your parents were cyclists as well?

SJ: Yeah they were - they often cycled. M-my dad used to actually er - cycle to work. When were a child as well. I remember him cycling, he used to work down in New Malden so that wasn't super far. Er-but it was a printer. So he worked at - where the new Tesco-where the Tesco site is that used to be a printer. Bradley Wilkinsons, they used to print bank notes. He worked there. But in the end they moved down to Portsmouth and he went up to Fleet Street so he become a Fleet Street printer and he used to cycle up to Fleet Street. So he used to work nights and go off a late afternoon, come back in the morning. So he

used to cycle as well yeah. And m-my uncle. Er-my dad's older brother - fantastic cyclist. Made me laugh earlier we were just mentioning about penny farthing racing. My uncle used to actually race penny farthings - not back in the Victorian times but back in the 70s. So they used to race penny farthings round a track. Erm. He was in a cycling club - loves cycling. And h-I still can't quite believe it but we got family who live in Hull - [Hesselwop] in Yorkshire. And he and a friend actually cycled from Worcester Park to Hull, was about 240 odd miles. He done it in a day. Longest day of the year. Or - around about then, mid June. And they cycled from Worcester Park to Hull. Wh-I - it's just amazing. Fantastic. Brilliant. Really good.

[17:52] KM: Fantastic. So erm - you've - you've obviously cycled to and from work. You've cycled for leisure. Have you ever cycled competitively?

SJ: I haven't. No I haven't. Because I was more into athletics so I was more of a runner to be honest. But erm - I used it as part of training as well. But yeah, never competitive. No - it would've been fantastic. Er - saying that I've done - I've done a few London Marathons and that kind of thing, erm - I've done a few biathlons. Erm - so that's running, followed by cycling. Er - no the other way actually. Cycling - so it used to be quite a erm - I'm just trying to think around [?] Country Park. So it was erm - I think it was a 20k cycle ride so it was two laps and then obviously you had to do the transition and then start running and that was a 10k run followed so I've done quite a few of them actually thinking about it. What's really interesting is getting off a bike and trying to run, it's totally different muscles. Trying to get your legs warmed up and get running after being on a bike, erm. But I actually done a - an A Level sports studies. Erm - when I was at school in the sixth form. And I done a study on which way - which was the best way to do it? Either cycling followed by running or running followed by cycling. Great - great results. I think it was easier for me because I was always a runner to run first and then jump onto a bike. But that's not the way to do biathlons. Triathlons is to swim first and then the bike then the run.

[19:16] KM: So it depends on the individual -

SJ: I think it does, I think it does, yeah. That was the study what come out of it. Yeah. So.

[19:21] KM: Fine. Simon, erm. Thank you very much. It's been absolutely fascinating hearing your - your reminiscences. Erm - er-and and hearing about your family's involvement in it. Really appreciate your time for this interview.

SJ: Fantastic. Yeah thank you ever so much, brilliant. Thank you.