

Transcription of an interview conducted 22 March 2018

Interviewee: JONATHAN ROLAND (JR) AND GARY LEE (GL)

Interviewer: ALEX BEARD (AB)

Kingston-upon-Thames, England

Transcription: JAREK ZABA

[00:02] AB: Hello this is Alex Beard. We're at Kingston History Centre on the 22nd March 2018. And today I am joined by -

JR: Jonathan Roland. 11th of May 1969 in Westminster.

GL: And Gary Lee. 21st of the 5th 1978 in Kingston.

[00:26] AB: Wicked. So I just start with a very broad question, I just wonder if you could tell me about Kingston Eco-op.

JR: Erm Kingston Eco-op was a erm project. Erm that came out of erm err Springboard at erm Tolworth Hospital. Erm. And it was initially set up as a erm err charity, part of erm Kingston Voluntary Action. Erm. Kingston Mind. And err I think - was there another one? I can't remember, it's so long since I thought about this.

GL: Yeah.

JR: Erm and they set up a erm mental health and learning disability service. That was the point of it. And the idea was to - oh that was it, the garden. And the idea was to provide lots of different activities for people with learning disabilities and mental health issues. Erm. Err. So part of that was erm a gardening project. Part of it was erm the community furniture project. Erm. And the other part which which is what Kingston Eco-op became ultimately was a packing workshop and some of activities and one of those activities - a small part of it was a erm refurbishing bicycles for second hand sale. Erm. So that's what Kingston Eco-op was. When erm erm when I started - err - it-it had just been increased from being two days a week to four days. Erm. And erm that - it just grew from there. Grew. Giving it more time, giving it more space. Allows it to grow. Erm. And so err yeah so we were providing erm a service for people with learning disabilities and mental health issues. They were referred to us as part of their social care by their care workers or care managers. Erm and erm they came and we taught them how to refurbish bikes. That's erm - that's pretty much it. Erm we also then sold those bikes on and the idea being that money that we generated was to go back into a charity to allow us to continue.

[02:46] AB: So where did you - where was the bike workshop?

JR: Erm it - it was running out of erm Adams House which was a er erm light industrial place just off - is it Kingston Road?

GL: Kingston Road yep.

JR: Near what is now Matalan and Aldi and - around there. And it was a - a small light industrial place. And we had two-two sides to it, the bike workshop side and the other side they made poppies and [] packaging for a local company. And the idea was we were trying to make people - give people a value to their time. So that they - there was - because one of the problems with erm erm people with learning

difficulties and mental health issues is social isolation so people tend to end up just sitting in their rooms or or going to a day centre where there's not much to do. So giving them - giving people a a - a job. Is of-is of tremendous value. And it's surprising, you don't really realise that until you're out of a job.

GL: No it's true.

JR: How important it is for the routine and an-an-an for somebody to - for people to feel like you're doing something worthwhile.

[03:56] AB: So what would a typical day at the bike workshop look like?

GL: Erm so - because it was always meant to be quite work based we definitely were structured to be - or put that across so that people that were coming to us had that in mind so w-you know we had a structured time to start and lunch breaks and we tried to really put across the idea that you were in a work environment. Erm. Hopefully to make people feel er they are part of something but also to put those skills across to people. Erm. So yeah we'd generally be er working alongside a staff member or a volunteer, actually working on the bikes doing various different things that needed doing on the bikes that had been donated to us. And ss-so that ranged from basic things like cleaning the bikes to erm then sometimes if the bikes weren't gonna be used we could strip the parts from the bikes to actually doing the **[05:00]** work w-with building the bike up that was gonna be sold ultimately. Then just doing all the different - many many things that would need to be done to make that bike ready to be sold. So yeah. It was erm generally that sort of thing that we'd go through but through doing that also putting across a lot of importances of health and safety procedures and other things. Jonathan would often work with some of the maybe w-when we got some money that had been taken in maybe working on - with someone to go through that and sort of dea-actually working with the members of the public who would come in to buy the bikes. So give people a very sort of rounded kind of view of the whole process - not just over there in the corner doing something really so that they were part of the whole buying process, w-meeting the public and dealing with the public and being part of the sales of the bikes as well. Erm. So yeah all those - those elements are important. A lot of the admin that went on as well. Erm. Just keeping them included with that. So yeah sort of generally, I dunno if you wanna add anything.

JR: Yeah I th-think er - I think there probably wasn't a typical day.

GL: No well that's a very good point as well. Yeah, yeah.

JR: I think that - just th-the nature of erm erm of-of working with people erm with learning disabilities and mental health issues is-is every day can be completely different. Which is quite good in a way. Erm. Gives you a lot of variety. But in other respects it's quite stressful. But yeah. But think generally we had er - it was all - everybody enjoyed themselves.

GL: Yeah. Yeah. I think so.

[06:26] AB: And how - how many people are we talking about at any one sort of time? I mean I imagine it fluctuated but -

JR: Yeah erm - I think err - well at erm. When we moved out there was two members of staff, there was Gary and I. And on any day we'd have up to three clients in. And erm two volunteers. So that's fi-seven - seven. There were days we had a few more than that. People just wandered in and then-

GL: Hectic.

JR: And it all got a bit, a bit erm - a bit yeah. Lots gone done on those days. [Laughs]. Lots of people.

[07:07] AB: And so if we just go to the beginning of the process how did the Eco-op get the erm - the bikes that needed repairing? Was there an active call out put out or-

JR: Er I think erm. When - when I started I think that th-the project had been established through a couple of years. Three or four years. And so people pretty much knew about it. So we didn't ever really have to go out and look for bikes. Erm. Generally they came from the public. So they'd phone up I've got a bike. And either they'd drop it off or occasionally we'd go out and collect them. And as time went by we - we integrated ourselves into the community a bit more and we were getting bikes from Southwest Trains. Er. From the police. Erm. And from the tip as well. Erm.

GL: Kingston University.

JR: Yeah. Kingston University. And errr private blocks of flats used to phone us up qu-quite regularly. I always got loads of people just moved out and they've left their bikes in the basement and we'd go and pick those up. Erm. That kind of thing. Er. But that's where they got - came from mostly.

[08:17] AB: And was there - in terms of the job that needed doing was there sort of some typical jobs or jobs people found - they were always a bit of a challenge, bit of a nightmare job that needed doing or easy tasks or what are the actual things that needed doing on the bikes?

JR: Erm. Er. Yeah I mean everything that needed to be doing on the bike needed to be done on the bike.

GL: And it varied depending on the person I guess. Depending on the person and their part-their sort of particular skills and abilities which obviously we hoped were improving over the time we were working. But y'know everyone has their own sort of particular needs and abilities towards things so there - we had to sort of I guess have that in mind. And gear what we were doing towards - gear what we were doing towards erm with each other person. Erm. But tried to give them a good overview as well, different systems and different times of bikes y'know. Mountain bike or a road bike, the different sort of things that would come up, given the very broad sort of view of everything that needed doing. But yeah it definitely came down to people's sort of individual sort of abilities. Y'know you - we'd push people obviously sometimes it was only a certain amount that people could - could do.

JR: Yeah I think we had - we had a sheet that we used to erm er to er to track bikes as they went through the workshop. And so it would say first thing you do is clean the bike. For instance. Erm. Check it over.

G-make sure that it - find out what's wrong with it by doing the check. So if you - for instance if it's got a bent frame we're not really interested in the ones with a bent frame they go - they were got to be recycled for scrap. Erm. And so that would be the first step - making a note of the serial number, colour and giving it a number so that we could track it. Erm. And then it would be taking the bike an-and just

[10:00] doing the work that needed to be done on it. So that might be as simple as erm just changing - changing brake pads. Or tyres. Erm right up to sometimes a complete [pause] er refurbishment of the whole thing if we thought it was worthwhile. So if we got a really nice bike in we might strip it back, give it a clean y'know do everything. So changing cables. And servicing headsets. Servicing bottom brackets. Servicing the wheel hubs. Trimming the wheels. Erm. Errrr replacing bar tape, replacing grips, replacing saddles. All of that stuff. An-and to-to we tr-as Gary was saying w-we wanted everyone to be involved as much as possible. So erm I think we built a bike for one of the - one of the staff members because he had his bike stolen. So what I tried to do was make sure that everyone in the workshop had at least some hand in building that bike for it so that he had a bike that actually came from the workshop and everybody there had had a hand in doing it which was kind of how our - that's kind of what we - kind of answers the question really. Everybody can at least do something on - on the bikes.

GL: Yeah. But I think also one of the big parts because we were using primarily erm second hand recycled parts. So from the bikes that have been stripped we have this massive stockpile of erm parts. And you erm everyone sort of together go through that or everybody that we were working with going through that process of picking out the right parts to go with that bike and seeing that importance - that important part of that whole process of what we were going through, that re-use thing which was quite important to what Eco-op was about. But yeah actively getting people involved in making those decisions. Oh should use that part, should we use that, why we would use that instead of that or, y'know that sort of thing so that was quite a big important of what we were doing as well during the day.

[11:45] AB: That's really cool. Erm yeah that was gonna be my next question actually but you've kind of answered it as to where you got the spare parts from. But it sounds like prioritised recycling plants.

JR: Yeah. Yeah. So they came off bikes that we stripped and some peo-some people when we donated bikes they said oh we've got this other stuff do you want it? And we go yeah, we'll have it.

GL: Turn up with boxes of parts that had been accumulated in their shed or whatever over years. So that was always quite interesting and very helpful as well.

JR: Yeah. And I think there was one go who used to own a bike shop in the 80s.

GL: That's right yeah.

JR: And he-he donated a load of his old stuff. Some of it quite-

GL: Amazing stuff that we got yeah. [Laughs]

JR: Pretty good. I mean new old stock from the 1980s, 70s. So that was pretty good. And I think also when Holdsworth in-in Putney - they shut down sadly. And they'd been going for years and years. I mean Holdsworth was a big mark erm er bike brand in the - back in the day. They bought Claude Butler, that's how - Butler was a big mark in those days. Anyway erm they shut down erm whilst we were running and er - we got this phone call from this guy, I got - I'm working this bike shop. I just found all this stuff in the basement do you want it? And just all the stuff that had been left behind by Holdsworth. There was some good stuff. Cables and things. Sadly nothing really - wasn't a really old Holdsworth so.

GL: Yeah that would've been nice. But just shows you that things did come from all different places.

[13:05] AB: So er - and then once you've got your - your refurbished bikes how - how did Eco-op go about selling them and passing them on?

JR: Er we - the - where we were based erm - we had quite a lot of space outside. Erm. And there was quite a lot of people walking past and erm we had a website. And th-the - over the time that the project had been running people got to know of it, that we had lots of repeat business. I bought this bike from you a couple of years ago and it's kind of finished now and I want another one. Have you got another one? That kind of stuff. Erm but we didn't erm do a massive amount of promotion. Erm. Although we did - we did do a bike do at the old post office. That's part of a sort of promotion thing. Erm. Did we sell any bikes I think? [Laughs] No we did. We did quite well. I th-I think we took about a month's worth of business in one day.

GL: No we did well. And it's just about raising the awareness wasn't it as well? Just getting name about so some people maybe turned up in the week or week after as well so yeah. There was - there was that, other events as well being involved with RBK er-erm. Like sort of events as well. So got our name and went on and did our bit and maybe we had a bike sale now and again with them. And also we went to Roehampton Uni, ended up being was it once a month that we did a bike sale that we used to take some

bikes on and sell [] to uni as well. Part of the project that they had going there. So yeah. There was some - some of the other ways, some of the other outlets but primarily from people just turning up at the - at the workshop. Yeah.

JR: We sold some to people - for people to send to Africa as well.

GL: Oh yeah. That's true.

JR: And sometimes we'd do - we'd get like erm er we'd have too many bikes. [Laughs]

GL: Which actually happened quite a lot yeah.

JR: And w-we tended to try and do the bikes that were better quality and partly because they're [15:00] better value. Not better - because they're more lucrative for us but also because they're better value. So you buy - we'd sell a bike for 80 pounds and it was a decent mountain bike from the 1990s that was made of steel that's still going 20 years - 25 years later. And will probably still be going in 25 years rather than the bicycle shaped objects that w-what we called them objects. Which were the Apollos and the - oh those were the ones.

GL: The Argos bikes.

JR: The Argos bikes, yeah. And the Asda bikes. Flat pack things that you get from Sports Direct, that kind of stuff. Those were just - those were scrap waiting to happen really. So we'd try and sell those so we'd end up with all of these bicycle shaped objects. But there were also other projects that we tried to sell to or we'd put them on Ebay as a job lot and generally just get rid of them in that way too.

GL: I think a few times we donated some as well when we had particular large amounts to other bike projects as well. Can't remember who we -

JR: One in East End somewhere.

GL: Oh yeah. There's one - sort of more central London place in there as well, somewhere else.

Somewhere out - can't remember where it was. But yeah I think I put an advert out at some - on a forum or something saying at the moment we've got - we're inundated if any projects - similar projects would like a job lot, maybe 10 15 bikes from us. If you're happy to come and collect them from us then please do because you'd be helping us and we can help you with it as well. So yeah.

[16:17] AB: And er generally was there - was the sort of prize point of them like fairly affordable, was that th- was that part of the idea?

JR: Absolutely, yeah. That was erm - th-the main remit was to - to be a source of cheap bikes for people in the borough. And particularly people who were disadvantaged. So people with learning disabilities, mental health issues, students all that kind of things. Homeless people, all that kind of stuff. It's kind of difficult in some respects to do that because if you've got a really bad bike - like one of the bicycle shaped objects. You don't really wanna sell it on erm but it's kind of the only - it-it's a really cheap bike. It's a cheap bike to start with. An-and it was difficult because - what were we-we ended up just setting a limit because it wasn't worth our while refurbishing a bike that couldn't really be refurbished. Erm. But still had some use in it. Erm. And so we just set a limit of 50 pounds, we're not selling anything cheaper than that. So if we felt that we couldn't get that much for the bike that we were looking at, that would be scrap and recycle it. But generally we would sell between 50 and 150, that was what we sold. That was our price range.

[17:31] AB: Erm. So if we return to the people that you were working with. Did you find that these were people with - who wanted to get involved with the project were with a pre-existing interest in

bikes and cycling or maybe not necessarily, it was all new to them?

GL: It's a mixture I think. Definite mixture. There were some people who had cy-had cycled in the past or were still cycling to work, sort of different sort of levels. But there was definitely some people who really wasn't something that was in their life but I think they definitely gained an interest whether or not they would be able to cycle due to their sort of personal sort of needs or whatever. Erm. But they definitely gained an interest even in the mechanic side of things, so I think it was definitely a mixture. Some people who had come from a sort of cycling background and some people who hadn't. But from the volunteer side of things, we dealt with a lot of volunteers. That was very important to us. That mostly came about I think from a cycling background or people who have an interest or did have an interest in cycling.

JR: Sometimes [?]

GL: Yeah. [Laughs]

JR: But the interest was still there, [inaudible]. And I think some of them - some of the guys were erm. They may not have had a - a massive interest in cycling. But they had an interest in doing things with their hands and fixing things and making things. Erm good. And - an-and I think the [pause] the social side of being in a place wh-where we could have a chat and meet other people and do that kind of thing was also - was an important aspect to it. So it wasn't solely about you've gotta fix that and you've got to do it this way. There was definitely a social aspect to it as well.

GL: Yeah. We did a couple of sessions I think at Kingsmeadow maybe elsewhere where we did using erm adaptive bicycles. Sort of like all abilities sort of cycling [perspective]. Erm and there was - definitely a couple of people who cy-hadn't cycled for many many years who we got on a bike for the first time in all those years and that was amazing to see that happen. There was definitely a couple of examples of that. Sort of resparked something that maybe had been very dormant for maybe 20 years or something so that was quite a big deal for us I think seeing that.

JR: Yeah. W-wasn't there one lady who said erm, when she said do you wanna stop and have a cigarette and she said no, I think I'll go round again.

GL: Yeah and that was big for us to hear that. [Laughs]

JR: Very cool. Yeah. No that was good.

[19:53] AB: How long did people tend to stay at bike [workshops]?

JR: **[20:00]** Er the volunteers. There were some volunteers there who - who had been there for quite a while. Erm. But they-they were the ones who came-came and went the most. Erm. The-the guys - errr - they stayed mostly people stayed particularly I think with learning - people with learning disabilities you w-they particularly things like autism. Er. That routine is important. Erm. And that constant is important. Erm. With mental health - people with mental health issues it's a bit of a different story because the nature of mental health is that you can have good days and bad days so sometimes they come and they go. But we try and be as er open to that as possible. And obviously w-that was our - our aim t-to not say well you're not coming so you can't come. [Laughs] It was - it was very much a well, let's see how you feel and tr-it was - it was a service that we were providing that was about support. It wasn't just like you're fixing bikes. W-we had - we were helping people. Erm. With their - with their issues. Yeah.

[21:11] AB: Erm. So you've kind of answered it in various other questions but I just wonder if you just say sort of what you think is the things that the people you were working with got out of being part of

the bike - the bike workshop.

GL: Er I think the big - the two things for me were the - obviously it's the social inclusion thing. Being part of something which was very massive for people. But then there was also the technical skills and finding things in them that they didn't think they had. And also a lot of people in their life going back many years probably didn't think that that person had in them to see that flourish and come out was - yeah it was very big I think yeah. Yeah.

JR: Yeah I'd - I'd agree with that yeah. It was erm - people wanted to come back because they enjoyed being there. That was-that was pretty much it really.

GL: Mm.

[22:03] AB: Erm. Erm. So the bike - the bike workshop isn't - isn't on at the moment. I wonder if you can tell us what's going on with it [?].

JR: Erm yeah. So after erm - what happened was Adams House was run by the Adams family. And erm they - not that one. And they erm they sold the site to erm a timber merchants who had a-had a - were on the site already. And erm the timber merchants decided that they were going to erm use the site for something else. So everybody on the site had to leave. Erm. So we had to vacate the premises. Erm. Sadly erm we weren't able to find a location for the bike workshop. The packing workshop erm was er they found a space at the er Jon Bunion Church, in the basement of the Jon Bunion Church and they're still there now. But the bike workshop, erm yeah was kind of put into storage. It wasn't kind of put into storage, it was put into storage.

GL: Literally put into storage, yeah.

JR: So we moved all of the benches, the workbenches, the stands, the tools, all the parts, all the bikes. Erm. Into a er [pause] sort of erm friendly charity in New Malden - they've got a big - erm - they run the accessible transport so they've got big - big spaces to fix cars. And they let us use a big space where they fix cars. To store all this stuff. And that's where it still is now. Erm. We tried to get the project working again - we were running out of a youth centre in Ham cos I - I knew the - I used to live in Richmond. The Richmond borough. And erm - and I was doing some work with er the youth centre in Ham. And I knew that they had some tools because I'd bought some tools for them. And the centre manager was a keen cyclist himself. So it seemed to make sense for us to go there and we hired that and did three days a week.

GL: Three days.

JR: Three days a week there. On a sort of temporary basis. Er. Unfortunately that just didn't work out financially. Because we weren't able to sell bikes. So it was really difficult for us to make any money. So - so sadly that had to - th-the - the whole project, the whole bike project part had to close cos of that. And as it stands at the moment erm I was told by the Chief Executive of the charity that was running it, Kingston Voluntary Action that he would be looking into - to erm try and restart it at some point in the future. Er - I don't know what's happening with it at the moment.

[24:43] AB: And this all happened la-was it last year, 2017 that it-

JR: Yeah so it f-it finally closed in December 2017.

[24:52] AB: And erm can I just ask you both because we sort of - I forgot to ask it. How did you personally become [25:00] involved in it? Was it from a pre-existing interest in cycling, or what angle

did you join it from basically?

GL: Er I got involved because I had a very broken frame and I took along to Eco-op to donate and while I was there I just got chatting to the previous workshop manager. I think it was. Or someone else who was working there. And just said - they said oh, look we quite often have volunteers come in. Oh OK, maybe I'll contact you about that. And I did. Decided to actually volunteer for quite a while before I started - before I became staff. I literally just randomly - I've been living in New Malden most of my life and I never knew it was there. I must have cycled past Kingston Road a thousand times and not known it was there erm but that one time I just happened to yeah have something that I wanted to do-donate - maybe for parts or something. And while I was there just found out about the project and sounded like it was something I definitely wanted to get involved with, volunteer. So yeah I volunteered for - I can't remember the timescale but I volunteered for a while and they seemed to like me so they've asked me - they asked me then to become staff. So yeah that's how I got involved.

JR: Erm I was - I was living in er Richmond borough. And erm I'd been doing oth-I'd been running my own project that I'd got bid for funding and got the funding for. Erm. And that was er starting to - to run down a little bit. It was doing - I was doing all kind of different things related to cycling. After school clubs at-at schools. Erm. I was running erm maintenance sessions er for the public so that they could turn up. I had some tools and er - er that I'd bought on a trailer, trying to make it all - this is what you can do. And erm - and showed people how to fix their bikes. Erm which was really popular. Erm an-and was really positive. Erm. And I - I erm - I was aware of Eco-op because they bid for the same funding that I - I'd been bidding for. Er. And I bumped into Bart who started the whole, or been involved in the project. Erm. A couple of times before. And he and I attended a first aid course together, coincidentally. And he said oh er we're looking for some staff, do you wanna, do you wanna come along? And I said yeah why not. Because it - it was erm I needed something a bit more steady. So I started initially it was gonna be one day, then it was two days and er - and then I was there full time. So yeah.

[27:30] AB: That's great. And then erm finally I'll just ask you the question that we've been asking because we're trying to collect these as well. Erm do you have any memories of your first ever bike? Or your earliest cycling memories?

GL: Christ. [Laughs]

JR: My earliest wow. That's going back quite a long time now. I remember when - I remember my dad teaching me to ride. I'd got - I'd had some - mum-my mum had got married twice and I had some half brothers and sisters. I don't know where the bike came from but I'm assuming it was a hand me down from them. And er - he took me over Wandsworth Common, because we lived near it. And we were riding around. And there was loads of grass. And I remember being really proud that I'd learnt to ride my bike. I was probably relatively old, I was probably about 4 or 5. And yeah. And that's it really. I mean I've got untold memories of cycling from then on. Th-that's over 40 years. So yeah. That's probably my first memory of cycling. Oh actually no. I'll tell you what - I'll tell you what my first memory of cycling was. Well maybe not my first memory but one that - one that erm probably erm er m-made cycling what it is for me today. Erm. My half brother was much older and I remember him picking me up from school and he- I remember him saying - putting me on the cross bar of his bike and saying don't tell mum. And we'd r-we'd ride down the road with me on the cross bar of his bike. And that's probably where it came from. That's probably where-where the excitement and me realising about the excitement, however painful and hard that cross bar probably still feel it now was when I was like -

GL: And you're just as daredevil now with your cycling as you were then.

JR: Absolutely not.

GL: Erm. I guess - I think I had my first bike was a blue and white BMX I seem to recall. I think it was. Erm. And I remember riding that for a bit and my friend had a Raleigh Grifter that you used to ride round like crazy. He was a bit older than me, I used to try and keep up with him and he used to just ride over everything so that if anyone remembers those bikes, they were pretty solid bikes. And I used to try and follow him doing that stuff but failed miserably on my little blue and white BMX. Erm. Then my first proper bike I think was - I had a Raleigh mountain bike. Didn't see many mountains but y'know. That's sort of the craze I guess late 80s, early 90s, came along and er - yeah then I started really getting into it from then when I first-that was my first kind of **[30:00]** proper bike. But my dad used to be very into cycling when he was younger and erm he used to build bikes with his mates and everything so he's always been sort of handy, quite mechanically minded so I think yeah he sort of inspired me definitely with that sort of thing as well. Yeah I think that's it.

[30:15] AB: Wicked. Thank you very much guys. Thank you.

JR: Thanks.