

Transcription of an interview conducted 20 March 2018

Interviewee: DES KAY (DK)
Interviewer: ALEX BEARD (AB)
Kingston-upon-Thames, England

Transcription: JAREK ZABA

[00:03] AB: Hello this is Alex Beard at Kingston History Centre. It is Monday 19th - or no Tuesday the 20th of March rather. And I'm joined by -

DK: Des Kay. Erm local resident - been in the borough for over 40 years. And erm I'm erm - have that - a different name - Professor Chaos. Erm. Which is my kind of performing name.

[00:35] AB: Good stuff. I wonder if we can start with just telling me about maybe some of your first memories of cycling. Any childhood memories of childhood?

DK: Yes. I've got the worst memory in the world for childhood. Erm - y'know. Childhood reminisces. Erm. But erm I - I do remember, I did have a - a little tricycle from uh-early on in life and erm. Love the sort of freedom - even at that age to-to go off. I remember I got-I had a good friend who had his back garden backing onto mine. And I remember erm - m-idea - mischievously took his bike. And went riding off. And he got a stick. And as I rode past him he a-he threw his stick. E-exactly where it wanted to go which was between the bicycle spokes and the frame. And er - and stopped me dead y'know. Didn'-I didn't get hurt fortunately. But I was just really - I really admired the fact that he was able to do this as I kind of whizzed past him. So erm - so that's er - erm - I don't actually remember getting on bicycles very much when I was at that age but I obviously did and er - and - and that's the memory that sticks out in my mind. And we were very young at the time, I think we were probably about six or seven in the days when you could ride around the streets and on your own without par-parental supervision.

[02:07] AB: A-what area were you in at that time?

DK: I was in Richmond at the time, yeah. So not too far away.

[02:13] AB: Great. Well I wonder if you could tell us about how you first came to be involved with the sort of Green Fair movement.

DK: Green Fair. Well I was - I think w-way back in the 60s, y'know I got - became very concerned about the planet because I was reading it International Times which was a kind of a hippie newspaper in those days and I was far too young to be a hippie really but - I-it did attract my attention and er I-I liked what was being written. And there - there was these extensive articles about overpopulation and pollution and er - and I thought God we've gotta go y'know - this is something we've gotta look at a bit more closely. Erm. So that's really what got me started as a - as a kind of green environmental campaigner.

[03:09] AB: So how - once you'd become er - sort of er - awoken or concerned with environmental issues how did that - what did you decide to do about it in Kingston locally?

DK: Well. Erm. I - I've - I was - first got involved in festivals. Erm. By erm - oh - I had a shop way back in

the 70s in the mid 70s. Erm. W-which came about because I had a stall at the Roundhouse er and another long story. Erm. But but I started selling erm button badges - I g-I er inherited this from a friend of a friend. Erm this stall. And er - they were selling all the wrong things and I thought button badges would be quite an interesting, quite a good thing to do. Nice and cheap and easy to er to er carry around. And er started by the - just-just specifically with badges and little bits and pieces for th-and the Roundhouse on the concerts and erm [pause] and errrm er [laughs] what was the question?

[04:25] AB: I guess we're moving towards how you started to do things in Kingston through the eco causes.

DK: Oh yes. Yes, yes. I haven't got a clue what I started on. On-on the - on the button badges. Erm. But erm - well I'm-I'm apart from the fact th-that I used to [come] make sure that I had all the sort of environmental er-erm badges and the protest badges. Erm. And then erm. And then can I go back a few notches to that yeah. Because - because then erm - I-I started to get involved with the erm - the **[05:00]** old CND marches. And I went on a CND march erm - probably the er - this is still in the kind of early 70s. And it was so boring. And I thought gosh this needs something a little bit more interesting and colourful. So then I got this idea of-of erm - creating a kind of display on the bicycle where I could ride around erm th-the crowds on th-on these marches. And erm - and I had this - I had this vision of a kind of CND spider. In a spider's web. With Margaret Thatcher looking a little bit concerned. Looking at thi-at this web and this CND spider. And having her hat [?] a colour blue - a colour blue [kind of] colour hat. Th-that would pop up and down as I pedalled you see so. So I put this togeth-er together. And erm. It was very er-it could - it could be displayed from up from erm err a position of being in line with the bike. So I could still slide between cars and things like that. Erm. But then I - I remember waking up in the night a few days before. With this incredible anxiety that - that I'd be riding around this - y'know this march. And everyone will be looking at me. And it terrified - I remember being absolutely terrified by it. But of course once it actually happened I was really enjoyed it. Th-the attention. So erm - so that was really - that's really wh-what sort of started off the whole idea of-of erm - of making bicycle displays. And I made this using er - using a bit of netting and a bit of some damn good poles and tying them to the frame and everything and it was erm. It was very successful. [Coughs] And then erm - and then of course erm err as time went on and there wasn't - th-the kind of concern for the environment started moving towards the mainstream but was still far away from what it is now. Erm. We erm - I started to go to these festivals. That's why I was talking about badges. Because I - I took some badges to - over to the Albion Fairs in East Anglia. And erm erm - and I- I was - I was absolutely overwhelmed and flabbergasted by the m-these amazing events. Where they had everything - I remember can-can dancers, I remember big globes of the world. Hanging up in the trees. And - and tents with - with bands playing and-and and different. And it seemed like the whole of erm - y'know the whole of Suffolk or Norfolk or w-w-were kind of managing to express themselves there. And erm it was very erm - i-it was just such an amazing thing and I thought gosh this is - this is wonderful y'know. People are able to express themselves in their own ways and erm and - y-and and and - in a joyful manner. So-so I thought this- what a great idea to erm put a message over erm and errm so I started making these kind of bicycle powered displays. Where you pedalled y'know as you used the kind of main sort of pedal mechanism and then collected it up to er various other wheels and things on frames. Just as a kind of visual artistic a-erm er apparatus. And erm and I took-I took these to some of the er events that were h-taking place in London. And this was during Livingstone's GLC. So erm - so I was able to erm display them there. And then erm - I was

talking to a friend about erm about festivals and we thought well y'know w-why don't we try and get an event going in Kingston? Erm. And er Kingston Green Fair immediately came to mind. And er this was in about the er - this is by this time this about the 80s. And erm so that's really how - how the Green Fair started. We-we got together. Erm. Managed to - we wanted to get the Fairfield. They didn't want us to use the Fairfield because it was a cricket pitch at the time. And they erm er let us have Canbury Gardens which is very [10:00] underused and-and nobody really wanted it. So they - they kinda dumped us there. And er - I could immediately see the erm the er advantages of having this kind of linear park where all sorts of activities could go on, different areas could-could could be shown. So we have the y'know we have the children's area or we had the main stage, we had a couple of other stages. We had a-a healing area. And erm we put on - we put this big mural up where the underpass is now that goes under the railway bridge on the one way system. Erm. I sort the potential for this great expanse of corrugated iron and thought that would be great to - to put a big mural up and we got some - I got some boards from erm the local TV studios in Teddington. Erm. Some big 8-8 by 4 boards. And we put them all together. Erm. Up er driveway in this big communal house I lived in. And er got quite a few artists in and we painted this mural of the kind of vision of what we - what we w-of - what we imagined it would look like. [Coughs] And erm and then put two big signs up and that was - I used to enjoy doing things like that where you y'know you get a little ph-photocopy and then you op-you overhead projector you project it and then draw round the lines onto a - onto the boards. And had these erm dozen boards up so it was quite a large stretch. And we had this up for a bit two or three months before the event. And I'm sure that was - that was a- a great deciding factor in getting quite a huge number of people, we had our first event - we g-we had almost erm 5,000 people coming along. Just out the blue y'know. And we couldn't believe it when they started pouring in. [Coughs]. And erm - of course our first priority being as it was an environmental fair was to keep everything low, low tech. And erm - erm. Y'know. Renewable energy. Erm so we had erm y'know we had panel-panels. And we had batteries. And this was quite early on in the - in - and of course erm bicycle powered generation. Erm. By this time I'd kind of got to know through the grapevine and through networking quite a few people involved in erm - er bicycle powered generation. And erm we did use erm y'know we did use the grid as well but but erm in the early days because it was - it was all so new and pioneering. Erm. But at the same time we started to have these bicycle powered generators. And er - that's really how erm y'know how er - the er Green Fair started to use alternative power. For erm for it's amplification. And power requirements.

[13:07] AB: It's amazing. So as the Green Fair went on year by year was that something you looked to sort of in-increase. The-

DK: That was indeed, yes it was. And then and y'know th-there still are obviously but there's some real boffins around who - who made erm erm some wonderful sources of power. Er - [?] name Bill Wright who erm - who I met at an event because by that time I was kind of trying to - to embrace as many festivals [?] it was such a wonderful way to live so I thought y'know. More - the more I can - I can be involved in, the happier I would be. So erm - so he was erm - he was actually making erm very err err efficient pedal powered generators for erm the flying doctor in - in I think it was [Kenya] in Africa. And erm and my-I met him with him and chatted to him. And then I linked him up with one of our erm the first mobile sound system people called Ricky Dink. Who erm who had - who was using a lot of people were using the old erm alternators from cars. Which er which worked pretty well at a high speed but er but not very efficient because they don't need to be efficient. Erm. But when you're pedalling you

obviously need something a lot more efficient. And he used - he w-would - this chap Bill Wright he was making erm coils er hand wound coils. And using erm rare earth magnets and having er a lot more efficient ways of-of [15:00] converting the pedal power into - into electricity. Erm. So I - I err [pause] put him over to er the Danny Smithy who was doing this this rinky dink pedal powered sound system. And he'd - and he'd y'know he made the unit sort of Danny and it was - it was - it worked a lot better than the one he was using erm. And er and that was - that was a good coupling. So erm - so there - so that was Danny. And then there was erm a couple named erm Melissa ohh what was her name, can you remember the name I can't remember the names of the ch-oh Chris. Chris and Melissa. Who-who who er who were running at a little stage so we had a k-kind of small stage. Of mainly acoustic but it was still being amplified, needing amplifying. And they made a very efficient genera-basic generator. Using erm a tandem and erm and er er again. Some kind of generating unit that - that - that - that they put together. And that was th-that was very er efficient as well, worked very well. And - and was quite successful. Erm. B-being the amplification for that particular venue. So erm. So that's really how things started to developing. Erm.

[16:38] AB: So at the fair would erm ordinary sort of punters take a tune at doing some of the pedalling? How did it work?

DK: Well yes. Absolutely. That was - that was the er - the advantage of this because people were almost queuing up to-to play on this. To get on the bike. And of course erm y'know you can - you can kind of pedal and dance at the same time. So y'know if you - if you're kind of active and you wanna, y'know you would be sort of bopping around on-on - in front of the stage y'know, you'd have your - the - th-the additional advantage of being able to sort of power th-the music at the same time.

[17:17] AB: That's great. Erm. So I wonder if you could just go over some of the different things at the Green Fair that were pedal powered. Erm. So you've got the - so the main stage was pedal powered at some stage?

DK: Er the main stage - no. There was never enough power to - I mean we could have done it with a kind of bank of bikes. But we - we just used erm erm PVs, y'know, we just used the solar panels for that. [Coughs]. Erm. And er and erm battery err battery back up. Erm. But erm err we did have - we did have erm some y'know - we did have some amplification from the bikes. And then also we tried to encourage we g-at one point we had erm a forge and err someone had a sort of pedal powered blower. For erm for erm errrm - for the air supply. Erm. Because you need to have a good - a good - a supply of oxygen with a forge so that you get the heat. You get the temperature right. Erm. We also had errrm - let me think what else there was. There was - oh th-we had a erm a very interesting chap again from East Anglia. Came down. And he had a bicycle that that he could then erm lift up the back wheel off the ground with a kind of rack which turned round. And th-and connect up erm a er errrm - a - what's it called. One of these stones, sharpening stones that erm that er - y'know. And he would sharpen people's knives an-and scissors and blades and things like that. So that was er that was another one. And er - and I was erm y'know by this time I'd been making quite a few erm bicycle powered displays th-that I could parade around because when I erm - when - a-as I developed this idea on the CND marches and the first time I y'know as I said I was terrified of the fact that everyone was gonna be looking at me but at the same time when it actually happened it was fantastic. Y'know. It was almost like I was royalty. I was riding around y'know an-and and - there would just be this wave of applause as I-as I rode around. Such a thrill

so y'know so I started erm s-making more kind of sophisticated erm displays. Using er more more [20:00] modern materials. And a-especially things like carbon fibre. Erm. Which came from a-and I would use - I'd say 98% of reused materials erm. And recycled materials. And I'd always kind of look around for things that might be appropriate for - for displays. That is kind of strong lightweight materials. Erm. Netting so that - so that you didn't get blown over by the wind when you had the displays up. Erm. And erm I made this special one for the Green Fair. Erm. And I used to er er I would ride around in between all my necessary tasks cos I was site manager for a few years. I was the chair for a few years. Erm. And but- I still managed to find the time to put these things together erm and er - when I say put em together, not from - obviously not from scratch, I'd have them all prepared but they- all these displays were made so that they could all fold down using things like the erm carbon fibre poles and erm - so they can all be nice and neatly err packaged on the bicycle and then I could ride the bicycle to various places without anybody knowing erm that I had a big display all tucked away. Erm. And also I could put it on trains and go to other events on - on - on trains. And set these things up. So er that's really how - how erm - how these displays developed.

[21:50] AB: Where did you used to er - to-to make them? To put them together.

DK: Well I've always had a workshop. I mean er y'know - I mean right now I've got a - erm a-my lounge is y'know I don't watch television and y'know I much prefer to be playing in my - in - in - in the workshop. So erm. So I- so I always had a workshop space that was my number one priority. So I could just erm make these things and play about with various apparatus that I'd find and pick up. Erm. And-and y'know obviously over the years I'd learnt about how cycling is c-kind of one of the most efficient machines. Bicycles are one of the most efficient machines one can get for converting human power into y'know into traction. Erm. They tell me that you could - it's the equivalent of-of erm. Of having something like er over a thousand miles on a gallon of petrol y'know. Well I mean I tried a teaspoon full, I don't know how people can manage a gallon. But that's really er one of the reasons why I-I chose to- to use pedal power. Is to kind of erm highlight the fact that it is - y'know as well as being a very efficient machine for getting you about. It's also a-a erm very useful for erm converting that pedal power into various apparatus. A-and one thing I forgot to mention was the washing machine. Pedal powered washing machine. Which er chap unfortunately I did try and research and find this chap but er but I - I wasn't very successful. But erm he used to come along to the Green Fair with this - with this showing the sort of guts of a washing machine y'know, just the drum and erm - and erm and had it connected up to pedals and er - and then it could be used for erm for doing your washing. Y'know. So it's great and if you think about it anything y'know like lathes y'know anything that really just rever-requires an electric motor could be replaced with-with er with pedals.

[24:16] AB: Absolutely. Erm. So you presumably had a number of things at different display bikes over the years. I wonder if you could just talk us through a couple of your favourites.

DK: Well. Yes. My-my - I think I-I've got erm - I had a bicycle err with a display at an event over in erm - it's called Seven Revels. It was over in er Forest of Dean. And erm and there was a chap selling a recumbent bike and I'd always looked at - in fact I tried the recumbent bike a-at at a bike exhibition once. And I thought this is fantastic, y'know. It's almost [25:00] - i-the main danger is that you might fall asleep while you were riding cos it's so comfortable. It's got erm - because you're almost horizontal and you've got very low wind resistance, you've got less erm less - erm distance to fall. And erm and erm it's

also very efficient because you're pushing against your back muscles or against your back. Because you're sitting down on it. Erm. In-in a kind of erm a relaxed recumbent manner. Erm. So er so I - I - and this - I kind of spoke to this chap and he said because you've got the display on your bike you erm y'know y-I think you ought to take - you ought to buy my bike. And erm - and I said - I got a very good price for it. And erm and I immediately set about erm putting something together and by this time I'd kind of found out some interesting kinetic objects which I - which I could see the potential of. If they were connected up to the - to the - either the bicycle mechanism or the pedals. Erm. As a kind of direct drive co-because of course if you put a piece of string on the end of a pedal and then put it over a pulley you've then got a kind of up and down erm y'know an up and down movement which you could y'know which you could utilise. So erm so I made this bike erm out from the recumbent display from the recumbent and the erm - the - I had this thing called the Hoberman Sphere which was - it's invented by - by a chap whose surname is Hoberman in America. And it's - it's a sphere that is made out of a kind of framework of of struts. That erm that are all hinged so that when you pull th-one end of it th-the sphere opens and closes and it - and it looks quite spectacular on its y'know on its own. And I thought well that - y'know if I can connect that up to the pedals then obviously it would look good. So I kind of built upon a display all - completely around this kind of this thing that inspired me. And I used to come erm - Disney erm child's er - kind of tipi for - to enclose it and cut all th-the nylon back so that y'know all the kind of covering back so that it doesn't get- get erm erm blown around by the wind too much. Erm. And then er and then I discovered and then I found out that I could if I put a little display erm erm - a wh-the old erm - wheels from the trol-from trolleys. Erm. Like-like shopping trolleys. If you took the tyre off you then got this perfect little pulley wheel lightweight plastic pulley wheel so I put one of those I stuck it on-er-on one of the wheels. Next to the spokes. N-and er fixed it on. And then used erm an old erm buggy erm to kind of transfer the erm the drive from horizontal to vertical. And erm and I remember I remember putting this thing together and thinking Christ, th-this can't be possibly work it's far too complicated. And I set it up and it did and I was so thrilled that I could get this y'know - I could get a kind of revolving erm er like a-like a well a revolving display. From th-the-the that was a direct drive from from this pulley wheel. Erm. So so - I've now got this this recumbent bike which er - which has these things on and then I've put on the kind of erm pe-I can't remember what it's called, what's it called when you've got the points on a - on a - on a er shape? Y'know, on a 3D shape. Erm. I've forgotten what their name is, anyway I've put some little sort of bicycle wheels on each of these points. And erm and err erm and kind of made it up - and got some - I had some little Barbie bicycles and fixed them on. And the whole thing is k-kind of celebration of of bicycles and cycling. So that's probably my favourite now. And of course that's on the recumbent so it's very erm it's er - very comfortable bike to ride. And I can [30:00] ride it quite slowly as well so I can be part of erm of parades and things like that. [Coughs] And the other thing that I made was erm was er a flapping wings again using erm using err erm carbon fibre. And erm and some netting. And and these wings are believe it or not they're 12 foot. Wingspan. Very high up. So that they - so that I can ride between cars without the - without the wings er whacking the vehicles. And erm. An-and then I can put erm little display, I can put large displays of erm li-like banners on-on to these wings so I've got one which er I'm particularly fond of which says 'love your mum'. [Coughs]. And erm it's got a picture of - of - of the er - with-with a thermometer like a kind of - a depiction of - of the - of a head with a thermometer in its mouth with the t-temperature quite high and all this kind of sweat coming off its - off it. So erm. And - and with love your mum on it, and the reason I-we I said love your mum is obviously cos of mother Earth but at the same time it was - it's very few letters so I didn't -

didn't take ages to put it all together. And much easier to er y'know for people to sort of read and people love that one. So er - so there is - those two are the main ones which - which I really erm enjoy riding around on. And they all y'know as they say they all kind of tuck in one one - the one with the wings sits into a to-a suitcase where it's all folded together. And the other one erm I-I use erm poles from erm ski-ing y'know, the ski-ing ski poles. Erm. Which which are great because they kind of - they're very lightweight they're very strong. And they fit into each other so you can have sort of two or three to make really long er long extensions if you need them. Erm. So er again can be taken on trains and to various events.

[32:25] AB: That's great. So obviously sadly the Green Fair's not - not running anymore. But do you still get out on the bikes a fair bit?

DK: Quite a - quite a er er - a fair amount yeah. I mean I was doing the erm the critical mass. I dunno if critical mass has come up at all erm. In err er- in our history of cycling. But critical mass [coughs] basically started about 25 years back at - in erm San Francisco. And it was a bunch of cyclists who got together er with the concept of that you get to a certain number and then y'know th-the critical mass a-aspect of it means that y'know you get to a point where the suddenly it becomes a-not minority occupation but it becomes a kind of general erm y'know a general movement. And erm - and so they started - it started in San Francisco and then it got picked up by many cities in the world. And now there's probably about 400 different cities around the world. And erm in London we meet up on the last Friday of the month. Under Waterloo Bridge. Sometimes there's two or three hundred cyclists. Sometimes there's 2000 cyclists. And erm err - my-I for many years - for probably about 15 years I used to be a regularly I used to regularly display. Erm. My my different bicycles th-there. And we - you just - we would just ride around and it was - the whole thing was completely random. Y'know you go on your bike, y-you and er - everyone we go off. I-nothing's determined. There's no set times, there's no set distances, there's no set erm er routes. But we kind of get and go off and we just start riding and it'll most of the time depends on whoever's at the front as to where we go. Sometimes erm people don't like way th-the particular routes that people are taking from the front and they - and then they so they go a different way and then the people at the front turn round and have to come back. Erm. And erm **[35:00]** it's - it's almost y'know I kind of I kind of er equate it with y'know when you see sort of birds all flying off together. And then y'know then a fair of them go one way and everybody and all the others follow. And it's it's great y'know it's a really lovely place of - of kind of expressing our - our er erm joy of riding. Erm. It means that you've - y'know that you're riding around streets of London without any distractions from the noise of vehicles. And erm and i-it gives one a sense of of er of empowerment. On a bicycle. Erm. Y'know and we're and er - I've seen a lot of kids who've come along and joined in with their parents and then y'know then they've grown up and they've they ride around themselves. And it's erm it's it's wonderful. So erm. So what was the question? [Laughs]

[36:07] AB: I think you answered it, whatever the question was.

DK: Oh that's handy.

[36:09] AB: So I just wondered - in your - y'know you've experienced cycling. You've been cycling for a number of years if you've noticed any attitude changes towards cyclists over time.

DK: Mm well yes or no. Y'know. Erm I think motorists - motorists obviously, y'know motorists who have been on bikes.