

SELLAFIELD STORIES

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEWER: Colin McCourt

INTERVIEWEE: Vincent McCourt

DATE OF BIRTH: 1952

DATE OF INTERVIEW: 7th June 2010

EQUIPMENT USED: Marantz PMD 671

CM *Just let me do this crap bit first... [clears throat] [pause]. This is an interview with Vincent McCourt, interviewed by Colin McCourt on... fourth,*

VM Seventh.

CM *Seventh – seventh of... we'll start that one again. Right...*

VM [whispering] Fourth, come on Col get it!

CM *I know,*

VM Get it right!

CM *I know, we know what date it was. Right we'll start again. Right. This is an interview with Vincent McCourt interviewed by Colin McCourt on the seventh of June 2010 using a Marantz PMD 671 Recorder at 44.16 kilohertz and an AKGC 414 Microphone.*

First off, could we just start by you telling us where and when you were born?

VM I was born in Whitehaven in 1952.

CM *Right can you tell us a little bit about your family and where you were brought up at?*

VM Er, I've got three brothers obviously and mam and dad. Mam's from, originally from Yorkshire, married me dad and moved 'ere. I've got three brothers: John, Colin and Andrew and born and raised and bred in er, Mirehouse.

CM *Can you remember when you were younger if any of the 'ouses that you were living in, or the f', families living near yer were what they called as key 'ouses?*

VM Yeah there's a, a couple o', obviously, next door to us, the Condons, they, they were one of those, I think they came up from down near Barrow way somewhere, and about six or seven 'ouses farther down we had the Burtons who had, I think he was, seemed to be pretty high up at Sellafield but I don't know what he did.

CM *Right so them 'ouses were, designated for Sellafield workers...*

VM Yeah.

CM *... when this estate was being built?*

VM Yeah.

CM *Right. Let's go to... your early life and the schools you attended.*

VM Er, started off primary school, junior school was St Mary's er, up at Kells. Er, then I passed me eleven plus and went to Whitehaven Grammar School, from eleven until eighteen.

CM *And where, was the Grammar School at?*

VM The Grammar School originally, the first place I went to was Howgill Street, which was for the first two years, er, then moved up to Catherine Street, which is where Morrisons is now, and finally up to Hensingham which 'as now become Whitehaven School.

CM *Right. So, you left Grammar School at... sixteen? Or...*

VM Eighteen.

CM *Eighteen. After A Levels?*

VM Yeah.

CM *Yeah, then... what, what did you do from there?*

VM Then I went to College at Sunderland for a while. Er, I left there and then I 'ad three pretty quick jobs at... Cleator Moor Employment Exchange, er, Marchon, and... DHSS, at Whitehaven and in '76 I went to Sellafield as a Health Physics Monitor.

CM *What made you apply for the job at Sellafield?*

VM More money.

CM *Simply a, a...*

VM Sim', sim, sim, simply money.

CM No...

VM I honestly thought I would last there two or three years and I've been there thirty four.

CM *Right. Did you know what... the job of Health Physics Monitoring, was all about before you went?*

VM Oh no, no. All I seen was an advert in Whitehaven News. Er, I had a, a very vague idea but it was nothing compared to, to what I found out it was.

CM *In what way?*

VM A lot more technical. I mean I, I, when I first went in there I thought it would be a... a matter of getting s', well, what I used to call a Geiger counter and just frisking it about. But it's a lot more technical than that.

CM *And were you given all the training on this when you first started?*

VM Yeah, we did a – well what it was at the time was a, a two week course, just to, to get us up to speed. And then it was, it was sort of like two, two to three years, training, before you could be classed as a fully competent Monitor.

CM *Right, and the pay scale, did that... show that, that you were in training as it were?*

VM It, it did yeah, for the fir', I think it took... about eighteen months or two years before you actually got... the competent rate, to be a Monitor.

CM *And how many people started at Sellafield doing monitoring when you started?*

VM It was er... there was quite a lot, it seemed to be a course... what we called a, a Monitor's course every... every four to six weeks and there would be about eight or ten people on each course. So at that time there was a, a big intake of, of workers at Sellafield.

CM *And that was in? What year?*

VM 1976.

CM '76. *[clears throat]* When you went to Sellafield, 'ow did... the, factory itsel', fit in with what your pre-conceived ideas were?

VM Er, I don't think it, it... did at all. When I, when I first went there, I've got, I mean it was a... a very lax regime. You went there, I mean... you, you 'ad, you 'ad so many breaks... you know, it's... totally different from what it is today. Today is a lot more... rigorous and er... I don't know it ju', just then it was... it was a very easy going regime.

CM *Yeah. And was that factory-wide did you think?*

VM That was, it was definitely factory-wide. Yeah, I mean... you, you would go more than, no more than an hour, an hour and a half without a... half hour or an hour's break at any time.

CM *Umm.*

VM You know it w', it was very easy going and er... I think it was a case of the management just didn't seem to want to, to push people too much.

CM *In what way? Frightened of industrial relations?*

VM I don't think it was – no I don't think it was industrial relations, I just... I just think at, at that time... I think they were very er, very wary of... what dose uptakes people would get and they were quite happy, so long as the work was done, to... to make it easy for people to er... [tuts] to have their breaks and... and keep the doses down.

CM *Yeah. And that's altered as...*

VM Oh with...

CM *... time went on?*

VM Yeah, without a doubt. I mean now, now obviously it's more efficiency... focussed than, than before. But er, still, they still... I think, I think they've learned to managed the dose uptakes a lot, a lot better and realise that it's, it's... it's not the amount of time that you're away from it, it's... keeping on top

of what the radiation actually, the dose actually is, so that they can work out what you're going to get, at any time.

CM *Umm. When you started Sellafield and you first started working with radiation, obviously that was a new concept. Did that worry you at all?*

VM I don't think it did, because at that time – I mean... [laughs] you, you can't see radiation and you can't hear it. And I think that, I think that's made, that made a lot of people complacent. If it, if it'd been a... a, a, a coloured gas or something like that, something you can actually see, that you'd walk into, I think you'd take a lot more, you'd take a lot more precautions than you did.

CM *Umm.*

VM But because it couldn't be seen and it couldn't be smelt and... couldn't be heard, I think an awful lot of people just... didn't realise the significance of it.

CM *Umm. And you think that culture now at Sellafield has changed?*

VM Oh yeah, it has, I, I think the people that's come in now, they're er... I think they're a lot more worldly wise to radiation than, than we were.

CM *Umm. So, when you done your initial training, was that in a, a training school or actually on the job?*

VM We did, a few weeks on the job where we, we walked round the different buildings for a week or two er, then we actually had a... a proper two week course in a, in a training centre, that was a, an intensive two week course and then you had your exams at the end of it. And then after that you, you spent sort of a, a, a month then in, in... a certain number of buildings to... to build your experience up.

CM *So which... which part of Sellafield was it w', that you had your first... main job, where you were actually monitoring and being responsible?*

VM Er, it was... it was in the old separation area: 205, B30, what, what they're, they're starting to decommission now.

CM *Yeah, yeah. What do, what do you think about that building?*

VM Well then, when you see what it, what they're like now, the buildings, then it, you would, you would just say it was a... a real mess, you know. You were, you were working with, with... open ponds, where, where now they're, they're covered over, you know, the, the amount of things that you could inhale at that time or touch. They've cleaned all those things up now, an awful lot. I mean it's still, they're still there, some things, but nowhere near what they... used to be.

CM *So when they were open ponds, did that mean that things like seagulls could land on them?*

VM Yeah. Oh yeah.

CM *And take off?*

VM Seagulls could land on them, take off, yeah.

CM *And was that, at that time not thought of as being a issue?*

VM I don't think it was because I mean...

CM *[clears throat]*

VM ... we all knew about it because, we used to check what they call flat rolls, which is the railway wagons that they put flasks on. And if we seen seagull dirt on it, that's the first thing we'd check because we knew there was a, a good chance that that was contaminated.

CM *Umm. So if it was on there, obviously it was all over the site and...*

VM Yeah.

CM *... off site?*

VM Probably off site if it, if, well depending on where, obviously where abouts they flew, yeah.

CM *Yeah. So how long did you stop in the sep plant?*

VM We were in there most – well I, for, for quite a few years because at that time... you only had the separation areas, you had what, what are UKAEA

areas now er, and it was quite a few years before any other buildings were built, so you were more or less in those... for the first few years. There was about twelve different buildings that we used to go into, so we used to do six months in each and... revolve round them.

CM *And that was all the Monitors, do that?*

VM Yeah, yeah.

CM *So nobody was...?*

VM No, nobody stayed in one, one area.

CM *And what was the thoughts behind that, do you know?*

VM It was just so that you didn't get complacent I don't think in, in the buildings that you were in, plus you were learning new skills and that, because different buildings had different, different things. You had... buildings that were, what you would call beta/gamma buildings, you had other buildings that were alpha buildings, so, it was no good just learning one, one skill and not knowing about the others.

CM *Umm. But it wouldn't be all the workers, or all the Monitors moved en masse? There'd be just some is it? Or...?*

VM Well what you did, you had, we had a, every six months you would move round but, it you were in a team of four or five, there'd only be one moving, at that particular time and then a new one came in and then...

CM *So the experience was always kept within a building?*

VM Yeah, yeah.

CM *Yeah. So when you moved round them buildings, what would you class as being, probably your favourite one to work in?*

VM [laughs] Er, the one I, I particularly liked was the one that used to... used to go round in wagons errrr, collecting waste from outside the buildings, we used to have to check the bags that went into the wagons and then they would go from there down to, down to Drigg.

CM *So that give you a lot more freedom from...*

VM Well, yeah you weren't-

CM *... management and everybody else.*

VM Yeah, you weren't, you weren't stuck in a particular building, you... you got out and about.

CM *When you were stuck in these buildings, did, were some of them enclosed to the daylight, as it were?*

VM Oh yeah, the majority were.

CM *And as Monitors, you had to stay in there as well as t'rest of them?*

VM Yeah, yeah. Oh yeah, there were... there was very few buildings where you actually went outside and, and... we, we had, we had somewhere we used to have to service the trenches and things like that but the majority you, you were in a building and that, and that was it.

CM *Umm. If we go back to, you worked er, at a few places before you went to Sellafield and one of them was Marchon, what did you actually do in Marchon?*

VM I was er... costing, in the offices.

CM *So, did you see much of the site while you were up there?*

VM I didn't see, well I, I seen little bits of the site but, every now and again I used to have to go across to Solway because... when he, the, the bloke there was on leave or on, on sick...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... they obviously needed some cover and I was the one that used to go over.

CM *So as a comparison between what you'd seen briefly at Marchon and to Sellafield, you know, was there a, a huge comparison, was there a huge difference between... the... er, how, how you would view a building?*

VM I think it was, at, see at Marchon you, you could actually... see what was there. You, you, you could see... nitrous gases coming out or you could see powder and you could see... at, at Sellafield everything co', by comparison looked clean, to the site. But obviously you, you, as I say with radiation and contamination, you can't see it, smell it, or... or hear it, so it was totally different. It looked an awful lot cleaner...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... because, as I say, you, you just couldn't see these things where you could at Marchon.

CM *Right, when you had to do this job that you enjoyed, going round in the Landrover or whatever it was, picking bags up and taking them down to Drigg, you know, what was your views of Drigg when you went down there, 'cause obviously you'd had years of storage, so did you have to do monitoring on that site down there?*

VM There, yeah, there was a m', a monitor down there, but when we went down there, where the bags were, were, were dropped it, it, I would say it was, compared to now it was very haphazard. They used to go and I don't think there was records kept really of, of, what was going down there into, into each particular, it just used to be a... a massive hole, that they would go with the wagons, tip the wagons, put the rubbish into the hole and, and that was it, where now everything that goes down there is put in a particular place...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... and records kept so that anything that, does need to be found later on could be found later on.

CM *Yes. So the first time you went down Drigg would be what? Late seventies?*

VM Errrr.... '77/'78 something like that yeah.

CM *Right. Right. So that'll have been very much like a... just what you see as the, ordinary dumps basically...*

VM Yeah.

CM *... except they dug a hole to put it in.*

VM Yeah, I mean we... there, there was obviously what they call the magazines that we didn't, I didn't know anything about, or didn't see anything about, which is, where the, I think there, there was a lot of alpha material there. The, the only part I've never been...

CM *Alpha being the, the most... dangerous is it?*

VM Yeah, yeah.

CM *Yeah.*

VM Er, the, the most I, I had seen at Drigg, as I say was the, the particular place where, what was, what is low, low level waste.

CM *Umm.*

VM So mebbe that was why they were a bit haphazard about it, because what went down there, there wasn't supposed to be very much on.

CM *And there wasn't?*

VM No, no. They, well they had, they had limits, I mean, I can't remember exactly what the limits are now, then compared to now, I think they're a lot lower now. But at that time, what the limits were everybody was very happy with.

CM *How do you feel, working at Sellafield, that when you started the limits were at a certain level...*

VM Yeah.

CM *... which was deemed as being safe...*

VM Yeah.

CM *... and as years have went on, them levels have been dropped down considerably...*

VM Yeah.

CM ... to now being safe. So your original levels...

VM Were a lot higher.

CM ... were a lot higher. How do you, how do you feel about that being changed so drastically over the years?

VM Er, well when we were there, we just assumed that what they said was a, a safe level was a safe level. I mean we took people's word for it.

CM Umm.

VM You know? Er, and as it's come down, as a... it, it doesn't seem to have affected me in any way health-wise and I've gotta admit the majority of people that I've worked with... I've, I don't know any people or the odd one or two maybe that's, that's actually developed some kinda cancer where, where... that isn't above...

CM Umm.

VM ... normal levels. So I don't know, I mean, obviously the, people find out things that, as they go through the years and, and these levels are coming down, so probably what we were working with, could a been classed as, as pretty dangerous.

CM So do you think it's possibly that, as every industry's moved on, health and safety wise, that the nuclear industry probably is the same process, whereby what was deemed as being safe then, they learn more and more and then health and safety increases?

VM Yeah, yeah. Plus on, on top of that I mean the, the plants are getting so much better now, that they can knock these levels down and still get, still get a, a good bit a work done. In the old buildings, if, if we'd had those, those kind a levels, that they are now, then... people just wouldn't be in the buildings for very long.

CM Umm. So what's, what's the worst kind of jobs you've had to monitor? You know, whereby, you've just mentioned there people couldn't stop in a building

very long or do a job very long, if you can think of a job whereby you've had to monitor people when they're doing it, you know, what's the kind of length of times they would be... be actually physically working with, a contaminate?

VM Oh we, we've had some where we've had to save five, ten minutes, and you, you're up, you're up to, to the dose that you, you, you can take for that day. I mean s', some can be pretty high, you've only got matter of a few minutes...

CM *And then they've got to stop what they're doing?*

VM And they've got to stop what they're doing.

CM *And what? Somebody else...?*

VM Somebody else comes in or, hopefully it's, it's just a, a job that er, only takes a couple a minutes.

CM *What happens if it was a, a serious job that was going to take a length of time that needed doing?*

[both talking together]

VM Then they – then –

CM *Would they have to have a pool that –*

VM They'd have to have a, a, a pool of workers, yeah. Yeah they, they wouldn't let anybody go – they, they've got the low level that they want people to work to.

CM *Umm.*

VM They've also got a higher level just in, just in case. But once it gets to that higher level that, that's it, they've got to have someone else coming in.

CM *Umm. When you were doing spots like Drigg off site, did you ever notice any protestors knocking round, anything like that?*

VM Oh yeah, I mean, I was, I was involved when the beach was contaminated.

CM *Which beach is that?*

VM That, that's er, Sellafield Beach, where, when there was a, a discharge from... from one of the pipelines, I think it was... 1984, something like that.

CM *Umm.*

VM But I actually got a phone call on the Friday night, me and this other monitor, to go to the beach on Saturday morning to check – we were the first two to check the beach, so we, we went down there and obviously, by the time we'd finished and, and give our results they'd, they'd had to shut the beach.

CM *How did that make you feel as being a local person and [inaud] at the time?*

VM Oh God it, what, what was going through your head was that this could be... I was, I was more concerned at the time about er, Sellafield shutting. I could honestly see... that repercussions coming for Sellafield.

CM *Right so that, you know, that... Yeah, 'cause obviously the press'll have picked it up quite quick?*

VM Well that's what I'm saying when we're talking about er, demonstrators. Greenpeace had heard about this dis– this discharge went out early in the week I think and this was the weekend when we went there and there was all kinds of rumours going round that actually something had gone out...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... but nobody, nobody was officially saying anything, so... as I say Greenp', Greenpeace had, had got inklings about it. They had a boat there. So that they were out and er...

CM *So, sorry, was this the time that Greenpeace tried to block the pipe off or was that a different time?*

VM No, no, that was a, a different thing altogether.

CM *Right.*

VM This was just because this... how I, material going out to sea itself.

CM *Right, so how far did this pollution spread? You know you said Sellafield Beach, did you go down to any other places?*

VM Well we, we went down, we checked as far down as the Duddon E', Estuary and up, up past Whitehaven. You know we, we f', a lot, we, we found things in different pla– I mean obviously Sellafield Beach was, was the worst. We, we did find places farther along but... we, we didn't know at that time whether it was a... was new material that had come on the beach or if there – because before that the beach hadn't been monitored.

CM *Umm. So is it monitored regularly now after that?*

VM It, it's, it's, yeah. It's monitored all the time now.

CM *So that's a positive that's come out of...?*

VM Oh yeah, yeah.

CM *Of, of...*

VM Obviously everything's a lot, lot cleaner. And it, it's gone, I think it's er, MAFF that does it now – Ministry of... Agriculture, Fisheries and, and they've got their own monitors, doing the beach as well, so if, if there's, there's, we do it and there's an independent one does it, so that...

CM *Aah.*

VM ... you can correlate between the two.

CM *This feeling that the factory may be in serious trouble, you know, was that felt do you think... by the workforce generally?*

VM I think it was, I think, I think people, especially, I mean it was, it was national news, it was in the papers that the beach was shut. I mean we were going down monitoring and there was television cameras there as you were monitoring the beach, so everybody knew it was a, a big serious issue.

CM *Umm. So I take it that... the pumping out to sea or whatever they done, will have ceased at that time?*

VM Oh yeah. Yeah, we, we got told there'd be, there'd be no', until it was... there was an investigation into why.

CM *And what kind of levels were found on the beach, from safe to highly dangerous? Whereabouts on that scale would it be?*

VM I would say there's, there was very highly isolated p', pieces where... you, you were talking about, not, not, not dangerous but... a lot higher than... you would, you would, you would class as low level.

CM *Umm. That's quite, quite worrying I would think for any families that live round that area.*

VM I think at the time it was yeah, on, on the beach. As I say, I mean when you get a public beach that, that's shut off...

CM *And is Sea', Sellaf', you say Sellafield Beach?*

VM Yeah.

CM *Where does that go from? Fr', that's... to the north of Seascale is it and...?*

VM It's, it's, yeah, it's er...

CM *Or south of Seascale?*

VM Well you, you could, you could... I, I would say north of Seascale.

CM *Yeah?*

VM Yeah.

CM *And that's... was a beach that was widely used by local people was it?*

VM It, I wouldn't say widely used, I mean, I think, I think most people had been wary about what was coming from Sellafield anyway for, for years before that and, it wasn't a St Bees or, or...

CM *Yeah.*

VM ... or anything like that. You know it, you, you had, you had the odd local or, or... a few people walking about, but it, it wasn't a... a tourist beach.

CM *No, but people could a been walking their dogs, that kind...*

[both talking together]

VM Oh it was a, it was a public beach, yeah...

CM *... that kind of thing?*

VM ... and people did walk their dogs and that there, yeah.

CM *Umm. So... what about the thought of, for yourself personally, 'cause you were in among it on the beach... of... people who, you know, had taken that contamination home with them? You know, was people's houses monitored at that time or...?*

VM I don't think they were, I think it was a case of er, just making sure nobody g', went on the beach. I, I can't remember going to anybody's house, I don't think anybody else....

CM *Umm.*

VM ... went to anybody's house and check on, on these things.

CM *Umm. Right, so, they, you, you, you, you'd done the beach job, what about times just as a general at Sellafield, when protestors being there, you know, you've mentioned Greenpeace, there was also the...*

VM The Greenham Common women...

CM *... Greenham Common women, you know what I mean?*

VM They, they were there yeah. I mean, we, we didn't have much to do with them as a, as a workforce. I think the police had more to do with them, with them than, than we did. I mean we, we went past them...

[both talking together]

CM *What, what...*

VM ... because they set their camps up.

CM ... give us an idea of, of what year that would be, rough, just roughly, you know what I mean?

VM [exhales]

CM Can you remember?

VM Roughly it was [pause] I, I would say mid to late eighties. There, there was, there was a, a camp there because I can remember the Visitors Centre was open, 'cause we used to go from Yottenfews roundabout... up, up towards er, North Gate, and Visitors Centre was on the right and they used to set up a camp, it used to be practically every Bank Holiday weekend.

CM Umm.

VM Straight opposite.

CM So how did the workers view these Greenham Common women?

VM Well they, they, I think the first... few times there was, there was, there was a bit of er, ill feeling towards them the first two or three times.

CM In what way?

VM In that, they seemed to be more of a, a nuisance than anything else, trying, trying to get over the fence or... and I, I, I can remember the police were telling me that they, we used to have to go and do what they call... dust mask tests. And er, BA, which is er... air fed suits training in this, in this particular bit, it was a derelict farmhouse and we used to have to go in there to show that we could go in the dark and find our way round and things like that.

CM Umm.

VM But these [laughs] these, these women used to use this as the toilet.

CM Oh!

VM So, you know, it, it was a case of, before you, you did anything you had to go in there and act', and people used to have to make sure it was, it was clean.

CM Aye. [laughs].

VM So, so yeah, I mean they weren't, they weren't s', they weren't seen as very ladylike or, or anything, they, they were seen as a, as a, a dirty nuisance.

CM *Umm [pause] And then... so that was Greenham Common women, you had the... Greenpeace come in, then they came one time and did a lot of publicity, when they done the pipeline?*

VM That's right, yeah.

CM *So these things, throughout Sellafield's history...*

VM Oh yeah, I mean, I mean...

CM *... have been, quite common.*

VM ... there, there, there, yeah I mean there's an ongoing one er, with the Irish, obviously because of the discharges from, from Sellafield.

CM *Yeah.*

VM You know? They, it's, it just seems to rear its head every, every now and again that, that you read about it. It's... I've gotta admit the last few years seems to have been pretty quiet.

CM *Umm.*

VM 'Cause we, we had the big Thorp enquiry in the, in the seven', late seventies.

CM *How did that period er... what, what was it like at Sellafield during that period when they building Thorp, 'cause you had that huge influx of people coming to site. You know, how did it actually affect people's everyday job, you know travelling in and travelling out, you know, was there a lot of changes because of the number of people on site?*

VM Er, yeah, obviously the, the traffic got an awful lot... worse and, and at that time... the road between Egremont – we used to have to go through Egremont Main Street and there, there was, there was bottle necks, then they started, because the number of people that was there, that they started building a new road which, for a year or two, added an awful lot long', longer onto your day, trying to get to work and, and, and getting back. But I think most people

looked at it as, as a good thing because it was job creation, they, they could, they could see jobs at the end of it, so they were...

CM *Yeah.*

VM ... prepared to put up with it.

CM *Yeah. And what about life locally?*

VM Oh it was a lot, obviously it was a lot livelier then and peop', people were making money. I mean... Egr', Egremont it was, the pubs were busy, there, there was money being spent all over the place. I, I think an awful lot of people, enjoyed that time because of the money that actually came into, into the area.

CM *Umm. Of course a few people may have had their fingers burnt when it came to an end?*

VM Of course, yeah. Yeah. I mean a lot, a lot of people probably bought houses and, and rented them out and then, Eg', Egremont all of a sudden, it, I mean it's not a ghost town but compared to what it was...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... you, you're talking about an aw', a, a big difference in atmosphere and money being spent.

CM *So was it Egremont that was, was the main recipient of the money?*

VM I think it was. It, it seemed to be yeah, I mean people used to come from, from Workington into Egremont for a night out, you know, I mean it's vice versa now.

CM *Yeah.*

VM But at that time Egremont seemed to be the hub of... of the night life round here.

CM *Mainly because of the influx of contractors?*

VM Mainly because that's where the contractors were predom', predominantly based. And they, they were the ones with the money.

CM *Umm.*

VM And if they were going out enjoying themselves everybody else was going out as well, because it, it just made for a fun night I think for a lot of people.

CM *Yeah. At, at Sellafield... there was, or there's been quite a, a history of... not s', I wouldn't call it conflict between management and industrials, but there seems to have been a lot of industrial unrest at times?*

VM I think a lot of it is er, is distrust. I mean... over, over the years, especially sort of in the seventies and eighties, what management said... was, we, we just thought as, as blatant lies at times, you know?

CM *We – by that you mean the...*

VM The workforce.

CM *... workforce?*

VM Especially the one, the ones in the know. I mean they were, they were, say with the, with the beach incident. The levels we found were, weren't the same as what management tried telling us was there, and other things like that. It, it seemed to be a case that...

CM *So they were, they were even playing it down to its workforce?*

VM Yeah, and, and they obviously knew, the workforce knew what was going on, but they were still quite happy telling the, telling us these other, what they call facts.

CM *Umm. So... if they can do that, did that put a total mistrust on any bargaining you done with them?*

VM I don't know about bargaining, but it, it certainly put a mistrust on that if, if... whatever they said, people used to... weigh up whether it was actually right or not. You know? They... peop– I mean, with bargaining I suppose you mean pay rises and things like this?

CM *Pay rises, anything like that?*

VM Yeah, I don't think that, that... that was, I think that was pretty open, you know? But, the, the mistrust was on... on indu', on... issues to do with er, the plant itself. You know, the, the, they used to put out press releases and... and after a while people just used to wonder well, are what they're saying's right or, or not?

CM *Umm.*

VM Because once you found out that they were, they were... manipulaf', manipulating facts once or twice, then people started wondering if that was happening all the time.

CM *Yeah. If I remember right, there was a... a strike at Sellafield, it must have been round about the time you started or shortly after?*

VM Yeah, '76/'77 I think, something like that, yeah.

CM *How did you feel being tied in with, a strike when you'd just started work basically?*

VM Well I've got to admit actually, at the, at the time I was a, I was a, a youngish lad, with er, no ties, no nothing and, I've, I've got to admit at the time I was, I was quite happy... having a few weeks off on strike, you know you – when I think back now... for people that, with families and that it was an, it must have been an horrendous time.

CM *Umm. Can you remember what that was about?*

VM It started off with er, change room attendants. We used to have, I think it was thirteen bands of pay, for industrials at the time. And when you, when you first started, you started off as a... a grade seven, which is... s', supposed to be half way up, up the pay structure. I mean nobody was actually grade one or two, because gra', grade seven was your starting pay.

CM *Umm.*

VM But the change room attendants, once, once they got trained up as, as, and were what we call now fully competent, they actually lost money and went back down to grade six, so they, they came in training on a higher rate than what they were going to end up when they were fully trained, so... it started off... with a dispute with the change room attendants and I, I, I think people then just jumped on, on, let's, let's see if we, you know, if we can get another rise out of this. So they, they went on strike first and everybody else went out, more or less in solidarity with them, but still looking for a rise for, for everybody.

CM *Umm. And that lasted for?*

VM That's, quite a few weeks.

CM *Yeah, I seem to remember it was a few weeks.*

VM You know, I think it was seven or eight weeks, something like that. As I say, I didn't have any ties at the time and er... it didn't particularly affect me, but I know a lot of families felt it very, very hard.

CM *Umm. So, you know, because you were having an extended holiday basically?*

VM More or less, yeah.

CM *You, you wouldn't have went to the union meetings or?*

VM Oh I went over, I went to the...

CM *Right.*

VM ... I went to the meetings yeah.

CM *What, what was the feeling like at them?*

VM I've gotta admit, e', even with the people with, with families and that, it, it, it seemed strong support for the strike. Now, at that time we, we used to have a show of hands on, on whether to, to carry on or not and I don't know whether peer pressure came into that or...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... or what, but it, we, we, I can remember we, we seemed to be getting er, overwhelming majority for, for staying out. I just think the, the last week or two, obviously when they, they come with a bit better offer I think everybody just decided then enough was enough.

CM *Yeah.*

VM And let's go back.

CM *Yeah, I think a lot of it's possibly about... saving face at the end as well, on both sides.*

VM Yeah, yeah.

CM *You know it's...*

VM I mean we didn't get much of a rise at the end, but... within a, a few months, other, other money started going up and that and we, we, we came out pretty well out of it.

CM *Umm. So... we'll stop on with monitoring for a while, because I know you've been involved in other things at Sellafield, if, if we stop on with monitoring, give me a day, a typical day as a Monitor. The kind of machines you would use, kind of places you would go. You know, I mean, like does a Monitor have to put the full suit on regular?*

VM Yeah, I mean... er, I'm not saying regular, I mean erm, dif', different buildings obviously have... you, you go in them a, a lot more, more than others. I mean, it's, in, what we call the plute buildings, which is obviously is the al', the alpha buildings, the 209's, the 299's, places like that...

CM *So sorry, just explain what them two buildings do, if you know.*

VM They, they're where we have what they call er, plutonium canisters that are, it, it involves a lot of work with plutonium which has got to be sealed in.

CM *Umm.*

VM So, mo', most jobs that you're there, you're, you're wearing at least a respirator and, and, and gloves and that. Once it gets a bit worse, in the, in the conditions you, you tend to wear PVC suits and gloves and, and boots and that. But it, it, it can come to a situation where you've got to have an independent air supply, so that... it, I mean a respirator'll stop an, an awful lot with the, with the filters, but it comes to times where sometimes you've got to have an independent air supply so that you actually, there's nothing at all can, can come through.

CM *Umm.*

VM But from a monitor's point of view they're... they can be pretty few and far between. Well in fact for most monitors they're, they're few and far between, those.

CM *So you, you tend to be involved, what? In monitoring them people who's wearing the suits?*

VM Yeah, yeah. As, as they're, they're coming out, making sure nothing comes out with them.

CM *You must be quite happy monitoring them rather than wearing the suits?*

VM Oh without a doubt! Without a doubt, yeah. I mean o', obviously sometimes we've got to go in, just to see what the conditions are before they go in. We, we go in and do a survey...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... and once we find that the levels that... require them to wear that, then we can come out... and they go in. And af', and after that it's a case of they go in, we check them out as, as, as they come out and then once the job's finished then, it gets decontaminated until, until it gets down to a certain level.

CM *So you could be... on a job for quite a period of time...*

VM Oh you can be –

CM *... for a number of shifts, basically?*

VM Oh yeah, oh, a, a particular job could go on for, for quite a few shifts, I mean I, I'm on a, I'm on a project now in er, in Vit Plant and we're working on a couple of evaporators and I've been on since last August, just in, in one particular work area.

CM *Umm.*

VM So yeah, I mean jobs can be ongoing for a long time, but the majority tend to be pretty quick fix.

CM *Umm.*

VM And a, a couple of hours and, and that's it.

CM *So do you find that Monitors are classed very much as, as part of the team, or a necessary evil?*

VM I think nowadays they're classed as er, part of the team. I know at one time, they were a, a disliked group, because over the years... we, we've never had as many Monitors as we, as we've needed. We've been a, a pretty... scarce resource, which meant when overtime was on, the Monitors got more overtime than anybody.

CM *Umm.*

VM So obviously pe', people seeing them coming in, extra shifts all the time, earning all this extra money and there was a, a lot of jealousy and a dis', lot of dislike towards it, but now... there's no, there's no overtime, there's nothing like that and er... I, I think with, a lot, lot of the Monitors now as well...

CM *Sorry, sorry, why is there no overtime now?*

VM It, I think at, at that, for a, there was a... a decision made, I think it was... when the new contract came in, that er, they, they would change work practices and, and things like that, I mean at one time it used to be practically a case of... if a Monitor was off, on leave or sick, we needed cover...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... it was automatic you'd get another Monitor in. And... now with, with... what they did, they've, they've changed the shift patterns and things like that so that you've got, you've got a lot more Monitors in at a, a particular time, so and it's not, but it's not just Monitors it's, it's everybody, there's just no... they, they've, the overtime I think, they see that as a... a symptom of what the, the plant was like at the time where it was, it was very... er... laxical in that, as I say, if one person was off, then it wasn't a case of, 'Well do you need anybody in'? It was a case of 'Let's just bring somebody in to, to cover for him'.

CM *So the Monitors must have been quite, hit quite hard when... you know, when these new contracts came out as such.*

VM Er, yeah, they, they were that way, 'cause a, a lot of people did budget with overtime at the time, because you got it, this had been going on for years and, and it was something that you were always, always expecting. I mean people didn't look at a washing machine and say 'Three hundred pound', they would look and say 'Three overtime shifts'.

CM *Yeah.*

VM So it was all, all based round your overtime, all, all this, you know, the luxuries in life.

CM *So the, the negotiations that went on, to stop the overtime, must have been quite heated at times?*

VM I would say they probably were, I mean I wasn't, I wasn't involved in, in anything like that, but yeah because a, an awf', an awful lot of people, you know, to, to them it was the way of life. But you also had an awful lot of other people that weren't getting any overtime. So you, you, you couldn't...

CM *And everybody had an equal vote?*

VM Everybody had an equal vote and a lot, what you were getting as well was annualised hours came in, which is, a bit of overtime in everything but word,

but... it meant that if, if you need to be called on, you could come out and, they could call you out and you'd do this work, for no extra pay.

CM *So you got this money up front?*

VM But ev', and everybody got it, every industrial. Er, obviously it was nowhere near what... a lot of people used to get, the Monitors and that used to get, but it was more than, more for some than, than they were getting. So, it, it had to be a case of... what was good for the majority rather than what, what was good for the minority.

CM *Yeah.*

VM So yeah, I mean Monitors did take a big hit on it, but it, it also made it better for a lot of other people.

CM *Umm. And is... has that annualised hours now been accepted and it works alright?*

VM Well, it, it's, it's accepted yeah, but it's, it's a bone of contention a bit in that, it's not, it's not pensionable, it can be taken away at any time I would say more or less. You know, with – I would hope – negotiation. But it, it hangs over people's heads that this money could actually be taken away because it, it's not recognised as part of your, your basic pay.

CM *Umm. So that's not pensionable?*

VM No.

CM *Right. And what kind of a percentage of a person's wage would that annualised hours be?*

VM Well it, we're on a hundred hours a, a year. So, it's fi', it's about twelve, twelve days' pay.

CM *Yeah.*

VM One, one day a month.

CM *[pause] So to lose, yeah, so to lose it is...*

VM Be a fair bit –

CM *... be a fair bit of money.*

VM Fair bit of money. I mean some are only on fifty... most staff, are, you know, senior staff don't get any, but a lot of staff are only on fifty hours.

CM *Yeah.*

VM You know, because they're not expected to, if you're an office worker, obviously you're not expected to need to come in if there's something breaks down.

CM *Umm. Obviously when you get any kind of a, agreement, there's an interim period where everything's settling down, how it's used, how it's worked,*

VM *Yeah.*

CM *When it first come in did you find that, it was worked differently in different areas depending on the manager, depending on the managers that were there?*

VM Oh yeah, yeah. I mean... we, we used to have... working shifts, we, we used to... have a handover time where we would come in, say if we started at half past six, you would expect to come in at quarter past six and... the night, the night shift wouldn't leave until quarter to seven because you allow that half hour...

CM *Yeah.*

VM ... er, and what we used to, well because the, when the new contract and that came in, there was no clocking off, or clocking on then so... it was up to, you know, you came in and you just went to where you work. So some people, well, thought, well we'll, we'll help our mates out, mebbe come in at half past five to let them go and then you would get management, some managers sticking to, to rigid times, saying 'Even if you come in at half past five, you can start work, but your mate can't go until half past six'.

CM *Umm.*

VM You know, they, they, they'd seen these start, start times and, and some of them stuck rigidly to it, even if people came in early to, to let their mates off and there, there was no... no loss of, of hours worked.

CM *And did that settle itself down?*

VM That settled it down. I th', I think yeah, I just think a lot of manage were, managers at the time were, were frightened of going against what was actually written down, even, you know, and wouldn't use common sense.

CM *Umm.*

VM But now if I came in early for a, a mate of mine, he could go early.

CM *Yeah.*

VM You know?

CM *Yeah, so that sounds a lot better.*

VM Yeah.

CM *So... you're working as a Monitor, what about... the union side of the job, did the Monitors have their own designated stewards?*

VM Yeah, every, every, every shift has their own shop steward. Days have, have their own shop stewards as well.

CM *So for a Monitor there'd be what? Five shop stewards on site?*

VM Oh no, no, when I say, you'd, you'd have, you'd have, there's five shifts, so you'd have one – but you've also got about eight, eight different areas, so each of those areas would have one as well.

CM *Ah right.*

VM So you'd meb', mebbe have thirty or forty, shop stewards for Monitors.

CM *Seems a, heck of a lot doesn't it, really?*

VM It does but, but... the, the areas are so different for conditions and work it, it'd be no good me going to, to one of these other areas like Thorp...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... and trying, and trying to, to get involved, involved with them.

CM *So let's have a look at the breakdown of, of the union and the meetings. If you have forty monitoring...*

VM Yeah.

CM *... shop stewards, I'm assuming the other trades will all have...*

VM Oh yeah.

CM *... a big number?*

VM Yeah.

CM *When you have a meeting... is it a designated person from the Monitors represents them forty Monitor shop stewards?*

VM No, no it's, see what we, it's very rare we have a, a mass meeting of all the trades. Usually, I mean we, we're GMB, Monitors are in GMB so we'll have a shop stewards' meeting. And any, any, any shop stewards can go, but it, it's a case of sometimes on plant you can't get away, so it, you've got to rely on people that's on, on their rest days or...

CM *Yeah.*

VM ... on, on another shift coming in and, and going to those meetings.

CM *So them people who come in, to cover for a shop steward, would just be using up their agreement hours?*

VM Oh not, no, nobody comes in to cover for the shop stewards, the shop stewards aren't allowed to go unless the, the work is... they, they can be allowed to go away from the work area if...

CM *Right.*

VM ... if it's quietish. But if, as I say with the others, you've got your shop stewards that aren't on shift and on leave...

CM *Yeah.*

VM ... they, they, then they go to the meetings.

CM *And are they using up their annualised hours or do they get that time back in lieu? What happens with that?*

VM They, they get the back in lieu.

CM *Right. Do you find that there's some managers try and put obstacles in t'way of people going to union meetings?*

VM Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, I've got, but our, ours tend to be, to be alright, but... they, they, they're, it, I think if you, once you really get involved in it and you, and you, you get onto committees and, and, and things like that, and it, not just union committees but you go onto, to safety board, safety committees and things like that, then management do start putting, 'cause they see you as being away from the job too, too much, they, they don't, obviously they don't want a, a, a shop steward doing seventy five percent of his time...

CM *No but these...*

VM ... on, on unions.

CM *... are these not committees that's been set up partly by the management, senior managers?*

VM Oh yeah, they are, yeah.

CM *So, you know, does the senior management then not have to negotiate or whatever?*

VM They do... well, well you can, you can try, you can tend to go, to go over, but a lot of it, I, I think, used to be a, a lot of it used to be lip service where they, you would go to meetings with your managers and they would say 'We, we, we... think it's great', and you'd get involved in these things, but when it actually does happen...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... they're, they're not, they're not too pleased, you know, to let you off for four hours to do a safety inspection or... or something like that. Because as I say Monitors, they, they see it as a scarce resource.

CM *Umm.*

VM And er, they don't, they don't like you being away too, too long.

CM *So, do you have huge meeting rooms where you can go for these meetings, 'cause you know you could have...?*

VM Oh yeah, we have... we tend to have our meetings at er, the North Group in B111, which is the apprentice training place and there, there is a, a big room there beside the canteen where we, we tend to have our meetings at.

CM *Umm. [pause] Right, and obviously you'll have your convenor for Monitors do you?*

VM No, no...

CM *Or a senior steward?*

VM We have, we have, we have a senior steward, yeah. Yeah we have a senior steward. Er, we u', we used, it, it's, we used to have a... an, a committee just, just for Monitors where we would meet delegates from each area, we used to have it once a month.

CM *Umm.*

VM But now we, we going to what they call Island Sites where, each, each site now is, is an individual entity on its own. So it looks as though that's, that's all gonna be finishing and we're gonna have to just... focus on the one particular area that – the days of... where we used, when I, I said earlier on about we used to move around every six months...

CM *Yeah, yeah.*

VM ... that's all finished, you, you're in a particular area now, but management now are, are looking at going back to the old ways of every now and again moving somebody out the areas...

CM *So that, that would then... affect the s', you'd have to change stewards as it were? As, if somebody moved out of the area obviously they can't represent...?*

VM Oh yeah, you have a different, you'd have, you'd have a different steward, but I think what it is, it, it's er, they're looking at now, a thing that come in on site, the big thing now is mobility, where if, if a plant for any reason is shut down for, for maintenance for two or three months or, or longer, then those, the people in that plant that aren't needed, can move into a, another area.

CM *Which seems to make common sense that, doesn't it?*

VM Which, which they, but which, but which hasn't... been done for, for year', it used to be done as I say with Monitors years and years ago, and stopped probably twenty years ago...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... fifteen years ago. But now they're looking at going back to those, those areas again, because obviously they're not, they're not taking any new, new workers on, so they want to utilise the ones that's there and, as I say if a building's shut down then they'll find them somewhere else to go that, they probably need the skills.

CM *It just seems common sense from a manager's point of view doesn't it?*

VM It's probably the real world, yeah.

CM *And er... What about the mix of Monitors as far as sexes are concerned from when you started to now, has there been a change in...?*

VM Oh a massive change in it. I mean when, when I was there, you know, you had mebbe six female Monitors, I think now it's forty odd percent... of, of Monitors are actually females.

CM *Umm, what, what about progression from monitoring up into higher grades?*

VM That, that's always been a bit of a, a sore point because with, with Monitors, when, when you're a Monitor, if you're still in Health Physics it's, it's very hard to get above Team Leader level.

CM *Yeah.*

VM Now, a lot, lot of people have left Monitors to go onto Process because with Process you can go all the way, all the way through even, even to shift manager level.

CM *Umm.*

VM You, you can do it so, it seems to be a case of erm... when, when you, when you first apply at Sellafield and, and you do your aptitude test, if you're in the top ten percent, they'll offer you a Monitor's job [pause] as if, as if they're the cream of the ones of...

CM *Yeah.*

VM ... that's coming. But when it comes to progression, you've got to actually leave the Health Physics to go into what the other ninety percent have, have gone into...

CM *Umm.*

VM ... and you work your way up there because it's, it's easier and you can get higher. It, it's, it's very hard rising above team, team leader in Health Physics.

CM *So how many Team Leaders would you have?*

VM Each shift's got a Team Leader in each area... er, and then you've also got day Team Leaders as well. I mean, I, I work in High Level Wastes, er we've just moved from two day Team Leaders down to one, er and we've got five shifts so we've got, we've actually got I think it's either six or seven Team Leaders because we have floating Team Leaders in case somebody's off on, on sick or, or something like that.

CM *And they're just in charge of Monitors?*

VM They're just in charge of Monitors. They don't do anything else apart from Monitors.

CM *Right.*

VM Because they're, they're there, they're not there for the day to day running of the plant, they're there for radiat', radiological and contamination issues.

CM *What about the numbers of Monitors? I know you said you were a... a, a, a small resource really?*

VM Yeah.

CM *I mean, on site now, how, how many Monitors would you say is on, on Sellafield plant?*

VM I would say, I think there's somewhere between three hundred and fifty and three hundred and eighty, something like that. Er... and I say they're, they're, they're spread all over, over site. You've got Thorp, Pond Five, High Level Wastes, you know, there's, there's, they're spread over an awf', awful lot of area.

CM *Umm.*

VM But you're still classed as a... as a resource that's, that's stretched all the time. Now whether some people use that as an excuse why they don't want, you know? We're, we're used over the years to, to being the, the sort of like whipping boys if – for jobs not done – it's because they couldn't get a Monitor.

CM *Yeah, it's an easy excuse.*

VM Easy excuse, I mean if they haven't got enough fitters to do a job or enough process they won't put that down, they'll just say we couldn't get a Monitor. Even if they haven't asked, they'll put that down as a, as a, a reason why the job wasn't done.

CM *So how, how are Monitors treat by... other groups of workers?*

VM A lot different now. I mean as I say at one time there was jealousy there but now what you tend to get with Monitors is... they, they see their selves as part

of the team. And I'll go and do a job and if... just lifting things or, or moving things about. But I'm in with them and they're – I'll, I'll muck in with them. So they, they see it as part of a team as well. I mean... years ago you'd be there and you would just do your, your own ordinary bit and you wouldn't think about handing tools over or...

CM *No just stand back.*

VM ... yeah. Where, where now, now you, you see yourself as part of a team.

CM *And does that make your job more interesting?*

VM It does, yeah.

CM *'Cause it must have been quite boring at times?*

VM Oh a lot, lot of times, when, when you're stand– I mean you could be stood there in respirator, PVC, watching electricians say, which, you can't do much to help electricians...

CM *No.*

VM ... because they're there, but you could be stood there for three hours, four hours, with them, giving the, the checks to make sure everything's all, alright. But it, it could at times, yeah it could be, could be really boring.

CM *Yeah. I was thinking when you were saying if people went into, in, in suits and you didn't, obviously you have to be there?*

VM Yeah.

CM *You can't walk away...*

VM No.

CM *... and have a cup a tea in case something happens?*

VM Oh no, you've got, you've got, you've got to be there. I mean, when you're there you're, you, there's still things to do, there's still things that need to be checked. If they want to bring things out or, or things go in, there's still things

needs to be checked. You know, so, you're not... sitting there doing absolutely nothing for three hours. There, there are things that, that you're doing as well.

CM What about the pressures put on by people who write permits or Team Leaders who are wanting a job done quick? You know, do they see sometimes the Health Physics as... slowing the job down, slowing the process down?

VM Oh they do yeah, without a doubt.

CM And do they, do they try and put any kind of – or in the past – have they tried to put any kind of pressure on to...

VM Oh yeah.

CM ... do short cuts or...?

VM Oh yeah, yeah. I mean, it was, it was... there, there, there was subtle pressures put on, they, they, they wouldn't, most times wouldn't come out and out and say 'Look, you know, do this and that's, that's, that's the way it's got to be done'. But there were, there were subtle pressures they would, they would, they would try, 'cause there, there was times there with, within a time scale, they probably couldn't get the job done, the way it was supposed to be done.

CM Umm.

VM So they, they, they would try and... and a lot of it, when you look back it was common sense what they were saying – but – the, the thing is, you've got to go by the written instructions and if the written instructions say this you've, nowadays especially, you've, you've got to look and you've got to follow those written instructions. Common sense...

CM Yeah.

VM ... if you, ev', even going through experiences and saying 'Well I, this job could be done quicker by, by that', if when you look and see what, what's written down you've got to, you've got to follow that.

CM *Yeah, so really the, whoever was writing a permit, their argument should have been with the people who were writing...*

VM Yeah, yeah.

CM *... the procedures down for what you had to do?*

VM Yeah, yeah. 'Cause as I say now, we, we have got to follow what's, what's at, what's written down.

CM *Umm.*

VM Can't deviate away from it.

CM *So... Sellafield, let's just for a overriding picture of how Sellafield has affected you as a person, you know if you had to... think of Sellafield, how would you word it, as to what it's done for you, your family, whatever?*

VM Well it, it's, it's, it's... it's, it's where, where me money's come from, where, it's where me lifestyle's come from. You know and, going farther than that, it's, it's, it's all me re', most of me relations and most of the people I know. Most of the town. If, if Sellafield wasn't here... then I don't know what people would do, I, I don't know... what the population would be here, because I just can't see anything else. Er but, but er, personally, I mean it's, it's gave me a decent lifestyle and I've got a lot to be thankful for with being there.

CM *And would you say you have any... any outstanding worries with it or any concerns?*

VM The o', the only concern I, I'm, I've got with it now obviously is, a lot of it's coming to the end of it's... life, lifetime. And... I've got to be worried for future generations now. I mean we've had, we've a good time out, we, we, we've probably had the best time out of it. But from now on, I, I can't see... the workforce increasing again, I think it's only gonna decrease, so you, and there's nothing else really round here anymore now so it, it's gonna be very 'ard try – thinking about what, what future generations are gonna do.

CM *Umm. Okay, should we leave it at that?*

VM Okay mate.

CM *Okay, thank you very much.*