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*Interviewer*

Interviewee

*So today’s date is the 5th October*

Yeah

*2015, that’s right isn’t it?*

Yeah

*And we’re at your house, and can you just started by telling me your full name please?*

Ahm… it’s, well the name I was known on the protest, M11 protests, was John the Cook because I went into the kitchen one day and took over the communal cooking and people was really happy with that

*Ok great [laughs]*

That’s why I got a name, John the Cook

*That’s how you became known as John the Cook, and um, can you also just tell me the year that you were born in?*

Um, 1962

*1962, ok great. So can you just start by telling me a bit about your family history, so anything you know about your grandparents?*

Um, well something in my family is that there’s um, grandparents or great-grandparents who are not English

*Ok*

Like, there’s a great-grandparent from France who left so he wasn’t conscripted to the French army in the Franco-Prussian war and he was a waiter in Nice, and his name was Fosse[?], Forsee[?], and he came to London and my grandmother was his daughter on my mum’s side

*Ok*

And then on my dad’s side there’s Jewish, a great-grandmother who was Jewish, German-Jewish and so, yeah my grandmother was half-Jewish, half-Irish

*So your great grandfather was Irish?*

Yeah, yeah

*Yeah, and they met in London?*

No, they met in Dublin, well maybe Bray because they settled in Bray which is south of Dublin and I still have relatives, the Bray Boyles in Dub- in Bray

*Do you still see them?*

No, no. I have done but some years ago

*Ok, um and so your grandma, what do you know about your grandma?*

Um… well it’s… sort of a reputation of having… independence and strong will kind of, I think on both sides of the families, this thing of people having strong will power or something, or independ…

*And so what about your parents? Have you got…*

Um, well they, something that I think is quite common to a lot of people on the protest scene is that they were borderline between the working class and the middle class

*Mmm*

Which seems to be quite a common factor, where you know you don’t really belong to class, kind of [laughs]

*Yeah, that’s interesting. I haven’t heard anyone else say that but I think that’s, yeah that’s really interesting. So, carry on*

And er, and then my parents were folk dancers and they really encouraged me with, kind of, music and folk dancing and they were very, quite permissive parents and… something I did a lot was, from quite a small child I was off without any adults with, like, friends, brothers, sisters. But from like maybe the age of 5, outdoors without any adult supervision and just roaming and…

*And so where did you grow up?*

Er, Streatham

*Streatham?*

In South London

*So have you lived in London all your life?*

No, because in 1971 the whole family moved to… Liss in Hampshire, a large village and then I started going into the countryside much more. Like in the evenings, the school holidays, the weekends, roaming, a London kid let loose, roaming all over the local area and…

*That must have been great*

Yeah, yeah [laughs]

*What did you get up to in your roaming? Sorry, do have a sip of tea [both laugh] I keep asking you a question*

Er, well there was a ????, a big common

*Mmhmm*

Which was army land as well and we used to find plenty to do in this area, and then there are hills, like, ‘cos the village was in a valley and you could go up these hills, yeah

*Mmhmm*

And, yeah, it was like plenty

*So you’d just be out kind of exploring?*

Yeah

*Through the hills. And was it, obviously it was massively different from growing up in London but can you talk about that at all, the difference between being a kid in London and being a kid in the countryside, how was that for you?*

Um, well in London it was very multicultural

*Mmm*

Even in the 60’s, and like, you know some of my early friends, the best ones, was Derek from Barbados and Picaloo[?] from Pakistan, and Kaltnesh[?] from India but then when I went to the village, Liss in Hampshire, then my friends were like white British

*Mmm and were you aware of that, did that seem weird?*

I didn’t even think about it, it never crossed my mind, so…

*Yeah, so how old were you when you moved to the village?*

Er, 9

*9, ok. And did you stay there for a long time or did you come back to London?*

Umm, well I kind of left when I went off to college, when I was about 19

*Where did you go to college?*

I went to Agricultural, Horticultural college called Writtle, near Chelmsford in Essex

*Mmhmm*

But then I left… like… because I didn’t have the disciple or… I was too immature

*What were you doing instead?*

Um, I started doing menial jobs, like kitchen work, and… going abroad

*And were you living in Essex still at that time?*

No, I was using my home as a base, my parents

*Which was back in Liss?*

In the village, yeah. And then… working short time often, then back to the parents and then off on other jobs [coughs] but there was no stable career

*Mmm, and when you were travelling where were you, where were you going?*

Well I was going to Eastern Europe a lot, which I liked and, hitch-hiking and trai… er inter-rail

*So just kind of moving around?*

And voluntary work

*Yeah?*

Yeah, doing voluntary work, in Eastern Europe, well its almost always the same sort of work which was kind of outdoor… heavy work, kind of, you know, reconstruction or demolition or to do with some sort of architectural or cultural projects, because they could use us as workers

*So, um, and what kind of projects were they, were they like charity? Were you like building schools or things like that?*

Um, well no there was like clearing stones from a ski slope

*Ok*

Then there was reconstruction of a… a large country house

*But why weren’t they paying you? [laughs]*

Er because, well it was like voluntary workers but it was not, it was about international… the organisation was also about getting people, young people, to meet

*Ok*

Who, from the West and the East

*Mmhmm*

To get people mixing, and to get people across… to get them across the border without any troubles and expense, because if you went as a volunteer you had, um, guaranteed visa and you didn’t have to exchange western currency on the border

*Mmhmm*

Which, what normal tourists had to do was exchange for every day of their stay [coughs], so much money at a bad exchange rate

*I see*

And we were exempt, which meant we could change at the black market rate, which is the realistic rate

*So where was that, where were you, whereabouts in Eastern Europe?*

That was in Czechoslovakia

*That was in Czechoslovakia, ok wow. So did you go back there a few times?*

Yeah, I went to about 6 camps… on yeah in Czechoslovakia and enjoyed it a lot, and I…

*Did you meet some good people?*

Yeah, yeah, I met good people yeah

*Anyone your still friends with now?*

No [both laugh]

*Not that good*

I’ve moved on in my life so many times and… moved on from many, many friends and…

*So what happened after that sort of period of backpacking, inter-railing and volunteering?*

Well, the sort of menial jobs, travelling abroad, volunteering, came to an end when I moved to Brighton

*Ok*

And the reason it came to an end was because I met alternative people, like kind of, hippy, protesting, alternative people and I’d been trapped in straight society, and, I don’t mean… I don’t mean straight as in…

*I know what you mean*

But I mean… I suddenly… the door was thrown open and… I went into protest and ethnic drumming and lots of other stuff

*So how did that door get thrown open? Who did you meet, how did you meet?*

Oh right, it’s because of this day centre in Brighton, called the BUC, Brighton Unemployed Centre. I went there and it was a centre for like all these alternative people and also some protesters was visiting from Twyford Down, one of…[conversation not relevant to interview] one of the first road protests was Twyford Down

*Mmm*

And there was a group who visited and something about them made me curious because they moved like animals and as a group, they’re vibe was really interesting and they were very… they were dressed like hippy travellers, they’re called the Donga tribe. And one of them gave me a flyer to go to Twyford Down for a gathering, so I went because of the way their vibe, you know

*How old were you then?*

Errrrrr… I think… about 29-30

*Ok, and do you know why they were called the Donga tribe?*

Yeah, it’s because in Africa, I think Kenya or…, they were these tracks, ancient trackways, called the Dongas and they named themselves… oh right, in Twyford Down there was like, one of these tracks as well caused by ancient… people with their animals or something and so they called themselves the Donga tribe

*After these tracks in Kenya or wherever it was?*

Yeah, yeah

*Ok great so you discovered the... [interviewer discusses whether tape is recording]… so you discovered the donga tribe then, and so then you went to Twyford Down?*

Yeah, I went to Twyford Down and as a visitor, just for about three weekends as a part-timer but then it wasn’t until I went to the M11 by accident, that’s when I decided to leave Brighton and move to the M11

*So tell me a little bit about what Twyford Down was like before we get on to the M11, what was it like as a protest site?*

Umm… well I went over there

*And what were you first impressions?*

And the evening before there was like a sort of party round the fire with some drumming and mandolin, guitars, and someone, some farmer from somewhere, maybe the West Country I think, had brought a big plastic container of scrumpy as well, and then that was quite enjoyable that party and then in the morning people went to protest, and there was security so you had to dodge the security and they would try and drag people away and people were trying to occupy the machinery to stop them working and that was a bit of a surprise to me and it was a little bit rough and…

*And did you go by yourself?*

Yeah, yeah

*And you didn’t really know what to expect?*

No, I didn’t know what to expect

*So did you experience any kind of roughness yourself?*

Yeah

*Yeah*

‘Cos I had an Irish drum, a bodhrán, and this worker put his shovel through it. I mean I was playing it and I put it down to join in the protest and he put his shovel through the bodhrán [laughs]

*And were you shocked by that?*

Yeah, yeah I was a bit shocked, yeah

*Yeah, horrible… ok so you went back a few time just as a visitor, but you were still based in Brighton?*

Yeah

*Yeah. And then can you remember what took you…*

There was one protest called Twyford Rising

*Mmhmm*

In July, and it was quite hot and there was a lot of people and then it end up with police arresting about 27 people and I was one of those people

*That was… ok, and what happened? What did they do?*

Well we had to go to court, but then in the end, nothing happened because the case kind of collapsed or something because it was a Sunday and there was no work going on

*What were you arrested for?*

Obstruction, like we were on a bridge…

*Mmhmm*

… and sitting down and then the police told us to move and we didn’t move and they arrested people, but when it came to court they said because no work was being done and it was Sunday, it doesn’t make any difference

*You weren’t actually obstructing?*

So weren’t obstructing anything, no

*Mmm, and that was before you went to the M11?*

Yeah, yeah

*Ok, so how did your visit to the M11 come about?*

Oh right that was because of the anti-BNP Welwyn march in October ‘93

*Ok*

Because there were 13 coaches that went from Brighton to that protest and I was with, there was three of us, well there was our group at first, but then there were 3 of us – me and big Jan and Yvonne, but then there was just me and big Jan and then when things got heavy towards the end of the march we bumped into a friend of hers who used to be in Brighton who was in Lancaster University and we joined their... they’d agreed, er Lancaster University green group, and we joined them. And there were like hundreds of coaches

*From Lancaster?*

From everywhere, all round Britain and I think 2,500 coaches, I think. Or maybe even not, I’m not sure [laughs]

*That’s a lot!*

And the police purposefully mucked up the order of the coaching so people couldn’t find, a lot of people were wandering around trying to find their coaches and the people from Lancaster university, we went with them in their minibus and they said they were going to this place called the M11, where there were squats for the weekend, so we went with them. That’s how I got to the M11

*And can you remember your first impressions? Do you know where you went on the M11?*

Well I knew it was in North East… oh, right, it was in… first place we went was Leytonstone

*Mmhmm*

In the office I think, in the building that housed the office, and we slept overnight on the floor

*So you stayed there for the whole weekend?*

Yeah

*And what happened over the weekend?*

Er, there was like, it was weekend of… construction and art and pro… er, actions, trying to stop the work

*And this was in ’93?*

Yeah

*Yeah*

Yeah, it was October ‘93

*So it was right at the beginning of the campaign?*

Well not at the very beginning

*But early on*

Yeah, early-ish

*Early-ish. When do you count at the very beginning with the campaign?*

Well I think it’s ‘92

*Tell me about that, what was the very beginning?*

I think the action began in ‘92

*Do you know what they were? What particular actions there were?*

I think you’d have to ask someone who was there ‘cos I didn’t arrive till later on

*Till ’93 [laughs] So what made you decide to…*

To move to the M11 permanently?

*Be there permanently, yeah*

Well, it was the atmosphere, I felt this atmosphere and it was something about this atmosphere I felt that…

*Can you describe that a bit?*

Er….. [deep breath] it was a really good atmosphere

*[laughs]*

It reminded of something a bit as a kid as well, something as a child, there was something in this atmosphere that reminded me in some way. There was a real positivity and… a very artistic scene going on and real confidence and erm… and very active, yeah lot’s going on, people doing lot’s, very enthusiastic

*What were the offices like?*

Ummm… well there was like er, the office type people, the people who office-minded, were working there but that’s quite a minority of people who, yeah not many people was wanting to work in the office

*What were they doing the ones that were working in the office?*

Well there was a lot of networking on the phone

*Mmhmm*

Yeah the phone was the biggest thing going on in the office, and then there were a lot of flyers and magazines, sort of hand out magazines and information

*So is that where they produced the road breaker magazine?*

Er, no, that was another guy who was, but I think it was distributed from the office

*Who was it that did the road breaker then?*

Erm, I think that was Colin… Bex[Becks?]

*Colin Becks!*

Colin Becks [laughs]

*I hear that name a lot as well*

Yeah

*Ah, I didn’t realise that was him, ok. But it was distributed through the office?*

Ah, yeah

*And the phone? What was the deal with the phone?*

But there was a lot of networking with different sorts of groups

*Mmhmm*

‘cos one of the strengths of the M11 was all the input from different sorts of people and different groups around Britain… and there was a phone tree that was operating from the office where… if there’s to be an eviction of one of the squatted streets then the, or a big action, the word can go out on the phone tree

*Mmhmm*

And lots of people turn up. And also calling people for actions and action weekends, days of action

*So can you just describe how the phone tree worked?*

Erm, well there was… branches who would call other people and those people would call other people, but I don’t know how far it went on… to be twigs

*And were you part of the phone tree?*

No, I was living on the M11 then

*So you went down for that first weekend and you stayed in the offices, can you remember what else you did on that first weekend?*

Well I did some art

*Yeah*

And I did some construction of barricades and I did some action, which was [coughs] sitting on this crane, climbing up and sitting on a crane to stop the work

*Do you know where that was?*

It was in Wanstead

*Ok. So was that around the time that the George Green stuff was happening*

Yeah

*Was that what you…*

Er, well this was in… a little earlier. Ah, but there was the schoolchildren knocking down the fences

*Mmm*

This was… before then

*Ok, so what were they trying to build at that point? Or what were they trying to do?*

Erm, they had machines working on Eastern Avenue

*Ok*

In Wanstead

*Hmm, so they weren’t knocking things down at that point they were just starting to construct the road?*

No, they were preparation work of some sort

*Ok, I see, yep. So the actions started really from then? It was just a kind of constant roll of…*

Yep, it wasn’t constant but… but then there was operation roadblock where they were doing… protests every week day for a month, that was October

*That was October ’93?*

Oh wait a minute, when was it? No! This was in Spring, sorry [laughs]

*That’s alright*

Yeah, this was like, March/April ‘94

*Ok*

There was operation roadblock

*And where was that happening?*

It was happening all down the route… and every day, every week day for a month… to try and stop the work

*So, after that weekend did you go back to Brighton…*

Yeah

*..and then decide that you wanted to move down permanently, move up permanently?*

Well I had commitments until Christmas in Brighton, so I think on the 6th of January I packed my rucksack and never looked back, moved off to the M11

*And where did you move to?*

There was this spot in Wanstead, called 106 Eastern Avenue… and I moved in there

*What was it like 106 Eastern Avenue?*

Um… some people on my wavelength, some interesting people

*Mmm. Was it a big house?*

No, it was a 1930’s style bay window, two storey

*Oh right*

But then, there was other people there who were a bit more irresponsible as well

*So how many people were in the squat?*

Um….

*Ish… I guess it maybe went up and down*

Well maybe…. [phew]… kind of, 10. But then there was lots of, there was others who were just… coming in as well who were not actually living there but there was…

*There was a lot going on there?*

There was school kids as well coming, also some of them had been on the protests

*They were just kind of checking it out, seeing what was going on?*

Well they were sort of part of the same social scene in the squat, and they knew some of the people

*Were they quite young? How old were they?*

Well they were like… [phew]… 14, 15, 16 age

*And how long were you there for at 106?*

Um… well I moved in in, yeah, January, early January and then it got evicted in February

*Oh, that’s quick*

Mid February

*So where did you go to then?*

I went off the route, there was this squat, like a normal house, in Fairlop road in Leytonstone

*And were you there for a while?*

Er, that was until October ’94. Then there was, in Leytonstone one of the squats got called Euphoria

*And you lived there for a bit?*

Yeah, and that got evicted as well

*So why were they, what’s this… everything’s called something ‘ia’, Leytonstonia, Wanstonia, Euphoria, how did that come about?*

Umm… Well some people, because it started with one and then it, people named it this kind of, every time there was a new one they called it with the same thing

*So was Euphoria just one house was it an area?*

Well there was 3 houses, 3 really big houses, like villas

*Mmm, in Leytonstone did you say?*

Near, right near the tube. Next to the tube

*So near Claremont Road?*

No, it was Leytonstone tube, just round the corner

*Ok, mmm, and tell me the story about how you got your name, was that around that time?*

Oh right, people called me John the Cook because I went one day and took over the communal cooking

*And where was that?*

That was in this kinda villa-type house in Wanstead, there were these 3 really large kind of houses and I was number 12, I think. I was cooking Cambridge Park Road, I was going into the kitchen nearly every day and, oh yeah in Brighton I’d been working in a vegan café for a year and I was used to this communal cooking, so I took over the communal cooking on the M11 and people liked it so they called me John the Cook

*How many people were you cooking for?*

Well I, sort of, thirty to sixty.

*And did you do that for a long time.*

About, about for a year I think

*And the vegan café in Brighton, was that the xx club?*

It was the er BUC. Brighton Unemployed Centre

*So was, was was it an activist sort of set up or-?*

It was a

*Was it actually an unemployed centre, I’m a bit confused*

It was, it was originally set up by as, Brighton unemployed workers centre, by union involvement with a grant from the council, but then the union part became less, and it became run by unemployed people for unemployed people and it was run very efficiently because they had an office and were very organised

*And they had a café as well?*

And they had a café, vegan café, five days a week

*Is that water something to worry about?*

Well its cos the drains, urgh, haven’t been cleaned

*Oh, ok, fine. I was just worried something was flooding or something*

We’ve phoned up the landlord the agency upstairs and they never do anything. The only time they did anything was when there were tiles of the roof, pigeons in the loft and they’d just ignored it for a few years, then we got the council involved, and the man from the council had a look then he threatened a fine, on the landlords, like our landlords and the above landlords that they’d be fined if they didn’t sort something out

*So then they did something?*

But they did a bodge job a cheap job

*And they’re not doing anything about this?*

No.

*Ok. Ok, so you were cooking in Cambridge Park Road doing communal cooking in Cambridge Park Road and that was mainly for those 3 houses was it?*

No. So the, the protestors, or the people on the campaign on a daily basis

*So it was for anybody*

For anyone. Yeah or

*But there must have been different kitchens along the site or…*

Yeah yeah, but it was more to do with the people who’d been active on the protest or the construction

*So were you very active on the protest or did you mostly get involved in cooking and like-*

Errrm, well I did some, I was doing action, but then I was more concentrated on the cooking

*Were you ever arrested again during that*

Oh yeah, yeah, a few times

*Regularly [laughter] and did anything ever come of the, were, were they pressing charges as a standard thing, or*

Only once and then the case got dr-, in the court case my, it got thrown out by the judge

*How come?*

Because there was police violence during the action, and also there was a big huge chunk of tape missing. The police had been filming and recording like sound but there was a big chunk missing when the police were most active and most of the police violence was and was these police called TSG, the heavy lot

*What does TSG stand for?*

Er, territorial support group. And a normal police man, he told a friend of mine that anyone who applied to join the TSG were a psychopath. And also in court the TSG were not very good in court. Maybe they’re good at being heavy but they’re not very good in court

*Not very good at being presentable?*

Umm

*And so I‘ve heard a few other people say similar things, erm so was there a real sort of sense of separateness between the TSG*

TSG

*And the, and the ordinary police, was there a like- Do you know what I mean?*

Well I never, I don’t remember them mixing with normal police. I mean they might have done, but I don’t remember, they seemed to be always in their own group

*And did their tac- did their tactics quite differ*

Erm, well they used violence as a tactic

*And the normal police?*

Mmmmmm, sometimes, but not that much. I mean, I’d say on the protests the normal police were mostly. No well actually sometimes they were out of order yeah [laughter] I remember. But then the TSG was just much worse you know

*They were always out of order?*

Almost always, yeah. Cos their like, they go in and they don’t ask any questions

*And in terms of the- So was it the- So the Donga tribe, were there other, was that the kind of majority of the incoming activist groups, or were there other activist groups with different names? And did you become part of the Donga tribe or were you part of a different- how did it, how did it kind of work?*

Er, well they were one of the largest groups, or one of the most defined. They were very, because they’d been protesting already at Twyford Down they brought with them to the Wanstead locals a real erm direct action co they knew direct action from other protests, particularly Twyford Down. And, but there was people from round different places in Britain, from other interest groups and protests and there were student drop outs, there students who dropped out to join the protest, there were like re-enactment people

*What did they, what did they do?*

Well no I mean from the re-enactment, because they were concerned about the country side, and there was, oh there was the druids-

*Oh hang on, sorry,*

The druids

*Sorry , go on*

People from pagan type people. You know Stonehenge, Avebury. And there was hunt sabs, travellers, you know crusty travellers, there was care in the community people

*Care in the community people?*

People who had problems, or drug problems, there was er people who liked the country side a lot when they were kids, there was musicians

*What do you mean, I don’t, I’m still not clear on what the re-enactment people- who they were and what they were doing*

Oh well like, there’s one called the sealed knot which is civil war, English Civil War re-enactment society, and there’s other re-enactment societies

*And they jus, they do like re-enacted performance or?*

They, well for instance they recreate civil war battle fields, and they recreate civil war life. I mean life as it was lived during the times

*Ok. And is that, did they see that as a protest, an act of protest, or just an act, is it more likle art, what is it?*

Well I think it’s a mixture of, it’s a mixture of art, culture, protest, sport, er folk dance, well there’s, yeah kind of. And they were concerned in the early days of the protesting they were concerned about the direction of road, of the countryside disappearing, an

*Um. And so even though this was in the city, rather than in the country side it was still, it was still important to them. Do you think that they were more concerned by the roads that were being built through the countryside?*

Yeah. Yeah cos they had the involvement in Twyford Down which is in the countryside. And also they were Earth First

*Yeah I was going to ask about Earth First*

and Alarm UK. Like fledgling groups, environmental groups who’d been developing and they got involved in Twyford Down and M11, which, and they’d not been active before

*Right*

I know you’re cycling groups as well. There were cycling people who were concerned about the motorcar, roads and

*And was there much kind of overlap between all these different groups? Or did they all feel quite…*

Oh yeah overlap, yeah yeah overlap

*And do you think with Earth First and Alarm UK, was Twyford Down and the M11, were they the kind of real catalysts*

Catalysts, yeah. Because it was more where they can take an active role in confronting what they see as the problems.

*So it sounds like there was quite a range between sort of really radical direct action stuff and much more you know the kind of official stuff campaigning stuff the local residents were doing. Is that, is that right, that there was a big diversity in different approaches?*

Yeah

*And was there a lot of kind of communication between those people*

But then people mixed together

*Yeah, that’s what I’m, that’s what I’m interested in, how*

But then there were some barriers sometimes. The worst barriers being with the irresponsible people.

*Who were-*

Well no in the sense that people who were more care in the community or drug problems

*Oh ok.*

That’s where the biggest barrier was.

*Between the kind of local community and the-*

Yeah

*-and the incoming-*

But also between the more responsible and the more irresponsible

*Of the incomers?*

Yeah

*Yeah. So how was that dealt with, if that was a big kind of conflict*

Well, it wasn’t really a big problem because there was so much space and property squats, so much squats available, and so much space on the M11 that people could do their own thing. But then the irresposibles also did stuff because they occupied places, they came on actions, so they still made an important contribution.

*And do you think that was generally felt by most people that the, that there was like a tolerance for that for all those different kind of approaches or people that*

No generally there was a tolerance yeah, and one of the strengths of the M11 was its diversity in terms of class in terms of occupation in terms of lifestyle druigs drinking, different groups, different interests it was very diverse. But then cos you had the office type people so the office was covered, and every area, there was loads and loads of diverse people covering all the areas

*Everything that needed to be done in effect*

Yeah. And there was some very active and skilful people, because there was so many people of such diversity. I was a very strong campaign because of that

*And what about racially, was there much racial diversity*

There was some but I wouldn’t say a lot

*And so where did you fit in to all of that? How did you sort of think of yourself, in you know, all those terms*

Well I was mixing with, with, there was this group Small World, media people, and I seemed to get on well with those people. And then there was others like kind of happyish sort of vegan hippieish who I get on quite well with but then I mixed with everybody generally. And I and I didn’t have problem with [pause] the, I didn’t have problem with thae druggy people

*Umm, and is this, is Small World the same small world went onto festivals and parties and things*

Yeah Small World, yeah

*And so they, there still going*

Yeah

*And are you still involved with them*

No, no. But I guess I was squatting with some of them in 106

*Ok. Erm and can you tell me, music was a big thing? Music was a big part of the whole sort of scene, can you talk at all about that*

Well there was this guy called Busker Paul who played the mandolin

*Paul Gerrall[?] ?*

Yeah

*I know him from*

And he played in the style of kind of er sort of irish hippyie crusty folky an yeah sometimes I was drumming, hand drumming

*So do you remember any of the songs that were kind of particarly*

Yeah it was kind of Irish folk mostly.

*Was he writing*

And he was writing some of his own

*What- can you give me any, give me any names or lyrics, or anything else?*

Ah right

*Because this project, the kids that I’m working with in the Woodcraft Folk are really interested in protest songs, so part of what we’re trying to do is put together a song book*

Also this couple called Theo and Shannon who were doing folky songs

*Um*

Who they had made themselves

*Great. Can you remember any names?*

Well there was… Maybe you can look it up on the internet. You know what I mean?

*Yeah. I’m sure I can but*

Its called- Oh whats there Album called? Its called [pause] errr, oh I cant remember.

*What about pauls songs? Busker Pauls, do you remember any of his? Or any of the songs that he sang, whether they were his or?*

[laughs] Its not, but if, but you can look on the footage you sometimes come across, on the footage of the M11 which is on the internet sometimes these songs are there

*Yeah it’s just good to be able to hear from people who were actually there cos, which were the songs that were actually sung you know? Or the, cos you can pick any old song*

There was also with the women from Greenham Common, and I remember one of their tunes which was, er lets see. [sings] She goes on and on and on, you cant kill the spirit, she is old and strong, she goes on and on and on, you cant kill the spirit

*Nice. That’s great, that’s really good, thanks. Any others?*

No. [both laugh]. Ah but there is on the internet therres like some Theo and Shannon songs

*I’ll look Theo and Shannon up. Will I be able to find them if I just type in Theo and Shannon M11.*

Yeah

*So, so were you, you were drumming all the way, all this time?*

Not drumming all the way through but I was an enthusiastic drummer, but a bit of a beginner.

*And what were you playing? What kind of drums were you playing?*

Erm I was playing…

*You had your Boran, but that got*

No I had no Boran

*Oh You didn’t have a Boran*

it had gone

*That, oh, it had got destroyed. Your Boran got destroyed.*

But I had a… I think it’s a jurarub[?] drum jarabokie[?]. And I also had a snare drum, but with no snare, which I play with a strap and sticks.

*And were you playing with- were you just kind of playing with whatever musicians were about? Or did you have kind of a band or-*

No, er playing with, jamming with whoever or other drummers, or whoever the mandolin or guitars, sometimes joining in with other bands. Folky type bands

*So was that kind or=f what you were interested in mostly. Kind of the folky type side of things? Or what about the more, like the dance music that was happening around part of that scene?*

Erm, well I was enthusiastic about going to rave parties, and I enjoyed dancing through the night. You know I like the new electronic dance music like techno, drum and bass, and this sort of music.

*And that was like early days of that, at that time?*

Oh no, it wasn’t the early days at that time, because this was already the mid 90s which was not the early days by any means. The early days was

*The 80s?*

Late 80s

*Yeah*

And in terms of this dance music, speed of change, speed of change was very very fast. And what was really good was the creative, the creative energy that so many people went and originated music.

*So what erm, what impact do nyou think that that whole protest scene ahd on the dance*

Ahha, this was also another input to the protest was the, the ravers.

*What was there, what was there kind of focus or interest or input*

Well they would turn up for actions or, there was another group who-

*But why, why did they turn up, why were they interested do you think? What was it-*

Errrmmmm.

*What was in it for them? What were they protesting about particularly?*

Because some of the protest was a kind of festival in itself, so its enjoyable and also the like erm this criminal justice bill

*Yeah. Tell me about the criminal justice bill.*

Well it was like a catchall law

*It was like a what law?*

A catchall, catch all, catch all law

*A catch all law, yeah, sorry*

Catch all law. And come with a lot of different groups to criminalise part of their modus operandi, and so there's a feeling of commonality and cross over interest. SO a lot of other groups having, turning up to the road protesting

*So what were the groups that were criminalised by the criminal justice bill?*

Err, hard sabs, squatters, new age travellers, errrmm, ravers, ravers, protestors

*And how did they, how did they kind of criminalise all of those? How did they kind of group them together as one group of people to be criminalised*

Under the law because there was some sections of the law and also the one of trespass and gathering, the gathering of more than 3 people. 3 people or more or something. And also the law of trespass would cover a lot of peoples interests.

*Umm, um. Um. Erm so did you stick around, did you stay around right until the end. Do you rem- were you there kind of*

Yeah, I’d stayed through the whole M11 yeah

*So do you remem- do you have memories of the, of the eviction of Claremont Road*

Yeah

*Can you tell me a little bit about that?*

Ermmm, well there was a night before and lots of people gathered. And then this guy called Rob who’s parents were Quakers, gave a speech and erm, and then they came in the morning

*What was his, can you say anything more about his speech*

Erm, well its on the internet

*How would I find it*

Oh its on the M11 Claremont Road documentary or M11 documentry

*Life in the Fast Lane?*

Yeah. Or no there's another one. Maybe its about Claremont Road or the M11

*Ok so Rob gave a speech*

And there's also a feeling of, it was kind of bit of a theatrical occasions as well.

*So how did people live after the theatricality of it*

Well it kind of, a feeling. Well there was a lot of art work that had been done and which was both part of the protest to make the eviction more difficult and as art as well in itself. So it was ;like a giant piece of art or, and the eviction itself was some form of big theatre on both sides. On both the police side and the authority side, and the protestors. And it was played as well through the media, kind of symbolically

*Ummm*

But also in reality it was a protest, but it was both, both the protest and the theatre.

*And do you think people were very, kind of conscious of it being theatre?*

Oh yeah. Yeah very

*The protestors?*

*Um*

*What do you think, do you think the police were?*

Yeah

*The police had a sense of the kind of theatrical-*

Oh yeah. I think there was you know, very little animosity

*Between the police and the protestors?*

On this occasion. Because it was kind of the peek moment of the protest played out for the media

*Right, that’s interesting. [pause] So-*

And as a historic occasion as well, but people knew it was some kind of cultural history as well

*Umm, umm. Were a lot of people arrested?*

No. Not on that day. No not so many [coughs]

*Was there a sort of sense that it was, I mean maybe not officially, but was there a sense that there was a kind of agreement that it was just going to be fairly non-*

Yeah. But there’d been a liason before hand

*So did you have police liason people in the-*

Ermmmmm-

*In the protest site?*

Yes. Well, because the ground floor was lost very quickly. What I mean is that when, when they came into Claremont Road on foot, we’re on the rooftops, or in the buildings, so they had control of the ground, and they, there was people who were in the protest but they weren’t taken out by the police. They were there specifically as liason, and the police allowed them to be there [coughs].

*And do you think they had very, er kind of were they very carefully chosen people who were liasing with the police do you thionk?*

Erm they, they were the people who chose themselves to do it

*Well I mean there was no hierarchy to chose them*

That’s right. Exactly [laughs]

*But, do you think that- I mean what kind of person chooses to be a police liason person*

Someone who likes talking [laughs]. I mean- But there were already people who were naturally in that role during the protest. Cos there was a guy called Wamble[?] He, I think he was the main liason.

*And what made him good at being the liason person?*

Because he was good at it, and he enjoyed it [laughs]

*But I mean, why, why did he enjoy it? What did he enjoy about it?*

You’ll have to ask him [both laugh] I don’t know

*But hes not here*

No, but he’s from Birmingham

*Oh right, that explains it. Ok, and what was your, what were you doing?*

Well I was in old Micks house. In in in in the old micks house,a nd then later on the roof, and on the tower of old Micks house. You know old mick?

*Well I don’t know him personally cos- but I know of him. And was old Mick a friend, a good friend of yours then?*

Erm, he was a friend. And we had a relationship but not, I wouldn’t say it was very close. And there was some, yeah warm feeling

*And he was a man rthat had a lot of, he had a lot of, he had a kind of, I was interviewing someone the other day and they called him the Sherrif, was that-*

Sherif?! I’ve never heard of that name. But he was, he was one of the most hard core people, yeah. He wouldn’t stand for nonsense, you need some people like that.

*What was his background*

Er, well he’d been a cat burglar

*A cat burglar?*

Yep

*Like literally cats?*

No

*No [laughs]*

A cat burglar is someone who uses their climbing skills as a burglar *[laughs]* and he was

*Sorry that’s just me being totally ignorant, I didn’t know what that was*

And he was a proper East Ender, I mean

*And he was a climber as well, where did he, where did he*

Yeah, he was very good at climbing

*Where did he learn? Did he learn?*

But he learnt of cat burglary

*So what di he burgle? Did he burgle- do you know what he burgled? Did he burgle like houses or organisations or?*

I don’t know, and he spent some time in prison. But he was someone who resisted, I think when he was in prison resisting the authority of prison.

*Uhum. And so was there a sense, did you get- was there a sense of authority with him? in the protest movement? Diud he, did he have a-*

Erm [coughs]

*I mean I know*

There was a sense that he was a hard core man. I mean

*Yeah*

Who had some suffering as well in his life and, and he was experienced, very experienced, and with kind of the negative side of life that he had experienced, and negative people, and [pause] and he was quite friendly as well. There was a very- warmth about him as well, very friendly warm person.

*Do you know how he got involved in activism? Or was it just a kind of-*

Erm, he was living in the street, and that’s how he got involved in the M11 protest.

*Oh ok.*

I think he was someone who took a leed in in the resistance against people accepting compensation and leaving

*So he was a, he was, he was living in his own house, he wasn’t squatting, hew was a kind of actual local resident*

Yeah. And he was offered compensation to move out, but he didn’t.

*And what about Richard Leighton? Do you knowRichard Leighton?*

Yeah.

*Umm.*

Well, vaguly.

*Vaguly?*

Yeah

*And was he, was he, what do you remember about him?*

Erm, well, quite an affable person and you know responsible, and you know in the sense of being able to communicate where more hippy type people- I mean to communicate with people in suits and more official people.

*Uhum*

Because more hippy crusty types, may be not acceptable in this communication.

*Uhum, uhum. Where as Mick was more, more involved in the kind of direct action side of things and Richard was a bit more involved in, more like official side of things, is that right?*

Yeah, yeah. Yeah.

*Ok and what about other, what about other characters?*

Well there was Dolly the old lady who lived on Claremont road

*Did you know her?*

Well a little, but not much.

*Did you go to her funeral?*

Yeah. Yeah.

*What do you remember about that?*

Ermmmmm. Well it’s a bit sad [pause]

*Ermmm-*

Because I was, you know, there were some people who were very friendly with Dolly, but its more people who were sort of talkative people, and I’m not very, I’m not that talkative really. I mean I’m not a great socialiser, sort of. I mean on one on one or smaller groups, but I’m not very outgoing socially

*So how did you, how did that work when you were living in these big squats full of people? How did that-*

Because if you live in the same house then you can’t help but socialise

*Yeah, but did you enjoy that?*

Yeah. But I know I was never living in very big groups….

*OK*

Cos…you know if it’s..always under 20…under 20 is…not very big groups.

*So you were alright with that…yeah?*

*Ehm I want to ask you as well….I want to move on from the M11as well and hear a little bit about life post M1! but is there anything else that’s kind of important that you think that we should talk about… about the M11 ?*

[Long Pause] I can’t remember anything

*What was there..was there a point when you…you…..*

Oh yeah for me personally…There were some people who thought the protest would stop the road…but I knew that that wouldn’t happen cos …you know…it would be a loss of face..to the authorities and the police..for it…for the protest to be successful so I always understood that it was a more sym..I mean it was a war of attrition with money.. a symbolic protest and the idea being that we spend very little money. I mean our resources are very minimal and their resources are very maximal and we make them broke ..that was the modus operandi of the protest.

*And do you think…did you understand that right from very early on?*

Well from about the middle of the protest…yeah I understood this...yeah

*But do you think.. most other people thought that it was…*

No, not everybody but there were people who believed that maybe they could stop it,.but I knew that wouldn’t happen

*Was there lots of… I mean…aside from like obviously the partying and the protest and the art and the creativity was there a lot of…. kind of talking in terms of ..you know figuring out your politics or*

Oh no it was absolutely people’s free choice. There wasn’t political correctness or..or persuasion… there was no struggle over the political narrative or the cultural narrative…it was everybody’s choice*…*

*And what about kind of conflict around about …Was there..Do you remember any..any..kind of conflict.. around..I guess the different ways that people chose to enact their cultural… erm.. .whatever you just said narrative… Their cultural/ political narrative. Were there different cultural/political narratives and was there any tension around that?*

Well the cultural.. the tension was not about people’s free expression, it was about…erm.. if people’s irresponsibility caused other people a problem.

*That was like….that was a big focus of..*

It wasn’t a big focus but sometimes.. and I would say on Claremont Road there was a problem of ..of the lunchouts versus the active construction people.. the people who wanted a lot of activity and work done and the people who…were…not taking an active part but smoking and drinking and drugging …

*And did that ever get kind of heated..or was it always managed fairly.....*

Occasionally,,,it got heated occasionally, yeah .

*Do you have any specific memories of that?*

Errr no.Cos I wasn’t living on Claremont Road but I was there…

*But you were…was it ever an issue where you were living…in the places where you were living?*

Well I’m a person who likes tidying up..so.. and there was people who were lunchouts…who were… who don’t do any tidying, but there wasn’t any conflict really because I would tidy and they might.. might make a few sarcastic comments but that’s about it so…

*They’d make sarcastic comments so?*

[Laughs]so….

*I guess I’m just thinking about the politics of living together and how….*

No, there was problem with the politics of living together at all

*Never?*

because it was people’s choice although there was sometimes discussion but it was never… it was never animosityit was just.. talking… you know…discussion

*Did you have.. kind of meetings…I don’t necessarily just mean kind of…*

There were.. there were meetings….but I’m not a meeting person and I don’t care for meetings.. so…

*Political or otherwise?*

On the M11 there wasn’t political meetings there were organisational or planning meetings there was no political cultural correction meetings.

*And what about..what about in individual houses…did people have meetings in individual houses about ..you know..living situations.*

No…[laughs] absolutely not. It was just a free for all and people went with the groups they wanted to be with. The thing was, there was loads of different squats so people could choose

*So there were some squats that were full of very active organised types?*

Yeah

*And others that were much more party*

Yeah

*Party-like?*

Yeah, there was all sorts of…people gravitated to the people they felt comfortable with [Coughs]

*And what ..I don’t…I’m not sure if I’ve exactly asked you this question about the….how the local residents responded …or how..or what they thought….was it different in the three areas, Wanstead, Leyton and Leytonstone….do you think there was a different reception from the locals in those three places?*

Well there wasn’t so much…. There was not much Leytonstone locals ..

*There weren’t…there weren’t many locals…*

From Leytonstone.

*Who were.. who were involved or who were affected or who were…*

Who were involved

*Right*

I’m… and it was more quiet, the Leytonstone part…but Wanstead was where the most the more locals were … you know it was more…there was a big lot of Wanstead locals

*Who got involved?*

Yeah

*That’s interesting and were they so were they quite active?*

Yes they were quite active

Yeah, yeah. They were quite active yeah… and because there was the thing about George Green and it was quite a focus…and.. yeah there weren’t so many locals in Leyton and Leytonstone.

*So in terms of….so so you’re saying in Wanstead there were lots of locals who actually got involved in the campaign, in the protesting . What about those local in all three areas who didn’t necessarily get massively involved but.. but… what do you think that their feelings were towards the activists who were…*

Ahm… I think standoffish.

*In all three places?*

Yeah.. well …it was a barrier that was.. for them .. too much of a barrier

*That were a cultural difference.*

Yeah

*That’s what you mean by the barrier and so*

Stepping across become part of this thing.

*What do you think people on the inside…you know the activists, the protestors, what do you thein they thought about the locals. Was there much attempt on their part to engage with the local people or not so much….*

Na I think, no well I don’t think there was that much attempt to engage, but then in Claremont Road there were some days, days where it was open for the public, where for….well it’s always open…but I mean specifically on a Sunday street parties for people to just turn up and locals came ..

*Did they? Locals.. local families*

With their families and…then one of the problems was the kind of crusty hippy thing…was..a barrier to local people mixing.

*Was there..was that..were they a really big group that big part of the…*

Oh yeah yeah, yeah. Yeah it was like…………..

*So at what point did …do you think that people really understood that the that the battle to prevent the M11..the M11 link road being being built was.. at what point did they really understand that that battle had been lost?*

Erm..well I think after Claremont Road.

*Yeah. And does Claremont Road.. is Claremont Road really like the end of it?*

No

*No*

No it wasn’t the end. It carried on ..it seen.

*So that was 9..?*

4

*4 oh yeah*

That was November 94 wasn’t it and it carried on in into….. at least until the summer 95…and I think it was kind of the end of of ..of the summer 95 …it carried on till then …

*In..in*

But it was a lot less. It was lower key.

*So it was more just like individual protests.. rather than a kind of constant opposition.*

It was a lot less people and less active.

*So in the final years of the road actually being built ….because I mean it wasn’t actually built until 98…99?*

Yeah. XXX My brother was actually working on it.[Laughs] I forgot that .

*As a construction worker?*

Yeah. But he was also working at Twyford Down

*As a construction worker?*

And the real pity is that I didn’t sell the real story to The Sun or The Mail because ..cos I could have made some money out of that.

[Laughter]

Because …you know.. it could have been…brother against brother in the eco war with a photo of him in his construction gear and me with my hippy crusty clothes looking at each other, you know …

*Xxxx story*

One is an unemployed drop out and one is like…yeah a construction worker..

*Were you… what was your relationship with your brother like during that time?*

Ahhhm…. Not confrontational in any way, no.

*Was it friendly? Was it*

It was OK. yeah it was OK. I mean but we weren’t really close but… and I met him once in Wanstead coming up Eastern Avenue [cough] and he had his reflector jacket on and I thought it was some security guard from the M11 and I sort of reacted a bit psychologically and then I looked oh it’s my brother… you know..[laughs] … so and then we had a chat and..

*What did he think of you and your lifestyle?*

Oh right , well what he said it was that when he was at Twyford Down, him and his mate used to go to the camp sometimes.. and join in with the camp ..and… and he said it’s not the politics is not to do with them because they’re just told where to work and he said that he would quite happily build [cough] non-destructive projects. I mean he would quite happily build projects that are not threatening the environment but he..he doesn’t get a choice .. as to where he works.

*MMM. So he was quite …. Kind of happy with the way… he wasn’t…he didn’t have a problem with the way you were choosing to live your life.*

No

*And did you…did you have a problem?*

I don’t think so.

*Did you have a problem with what he was doing?*

No

*No. So quite …*

Cos there were… there was people in the construction and in the security and other authorities who XXXX some on our side or sort of favourable or. ..They weren’t against us and some were more on our side than…

*And did they play a sort of role in your…in the tactics of your protest?*

Yeah cos there was tip offs …you know…people…if there’s going to be a big eviction .....someone in the police or someone… tip… tipping off …

*And do you remember specific instances where that happened?*

Yeah….cos there was the… eviction of George Green …the chestnut tree …well Claremont eviction…everyone knew about that …I mean

*And that… that was the result of a tip off?*

Yeah… I mean a lot of the big actions or evictions had tip offs [Cough] but then I think there was some money involved as well because …if…they get a lot more work …out of a good eviction with a lot more protestors there ….it lasts longer and they get more overtime and the security want to keep working ….. so it’s in their interests for the people…. There was one in more latter days of the protest .. they… the security were paying ..paid some money for people to do actions.

*Security paid money for people to do actions?*

Yes

*So they just approached….*

Someone in the pub in Wanstead …..someone I… a friend of mine … and they offered money in exchange for actions because they would lose… they were afraid…they were think… they were going to be made redundant.

*Wow..so did..what was the response to that?*

Yeah… they took the money.

{1.22.3}

*The took the money and did the actions [laughs]*

Yeah

*Probably would have done the actions anyway, erm, oh that’s great. And how about the other way round? Were there… do you think that there were undercover police?*

Oh, has to of been, absolutely yeah. Absolutely must have been, I mean I never knew any but then I wasn’t worried at all because I’m not doing anything illegal, or wrong as I see it, you know

*But was there a sense of… paranoia?*

Not from me

*Not from you*

There might have been a few people but I was never bothered about that at all because… I’m not doing anything wrong as I see it in the sense of… you know

*But what about just in terms of like… erm… sabotaging protests?*

Aha! … but then the people who were doing that were careful about doing it… with people they knew or on their own or… and the meetings for planning things, surprise things, were done with a core group and not, no one was told [coughs] in order to, yeah, guard against informants

*Mmm, but I mean if they’re good informants I guess they would get right into the…*

Try to get into the core group, but… no because the core group was… there was a problem with that in RTS later because that was after some years or later but in the M11 the core group formed quite early and there was no way that the people could get in the core group

*So was there just one core group or were there diff… there must have…*

Erm… there might be more, there was at least one maybe more

*And how many people did that consist of roughly?*

[sighs]… well I dunno, sort of three to five, or something like this

*And they were, when you say the core group you mean they were the people that were planning the most…*

Yeah

…*sort of radical direct action?*

Exactly, yeah

*And can you say what group they were likely to be from? Were they Dongas? Were they Earth Firsters?*

Erm… well I think I know who some of the people were

*I assume you don’t want to say their names…*

I’m not going to say their names, no [laughs]

*Yeah, can you say the groups that they were affiliated with? Or not? Or would you rather not do that as well?*

Well there’s some in the office, I mean, yeah there was the office and then maybe… phew… but they were more the organisational heads

*Yeah, yeah*

And more to do with Alarm UK and Earth First and this sort of stuff

*Yeah, but you know there were people like erm… Mark Stone later on*

Mmm

*You know Mark Kennedy?*

Oh yeah

*That’s why I’m sort of thinking about people really getting, because he was…*

Aha!

*…right in the core, wasn’t he?*

Yeah but that’s different to the M11 because… the people… the police, authorities… didn’t have time to get their people in place before the core group formed. I mean maybe they did… I’m not sure, but I think, you know. I think that the core group had already formed and it’s too late for them to infiltrate

*Yeah. And they kept that core group kind of closed?*

Yeah absolutely

*Throughout the entire thing?*

Yeah

*Yeah. And so was it just them doing those actions? Or was there a way of including…*

No, no, it was…

*…other people in the actions?*

But it was them who controlled the information

*Yep*

About the location

*So how was that information accessed by other people?*

Well it was sent… no I mean… you can say there’s gonna be an action but you don’t announce the location

*Right ok, until…*

Until the last minute

*The last minute*

Yeah

*Hmm. But the… as far as you know, you don’t know who, you don’t know, you’ve got know…*

Well I think I know some of the people yeah, but I’m not saying their names [laughs]

*No, no, no, no… I’m not asking about core groups, I’m asking about erm… police*

Ah, informants?

*Yeah, you don’t… as far as you know*

I don’t know any

*You don’t know of anyone*

No, I don’t know any informants, no. Because I once really thought about that during my time in the protest

*Mmm*

And only… later on when someone said that guy was informer or… that you know… there was a photo and they said “that guy is an informer”, and I looked at the photo and I looked but I didn’t know which person they meant and I tho… I thought “is it that guy there?” and I thought… and it was not anyone I knew usually or… so. So, no I’ve got no clue who any of the informants were

*But you’re sure that there were?*

Of course, oh there’s got to have been! [laughs] yeah, course

*Yeah. Um… ok… so when did you move out of the area, when did you stop squatting along the M11 route?*

Mmm… ooh… I stopped because I went on camps… protest camps… around Britain [coughs]

*What camps did you go to?*

Well there was the… A30 in Devon, then there was… the M65 in Lancashire… then there was… the open cast mining… in Wales, south Wales… and er… Newbury

*And so how long were you in each of those places for, were you there for like a considerable spell each time?*

Erm… I wouldn’t say a considerable spell, no but I sort of…

*What are we talking? Like days, weeks, months, years? [laughs]*

No, no it was like months, yeah months, months. Yeah months in each place, or more or less, some less, some more

*Mmm*

And it was good ‘cos it got me around Britain then

*Yeah, and was it lots of the same people in all of those places?*

No, some of the same, but there was a lot of different people as well

*Mmm, and was that kind of local people, I guess who were…*

Yeah, some local and some from other places who’d, you know, from around Britain and [makes swooshing noise], yeah

*And… how long did you do that for?*

Er… till… well it was like ’96… well it started in ‘95

*The travelling around stuff in ’95?*

Yeah, well no actually it started in ’94, but… sort of living more longer on the camps in ninety… yeah… like… ’95, the second half of ’95 and then all of ’96, and then half of ’97, yeah

*And then, erm, and then after that did you come…*

Then I moved into a squat in South Woodford in North East London, which is just near the protests, kind of [coughs] with some people I knew from the protest and some other people who already living there. That was a post-process, post-protest [laughs]

*[laughs] post-protest squat?*

Yeah. Post-protest, I was squatting and… going to rave parties… and sometimes protests… but not full time anymore, and then some working… cash in hand jobs

*What kind of work were you doing?*

Ah, like, cemetery and building work and…

*So what was the cemetery work that you did? What did you do in the cemetery?*

Grave-digging and grass cutting, picking litter

*And so is that how you got your current nickname?*

Yeah, Gravedigger

*Gravedigger. So does everyone just call you Gravedigger?*

No [laughs] some people, yeah some people

*Some people call you John? Is John your real name?*

Yeah

*So who is it that know you as Gravedigger?*

Erm… samba people

*Ah yeah, we haven’t talked about samba. How did you get involved in samba?*

Erm… it was because… in the squat that I lived four and a half years, in South Woodford…

*That was the post-protest squat?*

Yeah, yeah. There was this Italian woman who moved in and she was doing samba… ‘cos she was at… she’d been at UEL, University of East London, where… they started up a protest samba band, they needed, they had an occupation… against closing some of the courses on the faculties and… and then the band carried on after… it was established as Barking Batteria… it’s called the band. And I think it was the second samba band in London, the first was London School of Samba, who play purist samba and then Barking Batteria plays afro-reggae or samba-fusion… and does more… and does festivals, protests, er…

*And what about the other one… does samba tend to be associated with political things?*

Yeah because, a great… an ideal place to play samba is… on the streets during a protest march is one of the best places to play… and… and… you know it’s not a paid gig, but… people are not going to stop you turning up [laughs] I mean it’s… one of the… and the audience are there people like you, and also people are… up for protesting…

*So you’ve been playing with that samba band ever since?*

Yeah

*… that Italian woman turned up in the squat…*

Well, there’s… yeah through her that I… she told me the address of the UEL room 201, in the East Building to go there, and like yeah

*So you just turned up there one day?*

Yeah

*And… joined?*

Mmm

*And do they still meet at the… in room 101?*

No, luckily

*001?*

We’ve got out of there at last [laughs]

*Where do you meet now?*

Well the band split into two

*Ok*

[coughs] because… one of the reasons it split was because the sort of de facto chairman was kind of retiring… this man called Lionel Simms… and… there was these people who were kind of… festival… like going to Burning Man festival but the European one, or even the American one… but they were sort of into these clothes, wearing these freaky clothes… but even in their normal lives, not just… in the festivals and on samba… and they formed like a group within a group, and… they sort of took over the organisation and, but there was a problem of Lionel’s power base and their power base, and it led to a split

*So which one, which band are you with now, the freaky clothes?*

Well the thing is that Lionel sort of retired… and… except he’s still plays in Avebury at the solstice, ‘cos his part of this Avebury… solstice camp and there’s a lot of organised… I mean a lot of organisation involved… through the whole year meetings to make this camp happen

*Mmm*

So he’s doing this, and… and um… there’s one… there’s a band that meets in Tottenham, in a community centre called T-Chances, a music venue [coughs] and there’s the sort of festival freak people, but I don’t mean that in a negative way [laughs]

*No, no, I know*

They’re the two parts of the split and I like both groups, but… I can’t… I haven’t got enough energy to go to both practices, so I go to the Tottenham one

*And how often do you go?*

Once a week

*Once a week*

And then we play gigs and…

*Protests?*

Yeah, but we done… the… the festival freaks… they don’t really do much protesting… they’re more into… party gigs or… showbiz gigs… and we’re more into community, or protest gigs. ‘Cos that was part of the problem in the split as well…

*Erm… anything else you want to… oh, I wanted to ask… I just wanted to ask how your time on the M11 has kind of… what impact that’s had on your life and now?*

[child starts crying in background] Well it… it… opened up… whole new areas to do with…

*Shall I go and help with that… that sounds like a buggy that…*

Oh yeah, well I don’t know [both laugh]. But… you know when I was in Brighton the alternative scene opened me up to a lot of new things and then went I went to the M11 that was like many more times multiplied… of… I mean I [coughs]

**[third person speaks inaudibly]**

*Hello… we’re recording but that’s fine [laughs]*

Say, you know, Brighton was kind of the anti-chamber, like the foyer… and when I went to the M11 it was the main hall… and my life really changed a lot and affected me a lot, you know, and I did 7 years of squatting and did the rave parties living on camps, protesting

*Mmm*

Travelling… drugs… like especially mushrooms, like…and er… and I… you know I feel that… I’m not so compatible with… a regular job

*So, working at the cemetery works well for you does it?*

Yeah, ‘cos it’s part-time and it’s… ‘cos my boss says I’m unemployable, well he thinks I’m in a normal job not employable or something, but he’s a really good boss, but he was on the M11

*Ok…*

He was on the M11 aswell

*So did you know him at the time?*

Vaguely… not as a friend… sort of knew him vaguely, yeah

*And is he, do you consider him a friend now?*

Oh absolutely yeah, he’s a friend now definitely, yeah yeah yeah. ‘Cos we know each other really well now and ‘cos I’ve been working since ‘98

*So do you actually, he’s out there with you?*

Not all the time but…

*But sometimes you’re actually working together it’s not just….*

Oh yeah, yeah, yeah

*…like in an office somewhere*

Oh yeah, ‘cos… he’s working, you know, not in the office

*What’s his name?*

Patrick

*Patrick. Did you mention him earlier? I feel like you mentioned the name Patrick earlier*

He gave me Doreen’s number

*He gave you Doreen’s number?*

But I said about you could do an interview, but he didn’t seem so keen on it

*Was he heavily involved?*

Er…. I think he was not full-time

*Mmm*

But he was a building worker and he got involved, yeah

*So he says you’re unemployable? [laughs]*

Yeah [laughs], that’s what he thinks [laughs]

*Did you ask him for that information, for that opinion, or did he just…*

No, he just gave it, he just said, yeah

*And what do you think about that?*

Er… I don’t know if I’m unemployable in an official job

*But you’re happy doing… doing the work that you’re doing? You enjoy it?*

Yeah because… I do the music and with the samba, I’m like entertaining a lot of people so I feel… I’m making a contribution to London… to the life of the city

*Hmm*

I mean, what I mean is that… I’m playing for… like on these protest marches… the playing is not just for the protesters, it’s for all the tourists, the onlookers, anyone who’s in central London on the route of the march… it’s for everybody and it’s for free, you know and… I think it’s good to have that music, you know, street music, for everybody [laughs] like

*Yeah*

And if I was working full-time, I couldn’t probably have the energy to do that, you know. It’s something I’ve thought myself was about the loose sweepings of all these loose sweepings… around Britain being gathered on to the M11… and… and especially people who are on the borderline between middle class and working class, who… don’t have a firm place in society, are more open to… this kind of protest

*Do you think it’s just class that’s the… do you think that you’re on the border of? Or are there other kind of ways in which you’re kind of, people who get drawn into protests are sort of in between different things?*

Another factor is people who have… erm… different cultures in their background… people who are not… like stereotypically… English or… culturally kind of English or…

*So you think that there’s maybe something about just not quite knowing where you fit…*

Yeah

*…in the world that makes protest quite an appealing… direction?*

Yeah, ‘cos… if you had… more of erm… a very solid framework, you’d be less… you wouldn’t be so inclined, or even physically possible to drift off and go to the protests…

*Mmm*

Because your place would be solidly established….maybe you wouldn’t even have the freedom…I mean…possibly…er…

*So did you ..do you kind of see that as an advantage then? That…*

Errr….I’ve what I call these settlers and searchers theory.

*Tell me about the settlers and searchers.*

Well it’s like…I think in society it’s really important to have the settlers and the searchers and both are important and I….and both should respect each other and not… the searchers are people who is not attached to the…solid conventions of society and ..the settlers are the people who..have…conventionally…tend to be conventionally following their place in society and the settlers are very important….vitally important ……cos the framework of the country can’t happen… but then the searchers have an important role to play in bringing…of going beyond…to new frontiers and to play music, to do protest…to search out and then… ..they’re called the searchers…to have the freedom to go off and…bring riches back….for the .. for the whole comm..for the settlers and everybody..

*Hmmm*

And there shouldn’t be this animosity.. between the two which there is..is…you know…there is….some people amount of animosity but …but maybe only a minority. But then the problem is the media try to play on the differences

*Why do the media do that?*

Because they enjoy…playing on self-righteous indignation…to sell papers…

*So are you a searcher or a settler?*

Erm…searcher…[Laughs]…but then all the rest of my family is settlers…and I respect them…for that..you know

*Erm…Are you living in a house now?*

Yeah

*Are you living in a settled flat now? Is that…..Was that… kind of.. what made you decide to live ..like..this instead?*

Alright.. it’s…when my girlfriend got pregnant…the kitchen was too dirty..so.. had to move out..you know…cos like then…the idea of washing baby’s bottles in that kitchen..

*So was that was that in the squat?*

Yeah…in South Woodford…cos there’s people who don’t tidy much…or some people you know…and also you feel like more privacy..when you have your own family and…also there’s people’s problems manifesting…confrontations sometimes…erm…but some people live with kids in squats and it’s not a problem for them…but for me personally I can’t deal with the untidiness…so ..you know….cos I like..you know …I like to be tidy. I like it…[Laughs]..

*Yeah. And so do you think you’ll…you’ll…return to a more nomadic way of life ever?*

No…

*You’re..you’re..quite happy being settled now?*

Yeah…..And as you get older you get set in your routines you get …and I find plenty to do in London…there’s absolutely so much going on in London…musically and protest and..and all sorts of stuff so there’s no problem of stuff to do.

*Mmmm. Shall I..are we..turn this off again*

Alright ..yeah *.*

*Unless you’ve got*

No..no more..

*I’m really glad I turned it back on.*

Alright.

*…*

**Name of interviewee: John Frost (John the Cook)**

**Project: Voices of Leytonstonia**

**Date of interview: 05/10/2015**

**Language: English**

**Venue: Interviewee’s house -**

**Name of interviewer: Polly Rodgers**

**Length of interview: 108:46 minutes**

**Transcribed by: Maxwell Hopkinson/Holly …/Margaret …**

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