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*Interviewer*

Interviewee

Yeah okay

*Yeah good to go so…*

So I am my name is John Ellis j-o-h-n e double l i-s. I was born the 1st of June 1952 and I was born in Islington in London, North London.

*Excellent, so can you start by telling me anything about your early childhood memories?*

Yeah, I was my first real memories are from when I was living with my parents in Kentish Town. In a house a classic sort of London, post-war London house with myself my mum and dad lived on the top for floor. My gran and grandad lived on the next floor down and my uncle and auntie lived in a classic London house and then when I was about erm seven or eight erm my dad my parents bought a house in a place called Colindale which is very close to Edgware. So we moved out to Colindale which is on the Northern Line and erm then about five years after that we moved to a place called Kingsbury which is near Wembley, which is where my Mother still lives. So my youth was based in that part of North London so unit, until I moved out and went to er live in Crouch End that’s that’s where I spent my youth basically.

*And what did you do when you went to move to live in Crouch End?*

Well I lived there because I was doing art at erm horn well it, it was Middlesex Polytechnic but it had been know has Hornsey College of Art. I did my foundation course at Chelsea School of Art but I was still living with my mum and dad at the time and then when I moved to when I started studying at Hornsey I found a little flat in Crouch Hill which is where I lived for a very very long time actually until I moved into the East End of London.

*Where you in erm that flat by yourself?*

Yeah, I lived by myself on a top floor and it was a….it was where I lived and where I worked so I had a little recording studio in the corner of the room and erm but I eventually when I became a professional musician I was away so much it really matter. So, I lived there from about 1974 to probably about 19 well I kept it until about 1998, so probably twenty years I was there.

*And that was the first house you moved into after leaving home?*

That was yes

*That’s amazing*

And then erm then I eventually moved in with my partner into the house in Colegrave Road which is what we are gonna probably talk quite a lot about.

*Mostly what we’re going to talk about*

And then [laughs] and then when that house got demolished to make way for the M11…M11 link road we were lucky enough to, my parents lent is a deposit and this house was a re-possession so it was quite cheap and at that time this area was not a great area so we were very lucky. And we had a child a one year old daughter, so when we saw this house because it had such beautiful long garden we saw the potential for a family and we were lucky enough to buy this house.

*And you’ve been here ever since*

And we’ve been here for twenty two years now

*Fantastic, okay lets go back to the house in Crouch Hill*

Uh-huh

*Can you erm can you tell me a little bit more about that house? Can maybe just describe what the…*

Yeah it was erm, really it was a house over a shop. So er the shop er it’s a bottom of a road called Crouch Hill so at the other end of Crouch Hill you’ve got Crouch End which is now one of the most sort of poncey parts of London full of media people.

*[Laughs]*

And the church that the Eurythmics owned and it was very it was when I first moved in it wasn’t anything but you know as gradually As I was living there become more and more gentrified as did the whole area around my flat. So my flat was in above a XXXX shops erm very close to erm er Crouch Hill Railway Station and it was just very interesting watching the area change over the years, become slowly more gentrified actually but it was nice living there it was great when I was a young guy…groovy time lots of parties and the stuff that young people do.

*And I know it might seem like a silly question because we kind of all know what the markers of gentrification are, but can you talk at all if is there anyway*

Yeah it’s always the

….In specific way

It’s the kind of cafes that open and then it’s the kind of shops that’s open and then it’s the kind people you see walking around and it’s it’s incremental isn’t it. Erm around here for

example the markers are definitely the pubs, the kind of that are opening and the kind of cafes that are opening and that exactly what happened in Crouch Hill. There was an old dairy when I first moved in there was very very old dairy right on the corner, had the most amazing mural er murals on the outside wall. Erm eventually that got turned into a pub a pub you know these are like the early days of taking old buildings and changing them into erm into bars and restaurants.

*Hmm*

Whereas before all the local pubs would be purpose built pubs and you know Victorian Edwardian boozers but this was the…the shape of things to come. Taking interesting buildings and turning them into restaurants and gastro-pubs and then erm then another place opened which was an organic you know that’s the other one ‘organic’ because it’s expensive so you know people they’ve worked out local people can afford it so it’s just these little things, little signposts.

*Hmm and you said that you were studying art?*

Yes I was doing…

*At the beginning of that the period*

Yeah I was doing a Graphic Design degree at erm as I said technically it was Middlesex Polytechnic but just swapped over form being Hornsey College of Art to being Middlesex Polytechnic

*And what where you particularly interested in? What was your focus during your studies?*

I was…illustration mostly illustration but I was there with erm some very interesting people Adam Ant was one of my mates there and erm a very famous erm advertising guy now called Daniel Kleinman we were all very close friends and erm but that’s when I started my my band I had a little I started a band called The Vibrators just towards the end of my degree and erm we got sucked up into the punk movement and so we found you know that ourselves a big proper record deal. And so I had to decide whether I wanted to be a sort okay illustrator or go off and do rock and roll which you no was a bit of a no brainer. Adam made the right choice actually he stayed and did his degree before he went to be Adam Ant but erm I jumped ship with a term to go for my degree and erm went off to be a rock n roll person.

*Excellent*

Which is kind of what I did for thirty five years

*And do you think that was the right decision [laughs]?*

Well sometime mostly I do but it would have been nice to have a technically have a degree because of course that kind of would enabled me to teach it would of made life a bit easier.

But when I phone them up and said look ‘I need to know what my status is’ they’d lost all my records so as far as there concerned I was never there anyway. So a classic sort of office stuff

*Uhum, so tell me about The Vibrators and how they met?*

Well we were a bunch of mates who er we’d know each other I went to school with the bass player and erm I kinda knew the guy who eventually became a singer because he was erm, he was the cousin of a very good friend of mine. So we all knew each other you know we were all face on the scene. And I just fancied I had already put together some bands previously to that and I just got a bit bored and I thought it would be nice to have a little band to play at weekends. So we we came together we learnt a load of stuff very quickly, it was just covers of other people stuff but punk was beginning to happen at the same time and because of the way we played and the material we kinda got lumped in with punk thing and we ended up headlining the second night of the famous 100 Club Punk Festival and er as a result of that we got a record deal. First of all with Mickie Most er was a very famous record producer then we jumped ship and went to Epic Records and did two I did two albums with the band at that point.

*So you keep saying you got lumped together with the punk movement. Did you not see yourselves as part of the scene?*

No we never no because well its whole other story you know that’s a whole debate is how musical movements come up and are constructed. I mean punk was if [mumbles] if you know if we’re really cynical it was a construct to sell records you know, record labels were looking for new thing and people like erm Malcolm McLaren realised that there was a way of doing something interesting, I mean punk had been going in America in New York for quite a long time anyway so a lot of people will always if you want t be in the music business you’ll find something too hook on to, I am a country music artist or I am jazz artists it’s a genre thing. But we were just doing our thing and other people were saying ‘oh there like a there a punk band there a punk band’ we never we didn’t set out to be anything other than I mean sadly that’s partly why we didn’t succeed, we were just a bunch of mates who wanted to have a good time. But of course all around us was a bunch of young people who wanted to be pop stars however they did whatever the close they’re wearing so they were quite ambitious and focused we didn’t care we just have a laugh. And it all happened around us so we got kind of sucked into the vortex of it all.

*And so what was your what was your thing? Can you tell can you just tell me a bit about the music or about what forms of music?*

Oh we were doing like Beatles covers of we’d do like Interstellar Overdrive by the Pink Floyd and go straight into the Day Tripper by The Beatles oh we might do some Tornado stuff but then we would also do some Iggy Pop stuff so it was kind of mish mash. That was before we started ti write our own thing and then we’d start to write some of own own songs as well which we gradually incorporated in fact the whole the first albums was all our own material and got a XXXX

*And what kind of things were feeding into that material? I mean what was the scene…*

Well all of our well first of all the things that feed into material as a songwriter is you know that’s unfathomable really it’s the stuff you hear in the womb from to stuff you like to stuff you chose to go and see their stuff your parents like stuff you hear on the radio. So that’s the big feeding but erm we were as I say we just wanted to play music that was loud brash fast and was fun to play really.

*Hmm*

Guitar driven fun music

*And were you political in anyway?*

Na no

*Cool okay, so then you went off and got your got your record deal*

Yeah

*And made two albums*

Off around the world, touring everywhere doing recording that was the classic thing that you do when you’re in a band you make records and you tour

*Did you enjoy that time?*

Yeah, but I was also still some illustration work I I illustrated the second album cover for example that we did and I did all our a lot of our artwork

*Hmm*

So for me I always wanted to try and mix my interest in art with my interest in music and I still do as far as I am concerned its just art whether it sound or visual or moving or whatever

*Hmm it’s a creative outlet*

Absolutely

*Yeah*

Absolutely

*And how long did that go on for that phase of your life?*

Well I left I left The Vibrators in about 1978-79 and then I did lots of stuff I worked with bass from The Stranglers. I actually played in The Stranglers for a little while before I actually became a Strangler and joined The Stranglers full time for ten years. But I also around that time I was working I worked for two years with Peter Gabriel and I worked with another amazing artists called Peter Hammill. So I was working with lots of different people and I released erm a two solo singles so yeah I was just doing music.

*Hmm*

Doing stuff I liked

*And so you’re a guitarist?*

I am a guitarist but I am also a songwriter

*Okay, so were you writing the material for the songs for The Vibrators?*

Some of them yeah I write some of the songs and then erm I was just a guitarist with Gabriel and Hammill er when I eventually joined The Stranglers fulltime I was a songwriter. So you know you just [yawns] get paid to do stuff and if someone doesn’t want you to write, just wants you to play guitar that’s what I do. But if someone wants you to write that’s what you do.

*Hmm so what was it like being in The Stranglers?*

Pshhh had its moments [laughs] that’s a whole other interview

*And that’s a whole other interview [laughs] yeah I am just trying to touch on various different points in your life*

That’s true I understand it

*Erm in all of that time you you were still in the erm Crouch Hill flat?*

No erm no I was in the Crouch Hill flat up until the end of the period that I worked with Peter Gabriel. When I stopped working with Peter Gabriel I had a couple of years off from music and did things like mini cab driving and that sort of stuff erm and that then I eventually move in with my partner who I met by then and who was living in the house in Colegrave Road so that’s when I came I kept the studio on as a work space because it was very cheap and it was easy to get to, but I lived over in Colegrave Road.

*And how did you meet you partner?*

[Laughs] we met strangely at a strip club because a friend of mine we had a mutual friend who was a topless waitress at a strip club and I went there with a mate of mine that knew this topless waitress and Elaine my partner had come down from Glasgow for the weekend to hang out with her mate who was the topless waitress. So we just got talking at the bar so it’s just one of those funny things

*That’s a good that’s a good story [laughs]*

Yeah

*Erm so you got talking at the bar?*

And we just got on and we liked each other and erm I relationship developed from there. It was a bit difficult she was living in Glasgow at the time. Eventually she moved down to London to manage a shop so that enabled us to have see more of each other and she and so she started to live in Colville Road that she found that place in Colville Road because a friend of hers was living there I think at the time.

*And so when she got the place in Colegrave Road did she know that at that point the link road was going to happen?*

She knew it was a a short-let

*She knew it was a short-let yeah*

But nobody knew when if and when the link road was going to happen

*Did she have any idea of how? Was she told was she given…*

…Erm well I think you’ll have to ask her I can’t remember

*Sure*

Ask Elaine when she comes back in if you speak to her

*So how long was Elaine there before you moved in?*

I think she was there two or three years before I moved in and then there was also another friend of hers from Glasgow living with her so it was her at the same time. So I moved in there kept the flat on in Crouch End until I couldn’t afford it anymore and then erm in fact in fact I think I kept the flat on until we were living here. I still had it when we were living here if I remember correctly in fact definitely

*And you were using it as your studio?*

Yeah it’s a workspace it’s great because it was cheap. There was rent control and everything but gradually the eventually the landlord managed to get out the rent control things that started to put the rent up so eventually I had to get rid of it. So now I work from this is my my bedroom is my workspace now.

*Hmm and so when you were in Colegrave let’s talk about Colegrave Road because that sort of the focus of the interview*

Hmm Hmm

*Tell me about the house?*

It was a classic Victorian house that had been converted into a upstairs flat and downstairs flat. I am not sure if Acme had done that or when that had happened but we lived in the upstairs flat and it was number I think it was number six we were the third house a long from the station. It was lovely beautiful tree lined street we had a lovely big tree outside were we watched pigeons nest all the time like really close for the station for getting into London. It was idyllic really

*Hmm*

It was fantastic and erm the back the back room was the bathroom and that overlooked the cemetery and er the railway line it was lovely

*And XXXX*

And to be honest we we weren’t really we didn’t really know very much about the people in the street at that point, we we’d say hello to them and but we weren’t it was such a weird little community because there had been XXXX all their lives and then the artists and various other people in-between so it was a kinda strange. I am weird things would happen like you’d wake up one morning and the street would be full of cows because at that point there was cows grazing on the flats erm and then of course there was the famous er hurricane that blew down all the trees so a lot of amazing things happened in that street.

*Did it blow down trees on Colegrave Road?*

Yeah yeah I was out I was working in Bath at the time and Elaine phoned me up and said ‘I can’t get out the house there’s a tree the trees fallen down and it blocked the way out’ eventually they came and cut it up yeah it was heavy duty actually.

*And were you in an Acme house?*

I think I am pretty sure it was a Acme house it was it if it wasn’t a Acme it was a Department of Transport house. London transport had least it to a housing association where if it was Acme I can’t remember. Because Acme was really for artists.

*Well yeah so is Elaine an artist?*

No

*No, so probably…*

It probably wasn’t an Acme house but it was leased to another housing association. And erm I can’t remember how much the rent was I think at one point we just didn’t pay rent at all eventually which was quite nice.

*And erm what year was it that you moved in do you remember?*

I think I moved in well my daughter was born in 1993 so we were probably there…probably I move din around 91 that sort of period 1991. Ask Elaine she’s got a much better memory about that stuff then I have.

*Yeah that fine erm and you said when you first move din you weren’t too familiar the community or that it felt fragmented is that right?*

Yeah we didn’t know we didn’t go out of our way too meet local people might have been nodded at them of course we knew Richard Leighton he was our neighbour.

*Aha*

So we knew Richard very well to he was very nice and friendly erm but he was probably the only person really knew in the street because we never needed to go out to the other end of the street unless it was to go to the pub erm but we didn’t really know anyone in the pub either so we was kind of our own little but as I said apart from Richard who we got who we knew pretty well

*And did you know his Mother as well then?*

Well she hardly ever went out because she was really really old but yeah we met her loads because occasionally she would come out an stand at the front door so we did know her we knew she was there erm but she was as I said very old. And she I think I believe she was born in that house which quite amazing.

*What about erm people on erm Claremont Road did you know them did you anyone on Claremont Road no?*

No we started to get to know everyone once the campaign kicked off and then everyone knew everyone else but up till then it was just classic London street. You knew a couple of people I mean like around here these these people are great neighbour’s great friends new people next door XXXX great this guy’s let his out to like umpteen people who knows how many people are living there

*[Laughs]*

We know the lady across the…you it’s just London story isn’t it. So you know some people about half of the people you don’t know

*Hmm*

It’s not like the old days or the mythical old days when everybody knew each other and everyone helped each out probably a load bollocks anyway.

*Erm okay so that was 1991 and then the campaign kicked off when?*

Well I mean it’s really its really I can’t kind of get hold of a lot of this stuff so…[Mony?] was born in 1993

*And she was born in the house?*

She was born well we tried to have her born in the house

*Sorry I didn’t actually mean it but I mean you were living there?*

Yeah we were living there she lived there for a year with us. So if she was born in 1993 and the campaign had probably going for at least this my timeline is going all over the place here

*That’s alright*

But it feels like the campaign was about four or five years long, it can’t have been but erm dates Richard is best to ask about, but I bet you he can tell you the exactly the date of the very first meeting we had in church hall

*Ahh*

…When there was about four people there

*So don’t worry about the date but tell me about what you remember about that first meeting?*

Right, so what I remember is Richard banging on our door saying ‘so you want to come to a meeting?’ ‘what about Richard?’ ‘well you know there’s a they are planning to build a road through here?’ ‘no well yeah vague vaguely’ ‘well they are they are going start get going and we I want I think we should sort of have a talk about it what might happen to our houses’ ‘okay we will be there later’ So me and Elaine and Richard was there, probably only two other two or three other people max. So Richard explained what was going on and and he said’ I’d quite like to get a campaign to see what we can do’ so I said ‘look I don’t mind volunteering I’ll be a press officer if you want’ and that was it that little church hall which is still there

*Whats the church?*

It’s a little Methodist church hall on Grove Green Road. And then it picked up pretty quickly from there and that’s how we started to meet people by dropping leaflets and banging on door and asking people to come to meetings and erm yeah

*And what did your role as a press officer entail what were you…*

My job was to let the local press know a we started a campaign and b as the campaign went on to let them know about things we were doing if were doing a stunt or we were doing a protest to get the press and T.V down which of course they were eager because it was very very good copy and it was very good T.V if you pull if you do dress up and you do you know build a cardboard city outside the Department of Transport they love all that stuff so it w an easy sell to the press and media people and erm but you know my job that was my official role but because there was only four of us I was you know we were the people that did the initial research about what happened at the public inquiry what do you do you know there weren’t many of us to find that stuff out

*So it was you and Elaine and Richard*

And a couple of other people

*Do you remember who?*

It might have been she possibly Sheila Whitaker who’s a friend of ours possible Sally Barker who was at that time living with Paul Noble possibly Pauline I can’t remember it was an artist pretty sure there was a couple of artists as well. And then things started to quickly like all did his famous erm blue plaques ‘an artist lives here’ I think people started to get into the idea of that a the road was wrong and b there was a community worth defending but you know one of the things we found out as went around that a lot of people wanted the road because they thought it was going to be good for area good for the economy good for whatever. So you’d be you know you weren’t just fighting the government you were fighting local people who were in favour of it.

*Local people around Colegrave Road?*

Yeah oh yeah a lot of people wanted

*Ohhh*

You know you bang on a house say you ‘you know these houses are coming down to make way for motorway?’ ‘well that’s great these houses are slums anyways’ you know what we need new houses so the motorway will take the traffic of Grove Green Road you know it’s all the selfish reasons really. I guess we were selfish and motivated we didn’t want to see our house get knocked down and of course you have to bringing all the other stuff like pollution and increase in traffic because the more you research the stuff the more you realise just how dreadful motorways are for the environment and when are you going to stop. The classic thing was I did a radio show I think it might have been The Today Programme it’s one of those early morning news interviews and the guy say ‘what are you trying to achieve?’ I just said ‘look I just think we should stop building motorways’ and they kind of looked at me like I was a total idiot but I said ‘okay look if you don’t stop when are you going to stop there has to be a time when there simply no more space left’ so you know you’ve either got to start to address these now or just give up on the environment but people don’t like those kind of arguments because it’s too difficult to deal with you know you have to re-think everything the way you live your life fundamentally.

*Hmmm*

You have to kind of come to the idea that cars aren’t everything and you know you need to invest in public transport. But then you get then you get a row with well if you invest in public transport and the rail is going to go through my back garden its very very very complicated. So yeah we found a lot of actual hostility towards our campaign locally but most of the young people the young artists they all got behind it so then it became a lot apart from tradj a lot of the tragedy of it and the heartbreak and the stress of it a lot of it was fantastic fun, had a great time a lot of the time.

*So it gathered momentum fairly quickly?*

Yes it did I seem to remember it did go and then what happened was a group of campaigners from High Gate heard about us and they stopped a motorway in High Gate and they were pretty clued up. I mean I am not sure what their political motivation was see I think eventually what happened was all sorts of people accrete to the project who had you know who had different political agendas. They weren’t that interested in the road they were anti-government or you know they were from more extreme end of political thinking. But they came along gave us loads of advice and came to some of our meetings they were nice enough people and then we started there was this amazing bloke who was like really famous who’d written a big study on motorways I've forgotten Richard will tell you. He was a really famous erm he was a really famous transport advisor stroke investigator very very famous.

*He’s not the erm Lister Goldsmith that’s the the were architects who planned the cut and cover proposal the cut and cover yeah*

No no this is a guy that was an independent write thinker on transport

*Okay*

And we had two or three people like that like John or my memories gone, we had a guy that’s always on T.V talking about stopping airport runways and stuff so accreted there were local people who just didn’t want to see their house knocked down, there were people erm were philosophically against erm large transport infrastructure there was always people whose politics were just screw the government I am sure we were infiltrated by all sorts of people I am pretty sure our phone were tapped eventually.

*By police?*

Probably the police yeah or the government yeah. Because we were getting under their skin really we really embarrassed them a lot of the time so that we were not in their best XXXX so erm but yes it gathered it quit quickly gathered momentum as soon as you announce your doing this then stuff starts to happen. As soon as your on the T.V with your first protest then everybody know who you are and what’s going on. Local press didn’t like us strangely enough.

*Really?*

No

*Because you were very media savvy as an organisation weren’t you? As a campaign I mean*

Don’t forget there’s two campaigns there’s the Claremont Road punch up part of where everyone was cemented into their house and the previous bit. So I am talking about the previous bit and I would like to think we were media savvy because I was the media person and a press officer but we did know how to get T.V down we did know how to get local papers to write about we did because we put on stunts like we built a cardboard city outside of erm the Department on Transport that got a lot of T.V coverage erm one time we we during the public inquiry because there was a bit were when they take away when then take away public land to build s something like a motorway they have to replace it with land of equal value and we found out the land of equal value they had given us was actually toxic so went there and dug a ld of it up. I put it in a big tub and we took a nuclear waste sticker on it and we dressed up in white boiler suits and we marched into the Town Hall and of course people were going ‘its nuclear waste its nuclear waste’ great T.V of course it wasn’t nuclear waste but all that sort of stuff you just thought of things to do that would really get people going. You know but they they constantly shot themselves in the foot anyway. The very very first public inquiry was strange enough was held in a library up the road we got in there and I saw that all the cables from microphones er where laid out through the chairs of the audience so I phoned the fire brigade and said there’s a fire hazard here they came down and immediately shut it. That put it off for six months that’s must of cost hundreds of thousands of pound to put off. Just because they were absolutely stupid

*Hmm*

They were absolutely stupid those people all the way through. The very last thing that happened judicially I went to the High Court very last thing to appeal my house getting knocked down a judge tore into the Department of Transport you’ve been totally everything I look at is amateur it unbelievable we put on a more professional campaign then they did and they’ve got hundreds of people being paid to do it but we were amateur

So why do you think the road was built in the end?

The road was built in the end because you can’t realistically at that point we didn’t have the. Right well we lost the legal challenge as a result of the public inquiry that’s why it was built it was allowed to be built because we failed to stop it legally. The Claremont Road thing thing that was a sort of temporary hold up if we’d had like I said if we’d of had the internet and more legal people advising us and more money to fight the campaign we might have been able to stop it but that road had been build been thought of for a very long time and you know they there quite a lot of joined up thinking I am pretty sure they people were saying possibly the Olympics and possibly this part of the world was were and this part needs regenerating so there was a massive move to bring that link road to regenerate and your talking about huge business business conglomerates

*Hmm*

We were just a bunch of twenty people with no money no no how to do it we did an amazing job but ultimately. It’s a bit like King Cnut you cannot stop the tide of with only twenty people and no legal knowledge and no money so that’s the thing why it got built because we just failed to stop it

*Erm can you just talk to me a little bit more about the distinction between the Colegrave Road campaign and the Claremont Road campaign?*

Yeah so Colegrave Road and Claremont Road were two roads that both ran parallel to the railway line but separated by some houses. So Claremont Road had been pretty much a lot of the artists more Acme houses there then in Colegrave Road erm and there was also a remarkable old lady called Dolly who was living there who became quite an icon of the whole campaign but once we once we lost the campaign legally the people living there said ‘we’ve lost the campaign’ because a few of the people in Claremont Road had been part of our campaign

*Residents or…*

Residents no they were some were residents some were actual residents and some were artists living in Acme housing. And having lost the legal having lost the legal battle the road officially was going to go ahead so what do you do you say we’ll physically stop it. We’ll stop them knocking the houses down so that’s the differential is that Colegrave Road was really connected to the legal campaign which went on for several years and revolved around the public inquiry Claremont Road was really the protest the physical act of trying to stop them coming in to knock houses down as result of us failing you know to stop the legal process

*To win the legal battle*

To win the legal battle

*Okay so they…*

So there was the reaction to our loss of the battle really

*And they were direct action*

They were direct actions so a lot of those people were people from all over the country the people who who would do direct action anywhere because there political or whatever erm anarchic world view whatever you want so it was the physical campaign to stop the houses being knocked down. Whereas our we fought the legal campaign as it were we didn’t try to stop them physically knocking our house down because and from purely selfish point of view if we had done we would of lost a thousand quid or whatever it was that they were going to give us in compensation so that that’s the different mainly

*Hmm and once you lost the legal battle I mean presumably your house was actually knocked down until after the Claremont Road battle had also taken place an bene lost?*

I’ve got a feeling our house went down before the end of Claremont Road I can’t it’s such a long time ago and I didn’t really keep a diary or anything

*Sure*

But the houses were knocked down bit by bit [banging] along our street

*And was*

…and one house would go and then another house would go and they would still be people living in that house and that house would go. I mean the last the last real big event was erm Mrs Leighton being dragged out the house, so I was still living in we were still living in our house but you know the writing was on the wall we had to go by a certain time which we did. We moved our stuff out to a friends house whilst we were in the process of looking for somewhere to live.

*So you took the compensation?*

Yeah I mean who wouldn’t? You know

*Richard for example [laughs]*

Yeah but that’s up to Richard but you know erm I think I think realistically you have to say I’ve given it my best shot we’ve lost what’s the best we can get out of this rubbish situation, so walking away with a thousand quid as opposed to no quid it’s a no brainer as far as I am concerned. And er we gave it our best shot and I think we really really freaked them out completely

*Hmm*

I’d be really what I’d be really interested to see is all the notes internal notes from the Department of Transport from that time I bet there’s some amazing stuff

*Yeah*

I bet it’s amazing I mean I wonder if its possible to ge tout through the Freedom of Information but I bet you there really bastards M11 because we cost the government millions and millions and millions and millions and it was probably the first they were probably thinking this is a doddle we’ll just get rid of these houses build the road it will be lovely. But suddenly there’s these people a real thorn in their side giving them a real bad time just telling them how illegal their public inquiries are etc etc they didn’t like it.

*So why when you say how illegal their public inquiries were what do you mean?*

Well they because you know public inquiries are supposed to be run through a set of rules. They published the rules before the inquiry happens this is what’s supposed to happen at public inquiries like I said before they’re supposed to put they are supposed to put did I tell you this? Maybe I was telling Oliver okay so one of things they have to do is they have to put all the documentation drawing and maps etc into local public libraries for the public to go look at before the public come along and sit in the inquiries so that’s you’re informed.

*Hmm*

So the very first library we went to didn’t exists it had bene knocked down five years before so that was a lie the first thing we found out so we knew from there on that’s a lie next library have you got the documents ‘ah I think they’re going to send it in a couple of weeks’ it’s all that stuff then you get into another thing in a public inquiry for example is the inspector who sits in the middle who runs the inquiry he’s supposed to be not his officers and room are supposed to be completely separate from any of the any of the people appearing in public inquiry i.e. the Department of Transport. His office was in the Department of Transport office. We had to fight for translations I mean it was just almost everything they did you look in the book and see you out you hand up and say look ‘according to the book your…’ ‘I don’t care we’ll proceed we must proceed’ And when I phoned up the department the Lord Chancellors office because they officially run public inquiries or they did then they really didn’t really lie it that a member of the public was even daring to phone the office. It was a like an a amazing eye opener it was incredible we learnt it was as I said it was incredibly stressful heart breaking people had nervous breakdowns people died before they should of done as a result of the campaign but I got a massive amount out of it its fantastic

*Who died before they should of one as a result of the campaign?*

Well like there was a lady called Mrs XXXX for example who lived across the road from us four or five doors up she had breast cancer she was a old lady had a lovely garden she had breast cancer she was man handled in the public inquiry by an untrained security officer for example she would of probably lived a lot longer if she hadn’t had all the stress been turfed out into an old peoples home erm several people had nervous breakdown Mrs Leighton dragged out of her house its just that kind of stuff

*Yeah horrible*

It is but it goes on all the time you know that’s life isn’t it

*So at what point did you realise the legal battle had been lost, is that a fairly clear…*

Yeah when the public when the I am just going to turn the light on

*How are we doing for time are we alright?*

I’ve got another fifteen minutes erm when the inspector basically well fundamental when they when the result of public inquiry said we see no reason to not let allow a link the road to go through that was it really. We all appealed I appealed as I said went to high court the judge said ‘I think has been appalling but legally you don’t have a leg to stand on but I think the Department of Transport have behaved pathetically’ in the way they’d been really bad at their job they got a real hammering that’s why I’d really like to see the stuff in the Department of Transport because I bet heads were rolling left right and centre

*Hmm*

As a result of our campaign

*And where so once you lost that campaign and then the Claremont Road direct action campaign started were you how kind of involved with that were you?*

No not really because we had done our three or four years of you know a real lot of work

*Hmm*

Massive amount of research every day at the inquiry a real lot of work we did

*Hmm*

We kind of lost our spirit by then to be your not going to stop it, you might have a few punch ups it might be laugh for a bunch of young people but we had young daughter I was touring a lot its couldn’t do it anymore

*Hmm and do you think you know did it bring the community together did it end up being much more than…*

Yeah we’ve still got loads of mates from the artist community that erm we would never had known if it hadn’t been for the campaign and quite a lot of people in the street we’d never really of talked too if it hadn’t of been for the campaign. So I think they do bring people together you know either for a long period or for a short period but they definitely erm and you know we’d always end up in the pub afterwards and it was always a great atmosphere and lots of people it was good it did create a community spirit I think

*And were more than four of you involved in the kind of core work of the campaign?*

Yeah yeah probably twenty or thirty eventually

*Hmm*

One of who was a lawyer but his expertise was in something completely different but he did his best er we didn’t get any they had something like fifteen paid lawyers working for them and they hated us they really hated us erm and we had one guy who was in dunno town planning not even related road it was matrimonial law or something I can’t remember but he did his best he eventually became a big councillor. Its was very very interesting.

*Hmm and did it politicise you?*

No far from it I am totally apolitical…you know I don’t trust politics that in fact if it did anything cause our Labour MP Harry Cohen would occasionally turn up to look good in front of tele and er we had high hopes the Labour cause we kind of were Cohen would say thing s like if Labour get in we’ll stop this road and Labour did get in and they didn’t stop the road so you just kind of it reinforces people like me. I am cynic when it comes to politics I think they lie through their teeth most of the time. So no didn’t really.

*Erm I could as you loads more things but given we’ve got quite limited time*

Hmm

*I just I wonder if you could say a little about erm leaving Colegrave Road did you witness your house…*

Yeah I watched it yeah because we kind of had a running battle with the people who erm the people who did a lot of that work I’ve forgotten the name erm Squibb and Davis they were called something like that they were the guys that would come and demolish houses and we hated them because they were working class blokes who would just go in and smash up working people’s houses so we’d always give them a bad time about it. Erm but yea I watched the house get demolished I stood opposite the road and watched it get knocked down basically.

*What was that like?*

It wasn’t a real big deal you know we didn’t own the house and we kind of psychologically moved on by then and erm we were in the process of coming over here we’d left the house we were living around a friends a friend had gone to America for six months so they said use the house store your stuff and come and live in the house. So we were there while we were in the process of looking for a place to live so we kind of psychologically switched off that’s then now we move on

*Hmm*

Which is what you have to do you can’t you can’t just remain attached to things like that you can’t let it…we’d had three years of massive upsets I wasn’t going to be upset anymore

*Hmm*

So yeah watched it knocked down get knocked down but we did get the fireplace out of it we took a few things out like the fireplace like a lot of people did a lot of people got in and got nice stuff out before it went into Squibb and Davis’s skips and things hmm.

*That’s nice*

Hmm

*Erm and so then you moved into this house can you just finally my last question really is just kind of what the legacy of that period of your life has been? How it’s affected you? How it can effected the rest of your life is there any can you talk about?*

Yeah well as it said its kind of made me cynical about politics which I think is quote a good thing really erm I learnt a lot about running campaigns which is good for me personally because you know as a musician I need I kinda your constantly on the campaign to promote your own work. But also it did also kind of create a big sense of community for me although you don’t there not a lot of community despite all the bullshit that we’re one big happy multi-cultural community its lies its lies you know but I volunteer for a radio station a community radio station but I do what I can for what there is of the community. But the community is not what people imagine it to be its just pockets pockets of like-minded people and culturally connected similar people so yeah I’ll always do what I can for communities erm what else? No that’s about it really erm I ended up writing a song about for The Stranglers called Paradise Row because it was all happening so much of it was happening when I’d been in The Stranglers in my early ears of The Stranglers.

*But obviously I can just look that up*

Yeah

*But erm this project I am also working with a group of young people on this project and what there particularly interested in is the music*

Hmm

*So can I just my final question can I just ask you a little bit about the you know the music around at the time particularly that song how did it go?*

Erm huh I’ve forgotten {starts to sing] and the pharaoh raised his hand said dig a road in the promised land and…’ I dunno can’t remember but its on our second album I think it’s on the second Stranglers album erm but also there was a lot of music in Claremont Road actually there was a band called Bark Psychosis who went on to be quite big in kind of underground world and you know that erm Damon Albarn lived in Grove Green Road

*I didn’t know that*

Oh yeah

*[Laughs] that’s terrific I can’t believe I didn’t know that*

Of course this whole area is full of Hitchcock was born at the end of my street

*Yeah I mean I know that one*

So yeah Damon Albarn was up here

*I knew he was in the area but I didn’t know he was that close*

No Grove Green Road

*Yeah okay but was he around at the time?*

No he wasn’t he would have been a young guy I mean he younger quite a lot younger than me so he would younger watching it happening presumably. I don’t know maybe he did take part in protest it would be interesting to find out actually erm but there’s also some other really interesting musical connection not necessarily to do with M11 link road there’s a very famous English composer called Cornelius Cardew who was killed at Leytonstone Leyton Tube Station actually mysteriously killed at and he had a thing called the scratch orchestra of which Michael Niemann the very famous film composer was a member. So there is a lot of music stuff around here actually

*Hmmm*

It’s quite it’s an interesting area actually and a lot of the people are coming back like there are artists creative people Theresa real regeneration now happening which I think is wonderful.

*Okay well I’ve asked all the questions that I’ve got, but is there anything I haven’t asked that you feel has has been missed out?*

No I mean I am sadly my memory for dates is rubbish Richard people like Richard have got they must have tons and tons of paperwork that if you really wanted to get your teeth into you could do a proper timeline and

*Hmm*

And all that stuff but no no I can’t there weren’t any sort of totally major incidents that you there were a lot of amazing incidents like things like the occupation of the tree at Wanstead for do you know about that? Erm just incredibly interesting events around as part of so I wouldn’t have missed that for the world

*And did they feel fairly kind of connected up were you kind of aware of all these other things going on?*

Well the Wanstead protests that that was kind of we were all really involved in that because that was while the public inquiry was going on that Wanstead Wanstonian the people living in the tree on Wanstead and the punch ups with the security guards and everything. Erm no I mean it probably needs another conversation about the nitty-gritty of day to day life in the street while it was happening like for an example towards the end the street was full of security guards standing outside empty houses and they eventually drift to outside our house and talk incredibly loudly all through the night and that not that not a coincidence that was just to piss us off so we go you know its little things like that as I said all sort of clicks on the phone. I I would really like to see some records from the police or from the Home Office or from the Department of Transport for that period because I bet they put us down as they had us down as real political anarchists getting funded by Russia or something. They probably that’s probably their thinking at the time because they [stutters] you know turns at these so called very brainy clever people a lot of the are absolutely stupid

*Hmm so did you ever go down and speak to the security guards outside of your house?*

So why you stating and they give you just a load of verbal, so there was liaison guy to ring up every day said ‘you know your guys are outside talking’ ‘I’ll talk to them’ and then they would be there the next day the next day. And then there was a time when I think when Mrs Leighton was being kicked out there was four cordons of police at both ends of the road and I was in the house with my baby my partner was away and I went down to protest against something and police came over and shut the door while my daughter was still upstairs by herself you know less than one year old I said ‘look my daughters in the house’ ‘go and talk to the inspector’ it’s that kind of stuff

*So he locked he shut you out of your own house*

He didn’t know my daughter was up there but he shut the door to keep me out the house he though oh you won’t be able to get in now you’re the house you know they wanted us out as quickly as possible

*So did you watch Mrs Leighton being taken out?*

Yeah I was woken up in the morning when they broke in her backdoor they gave her like thirty seconds there supposed to give you something like five minutes to get yourself together they gave her thirty seconds. Richard I remember distinctly I remember Richard saying [mimics voice] ‘hang on hang on I am putt me trouser on I am putting me trousers on’ and then they through the door and the next I see is Mrs Leighton coming on a stretcher and then this is a skip outside and they chuck they are supposed to store your stuff they just chucked it in the skip and there’s all these young policeman laughing like it’s a great big joke this old lady being yanked out of her house.

*And where was she taken to?*

I don’t know an old people home or hospital or something?

*Was she put taken straight in put into an ambulance or something?*

Yeah

*Yeah and Richard was kicked out at the same time?*

Yeah

*Yeah okay*

That’s at least we not in Palestine or Syria or something that mild compared to what some people experience some days but when you talk to people people go’ nah that can’t be right the government wouldn’t do that no that can’t be right the government would be so nasty to people’ well so that’s the great thing is an eye opener it’s a real eye opener about how stuff work and that’s why people like me I am cynical about all that stuff because I’ve seen how it actually works and the bullshit and the lies they tell you

*Is that the end of the interview?*

I think so yeah…liars and bullshit

*{Laughs] thank you very much*

My pleasure

**Interview Details**

**Name of interviewee: John Ellis**

**Project: Voices of Leytonstonia**

**Date of interview:**

**Language: English**

**Venue: Interviewees’ home**

**Name of interviewer: Polly Rodgers**

**Length of interview:**

**Transcribed by:**

**Archive Ref:**