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Interviewer: Eoin Dunne, King's College London

Interviewee: Don Keen

Venue: 65 Compton Street

Purpose: Part of the One History, EC1 in the making Oral Histories

E: If you don't mind me asking where and when were you born?

D: I was born in Hackney in 1957.

E: Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

D: Yeh, I had quite a good childhood actually we lived in a small cul de sac turn in Navrino Grove which is near Dalston, Hackney. Went to a local school Ann Hurst Primary. Had quite a good education, quite a nice time at school, went on to Homerton House Secondary School, that was Homerton Road Clapton. Schooling was okay I got more out of the two years at college after school though then what I did in school. That's where I met my future wife. When I was youngster holidays and things were spent with the family abroad mostly learnt to ski when I was about 8 years and we were always down the South France. Dad had a motorised caravan so it was easy to travel around because we didn't have hotel fees and things so therefore we could go for a bit better holidays. Done a lot of travelling around a lot of travelling in this country.

E: If I could ask you about your parents, where were your parents from where did they originate?

D: My mum was from New Cross and dad was from Stoke Newington and they met during cycling, we were basically a cycling family it was our main sport over the years and they were both interested and that's how they got together. Dad was in the RAF and when he came out of the RAF he started up not this exact business but a business similar to it carrying on the work he started as an apprentice with a silver smithing company called CJ Vandas, it used to be in Hatton Garden unfortunately gone now.

E: When you were younger what kind of houses did you live in?

D: Navrino Grove was a little turn in of 9 houses and we lived at number 8 right down the end so we had no passing people and we used to play in the street it was like our street and there a few kids down there. It was standard terrace 3 bedroom house with a small garden; eventually we had a big garden because we commandeered some land behind us. The Council and the Railways could never work out who owned it so dad took it over with a big allotment and turned it into a big garden, big landscaped garden I spent many happy hours there. I was in the Scouts association fortunately the Scout hall

was literally across the road from us it was the last building the grove. I spent years from first being a cub scout right until about 25 years old in the scouts going all over the place, ended up as a venture scout leader assistant cub scout leader, so I had a good life in the scouts.

E: Did you stay in that house area until you left home?

D: Yes always lived in there family home when we lived in there, till I got married, when I got married I moved to upstairs here in 65 Compton Street, father owned the whole building and we moved into the flat upstairs lived there for two or three years and then lived out to Walthomstow where we have been for some 30 years.

E: You talked a little bit about your school, what kind of school did you go to? What was it like the schooling?

D: Primary and Junior school was a great school I had a lot of good times in there I remembered most. I still remember some of the teachers my 4th year teacher was Ms Evers the headmaster was Mr Father's and we had a good time a school there. Secondary school was a bit tougher and rougher, I wasn't the most street wise of kids regarding looking after myself so I kept my head down and kept on the side of the teachers always knew where to go if there was trouble, Homerton House it was a tough school but yeah it was a good school, I enjoyed it there, I have no complaints really.

E: What was that area like growing up?

D: Well I thought it was great we had the London Fields Park just down the road and Victoria Park was down the road the other way and we were always in the Parks in the Swimming Pools we weren't into groups hanging around on street corners we were all out and about from an early age I was into sport or the scouts. All of my time was into scouting.

E: What did you do in the Scouts what kind of things did you get up to?

D: Well mostly weekend's we were camping most weekends Hackney district Scouts have their own camp site in Epping forest so we were there most weekends during the year which was great, we used to go there by train and walk through the forest. We used to walk there from Hackney to Epping Forest with one of the old track carts, hand pulled carts and there used to be 6 or 7 of us rush down Lebridge Road totally out of control sometimes, it would take 2 or 3 hours but we would get there put up our tents. None of the soft tents they have these days frame tents it was all ex-army 14 foot heavy canvas tents. Many happy years in the Scouts, that taught me life it really did.

E: It must have been good to experience living in the city and also going not outside the city but??

D: Hackney was very on the edges of the country and the city. You go one way come into town go the other way and it didn't take long to go out of town. So we were sort quite on the borders in Hackney. A lot of people thought Hackney was a rough tough area to live in, but I didn't find that at all. I didn't experience hardly anything like that, there were a couple of small gangs but no violence that I got involved or knew of much.

E: So you went to junior school and high school, what did you do when you finished? When did you finish school?

D: After Upton House School which is was its original name was, Upton House School at Homerton now Homerton High, now demolished. After that I went to College at Stoke Newington spent two years doing A levels at Stoke Newington that was okay time I lost 2 years really although I did pick up my grades also picked up my wife, met my wife there, we had a good time with that and it was fun and easy, it was an easy 2 years a step before going to work.

E: Did you choose to do the A Levels?

D: Yes I went to College because I knew I had to get more education general education I didn't feel that the School had pushed me enough and I didn't learn enough spent too much time messing around like you do when you are at School. So the 2 years at College was very informative and got to know a few more people which was nice.

E: From College did you go into work then?

D: Yeh from College I went to Sangers Warehouse which is drug distribution warehouse which was just off Well Street in Hackney, I was there about 6 months to a year working as a trainee manager and then my father said do you want to come into the business. I had no intention of coming into the family business he wanted to start selling goods because it was only a hand engraving company at that time and he asked me if I would come in purely to run the office which was a very small dingy little office and start looking for things to do for buying and selling, so we started our retail trade as selling pewter tankards which I found a good supplier and we are still with them today and still buying from the same people today and that's where I learnt my work as a machine engraver and we had the manual engraving machines and self taught and actually enjoyed the job and the work from simple sports medals up to profile milling very technical work its quite interesting.

E: So you came into the family business did your father start the business?

D: Yeh dad started the business in 1954 that was when he came out of the RAF he had been partnered with other people in a sort of family business called Rose and Keen and they used to make copper gallery trays and candelabra and buy and sell cutlery. Dad's main bit was the engraving side of it he was a hand engraver and the two other guys involved used to make silver plate copper wear and they started that originally from the front room of a home in Navarino Grove. From there they had 2 or 3 moves they went to workshops in Grays Inn Road then after that the company split up and they all went their various ways and dad carried on the hand engraving business and moved to workshop in Albermarie Way which is just off St John's street and he had the top 2 floors there and dad employed about 2 or 3 hand engravers my brother eventually joined the firm as a hand engraver he went to St John Cass College and learnt art. Now he is superb hand engraver dad's retired still living in Romney Marsh where mum and dad moved to. Dad first place in Gray's Inn one of the funny stories he always used to tell me, is that the trolley buses used to swing around from Swinton Street into Gray's Inn Road and they used to take great pleasure in leaning out of the window with a big pole and unhooking the trolleys at the top of the bus the wire connectors, they used to unhook it so they would end up with a dead bus 100 metres down the road as it rolled to a stop they had great fun doing that apparently.

E: Do you remember when your father started the business and began things? Do you remember that time what was it like for him starting the business was successful?

D: Obviously he started it before I was born I think he worked the first few years he has always been successful its never been a business where you would earn a big fortune its not a big money turnover business but if you got your customers right it would pay you a reasonable living which is what it hoped to do in the future and its what its done for me when I have been in the business. He had some nice customers, he started as an apprentice with one of the biggest silver smith companies in the country C J Vanders and obviously picked up all of their hand engraving work and that was huge, hundreds of goblets and canteens of cutlery trays and other decorative pieces commemorative pieces. Pieces that went to the Royal Families all around the country and round the world he had done a lot of that classy handiwork very good.

E: He was in Gray's Inn Road when did he move from there?

D: I don't know when the move was from Gray's Inn Road that was when I was very young. I remember dad was always at work when I was a youngster, he would come home quite late in the evening after working all day, he spent many hours at work, never worked weekends he was always home for weekends and we have kept that tradition going we do not work weekends although we have a retail shop we don't open Saturdays. Because we see ourselves as more of a trade company Monday to Friday

business all of our customers know that and they don't bother coming here on a Saturday but the early years when he moved to Albermarie Way that's when he employed 3 other people as hand engravers they were in, 4 small rooms up on the top 2 floors and it was very dingy and black walls and stuff where the smoke from the various activities during the trade caused all black walls and soot and polishing dust all over the place the only bit was nice and clear was the middle of my dad's bench where the sand bag was where the silver sat to be engraved because you didn't want to scratch or get the silver dirty or damaged. It was a good time for them then I think.

E: You said you worked in a warehouse then you joined the business how did that kind of come around?

D: I left College and went straight into this company drug warehouse I had a good time there it was good fun. I saw my near future with the company I was being trained as a trainee buyer seller learnt a lot of things from the people there. Then one day dad said do you want to join the family business and I thought about it and I said why not, he told me what he wanted now I had learnt a little bit of buying and selling with the drug company he said come in and join the business and source some tankards and pewter wear for sale and I thought also we got this huge engraving job which was the Paul Revere liberty bowls most of which went to America there was 1776 bowls that were exact copies of the large silver liberty bowl that was made by Paul Revere. On the bottom of those was a large machine engraved inscription and doing 1776 of those took along time that was my first job when I came into the business on these very expensive hand engraved bowls to do I learnt on the inscription on the bottom. I couldn't believe it this bowls that were being boxed and glass cased that were sent to all the dignities around the world there was me never done an engraving job in my life doing all these silver bowls.

E: You came into the business for the retail side and you learnt engraving, was your father expanding the business?

D: Yes it was all about a little bit of expansion he would use various members of the family to do office work my Uncles, my Grandfather, his father who were now getting onto retirement so he wanted me to cover a little bit of the office help out with the machine engraving on this one big job so I could just sit there and just plod away. Dad set the machine up he sat me down and I just got on with it. Yes I think expansion was on his mind and was 1976 when we brought these current premises and that's when we expanded big time turned a little bit of the front into the shop and had engraving bits for my father and my brother was in this back area, the back of the shop. We also had a small workshop in Clerkenwell workshops just off of Clerkenwell Green and had another guy working for us in the small workshops there.

E: How did you go find it going from a large company to working for a family business?

D: Sanger's Medical Company was a huge company I quite enjoyed it actually because I looked forward to coming into the family business and there were only 5 of us and was nice and used to go home at 5.30 I was just one of the employees and I had no responsibilities I could get home sharp. Sometimes there was a little bit of overtime and dad paid me a little bit more but it wasn't a big deal going from a big company back into a small company. The warehouse I worked on there was probably only about 12-15 people working there so it wasn't a huge place although they had lots of factories around. It was quite an easy transition it didn't bother me too much. I did have 6 weeks off before leaving my old place and joining my company more then 6 weeks I went to America for 10 weeks. So it wasn't like in one company one week new company the next I had a nice 10 week break and then joined the company.

E: You joined the company for the office side and you learnt engraving as well?

D: I learnt machine engraving never learnt hand engraving I had no interest in hand engraving whatsoever I just wasn't artistic enough and I couldn't see myself sitting at a bench all day long with a piece of metal in front of me I wanted to be up and about seeing customers and seeing people doing things. I am more of a people person and I like being in the shop front and chatting to people and communicating, I have always been a good communicator with customers and that. Something I learnt from Scouts I guess being with people all the time like that, being with strangers it's easy to make contact with. The machine engraving was great I used to like that because it was so varied as I say from small sports medals and cups I learnt sign work really technical stuff things like cash registers the old cash registers that used to have the little tiny wheels and you have to mill out all the background leaving 1 ½ mm raised letter in case hardened steel that was not a fun job, but it taught me how to use the machines and grinding and cutters and things like that, a lot of people don't know how to do. The early period in the company was good I learnt lots and awful lot went on one course, it was a manufacturer of the manual machines that we used to have then and in fact we still got 2 of those machines the Taylor Hobson manual machines. That carried on, we expanded the shop into quite a respectable trophy shop now with huge customers eventually dad retired in 1991. Myself and brother are partners in the business now expanded it a bit more, got computerised invested a load of money in computers turning out more work and still in these times of recession are very very busy. In the last recession in the 80s we had one quiet month I remember it was August can't remember what year it was and so far in this recession we have had a quite Thursday afternoon so we aren't complaining.

E: So the business moved to this area, were you in the business when it moved to this area?

D: I was already in the business and the company now Albermarie Way just off St John's Street it has always been in this area I mean Grey's Inn Road is not that far away it's always been a Clerkenwell based business. So we brought this building in 1976 so we have always been here.

E: Did your father pick this area specifically then?

D: Yeh, when we brought this building he brought it in mind of not too move out too far from Hatton Garden the jewellery trade the silver trade the watch and clock industry was all based in Hatton Garden and the surrounding area the area of Clerkenwell. It's the silver manufacturing area of London it was the place to be, also this premises you are right on the boundaries of the city of London for all your corporate presentation your retail side of it, huge amount of trade comes in from the city and we are the only shop, only company like this anywhere near this area.

E: Did there used to be more companies like this in the area?

D: There were a few more hand engravers there was about half dozen hand engravers there has never been any trophy showrooms in this area, the nearest one is the Darts and Trophy shop at Whitechapel this is the only one in the City of London and Islington area this is the only trophies and awards shop, presentation shop. As far as I know we are the only company in the whole of England that has all three the hand engraving, machine engraving and now glass sandblasting workshops so we have covered the whole spectrum in one company in one building and I don't think there is another company like this in the country so we are pretty unique.

E: Being quite successful would you put that down to the business or do the things that you offer make the business successful?

D: It's the service I always say it's the quality of insults it doesn't matter how much you insult your customers they always come back to you if you know they are doing a good job. We do good work, we have a vast range of trades here with the glass sandblasting, the machine engraving which is sign works and trophy works and presentation works and the hand engraving side which is antique restoration work new jewellery engraving and new what we call hollow wear which is like cups and servers and trays and things like that. Because there are 3 or 4 trades under the one roof if one bit goes quite the other bit is busy so we are always being busy doing something and the trophy sales brings in plenty of engraving mostly machine engraving but that's a significant part of trade. With trophies it doesn't matter if recession is high or low or interest is high or low we get busy at both ends of the market when interest is high you get a lot more high quality work being done and when interest is low and when there is a recession and

people are unemployed people go to pubs and clubs and golf courses and they all need trophies they all start up all your darts leagues again so we get the lower end of the market as well, which brings in a lot of engraving.

E: You have been in this area for quite a while now and you are an independent business have you noticed a change in the businesses in this area during that time.

D: It has a lot more service industries type business computer technology companies people that are doing technology for other people that sort of stuff. A lot of restaurants and cafés opened up in the area. Our trade colleagues a lot of them have closed down because they had relied on the hand engraving or machine engraving and they have closed down or moved out fortunately we have purchased this building and most other people rented with rent going so high that's the big thing we noticed is the cost of rent now in this area is huge absolutely huge. The area itself it has always been sort of a scruffy area a lot of boarded up shops even when we first came into the area and although a lot of places have opened up and brightened up the area a little bit mostly with bars and cafés there's still a lot of boarded up shops a lot of dereliction well not really dereliction old its old the whole area is old and that's always been the same its not really changed a great deal.

E: You say there used to be engravers in the area, what other kind of businesses were here when you moved to the area?

D: It was mostly silver smithing, engravers watch and clock, loads of watch and clock people in this area jewellery type businesses and then a lot of print business, a lot of print in this area. Behind us was the brewery and that was a big area huge area. Allied Breweries when we were here but it was something before that. There was a lot of office area tied up with the brewery a lot of office places. But really the main areas trading was watch and clock silver smithing and print, the print business was huge.

E: You took over the business in 1991?

D: Yeh 1991, dad said I am ready to retire here are the keys and that was it simple as that. We changed the forms just a couple of years ago, we actually got around to doing all the paperwork and it was in 1993 or 1994 that my brother and I purchased the building next door so that we could expand even further expand the shop further and converted the building upstairs for students accommodation which is very good the amount of students in the City University, they were all ready our customers as far as the engraving and trophy supply went to City University a lot of work with them.

E: How did you find it going from working as part of the business to running it?

D: It was a very easy transition because I was running a lot of the business before dad retired he was giving me more and more things to do responsibilities to do. I still had to run any big purchases by him but towards the end of the 80s I would be able to purchase what I want sell what I want take on the work, take on the engraving work he just left that gradually more and more to me so when he eventually retired I was virtually running the business anyway. My brother has never been one for shop front work he likes to be stuck on his bench around the back and stay out of it so basically I run the business and my brother just backs me up disagrees or agrees with me as the case may be.

E: How is the business progressed since you took over?

D: Since we took over we have invested thousands of pounds in computerised engraving we now have 4 computerised engraving machines setup, the office is now all computerised we do all of our graphics and drawings by computer now, whereas that was always hand drawn that is the biggest thing is getting it computerised we had to do that. We could see the way the trade was going and that has been very successful the computerised engraving machines are extremely expensive but they have more than paid for themselves they have done a huge amount of work. I now employ 2 guys to work those machines and between them they run the 4 computers and 2 manual machines and the glass sandblasting workshop and I just sit back and watch them do it. My time now is totally in the shop, I help out on the machines as and when if they get inundated with work they need help, I come and be a 3rd party in their workshop. But now I leave their workshop up to them and they run their workshop I just pile in the work and as long as they get the work done when I need it by they run it how they want to. It's quite easy.

E: Computers changed the business quite a lot, did they affect how many people you have needed to employ?

D: When we first took over it was just me and my brother just the 2 of us and a secretary, we always employed another engraver and that's now my brothers partner, she comes from Holland and she is a very, very fine engraver, she joined the company in 1978. So there has always been 2 hand engravers and with the machine engraving side of it I employed 1 person and it was just the 2 of us doing the machine engraving and then it go busier still and I employed another person and it did get a bit quieter so I went more into the office shop work and increased the shop side of it leaving the 2 machine engravers on their own. Work picked up again so I employed a 3rd machine engraver and we had 3 guys working when we started the glass workshop. Eventually 1 of those guys left he wanted to move out of London, he had a young family and he didn't want to bring his family up in Central London so he moved to Cambridgeshire and that's left us now just with 2 guys and myself and a busy workshop and it stays busy. I

think we are about right we don't want to expand anymore it's a successful business as it is and there is competition and it can be quite fierce especially in the trophy sales side, because you have a lot of online and mail order trophy companies that you are competing with all the time. So these days with the computer age you don't actually need shops but you do need shops for engraving so people always come to get their goods engraved even if they brought trophies from someone else they still have to bring them in to someone like us to get them engraved.

E: You are based here, where does your trade come from?

D: Trade is really worldwide; we send things all over the place on the trophy sales. Predominantly the business is relatively local the Congestion Charge has stopped a lot of people coming in, that's the biggest thing in recent years that has affected us, people are looking to get their trophies online rather than travelling to London to pay the Congestion Charge. Although the other way the Congestion Charge has helped it's easy for our customers that are in London they do get around London easier. We deal with a lot of jewellery customers for the hand engraving side of it. A lot of jewellery customers all over London. I would say about 80% of our business is immediate area, central London area.

E: How do you find those people hear about you or come to bring their business here?

D: Its just word of mouth, we do have an advert in the telephone directory but the engraving side of it is a very small advert it's only an information. The trophy advert is quite a more substantial one, so that bring in some trophy sales. Most of our customers are word of mouth, people who know someone who knows someone, especially with the hand engraving side of it. Because it really is a dying trade not a lot of people are coming into so the few that are left everybody knows who is doing what. Very often if we have too much work on we will send work to one of the other hand engravers in the area, there is enough work to go around the half dozen or so that is left.

E: Do you find that because your business comes through word or mouth essentially does it matter that you are in this area, I guess you have been here so people know you are here but do you think that doesn't matter so much where you are in London?

D: I think we still have to be in this area, for the trade we do this is the best area to be in, because you are amongst all the allied trade for silver smithing all the silver supply shops and things so your jewellers when they do their shopping they like to go into one area and get all their bits done in one area, which is the area we are in so they can drop off their work to us and go down to the diamond merchants and the silver suppliers and the tool makers they are all in this area, so for that side of it you do need to be here. With the sales and presentation awards side of it, it's good to be in this area people do

come and pay the Congestion Charge because its only £8 and they are talking about a £200 order of trophies so at the end of the day the sports presentation evening it's only going to cost them an extra £8. We get an awful lot of work that comes in from the city so of course that's people who are already in the area; they have already travelled in a huge amount of city work corporate work.

E: So you have never considered moving the business?

D: No, we considered moving to bigger premises but there is nothing in this area that we could afford which is why we have eventually decided to stay the size we are. We feel that if we were to move out the trophy side and glass sandblasting side of it would be okay, but you would lose a lot of the hand engraving customers so that side of it would become an arts and crafts type business rather than a commercial business.

E: Do you think the purchase of the building here was vital to the success of the company?

D: Absolutely, we don't have to pay rent and that's what's killed off a lot of business's the rents around there are phenomenal. It took a lot of years to pay of the mortgages 20 years. I suppose its not along time these days when people are looking at 30 or 40 year mortgages but for us it was a lot of money and it was vital, it's been a family thing we have always had our own property no one has paid rent in our family its always been a thing you buy its cheaper, it ends up being cheaper to buy then rent.

E: Have you noticed other changes in the area since you have been here, the make up of the area?

D: I don't think it has changed a great deal if anything we have always had the kids going to the School up the road, the biggest thing I have noticed in recent years is the amount of couriers who are not English a lot of them are foreigners most of the couriers we get coming in and out of the country would be foreign. We got a café down the road which is Brazilian based café brilliant café but absolutely full of Brazilian motorbike couriers which is great when they are playing football you can hear them down the end of the street. Its always been quite a close community this area this street, all the shops we all know each other, we all talk to each other we all support each other when things are going wrong. The make up has not changed; I don't see that it has changed at all. The flats across the road have always been there, they've always not had the wealthiest of people living in there and it has always been the same. A couple of big factories have closed down Scholls Shoe Factory across the road in St John's Street and now that's just a computer graphic design place downstairs and its all expensive flats upstairs so, there have been an influx of more wealthy people but you never see them, the only people you ever see walking around are what we call the local people the home bred people

that have been living around here their families have been living around here for ever, for years. You've got new development at the back of us in St John's Street and that's going to be a lot of very expensive flats when that's finished. It's people that are working probably in the city so you actually never see them wandering around the streets, but bear in mind I am only here the working day 9.00am to 5.00pm Monday to Friday. I do come up here sometimes of a weekend and it's such a quiet area, always has been very, very quiet. I can't see much of a change whether I don't see what's going on outside because I am stuck in the shop but the roads are the same they still have the same holes in the pavement as what they have for the last 15-20 years. You see the same people going to the School who are now adults, married and taking their children to School. Life just goes on; I think it's an area where life just goes on. There is no big area for expansion or anything like that. I think there is more residential than industry in the area, which has helped businesses like ours as well. People are bringing in jewellery repairs and small works retail trade. Apart from that more factories are being turned over to residential apart from that I don't think there has been much of a change in the area at all.

E: You spend quite a lot of time in the area obviously you walk through area and stuff, what kind of area do you think it is? How do you see the area?

D: I still see it as a craft and trade area with the print workshops which are still around a few of them. A lot of them have turned into graphic design shops, printing is all done on by computer still a trade. It's a very family orientated area, big Italian area, but there always has been it's not a new thing. When I first came into the area the Italian was a strong part of the area. I can't think of anything that's really sort of specific of the area really the jewellery side of it of course a simple trade and craft area.

E: You mentioned earlier you say you lived upstairs in this property? You didn't want to stay in the area you actively sort to move out?

D: We stayed here when we first got married we knew we were going to live here for 2 years to save up paid a very small amount of rent to my father enabling us to save as much money as possible. My wife was in a good paying job for the Hackney Local Authority working with children I was working here we had no travel expenses to pay didn't even own a car for the first few years or even a television. We had the pub next door so we didn't have to go far for the pub. We knew we were going to stay here for a couple of years and got a deposit together and looked for a house which we found very easy it was a very useful time.

E: So you never planned to stay here?

D: No it was purely convenience it was not a flat designed for long term living, bearing in mind part of the flat was taken over by my fathers hand engraving workshop and we only had 3 rooms and my dad was here all hours so we didn't have much privacy, so it was only a very short time just a convenience save some money up get out.

E: Is there anything you want to talk about?

D: I think it's just a nice area to be in its had its problems its had its criminal problems in the past which has not really affected us, I suppose it's been a bit of a rough tough area a lot of gangs of kids floating around these days but as long as you take precautions lock your car and your front door its always quite a nice area to live. We rent out to students upstairs and they love the area because of a weekend its so quiet because all the companies all the trades close up at 5.30 on a Friday it dies around here and there is the nightclubs and things close proximity but this particular street you can hear a pin drop on a Sunday because its so quiet and of course that's a big income and a big support to the business is the student income. That helps us in times of recession as well the business still has that income. I think it's just a nice area to work in.

E: Thank you very much for talking with me.