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Interviewer: Eoin Dunne, King's College London

Interviewee: John Mason

Venue: Flat 31, Greyson House Radnell 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?

J: I was born in this area; just down the road Amias House that's in Central Street that is a block of flat's used to be old houses there I was born there. 28th December 1924.

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

J: I grew up in this area and our local school was Moreland Street which still exists, I was there until I was 14 and that was when I had to leave and find work. I had various jobs when I was 14 I think my first one was in Clerkenwell Road in the Watchmakers I was packing rouge in cartons which was a bit of a messy job I don't think it lasts more then week, my mother said you can't go there anymore its too dirty. From there I worked in Parkinson Cowan in Cottage Lane that's off of City Road and there they used to make gas meters very famous firm it was in Parkinson Cowan and I was there quite a few years and then I went to a firm in Tottenham Court Road just off of Pancreas Street and I was manufacturing wire drawing dyes. I don't know if you understand that?

E: No

J: It was like a dye, where they used to pour copper wire through to get the certain sizes and we used to make the dyes it was a German firm and I suppose I worked there until the war broke out in 1939 and being a German firm they were all in turned sort of thing and then I went into another company in just off Gloucester Way that was called Spalding's and we were manufacturing parts for aircrafts because it was a fibre company. I was in there until I was 18 ½ and then I went in the Royal Navy.

E: If I could just take you back a bit. You say you were born in this area. Did you live in a house in the area or flat?

J: Well it was all houses, most of this property around here belonged to St Bart's Hospital and the house we lived in had about 2 rooms and there was 5 of us in the 2 rooms and then we were there till about 1936 and that was when we lived in Leverington Street, that was across road it was joined up to King's Square. From there we applied for a bigger house and we get one in the King's Square which were massive houses.

E: What were the houses like inside? What were the conditions like?

J: Quite good, as conditions go, there was no bathrooms, you had a bathroom out the back in the shed like a copper which you would light up once a week and do all the washing and kids used to bath in it (laughs).

E: You lived with your parents; did your parents come from the area?

J: My parent's come from the area yep.

E: Where was your father from in the area?

J: My father was from Gee Street, that's over the road you can still access. He lived right opposite the old mission, there used to be an old mission there. My mother lived in Amias House.

E: Did they both work in the area when you were a child?

J: My father was on the Railways all his life.

E: What did he do on the Railways?

J: Worked out of Liverpool Street Station, he was porter then he had all sorts of odd jobs you know. My Mum used to do homework she worked for a place in Goswell Road called Bacinders. She used to do machine men's braces machining them, that was her primary income.

E: What was the area like when you were a child?

J: It was very a happy go lucky area, no problems, no crimes and all the kids used to mix didn't matter what kids you were you all mixed. It was so easy and it was a good school we went to that was the thing we were well disciplined and everyone got on well.

E: What was it like a School did you enjoy it?

J: It was strict but they did teach us that's the main thing, the only problem was it's not like nowadays were you qualify for a High School or whatever our school was just elementary and you had to leave when you were 14 if you were very lucky you got into another school. Unfortunately I wasn't (laughs).

E: Do you remember any times or days at School that stand out?

J: Oh yeh Fridays, that was the day we had the Finsbury Council let us play in the fields at Sterling Corner at Barnett, Friday was our day out to the sports fields, you go and do your lessons then play what sport, cricket, football you name it. That was our main day out.

E: How did you used to get there?

J: Coach.

E: So you finished School 14 and then you went straight into work?

J: Well you had to go to work you had no option (laughs).

E: Tell me a little bit about your first job what was it like going into work at 14?

J: It's a bit hair raising at first, at first you didn't feel really comfortable when I had this first job its in the basement with all this rouge covered in red and my Mum oh you can't do that after a week I had to back out. Then I went to the Gas Meter firm and I was the job boy and used to go round get the lunch, sweep up and every month I used to get a bonus. They used to come around and give you six pence (laughs).

E: Was that quite a big firm?

J: Oh yeh Parkinson Cowan that was a big firm.

E: Was it a good company to work for?

J: Oh yeah it was a good company.

E: What were the conditions like there?

J: I suppose compared with conditions today, everything goes sort of thing you had no health and safety.

E: Did they look after you as workers? Was there things to do?

J: They always give you something to do, you made yourself busy. Which unfortunately that doesn't happen to young people today, they don't worry.

E: How long did you stay in that job for?

J: Must have been a couple of years. Then I moved to the drawing dye place in Tottenham Court Road and I came back and went into Spalding's that's when the war just started.

E: So you stopped working when the war started?

J: When the war started no I was still working. Then we did evacuate like the family we went to our relations down at Slough and I got a job in the airplane pump factory. I was there I suppose about 6 months it go so bad there it was worse then London the Blitz so we came back.

E: What was it like leaving London at that time?

J: At that time, when the outbreak of war came we didn't know much about it, I remember standing in the street and seeing the first bomb drop in the city and the fire and then we had bombers and then I went in the Navy and that was a bit more peaceful (laughs).

E: When did you join the Navy?

J: In 1943.

E: So you were in the Navy until the end of the war?

J: I went up until 1946.

E: Why did you decide to join the Navy?

J: Well I wanted to get in the Fleet Air Arm but my eyes didn't pass the test. I had hoped to be a Fleet Air Arm pilot, but when you go for these tests they say your eyes aren't good enough, I finished up as a mechanic in the Navy.

E: Did you travel with the Navy? Did you get deployed?

J: Well I mean most of the early parts, I was trained to be mechanic then I passed out and then it go so bad, the Blitz, they brought us up to Harrods' Warehouse in Kensington all Navy personnel about 200 of us and we were out repairing houses over South London. When a bomb dropped you would go over there put the old green bays at the windows and repair the ceilings. I done that for quite a while then some there said right then it died down the Blitz then they sent us out to Australia which couldn't have been better (laughs) great time I had there.

E: Why did they send you to Australia?

J: Well they thought the Japanese campaign was going to carry on, so we ran out there but fortunately enough the Japanese surrendered after the atom bomb in Hiroshima. Then I was attached to the ship with the Australian troops all around the Islands and all through Australia which was quite a pleasant experience.

E: What was it like being there? It must have been very different from being in London at that time?

J: We didn't know war was on then in Australia, there was no air raid siren or nothing like and being a mechanic they put me in charge of a generator outside the Duke of York's Headquarters in King William Street in Sydney. In case of a strike I was in charge of the generator which supplied the Headquarters which were never ever used (laughs).

E: So you stayed in the Navy until 1946 what did you do when you left the Navy?

J: I left Navy and I was a diesel mechanic I went to a couple of jobs and I thought I don't fancy doing this. There was a lot of building working going on and incidentally my brother worked on the County of London Electricity Supply Company which was later transformed to the London Electricity Board and he said they have vacancies in the Electricity Company so I went to see the General and he said to me yes he said I will keep you mind. Well it was only a couple of weeks he came around when I was working on this building site and he said, 'I have a job for you' and I went onto the Electricity of course it was a private company only a small company only about 120 thousand workers in total. From then he said, 'I send you out with a bricklayer seen as you are interested in building' well I went out with bricklayer and after a couple of months he said you are going into the meter department so they put me in the meter department and I learnt about meters. Because of that time the only way to gain to knowledge was to go out with a technician and that's how I started and I finished up doing 42 ½ years on the electricity board.

E: How did you find it, you went from working in companies to going into the Navy and then back into a company. Did you find it different before and after the Navy?

J: After the Navy I have got to say I had a good time in the Navy and visit so many countries I went all through Hong Kong, Japan, it was like a pleasure trip because the war had died out the time we were out there then I came back at the age of 21 in 1946 when I came out the Navy and I had a good time. I had seen the world and my wife now, she was my girlfriend then and 1946 we were married in that church there in the LSO. Ain't a bad history is it?

E: So you worked for the Electrical Company?

J: The London Electric Company yes.

E: Until you retired then?

J: I retired in 1989.

E: How did you find it going from working for the Electric Company to retiring?

J: No different because I have always been industrious even when I retired I was still doing loads of electrical work on the side lines.

E: So was it kind of by chance that you went into the Electric?

J: Not really I was always interested because it's one of those industries that was strong union but good pay.

E: So did they look after you as workers?

J: As you workers, oh yeah. You got good holidays, sickness all that.

E: So when you left the Navy did you move back into this area again?

J: When I came out of the Navy, I came back to live in King's Square and then we got married and lived in a couple of rooms in Lever Street which was just around the corner. A couple of tall houses no electricity only gas (laughs) can you imagine? (laughs).

E: How did you come to get those rooms?

J: Only by people we know, the families all come from the area so it was no problem getting the accommodation. From then I applied to Bartholomew's Estates for a property and they accepted me so I was very lucky.

E: Where was that property?

J: I will show you, in 1960 that's when they pulled all them down.

E: You got that house from St Bartholomew's Estates. What was that house like?

J: That one was very good, because it was a shop but they converted it into a house, they completely rebuilt it.

E: So it was a lot better then the one before?

J: Miles better oh yeh (laughs)

E: How long did you stay at that address?

J: About 12 years

E: Why did you leave that house then?

J: They pulled it all down, compulsory purchase the Council and pulled the lot down and moved us in here.

E: So you have been here since?

J: 1960

E: How did you find moving from a house into a flat?

J: Not very good (laughs) It was nice because bathroom and all the modern cons but other than that, because you had your backyard and your little garden.

E: Did it take you a long time to get used to?

J: I suppose it did but then again, we didn't know what it was like to have a bathroom, that was the main idea. I mean you come in here and you say oooh lovely, bathroom, and shower when you want. Even that one when they rebuilt it there was no bathroom in there.

E: So you came here and this was a council property. How do you find it living in a Council property, how did the Council look after it?

J: When it was the Finsbury Borough Council and it was a very wealthy Council. We had all the breweries, oil companies and they used to be our area right down to Chiswell Street and our rates were nothing because all the companies paid so much rateable value - it was a very good borough. When Islington took over I am afraid we were lost in the mire (laughs).

E: So there was a very notable difference from when it changed from Finsbury to Islington?

J: Oh yeah, notable difference.

E: Was there a noticeable difference in the standard of the council how they looked after things?

J: It goes on today, most of the good activities are North of the Borough. South of the Borough, in actual fact this was a very poor area. There are more old age people in this area than the whole of Islington but they didn't cater for us in that respect. So the government come along with this grant of £52 million New Deal to be spent on the Bunhill Ward that's us but of course the Council has got there nose in the trough especially up from the Islington, 'oh we want to extend it' which they did, and they should never have done that.

E: When you came back from the Navy and you came back to this area, did you actively come back to this area? Did you think about going to live anywhere else?

J: No I was born and bred here but I have seen the world, I would have loved to have settled in Australia then you think, think of the families I am leaving behind. I mean we are big families and closely knit at that, I couldn't imagine myself going off.

E: You say big families, do you have a family in this area?

J: I have two daughters.

E: How did you find it having a family in this area?

J: Quite good they had a fair education so I was well pleased.

E: It's an alright area for kids to grow up in? They could go out and play?

J: You had no problems kids were playing out a 9.00 and 10.00 at night. Mind you at that time there wasn't much motor traffic mostly horse and carts (laughs).

E: You mentioned the bigger businesses in this area, was it a noticeably busy area for business?

J: Well they employed most of the people here, I mean my wife's father he worked in Whitbreads for 50 odd years and he was an ordinary man but it was a secure job.

E: Did he have any stories about Whitbreads?

J: Some you couldn't relate too (laughs) he did like a drink (laughs). We estimated one time, we were talking about his drinking and we reckon the whole time that he was there, the swimming baths round the corner, he's drank that 10 times in 50 years (laughs).

E: So having lived in the area all your life have you noticed a lot of changes?

J: Well, I have to say you don't suppose you'd see a covered face in this area at that time right up to the 60s and the only people we had in there was the West Indians they came over as bus drivers, sweeping the roads. That was no problem now it's a bit more widespread sort of thing.

E: You will remember the area before the council estates and when it was houses and squares do you remember the change, the clearing of the house to the estates what was that process like?

J: The thing is the families all lived next door to one another these houses I knew everybody in that street you could you walk in and out. Now it's not the same in flats people are frightened to leave their doors open.

E: When they moved people from the houses did they just get individual flats in places?

J: They moved them in blocks, 'You're on the first floor, you're on the second', that's how they did it. That was quite good.

E: Was there a sense of community when it was houses?

J: Oh yeah.

E: What was the community like?

J: Unbelievable, going back to the 50s the Coronation, I mean you could knock on all the doors and collecting money biggest party in the street, all the kids the street and it was something different. Now it don't happen that way. Nobody is interested.

E: Why do you think that is?

J: Well we have it here. I'm sharing with the TMO in here and it's such a hard job to make people mix I mean we have all sorts Somalis, Greeks, you name it, Turks. You ask them to come to a meeting; they don't want to know unfortunately.

E: Do you think that's the people who are coming to the area or do you think that's because of the way the buildings are built?

J: Not really no it's not that, they just don't want to mix I don't know why.

E: So the area has changed, do you remember the way the area used to be? Do you remember any certain area's especially well?

J: Well at that time we had no television that was one great thing in our day you made your own amusement. We'd go around the corner, they used to leave a lot of wood out, we'd start marking carts and we will put our wheels on. Every kid wanted to do something.

E: Where there any particular areas you used to go to play that stand out. Did you used to go to certain areas to hang out? Where were those?

J: Saturday morning there was Coram's Fields it's called a Hospital. Every Saturday morning there was football matches, arrange your own football matches, we had teachers in Schools that used to run football and the teachers used to come in on Saturday and take you to football. They won't do that now. You see it was a real community everyone was interested. Even after the war that School I went too we had an old boys association and that went on for many years. All the old school boys used to meet every Friday night run about 4 football teams. It was really good, of course as you get older the youngsters don't want to know.

E: So you used to play football and things, when you were in your teens and early twenties, thirties. What did you used to do with your spare time?

J: The old school we used to go there Friday we used to arrange outings, Easter go across Austin or ?? and this was our way of life. Now of course kids they don't worry now do they everything is there for them.

E: Do you remember St John's Street? Do you remember any of the businesses and industries that used to be along there?

J: One of the bigins there was Pollards that was a shop fitters they were in that area. The Cannon Brewery.

E: Do you remember the brewery was it a busy street did the brewery get busy?

J: I worked down there with the electricity board and we'd go and do a job in there and they would give you a ticket and I would get a pint (laughs)

E: What was it like inside when it was in full flow?

J: Very busy place there was so many industries down there I mean there was some of them you probably never heard off, there's Farmerstead big electrical wholesalers, there was Fawkstedleman, mind you that was in Farringdon Road they had done metals and all that. There was John Smith's in St John's Square that's just around the back of St John's Street – they are still in existence they got a little place up in Tottenham Street just off Kingsland Road and they done all non-ferrous metals. ?big butchers. Nicholsen that was down St John's Street. Mind you I didn't tell you I was in the ATC during the war. Our headquarters was the Lady Iron's Public House and that was in St John's Street, that was another good thing the ATC that was another adventure.

E: Do you remember the area; was the area really affected by the war?

J: Oh yeh it was affected but there was so much industry, you look now there nothing at them times the industry was unmoveable you couldn't fail to get a job sort of thing.

E: Did it take the area a long time to recover from the war?

J: I suppose it did because it was so devastated I mean especially the place where I was born that was bombed and over the road to King Square that was our shelter at first we had an all old wooden shelter but the rain used to pour through and suddenly they built the concrete shelter at the other end and a landmine fell just buy the side of that and destroyed all the houses in the square but the shelter saved us all. I think that shelter is still there I think they covered it in.

E: You were saying there used to be a lot of industries do you remember the industries leaving the area?

J: The exodus was in about the 60s because we had all the oil companies in Finsbury Square a lot of oil companies they moved out. Then Whitbreads moved out to Luton, most of the big companies did move out.

E: Why do you think they moved out?

J: Well I suppose it sort of the times and expense and all that.

E: What did you notice that moved in?

J: Nothing. No industry moved in, I mean Clerkenwell Road every shop was a watch maker and clock maker but all these are gone.

E: How do you think the area has changed because of that?

J: The markets, I mean I am a market man I love going down the markets, over on Whitecross Street that market there was a hive of activity there were stalls galore, but now it's all food, no industry but we can see all the office workers. Most of them go out the local city jobs.

E: Do you think the area now, what is the area like now to live in?

J: To live in, as London goes it's not a bad area, it's quite a safe area, it's not bad but then again people don't like going out of an evening like late at nights.

E: Is that because they don't feel safe?

J: They don't feel safe.

E: Why don't they feel safe?

J: Well there are too many gangs roaming about you know with a spate of kids going around on bikes smashing car windows and thieving things but I think that's been totally cured now you see.

E: Have you noticed any work or money being put into the area to make it a safer and better area?

J: Oh yeah a lot of money has been put in the area from the New Deal they have improved the outlook of the place, if you see our flats and our gardens. They have wasted a lot and they have spent a lot.

E: Do you think that work makes a big difference in the area?

J: Oh yeh, otherwise it was a run down area there was nothing there and then suddenly they have built a new gardens over there and they have spent wisely I would say it's a much better area. You can tell that by the people moving in the area there is a lot of what do you call them upper class sort of thing (laughs).

E: Do you think those people moving in detract from the community of the area?

J: We got a problem over here now, we have an old hostel and it's been closed now they want to reopen it something to do with drug addicts and things like that. But the people in the private flats, we told them, and now they come to our meetings so you are all interested into what is going on in the area which is a good area. We run the Estate the tenants we have Tenants Management Organisation and that's another problem I mean there is about 8 of us and we are all old age pensioners and we are running the whole ? – Every year we invite people to come in and say would you join the committee because some of us are getting too old to carry on, not a young person will come along to that committee.

E: Do you think they are just not interested?

J: They'll take everything you offer them but they won't give nothing (laughs).

E: Do you think the estates suit the area? Do you think they work in the area?

J: Unfortunately we are getting overrun by building. Up to a point I would say we have had enough flats or whatever, now over the road here City Road there is a brand new complex only there only been up about 5 or 6 years they are going to knock the whole lot down and build a 42 tower block.

E: 42 stories?

J: Yeah I mean but we haven't got the facilities for the people to go in them places we are stretched right out with doctors, I mean the doctors will tell you they can't take anymore patients.

E: What do you think the area needs to make it function better, to make it work better as a community?

J: Well you see they have to stop building in this area it's too cramped, I mean they should push them out to North of Islington and say where the open spaces are. You see every place that's derelict now becomes a block of flats. Which is not very good. Would you like to see some old pictures?

E: I will do in a minute yeah. Is there anything that you would like to talk about that maybe you remember that I haven't kind of touched on?

J: Well there is a variety of things we haven't got the shops we used to have, I mean you talk about the market having all that food, we used to have shops selling cooked food, butchers you name it. All disappeared. We haven't even got a bakers around here.

E: That takes away from the community I guess?

J: Of course it does I mean people have to travel to go and buy a decent loaf of bread and we have no butchers the markets have the monopoly, but we always used to like the butcher

E: So there is not a lot of smaller independent shops left?

J: The only ones are grocery shops but they are struggling they can't compete.

E: Would you like to talk more about your family?

J: My father he was on the Railway for about since the First World War 1918 and my brother he was on the electricity board he has finished up as a quantative surveyor. Last year he died he was 92 when he died, so he had a lot of the knowledge of the old electric company. One sister –

you went to see. My other sister she lives upstairs and she worked over the company's house. We all had jobs that was thing my wife she worked in Goswell Road there used to be a place called East Pill's for gout and all things like that and she worked there packing them but during the was she worked for the Initial Trail Company that was in Goswell that was a massive concern doing all the laundry, she worked there until she had our first child I think. Then she worked in the East Pill's, I mean we had so much industry on Goswell Road.

E: You got a council flat and you have been here for quite along time. Your daughters have they been able to stay in the area?

J: No, the youngest daughter she worked for KMPG , the big company by Blackfriars they are accountants, well she worked there all the time then she got married and she moved to Shirley she lives at Croydon, she has 3 kids and her husband works for Fidelity the big American company. The 3 children are exceptional one of them is at Southampton University the other ones 16 he is at Trinity School in Croydon and the other ones in the high school, they go along quite well. The older daughter she works over at City University she was there for ages then she got married and she has a couple of daughters, she ventured off to Spain she is a holder of council property over in Spain but now she is back, she made a bit of a mistake she is trying to sell the property but she has problems nobody wants to buy.

E: Did they find that they couldn't afford to stay in the area or did they choose to move away?

J: Well her husbands a black cab driver so that's a good living. They have all grown up in this area you know they still want to come back to the area; they love to come back here just for a visit (laughs).

E: Do you think that people who grew up in the area do you think they can stay in the area?

J: A lot of them venture off, but then the problem is we have old people in here and there sons and daughter's live miles and miles away suddenly they are ill and they are looking around for someone to look after that's the problem in these flats. I know we have social workers and all that, they ring you up can you do this can you do that. I mean I'm 84 but I'm still going now looking after older people because there sons and daughters have moved away and that's it.

E: Because the people have moved into the new flats they are quite posh and there is newer things, that's probably pushed the prices up elsewhere do you think that has affected who can and who can't stay in the area?

J: I think the problem was I mean the Barbican and LSO and everybody wants to come into the area and that's what pushed the price of flats up. I mean a Council flat like this is worth £240 thousand which is ridiculous I mean I have been here since 83 I paid £12 thousand pounds for the lease, I mean I am sitting on a goldmine when you think about it (laughs) I brought it with the intention of staying here a lot of them brought it with the intention of selling that's when the prices starting going sky high.

E: Do you think people would stay or there would be more community if the prices weren't so high?

J: Well I don't know. Ordinary people they wouldn't take up the option would they. When they offer you the freehold 125 year lease at that you think £12 thousand pounds that's a lot of money but then again you should think over 125 years well by the time I have paid my mortgage I will be paying no rent. They don't look at it that way. Now they say well you don't pay no rent and I say well I pay expenses like new kitchen but other than that I say you all had the same opportunity but nobody took it.

E: Why didn't they take the opportunity?

J: They are frightened to say £12 thousand pounds but that was split over 20 years and that's how you have to look at it. They thought £12 thousand I have got to pay that in a couple of weeks kind of thing (laughs). I must be the oldest inhabitant in here now, the old lady upstairs she passed away last week she was 92 she moved in with us.

E: Is there many people left here from when you moved in?

J: Not many, no not many.

E: It must be strange having new people come in that you don't really know.

J: This is the problem see we have a TMO and we have a committee and I can honestly say 75% of the people we don't even know. That's where the council went wrong as well instead of coming and saying this is the new tenant, oh nice to see you, nothing like that. Sometimes someone comes down I am moving, but we don't even know them. The strange part about it, they move in and it's a strange world for them they don't know what's going on they don't know there is a TMO they don't know we run the estate with the Council's money.

E: you say you are part of the TMO and you run the estate what do you do for the estate?

J: Well the council give us about £12 per flat per week at the end of the day its about £200 and odd thousand a year all we do for that is run the estate do minor repairs, employ 3 cleaners and see the estate is kept up to scratch. We are doing a better job than the council by the way (laughs).

E: There is a group of you who do that?

J: Yes there are about 8 or 9 of us we employ a manager and she looks after the books and all that, she does all the books.

E: Why do you do that? Why are you involved in that?

J: Well we were involved from the start we did training for about 3 years and we got to know her and that's alright, and we got award last year being most efficient TMO in Islington so we stuck our chest out (laughs), but it's really interesting we didn't know how much the council wasted money with builders and contractors and its amazing how much you can save.

E: I suppose from doing that as well you get a sense that you are in control of where you live?

J: We tell people were going to do this and we are going to do that and they appreciate it. A lot of them of them couldn't care less (laughs).

E: I have done my topics so is there anything you want to cover or talk about?

J: I will show you these pictures shall I?