

Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

INTERVIEW BETWEEN DAVID BERGUER AND KARL RUGE AT 133 FRIERN BARNET LANE N20 ON WEDNESDAY 19 MARCH 2008

DB: When did you become a Councillor for the first time?

KR: In 1962.

DB: So this was before Barnet came into being.

KR: Yes, Friern Barnet ceased to be independent in 1965. In fact we had a meeting in 1964 of one representative from each of the five constituencies – Hendon and Finchley were the two Boroughs and Chipping Barnet, East Barnet and Friern Barnet were the District Councils and we were supposed to decide on what name to give to the Borough. Finchley and Hendon had worked out that we were going to be “Finbardon”, a combination of the three – Finchley, Barnet and Hendon. The three of us decided that it was not a very desirable name, so we opted for Barnet and as we were a majority, three against two on the committee, we won. So that was the end of Friern Barnet.

DB: So the Education Department of Barnet moved into the Town Hall about that time?

KR: Yes.

DB: When you were a Councillor, how often did you have Council meetings?

KR: We had committee meetings regularly, once a week. There were a number of specialised committees, the Finance Committee, the Planning Committee etc. and there was one full Council meeting once a month. In those days we had five wards in Friern Barnet: North, East, West, South and Central and each of them had three representatives on the Council. We had annual elections, electing one of the Councillors for the five wards every year. After three years you were re-elected or you resigned.

DB: Did they have a good turnout?

KR: Yes, because they were a regular event, people got used to it. I’ve still got one of the election leaflets that I sent out in 1961 and I will let you have it.

DB: So you’ve been a Liberal all your life?

KR: I started in Germany as a Marxist - I was very much to the left. I think it was largely because the Nazis were coming on. My father was a Conservative and he heartily disapproved of it. I used to go around and lecture on Marx and socialism.

DB: This was what period?

KR: The first few years of the '30s - 1930-33.

DB: Before Hitler came to power...

KR: When Hitler came to power I had already been in trouble at University with two or three of my colleagues from different groups. I represented the so-called free students and we knew that the Nazis were going to pick on us as soon as they got into power in 1933. About half a year after, I cycled back from my studies and I could see a van outside the digs where I was and they were bringing out my papers. So, I turned my bike around (I always had my passport and some money on me) and I cycled out of Germany, through France and into Spain. I stayed with an uncle of mine.

DB: And how long were you there?

KR: About two years, and then I came to England in 1935. It was a temporary arrangement, really, because I was going back to Spain, I had developed a particularly unpleasant form of dysentery, which was diagnosed as being a form of lead poisoning, so my poor uncle tore every bit of the lead out of his house. Anyway I was able to survive thanks to someone who was particularly acquainted with that form of dysentery from the First World War. I had an enormous number of blood transfusions which in those days had to be done person to person – I had someone lying beside me. It was then decided that it was not advisable for me to spend another summer in Spain until I had fully recovered.

DB: How old were you when you came over here?

KR: Twenty-three.

DB: And what did you do here?

KR: I got myself a job and I studied formally at the London School of Economics. Unfortunately in 1936 the Spanish Civil War broke out, and the firm I was working for had branches all over the place in Spain, so I couldn't go back.

DB: What were you doing in Spain?

KR: Importing oil. So there was no point in going back to Spain. My boss asked me what I was going to do but I didn't know what to do and then I applied for a job that was going in Mexico, because in those days I was Spanish speaking. It was quite an attractive job, but I had to deposit £450 at the Mexican Embassy and I didn't have that much money. So I went to my boss and asked for a loan of £450.

DB: That was quite a lot of money in those days....

KR: It was quite a lot of money. Anyway, to my horror he said that he would have to consult his partners and the next day he told me that it would be possible but he could offer me a post here. It was one of those moments when you had to make a decision. On the one hand I was quite keen to get back to Spanish speaking territory and on the other hand I had quite a close relationship with a lady in Spain who was married and whose husband was shot down during Civil War. She gave birth to a child about two months after her husband had been killed. I had been keeping in touch with her and I thought it was unlikely that she would want to come out to Mexico, but she would want come over here to marry me. So I agreed to stay here with the bank.

DB: So you were an accountant?

KR: I was a clerk, I had no qualifications. My qualifications would have been as an architect, because that was what I studied in Germany, but I was not able to complete the course – it was about six months before the final examinations that I came out, and so I didn't have any qualifications at all, so I stayed with the bank.

DB: What bank was it?

KR: It was a private bank, what you call a merchant bank.

DB: This is rather strange, you're a Marxist and you're working for a private bank...

KR: By that time I had softened quite a bit because I had got involved with the Liberals, as they were called then. I was a member of the Liberal Party before the War. I asked her to marry me and, to my surprise, she said "Yes" and she came over in 1939, about ten days before War broke out and we had a civil marriage. So the first daughter was not really mine. I tried to get naturalised but you had to be in the country five years before you could apply, so I was not in a position to do that. Despite my left wing views I felt I would like to do my bit to defeat Hitler and consequently I joined the army.

DB: In what year?

KR: In 1940.

DB: So you could join the army even though you weren't naturalised?

KR: Yes, that was in fact a bit of a problem. In London I was exempt from any detention but I went to Cheltenham in the week that foreigners were rounded up and put into internment camps. I spent three months in an internment camp in the West Country and on the Isle of Man and that is where I spent the bulk of my internment.

DB: When you joined the army, did they make use of your German language?

KR: Very much later. As a matter of fact, at the beginning it was very undesirable to use the German language – my wife and I spoke Spanish in public. We had a flat

in Woodside Park and some people broke our windows. It wasn't really advisable to let them know you were German. I was in the army for six years and when I got promotion I was transferred to the Intelligence Corps and I used the language in interrogating prisoners in North Africa.

DB: What year did you go to North Africa?

KR: In early '44 and I came back in 1946.

DB: What did you do when the War was over – did you go back to the private bank?

KR: Yes, I didn't have very much option, because by that time I had a daughter of my own, so we had two children. I had hoped to go back into architecture but it would have taken too long and I couldn't afford it and I went back to the bank.

DB: When did you move to Friern Barnet from Woodside Park?

KR: We moved into The Ridgeway in 1953 and we were there for about 16 years and then when our daughters moved out we decided that four bedrooms were too many, so we were looking for a bungalow and a friend of mine who lived in this house and whom I knew from the City, asked us round for tea and we were sitting looking out on the garden and he said you can more or less say goodbye because my bank is posting me to Ireland and so I'm selling this house. I said what a lovely house it was and what a pity you had to sell it and he had found a buyer. About a week later he phoned to say that the chap who had bought the house had decided to call it off. We discussed it and I went to my solicitor and asked him if we could get a report on the house and, strangely enough, he came up with a report within two days that said that the roof needs repairing, the fence need re-doing, the plumbing was not very good, the garage was falling to pieces etc. My friend wanted £17,500 for it but the previous chap had offered £12,500 so we settled about halfway for about £15,000.

DB: So from wanting a bungalow, you in fact traded up?

KR: Yes, it was totally illogical, but we have spent many happy years here.

DB: When did you start getting involved in local Liberal politics?

KR: I was still in Woodside Park in 1938 and at that stage Stanley Haigh, who lived in Torrington Park, was Chairman of the local Liberals and subsequently Ken Norman was the first Liberal to get elected in Friern Barnet.

DB: Was it all Conservative controlled?

KR: Yes.

DB: Even the South Ward?

KR: No, that was Labour and the Central ward changed from time to time.

- DB: In those days was there voting on party lines as there is today?
- KR: Yes. We did have some people standing as Independent but that was a bit of a dicey game. If you were sitting as an Independent – Ken Norman was, to all intents and purposes, an Independent because he was the only Liberal on the Council. He couldn't really do anything because he couldn't even put up a motion to the Council because it needed someone to second him, so unless you could get someone from either of the two big parties, you were just completely isolated. That was very much a party game.
- DB: Am I right in thinking that some of the Conservatives were Estate Agents who would have a vested interest?
- KR: Yes. Quite a number of them were Estate Agents.
- DB: Would they sit on Planning Committees and vote? Did they have to declare an interest?
- KR: Yes.
- DB: When were you first elected and in which Ward?
- KR: In 1962 in The East Ward that runs from Friern Barnet Road north as far as Park Way.
- DB: What do you remember about the Town Hall? Presumably you had been going there and paying your rates? Did you use the Town Hall as a normal resident?
- KR: Very little. I don't think that residents on the whole used the Town Hall much unless they had to come and see an Officer, or unless they attended the monthly meetings, which were public. The one thing that I do remember right in the beginning was that it was a remarkably splendid building and that it was quite luxurious considering that it was built during the War. The pressure on finances and materials must have been great.
- DB: There was a shortage of materials and labour, that's why it took as long as it did. And, of course, the plans had to be amended to include a Control Centre in the basement.
- KR: The Council Chamber and the Committee Rooms were on the first floor and you had a staircase going up and the door to the Chamber was what you saw from the vestibule. The two large Committee Rooms could be opened up as one to create a room for lectures. The offices were at the ends of the corridor on the first floor. I've been up where the clock is and there is a good view from there.
- DB: When you were a Councillor what kind of contact did you have with the Officers?
- KR: It depends what subjects you were interested in.

- DB: Did you specialise in anything?
- KR: I was Chairman of Finance one year and for another year for Town Planning. Mr Pitt was the Treasurer and Mr Starr was our Engineer who was very good.
- DB: Would an Officer contact you and tell you what was going on, or did you have to drag it out of them?
- KR: I don't know where the initiative came from but it was a regular contact. When I was in Finance the Officer in charge was living in The Ridgeway, opposite me, so we were in touch all the time. And then, of course, we had budgets to prepare and all these meetings were public but I can't remember to what extent we encouraged the public to take part. Certainly at the monthly meetings they were encouraged to ask questions.
- DB: Not like Council meetings today!
- KR: We were very keen on working democratically.
- DB: So when it was decided that local councils were going to be merged in 1965, was there any talk about what might happen to the Town Hall?
- KR: There was quite a bit of talk but we were not involved any more – I was never a Councillor on Barnet Council. But Barnet decided eventually to concentrate on the development of the North London Business Park.
- DB: I heard the other day that the only part of Hendon Town Hall to remain is the Council Chamber – all the rest is being let out to Middlesex University. Everyone who works in Hendon is going to the North London Business Park.
- KR: They were planning on some sizeable complex of offices near Hendon Town Hall.
- DB: That was the original plan, with the buildings opposite Hendon Town Hall knocked down and a new complex was going to be built, but I think that's probably gone by the board. When it was announced that all the small London councils were going to be merged, what was the general feeling amongst local Councillors?
- KR: We were unanimous that was a retrograde step. We thought that in London it was essential to have comparatively small units, and I think that we very much more effective and very much more cost effective. With the Borough of Barnet very often you have the feeling that people don't know which part of Barnet you are talking about. You get people on a Planning Committee discussing Friern Barnet and you have to have someone to advise them how to get there. So, I'm convinced that it was a bad move to create such a large local authority.
- DB: And I would imagine that most Councillors throughout London thought the same thing.

KR: I would imagine so.

DB: The thing we haven't covered is your time as a JP. When did you become a JP?

KR: I think from about 1962 until 1982, when I reached 70. When I joined there was no retiring age for JPs – you carried on forever. One of the people I was on the Bench with was pretty ancient and had great difficulty hearing. He was also very racially prejudiced. And then they introduced an age limit which started at eighty and it gradually worked down and I think it's now seventy.

DB: There's no age limits for judges is there?

KR: No, they go on forever.

DB: How do you become a JP – do you fill in a form?

KR: I was invited by the Court. I was a councillor at that time.

DB: And this was presumably as a result of your work as a Councillor?

KR: Yes.

DB: And how long were you a JP for?

KR: About twenty years.

DB: And you were at Highgate?

KR: And I'm still in touch and we have ex-JPs meetings once a quarter.

DB: And what's the general consensus about the way things are going at the moment?

KR: Very disappointed.

DB: Is there too much interference now from Government?

KR: They complain a great deal about that.

DB: Did you have carte blanche, or more discretion then than they do nowadays?

KR: Yes, on the whole. You were never greatly encouraged to do it, but you had the options. It was a very interesting kind of job and I liked that. I had the first case of someone being caught driving drunk – it was a completely new law that came during the 60s, deciding that if you were over the limit you were fined. I remember that case very clearly: it was this chap who was obviously well over the limit and after we heard the evidence the magistrates withdrew and asked the Clerk to join them to discuss in his presence what to do under this new law. The Clerk said that you cannot convict, and when I asked why he said that the law

says that you must be caught driving. The chap had been driving into a parking area behind some flats and the police had followed him and he had been smashing lamps and other cars. He dashed out of the car and the police caught him and brought him to the ground but he said that he had not been driving. So I said to the Clerk, "How can you arrest anyone whilst driving?" I used to have a car with running boards that you could jump on.... but he said: "That's got nothing to do with you, the law says you must be arrested while driving and consequently you cannot actually do anything about it." So I said: "Thank you very much for the advice" and the Clerk left us and I said to the other magistrates: "Well, what do you think about it?" and they said; "Well if the Clerk says you can't do it, you can't do it. He is the expert on the law, we're not." I said: "Well quite clearly the purpose of the law is to keep people like that off the road so I am in favour of taking a chance and convicting." Well, I managed to persuade one of my two colleagues to my way of thinking so we went back into the court and as usual the Clerk said: "The Court will rise. Have you come to a decision, gentlemen?" And I said "Yes. We have come to the conclusion that the case is proved", whereupon the Clerk fainted! He had to be supported back into the seat, because he had so clearly advised us that we couldn't do that. So we sent the man down for three months and fined him quite heavily. The Clerk came after me afterwards, and said: "How could you, sir?" And I said: "Well, look, if we fall in line with this nobody who drives drunk will ever be convicted so the only way we could do anything about it was by convicting him. He is going to appeal which means that it goes to the House of Commons to reconsider the wording of the law. The astonishing thing is that this chap appealed and I certainly should have expected him to win the appeal, but he lost it. I don't know in fact how that was possible because I thought that our convicting him was illegal, consequently he should have got off, but I am very pleased that in the end he didn't. Of course, it went back to the House and was re-drafted and nowadays you don't have to be arrested while driving.

DB: How often did you sit on the Bench?

KR: I think about once a week. In theory you had to commit a whole day to it and I had to ask my boss for permission to join the Bench because it was interfering with work. In practice, we hardly ever sat beyond midday, sometimes the early afternoon.

DB: And how many of you were sitting?

KR: Three, but there are occasions when you can sit on your own, for paternity cases and things like that, but, on the whole, we always were three.

DB: And do you retire and confer?

KR: Yes, but there were occasions when it was so clear cut that you looked left and right and then went ahead, but on the whole you went back to discuss whether to convict or not. And, of course, we had the advice of the Clerk.

DB: What was the pay like? Did you get expenses?

KR: There was no pay we didn't get expenses. Expenses were introduced, I think, about the time when I retired.

DB: So they get expenses now?

KR: I think they get paid too.

DB: I suppose that by not paying it virtually restricts you to the wealthy.

KR: It didn't work out that way, we had quite a number of working people on the Bench, but it is a question of the employer being willing to make a contribution to society. I think we used to do a lot of things that were unpaid. Councillors is another one. We never got expenses or pay for working on the Council and you could in theory assume that it was going to restrict access to the jobs, but in practice I don't think it did. Again it depended on what party you came from and the Conservatives were fairly well-heeled and self-employed and, as you said, were Estate Agents and the like. Of course I've been off the Bench for so long now that quite a lot of magistrates are retired now who joined the Bench only after I retired from it. At one time we dealt with all armed robberies in the south of the country, with armed police and dogs in the courtroom. The Chairman and I took these cases throughout.

DB: Where did the JPs sit?

KR: In the Magistrates Court and one level higher we sat with a judge.

DB: So you could only deal with certain cases in a Magistrates Court?

KR: We dealt with all cases but our limitation was not so much the type of case but the degree of punishment that was possible. If it was incarceration I think it was a maximum of six months that we could send anyone down for. If we felt that it was something that deserved a greater punishment the case would automatically have to go to the next highest court.

DB: So you could, for example, hear a robbery case, but say this is clearly a very serious case and we can't deal with it?

KR: We adjourned the case for it to be heard at the next highest court. We even had the very first instance of murder cases – they all got up to a higher court.

DB: And that decision was yours?

KR: Obviously we had strongly to lean on the advice of the Clerk in those cases. I think that the decision was ours in the sense that if it was possible to limit the punishment to something within our scope then we could, in fact, go ahead. But there were not very many cases where there was any doubt about it from the start and, of course, if we made a decision which the defendant disagreed with he always had the chance of appealing to a higher court. We always had one day set

aside a week for defaulting on rates, on matrimonial problems and so on. We had some of the magistrates specialising in those subjects.

DB: I think I'd better leave it there so that you can have some lunch!

Transcribed by David Berguer
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