

Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

INTERVIEW BETWEEN DAVID BERGUER AND PETER AND MARGARET CRAGG AT 11 WEIRDALE AVENUE, WHETSTONE, N20 ON MONDAY 11 FEBRUARY 2008.

DB So, can you tell me how long you have lived in the area?

MC Since 1961

DB Where were you born?

MC In Fulham.

DB In Fulham? So you're a south London girl?

MC I spent the first twenty-three years of my life in Wembley. And then I moved here in 1961 with my first husband. I lived in Longmore Avenue for twenty-seven years

PC I'm not from here at all. I'm from Nottingham, via Nottinghamshire, Essex, and the London Borough of Waltham Forest

DB So you've been gradually moving west

PC Yes, I came here in 1963

DB When was this house built, do you know?

PC 1935

DB Yes, that would make sense because all that development, Manor Drive and Raleigh Drive etc. were all built in 1935

PC This whole estate was owned by the Lipton tea people

DB So who started at the Town Hall first?

MC By a few months, me

DB So you didn't know each other: this was an office romance then?

MC It was. I started in March 1969

PC And I started about November the same year.

DB Had you worked in local government before?

MC No, never. I was temping in the film industry

DB Was this secretarial?

MC Yes, I was a secretary

PC I have been in local government man and boy

DB So what was your speciality?

PC I seemed to have been involved in everything. You've got to be a sort of Jack-of-all-trades

DB So when you joined Barnet, as it was then (because that was formed in 65)...who was your boss? Were you working in a pool?

MC No I worked for Henry Webb

PC He was my predecessor. He was the principal Administrative Officer

DB So you joined in the November?

PC Yes I was the number two in what was known as the Building and Development plant

DB Does that include planning?

PC Well, dealing with planning, but not planning. The department we had dealt with the maintenance and building of all schools in Barnet, so it was varied. In a word, I was the client. I dealt with the planners and the Engineers Department and so on. We were involved in all new build and it was quite a lot because it was in the time when Margaret Thatcher introduced the biggest building boom in education there has ever been

DB So where did you actually work?

MC Well I started as a temp

DB So you didn't intend to stay?

MC But I did. So I moved all around in various posts, even when I was permanent. I worked upstairs there [*in what was the Committee Room on the first floor*] because it was divided

DB This plan we are looking at was when it was first opened

- MC There was a door halfway in the Committee Room. That was my office for about fifteen years. I got various promotions and eventually became Peter's secretary and when he retired I became PA to the Director, Neil Gill
- DB So when did you two get married?
- MC 1988
- DB So it took a long time...
- MC We only worked together for a few years
- DB And were you there all the time, Peter?
- PC From 1969, yes. I have been looking at these plans but there is no plan of the top floor: there is another floor. When I arrived I was on the top floor – the Building Developments Division was on the top floor. Gradually, as I ascended I took up that office
- DB Which is shown on the plan as the Members' Room, so it was at the back of the building
- MC That was the Director's office, that was Neil Gill's
- DB Where it says Chairman, on the plan
- PC Neil Gill used to have that as his office, of course, that was more sunny. It got very little sun at the back, where Jack had his office
- MC Peter retired in 1990 and I stayed on another four years as PA to the Director
- DB In the course of daily working, what contact did you have with the Councillors, or were you all the time working with officers?
- PC Margaret would have had more contact with them because she was talking for the boss
- MC As they came to see the Director
- PC Mine was more passive – I saw Councillors more at Committee than at work. I was more on a day-to-day basis dealing with Officers and staff. In those days it was the Chief who was the main, if only, contact with Councillors – it doesn't happen that way now, of course
- DB Towards the end it became more or less the Education Section?

PC It was always....

DB Even from 1969?

MC Yes

PC When I first got there in 1969, the Children's Department had three offices and they were then absorbed into Social Services. So from 1969/1970 it's been Education all the way through, till the end

DB And, of course, with things based at Hendon at the Town Hall...

PC There was, of course, Gateway House and then Barnet House; they were the three main centres

MC We did have offices in Colney Hatch Lane

DB Whereabouts?

MC Where the Electricity Offices used to be

DB Where the Hindu Cultural Centre is now. And when did they vacate them?

PC I should think about 1985. They had all three floors

MC School Meals was there

PC Grants was on the top floor but we didn't use the middle floor because it was a big hall there

DV: And what was it like working in the Town Hall?

MC Loved it!

DB The environment and the people?

MC People. I keep in touch with loads of them to this day, from the time we left. It was great; we had a good social club. I was Chairman for a few years. It started in 1972

DB What was it called?

MC It was just called our little social club really

DB It wasn't for the whole Borough of Barnet?

MC No, just for the Town Hall

- DB So what kind of things did you do?
- MC We used the basement to play table tennis, we had lunches down there, we played darts down there. One of the girls had a little cooker and we used to do soup and a roll and play darts in our lunch hour. The lunch hour was 12 till 2, it was staggered. That went on for a long time. We used to do Children in Need – we used to dress up
- PC I won't say it was unique to Education, but the other departments had a bit of a go, occasionally, and we used to have one or two inter department darts matches and "wellie" throwing
- MC It never really took off though
- PC But ours kept going for a good long time
- MC If it was Valentine's Day that would be a reason to have a lunch and we would get fifty people to lunch in the Council Chamber and we always had a theme and we made a lot of money for charity
- PC Children in Need used to be very successful at Christmas
- MC And the Director was always for it. Neil Gill and John Bailey thought it was great. Christmas was a great time and each department would have their coffee morning and we all went to each department. We didn't do a lot of work, but we worked hard during the year. It was excellent – we had mince pies
- PC It was one of the reasons why the social club worked and one of the reasons why the office was a happy place to be. In those days there was a lot of loyalty
- MC And because of the social club we all knew each other quite well
- PC And we were all contained in the one building, all the departments, whereas others were more mixed
- MC And of course we had a receptionist, Chris
- PC Those steps there [*leading to the Rates Office on the plan*] we took out and set up as a more modern reception. In the old days you went through it to pay your rates. So it was a dead area
- DB So when you joined in 1969 that was already there?
- PC No, I did it – well I didn't do it but it was done under my regime. It was done about 1983

- MC The switchboards were either side as you went in and the one on the right hand side became an interview room. Of course, that was the old plug in switchboards
- DB So when you joined it was Education even then?
- PC Yes, but it was The Town Hall! And then one of our esteemed Town Clerks arrived - Max Caller - and refused to let us call it the Town Hall
- DB What did he call it then?
- PC He called it the Education Department. But it was Friern Barnet Town Hall! That came about because there was still war between Finchley, Hendon and Barnet and that never quite subsided
- DB I think that is the case with any organisations that merge and it goes on for years, almost until people retire and new people take over who never knew the old set up
- PC Some people hold very strong feelings, but I never really understand why. I'm a great advocate for change, but not too dramatic a change but I think you can make things happen a lot. You cause a lot of problems
- MC I loved it. There were always weddings and usual things that women are interested in. There was a real family atmosphere there
- DV: Did you have any contact with anybody else in Barnet, was there a giant Christmas party for all Barnet Council employees for example?
- PC There used to be an annual golf match between the Councillors and the Officers, but it was never publicised. We played all over the place at different courses; two matches that I played in were at Moor Park and Sandy Lodge. That was about it all really. And there were theatre trips, but that nearly all went on in the Education Department
- DB And the Education Department was all at the Town hall, there weren't other parts elsewhere?
- MC No. Every aspect of a child's education was in that building
- PC It changed when the 1982 Act came in and they started giving the budget to schools, individually, and that reduced a tremendous lot some of the people's workload. Some people moved away, some people were made redundant, so gradually, gradually, gradually, we had one or two small outposts – one over at Edgware at the Child Guidance Centre where two people were working – they all came back into the Town Hall. At the back, here [*pointing to corner of Goldsmith Road and Friern Barnet Lane on the plan*] was an old youth club
- DB Was it next to where the fire station was?

- PC Next door, where the houses are now
- DB Was it a wooden hut?
- PC No, there was a wooden hut but that was there before the War
- DB That was alongside the Town Hall going up Friern Barnet Lane...
- PC Yes there was the hut, then the Fire Station, then the Town Hall
- DB I think they used the hut for wedding receptions didn't they?
- PC It was a dreadful place. No, that is actually wrong. There was the wooden hut, then behind there was the building I am talking about. The houses were then built first and now, of course, they developed over there [*Leadbetter Close*] The building behind the hut was on two floors, one underneath was all garages and store places for the engineers and on the top it had been a youth club. What it was built for originally, I haven't a clue. The downstairs part was derelict, it wasn't used at all. When we closed over the road [*Colney Hatch Lane*] we brought what was called the Awards Office and put them in there. Eventually that was all knocked down
- DB And the Fire Station was obviously still a Fire Station then
- PC It was never a Fire Station when we were there
- DB Of course, latterly it was used as a Day Centre
- PC Well, I was Chairman of the Day Centre for 17 years. Eventually we put the caretaker in the former Fire station. He used to have a flat in the attic of the Town Hall. He had part of the top floor and two small bedrooms actually in the attic [*on the right hand side of the Town Hall*] and there was a ladder going up into the loft, which is now, of course, converted into flats. We moved him from there to the top floor of the Fire Station
- DB I can't imagine who would buy a flat in the old Fire Station, with those big windows in the front – there is no privacy at all
- PC That's a lounge we're told, a communal lounge. The front bit was used by the Caretaker and the back bit was used for what we call peripatetic people, used for their desk space, they didn't work there for very long and under the conversion that bit was knocked down. I think there are now five flats in there, with this communal room
- DB Plus all the flats and houses at the back. Of the Town Hall. I shouldn't imagine they get a lot of sun

PC Not a lot, because the Town Hall is quite a large building. The offices in the front were very hot, of course. I think they made quite a good job of the site but I won't talk about the quality of the internal walls of the houses – they won't be like the Town Hall, they were so strong.

Pause

PC Gateway House was the Engineer's Department. If you went down towards London, there was a road, the gas department had an office and then there was what looked like a raggedy park going down towards Gravel Hill, that's now a very expensive Bovis development

DB So that was going to be Finchley Town Hall?

PC No, the Town Hall for Barnet

DB When Barratt's were trying to buy the Friern Barnet Town Hall we managed to get it listed otherwise they would have probably knocked it down

PC But it was so well built

DB And that was during wartime, of course. And the interior fittings were beautiful with the marble, etched glass and wooden panelling. Just after they vacated the place we went and had a look round

MC There used to be the names of the people that worked there on the walls in the basement

PC There are also the remains of a telephone exchange down there

DB And there was that gas proof room at the end with a great steel door

PC The room you are talking about latterly, and I am talking about 1985, was used by the Town Clerk as the official archive for storing special files. When Barratt's had finished they took us round

DB Had they done a good job with the conversion?

PC It looked very nice. They've got five or six flats at the top but they were not allowed to put windows in the top

DB You paid your rates to Mr Kelly? And I suppose that most people would have popped in once a week or once a week or once a month

MC Yes. There were also wedding receptions there and two of my friends had their receptions there in the Committee Room. It was 1969 when Mr Kelly was there

PC And then, of course, people didn't pop in anymore, they would send a cheque

MC And not everybody had a bank account. It took ages for them to persuade people to be paid by cheque

DB When you were Peter's secretary, you were married

PC Not to start with

DB Wasn't that difficult?

MC I retained my old name

DB I've always thought it must be a strain on a marriage to work together

PC It's the easiest thing in the world, but it could be the most difficult thing. It depends on the people

MC I'm still Peter's secretary in a way. I still do all his typing for the PPI Forum!