

AUDIO INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Sharp, Ernie: transcript of an audio interview (30-May- and 25-Jun-2014)

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Biography: Mr Ernie Sharp (1921-2015) worked as a dustman in Lewisham Borough Council from 1947 until 1965 when he became Junior Area Manager of the Rivers and Refuse Disposal division in the Greater London Council's (GLC) Public Health Engineering Department. He was promoted to Deputy Area Manager, then Area Manager, and in the early 1970s he was appointed Assistant General Manager of the GLC's Solid Waste Management Branch. He served in the Armed Forces from 1941 to 1947 as a mechanic, and spent a long period of his service in Egypt. In London, he taught on the waste management course at Hackney Community College for more than 30 years.

LF: Lynda Finn

ES: Ernie Sharp

LF: Ernie, can you tell me your full name?

ES: Ernest John Sharp.

LF: And when were you born?

ES: 1921.

LF: Where were you born?

ES: Holborn, Central London.

LF: Your current employment status?

ES: Retired.

LF: And your parents' occupation?

ES: Father was a bookmaker, mother didn't work.

LF: Can we talk a bit about your early memories, your childhood? Did you live in Holborn?

ES: Yes. Old Gloucester Street is just off Holborn High Street, near the British Museum and at the bottom of the road there is a garden and on the side of the gardens is a children's hospital, Great Ormond Street. We played in the street in those days, which children don't seem to do now or are able to. There was a transport depot called Great Baileys and they had horses and carts coming out, shire horses with long carts. Most furniture and stuff was moved that way until they eventually got some lorries. And we used to

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jump on the side of the carts, and I remember we finished up in Great Ormond Street when I fell off and hurt my leg. When I was five years old the new estates were being built on the periphery of London, that's at Downham, Billingham, and Dagenham, and we were rehoused as being in a poor area and went on to a new estate at Downham, which is now in the borough of Lewisham.

LF: And that was when you were five?

ES: Five. I had my sixth birthday in Downham.

LF: Whereabouts is Downham?

ES: That's over the road. It's exactly similar to this. I remember that the road wasn't made up, the pavement was there and the removal lorry, the men were taking the furniture down on the pavement rather than taking the lorry down on the unmade road. At the bottom of the road there was a farm, and we had a rather large garden and we used to get the soil from the edge of the farm - that's good topsoil - for our garden. Also, there were many deliveries to houses by horse and cart so we had a bucket and spade ready to go and get the manure for Dad for his garden.

LF: Did you have brothers and sisters, Ernie?

ES: Yes. I had three sisters and two brothers, and I was the youngest. Unfortunately my parents had ten children but four didn't survive for various reasons, during the War and so forth. I was a twin but the other half came out stillborn.

LF: You were going to tell me about your early schooldays.

ES: I went to Downderry Infants School on the Downham Estate and went on to Churchdown Boys School, which was an elementary school. I had to leave school at 14 years old; it was necessary that I went and tried to earn my keep. My first, being five feet tall or short, my first job was as a pageboy in a shop in Bromley, in Kent, operating a lift and things like that, doing the messages.

LF: Why was your height significant for that?

ES: Because height used to count when you went for a job. And being short I noticed all my life has been a disadvantage. I can put the same suit on as a six-foot man but not look half as smart. Being short has been a drawback, not that it's bothered me at all but it has been a drawback.

LF: How long did you do that job as a pageboy?

ES: Well my wage was 10 shillings (50 p) a week, and I gave that to mother and she gave me one shilling and sixpence (12½ p) back for pocket money. Then I saw an opportunity to get an increase in wage by going to another job, so I went to the Royal Automobile Club in Pall Mall in London as a pageboy. I was there for the Coronation in the 1930s, and the funeral of the King. I'm not sure how long I was a pageboy going around with messages. I [later] progressed to *commis* waiter in the senior staff dining area.

LF: Still at the Royal Automobile Club?

ES: Still at the Royal Automobile Club, yes. The only problem with that, we had two of us, one started in the mornings to prepare for breakfast, we both did lunch and then the morning man went off home and the other one stayed for dinner, to serve dinner. So in between times was a large gap. In the gap I used to go to Marshall Street swimming baths every day. Often I went to the Disney cartoon cinemas. I don't know if you ever knew about those? All they showed was cartoons, nothing else but cartoons.

LF: So what sort of hours did you work?

ES: Well, because it was two shifts it was a bit difficult to say exactly how we worked; things weren't as tight in those days, you were employed, you were working, and that was it. The advantage I had being there, being the Royal Automobile Club, was that there were so many well-known members that I got the autograph of Malcolm Campbell, George Eastern - many, many famous people. Another thing I used to do was collect foreign stamps when they threw their envelopes away in a bucket. There were lots and lots of foreign stamps I used to get, and the pastry chef in the kitchen wanted stamps, so I used to exchange them for pastries and sticky cakes.

LF: Roughly how long did you stay at the Royal Automobile Club?

ES: About three years, four years. Then my parents moved to Greenwich, I was still living with my parents. In fact they opened a café, I suppose one would call it a greasy spoon. Then I got employment in the United Glass Bottles factory in Charlton, and then came in the beginning of the War at about that time. At the time, I got my first motorbike. It was unfortunately parked in the works, and we were down in the basement. We usually spent nearly all night down in the basement, and when I got up in the morning the back wheel had been splintered full of shrapnel. I joined the Home Guard, it was the local defence volunteers in those days. So I got a helmet and gas mask and learnt to strip down a submachine gun, the Browning, and did a bit of spotting for fires, a bit of roof spotting.

LF: Were you still living at home with your parents at the time?

ES: Yes.

Then, in November 1940 when there were lots of air raids and things, they started calling up 21 year olds into the army: conscription. And being 19, I saw the trend that they went to 22 years old and came down to 21, and I thought, 'Soon I'm going to be called up.' What's the option? So I went into a recruiting centre in Eltham and enlisted in the Army as a young tradesman. This was on deferred embodiment, which meant I had to wait for a course to start. I then went to work for Lewisham Council, road sweeping and helping with road repairs and bomb damage. When bombs dropped, the job of the authority was to clear the roads - not the bomb site, but to clear the roads. I did that until I got notice to join the Army, I went to Aldershot and I found I was in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. I did training at Aldershot, then I was sent on a mechanics course in civilian billets in Manchester, so for the next six months I was in Manchester working in a garage with a trainer, of course working on vehicles, cars mainly. By August of that year I was trade tested and passed as a tradesman, I think I got thruppence (3d) extra a day or something. I put the pliers and hammer on my sleeve. The next thing I was given a week's leave because I hadn't had any leave for over six months, and when I got back I had to report to a place in Hucknall in Nottingham. There was an old timber firm that had been taken over by the Army, and we were being mustered to go abroad. In Hucknall, we were marching up and down the streets for our training and one night we went to the fish and chip shop and they said, 'You're going tomorrow morning'. At two o'clock in the morning we loaded into coaches and the people were all out ready, waving us goodbye and we went to Liverpool docks and got on the *Duchess of Bedford*, was a PFO I think, liner. We were on the *Duchess of Bedford* quite some time because it didn't go in a straight light, it zigzagged across the Atlantic. We went across to the Azores, then back to the Ivory Coast. We weren't allowed off at the Ivory Coast. We were allowed a few hours shore leave at Cape Town, and I remember seeing everywhere we went, we went to the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], and that everywhere were oranges, you could help yourself to oranges. And that was the first time I ever saw a lemon growing on a tree. At the YMCA they gave us a ticket for the train, and the train had a peculiar hooting whistle, it took us around to a place called Camp Bay. When we got off the train there were people waiting there to take us into a lido where they fitted us out with costumes and said we could go for a bathe in the sea. All I remember is it was cold and rough, but everybody was very, very nice to us. On the quay people were waiting to take soldiers back to their homes, or somewhere, wherever. Back on the ship we went to Karachi. We disembarked at Karachi with all our kit on our shoulders and we got onto a flat-bottomed troop ship called *HMS Lancaster*. This was because it was going up the Persian Gulf, and up the Red Sea, and the larger ships

couldn't get there. I'm trying to think where in Egypt we landed.

LF: Did you go to Cairo?

ES: No, it's quite a long way from there. It was near the top of the Red Sea by the Persian Gulf and just on the top of Egypt on the borders with Persia, Iran [possibly Taufiq Port/Tewfik]. Disembarking there we went about five miles out into the desert and put up our camp. I was now in the number one army workshop, the only ever mobile-based workshop the army ever had. We had two very large canvas 'arkies' called Aldershot shelters. We were there for 18 months. We weren't allowed to stay any longer than two years because of the temperature. Temperatures were very high in the day time and a bit low at night, which I think not many would appreciate that you could be in 120°F during the day, and wake up in the morning and the water bucket outside had ice.

LF: How did you and your mates cope with that? That temperature was so different from what you were used to in England?

ES: Should I say engineers are harder than soldiers? We wore overalls, not an army uniform, unless we had to go on parade. And we always wore a topi, a sun helmet, a thick helmet, very light and it came down the back of your neck. In fact, we had an officer when we went out on a small working party, the officer always in front and they're always standing, if they're in a tank or something, they're always standing with their head out the top. Because he had his army cap on, his neck wasn't protected. He eventually died of sunstroke. We did have a very deep hole dug in the desert with a tent on top of it and this was for soldiers with sun stroke, they had to be treated down there. It was exceptionally hot. We thought we were clever to fry an egg on the wing of a car or a lorry. All it did was dry up. At that time General Montgomery issued an order that everybody would do PT [Physical Training] in the morning, officers and everybody. Well, some of our officers and senior NCOs [Non-Commissioned Officers] played hockey because we were then in the 9th Indian Army, and at that time the major sport of the Indians was hockey. And so we had a hockey team, and instead of running around the parade ground doing PT they decided that they would have hockey practice. So I joined the hockey team, not that I could play hockey but I could run a little bit fast in those days, bearing in mind I was 21 or 22, something like that. So I had many trips going to play hockey and we always got some sort of reception there, so it split the monotony up a bit.

As a fairly new trainee on the mechanical side I had various minor jobs to do. One of them was working on a motorcycle, and I got that running. My closest friend was the post corporal. He had a motorcycle. He used to collect the mail, deliver it, give it to the officers who censored all the mail going out, took the stamp for them to pass it, and then he would take the post off in the motorbike. When I repaired my motorbike, then it became two idiots driving across the desert. And I'd like to say that when I say desert, when you see these people tramping through in the sand and falling all over the place, it is nothing like that. It's more hard, rocky and stony. A few miles, three or four miles, away was a base run by the RAF [Royal Air Force] and they had some aeroplane hangars there. And there was an Egyptian café there that did, their main thing was "eggs a bread, eggs a bread", and we used to go across the desert on these motorbikes and get a breakfast there. As I say, that lasted for about 18 months but during that time lease lend was going on with the Americans, and Dodge three-ton lorries were coming in crates to the dock, and being assembled by Arabs and Americans. They had 90 of these vehicles and they had to be delivered to the Russians. A light-aid detachment is just three or four people, soldiers going out to do something, collect a vehicle or repair a vehicle or something. So they wanted a light-aid detachment to go with these vehicles. Fortunately I was one of those. All these vehicles were loaded, some with boots, some with corned beef, they were all loaded with something for the Russians. And this was to go across Iraq, and through a pass called the Paytak, that's over the [Zagros] mountains in Persia. And we finished up in Teheran. You can imagine it just took a few days.

Anybody that could drive was asked to take one of these vehicles so you can imagine there were chaps who said, 'I can drive,' and had never been in a vehicle before from the service corps, the signals, the Royal Artillery. So our job at the back was to keep them running and there are many stories about that,

going over the Paytak pass. The mountain was very steep, and the only way that we could make sure that these chaps got over it was at the bottom, put them in bottom gear and put them in booster gear, two gear boxes. We put them in booster gear, and said, 'Don't move out of that. You won't go very fast but you won't stop. Don't stop because you'll just go backwards.' One didn't make it and tipped over, so we had to unload that and load it onto one of our vehicles. We had three vehicles at the back with all the toolkits. And because we had to stop and keep repairing vehicles or telling drivers what they were doing wrong, we were always a long way behind the convoy so that when we'd got to camp they'd had their meal and finished, so it was a bit awkward there. I remember on the top of this Paytak mountain pass there was a sort of a small pond in the rocks. It was a little bit green, but bearing in mind we were perspiring and this was ice cold we had a swim in that.

When we got to Teheran we drove the vehicles into an American camp and they serviced all the vehicles, prepared them to be handed over to the Russians. And we were in a camp opposite, which was a transit camp. We were there for three weeks so we kept two of the vehicles for our use and handed them over afterwards. I always remember out in the middle of the road was a very, very large lady with bandoliers of ammunition around her, a Russian, so my impression of Russian women from then on was great big women [laughs]. But the Russians then took over the vehicles from there, and that's the time when the Germans were pushing them back through the Caucasus Mountains and we were on the other side. Three weeks in Teheran with all the problems we'd had, sexually I never went astray, but I was interested in what it was all about and so I had a few scrapes going out of bounds, as it were. I won't go into those.

LF: Where did you go after Teheran? Where were you stationed?

ES: The next move from there was back to where the camp was. We then moved camp to about three miles outside Suez. It was on the banks of the Suez Canal; we put our camp up, and there was a pontoon bridge across the canal. I might have my figures wrong now. As I remember it's 90 feet wide, 90 yards deep, and 90 miles long - something like that - and in the middle there's a lake. What a memory I've got, good grief! King Farouk's yacht was anchored in the lake. We used to have a liberty lorry when we were finished our work, we could go down to the lake to swim.

LF: What was the "liberty lorry"?

ES: Well it was an ordinary army lorry that we just got in, and one of them volunteered to drive it.

LF: As the War went on, did you spend all of your time in North Africa in Egypt, or were you stationed elsewhere?

ES: At Suez they were preparing for the invasion of Italy and Greece so our main task there was waterproofing vehicles - vehicles that come off the landing craft going through the water, the exhaust pipe was underwater and that would stop the engine, and the carburettor and things like that, so we had to waterproof. So we had a sort of a dip where you go down through the water and out the other side and we were in swimming costumes or our pants doing that. All this time we were getting liberty in the evenings, and at Suez there was a...

LF: When you say "liberty", just for people listening, you mean time off?

ES: Yes, time off, time off. Out in the desert there was a bit of a river and there was an area where there were some rocks where the water was deep enough to swim. So often we would get one of the vehicles, drive out there, and as we got off the lorry we'd dive straight into the water. And if you took a bit of soap with you, you then soaped all your clothes and got in the water again and then put the clothes on the rocks. Then after we'd finished swimming in our nuddy we put our clothes back on all clean. Being on the banks of the Suez Canal, we actually had a lunch break, we had cans then, we had bully beef and hard biscuits and things like that, and tea.

LF: Tell me what “bully beef” was.

ES: Corned beef. Daily, we’d swim across the Suez Canal and what I learnt was that the Mediterranean is higher than the Red Sea so there’s a current all the way flowing down that way. So when you swam across, don’t matter how well you could swim, you finished up about 100 yards further down, so you had to walk up 200 yards to get back where you started. We saw many ships going through, some of them troop ships. I remember one going through, rather large, bearing in mind I said it was about 90 feet wide and just imagine a ship’s pretty wide, so in between a ship and the bank there’s space, but not a lot. I was swimming in there when one of these ships came past and there were a lot of nurses up there, and I’m waving to the nurses like this and a displacement of the water from the front took me whizzing back down the back.

I was always trying to learn the language where I was, so one time we were parked in a date plantation, and they flooded it every night, and we had Arabs to guard us although we did our own guarding. But the Arabs were very adept at sneaking in and one of our greatest problems in those countries was the stealing. They were very good. So we got the thief to guard the thief. I used to sit with the chokidars - that’s the guards - with a language book, learning Arabic words. Everyday words: “come here”, “good boy”, “how are you?” and so forth. Then I’d always try to learn one to ten, “what’s it worth?”, “how much?”. When we had these Aldershot shelters out, when a vehicle in the army is discarded because it’s beyond local repair, something called a BLR, they couldn’t use it till something major was done to it. So major repairs were brought back to us. The breakdown vehicles went out and brought them in and the army employed Arabs to strip the vehicles down, and we had paraffin cleaners, which did the tank and you pumped it with your foot to wash the stuff. So they washed all the parts down and then we put them up, new parts or replacement parts, so there were other Arabs working with British soldiers reassembling the engines and things like that. Because I’d learnt a few words of Arabic I was put in charge of this working group: “hurry up”, “come on”, “work”, and things like that. That also kept me amused.

When we got down to Suez, we were wandering around. Wherever you go in the world you’ll find little knots of people, Orthodox Jews and Orthodox Greeks or a group of Italians, little groups in every town; you’ll find them. So you get talking to some of these people, and I didn’t drink in those days. In fact, we used to get issued with 50 cigarettes and a bar of chocolate, I’m not sure, I think about once a month, so I used to swap my cigarettes for chocolate. I forgot to tell you that on the journey over the Paytak, it was a large value and we were on the slope at the side when I had my 21st birthday [laughs]. All it was was a big oil drum with a fire in it and an orange box full of, a crate for beer, with beer on the back end of a vehicle that we had. That was my 21st birthday.

From Suez, following the invasion that had started in Greece and Italy, we packed our workshop up, boarded a ship to go to finish up in Piraeus. We were delayed because our ship couldn’t get in because of sunken ships, and the Germans were just getting out, were being pushed out. On the outskirts of Athens there’s a district called Himitos [Ήμιτός], which is named after a mountain at the back. We took over this workshop, an old Greek might remember, Malsiniotis [Καλυκοποιείο Μάλσινιώτη] was the name of the workshop. And we had captured the German workshop division in a barbed wire compound inside. So working in the workshop were English soldiers, British soldiers, German soldiers, and Greek civilians, all working together. So now I’m trying to learn Greek. Because I was trying to learn Greek - anywhere you go if you’re trying to speak to them in their language, you always get treated a lot differently - so we were invited to a school just up the road to a party. I think three or four of us went. As we walked through the door they were playing their Greek music and dance, and as soon as they saw us they stopped playing their music and started playing *God Save the Queen - King, Queen*, or whatever. Before the night was out I was, after a few retinas, I was leading the dancing, trying to do Greek dancing and singing in Greek. We still used to do two hours on and four hours off guard duty on a rota system. So one night on the rota system I decided I’d go up to the Mimosa, which was the name of the taverna. And I was dancing with my jacket partly open, and I’d been working on a tank and it had a Very Pistol [Flare Gun] in it, and I’d put it inside my belt. So, with my jacket open, they saw this pistol and they got a bit frightened. I said, ‘Don’t get frightened,’ and I fired it. The next thing I know whistles are blowing, the red caps are coming.

After a short time the Greeks decided, the Communists of Greece decided that they didn't like the Royalists, so the Communists and the Royalists were in conflict. Unfortunately we were sort of in the middle of the two. So there was a bit of cross fire going on. We still had people up near this school who were a bit isolated so to keep in contact with them we had a very large AEG/AEC lorry with very wide wheels and armour plating around the cab with little slits for windows. And my job was to go up to this place once or twice a day, sometimes with some supplies, sometimes not. The road to the school was unmade, so whenever it rained the rain poured down the road and the road was full of ruts all the way down. So as I went past, I told them 'Put the rubber one in,' and I rode over it, so every day I went up they were out there filling the ruts in and pointing where they wanted me to drive. The civil war was a bit nasty. The trouble was I was more on the Communist side, so the next thing I'm singing a Communist song, *The Red Flag*, in Greek.

LF: When was this, Ernie?

ES: That must be about 1943/1944. Was it in Japan the first peace? Peace in Japan first, I was there then. I missed all the celebrations. Yes, it would be 1944. I never forgot that song - I found it easy to learn a song wherever I went.

LF: Sounds as if your Greek is still pretty good.

ES: Well I tried. I got a young lady, didn't I? Well, as my wife is no longer about, I got engaged to a young girl in Greece, and their engagement was to exchange gold rings with your name in and go to church and get it blessed. So we did all that. I now got a little bit better with the Greek, still didn't get the grammar. Then we moved out of that area because of the problems and we moved down to the coast, which is now one of the best resorts they've got down there, along the coast. But in that day when we moved, the beach was completely empty. It's now full of hotels and things. So every lunchtime I swam out to sea as far as I could until I saw a jellyfish, and turned around and belted back again. We went round to a place called Vouliagmeni [Βουλιγαμένη], which is round the coast, there was a sort of break in the rocks and it was about 25 to 30 feet to the water but it was deep water. So everybody was diving down into this narrow area. I wouldn't do it now but it was chicken run, so we did that.

We had a joint party in the workshops, before we left the workshops, with the Greeks and it was a fancy dress thing, so they dressed me up as a doctor and taught me something rude that I didn't know I was doing at the time. Should I tell you it concerned a pestle and mortar? We had paper money, a little voucher, sixpence or a shilling and things like that, so we didn't have to deal with Greek money at all, and we got well in with the taverna. They had banana wine, cherry wine, they had barrels of all sorts of stuff there. The first glass of retsina was horrible, after that it wasn't too bad, but I didn't like ouzo, but I liked cherry brandy and, I think, I mostly had cherry brandy.

LF: I want to know what you did with that pestle and mortar.

ES: Let's say one was hanging. And everywhere I walked along the street they were all coming out shouting, 'Is this your gear? Is this your gear, γιατρός (doctor)?'

LF: What does that mean?

ES: Doctor. "Γιατρός" is doctor. So by the time I got to the party, can you imagine? Then somebody said, 'There's somebody waiting for you at the gate.' It's my cousin. He had the same name as me, Ernie, but unfortunately he's passed away now, it's a long time ago, but I still see his wife. That was a surprise, but that meant another party, didn't it? What I thought unusual was that none of the Germans seemed to try to escape. They were only in a barbed wire compound and we weren't all that brilliant at guarding. We were engineers not guards you know, although we did our two-on and four-off walking about, I thought there was plenty of scope for them to get away, but they didn't. And we had a fire station that was run by

half Greeks and half Germans. When my cousin came, at the fancy dress what were we going to go as, we were standing by the fire brigade and one of the Greeks, they only fitted him up as a fireman.

LF: Shall we move on a bit to the end of the War and when you were demobbed? Do you want to tell me about that?

ES: I transgressed a little there, somewhere along there, I opened a gate that I shouldn't have done so I got into some trouble. I was then sent to Italy and I was in Naples and drove for about six months learning Italian. I had got a Greek girl, but she was Yugoslavian. So I was in a bit of a bother with Greek, Italian, English, and Yugoslavian, got a bit mixed up. I went back to the unit, which was now in Egypt, a place called Kassassin. From there we were shipped home, I can't remember the name of the ship, but I volunteered to work, clear up the canteen after you know, when the NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institutes) was shut down. Well they all left their empty bottles there, and there was something on a bottle, I don't know if it was a penny on a bottle or something, and they used to queue up waiting for the window to open. So we had all our bottles on the counter and were front of the queue. So we did alright. All we had to do was clean the place up and there was, every morning was a ship's drill where you went up on deck with our lifebelts on. We stayed down there and as the Captain come around, we moved around to somewhere else so we didn't go up on the drill. I spent a lot of time in the sun there. By the time I got off a train at King's Cross, and my sister lived just around the corner, I knocked at the door and stood there with my kitbag, and she looked: 'Yes, what do you want?' I said, 'It's me.' I was nearly black at the time, very sunburnt, and possibly some of the troubles I get now are through that as well.

LF: When was that? When did you leave the Army?

ES: 1947. I was discharged in 1947. It's when I came back from abroad, got off the troop ship. We handed our clothing in, got civilian shoes, and a pass to go home. I think about a week later I got a form saying I'd been transferred to the Reserves, so that's the last I saw of my uniform and all the rest of it.

LF: How was that for you, after all those years in the Army with all of those interesting things, all of that camaraderie, how did it feel when you left the Army.

ES: Well, my mate Les, who I had been with all those years in the Army, we met up again and we used to do things together. One of the things we did is, I said I'd like to learn to dance. So we went to a dancing school, learnt to dance, and that's where I met my wife, Vera. I like girls with red hair and she had red hair and that done it. I just found that among the old photographs the other day. I don't remember seeing it.

LF: That's a very beautiful photograph.

ES: I said it must be an omen that she sent it back. So I had to get that framed and put it pride of place. See how gorgeous she was.

LF: She certainly was.

ES: Oh yes.

LF: Ernie, tell me about your first job after you left the army.

ES: Well, the system was for every month you'd been abroad you got a day's leave, so I had nearly three months leave, paid leave, from the Army. I didn't want to be a fitter, I'd been a fitter for six or seven years almost, and I wanted to be a driver. But as you would appreciate, every other man had been taught to drive and there was a shortage of vehicles as well at that particular time. So I was going around trying to get a job as a driver and I went to, I passed a scrapyards at Greenwich and I don't know how I got to it, but you could go to this scrapyards, just walk in and say, 'Good morning, any work?' You could go to work and then as you walked out they'd give you your money. So I did that for a month or so, still looking for

this driver's job. My parents had moved to Cheshunt down in the Lee Valley, so I was living with my sister in Woolwich. I went to Lewisham Council and said, 'Have you got any driving jobs?' Well the Superintendent at that time was a clerk in the office that used to book me in when I went there every day for work before the War, and he said, 'Oh, we kept your job for you.' It appears that the rules were that if you worked for somebody for four weeks or more before going into the Forces, they had to save your job, or have a job for you when you went out.

So I said to him, 'What is it?' He said, 'It's helping on the highways.' So I said, 'Well, we'll see how we go.' In fact, I was laying cobblestones in a workshop in the main transport depot at Lewisham and there were another two chaps, similar age to me, under similar conditions, and they called one in the office and said, 'It's getting near Christmas and we want help on the refuse. We're short of dustmen. Would you help over Christmas?' 'No fear, I'm not going to be a dustman,' he said. So next thing he knows he's got his cards, he's finishing on Friday. Then they asked the other chap and then they got to me. When they got to me I thought, 'I don't want to be out of work, like.' So I said 'Yes.' I went to help out over Christmas and I was carrying dustbins for the next 12 years. My first lorry I went out with, a freighter low-loader, I have a picture. That was the first time I tipped a dustbin into one of those. Then I was detailed to go and fill in with a gang. In those days we had six men working in a gang, one of them was a charge hand and then there was a driver. The refuse was taken to Deptford Creek and tipped into a barge to go down the river to the landfill side down at Mucking in Essex.

So my first taste of being a real dustman was round about Lee, the Lee area of Lewisham and the charge hand showed me how to lift a dustbin and what they expected. I was about 24, 27, something like that. I'd just come out the Army, I was quite fit. So I got used to it.

LF: Can I just ask, were many of your colleagues also ex-Army or ex-Forces?

ES: Not many of them, no. Some of them had been dustmen for years.

Yes. I joined the trade union as any good worker should do, became a shop steward, as the silly ones do. By this time, I was married, I had one child and another one on the way so I needed to earn money. One of the things I used to do was we worked half past seven till half past four, did a 40-hour week, six days a week; four hours on a Saturday. And so when we finished work at half past four on Mondays and Tuesdays, I would do an hour's work in this man's garden. Anything he wanted done: mow the lawn, help repair the greenhouse, things like that, for two shillings and sixpence an hour. And the other one was his sister's house around the corner where I cut the grass. During the War when all the authorities were collecting material for the War effort, we call it recycling now, in those days we called it salvage. They had a trailer behind so the drivers dropped the trailer at the cleansing depot in Lewisham, then they emptied their vehicle and went back to the transport depot. So those trailers had to be emptied after half past four at night, but ready for them to pick up at half past seven in the morning, or seven o'clock in the morning. So there was overtime in the depot, unloading the trailer, sorting the material and bailing up the paper and the tin cans. And that was usually five o'clock to 10 o'clock, because there was quite a lot of work there.

So I was on a rota for that and the Foreman, the Senior Foreman, Superintendent knew if he was short just to send someone down to me saying, 'Will you work tonight?', and I'd say 'Yes'; I never said 'No.' One of my problems, I always say 'Yes.' And, well it paid off. After a while I was made senior hand on the gang, but still doing this overtime. Another source of overtime was Lewisham market, which is still there but in a different shape now. It was in the High Street going along in front of the shops. Well, that had to be swept and washed down when the market stalls left at six o'clock, so there was overtime there from half past five until possibly 10 o'clock again, and you had to sweep the High Street from - people won't know, but there was a Prince of Wales cinema one end and the Gaumont cinema at the other. We had to sweep the High Street, so it was another until 10 o'clock. It got in the habit, if they were short of a driver they would also ask me to drive a vehicle, even if it was only for half a day. That was a good break actually. One time they asked me if I could drive a motorbike and I said, 'Yes.' Then I'm in the transport depot with a motorbike and a box sidecar. In the box sidecar was weed killer and disinfectant and I had a

passenger on the back and the job was for the summer, six months, to go around the bomb sites that were all weed grown and spray the bomb sites. So that was six months break going around on a motorbike.

I know when I drove around the depot I turned a bit sharpish and the wheel of the box came off the ground so I was on two wheels and when I got back to the Foreman he said, 'No need to show off.' I hadn't done it on purpose. Eventually they got a new lorry that had to be emptied at lunchtime. They were trying to do one lorry for one crew instead of changing vehicles, so I took that lorry every day for an hour and a half while the driver had his lunch. So it was a different lorry, something a bit more grist to the mill. Then the Governor came down one day and said, 'I've got a job for you.' I said, 'What's that?', and he said, 'Depot Foreman. That's in charge of all these trailers being unloaded, *etc.*, and seeing that the bailed paper was, call the mills when there was a trailer full of paper to go down, and things like that.' So I said, 'No thanks,' and he said, 'Why not?' I said, 'I'll lose all my overtime. I do that gardening, I can't do that.' 'Think it over,' he said. 'No,' I said, 'I've got two kids, I can't do that.' We're getting up the 1950s now, late 1950s. I talked to Vera, my wife, and I said, 'We can't afford it, you know' - I think my wage was something like £5 a week or something like that, I'm not sure, something around there.

'Well,' she said, 'If you like, I'll get a small job in the evening.' So well, let's try it and just up the end of the road you walked down, across the other side there's a huge park, Beckenham Place Park and a golf course. So she worked behind the bar at a golf course in the evenings for a couple of hours. When the Governor came around the next time, I said, 'It's still a bit dodgy. Vera's got a little job in the evenings, but I don't like that, you know, with the kids and...'. He said, 'You'll be in charge of the depot, and if you think you should be there to see that the job's done properly up till 10 o'clock at night, it's entirely up to you what you do. You don't need to lose any overtime.' So I said, 'That sounds fair to me.' So I got this appointment, okay, as a Foreman. Bear in mind there's differences, okay? So I probably did that for about two years. I did various other things because when I was asked I said, 'Yeah, I'll do that, I'll do that,' and sometimes I regretted it, but not very often.

There were five gangs of refuse collectors with a Foreman in charge of each, so we had five foremen who rode bicycles to go around to their gangs, and another job was Friday afternoon and Saturday morning to go to trade premises who had refuse that had to be paid for, to collect the money and give them a receipt. So there was one of those going to be vacant, so I said, 'Oh, well I'll put in for that.' This was advertised, right? To cut a long story short, I went to the Town Hall to be interviewed by elected representatives and the Borough engineer was the Chairman. This was an inquisition of what you know and what you do, and they asked a lot of questions. At the time Malcolm, my son, had started to go to Grammar School and he came home one day, he was very upset. He had an Anglo-Indian teaching maths and he couldn't understand him. So I said, 'That's alright' - I was good at arithmetic - 'What do you want to know?' Well, it's $A \times A$ and $A \times B$, and I said, 'I haven't a clue.' So I enrolled in evening classes in Catford College and I found that $A \times A$ is A^2 and $A \times B$ is AB . I was doing O-level maths and O-level English. At the same time the Deputy Superintendent had taken the Institute of Public Cleansing exam, and he had a briefcase of all his stuff and he said, 'Read this, Nobby, see what you think.' I said, 'Laurie, look, I haven't got that sort of education. I left school at 14, nothing else.' He said, 'Just have a look at it, see what you think.'

About three months after I got the Foreman's job, the Senior Foreman retired and I was in the office one evening where the foremen used to gather in the office with the Superintendent and being his Depot Foreman I was talking about this job and I said, 'I'll put in for that.' And he said, 'What are you putting in for it? You've only just got this one.' I said, 'Well, someone's got to make the numbers up.' So I went on the shortlist. For people who are not aware, when you go into these interviews, you go in alphabetically and then the one they choose they call back in. So they said, 'Harry's going to get this job, he's already earmarked for it.' So fair enough, I'll be lucky if I get Harry's old job on the bike now. Instead of in the depot, I'm riding a bike as a qualified Foreman, if you like.' When I went in for the interview, Johnson was his name, was in front of me, then it came to Sharp and I went in. And the man in the Chair was an ex-fireman, very scarred from being in a fire: 'Ah, we've seen you recently Mr Sharp.' 'Yes, Sir.' 'You were studying weren't you? You were going to college?' I said, 'Yes, I was going to Catford College.' 'Well, what are you doing now?' 'Oh,' I said, 'I'm reading the papers of the Institute of Public Cleansing.' 'Oh, jolly

good show and blah, blah, blah,' and all the others asked questions about different things. I came out and we're all waiting there, and the clerk came out and said, 'Sharp,' And it should have been Johnson. He said, 'Sharp,' and I went back in. 'Mr Sharp, we'd like to offer you this post.' So I said, 'Thank you for your confidence in me, Sir.'

LF: Tell me a bit more about the Senior Foreman's job.

ES: Getting the Senior Foreman's job meant quite a change in the type of work I was doing. I then took over responsibility for the binning and cleansing refuse collection for multi-storey premises and commercial premises.

LF: How big a team did you have?

ES: I was in charge of the five foremen on the five refuse collection rounds and the depot foremen. At this time when measurement and work study came in, I was then asked to do work study measurement on the bin rounds. This involved going around with each crew separately with a clipboard and measuring the distance they walked in and out of premises to collect dustbins; how many dustbins emptied per premise; how long it took. I had a schedule to keep up to, which I admit was a little ambitious. Nonetheless, with, fortunately, good men to work with, we reached the Superintendent's targets of increasing the number of bins collected. Bearing in mind that, up until now, the refuse collection system was work and finish, as soon as they finished they went home. If they worked quickly enough and got finished at one o'clock they could go home at one o'clock.

LF: What were the normal shift hours?

ES: Half past seven till half past four with half an hour for lunch.

LF: But if they finished early, they could go?

ES: They could go. This was important on a Wednesday when Charlton [Athletic] Football Club were playing at home. If there was a football match at Charlton on a Wednesday we had to work like mad on Wednesday morning to get down to Charlton football ground by three o'clock. We did that very often. But work study and work measurement became important at that particular time and made a lot of difference to how work was done. In the measurement, gates had to be closed after the refuse bin was put back; the bin had to be put back on its stance with the lid on.

LF: The bin had to be put back on it's what?

ES: Stance, where it was sited. And mostly because kitchens were at the back of the house, the bin was generally outside the back door of the kitchen. So some of the bins were quite a walk to get to and to take back. Possibly as an outcome of this work measurement, bearing in mind that each bin emptied was in and out of the premises twice, so a method was devised to cut out one of those journeys. Each refuse collector was given an aluminium skip, which he carried at all times. So he carried the skip into the premises, he tipped the refuse into his skip and came out and discharged that into the vehicle and then walked onto the next premise, which saved quite a lot of walking, a lot of fatigue and a lot of time. So our ambitious target was achieved reasonably well.

LF: Can I just take you back for a moment and ask you, how was that measured? Were people shadowed by someone measuring each movement or was there some other method used?

ES: I was the measurement.

LF: You were the measurement?

ES: I would walk, pace into and out of premises and say, 'They've walked 20 yards'. Having been a referee, I'm adept at measuring 10 yards, which is the distance a player must be from a free kick.

LF: Oh, you were a football referee?

ES: Yes, Sunday morning. Pub teams. Over the next few months, I think about that time, I attended my first Institute of Public Cleansing annual conference, which was in Brighton in, I think, 1958, something about there. And I got more interested in the Institute of Wastes Management.

LF: It changed its name, didn't it? From the Institute of Public Cleansing...

ES: Yes.

LF: Do you remember when the name was changed?

ES: In the 1960s. Somebody argued, 'We don't cleanse the public.' About that time, the Institute ran its own examination called the "Testamur". So our Superintendent said, 'Well, you've told them you're reading the papers of the Testamur, you'd better get day release and go...' So I had day release going to the old St. Marylebone depot in West London for day release, one day a week, and took the opportunity on various odd days to go with a colleague on a scooter to visit various incinerator plants and landfill sites around the London area, now on the outskirts of London, so that I could get more knowledge of what the other side of waste was about.

LF: Roughly which year are we talking about?

ES: 1959. The Testamur was in four parts. Management was Part 1: Methods of refuse, what refuse is and refuse collection; Part 2: Refuse disposal method, and Part 4 was mechanical vehicles and mechanical plant incinerators and so forth. The system at the time was that you took all four parts of the examinations and most of the candidates passed one or two parts and then took the other two parts the following year. I had a system where I took a copy of the monthly journal home every week from the office and it had a question and answer page for students, which I copied out word for word. I did it for a long time. And on the day of the examination, there was Part 1 Monday morning, Part 2 Monday afternoon, and Part 3 Tuesday morning; Wednesday afternoon, and Thursday was an oral with the tutors, the management; the higher ups. You were orally questioned on your answer, which they'd marked overnight in a hotel, or on the A and B. If you'd answered 'A' they questioned you on 'B'. And Thursday morning we were told the results. Much to my amazement I passed all four parts, which was a relief. Having made an effort on Monday night and Tuesday, I went into the Westminster Library and looked up notes and things I thought might come up. I think I was fortunate some did, so diligence and luck were on my side.

Having passed all four parts, I was then made an Associate Member of the Institute of Public Cleansing. Then, any time a post became vacant anywhere above my level, my Superintendent said, 'You're the highest qualified Foreman in London, you'd better put in for that.' I did this two or three times, but my heart wasn't in it. I'd been in Lewisham a long time and I was settled with the family. Eventually the Greater London Council (GLC) was formed and there was a post there for an Assistant Area Manager, so I thought, 'Oh, let's see what happens,' and, fortunately, after interview, I got the Assistant Manager job on the GLC covering the parts of South London: Lewisham, Greenwich, Southwark, and Croydon. I then left Lewisham and started working for the GLC in this post.

LF: So this would have been 1965 when the GLC was formed?

ES: Yes. London was split into five areas, each had an Area Manager with a Deputy Manager and two Assistant Area Managers. I was the Junior Area Manager, because the person who had got appointed before me was made Senior Assistant because he had three parts of the exam and I hadn't taken the exam

at all early on. Each year we got an increment, but at one stage the increment depended on your qualification. Getting over this bar, the Senior Assistant only had three parts and couldn't go over the bar. I had completed the exam with four parts, so I went over the bar and assumed the higher duties. The Deputy Superintendent had completed the Institute exam and he was leaving to move up to Cheshire, [so] there was a vacancy for a Deputy Area Manager. After attending a shortlist I was made a Deputy Area Manager. Unfortunately my Area Manager had a heart attack. He was away for six months and I was Acting Area Manager in that period. He came back for a short time and then decided that he just couldn't stay, and after another interview, I was made Area Manager. I'm now one of five Area Managers, I had the reins to do what I wanted to do in my area, the south area, so I endeavoured to be as efficient as possible.

LF: Tell me about the job. Tell me about what you did.

ES: I had 13 separate depots: three were waste incinerators, four were landfill sites, and two were river stations. So I was responsible for the manpower and the operations of these depots. Having taken the exam and full study and work measurement, this stood me in good stead because this is how I seem to look at things: 'Is there a better way of doing it?' At that time, the central controls of the Greater London Council over the waste area were rather loose. In fact, I probably got away with something I probably wouldn't have at another time. There was, when I did the budget, I put £5,000 to build a wall or resurface a road, but then if during the course of the year I wanted that £5,000 for somewhere else, I would just send a form to the treasurer, and he would change the code over and I could spend that money on something else completely. In a way this could have been a bit of a farce because I probably put in money for a road I didn't want to do anyway, but I knew I'd want the money some time later on. And with the help of my senior administration officer we kept a tight budget. We had a chart up on the wall and money spent was printed out on the printer every month and we charted this, and I kept within my budget, and at that time, inflation was rather high so, I think, that wasn't a bad job to keep within the budget. We closed two of the incinerators down.

LF: Which two did you close?

ES: Waldo Road and Churchfield Road, Beckenham and Bromley.

LF: And which did you keep open?

ES: In Merton.

LF: Merton?

ES: The Merton incinerator we kept open simply because by closing the incinerator we now had to take the waste to landfill, an alternative.

LF: Why did you close those two incinerators?

ES: They were very old and pollution was coming out of the chimneys. Nowadays it's so clean coming out the chimneys, it's silly to talk about pollution from incinerators unless you go into the science; they're really no trouble. A lot of people are anti-mass burn; I'm not. Being a member of the Institute of Public Cleansing, I then attended many more meetings with my peers and acquired a lot more knowledge. We had to be able to operate landfill sites within the law and without upsetting the environmental public health officers who came round inspecting by not causing any pollution. The main problem we had at that time was from the transfer stations where we took the refuse in but we'd now closed the incinerators so we'd got to transfer it into bulkier vehicles, bigger vehicles, to go to landfill and we had odour problems that were difficult. In fact, when we bought perfume sprays and put them up people complained about the smell of the sprays. It was peach or apricot or something, and they didn't like that. The other problem on landfill sites, bearing in mind the lifecycle of a landfill site is something between seven to ten days, so as the refuse was being collected once a week the flies were already in the bin. I'm sure many people have looked in

their dustbin and seen maggots. Well, that's the stage the flies are going through, the next stage the flies are coming out. And the heat from the sun on the plastic or metal dustbins exacerbated the incubation time so that when refuse went to the landfill site, when they opened up and tipped the refuse out, then flies came. The flies would simply go to a nearest point where they could settle down in the sunshine and breed. So the great problem we had on landfill was the flies.

One of the tasks I had was trying to solve that problem, especially in the landfill site in Essex, Murston. There was a local pub, and the landlord collected a matchbox full of flies and brought them round to me. All I could say was, 'They're not my flies, they haven't got GLC on them.' Residents complained and said that they couldn't get fly killer so I ordered cartons of fly killer and told the Foreman, 'Anybody wants a can they come round and give it to them.'

LF: But you must have been thinking about a longer term remedy? How did you tackle it in the longer term?

ES: We got a manufactured spray, Cooper's dressing, Cooper's number nine, I think, it was, and we had a light tractor with a spray and a tank on the back and it sprayed the refuse all day long. It kept going across spraying the refuse. But, as one will know, flies and all these mice and things, once you start poisoning them they become immune. You know we've now got super-rats that Warfarin won't affect.

LF: Can I just ask you, Ernie, so your colleagues across the country will all have had this similar problem and the Institute would have been looking at it?

ES: Yes.

LF: What other remedies, what other solutions were there because this was a clear public health problem, and as you say, as some things are improved, there are often knock-on effects elsewhere.

ES: Well, the most important thing with a landfill site was to cover it. Under the law it had to be covered every 24 hours, within 24 hours, you couldn't leave a landfill uncovered overnight. So the last job at night was to cover it with inert material and you would press this down with the biggest earth-moving machine you had to squash it down and get the soil across to make it more difficult, and you did your spray. It didn't solve the problem but mitigated it. Probably now there's still odour problems on existing landfill sites. It's something that, I won't say it's impossible to cure because these days they should be able to cure anything but let's say it's difficult; one of the difficulties of waste disposal. The other problem is on landfill is excessive precipitation, then the refuse vehicles could get across the landfill sites. Because you put the soil on, it's now mud and the vehicles would sink into it because of the sponginess of the refuse, so another problem was getting the vehicles on and off in inclement weather. At the same time, I had to be careful that you controlled the run-off from the landfill site, it's now called "leachate", because leachate is more highly contaminated than pig's waste, and pig's waste is probably the worst you can come across, so the problem on a landfill site was controlling the leachate.

LF: And what measures did you use to control it, and precipitation?

ES: On one landfill site we had a pond at the bottom of the, it was an inclined landfill site so everything would run down the road into the pond. The pond would go black and smell. The other way we could control that was by aeration, pumping oxygen into it. So we got an oxygen machine, pumped oxygen in. If we left it running all night the water would be grey in the morning. If the pump didn't work or broke down in the night or ran out of oxygen, or some silly thing like that, the water would be black in the morning and we were in trouble. Once we'd aerated it we could then pump it lower down the hill to a grass field that sloped down to a river. We could pump our reasonably clean leachate onto the grass and that would, by the time it got down to the river, it didn't affect the fish in the river. It sounds simple talking like that now but if you think of the problem we had at the time, trying to do this, trying to do that, trying to control it,

it wasn't that easy. To control it on another landfill site at Murston - Croydon's refuse used to go into Murston landfill site - this was an old chalk pit, the water level below the pit was very high so there wasn't much scope for controlling stuff going through. One way of doing it at that time was to spread the chalk across the refuse or the ground below the refuse, roll it out with a vibratory roller, this was to break it down. By the time you'd finished with the roller it would look like marble, all flat and level. We did this in the shape of a tilted saucer, then we put six inch land drains across in herring bone fashion, set in clinker. Then we could put refuse on top of that and leachate would run through these pipes and we'd pipe them out of the site into a large container where we could take the leachate out with a gully emptying vehicle. At that time, with fingers crossed, we emptied it down a drain into the Croydon sewerage works. I would be in for the high jump if and when it was discovered, but it never was.

LF: Where did people think it was being emptied?

ES: Nobody asked, nobody told. It could possibly have gone to a treatment works at a price, a rather exorbitant price. We built concrete and brick chimneys so that if the pipes got blocked up somebody could go down with breathing equipment and free the pipe. I passed this site last week, it's where the M25, I think, I don't know, there's two motorways that meet, and part of the motorway is on the side of what was the landfill site. I couldn't find it, I couldn't see it - nowadays it's so camouflaged with greenery that I couldn't see the site, you wouldn't believe it had been a landfill site. That was last week; I was looking for it as I come past. We had a problem at this site because all the way up we'd put this chalk around, the two basics coming from a landfill site are methane and carbon dioxide, possibly in the proportions 60 per cent methane, 40 per cent carbon dioxide. Methane is a poisonous gas with no smell, so that's one thing one must be careful of in decomposing refuse. As the gas was produced, the side of the chalk quarry had gaps in the chalk and the methane was going up through the gaps and above on the top - if you imagine a cliff with a fence and then behind the fence were gardens and houses. The methane was killing the plants in the garden, so that's another problem we had. A sign of this was, in particular, gooseberry bushes had white crystals forming on the roots from the methane and were being killed. So we had to be more meticulous in, as we moved up with the refuse, by sealing the wall off with more chalk as best we could. In fact, we couldn't go right up to the edge of the wall with refuse, we had to go with chalk.

We were experimenting by stopping the methane going up, by burning it. The divisional manager and a couple of scientists all discussed this so eventually we drilled a hole down into the refuse - once it's compressed it's difficult to drill through it - and we put a pipe down, a metal pipe with holes in the bottom, and if we lit a bit of paper or a rag it would burn the gas at the top but as soon as you took gas away there was too much oxygen. So then we got in people from the gas company, the coal board, the experts in to devise a Peter Pan type of gas burner, it's like a Bunsen burner. If you don't open that hole at the bottom of a Bunsen burner, you get a different type of flame. Open the hole and then it burns properly, and this is the effect that we had to get. We then built a brick construction with six of these burners in and did our best to pipe what we could of the methane into that. So that was, as far as we were concerned, the first time anybody had tried burning the gas off from a landfill site.

LF: Was that then adopted by anyone else?

ES: Yes.

LF: Who adopted it?

ES: Everybody. They're all burning it now.

LF: So you pioneered it in the GLC?

ES: The Divisional Manager was going to write a paper on this for the journal but he never did get round to doing it. And nobody else could do it because he was going to. We had another landfill site off the A13, so on the knowledge we got from this, we then put pipes into the refuse before we covered it with gaps for

the methane to go through, then installed extractor fans. Then we built a miniature power station with electric motors and that, and we were then supplying electricity to the Thames Board Mills, the paper mills, down at the A13 at Purfleet. As far as I know to this day it's still operating and that's, must be 40 to 45 years ago. It's always a problem talking about landfill gas because nobody knew how much it would generate, and for how long, so anybody's guesstimate was anything from a year to 30 years, or 50 years even, so one couldn't tell. During my days at the GLC, I did go to the Harlow works to see them experimenting with the gas there but they would do it in small tanks, which was a far cry from a few thousand tons in a hole in a chalk pit or something.

LF: So Harlow were in advance, were ahead of the game?

ES: They were following up.

LF: So they took your ideas...

ES: Well, I wouldn't say that. They knew that methane was being produced and decided to try and do something to control it. I wouldn't say we'd take the honour of them doing what we did because we did it; they were experts.

LF: I didn't mean that, sorry.

ES: I wouldn't like it if we said, 'We did this,' and nobody else did it. Other people are doing things all the time, not only here but all over the world.

LF: Of course.

ES: When we read up about them doing something then we latch on and we try it. So we were successfully utilizing the methane from the landfill site at the Thames Board Mills. They told us we were driving the heating, or driving the pump for one of their paper lines. When they make paper, it's a huge long roll, as wide as this room, paper rolling down all the time, it comes back down the end rolled up. We were supplying enough power for one of those to work. Anyway, I think it was called the Thames Board Mills at the time, I think they changed it to Purfleet Board Mills. Part of my MPhil was on waste from a paper mill, and waste from a leather processing plant. You had to do two manufacturing plants so I chose leather and paper. Two things I didn't know a lot about, so sweat and tears. Probably at the time I said to Paul Phillips, my Professor, 'I don't think I can do this, Paul, not my cup of tea.' But there you are.

LF: You did it and you did it very well.

ES: Having been a shop steward in the past I seem to get a lot of enquiries from the workers when I had what they thought were union problems, they would come to me for a solution. The only thing I can say to my benefit was I seem to apply a lot of common sense. I didn't know a lot but I had common sense, which I thought was more important than anything else. Then the GLC decided to have a reorganization of the waste disposal section and the Divisional Manager was made General Manager and he called two of us Area Managers into the office and said, 'I want you to be my Deputies.'

LF: When was this? Do you remember the year?

ES: It must have been in the 1970s, maybe 1980, I became Assistant General Manager. I'm now in charge of three of the Area Managers covering East London, all of the river stations around Southwest London with the other area manager, and North London, West London, and the Edmonton incinerator, which had just been built. There are many stories there. Now I had more duties, I used to travel a lot to the different areas, different depots. I suppose it sounds a bit trite saying 'looking at standards', but I spent a lot of time going around the depots and the senior officers from many of the authorities were lecturing part time at Hackney College on the Higher National Certificate [HNC]. I had 13 depots, some had foremen, some

had supervisors. There was always a problem that when the vehicles came into discharge in the depot, whether it was an incinerator or a transfer depot, there was a queue because they all loaded their vehicles about the same time and they all came in together and had to take their turn to tip and they all were impatient because this work can finish, so to them they're wasting time. In an effort to make my men understand why they're in a hurry and always upset, because this is what their work was. I explained their work to my 13 depot managers.

And so I started this class in a depot down by the river in a river transfer station, there was a spare room there. A cleansing manager from Waltham Forest who was lecturing at Hackney College, I told him what I was doing and he said, 'Let's start up a course at the college.' Before that, other authorities said, 'Can we send some men on to your course?' I said, 'I don't mind, do I? I can talk to 20 as easy as I can talk to 13.' Lambeth gave me a classroom in a depot in the borough, I think it was Shakespeare Road. So, I was telling the refuse collectors what happens in a transfer station and at the landfill site, why we can't rush things just to let them get out quick, why we had to be methodical apart from health and safety, and people walking about in a depot. Eventually we started the NEBS course in Hackney College.

LF: NEBS?

ES: NEBS. National Environmental... [Examining Board in Supervisory Management].

LF: It's the supervisory studies course?

ES: Yes, supervisors. So now all sorts of chaps were coming here: drivers, sweepers. As I saw it, it was a first rung of a ladder. Somebody put me on the first rung of a ladder, now I can help somebody else. So we had the examination for that and they also got a certificate from the Institute of Public Cleansing to say they'd passed the supervisor's course, the first certificate some of these chaps had ever got in their life and never thought they'd get one.

LF: So were these refuse supervisors from all over London?

ES: Yes, and even further afield than London.

LF: And was Hackney one of many colleges, or were there very few colleges doing this?

ES: There were a few colleges doing it. A few of them were doing the HNC, but a street sweeper couldn't go on the HNC course just like that, he had to do some sort of learning to show that he was qualified to do it. But the NEBS people that passed could go on the HNC, which many of them did. So I was lecturing on the HNC and the NEBS. To give the lads a bit of prestige, they used to be invited to the Institute's Christmas lunch, which is a prestigious affair and they were presented with a certificate there which I thought was terrific. Even now when I go to meetings, there are still lots of ex-students and to be honest I don't recognize a lot of them. 'Oh, are you lecturing in Hackney, Ernie?' 'No, I had to pack that up. I stopped the course.' 'What are you doing now?' One of them in Lewisham is in charge of all the Lewisham waste, and he didn't know a thing. He's a black man, and they don't seem to get that many opportunities.

LF: When did the course at Hackney stop?

ES: Oh, I'd say seven or eight years ago. The government withdrew funds, and so the college wanted to start a degree course so, what do they call it? A first step on a degree course. It's got a title.

LF: Did they call it an access course?

ES: No, it's something degree and I said, 'At 88, I'm sorry, I'm too old to start anything fresh now.' And to be honest, I was going to Hackney by bus. I walked down to the bus garage to get the 47 bus, which was

terminal to terminal then, and I had to walk from the other end at Shoreditch so I was longer on the bus going and coming back than I was lecturing, and a two-hour lecture. And I didn't want to keep doing that, it got a bit much. I did it for 30 years, or 35 years I think, so I did my whack. Now I have the pleasure, as I say, of going to meetings and seeing people that were on my course. One chap who had his own refuse company, he used to work for Westminster Council as a Superintendent at the time. They took over the refuse as a company, three Superintendents. One of them was on that disk the other television programme, the rubbish one, the BBC one: he was one of them - MRS, Metcliffe Ross and... one dropped out of the three and the other two ran it, and then one sold out and left one running it: Ian Ross. He sold the company to one of the big firms, he made himself quite comfortable, so every time I see him now he puts his arm around me and says, 'This is the bloke who taught me all about rubbish.' That sort of thing, you know.

Senior people, the Director of waste management in the City of London, which is the biggest management job in waste management, or the highest paid anyway. He's retired now, he was one of my students, a close friend of Malcolm's, they were doing a course at the same time. Now the funny part about it, his daughter came onto the course and she's now getting on, she's just got a new job in a private company - he was tell me at a conference we had last week. So walking around there and, well, like Nick (Patterson), he was one of my students. Can you imagine him now? I mean the knowledge he's got now, they'd probably all leave me behind, the way they've got on. I certainly couldn't cope with that sort of work today. And even that travelling, I would go to two or three depots in a day, I would go right across London; I'd go from Star Lane down in Kent across to Murston. Well, I wouldn't get across there in a day now with the traffic. I did an awful lot of travel. In fact, I put it all down in the diary and when there was a problem about some of the waste going adrift or being mischarged in one of the depots, they accused the weigh bridge clerk and then they couldn't prove it was him, so they accused the Foreman. And then they had me in on an inquisition.

And they took my diary and they kept it and they went through it all, everything that I'd done, the mileage I'd booked, I'd claimed mileage for, and the hours. Well I didn't claim hours because hours didn't count in those days. I would go out Saturday and Sunday to depots. In fact I'd pick my mother up, or my sister or my daughter or someone, pick them up either Saturday or Sunday, 'Going for a ride, do you want to come?' 'What tip are we going to today?' I said, 'I don't know, we're going down this way, we're going down to Kent. I'll call in there on the way and then I'll call in that one and then we can go there for lunch, and that was a habit.'

LF: So a day out was a day visiting the tips?

ES: Yes. I remember following one path down and it went on and on and on and I finished up in the middle of a farmyard and had a difficult job turning the car around to go out. But I don't know, they seemed to enjoy it. 'What trip today?' They knew they were going somewhere, you know, and they were interested.

LF: So you've seen so much change. Change in collection, change in transfer systems, and changes in disposal. Just reflecting back on some of the major changes, we've talked about methane and some of the toxic gases.

ES: I mentioned that the changes in storage are an item to go through on their own. I mean, we had refuse coming down the refuse chute in a multi-storey premises onto the floor and that was shovelled up. Then we put containers underneath. At one time they tried huge paper bags underneath but that wasn't a success. Then they got galvanized metal containers but they had to stand on blocks so that you could put a trolley underneath to wheel them out. Each lorry had a trolley underneath the body on a bracket so the refuse cleaners had to take that out, wheel it under, jack the bin up, pull it out, put it on the back on a vehicle with a brace and arms that went around and gripped the body, and then tipped it up into the vehicle. Some of the flats had square bins in, some had round ones. The square bins were the old system, mainly Southwark Council and around that area, always in multi-storey premises. That was always a problem at Christmas because people would put a Christmas tree down. What would be the easiest way to

put a Christmas tree into an 18 feet gap, you would put it in root first so that the branches, but now the branches have opened up inside, refuse has gone inside and gone on top and added weight to those branches and now it becomes a blocked chute. So people keep putting refuse in so the refuse is piled up with a Christmas tree stopping it and someone has to unblock the chute. It was similar to what would happen with an umbrella, you put an umbrella in and it opens up and the refuse drops in there and the same thing happens. Occasionally you would get the chute on fire where somebody put hot ashes in, or the bin on fire - not too great a problem but they used to be there. They were things that came along and you had to solve. Different with different types of vehicle and this was the Paladin was the manufacturer of these containers; everybody knows them as Paladins. Seven cubic metres. Or have I got that wrong?

Anyway, these were in all the multi-storey premises, so we had two vehicles, two rounds in Lewisham when I was Foreman there at that time. More multi-storey premises were being built, so the rounds were getting bigger. This was the beginning of some of the mechanical lifting gears on the back of refuse vehicles. Sheffield were one of the earlier ones with what was called dustless loading. The dustbin lid was fixed, similar to the wheelie bins we've got now, but if you can imagine the wheelie bins as steel bins, not quite as big as these ones now, and we're talking about 60 years ago, these were an innovation. They would be automatically tipped into the dust cart with the lid flipping open, and it was called dustless loading in those days. People know so much about the wheelie bins but they're basically dustless loading now.

LF: When was that?

ES: That's what I can't remember. We've now got bin lift on the back of the refuse vehicles, and then the wheelie bins came along and we've got more refuse coming up, and because there was room in the bin then they would put all sorts of stuff in apart from normal refuse. It would be hard-core and things like that would go in, so the weight increased. A problem that's already been mentioned by the other guest speakers we had was that with the lifting gear on the rear end, on the tail of the vehicle, protruding out of the back, it exacerbated the weight on the rear axle. At that time the law was nine tons was a maximum weight on a rear axle so by the time they put refuse in the back as well at this point we've got the refuse and the lifting gear at the back but nothing up the front, and the vehicle's tilted slightly, putting more weight on the back axle so when the vehicle licensing authorities, if they checked it they found that the back axles were overloaded. This led to twin axles being put on the back. If you look at all the vehicles now have got twin axles. Now they've got twin axles, the first thing I said, 'Well, let's take advantage of the length of the chassis and put a bigger body on,' so now we've got bigger bodied vehicles with a compression gear on the back to maximize the payload, so the payloads went up.

A similar thing that happened was a lot of London's refuse was tipped into barges. Deptford went into barges at Deptford Creek; Lewisham's refuse went into barges at Norman Road; Southwark's went into barges on the canal; Lambeth and Wandsworth went on the river, but there were many other barging stations in creeks and canals. They were going down river to Pitsea or Rainham in Essex. If there was a fog on the river, which we got in those days, we haven't had much fog now on the river. A fog on the river means everything stops, nothing moves on the river when there's a thick fog, or in those days - technology nowadays may allow it with radar and things. So if a fog lasted more than a day, we had no empty barges to put the refuse in, so we've now got a problem: where are we going to tip the refuse? The alternative was, well, where's the nearest landfill site? As London grew, the available holes that had been excavated for chalk and sand and ballast were being slowly filled up so we were going further and further from London to tip into a hole. That meant that if the refuse collection vehicle had to go to the landfill site it was away for an hour and a half, maybe two hours, and you got six refuse collectors standing waiting to get their work done because they want to get finished and go home. You see the types of problems it caused.

LF: I just want to ask you a bit about the work and finish system. When did that change and tell me what led up to the changes and how it changed?

ES: Well partly because of work study and work measurement, and we've already heard about council cuts. The refuse, or cleansing, department was the Cinderella of the local authority. This was even mentioned by the Chair at our meeting. She said, when she was elected MP, 'Nobody wanted the dust job'; same applies with local authority. They're in for four years and they all have their pet thing, it could be gardening, parks, swimming pools, health and safety, welfare, old age pensioners, but nobody wanted the refuse section. So the councillors elected with, shall I say, a bit of go in them would fight for their department. The one that got the waste was the least inspired of them, so that they didn't get a look in. In February, round about February at the time, every Treasurer is working on his pie chart. He's got a sum of money the size of it is his pie. And by the 1st of April, he's got to carve that pie up into pieces to give each section a budget that they've got to work to. Everybody wants the biggest bit of the pie. I would assume from this the cleansing department always got the crumbs that were left. So, being a Cinderella, we mentioned earlier on about clothing. Well, if they didn't have a budget they didn't have to buy the clothing. That's why many authorities didn't supply clothing or very much clothing.

LF: I do want to come on and ask you about protective clothing in a minute but just tell me about the changes in working hours and shifts and so on and then we'll come onto clothing.

ES: 48 hours... a 48-hour week with eight hours, five days a week and four hours on a Saturday at the particular time being after the War when people were becoming more affluent and life was changing, and the unions were beginning to form and feel their feet. They pressed for less hours. Actually eight hours carrying dustbins, emptying dustbins, taking them back could be fatiguing so why should we work 48 hours a week? The first thing they cut out was four hours on Saturday, so they only worked five hours a week. Bearing in mind that the job was still 'job and finish' that quite a few of the chaps had another job to go to of some sort. When I was a dustman, personally, I would do a couple of hours gardening after I finished just to earn a little bit more cash. I think that some of them were taxi drivers, had taxi cabs, so they wanted to get onto their jobs, mainly in central London of course. So hours became important and the unions fought for them to be cut, and every time there was a cut they fought for another one, another cut. I think I said before, it's down to about 32 to 33 hours now they work, but that's a big change that occurred and it also occurred because of the changes in method. Method study and work study, method study made a lot of difference. I mentioned about the aluminium skips which saved a journey, so if you imagine we've halved the walking the dustmen did, we could cut the hours down and still do the same amount of work. When they brought the wheelie bins in there was also a lot less walking and a lot less fatigue. They increased the numbers of bins per man, which again allowed them to cut the number of hours without costing anything. Money was important, what things cost. It still is, isn't it? Now they've gone so far as to say your bin must be on the periphery of your premises or else we won't empty it, so they have practically no walking, just across the kerb to the vehicle. Even then, they drop the bin on the footpath without taking it back to the premises. They do a lot more bins per man a day. So cost-wise, the cost of collection went down dramatically so that could accommodate the cut in hours.

LF: Tell me a bit about the changes you've seen in protective clothing for collectors, because you must have seen enormous changes since 1947.

ES: The last time I carried a dustbin it was two overalls and a donkey jacket. But now, as Nick (Patterson) has said, with Westminster being a wealthy borough, what one has to consider in local authorities is how much does a penny rate fetch in? A penny on the rates in Westminster will fetch in a small fortune. A penny on the rates in one of the outer London boroughs is less significant so, once again, money counted. Westminster could afford to buy-clothes and boots where other local authorities didn't have that sort of money.

LF: So what sort of clothing would collectors in Westminster wear?

ES: They would have overalls, possibly waterproof trousers and jacket and boots, gloves, and they may even give them a sou'wester, something like that, to wear. They would give them the lot. Then this had to be augmented with health and safety saying various things were necessary. One was gloves were necessary.

With all the drugs and needles about one's got to be careful about that, and broken glass. I don't know when boots came in, I've never been issued with boots. In fact, I wore trainers, which in our days we called pumps. They weren't trainers, they were thick-soled slippers, similar to trainers. We used to wear those because we could get around quicker. Under health and safety we probably wouldn't be allowed to even wear them now. It might sound like bragging when I say we used to run with the dustbins, especially with the empty ones, taking them back especially Wednesdays when Charlton were at home. We would want to get finished at least one o'clock, latest, to be able to go and get a sandwich and get down to the football ground.

Health and safety plus the unions pressed for more clothing. To do with clothing, there were other things. Now, at my time, when we tipped the last dustbin into the vehicle then I would go and get my bicycle and ride home. When I got home I would change and have a bath. But later on they had showers and baths in the depot so you would have a cupboard in the room, you could change in the shower room and come home clean. But in my day I used to go home, and I always had a job of getting the overalls washed and patching them. Where I carried the bin on my shoulder and on my back the overalls wore out so I was always putting patches on them. I used to sole my own boots with an old car tyre, cut pieces off the car tyre and nail them to the bottom of the boots. I also repaired my own boots in those days, couldn't afford anything else. Protective clothing was not only important for the refuse collectors, even on building sites they never had protective clothing but you will see now that protective clothing is worn everywhere, now you can't work on a building site without a hard hat and visibility jacket. They won't even let you onto the site. When we go on visits to factories or somewhere now, we go and see where they make sweepers and lorries and things like that, we have to put a jacket and a hat on. And not all of them but most of them are obeying the health and safety.

LF: Ernie, you also alluded to improvements in occupational health in that now there are showers available for people. What other changes can you tell me about regarding the occupational health of collectors and employees more generally?

ES: When I was a shop steward I went into the boss and said, 'We want danger money'. This is when we stopped tipping into the barge and went down and tipped at the landfill site. He said, 'What do you want danger money for?' I said, 'Because we're now going onto a landfill site and that's dangerous.' In the vernacular he told me where to go. I also went in because the men complained about having to carry these aluminium skips, they thought they didn't want to carry those all day long and they were refusing to carry them, and as I was a shop steward it was my job to go and tell the Governor.

LF: Why didn't they want to carry them? Because of the weight or...?

ES: Well, you had no relief from carrying, you're carrying all the time. It's one of those things, they just didn't want to carry them. And I said, 'The union have instructed us not to carry those skips.' He said, 'Who's your boss?' I said, 'You are.' 'Now go and carry the skips.' I went back and said, 'The boss said you have to carry them.' They said, 'Alright.' So it was a wasted effort. Nonetheless, I didn't care one way or the other but I went and complained. When I got promoted I had to leave the National Union of Public Employees and join a senior, more professional institute.

LF: I want to know a bit about when you decided to do your degree, and you then went and completed that and did an MSc. Tell me when you started thinking about it and how you went about it.

ES: There were one or two problems at work, nothing that I couldn't overcome but I was getting a little dissatisfied one way or the other, I don't know why. And they had built the Thames Barrier and there were five officers on the same grade as myself at the Thames Barrier that they had to find jobs for, so they offered any officer on that grade the opportunity to take early retirement. Being a little dissatisfied I said, 'Oh, I'll go.' Well, that 'I'll go' lasted about four or five months: 'You can go in June. No, go in July. Go in August.' I'm not sure when I finished, September or something like that. So I took early retirement.

LF: And that was when, Ernie, do you remember which year?

ES: About 1983. But still being active, I was still lecturing at college, I was still refereeing football matches, I didn't want to sit back doing nothing so I wondered what else I could do. And I was still attending meetings at the Institute of Wastes Management and the Association of London Cleansing Officers, I hadn't cut off all links with it. I was still very much involved and all the changes they were making, I started, tried to gather a bit more information together and the Institute of Wastes Management applied for degree status, chartered status, applied for chartered status, and the committee in the House of Lords that grants a charter required 75 per cent of members to hold a degree. There were so many members similar to myself who had passed the Testamur but didn't have a degree. So there was a 'Oh, we're going to be second class members.' Oh no, no. So they chatted to Northampton University and said the degree can stand as an admittance to get onto a degree course: the Testamur, to give you credits on a degree course. Well this went on for three years, they're going to do this. And at the AGM meeting down in Paignton, Torbay, after the AGM they generally said, 'Any other business?', and it's part of, no, nobody ever says any other business. But on this particular time I got up to the microphone and said I would like to ask a question. I don't think it was well accepted but nonetheless: 'For three years you've been saying that we're going to link up with Northampton University so people like me who haven't got a degree can get onto their course with some credits that would help us. And nothing's happened in three years. Well, I would like to say, when it happens, I'll be the guinea pig.'

Following that, every year we have a meeting at Imperial College on education and one of the speakers was a doctor from Northampton University. They were all telling them how you get a degree and how you do it in their course. And, I'm trying to remember his name, was talking about Northampton, but he had to leave early. So as he left the room I chased after him and said, 'When's this thing going to happen?' 'Well', he said, 'we want someone to start it'. 'Well, I'll start it.' He said, 'What have you got?' I said, 'nothing, only the Testamur like, but the Institute said you were going to link up'. With that, they arranged for me to have an appointment with two people to interview me at Northampton University. A Professor from Southampton University and one from Northampton, Professor Paul Philips. They asked me about rubbish, I talked about rubbish for about an hour, I suppose, and they just said, 'Alright, you're in.' I had no O levels, no A levels at all and they said, 'You're in.' And Paul Philips was one of these, and he became my mentor, and I must say from day one he pushed me. I did it day release working from home. As you can see, I had ample stuff, I've got a load of it upstairs. I used to send it or take it into Paul, I'd e-mail it in and it'd come back full of red ink, 'You can't say this and you can't do that.' I've got more red ink up there still than anything else. And that that you saw was the result of all that.

LF: Your dissertation?

ES: Yes, plus other stuff. I had to do a lot more than that, but it's all here, most of it anyway except the two industries, the leather and the paper pulp that I had to work on. I used to go up there occasionally and have long chats with him, and he used to tell me where I was going wrong and how to do things. It was completely new to me, completely. One of the things we had to do was to give a PowerPoint presentation to others, and this was at Nottingham University. So I did a PowerPoint on North London's Waste Plan for the future, which I think earned me a bit of merit.

LF: When did you finish that degree? Because I know you went on and did your MPhil. When did you finish the first degree?

ES: That was somewhere about 1986, I think it was 1988 or 1986. Because of the help of Paul, I won't say it was easy but it was a lot easier than I'd imagined. I did a lot of work, of course I did: you don't get anything for nothing in this world. And I told you about my viva voce, which is the accolade at the end. I passed the accolade with flying colours apparently. Then, as a joke, I had the degree presentation and Paul and a few other people were congratulating me and, with my peculiar sense of humour, I just rubbed my hands together and said, 'Right, well what's next?' And Paul said, 'Your Master's degree.' And I said, 'No,

that's a failed PhD. I'll do a PhD at 88'. I must have been 88 then. He said, 'It's a six-year course, it's a bit late to start a doctorate. Do a Masters.' So I said, 'Oh alright then, I'll have a bash,' not thinking I would get it but, oh well, I've been doing this study, let's carry on. I found that research for a Masters is completely different from the Bachelor of Science. The Bachelor of Science is what you know, the research is what you can find out about what you don't know, and explain it to somebody else, so I did a lot of research then. I think the title changed a couple of times. It finished up as *The Interpretations of EU directives by local authorities*, something like that.

LF: So your Bachelor's dissertation was on the history of collection and disposal within the GLC?

ES: Municipal Waste in London.

LF: In London?

ES: Yes.

LF: What was the period that you finished?

ES: Round about 2000.

LF: Right, 2000. And then for the Master's, you took it from 2000?

ES: When the EU directives came in. So a lot of the law there was what I had to have during the Bachelor degree.

LF: So Ernie, reflecting back on a very long career, what would you say are the best and the worst times?

ES: I think the worst times were probably carrying dustbins in inclement weather. When it's pouring with rain or snow, or something like that, that wasn't very comfortable. Sometimes working when other people weren't, I didn't feel very happy then. There weren't very many bad times. I'd had a period in the army so I'd known a bit of regimentation and I was reasonably fit through exercise in the army so that I wasn't uncomfortable with what I was doing. The *esprit de corps* among the refuse collectors meant working wasn't the chore that it could have been. One didn't get up in the morning and say, 'Ugh, I've got to go to work'. It wasn't that sort of attitude that one would adopt. I was fortunate enough to progress away from the manual part of the job, I was getting more involved in the management and control of things, and educating myself on the way. I enjoyed going to meetings and discussing things with other people, I still do enjoy going to meetings, only now I'm retired I can be devil's advocate, which I am often, and ask the question that others probably wouldn't ask or say things that others wouldn't say. So I enjoy that and I was rather upset at the last ALCO (Association of London Cleansing Officers) meeting, which was held at Lewisham.

I wasn't really in a fit condition to go to the meeting but as it was only 10 minutes' walk away so I walked in just to say 'Welcome to Lewisham' to the lads and that, but I missed being in the meeting and being controversial. I'm afraid I haven't always had a lot of people agree with me, I've always been, or more recently, been more controversial. It's probably coming with age. I'm perhaps getting a big head, I know better than you sort of attitude, but it's not that. For many years in meetings I've said, 'I'm a 40/40/20 man: 40 per cent recycling, 40 per cent incineration, 20 per cent into landfill.' When more composting came into the picture, before that there wasn't very much composting, it was only gardening stuff from the parks' department, composting. But when composting came in more, I took 10 per cent away from the landfill and put it into composting, so 40/40/10/10. 'Well, why do you say that?' 'Well,' I said, '70 per cent of waste can be utilized reasonably, but after 40 per cent it becomes less financially viable.' And seeing as everything we talk about now is watching cost and money and all the rest of it, I thought, why go the extra length on that over 40 per cent when that can go for incineration where we can recover

electricity or power from it - combined heat and power - that it's not being wasted. If we concentrate on finite resources for recovery, take paper for instance, that's infinite. For every tree they tell me, the waste paper people tell me, that for every tree they cut down they put two or three up. So what's the point in saving paper and paper and paper when we're getting more trees and more trees, and you'll notice if you go to places like Scotland and see pine forests increasing. And they say commercially how about the others where they're chopping all the trees down? Right, well we can't do much about that because a lot of that goes as plywood to China and Japan, and nobody saves their plywood, they all burn it all. So finite resources, let's save them. Infinite resources, do the best financially viable way. And that doesn't sound sense to a lot of people but that's me. And when somebody said, 'Well, how about zero waste?' I said, 'You want zero waste? I'll tell you how to do that. You've got 10 per cent after what I've told you. You can burn that with lasers and you get like a hard material like glass or hard stuff that can be used for road-making, or all sorts of jobs, but it's not a waste anymore. So you can do 100 per cent.' And when I say that they all poo-poo it. Okay, fine, but there is zero waste if you want it, Ernie Sharp's way.

LF: Ernie it's been an absolute pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much. Thank you very much indeed. [Interviewer's note: at the end of the interview, Mr Ernie Sharp listed some of the important legislation that's come into play in recent years].

ES: Well, I asked this because there was so much legislation during that period that influences the methods of collection and disposal of waste. It's so numerous that I've asked Lynda if she would just note some of it down. It isn't all that occurred then, but it's some that I looked up today and I think was relevant to what we had been discussing. Some of those have been mentioned during the meeting we had, but there's so much there that I think it should be noted that this had quite an effect on the future of waste management.

1958 London Traffic, Regulation of Traffic Regulations
 1959 Factories, First Aid Boxes in Factories Order
 1960 Radioactive Substances Act
 1961 The Factories Act
 1964 Scrap Metal Dealers Act
 1961 British Standard 3425: Method for the Measurement of Noise Emitted by Motor Vehicles
 1963 The Offices, Shops and Railway Premises Act
 1964 London Government: the London Authorities Property Etc. Order
 1966 The Construction Working Place Regulations
 1966 London Government: The London Government Order
 1963 The London Government Act
 1967 The Control of Liquid Fuel Act
 1967 The Ministry of Housing and Local Government Refuse Storage and Collection Report
 1968 The Town and Country Planning Act
 1970 Road Traffic: The Motor Vehicles Rear Markings Regulations
 1972 The Road Traffic Act
 1972 The Local Government Act
 1972 Road Traffic: The Road Vehicles Lighting, Standard Vehicles Exemption General Regulations
 1972 Public Health England and Wales, Public Health Scotland: The Deposit of Poisonous Waste, Notification of Removal or Deposit Regulations
 1972 The Deposit of Poisonous Waste Act
 1974 Department of the Environment: Disposal of Awkward Household Wastes Report
 1974 The Health and Safety at Work Act
 1974 The Control of Pollution Act
 1975 The Guard Dogs Act
 1976 Public Health, England and Wales: The Control of Pollution, Licensing of Waste Disposal Regulations
 1979 Confederation of British Industry, Guidelines for Action on Employee Involvement
 1980 Local Government Planning and Land Act

1980 The Control of Pollution Special Waste Regulations

1980 The Contract Refuse Collection: Guidelines for local authorities by the Institute of Solid Waste Management

LF: And these are just some of the regulations and acts, Ernie, that influenced your work.

ES: Well among all of the acts that you've got there the way we operated our vehicles, drivers' hours regulations, one way streets and refuse collection vehicles being in double yellow line and things like that. All that came up with that. And what the Local Authority could do to make it easier to collect the waste were in some of these acts. Legal duties that the local authority had to do to control certain waste, that's the poisonous waste, liquid waste. When the Civic Amenity Act came in and we put up civic amenity sites for local authorities to take their waste, one of the things we had to put in was a tank to take motor oil because many, many motorists would go change their engine oil themselves, then they'd have a can of old engine oil that they'd put down a drain, which was not on. So we had to supply these tanks and arrange for them to be emptied periodically. So most of these acts had some of effect on what we did. As I say, with health and safety it was the way men operated when men worked. The industry has a bad name on accidents at the moment. The worst industry was building and construction but their act has been cleaned up a bit and waste management seems to have topped the bad league at the moment.

LF: Okay, thank you very much.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

Further related resources:

1. Finn L (intvr); Jones E M, Tansey E M (eds) (2016) *Coggins, Chris: transcript of an audio interview (23-Jun-2014)*. History of Modern Biomedicine Interviews (Digital Collection), item e2016106. London: Queen Mary University of London.
2. Finn L (intvr); Jones E M, Tansey E M (eds) (2016) *Cooper, Jeff: transcript of an audio interview (19-Jun-2014)*. History of Modern Biomedicine Interviews (Digital Collection), item e2016107. London: Queen Mary University of London.
3. Finn L (intvr); Jones E M, Tansey E M (eds) (2016) *Dennis, Barry: transcript of an audio interview (30-May-2014)*. History of Modern Biomedicine Interviews (Digital Collection), item e2016108. London: Queen Mary University of London.
4. Finn L (intvr); Jones E M, Tansey E M (eds) (2016) *Ferguson, John: transcript of an audio interview (04-Jun-2014)*. History of Modern Biomedicine Interviews (Digital Collection), item e2016109. London: Queen Mary University of London.
5. Jones E M, Tansey E M (eds) (2015) *The Development of Waste Management in the UK c.1960-c.2000*. Wellcome Witnesses to Contemporary Medicine, vol. 56. London: Queen Mary University of London.