

AUDIO INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Wright, Mick: transcript of an audio interview (08-Jul-2014)

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Wright, Mick: transcript of an audio interview (08-Jul-2014)*

Biography: Mr Mick Wright CEnv DMS MBA MCIWM (b. 1949) worked as a Refuse Collector, then as an LGV [Large Goods Vehicle] Driver for Luton Borough Council from 1974. He was elected as a Senior Shop Steward for the Transport and General Workers' Union in 1977, and in 1981 he was elected as a Councillor for Bedfordshire County Council where he served until 1989. He became Quality Insurance Inspector for Luton Borough Council's cleansing contract in 1990, then Refuse Collection Manager, Street Cleansing Manager, Cleaning General Manager, and finally Head of Waste Management until his retirement in 2009. He is writing a book with the working title, *The History of Rubbish in Luton from 1850 to 2010*.

LF: Lynda Finn

MW: Mick Wright

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

MW: It's Michael Robert Wright.

LF: And your year of birth?

MW: 1949.

LF: And where you were born?

MW: Luton.

LF: Can you tell me your current employment status?

MW: I'm retired.

LF: And before that?

MW: I was Head of Waste Management for Luton Borough Council.

LF: And your parents' occupation?

MW: My father was a factory supervisor and worked for Commer Cars, which was formerly at the Biscot Road plant [in Luton] and then when they built the Dunstable Road plant he moved there, and that's where he got promoted from a foreman/fitter to a supervisor. My mum used to do various jobs. She was actually a catering manager for Whitbread's, they were brewers in them days, but no, she packed up work quite a long while ago.

* Interview conducted by Ms Lynda Finn, for the History of Modern Biomedicine Research Group, 08 July 2014, in the School of History, Queen Mary University of London. Transcribed by Mrs Debra Gee, and edited by Ms Emma M. Jones and Professor Tilli Tansey.

LF: Let's talk a little bit about your childhood. Did you have any brothers or sisters?

MW: Yes, I've got one brother and one sister, both younger than me. So I'm the...

LF: So you're the first child?

MW: Yes, [my] parents got married in 1942 and then decided they wouldn't have any children because it was during the War. My father was in a protected occupation because he worked in a truck factory and they were making the army trucks. Eventually he did get called up, though, to go and service the army trucks in Germany when the British Army at the Rhine was set up. And so he was conscripted then, and went to do that, but then when he came back they decided to start a family, and I was the first one.

LF: So it was a post-War childhood? What sort of memories do you have? What's your earliest memory?

MW: We used to live in a two-up, two-down [house] in Luton. There was a big stable at the back of us which belonged to one of the local families who delivered milk, so I can remember that. Polly, the horse, is one of the first things I can remember [laughs]. They used to lead it out down from the stables under an archway under our house and hook it up to the milk float, go off and do the deliveries. And that's probably about the earliest I remember. We moved from there when I was four to a place my parents were buying, quite a way from there, outside the town centre. In fact, sort of halfway between Luton and Dunstable because Dad worked at Luton, like I say he moved to Dunstable in the end and that made it easier. Then gradually, obviously went off to school in the locality where we were, I went to primary school, infant and junior it was in those days, primary school now, then on to secondary school. I failed my 11+, but people were quite surprised by that, I think, because they generally thought I was clever enough to pass my 11+. So I took the 13+ and went to Luton Technical Grammar School. I stayed on there until I was 18 and did my A-levels there.

LF: What were your special subjects? What did you do your A-levels in?

MW: Economics; British constitution; economic history; economic geography, those were the things I did. I got quite good results as well, good enough to go to university, but I'm afraid the romance of becoming a musician got the better of me. I was always a musician. I played violin when I was at secondary school, taught violin, and then swapped to guitar when I was about 11, and got the romance of the wooden planks. I suppose with the American bands, seeing them on the telly and so on. I got to be quite proficient at it, I mean I was professional even though I was that young. I joined a professional band when I was 14 and that went on until I think I was about 20, but that stymied any chance of me having an academic background of any sort, but, as I say, I've got my A-levels.

LF: So after your A-levels, what happened?

MW: I ran off touring and things like that, went to tour America, Germany, Sweden, France, I went all over the place.

LF: So you were quite successful?

MW: Yes.

LF: Your band was quite successful?

MW: It was, yes. I used to deputize with a lot of people as well. My friend from the grammar school days, John, he was a pianist and he was playing with The Kinks, and when the Davies brothers had a massive falling out, they recruited me to go and play guitar with them on a tour they'd got lined up. So I played with The

Kinks for about seven months, and played on one of their hits, 'Lola'. 1970 that was. Then, eventually, I thought it wasn't really any life, I decided I wanted to settle down, get married, and things with my girlfriend at the time, so I packed it all up in 1974. Well, not quite, I carried on playing in sort of semi-pro bands and things for a long while after that, but professionally no, I don't know, it seemed to be getting the better of me, all the touring and things. So I started to get jobs and work, and I had quite a series of different jobs until I alighted on becoming a refuse collector.

LF: So you gave up playing with The Kinks? That's quite a claim to fame.

MW: Yes, well I was just, I never was mates with them or anything like that. John was my mate, and obviously they, the Davies brothers, had a long history of falling out. This particular incident had come about when Ray Davies threw a bottle at his brother and it hit him on the head, and that was it, they really fell out over that, and they just weren't going to have nothing to do with each other, but then they had some sort of re-approchement and got back together again, and sacked me. [Laughs]. That's okay. I got other work and things, but yes, it was only about seven months, it wasn't a long period. That's probably my claim to fame.

LF: So we've got you in your twenties so you're about 25 now when you moved into refuse?

MW: February 1974, I got married in April 1974, we celebrated our 40th wedding anniversary. Yes, so it must have been around then, I was 24 when I got married. I wasn't 25, because it was my birthday later that year.

LF: So your first refuse job was, do I assume you're still in Luton?

MW: Oh yes, yes, I was with the Council.

LF: Tell me a bit about that job.

MW: Well, it started off on, my first day it was, although I was expected to be going there and be a refuse collector, the guys who actually worked at the disposal site at Luton Airport tip were short of some people so I got hoicked into that. So I think the first two weeks I worked at the tip. There I was just doing the sort of jobs like picking up the litter from the edge of the site, seeing the trucks back, I'd been a banksman.

LF: What's that?

MW: Making sure the trucks don't fall over the edge of the site and stopping them, that sort of stuff. Eventually, towards the end they thought I was trustworthy enough to be in the office and write the weights down of the vehicles, so they came, they had a weigh bridge on the site, and that was it. But that only lasted, as I say, a couple of weeks. I then went back to the other jobs in the depot, and did various jobs as you used to when you were a spare refuse collector, including street cleansing jobs, bulky household waste collections and so on. Then one day they put a scratch crew together to just go and clear about 10 roads of refuse, the truck had broken down. The truck had become unavailable, pulled us off whatever we were doing and told us to go and collect these roads, and that was the first experience I had of refuse collection, so I got broken into it quite gradually. I was lucky, there was a guy there who was quite an experienced refuse collector who showed us how to lift the bins.

LF: Yes, I was going to ask you because, what bins were people using in Luton at that time?

MW: Mostly they were the galvanized, I think 3¼ cubic yard bins, I think, they were, with the metal lids, and, of course, you had a fair amount of ash in those days, surprisingly for the mid-1970s. On the private estates not so much, they used to use sacks - buy their own sacks and put their sacks out.

LF: So on the private estates...

MW: They had central heating.

LF: So there was no ash.

MW: No, no ash, only on the Council estates there were still back boilers, coal-fired back boilers and things like that. They'd moved on from having open fires, but you know there was still ash there, and I remember the ash going down your neck and all that stuff.

LF: When did that stop completely?

MW: Eventually, I think about towards the end of the 1970s, the Council decided that was antediluvian and they were going to go over to boilers and all that stuff, or back boilers on gas fires, so by then it had stopped.

LF: Do you think that was typical of the rest of the country: late 1970s was when ash stopped being put out for collection?

MW: Yes, I think so. I think most Councils had got their act together by then. Obviously you got some high-rise developments that never had ash or anything like that, flats they never used to have it. A lot of the schools used to have ash as well.

LF: Mick, you were just saying that some areas used sacks. Say a bit more about that.

MW: It tended to be more on the private estates where they'd already got central heating, so they were moving more towards, more modern I suppose, contents of a refuse bin. There was a lot of packaging and things like that. They used to buy their own sacks and put their own sacks out, which used to help us a lot. Obviously they were not so heavy and we just used to chuck the sacks in as we drove along the road; it was a lot easier than actually collecting the bins. It wasn't totally divided like that, but generally that was the way it worked. The round I was more regularly on had quite a lot of bins still, which gradually faded. The Council as well, once they'd got rid of ash and it was noticeable that it was going, they started then to supply people with plastic bins; it started on the Council estates: Ivanhoe bins they were called.

LF: Ivanhoe bins?

MW: Yes, you could use them either as an ordinary dustbin. They had a step in them so you could use them as a sack holder, you could put your foot into the foothold thing and then just pull the sack out. That was better as well because obviously they were a lot lighter. That gets us towards the end of the 1970s, I think, as regards to the general household collection but, of course, there was the bulk household collection, the big Paladin bins, metal bins, I forget how big they are. They were almost the same as these modern Euro bins, you know the thousand-litre ones, quite large. They used to be at the blocks of flats, school, trade premises, things like that. I worked on them as well, of course, as part of being a spare collector and a spare driver. We had three rounds at one time that just used to collect those bins. I remember them vehicles, they were Knorbas [Geesinknorba], and they had an Archimedes screw in the back, a water screw, and this one used to compress the refuse.

It's a Swedish design. The refuse used to go forward into the hopper and the screw used to go around and push refuse into the back of the body and compress it. It used to carry a fair load as well. The only trouble with them is if there was anything dodgy in the bin, half an engine or something, the screw would not work, so it had sheer pins on it. The drivers had a bag of sheer pins in the cab and if anything did happen to the Archimedes screw, he took the pins out and replaced them. That was a good way of working, and they were quite inexpensive collection vehicles, apparently very efficient, used to work well. We moved on then. I suppose the next thing you get to then, as far as the bins were concerned was about 1982, the Council noticed that some of the Councils were starting to go to wheeled bins, and various visits were

organized for people. From memory, North Herts District Council, next door to Luton, Hitchin, Letchworth, around that area, they'd gone to wheeled bins. So various members and officers went out to look at things, watched the crews operating, and saw what it was about. I think there was then a sort of growing feeling that perhaps that was the way to go. They were getting quite a lot of injuries to the refuse collectors from sacks. There was one entire round that was on plastic sacks, and they were always getting stabbed with cutlery and knives and forks and broken plates and even some injuries with hypodermic needles and things.

LF: So people were just throwing everything into the sacks and there was no sorting?

MW: No, no, you weren't aware of it until you got some stab in your leg.

LF: Tell me a bit about the protective clothing.

MW: We had various phases of protective clothing. When I first got there you used to wear an overall cover, or you know, like mechanics wear really, and we were issued with donkey jackets. They were dark blue. Then we went to the bib and brace, and the blouson jacket. That was also blue: Chelsea blue, if you like. It had a stripe in the legs. That looked quite smart. Then we went to the dreaded orange overalls.

LF: Tell me a bit about the orange overalls, about the clothing and how it changed, and then why you were protesting against the wheeled bins.

MW: There were two serious injuries to refuse collectors, whether it was anything to do with high visibility clothing or not, we were never totally convinced. One was doing what he shouldn't be doing, which was sitting on the back of the vehicle in the road with the vehicle. He tipped the bin out and he fell off and the vehicle reversed over him. And the other one, it was a bit more like he walked from behind the vehicle and a car just hit him. The car was going too fast, and shouldn't have been going that fast when they saw the vehicles. So the Council then decided they were going to introduce orange overalls. We said, 'Well, surely the high visibility jacket would be enough, people would see that.' But no, they were insistent, and there was a lot of resistance from some of the people. Orange had very significant bias as far as they were concerned.

LF: What was the reason for that?

MW: They were Catholics. We had quite a group of people, Catholics from Belfast who came, quite a lot of them *via* Scotland, but found that Scotland was just as bad, or good, or whatever. There were also a lot of Scottish Catholics from Port Glasgow and Greenock who felt discriminated against and came south to get jobs. Yes, quite a number of them, about half the workforce at one time, so they weren't very happy about the association of the orange, which we had some sympathy for. Certainly, one of the Senior Shop Stewards in the other Union was a bloke from Belfast, a Belfast Catholic, and he was very, very unhappy having to wear orange. Anyway, the Council forced the issue and said it was health and safety and, we're in about the early 1980s, so the Health and Safety at Work Act was fully in force by then. But then, in the end, actually the Council changed its mind and went for more protective clothing.

LF: I was going to ask you about that because the orange, which one would think a sensible Council could easily produce, or have produced, in another colour equally highly visible, didn't offer protection; all it offered was visibility.

MW: Yes, visibility, and, of course, it showed all the dirt, every dirty mark. Being in a refuse collection environment, they used to get very dirty. So the Council, they introduced a laundry service for the refuse collectors. So yes, [we'd] have three sets of overalls: one to wear, one to keep, one was in the wash. No, they relented in the end. I'm not quite sure what the story was about that. I think it was the injuries that were occurring. Anyway, they came up with the idea of having Kevlar inserts in the trousers, which was adopted by loads of Councils. You see them, loads of refuse collectors have got them.

LF: Can you describe that?

MW: Yes, well it was the material; it was developed by NASA for the space suits for the astronauts. It's very hard to puncture, you can stab it with anything and it will bounce off. And, of course, the police use it in their flak jackets and things, and the army, to try to prevent stab injuries. It did work, we found when we tested it, it did work, and the Council introduced it.

LF: So was that for the whole uniform or just the trousers?

MW: For the trousers. They're most susceptible to leg injuries: both of them, street cleansing and refuse collectors, because they're picking sacks up which you're never quite sure about. So yes, that's what they went to, but Kevlar came in the dark green colour, like an army sort of shade of colour, you know, and they didn't go with the orange, so they went back to green.

LF: And this would have been roughly when?

MW: This was... mid-1980s, I think.

LF: So orange was abandoned and all the politics around it.

MW: Orange was gone, all that was gone, and they then went back to green. They had the bands of fluorescent clothing on the legs and on the arms, and they also wore the fluorescent jackets. [Shows picture]. That's me in my fluorescent jacket when I was a Manager. We used to just wear, you see that's the blue... that's me leaning on my refuse truck. That was about 1984, I think. That uniform was a lot more acceptable, you know. I haven't heard anything, have any complaints about the protective clothing since then.



LF: You talked earlier about Luton Council learning from Hertfordshire and surrounding areas; it sounds as if there wasn't a kind of unified policy across local authorities. Some were better at some things, some might have been more advanced in uniforms and protective clothing, others in equipment. How much learning was there across local authorities?

MW: There was quite a bit. It was very localized, very informal. There was a Bedfordshire Cleansing Officer's panel that used to meet, so the authorities, the local collection authorities in Bedfordshire, we used to get together and swap ideas and any examples of good practice we thought could be implemented across the Councils. Sometimes other people used to attend as well, people from other local authorities. Milton Keynes used to come quite often and there were some similarities between Milton Keynes and Luton, not that many [laughs], but there are some. I used to get on very well with the Officers in Milton Keynes, so they used to attend and we used to learn things, swap things with them as well. But on a wider scale than

that, yes, it wasn't a very good information exchange. There is probably a lot of it still, a lot of people complain - don't they - that one recycling system in one district is totally different to the one next door to it, and so on. I don't suppose it matters too much so long as the people in that area know what they're supposed to be doing. I suppose, when people move they have to get used to a totally different system of collection, whereas there are a lot of countries I know, they have a unified system across a state, Australia for instance. Each of the states has its own refuse collection system and those are very, very big areas, and a very wide number of communities, and they all have the same. That tends to happen on the Continent as well. But not in this country; it's always been pretty poor, the communication between Councils, even though the members get together quite often. I don't think, it's not top priority to talk about refuse collection, so it's always left to the practitioners to do anything they did. Like I say, it's quite informal.

LF: So let's get back to you. I think we're in the mid-1980s.

MW: Yes, right. Okay, by then I'd become a driver. I mean that wasn't really my inspiration to go for the job, it wasn't to become a refuse collector, it was because they were so short of drivers when they brought the HGV [Heavy Goods Vehicle] regulations in. It was very difficult; there was huge amounts of competition for drivers in Luton. Apart from the actual factories, there was loads of warehouses and so on that had drivers.

LF: Tell me a bit about the HGV regulations?

MW: They came in before I started, I think about 1970. People who had existing, existing drivers had what they called 'grandfather rights'. They didn't have to take a test as long as they got their employer to sign up that they were drivers and they were competent drivers, they got their licences. But then, anybody from that date onwards had to take a test, the full test, in the different classes of licence. So by the time I started, if you wanted to become a HGV driver, you had to pass your HGV test. But Luton was training people, had its own training school attached to the transport division, and not only to train people from Luton, they used to do private sector people and have people from other Councils as well. So that was the aim, and the deal was that if you came and you stuck it out on the bins for six months, they put you through to do your test. Well, you'd certainly go for an assessment, I think they did an assessment, then started you on the lessons. That's more or less what happened. It was a bit later than that, because the guy who promised all that left, went somewhere else, so perhaps it was nine months, but yes, it was quite a while. The irony was, once I'd gone and done it, passed my driving test first time, no problems, went back, and by then they'd got a surfeit of drivers. [Laughs]. Always the way. So they said to me, 'Well, you're about number 14 on the spare list.' You were always being mucked about. 'Wouldn't you rather go back as a regular member of a crew? In fact, you know, with your knowledge, we'll make you the charge hand on the crew.' So that was a bit of extra money, I thought that was better, so that's what I did, but I was quite good mates with the driver so we used to split the driving sometimes. If he was keen to get finished, we used to take the truck up the tip.

I was a change hand of a regular round, and I carried on doing that for about two years, and then a vacancy came up for a salvage collection driver, so they used to take salvage: cardboard and packaging, and that sort of stuff. There were two rounds by then. It used to be more than that but they'd reduced it to two by then. I did that for quite a while, and then the vacancy came up as a regular driver on a refuse round, and I did that until 1990, so I went through all the conversion thing.

LF: What do you mean?

MW: The conversion thing to wheeled bins. We started in 1985 with a trial round and then went on from there. There was obviously a bit of resistance to going on the truck, because it was a huge reduction in the number of refuse collectors. You used to have a driver and four refuse collectors on the old rounds when you only needed a driver and two collectors, so you literally halved the workforce.

LF: Just for people who have no background in the industry, is this because the capacity of the bins

was greater?

MW: No, it was because wheeled bins were usually introduced on every kerbside or on a premises boundary system, whereas when we were on the other bins it was a back door system. So you used to have to go into the property and pick the bin up, take it out, empty it, trail it all the way up. Whereas with the wheeled bins they were out either right on the path or on the person's premise boundary, so you cut down the amount of time. There was a lot more in the bins, even though they were much easier. It was easier work, but still hard, still hard work, I think, not as easy as a lot of people think it is, but it's not as hard as lifting bins. Of course, because it was on task and finish, you got people doing heroic things with bins like carry four bins: one on the back, hook one through on the fingers on the front and they used to carry two with the handles. They used to do that up alleyways as well. Yes, we wouldn't have done it with the ash bins, but by the time we're talking about then...

LF: It sounds as if the degree of injury potential is very great.

MW: [Laughs] Yes, yes, strains and all that sort of scene, but obviously they built their strength up and their fitness up. They were very fit.

LF: 'Task and finish' means you don't work a fixed number of hours?

MW: No, you're given the amount of work you've got to do, so, yes, that was from the work study thing, because on the work study they carry one bin. When they're doing it normally they carry two, three bins, even four bins some of the crews, and some could do it.

LF: What was the shortest amount of time someone could do their shift in and what would be the expected amount of time?

MW: Well they were supposed to work, when I started on the rounds, from seven until half past three. It was very unusual for anybody to go up to half past three. Generally, crews used to manage to finish about one, half past one o'clock. A lot of them used to pull work forward on a Thursday so they could finish early on a Friday.

LF: They used to what?

MW: Pull forward, so do some of Friday's work on a Thursday, but once you decided to do that you always had to do it, of course.

LF: Was that because the customers, the clients, would expect it to be done?

MW: Yes, they'd expect you to call around regularly. The fact that you were doing, they didn't know what their day of the week was, it wasn't so important. It was quite an issue if you were on wheeled bins, because they've got to put the bin out, but if you come in the back of their house, it doesn't really make any difference, as long as you do it regularly on the same day. Also, the fact that we used to get paid at three o'clock on a Thursday, so they thought, 'Well, might as well carry on and do a bit, until it's time to go to the depot and get paid.' And so then they could finish about 10 o'clock on a Friday, seven till 10. Some of them used to push it a bit further than that, but I think they got warned off a bit, finishing too early and making it look a bit bad, you know.

LF: So do you think the employer was aware that people were doing it?

MW: Oh yes [laughs].

LF: And how was this dealt with?

MW: Well, there seemed to be a sort of tolerance of that, as long as the customers weren't complaining, carry on doing it. I used to get some people [who] used to pull strokes so you used to sometimes get people who got their pay, went out on the lash on a Thursday night, and didn't make it on a Friday, so some lucky spare carrier would get an easy day. On the other hand, there were some of them who used to regularly not turn in on a Thursday, but come in on a Friday and then they'd have an easy day and the poor sod who'd come and picked all the extra work up didn't used to get the job. That used to cause a bit of friction, a few words behind the dustcart or something. Yes, I don't think, as long as it wasn't pushed too far, management was prepared to tolerate it. But all that ended with the wheeled bins because people had to put their bins out so they had to know which day it was. And then, when you started to get to the complications of recycling and green waste and glass and you know, you had to give people a calendar and tell them which day you were calling on, so that all stopped with that.

LF: So let's go back to the introduction of wheeled bins, which then meant fewer workers were needed for the job.

MW: Yes, that's right.

LF: How did the Unions deal with that?

MW: Well, by then I became a Shop Steward in 1976 and the Senior Shop Steward for all the TG workers, which was the drivers and the charge hands mostly.

LF: TG meaning...?

MW: Transport and General Workers' Union. There were two Unions, Transport and General Workers and then GMBATU, General Municipal Workers and boilermakers or something [General, Municipal, Boilermakers and Allied Trades]. The "GMU" they are calling themselves now. Yes, so yes, well obviously it was a big reduction and there was a lot of resistance. It was a Conservative-controlled Council at the time, but the Conservative leader was actually okay, as far as we were concerned. He used to have some sympathy whereas a lot of his members didn't. [Laughs]. Anyway, we went along to the Council and said, 'Look, we're going to carry it.' We did have a meeting with cards on the table between the Shop Stewards and the Leader of the Council, and a couple of his senior colleagues, and he said, 'Well, this is going to go through, so we want you to settle. What's it going to take to settle you wanting to implement this and get it in and smoothing the way to get all these wheeled bins in?' So that was the suggestion then that we should split the saving between the refuse collectors and the Council. They certainly wouldn't agree to a 50/50 split, but they did agree in the end to a two-thirds/third split, which made us some of the best paid refuse collectors for miles around. You only got it when you were working on the wheeled bins. All the rest of the people who were doing other jobs, trade refuse collection, bulky household waste collection, didn't get it. It was only when you were specifically working on the wheeled bins. Extra bonus payments is how they did it. They wouldn't pay extra on the actual rate - they were set nationally and that was it - but bonus schemes were negotiable locally, so that was it. We did the deal and received quite a big pay rise. Certainly the drivers were extremely well paid, which I was one of, so that was a pretty legit self-interest perhaps.

LF: And this was in the 1980s?

MW: Oh yes, yes, this was mid-1980s. Yes, so we got a move on then, and the whole of the town was on wheeled bins by 1988 [laughs]. It's amazing what you can do with a bit of carrot, you know. So yes, all the rounds were in by then, and that was the way we carried on. Then, in 1990, it was the effects of, of course, it was the start of the competition thing, and the in-house team put in a bid which they lost out to UK Waste Ltd. The Government at the time introduced an Act that said that all Councils had to put a select range of services out. It started in 1980 with the highways and some of the other services, but by 1988 that was extended into street cleansing, refuse collection, building cleaning, leisure centre management, a few other things as well, but they were obviously the ones that concerned us the most. Refuse collection was

included. There was a timetable as well, a statutory timetable that named Councils and when they had to put their services out to tender, so the day came when we put our tender in. We thought it was reasonable, doable, cut the number of people. It was much more efficient, but we lost out to UK Waste. However, we obviously weren't very enthusiastic about UK Waste, and pointed out to the Council that we thought they were a lot of fly-by-nights, and that they'd lost accounts or contracts in other areas because they just didn't do the job. The Council we thought weren't going to take any notice of us, because we had a vested interest in keeping our jobs but they did and they actually put in a penalty clause that said that if they failed to perform they then would have to pay the Council to put a service back, and it was quite a lot of money: £800,000, I think.

LF: Was that unusual, to build such a penalty clause into...?

MW: No, no, it wasn't. The Government didn't like it, but the Councils all got various legal opinions, which said it's quite common in contractual negotiations between commercial companies. If you take on something, or outsource something and there's a chance of them failing, there's a penalty clause that somebody else can step in and that will pay for the administration running an emergency service, if you're in a service industry, and so on. So they pushed the line, yes, and said, 'That's what we're going to do.' A lot of Councils did it. Anyway, UK Waste bitterly resented the idea that they'd have to take out a bond. They wouldn't have to pay out the £800,000, but they would have to take out a bond with the bank or somebody to cover the £800,000 to pay a certain amount each year. I think it was quite a lot, 20 per cent I think. They wouldn't do it. So we got to the final stages of the... I think they were due to take over at midnight one night, and the Council said: 'If we haven't heard anything by eight o'clock, you've forfeited the contract.' And they didn't, so we had to start an emergency service the next day. By then I'd become an Officer, because I knew they wouldn't employ a Senior Shop Steward.

LF: Can I just take you back one step? Had the original plan been that the workforce would have been transferred to UK Waste, or whichever contractor was taking over the work?

MW: Yes, well, you wouldn't know about it. There was a lot of argument about the transfer of undertakings' regulations. The Unions were of the view that the Government wasn't carrying out the procedures under the EU regulations that it was supposed to, but the Government said: 'No, it doesn't apply. These services are being submitted to commercial contractors with competitive tendering before, so it doesn't apply.' So, actually, the workforce had to apply for a job with UK Waste, and they could pick and choose who they had, and they chose not to employ an awful lot of the old workforce. In fact, they took on a new workforce, about half and half, they took on about half of them. They weren't intending to bring a totally new workforce in. Later on, of course, it was after the Government was threatened with action by the European Court they brought in the TUPE [Transfer of Undertakings (Protection of Employment)] regulations probably as they should have been, and you know they should have transferred the workers over.

LF: So UK Waste lost the contract at the last minute?

MW: Yes.

LF: What was the emergency service that Luton delivered?

MW: Well, we had to start by, we went around and anybody that had been made redundant who didn't want to be made redundant could come back and start work immediately, which a lot of them [did], obviously the younger ones got hardly anything in redundancy pay. There were one or two of the older ones who had done quite well out of that, got access to their pension, superannuation bonus, and so on, so we had to take on new people. We found out who UK Waste were taking on and said to them: 'Do you fancy coming to work for us? Obviously you'll have to come and do an interview and so on but you know...' I think it was one of those interviews where if you had two arms and two legs, that was it, you were in. I actually got quite a good workforce out of that, surprisingly. And yes, so we managed to retain a lot of the

experienced refuse collectors and carried on the service.

LF: And you said you were an Officer by this time?

MW: I was an Officer by then.

LF: So when had this happened, and tell me about your promotion.

MW: It became, as I say it was pretty obvious to me that I was not going to get the job with UK Waste so the Council had a redeployment scheme in place.

LF: And that was because you'd been a Shop Steward?

MW: Yes, a Senior Shop Steward. You know, I couldn't see that happening [laughs] because they weren't going to employ me. I found that out in the end anyway. So I applied for redeployment. What the Council was doing was taking on people to monitor the contract, and certainly the members of the Council who might have been a bit askance about taking on a Senior Shop Steward as an Officer thought I'd give them a really hard time [laughs] if I was taken on as a quality assurance person, that's what it was. The ex-Cleansing Manager, they weren't going to take him on either, he was the Quality Assurance Manager. We were Quality Assurance Inspectors, and there were three of us, all Shop Stewards, who were taken on in that role but we never got to start work, and then we got moved back gradually, pulled back from being the sort of client-side officers to being operational managers. Strange times. Then, from that, there was an emergency period of nine months where they had to re-let the contracts. That's what the Government Department allowed them, and they did, this time round, the Council won the contract. Again, they were pretty tight terms and conditions, but they did win it. By that time I'd gone back totally to becoming a Client Officer.

LF: When you say the Council won the contract...

MW: Yes, well the Council's in-house workforce, so it was a DSO, direct service organization. Yes, all the people who were employed were actual Council employees even though they were sort of arm's length, and had to make a return on their money and so on and so forth - all the restrictions that are applied under the competitive tendering regulations.

LF: So did the Council have to set up a separate company?

MW: It wasn't really a company. It was an arm's length organization, but it wasn't that arm's length, and certainly by then the Council had changed control and became a Labour-controlled Council in 1992. They weren't that arm's length, never were really [laughs]. It was always part of the Council, but they used to report to a separate Committee, a direct Labour Committee and so on. We fulfilled all the obligations we had to do, made a rate of return, which was actually not a great deal of problem on the refuse. We'd cut ourselves pretty fine with the people who were doing it. So then I became a full-time Client Officer for about a year.

LF: And what did that mean? A Client Officer?

MW: It's where you go out and inspect the work, make sure they were doing what they were supposed to be doing. And anybody who left wasn't replaced, because it was an in-house thing, and it was another way of applying pressure other than financial penalties, you know. And then the Street Cleansing Manager left, and I applied for that job and became Street Cleansing Manager, and then the Refuse Collection Manager. By then it was still a DSO, a direct service organization, so I applied, then they decided that they'd have a Senior Manager who was responsible for the whole of the services, which were under the direct services part, so refuse collection; bulk household waste; street cleansing; toilet cleaning. Then a General Cleansing Manager post came up, and I applied for that and got it. And I went to occupy that position as a Senior

Manager, so there were a lot of changes then, introduced a lot of recycling collection rounds and so on.

LF: Tell me about that. Tell me about the shift towards recycling and having the clients do their own sorting and how that developed.

MW: Yeah, we set up a waste transfer station in the depot, because the local landfill site closed. As part of rearranging that we set up a materials recycling facility, so we could then start doing kerbside collections.

LF: And this was which year?

MW: This was 1991.

LF: Okay.

MW: Yes, 1991, 1992 they decided to do it. I don't think actually by the time the works had been done it was probably 1993 because it took quite a while to set the thing up, you know, build it. By that time, as I say, you could then actually do kerbside collections and they did start kerbside collections. Anyway, we did set it off, but it was doing it quite a cheap way, quite cheapskate probably. We got people to use supermarket carry out bags, gave them a couple of hooks to hang on the side of their wheeled bins, and then they put they put the hooks on. A lot of people used it though, they were keen to recycle and they did it, but a lot of people didn't, so we thought that the way we were doing it probably wasn't encouraging people. We looked around then for alternative ways of recycling, obviously driven by the Rio Summit, the fact that the Government had introduced recycling targets, which weren't statutory but they were putting pressure on Councils to recycle more.

LF: When did the Government introduce those targets, do you remember?

MW: It was in a Green Paper. The Conservative Government introduced it. That was where the 25 per cent recycling rate came from.

LF: So before 1997?

MW: Oh yes, a long while before that. That was through the early 1990s. I've got it all in my history, I wasn't bothered looking it up. Then when the Landfill Directive came in, that actually had statutory targets in it, so that actually became a statutory target to do the recycling and that really shook local authorities up. They realized they just had to do it, had to keep achieving higher and higher targets or they weren't going to make Government's targets or the national targets for the EU. That was later, that was in the 1990s. So we abandoned the sacks held on the side of the wheeled bin idea, thought that was a bit too cheapskate, and started to look around at what we'd use as an alternative. We tried boxes, 55-litre recycling boxes, decided they weren't that great and you'd probably have to have two of them. People used to use them for other things, storing stuff in their loft and we used to get a lot of leakage from box schemes, still do, so we decided it really came down to wheeled bins. We used wheeled bins to collect people's rubbish, why not use wheel bins for all the same reasons? Manual handling, the easiness, get people to get them out on the kerbside so it makes it much more economical to do the collections; so we went over to wheel bins. Perhaps the mistake we've made is, we went to 140-litre wheel bins, not realizing how popular it would be, and how much more recycling we'd have to do, because we went quite early. If we did it again, now you'd use 240-litre wheeled bin instead of smaller ones - people in larger families could request the 240-litre ones, and a lot of people did, but the standard size was the 140-litre.

LF: So people weren't given enough capacity to do all the recycling that...?

MW: I think they started off okay, but then as other things came on board, you know, we couldn't find a way of anybody, in our area anyway, taking cardboard and packaging waste. That sort of waste, they just weren't interested. It was negative, you know, you actually had to pay them to take it away, which was crazy. We

couldn't recycle Tetra Pak, recycling plastics was quite difficult. We were quite lucky we were close enough to Milton Keynes to ship it there, so we did some plastics recycling, but then, of course, it got much bigger, there was more and more they could deal with. We could always do the milk bottle type things, and that has always been a valuable material, but then gradually they could take PET bottles; polyethylene tetrachloride, I think. Pop bottles, they could do things like that. So, gradually, as those sorts of materials came on board and people could deal with them, then it started to be a capacity issue, yes. Well, one of the things we came up with, one of the tricks, was to say: 'Well, look, if we've taken all this stuff away from you now, you don't have to put so much in your black swap bins. Use your 140 as your waste bin and your 240 as a recycling bin.' We gave them all adhesive labels to put on so the refuse collectors were in no doubt about which bin was which. We thought, a couple of thousand people will do that: the first year we had nearly 7,000 people turned over, and I think it's running at a lot more than that now.

LF: So let me just probe that a bit. Was that, do you think, because the general awareness had been increased so much? Why were your expectations so limited and why were they exceeded, do you think?

MW: Well, Luton's never been a town where you can just go and put something out, and everybody will do it. Certainly, there are places like that, you know, you get 98 per cent participation rates and things like that. You don't get that in Luton. We're, you know...

LF: What's it about Luton, then?

MW: It's just the cultural variety, the fact that it's a very, very high density population, the type of premises, large families living in quite small properties. It's a difficult, tricky area - 120 languages are spoken in Luton, communicating with people is challenging. You've got to do it door-to-door really, and that's expensive. So yes, a pretty typical urban area. We all think of Luton as a sort of London borough, but it's 30 miles up the M1; we're very similar to places like Harrow, and places like that, same demographic.

LF: So, many more people were recycling than you expected?

MW: Yes, more were, I think, yes. Our early attempts at it had given us perhaps the wrong message that people weren't going to participate in quite the numbers that we were hoping. Then, when things turned round and we went over to wheeled bins, more people did. A lot of the town, as well, is terraced premises from when we had the big expansion of the town in the Victorian and Edwardian times towards the turn of the century, and there's just no room to put wheeled bins. They were always on sacks, so we had to leave them all recycling sacks, which is never really, you won't get as good participation rates out of that. But, obviously, people, they've been inspired by the general recycling publicity, as you say. We saw some big increases in recycling throughout those years, apart from putting out more and more facilities, which we did.

LF: Was Luton ever a local authority that required people to sort at their door, or was that all done centrally, because I know there's great variation across local authorities?

MW: No, we always went for co-mingled collection of recyclables. We did try, we did get one of the vehicles in that you could do a source separated kerbside collection with, we sent it around some of the areas of Luton and we got loads of complaints from the motorists. In Luton, and it's quite similar to London, you go along the middle of the road with street parking on both sides and nothing can get past the refuse truck. It just took them ages to come along, bring the box out, start sorting it into the different compartments, even with crews of five or six carriers. We couldn't afford it.

LF: So quicker to collect it all and...

MW: Oh yes, massively quicker. We could do it in, I don't know, a quarter of the time. So we decided that it was a very nice idea, but it wasn't going to work in our area. Alright, there were areas where it could have

worked but you've got to go for one system, I think. We decided to go for one system within the Council and tried to stick to that, so we went for co-mingled. We got an MRF.

LF: You got a what?

MW: Materials Recovery Facility. We had a small one when we started, but when we re-let the waste disposal contract, Waste Recycling Group won it in 2004 and they rebuilt a huge, great MRF site because they were going to take stuff in from all over the place, which we allowed. No problem with us, so long as it didn't interfere with our collections, and they built a very large MRF, with a trommel revolving drum, so it's got undersize and oversize. It's got two lines that come off that, so they can sort huge amounts of material. I think the throughput for that is, about half of it is ours, and half of it comes from other Councils. They've got problems with their commercial collections and so on.

LF: So Luton offered that service?

MW: Yes, well they bring it in in their own vehicles, I mean their own delivery trucks. Yes, well it didn't bother us, *per se*, as they helped us defray the costs, it's part of the deal. We've never gone for kerbside, and we can't quite see how it would work in our area.

LF: So let's go back to your career. Where are you now?

MW: By then I was Cleansing General Manager. The other thing we did was introduce green waste collections, so a brown 240-litre bin for anybody who has a garden. I think about a quarter of the premises in Luton haven't got a garden, so they're excluded from the scheme. But there are plenty of places still with gardens, and some places with some very large gardens as well, so that's collected fortnightly. That took another big chunk out of the waste stream, and started pushing them up to about a 30 per cent recycling rate. And then the final bit of the jigsaw, perhaps, was we never had a system where we could collect glass with the dry recyclables, and we had PSA 2 [Public Service Agreement 2] money from the Government to improve our recycling rates, and if we met the targets for that we'd get a putrid amount of money, £428,000. The Council was very keen to get their hands on that - not surprisingly - but it did mean us improving our dry recycling rate so we couldn't include the green waste in that, we had to do it through packaging waste.

LF: So you were at 30 per cent, and you were trying to increase it to what?

MW: I think our target then was 35 per cent.

LF: Excluding garden waste?

MW: Excluding garden waste, yes, which was challenging, and the way we found to do it was to get a better collection system for the high-rise and medium-rise flats and introduce glass collection, a kerbside glass collection.

LF: So, until then, glass had been excluded you say?

MW: Yes, we just used to have about 16 bottle banks.

LF: So sorry, just to make sure I'm absolutely clear: people had to take their own bottles to bottle banks?

MW: Yes.

LF: And if they didn't, and it wasn't collected with their recyclables, they just put it in their general waste?

MW: In the general waste, yes, so there was a nice, heavy material there to be harvested.

LF: Just as well the Kevlar trousers were being worn.

MW: [Laughs]. Well, then they're in old bins, although we decided in that instance that, although there wasn't that great deal of the material, even collecting it fortnightly, it was not worth giving them a bin to do that, so we gave them a 55-litre box, which proved to be well adequate for most people's glass, even during the summer when they're having barbeques and things, and parties, and at Christmas. I don't know if we usually had much excess with that. So yes, so they'd introduce that, and those measures got us to the target so we did get the money which was immediately lifted off us, of course. We never saw any of it. [Laughs]. Oh, the other thing we did was the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP). They were holding out some money to local authorities to introduce food waste collections, so we had a go at that as well, put 7,500 premises on a discreet food collection service.

LF: And how did you select those 7,500?

MW: Well, we tried to pick the ones who we thought would participate, and produce the most, and were the most likely to do it. We got 90,000 properties in Luton so this is a fairly small proportion of the properties, but it was enough to do one round and make it worthwhile. They had a 7-litre kitchen caddy, so they kept that in the house, used biodegradable bin liners, and then they used to take those bin liners out, and we had a 20-litre collection container that went out with the wheeled bins. We used to make collections on that. Our only real problems with the food waste was that we had to haul it up to a place north of Bedford, so it was a good 40 mile round trip, and it wasn't really economic. We extended it to 10,000 properties because we had the capacity to do it, so we found that there was no reason not to try and harvest as much stuff as we could with just one round. But it was proving, looking to go further than that, you'd either have to find a site where we could take the food waste which was much closer, or put it in with the green waste - the co-mingled green and food waste collections, which a lot of Councils do. But then again you've got to have a place where you can send it, and there was nowhere, so the Council actually stopped the collections. That's the only collection scheme, I think, they've actually stopped.

LF: What was the general response to that? I mean, did the population of Luton...

MW: It was very mixed. Quite a lot of places where we thought it would be really good, weren't. People thought that food waste is a bit icky and nasty, and then in other places where we thought, 'Ah, probably a bit marginal, maybe we'll get them,' they were really good, still participating right up till the end.

LF: How long did it run before Luton abandoned the idea?

MW: Um... about four years till 2010, they stopped it.

LF: So it just wasn't cost effective?

MW: No, I think the grand plan was to get together with one of our neighbouring authorities and have a plant somewhere where we could send the waste to be treated. Our contractor had discussions with the place where they send the green waste up at a farm near in South Beds, had a discussion with them to see if they'd do it and they would. But we got the costings for all that and there was some negotiation about it, went to our neighbouring authority but unfortunately the Councils had fallen out by then over planning issues - what a surprise - and it got nowhere, basically. We couldn't afford to send the stuff all the way up there, and they couldn't deal with mixed green waste and food waste; they just didn't have the plant to do it. They could only deal with food waste.

LF: Do you think Luton was unusual in abandoning that or would that have been a problem for a number of local authorities?

MW: A lot of local authorities gave it a go. If they found some way around it, I mean a lot of authorities in Hertfordshire have got no access, they're the same as us really. So there, the County Council put in a transfer system so they actually load the food waste or the mixed food and green waste up and take it in bulkers, huge great vehicles, you know the bulk refuse vehicles. They take it all the way up to St. Ives in Cambridgeshire, and that's a long way to take stuff. It was right on the boundary of being feasible and economic, but they get so much material from their authorities; Hertfordshire's a big County with a lot of districts, 11, I think, or something. Anyway, they all do it because they've all got a 50 per cent recycling target, so yes, it sort of works out, but we couldn't see how we could do that, not on our own, it just never stacked up. I think there are others, we've heard of other Councils that have had to abandon food waste simply because the treatment facilities are not there, they just don't come on stream fast enough, but it was a fairly low contribution to our recycling figures anyway.

LF: So where was Luton with its targets at this stage?

MW: I think we topped 38 per cent, still collecting the waste weekly, we didn't go to fortnightly collections. The Council considered it, I don't know how many times. I don't know how many reports I wrote to the Council either.

LF: You were proposing it?

MW: Um... not really. I mean only insofar as how are we going to meet our targets? I mean the problem with having weekly refuse collections is there's no driver then to push people into using the recycling facilities. That's fairly apparent from all the research that's been done on alternate weekly collections. A lot of people will participate in the kerbside dry recycling collections, they got used to it. It's got embedded at 70 per cent, still 30 per cent of people who don't. Green waste, yes, that's a seasonal thing, but probably 60 per cent of people participate. The glass rounds, that starts to fall off a bit, about 40 per cent, and food waste, it was only ever about 30 per cent.

LF: So the incentive is to have less frequent collections and actively encourage people to...

MW: Well, the phrase they always use is 'collect frequently what you want and don't collect so often what you don't want' and, yes, well, we tried to go for that and that was the driver. The Council had, the current Labour group, had made a commitment in their manifesto not to go to fortnightly collections so they felt that was quite a big inhibitor. Then they got a grant from the [Eric] Pickles fund of keeping weekly collections, so that burned that bridge I suppose, and they gave up any idea of doing that for the meanwhile.

LF: What's your view then of Eric Pickles' stance on this? Do you think it's done a lot of damage? Do you think it's been helpful in any way?

MW: In some ways it's not done a lot of damage because some Conservative-controlled Councils have taken absolutely no notice of it. In fact, a lot of the new, very large, unitary authorities, Cheshire West, no sooner had the Council been set up and put in place, they made a decision that the whole of their area would go on fortnightly collections. So they didn't take that much heed of it. I think there was only one Council that went from doing fortnightly, I think Stoke-on-Trent of all places, so a very Labour-controlled Council. Anyway, they abandoned fortnightly and went to weekly collections. They were the only ones as far as I'm aware.

LF: I'm not asking you to be a mind reader here, but I will ask you: why do you think Eric Pickles has been so prominent in this? What's driving him?

MW: I don't know, I think it's a *Daily Mail* reader thing, you know, that they seem to get, they seem to have an opinion about what happened when you go over to alternate weekly collections. And yet, you could take

them to places that have got alternate weekly collections, and we've got South Central Beds next to us, so you've got the line down the middle of the road: one side of the road has a weekly collection and the other side of the road has fortnightly. You could go into their estates - very nice estates I must admit - over on their side, and they all do fortnightly collection, and you don't see bags or bins strewn all around the streets; you wouldn't notice any difference between the two. I don't know what motivates people to get, certainly when Defra [Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs] were running trips to Germany for Waste Managers, they don't do that anymore [laughs], but they were to look at waste facilities and collection systems, and we went to Hamburg, and Hamburg does a four-weekly collection of waste. When we asked, 'How do you get 68 per cent recycling?', they said: 'That's it. You just put the things in place, charge them per bin for doing it.'

LF: So individuals are charged per bin?

MW: Pay as you throw, yes.

LF: And they do a great deal of sorting?

MW: Six stream collection, I think, in Hamburg. Yes. And we went out into the country areas where they do eight-weekly cycles [laughs].

LF: In Germany?

MW: In Germany, yes.

LF: Eight-weekly?

MW: Eight-weekly, yes.

LF: That would make Eric Pickles' hair curl.

MW: Well, what would that do, give him apoplexy. Because some Councils are going to three-weekly. I know the first ones...

LF: In this country?

MW: Yes, one in Wales is going. Up in Scotland, Airdrie.

LF: So more rural Councils?

MW: Yes, probably, probably.

LF: And how has that been regarded by the local population and the local press, and the industry?

MW: Well, it's clear to most people who are practitioners that it works, and you can make it work. There are things you have to do, it's not just going to happen. You have to really plan your way into it, make sure the publicity gets out, front out all the public meetings and so on and so forth, you know. But it can be done and it don't cause any real harm to human health.

LF: So with preparation and planning...

MW: It can be done.

LF: So where are we with Luton now?

MW: Luton at the moment, well, obviously they're facing Council elections in 2015, same day as the general election, I think, for the first time in living memory [laughs], so that's going to be an interesting outcome. The Labour group is looking at what it is going to say about refuse collection. I think they might have gone for fortnightly collections if the Pickles' fund hadn't been there, in spite of saying they weren't going to do it. I think they've lost 40 per cent of their Local Government grant. Yes, I don't want to get too political, but it does seem to be, and Central Beds has got more grants, so has the leafy, luxurious, 'we don't really need the money', got more money, and the deprived, urban, tightly-packed multicultural area has got a hell of a lot less. Well, what a surprise. Anyway... [laughs] but that grant runs out, and they are saying now if it does run out, that's it, we're going to fortnightly collections. It's just such a huge great saving, and it will push people to recycle more, which will save us all money in Landfill Tax and push up recycling.

LF: And the money runs out when? In 2015?

MW: No, I'm not sure, to be honest. If it was for three years, this has been in a couple of years now. I think it might run out next year. I suppose that was not being able to commit the next Government to something that they put in place. Anyway, so that's the deal at the moment, so it's still weekly collections.

LF: Let's go back to your career. Where are you now?

MW: [Laughs]. Where am I now? Well, yes, okay, Luton became a Unitary Authority in 1997 after losing its County Borough status in 1974. It was a County Borough for 10 years, which was bitterly resented, and as soon as the Government said about having a Local Government review and Councils being able to apply to become unitaries, I think Luton must have been one of the first in the queue as they always felt they had been robbed. There should have actually been a way of having large urban authorities that had more powers than the Counties, or the Counties still, and it was a massive mistake in 1974. It's crazy having places like Bristol that were District Councils. So they become a unitary Council, and took back everything including waste disposal, which maybe they were not too keen on. In choosing that, they thought with the way it was going with the landfill sites, sites in Bedfordshire were closing at that time, one of the biggest in the country closed during that period: Brogborough landfill site.

LF: Were these closing because they were full because of capacity or...?

MW: No, they had come to the end of their planning consent in the case of that one. WRG (Waste Recycling Group) run the site at Brogborough, which used to take two million tonnes of waste a year. And that was one of the biggest sites in the country, it used to take all of London's waste, well a lot of London's waste, but it just came to the end of its planning consent. They wanted a year extension and the County would not give it to them, they said 'It's too much trouble, the smells, the complaints. We're not going to take any political risk with this, we're not going to extend your planning,' which they didn't like at all. We could see that was the way it was going, so we would be pushed inevitably towards some form of waste treatment eventually, sooner or later. On that basis they said, 'We'll need somebody to drive that whole process, so we'll need a Head of Waste Management.' So, in 1996, they started a recruitment campaign, and I applied for that and became Head of Waste Management, so a full head of service. I still reported to a Director, of course, but that was it; the waste was my empire. [Laughs]. Some tatty empire that was, but there you go.

LF: Tell me about that job.

MW: It was interesting, I found it a fascinating job, I must admit. I mean I've always been interested in waste management, of course, I've been at it a long while, but actually having that sort of level of job, where you could go and look at and see everything, what I used to get involved in was quite a revelation really. It became almost like a regional job because it gave you the seat at things like the Lead Officers' Management Group, which was where the Counties and the unitaries all came together on a regional basis and made decisions, initiated research, looked at market development strategies and things like that, which

we certainly wouldn't have done if we were just little Luton sitting on our own. Yes, there was that and then there were really big-scale schemes that the Government was encouraging Councils to look at, so even while Bedfordshire was still there, it was from 1997 and was only abolished in 2009. They were doing a very large treatment scheme for the whole of the County. That was the idea, a £1.3 billion project, and so we got involved in that. Well, there had obviously been quite a bit of experience from doing a PFI scheme with WRG for our own waste.

LF: Private Finance Initiative?

MW: Yes, yes, that was a smaller scale scheme. It was really a design, build, and finance scheme, but it got the experience. There's no difference between the two in terms of what you have to do, hurdles you have to jump through and so on. So they decided to do that, and I was invited to join that group of Officers, so we started that whole thing again of having financial advisors, legal advisors, technical advisors, went down that road and came up with a site, and really we were quite well underway and then there was a huge great spike in the cost, and the Councillors in Bedford were getting very cold feet about it. So they withdrew, and that was the end of it, because we couldn't really support it with two Councils, and in about, just after I'd left at the beginning of 2010, Luton pulled out as well. Central Beds decided to carry on, but you know I'd have been on that all the way through it and seen it all the way through; totally different set of advisors to the ones we'd had so we had to form relationships with a totally new group of people, some of whom I'd met before - small world waste management. Yes, it was a fascinating job, I was sorry to give it up, but it was mostly ill health. I was 60 anyway, and I was still in that group who could retire when they were 60, so I did. I don't think I've really regretted it, because that's when it started to go downhill as regards to Local Government finance. Recycling performance has plateaued now, in fact it's gone backwards, it's down to about 33 per cent now.

LF: And is that because of a lack of investment in promoting it?

MW: Not investing in promotion. I mean the whole recycling officer part, and their recycling, what do we call them? People who go around door knocking, that's what they did. We had about six of them. That's all gone, went in the cuts. So you've got no real way of carrying out communication and education: very limited resources. We had a recycling bus we put together, got the money for that, put that scheme in place. That was run by three people who used to go around all the schools, community centres, and events. During carnival we used to have the recycling bus there. That went by-the-by, just couldn't afford to have anyone do it anymore. So yes, it's all been a bit sad. And there was a recycling enforcement team as well which used to go around, so we had a lot of persuaders and then a heavy mob.

LF: What did the heavy mob do?

MW: They used to enforce the Environmental Protection Act so with: 'This is it, this is what you're supposed to be doing, if you carry on putting rubbish in your green waste bin, we're going to start taking action against you.'

LF: So they would inspect people's bins?

MW: Oh yes, yes, the bin police.

LF: How did that go down?

MW: Well, not too badly actually. I think if we'd got to the point of having to take enforcement action that might have been politically difficult, but we never did because they always managed to do it by a bit more heavy-handed persuasion.

LF: What were the major misdemeanours that they found? People were putting recyclables in their rubbish or...?

MW: Yes, yes, just didn't bother, you know. A lot of areas of the town, perhaps there is a communication issue, had a lot of people coming in from Eastern Europe at the time. Of course, there's a huge Polish population in Luton anyway before they descended on the town. There were Polish grocers and Polish pubs in Luton, Polish clubs.

LF: And there's not such a strong culture of recycling?

MW: No, no, no, there's certainly not. Talking to them, actually our Recycling Officer was Polish [laughs], did her environmental science degree at Lodz University. She said, 'No, there's really very little background in recycling. They do some in the big cities, but outside of them, no, nothing really.' So yes, from the ground upwards it required a lot of resources which they just didn't have anymore, so 'any bin's a bin, just use it'. Yes, in some of the Asian areas there was a problem, there was an issue, but that was easily dealt with. They are quite law-abiding, and want to do what's right. I think that's part of their religion, part of their real religion, never mind the other part, you know. They do, especially if you approach them properly and ask them to do it, they just do it.

LF: How about commercial premises throughout this period, both construction waste and perhaps food waste from restaurants?

MW: Yes, we had, as part of the food waste thing, there were some people who volunteered. Pizza Hut seemed to have a quite keen corporate policy to participate in food waste schemes if the local authority was running them. We used to do collections from them, schools - had no problem persuading them - always seemed to be very keen. They used to use that as part of their curriculum thing to show the kids what they were up to through waste, and some of them went a lot further than that and had wormeries and things like that. Yes, but mostly commercial premises. Yes, we've always had commercial waste collections, we've still got quite a big commercial waste business. Commercial waste recycling, yes we brought it in, we've got a MRF, so there's no reason why we couldn't take it in. We used to collect cardboard packaging waste free-of-charge for years, but that was then scrapped by the refuse collection regulations, so we had to charge something. Of course, we could, there's a lesser rate of charge, because you don't have Landfill Tax to put on it, which has also become an increasing factor. So we put that in place, yes, it was successful really. I think one of the trade waste vehicles does trade waste collections three days a week, and the other two goes around and does recycling collections, and obviously we have to take that out of our figures, which we are most scrupulously careful to do because it's not household waste. But yes, it works out well, it provides I don't know how many tonnes, but it's a lot and it's built up over the years, as things do.

LF: If you had to name the one significant change you've seen over your long career, from the day you started to the day you retired, what would it be? The most significant change?

MW: The most significant change? Yes, I think there are too many. It's probably down to about five.

LF: Alright, tell me five then.

MW: Well, it's only the vehicles. There were a ragbag of vehicles when I started in 1974. Some of them were ancient, some of them were 10 to 12 years old by the time we got to them. Alright, they were spare vehicles, they weren't in regular use but they were wrecks. A lot of Councils learnt that you just can't do that. You can't maintain a regular system, tell people when you are going to come round, and you're going to keep a weekly system. It certainly was in those days, if you've got that fleet of vehicles it persuaded a lot of Councils to go for regular replacements, or to get into deals with manufacturers so they let a contract not just for one vehicle or two, but for the whole fleet to be replaced over a period of time. That way you get the top spec, top of the range vehicles. I think a lot of Councils did that. Whether that's still the case with the cutbacks I don't know, but they were a lot different. So the vehicles changed totally, the compression you could get with them and the capacity those vehicles have got, it's a different world. That was the first big change. The second one was the wheeled bins, changing it from a very manual

occupation to probably a less manual occupation; still hard work but not so many sprains and injuries and back injuries.

LF: And task and finish presumably ended?

MW: Yes, task and finish came to an end. Yes, that was a big driver and I think that wasn't a very safe system of work.

LF: When did that finish?

MW: Officially it finished in Luton when they let the second refuse collection contract, which was in 1998. They actually said: 'We're going to end this contract. We're not going to have task and finish,' or it was a very, very highly amended task and finish where everything had to be complete, not just your bit. Everything had to be done and then you could go home. That's pushing them back to, they start at six now because of the traffic, they started at seven, brought it forward an hour, because seven o'clock is the new six o'clock, I suppose, with people going to work. They're supposed to finish at half past two, but probably they finish at half past one.

LF: So we've got vehicles...

MW: Vehicles.

LF: Bin, wheeled bins.

MW: Recycling, of course, that's a huge change, the amount of waste you get. And, after that, waste treatment must be one of the biggest changes. Truck and dump has gone out the window.

LF: So when you started it really was landfill.

MW: Landfill was the only option.

LF: Collect and dump.

MW: I don't know of any local authority in our area who sent their waste for treatment; it all went to landfill. Perhaps we're particularly gifted in Bedfordshire with huge great holes in the ground. Now I know there was all treatment. Used to do recycling, used to collect recycling from households in the form of paper and cardboard, and Luton carried on doing that for much longer than a lot of Councils did. But the big revolution was source separating and co-mingle collection recyclables. How many is that, four? What's the fifth one? There must be a fifth one. Landfill Directive, I suppose, the pressure. That's reaching our recycling target, it's the Landfill Tax that made a huge difference: £80 a tonne it is now.

LF: So remind me of how the taxation works? Does it act as a disincentive to dump a large amount or is it the frequency?

MW: Any amount really. So the way it was introduced was to encourage local authorities, that's who it was aimed at, that's who pays it, to divert more of their waste stream. It came in at £7 a tonne during the Conservative era. I can't remember what it was, forgotten which Chancellor of the Exchequer introduced it, but was it £7 a tonne and it gradually went up a bit and then it got on the escalators so it was really going up a lot. Then it went up to £80, it was going up £80 a tonne. We're not going to know what happens after this year, because this was supposed to be the final big increase to £80 a tonne. The feeling is it will probably go up by the rate of inflation now, so it will be a much lower rate, but it will still go up so it keeps pace with, so it maintains its value if you like. So for every tonne of waste you take to a landfill site it goes over the weigh bridge, they've all got weigh bridges now because it's a tonnage based thing. Every time you take landfill, you pay that tax on it. It's recharged from the provider of the site back

through Customs and Excise, because it's a huge sum of money, they watch it very carefully. There are still two rates of tax, lower and upper rate. The upper rate is the biodegradable stuff so real waste, household waste, commercial waste. Anything that's got a biodegradable fraction in it is lower rate, which I think hardly anybody uses anymore because they try and divert it away from that. That's for inert material, rubble, things like that, that's £2.50 a tonne. It hasn't gone up for a long while, but it's become a bit academic really.

LF: Looking to the future now... So Mick, looking back at your career, and you've had a very long and very fruitful one, is there anything you'd have done differently?

MW: Probably become an Officer sooner than I did. I was probably quite good at it, if I say so myself [laughs] and should have probably done that quicker, but I was trying to pursue other things, including a career in politics.

LF: Tell me a bit about that.

MW: I stood as a prospective parliamentary candidate in Luton North in the 1987 general election but I could have done it before then if I'd been prepared to move to another constituency, I think I probably could have because I was so involved with the Union. I think they were pretty keen to try and get people who were as working class as I was to go for it, and they were talking about places like Birmingham to do it. But anyway, I was a County Councillor for eight years on Bedfordshire County Council, 1981-1989, which didn't do my knowledge of waste management any harm because obviously I was Chair of the Environmental Services Committee for about six years out of the eight. But then, once I'd left that I decided I was going to become an Officer, and that's when it happened in 1990 which was probably a bit more of a coincidence with things that were going on at the time. Yes, I probably should have just gone a bit earlier with that. Apart from that, I don't know what I would have done differently.

LF: What were the best times and what were the worst times in the industry for you?

MW: The best times were when we were putting schemes in, and really seeing an improvement in waste diversion performance and you know doing something and actually getting it done. There is a fantastic amount of built-in inertia in local authorities, and actually to be able to overcome that and get them to do something and carry on with it, and see it through and see some good results from it, has been very gratifying. That must have been about the best and probably now, from what my colleagues say, is probably about the worst. They're really officiating over a series of huge reductions in both the scope and ability of local authorities to deal with all the issues they've got to deal with. That must be very bad, and I'm probably very fortunate that I got out just before that happened.

LF: And looking forward, looking globally at the whole development of the industry over the next 10 to 20 years, 50 years even, given the predicted massive increase in population, how do you think, what shape do you think things might take?

MW: Treatment has got to be the way forward, whether it's the energy-from-waste facilities we've got at the moment, or to go perhaps down the way the Germans have gone and actually have waste-fired power stations, places that are burning two million tonnes of waste a year, you know, in order to overcome their energy problems. As much as anything else, to generate gas and electricity from that might be the way. But I don't know, there's got to be, I suppose you've got to get much more public acceptance about the issues: the way waste has been managed in the past is not going to be the way it's managed in the future. It's going to be much more of the step change we've seen from just 'truck and dump' to recycling and treating energy waste as a resource. There's going to have to be more step changes along the way, and probably bigger ones.

LF: So what do you think the public needs to begin to understand, and how would you get those messages over?

MW: I don't know, that's the eternal question, isn't it? Well, I think you've got to try and make them see that what they throw out is their responsibility, and dealing with the downstream effects of that is part of modern life and it's not nice when you're a throwaway society. They talk about don't they? I think we started to make inroads in that, but it's quite clear that there are still a lot of people who think along those lines, that you just chuck it in the bin and it's gone and that's it, and that's the end of it. You know, I think it's tragic really to see places like Primark and places like that where they buy clothes and just throw them away, actually throw them in the bin. They don't even recycle them or take them down the charity shop. It's just an attitude that's got to be changed.

LF: What messages would you want to give to the commercial sector, to the retail sector?

MW: Yes, the retail sector in this country, and it's relationship between them and waste managers, is underdeveloped, I think that would be something of an understatement. Yeah, they've got to take responsibility, and I think that was an act of cowardice on the part of the Government when they didn't insist the likes of Sainsbury's, Tesco, Asda, actually took some responsibility for the household waste that they generate. That could have been the moment to push it, but they didn't. They backed off, I suppose under pressure from the retail sector that is extremely powerful. But if you look at other countries, again Germany, and Austria, the local recycling schemes, a lot of them are financed at least partially by contributions from the supermarkets, and that's never happened in this country. So I suppose that's a step change in culture and attitude that needs to happen.

LF: They make no contribution to recycling their own debris?

MW: I think they do for their own, but I mean it's not their own that's the issue, it's partly the issue, yes.

LF: I meant materials generated.

MW: But the stuff they push out through their tills to their customers, no, that's gone, it's their part of the throwaway society. They don't take any responsibility for that at all. That's something that's quite galling.

LF: One of the things you're doing now that you're retired is writing a history of waste in Luton. Tell me about that.

MW: Well that started off really from my interest in family history / local history / social history, which I've always had a strong interest in. I did look around to see if anybody had written a history of waste in Luton, and I don't suppose I was too surprised to find out the answer was absolutely none whatsoever. There are local histories of Luton, and some quite well known ones as well, by well-known people, but they don't really write about waste. It's probably too workaday for them. I thought that was a gap I could plug, and I've worked for the Council for 35 years in various jobs in waste management, so I've lived through a lot of it, and there are quite fundamental changes so that's what I decided to do.

It started off just me writing about my own experiences and then consulting the waste historians, which surprised me how many of them there are [laughs]. They said, 'No, no, no, you've got to start at the beginning: When did the waste thing start to change in Luton?' I found out it was really when Luton established a local public health board in 1850, and the links then between public health and waste management couldn't have been clearer. It was on the back of the terrible cholera epidemics, typhoid epidemics that took place in Luton. I think it was four waves of cholera epidemics in Luton. Reading about the social conditions that people lived in, it's not surprising, it's really terrible, awful. Certainly the public health board had an impact, but of course the big impact then came when Luton became a Corporation Borough Council in 1876 and really started to make a lot of changes to the way it operated, both its street cleansing and refuse collection activities. Either of those dates you could pick out as the date it started from, but that means that the history is a lot longer than I thought it was. So I've had to do all the stuff that was before my time, pre-1975, so it's all had to be academic research really. There was

very little record of living memory as well, very few people around who remember anything of that, although, again, I can call on my memories of people who were working when I started, who could remember that or knew the people who were working when it was horse and carts that used to go out on the refuse. Some things have come forward as a result of that as well, and a lot of information, and I've got a quite healthy archive on it all now, yes.

LF: When do you think you'll finish it?

MW: Oh, the eternal question. I was hoping to get it finished by the end of this year, but I don't know. I keep going back to it and adding something else, or finding something else out. There are still a few gaps there that need to be filled, but I'm gradually getting there. The way I'm intending to publish it is online, that's the way most people seem to print these things now. I've been offered assistance from Luton library reference service to help me do it. I must admit, some of the technical challenges can be quite daunting for somebody with my low ICT [information and communication technology] skills. There are a lot of photos to put in it, a lot of articles from newspapers and so on, and so I'm probably going to need some assistance to do that, but I imagine doing it in about five sections. That's the way people seem to do it, so go through each history section chronologically, and then my own contribution from my career.

LF: Well, I shall look forward to reading that, so you need to finish it. I think you'll have a lot of people queuing up to read it.

MW: I'm certainly getting a lot of nagging about 'When am I going to finish it?', so the pressure's on now.

LF: Mick, it's been a real pleasure talking to you. Thank you very much indeed.

MW: Thank you.

[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. Finn L (intvr); Jones E M, Tansey E M (eds) (2016) *Sharp, Ernie: transcript of an audio interview (30-May- and 25-Jun-2014)*. History of Modern Biomedicine Interviews (Digital Collection), item e2016124. London: Queen Mary University of London.
6. 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.