



PhD Pioneers: The Living Experiences of The Open University's First PhD Graduates

Oral History interview transcript

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Date of interview: **25/03/2021**

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This is Liz Currie, visiting researcher for The Open University on 25th March 2021 recording an interview for the project, Looking Back the First Open University PhDs project. And Stephen if you could introduce yourself as well, please?

OK. My name is Stephen Potter. I'm the Emeritus Professor of Transport Strategy at The Open University. I work in the STEM Faculty but that's a lot of technical areas put together. But basically I work in what was the technology part of the STEM Faculty or still is the technology part. And I work in a research group called Future Urban Environments. I retired from the OU a number of years ago and I seem to be doing quite a lot of work with it at the moment. I've spent most of my academic career working with The Open University in a whole variety of areas of transport, energy and environment studies. And also for a good many years I had research training responsibilities for our PhD students. So I ran a face-to-face PhD programme for our full time PhD students and I edited up a book called Doing Postgraduate Research, which was made available for our part-time students as well as our full-time PhD students.

So I'm a graduate from The Open University itself. I obtained my PhD in 1977 and in the end wheedled my way onto the staff and through a variety of soft money with projects eventually clawed my way onto the full-time staff and I'm still knocking around Walton Hall today.

That was fantastic, thank you very much. So we're going to go on to the questions for the interview if that's OK. So remember it starts off with a little bit of background about your childhood and your education prior to university. So can you tell me a little bit about the area you were born?

Ah I was born in Southgate in North London. I was born and brought up on a big council estate. My background, actually it's very working class, my mum was a dinner lady at a local teacher training college which later became part of Middlesex University, that was at Trent Park. My dad was a builder and decorator's mate. I went to local schools. Perhaps interestingly I failed the 11

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plus, so I went to a secondary modern school which didn't have a particularly strong academic reputation but I was a later developer and succeeded in getting A-levels there. And much to the headmaster's amazement I was not only one of the rare pupils that made it to university, but I succeeded in being accepted for University College London for an economics and geography degree. I bust a gut to get the A-levels necessary, they did actually ask for quite tough grades from me, so I went to UCL.

So my background is actually very OU student type. I worked my way through the conventional system and in a way academically fought my way up into university. But actually my background is very OU. The sort of background which, I was the first person ever in my family to go to university, I think I was the first person to stay at school beyond the minimum leaving age, I didn't actually leave school at 15, which I could have done. So that was my background from a council estate in North London. University was a real transformation for me. I got to meet people from so many different sorts of backgrounds. It was a real eye opener. And it was, when I left UCL I originally didn't have any intention to carry on as an academic, I had developed a great interest in energy studies and I applied for a variety of jobs in the oil industry.

I'd developed an interest in transport so I applied for jobs with London Transport among others. And I didn't get any of those jobs and then I just happened to notice this advert for this weird newly founded university up in Milton Keynes. Which they wanted somebody to look at new towns, I had an interest in urban studies from my geography, they wanted somebody who was interested in energy studies as well, it sort of fitted my interests. I'd done a little bit of research assistant work with some of my tutors at UCL. I developed an interest in research and hadn't really thought of taking it forward professionally. So I thought OK let's give it a go. So I threw this application in just before I was taking my finals. It was the old days when they did have finals. You had all these big exams at the end of a degree course, so it wasn't a course unit system like we have at the OU. And sent off the application and more or less forgot all about it for about two or three months, until eventually I got a letter from the research degrees officer at the OU offering me an interview. So up to Milton Keynes I

came. So that's basically my background and how I ended up turning up for a PhD interview at the OU.

Just stepping back a bit, how did your family react to you going to university?

They were very supportive. Mum and dad were great in that respect. I also, my older sister who was 18 years older than me was also another one who had actually effectively beaten the system. She had actually become a company director by this point, which was really unusual for a woman in the 1960s/70s, quite exceptional. And she'd done it in the rag trade. Working her way from the shop floor upwards, being spotted and headhunted and she ended up being head of promotions for News International which happened a little while later on. So in a way I had a role model in my sister of how you could actually rise from your North London council house background. It was a time when those sort of barriers were being broken down. And although there weren't many kids from my sort of background at university, it wasn't actually too much of a problem.

You've got to remember also UCL had a culture of its own which was very OU like. It was the first university established in the 19th century which accepted people who were not baptised members of the Church of England, were not from the usual upper class background. They had a social policy of inclusion. Which actually I wasn't that aware of but I think actually influenced me because they did recruit and continue to do so, they have this mission there, people from a wide variety of backgrounds, so there's people from a wide ethnic and international background that were available there, rather than the monoculture that you might have got at Oxford or Cambridge. So I'm actually quite glad that I never even made an attempt at Oxford or Cambridge. That was totally out. But also probably other universities, some of the traditional, traditional ones wouldn't have prepared me quite so well for the OU as say UCL did. And I kept up my links with UCL and still do. I became an external examiner at UCL just before I retired, so it was great to be back at the old place again and building up contacts.

It's amazing, so thank you for that. So we talked about your family and your amazing sister. We've already talked about what you studied at your undergraduate level and why. Why did you decide to go and do an undergraduate degree rather than go out to work?

I think it was when I was at school I found that by the time I was 15 and 16 and taking my O-levels, I found that actually I was quite good at academic stuff; whereas I was not that good at many other things from a secondary school background. I was total rubbish at sports. You know, secondary modern schools tried to teach you to do technical drawing, woodwork, metalwork, to be prepared for working in light industry in North London, that was the sort of thing and I wasn't any good at any of that. So I just followed what I was good at. Which was actually, I ended up being quite good at academic stuff and the headmaster was really delightful at the thought he had a prospective candidate for university and supported me in that respect. So I had a very interesting relationship with him, which we can go through on another time. So I got drawn towards the academic and enjoyed the idea of going to university. So I did and that was basically it and that set me on the path that eventually resulted in me turning up at Walton Hall in summer '74 for an interview for a PhD studentship.

I'm quite interesting in what you said about your relationship with your headmaster, was it because he wanted you to do things differently academically or was it...?

I actually didn't like him very much, I thought he was rather pretentious, and so I quite enjoyed doing things that slightly embarrassed him. I was a bit of a character at school and I recently met up with one of my really good school mates who I'd got in touch with again through Facebook after us being separated for 40 years. And we're reliving some of the tricks that we got up to and we were very, very naughty boys indeed. Which incidentally I think prepared me very well for the early and extremely informal years of the OU when I joined it. I carried on being a little bit out of the box then and I think that's

partially why I found myself suited to the university and the university was suited to me.

Thank you for that. So, and then you did talk about why you decided to do a PhD which is great, thank you. And we have also I guess talked about what appealed to you to study at The Open University, but I guess what I would like to get onto also is what are your most enduring memories about studying at The Open University? So, we've talking about your interview, but not much about your interview if you want to do that a bit long.

Yes, that's exactly what I was going to do, let's start with the interview, which is all about the atmosphere of the OU at that time. One nerdy thing about me is I've kept a diary since the age of eight, and I still keep it going now, so we're into 50-odd years of diary keeping, no a bit more than that, anyway. But let me quote you from my diary of the summer of 1974. I said, three people interviewed me, now they were Daphne Hudson, Peter Cresswell and later Ray Thomas who was Head of the New Town Study Unit and that was the research group I was going to join. And I said the atmosphere was hurried and near chaotic, I fitted in perfectly and enjoyed the matter very much. We talked for a very good while. I mentioned my interest in energy and was surprised to find that would fit in well with any research I may do - and they had a good letter from Michael Stewart there. Michael Stewart was my Economics tutor for whom I'd done some research assistant work over the previous summer. And then I say after an hour or so a chap called Rob Redfern took me around the library and talked about accommodation. I then noted in my diary, I returned to find they wanted me, the Head of the Study Unit - that was Ray Thomas - then saw me and I then had a chat with my girlfriend who'd joined me at the time. I had just got engaged, it was a mad, mad melee that was occurring at the time, we were just on the way to tell her parents in Stafford that we'd got engaged, that all happened at the same time. But we talked together and agreed to do that. I later discovered that Ray Thomas having arranged this interview for his potential student had forgotten all about it and he'd gone off for his lunchtime jog leaving Daphne and Peter in the office and I turned up, they were hoping

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Ray would return at any moment, he didn't, so we started chatting. After an hour or so I realised that had been the interview. So they sent me off to have a look around the university. The library incidentally was in the old Geoffrey Crowther Building at that time and that's the bit that's been totally demolished now. Because the Jennie Lee Library hadn't yet opened, so you're in pretty early years of the university. So Ray eventually turned up, Daphne and Peter, I don't know the details of it, but told him what had happened, so basically when I returned they'd convinced Ray to offer me the studentship.

So that's how it happened. Don't you just love the interview process that existed at that time, there's no way we'd do it now. But it worked, it worked, they had judged that I was suitable for the OU. And actually being suitable for the OU was actually quite important because what the place was like at that time. There weren't many PhD students around. There wasn't a big PhD student community. They needed people who could actually fit in to what was quite a frenzied atmosphere, be pretty self-motivated and be able to keep going with limited support. Not that that was unusual for that time. I do remember talking to Dave Elliott another professor in technology a few years ago. He did his PhD at Imperial College. He's about 10, 15 years older than me, so it's generation or so earlier on, but not that far off from when I started. And he said that he met his supervisor three times in the whole of his PhD. The first day when he turned up and was shown where the lab was; one day in the middle saying how are you getting on, all right, good, carry on; and then at the end when he sat his viva. And that was the sort of, you've got to remember actually the level of supervisory support I had at that time was probably about par for what you get at any university anyway. It's just that the OU was this unusual animal that was still finding its legs when I joined it.

That's great, thank you. So it sounds like a very interesting and as you said frenetic interview and gave you a bit of a taste for what the OU was going to be like to study in, I guess. Was that fulfilled as you started studying, did that impression, was that right, that first impression?

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I think that impression was right, because I did find I did fit in there. But it wasn't easy to start with. Getting settled down in the OU, finding somewhere to live for a start was extremely difficult. You've got to remember this was a time when Milton Keynes was only starting to be built. There wasn't much of Milton Keynes there. What you'd got were a load of villages around the OU. The OU was a very isolated campus. It wasn't even on mains sewage. We had our own sewage works at Milton Keynes, discharging into the river just below the campus. The OU ran a whole load of contract bus services round the area because there was virtually no public transport. And finding somewhere to live was basically bed and breakfast places for students. There was an advantage that you could put your name on a housing list with a development corporation and eventually I did get a house that way almost a year later. But I ended up sharing a house in Newport Pagnell with another PhD student, Alan Stokes who was a PhD student in IT. And Alan and I shared a house until the following summer when the development corporation house came through and I got married. So that actually was the most disturbing element of it.

As to the OU itself, it was barely five years old when I joined it. Teaching had only started in '71 so the OU had only been teaching for three years, the initial tranche of courses were there. But what I was was, I actually represented something that was an important part of Walter Perry's and Jennie Lee's vision for the OU. The idea was that the OU would not just be a mass teaching institution. It would actually be a fully rounded university. That meant there would have to be a real research presence and it would have to have a global influence as a whole. Now Walter Perry, Jennie Lee and the team around Walter were looking towards that, but initially all the effort had to be on getting the teaching side going. So there were a few senior academics that had really pushed the research side from the beginning, up among those really must be Steven Rose who actually had a group of PhD students right from the beginning when he was appointed. So when I turned up there there were I think only about, you could probably sort out the numbers, but I think there were only 20, 25 PhD students at most on campus. And most of those were in biology and in earth sciences. They were the two areas that got going. I was the first PhD student in social sciences, the first full-time one. There was another one who

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was a part-timer who joined just before me. I got the first PhD in social sciences. There were no others. Alan was very alone in IT there weren't many knocking around there.

You turn up, there were no induction days or anything like that, you just were shown your desk and you got working, so I had to be very self-motivated. But in actual fact the research training and the guidance I got within the OU worked very well. I was put in touch with research groups across the university in any that might be relevant and the most important one for my early development was over in technology, was the Energy Research Group which had been founded by Peter Chapman. And he had a small group of research students there and I got meeting up with them. But, in terms of research, Ray Thomas and the others largely put me in touch with people outside of the OU and I actually made some really useful networks with a number of people who ended up being mentors of me.

Ray Thomas had actually come from an applied research background. So, rather than an academic research background he'd worked in research for London County Council. He later worked for the policy research organisation called Political and Economic Planning which later became the Policy Studies Institute in London. And he had a colleague there called Mayer Hillman and Mayer ended up being effectively an external mentor of mine and Ray had this great idea of getting me to work with Mayer to jointly write a conference paper and to jointly write a book chapter, develop that into a book chapter. And it was very applied. It was from somebody from an essentially non-academic research background, an applied research, social research background, so there was an interesting tension there between the academic and the applied side. But it was also some tensions which perhaps reminded me of the relationship I had with my headmaster.

Mayer was one of these people who was constantly highly critical of policymakers and politicians. He adopted an incredibly assertive campaigning stance rather than an academic one. And part of, it was quite good working with him because it actually got me to understand what the academic stance was as

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opposed to the semi-political campaigning stance that was Mayer. He was very aggressive in his papers and his presentations which tended to put people's backs up, but also he tended to have rather a thin skin to any criticism of himself. So I had to go along this very narrow path of dealing with an incredibly constructive character, I've got to be careful about this, because Mayer is still alive and I think he's aged 89 now and if he hears this he'll be getting a go at me. But I loved Mayer, I really respected the work and I really thought it was a brilliant idea that Ray lined up this external mentor me. So, rather than an internal research training programme, I ended up having a quite informal, throw him in on the deep end and see what he does sort of work. Which actually suited me very well indeed and I worked with Mayer, we produced our conference paper and everything, and we continued working together for many years, though I must admit the whole process was quite stressful and I never wrote a joint paper with Mayer again, but yeah our paths diverged a bit thereafter, we bumped into each other now and then. But that sort of research training was really great.

You've got to remember that the OU at this time was still very much finding its feet. And when you look at the things that are written up of the OU, the OU in the '70s, it tends to concentrate an awful lot on the great pioneers like Walter Perry, Chris Christodoulou and so forth. And of course they were utterly vital for the high level politicking that needs to be doing at the time, remember this was, the OU had only just succeeded in not being killed off when Edward Heath's government came in. Walter Perry did brilliant work with Margaret Thatcher getting her on board so that when she became Prime Minister she did actually strongly support the OU and there were many other institutions that she certainly didn't support at that time. Give the OU had such a socialist ideology background that perhaps was an incredible feat. But of course the people that I got linked with at my lowly level were more the everyday people working in the faculties, working in the administration and there were some real characters in there and some really exciting people.

One of the things I noted in my diary was I mentioned our Dutch Resistance typist Betty. Now this was one of the secretaries in the group that supported our

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research group. Now Betty was this little white haired lady who was in her early 50s and you would have thought butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. But she came from the Netherlands, came from the town of [unclear 0:29:18] near the German border and was a teenager when the Germans occupied the Netherlands in the Second World War and she became a member of the Dutch Resistance. She had some incredible stories to tell. A lot of them about the appalling hardship that the Dutch faced, particularly towards the end of the war, the starvation and so forth, but there was one story she particularly told me that stuck in my mind which was about the family's piano. I'm a musician as well, I play violin, I sing and that was part of the social life at the OU that I entered into, so I was aware that the upper notes of a piano have two or three strings each, but by the end of the war the family piano in the Netherlands only had one string on the upper notes of the piano. The others had all been removed to garrotte German soldiers and guards on a whole variety of Resistance missions including those in which Betty served. Grey haired little lady she may have been, but nobody messed about with Betty. She was one of those formidable ladies.

And the OU was full of those sort of characters. I got to know a number of other people through, now of course you got treated effectively like you were a member of staff rather than a student, so although there weren't student societies they were lots of OU club societies which I joined, chamber music club, the Christian forum and all sorts of bits and pieces, the film club was great at that time, I thoroughly enjoyed joining in the film club. And so I got to know all these number of people. I got to know the first OU archivist, Peter Thornton-Pett who told me an awful lot about the history and the background of the OU. I got to know a lot of the 69ers, there was Freddie Croix who ran reprographics and the printing service, Des Statham, Head of Purchasing. I also got to know Professor Russ Stannard on the academic side who was an absolute champion in physics research and did some world recognised work on charm I believe if I remember correctly, the charm particle. Russ is still around living in Leighton Buzzard, he's quite elderly now.

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So I got to know quite a lot of these everyday people and became involved with the normal social life of the university, which was really good, and the mixture of people you got to know it got me out of the student community. If I'd been at a conventional university I probably would have joined in all the student societies again, because when I was at UCL we had postgrad members of the student societies, but here it got me to mix with a much wider range of people in terms of age, in terms of experience, in terms of background. And that actually was something the OU did that a conventional university wouldn't. So a combination of that and the way in which Ray got me mentored with key people outside the university I think actually gave me a really good research training experience and also got me more into how the OU worked, how it related to people who were its students in ordinary life and how I could actually find a place to work within it. So it was a far more informal mechanism and far more ad hoc, but it actually suited me, it suited my character and I got to know an awful lot about the university through that.

And how did you, were you married at the time?

I got married about halfway through my PhD in the summer 1975.

And how did things socially fit in around your wife and you?

Well that fitted in quite well because Jenny commuted down to London, but we built up a social network within Milton Keynes, a lot of them linked into the friends at the OU, we started to build our own life. There's a whole different story there, we were, you know, I was a PhD pioneer within the OU and my wife and I were pioneers in the new developments in Milton Keynes. We were some of the first residents of the Netherfield Housing Estate and we helped establish, you know, we started making contacts there, started being involved with the social and community life locally. I started playing in the local orchestra, started getting involved in the music scene and we both did that. So we were both, we ended up being pioneers in the community as well as myself being a pioneer at The Open University, so the two actually ran in parallel with each other.

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It's funny, I was talking to my parents a little while afterwards because they moved to the council estate in Southgate in the late 1930s and that was when that bit of suburban London was first being built up. And so it was a sort of parallel situation, that it was a new urban area, with very, very few facilities to start with and they went into, my brother and two sisters are much older than me, so they went in with a young family and they were pioneers there in North London and I was a pioneer in the development of Milton Keynes. It's remarkable to see the way the place has built up and developed while I've been there. So yeah so that all worked quite well.

Thank you very much, very interesting parallel actually.

Yeah.

So you've talked about quite a lot of the important relationships that you developed during your studies, is there anyone else that you want to mention?

It's not so much people; it's still about the experiences or the way in which the research developed within the university. The New Town Study Unit was quite critical of Milton Keynes Development Corporation, and there was an energy crisis, 1975 energy crisis review that the Development Corporation undertook and they wanted academic input. But they didn't go to the New Town Study Unit because they wanted somebody who was more complacent I think. So they went to the energy research group and Peter Chapman. And Steve Cousins who was a researcher at the time there, later went on to be a professor at Cranfield University, and Steve and I ended up putting together an input for the Development Corporation's review. So that was quite fascinating. I used some of the techniques I did from school for circumventing the headmaster. I used that on the Development Corporation, got in on the review, even though the Development Corporation were trying to exclude the New Town Study Unit. So it was quite fascinating stuff that.

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We also had a period when not only The Open University was fascinating for international visitors, but we had an awful lot of international visitors who came to us at The Open University because they wanted an independent view of the development of Milton Keynes, rather than the standard PR presentation that they got from the Development Corporation. And so there were loads of people, groups of students and researchers from United States, Chile, India, Australia, Hong Kong, all around that, but there was even a Dutch, Belgian TV crew who came along at one point. Actually Betty was incredibly useful in that, our secretary, she spoke six languages and Flemish happened to be one of them and it was a Flemish TV crew, so she acted as our interpreter. Good grief at the time it was, some people can stumble along with appalling French and there you had a secretary, typist who spoke six languages. So anyway, so that happened.

I was also introduced to OU coursework, now of course that was all going on at a rate at the time, but one of the other things that I did was I was asked to be an informal critical reader of some of the units that were being written at the time, a statistical sources course was being produced by Ray and Neil [unclear 0:39:01] and his colleagues in social sciences. So at the OU you got experiences of academic writing and production that actually was extremely useful and I got to learn all about this. Now remember we're in pre-word processor time, we're into hot print, we're into typing up drafts, you're into Tippex and correcting with literal cut and paste, you know, this was an era where you had to learn those sort of skills. You had to learn dictating skills, these are the things you just don't do these days, but as a student you learnt all those bits and pieces as well. And I ended up editing, we ran some conferences and seminars and I ended up editing some of those.

I was spotted by the editor of the House Journal Open House who actually got me to write some articles for Open House. I did a few articles for external journals. Most of them non-academic, I may add, it was quite interesting. I even ended up being a cartoonist, something I've never followed up since. I did several cartoons for Open House. I notice in my diary in I think it was March 1976 that Harold Wilson had resigned and I then saw in the following edition of

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Open House I produced a cartoon of an OU person reading the newspaper, Wilson Resigns and muttering, thank goodness now we can name something after him. And interestingly, well OK it was a few years later but we did get the Harold Wilson Buildings, I was anticipating that there.

So I hope it gives you some sort of feel for the melee that was going on there and the different sorts of experiences that I was getting as a PhD student, it was really interesting. About halfway through my studentship the Social Sciences Research Council had a visit to the OU and I think this was meant to be some sort of assessment visit to sort out how suitable the OU was for receiving their funded research students. I was the one and only SSRC research funded research student there and of course you also applied to that Research Council for big research grants and the like. And they found it very difficult to understand how I was actually enjoying and appreciating and developing without the formal structures they were expecting to be there. They didn't even really quite understand how the OU worked. They didn't understand it's mission, the sheer incomprehension of the idea that we didn't have any entrance qualifications, that was just, let alone the distance teaching side of stuff and all the television and radio work. They actually found it very hard. And I think the OU really, really struggled with the Research Councils for a good many years after that in '74, '75, '76 the OU was a weird beast as it was and in research terms for the Research Councils it was just totally off their comprehension. And I don't think we did get anymore SSRC research studentships for many, many years after mine, I think they just found it didn't fit their nice neat boxes and that was a big problem for the OU.

Yeah, I can see that it would have been absolutely. This might be leaping ahead too quickly so we can always go back if it misses out stuff you wanted to say. Did you go to your graduation?

Oh yes I did, yes, let's just tell you about that a bit. Let's just jump a bit. Firstly of course I had a certain viva examination, so perhaps let's cover that.

Let's do that first.

Yes, let's do that first. Now my SSRC studentship was for an initial two years and it could have been extended into a third year, but Ray Thomas was looking around for research money and he got in touch with the Nuffield Foundation. Now the Nuffield Foundation were more likely to provide the money for operational research rather than the existing Research Council. So he actually started opening discussions with them while I was almost halfway through my PhD and he succeeded in getting a grant out of them. So I actually only did two years of my PhD studentship or two years funded and then another three or four months thereafter. And so I rather rapidly wrote up my PhD at the end of 1976 and submitted it at the beginning of 1977. It took a while for my viva to be arranged and I don't know for sure, but I think the decision was taken that as I was the first social sciences PhD they've got to give me a hard time. So instead of the usual research panel of one external and one internal examiner I had two high flying external examiners and one internal. So I had a panel of three.

They were Peter Hall, Professor Peter Hall from University College London, later Sir Peter Hall who was an extremely internationally renowned urban scientist and William Houghton-Evans who I think was from Cambridge and had just published a major book on Planning Cities and then Ray Thomas my supervisor was actually my internal examiner as well, at that time it was acceptable for the supervisor also to be examiner, that was stopped fairly soon after that I may add. My viva was in May '77, which, bit of a problem, I'd submitted in January and it was a long time afterwards and in the meantime I'd got working on this Nuffield Foundation project which was entirely unrelated to my PhD. There was no mock viva or any preparation and all I did was read through my PhD the morning of my viva and that was it.

Again I'll quote from my diary at the time, Bill Horton-Evans arrived at 12 o'clock and Ray and I met Peter Hall at the private dining room, that's in the Refectory. One thing at least, we got a good meal out of this, that's what I wrote. Then to the viva proper, firstly my three examiners discussed things among themselves and I got a one and a half hour discussion, a strong discussion too. The main point came out was presentation, there are a number of minor errors that I had

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missed so I'll need to correct them plus some grammar. Still they recommended that I get the PhD once these are put right, it was exhausting and I came away very tired. Do you know, my mind's a real blank on the whole of that and when I talk to my own PhD students they say exactly the same, their mind is often a blank because they're so concentrating on their viva. But the thing that utterly amazes me that I wrote in my diary that I actually did those corrections the next day and two days later I was actually taking the retyped PhD off to be bound at the printers.

A good many years later I had a research meeting with Peter Hall in London and I mentioned to him being my examiner, and he remembered it much better than I did actually, and he said I saw it as my job to give you a hard time. Yeah he did do that, he did give me a hard time, but I think it was worthwhile. I didn't feel in any way that it had been an easy ride going through the OU system and I'm glad that they set up a tough viva for me with tough examiners. Because one of the things the OU wanted to prove at that time was it had the same standards as anywhere else for its research students, a PhD at the OU could stand proud next to a PhD from any other university in this country. That was important to do in those early years, extremely important to do because the OU was finding it hard to get itself recognised both at undergraduate, but it was certainly finding it harder to get itself recognised as a serious research university. And so as a PhD student I needed to go through the mill as much as a PhD student anywhere else. Quite how I got there was quite distinctive, quite distinctive and very different in the OU because of what the OU is. The experience was quite different and that experience probably would suit all types of PhD students, but it certainly suited me and I came away at the end of that realising that actually the OU was somewhere that I'd, yeah this really was going to be the place for me.

The degree ceremony came a little bit later on. Oh something that's actually worthwhile mentioning is that just a few days after my viva my wife and I, Jenny and I, we went to the final performance of the Ballad of Walton Hall that was held in the OU lecture theatre. This was an incredible event. It was a sort of folk opera. It was a musical celebration of the OU story and I think it was almost a

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celebration that the OU had actually lasted that long, it was eight years old, it had survived the traumas of the early years, it had now become established as a university in the British system. And it was extremely good. But one thing that really hit me was that there was one piece written there called the Vice Chancellor's Song which was a pseudo Gilbert and Sullivan piece, which I later discovered Peggy Aprahamian who wrote the words went to see Walter Perry and asked him for some material that she could weave into the lyrics of a song to be sung. But she came away with Walter having convinced her that he needed to sing himself in the opera and he did. He got an encore I noted in my diary singing the Vice Chancellor's Song and I wrote in my diary. That must be almost unique the vice chancellor himself playing himself in an opera celebrating The Open University. And I'll come back to that in a little while because that actually was something that had a link through to a more recent experience of mine.

I'd got my degree too late to go to a 1977 degree ceremony so I went to the summer '78 ceremony at Alexandra Palace where the first OU degree ceremony had been held only a few years earlier. I looked at the brochure for that, I've still got it in these bookshelves behind me here. There were only eight PhD students being presented that year and that shows you how small the cohort we had coming through and there were three of us at Ally Pally in June '78. Walter Perry presided over the event and so it was his hand that I shook when I went up onto the rostrum, it was televised and repeated about two or three times at 2am on BBC2, you know the way in went in those days. But it was sufficiently notable that I was one of three PhD students who took part in an open forum programme. This was the magazine programme for OU students that was transmitted I think it was about once a month, so as well as the teaching programmes going out you had Open Forum which was a programme to introduce students to wider issues and wider things going on within the university. And so this programme was devoted to the postgraduate programme and it was me and two other PhD students who were presented at Alexandra Palace and it was a really great programme, we did some extra filming. And that's the first time I did some filming at Alexandra Palace.

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So I can actually claim that I have done real filming at Alexandra Palace right under those boiling hot lights in the tiny studio which they allocated to the university and the lights were literally only about I suppose half a metre above your head, they were so close. My hair's receding I think half of it was burnt off at that interview there. But by that point I'd really come to realise the OU with its great diversity of experiences and actually diversity of opportunities it had was going to be the place for me. So I carried on with that research assistant's work. I moved on to become a temporary lecturer in urban studies. I did some more filming work at Ally Pally as part of that, it was before the BBC production centre was built and opened at Walton Hall. My career at the OU has been quite chequered, I started off in social sciences, I was on soft money, temporary research contracts, the money ran out, I left for a while, went and worked in community transport in London, but then returned to the Technology Faculty, I got drawn back again and eventually clawed my way onto the permanent staff and ended up as a professor in technology which was later incorporated into the larger Stem Faculty.

I've done all sorts of diverse things within the university, focusing quite a lot on research training. I have supervised a good many research students and have thoroughly enjoyed my career at the OU. It has turned out to be as diverse and fascinating place to work for as I suspected it would be. And although it has a lot more formal structures I think the odd element of chaos is still maintained and perhaps I've played a part in maintaining that as well. But let's just finish off with that memory of my PhD studentship and I think it just illustrates the idiosyncrasy, the serendipity let's say of the university, sometimes I stumble over my words. [Silence 0:56:14 to 0:57:42] but guess who ended up being the soloist and singing the Vice Chancellor's Song, it was yours truly, it was me. And now I think about it me singing it was the first time that piece had been performed since I had seen Walter himself sing it and the fact that he had done that had entranced me so much on that night, just a few days after [silence 0:58:13 to 1:00:36].

Well it's really interesting to hear first of all your enthusiasm and still love of the OU which is great, but also some of the things that, not critical of

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the OU, but things that you've said that build a full picture of what it was like to study for your PhD there and thank you for that, that's just fantastic, I really enjoyed that.

END OF INTERVIEW