

HL: This is Helen Lloyd recording the memories of Sheila Bagley on Wednesday 11th February 2015 at the Birmingham Assay Office. Sheila, tell me about your background?

SB: I was actually born in Small Heath right next door to the Birmingham City Football Ground, which I'm a big fan of. Moved to Kingshurst and then to Chelmsley Wood. And there, my first job when I first left school I worked for the Birmingham City Transport Department in their, what was it called? Well, its Insurance Department, we dealt with all the crashes that the buses were involved with. And I went to the Isle of Wight for two seasons I worked away from home, which brought me out of my shell a little bit because I was quite naïve and shy. And then had a variety of different jobs until I went to work for the Traffic, as a Traffic Warden in the city centre, and I worked there for just over three years. And regardless of what people may think it was a lovely job and I thoroughly enjoyed it and, but decided to have a change of job and I started at the Assay Office in 1978.

HL: How did you get a job at the Assay Office?

SB: Well, as a Traffic Warden, I used to work on this area, it was one of my areas that we were, you know, we had to cover, and I used to have to come in to the Assay Office to ask people to remove their illegally parked cars. And I saw the job advertised in the local paper, thought "Well I know where that is, it's just down the road, I'll apply for a job." And I got an interview with Alf Hall, one of the gentlemen that used to be one of the bosses, and he offered me a job as a postal clerk and I accepted and started work on 15th May 1978.

HL: Describe what you had to do?

SB: Oh, the Post Department. It was, at first I thought it was a lovely job because it was so completely different from what I used to be, was used to doing, and I used to work with a lady called Alma. And we were usually very busy in the morning. Obviously when the post came in we used to have to open the post and send it off to the various departments, but then during the day we were fairly quiet, and then around about sort of two o'clock as various jobs came back down to us we used to have to get them posted up. And I can remember on my first day here, we used to have to go through the main entrance to go across to the Post Office that used to be just across the road and I remember walking round to reception, to the

receptionist and realised I knew her, and Evelyn, I knew her from one of my old colleagues at the City Transport Department and it was really nice to see somebody that I knew. But that you, I gradually realised after a while, after a few weeks that although it was really nice in the morning and really good in the afternoon, the bit in between it was very quiet and very boring and I started to get a bit restless, and I was working in a night club in the evening I used to get very tired with nothing to do. But because we weren't allowed to go and help out anywhere else I used to just sit there, and I used to hate that, I just couldn't bear that, I got really fed up. And I was thinking of leaving, even thinking of going back to being a Traffic Warden, see if I could get my old job back. But then a vacancy came up at The Trap, because one of the gentlemen were leaving and I decided to apply for it and, much to my surprise, I got the job, which I was very pleased about.

HL: Before we leave your first job, what kinds of things were coming in in the post and how much?

SB: Basically everything. Literally all jobs from all over the country for hallmarking, mainly it was hallmarking work. And we'd have to book it in into the system and just send it on its way if it was just straightforward hallmarking. Occasionally, it was mainly packets, any sort of just envelopes went straight in to the offices. But if it was a packet but it wasn't really for hallmarking then if it was like for just for an assay or to find a hallmark or even just an accounting [00:05] job we'd just split them up and just book them in to the various departments. And, but the majority of the that we dealt with was really for hallmarking and we just have to book it in, register it in, give it a number, write everything down on sheets and then just send it off to the, basically on to the ground floor first where it was checked to make sure everything matched up, and then they would send it on to the Assay Floor and just carry on from there really. But the majority of the work was mainly hallmark, for hallmarking. Occasionally we'd get a couple of other bits and pieces but it was mainly for hallmarking.

The work used to come in mainly just over the posts, there was no such things as security vans or anything like that in them days. And it was mostly just registered post, or ordinary post, a lot of the work was just ordinary post. So whatever the method it was sent in we had to send everything out registered, so even if it just come in recorded or just ordinary, normal

post it didn't make any difference, everything had to go back registered because once it was hallmarked the value was there because it was a hallmarked item and so we had to send everything back registered.

HL: You mentioned that you weren't allowed to do anything else during the middle of the day, why was that?

SB: That was mainly the union ruling. I don't know whether it was just union or whether it was something to do with the company as well but it had been something that was in place for a long time. And basically you had one job, and you were employed on that job and you weren't allowed to help anywhere else. So if I was sitting there doing nothing... I offered one time to go and do a bit of counting, and that was literally all it was, every single item that came in had to be counted, every single item. And there were some times it used to come in the thousands and it, everything was still counted. And a couple of the times, because once the work had left me, left the Post Department, it went straight to the Booking In side on the, you know, on the ground floor and everything was counted. And sometimes it used to get quite a big backlog and I just wasn't allowed to go and help. And I offered a couple of times but I was told off and I had to go back to the Post Department because I just wasn't allowed to do it. And it used to get me quite annoyed because I could see all the girls rushed off their feet and there was me sitting there, staring into space and I used to hate it.

HL: Tell me about your next job?

SB: Ah, my next job was on the counter, the Booking In Area, and right from the word go I loved it. I worked with Jack Batt and Phil Bennett, Walter left, he was the one I was replacing. And I can, it was three weeks before Christmas and it was a very old, oh really old-fashioned place with, oh, the reason why it was called 'The Trap' was because we used to literally have three trapdoors, wooden, the partition was wooden and there was three wooden trapdoors that you used to have to lift up and put bolts in to hold them up. And I can remember it was, in the winter it was always freezing because the staff also used that entrance and you used to have the clock cards for everybody who was clocking in. And so every time anyone walked in the door, the door opened and it was just cold, there was nothing to protect you at all. And I can remember saying three weeks before Christmas I

walked round there, my first day, and of course, people had started putting up the Christmas decorations and I remember these two blokes, these three fellows had put toilet paper up as Christmas decorations. And I was so disgusted I was made, I made them give me a pound each so I could go and get some Christmas decorations. And it was just great, I loved it right from the word 'go'. I used to get all the customers coming in and we used to have a laugh and a joke with them, and I got to know quite a few of them very well - quite a few of the customers - I saw generations over the years, it was three generations in some of the cases. And I did, I just loved it right from the word 'go'. I loved talking to the customers, I love answering the phones and all this sort of thing. Sorting problems out, [00:10] I just loved it.

HL: What early customers do you remember?

SB: Oh God! Oh, the ones, over, throughout the years who I've seen grow up in particular, Millington, L J Millington, Len and his son Steve Millington, who I got to know quite well. J B Chatterley's, oh, same again Chatterley's. But, oh, there used to be a company called Gallery, Payton Peppers, oh, and one Slackman, oh crumbs there was so many names from years ago. Smith & Pepper. S Hope's, oh, Rossiter's, Greville Rossiter's. Oh crumbs, I'd probably remember loads of them but I can't, it's just trying to think of the definite ones. Mm, W Downing, there's so many. Crumbs I can't, I can't even remember them now, I mean there's that many names it's trying to think of them. Mm, I can't remember them all. [Laughter] Oh Jack and Phil told me quite a few things that used to go on at the Assay Office. I know they used to have table tennis competitions and it got, apparently it used to get really competitive. Down in the old social room they used to have a table tennis, well they used to have it out, I think they used to have it outside in the bit that open before it was all redone and they were in a quite a big league, I think they were even in a league. There used to be darts on down there. Oh all sorts. They used to have football competitions, all sorts of things. I can remember even going to cricket competitions with one of the other, the other assay offices. We used to have cricket and rounders competitions. But I mean that was going on all before I got, I started. Phil used to tell me, I've got to admit, Phil was, used to be in the Navy but I can remember him telling me when he was a child his dad had an allotment and he used to make Phil go with him to the allotments and he used to grow flowers and they used to have to wheel all the flowers back and they used to have to go down somewhere and sell the flowers in the street, bunches of flowers, and he used to hate it. But one of the things I can remember,

he always told me that he hated was the fact that when some, when a man, when a woman is in hospital people take them flowers, when a man's in hospital people don't take them flowers, and I always remembered that, yes I always remembered that.

About eight years after I started there unfortunately, Phil had already had cancer the once and he'd lost one lung and unfortunately the cancer came back and when he was taken seriously ill he was taken into hospital, he was at The Priory in Edgbaston. And I'd always remembered him saying about the flowers and I made a point of taking him a large bunch of flowers to the hospital because I'd remembered what he'd said. Fortunately because of the private health scheme that we had Phil and myself have taken good advantage of the fact of the private health scheme and you would say The Priory is a private hospital and he was really well looked after. I've got to, I have to admit he was well looked after, yes, it was a shame, he was lovely.

HL: Tell me more about being a counter clerk in The Trap?

SB: I really enjoyed being there but it was the same with the original business of being on the post. During the day sometimes things went a little bit quiet, and at that time there was three of us on The Trap. But I think by this time people, the management began to realise that it would be very helpful if people were able to move around a bit. And they asked everybody if they would like to go on to what they then called 'mobility', and, funnily enough, a lot of the staff that had been there for some time didn't want to go on to it, but there were three of us that had started more or less round about the same time together, there was myself, Dave Ellis, Rita, as I say myself, and the three of us decided that we would like to do that because it gave us more scope to do different things. And the idea [00:15] was that you learnt three other jobs apart from your own. Well I already knew one because I'd been a postal clerk and I decided I would like to do the other two as well. And I think I chose examining and counting, I think it was examining and counting. So you did, I think it was either three or six months on each section and it just gave you that little bit more scope to be able to do other things. And, fortunately for the three of us, the first time, they had the first round of redundancies we were not chosen, because we'd all been fairly new people at the Assay Office and we were told that we were being kept on because we knew other jobs and not just one. So we were very, very lucky, and I'm really glad. [Laughter]

HL: What are your memories of the 1980 strike.

SB: Mm, there's some quite funny ones actually because it affected my private life as well. I was one of the, one of the ones that was involved in the sit-in, or the sleep-in. And I can remember food being smuggled in to us through one of the side entrances, through a basket and ropes. I remember sleeping on the benches, I remember that. But it was the actual day we decided to go on strike that I remember, because we all went over to the churchyard over the road, St Paul's, and we had the meeting in the grounds of St Paul's, and that was the day we all went on strike. But it was also the day that I got engaged because my husband, who used to work here then, went up to the trade to get the ring so he had to give like his vote, you know, up front and that night we got engaged. And, as I say, we spent the time, we both of us were in the sit-in, were involved in the sleep-in as well. I at the time I was a member of the union, I hadn't actually joined as a rep but I was a member. In those days it was a closed shop so basically if you worked on the hallmarking side of things you had to be a member of the union. You had no choice, if you wanted a job there you had to join the union. The only ones that were, you know, exempt from that was office staff. So if you were working on the shop floor then you had to be a member, so basically everyone on the marking side of things was a member of the union. But we all agreed, we all agreed with what was going. Because I mean obviously nobody wants to be made redundant but unfortunately the strike didn't resolve anything and redundancies took place anyway.

Most of the time I must admit we didn't see many of the office staff. I'm not a very confrontational person, I don't like any nastiness and I knew a lot of the girls in the office and the other parts of the building and I was friendly with them so I kept well out of that side of thing. But I do know some of the more zealous members got a bit nasty in some ways and said things to them, but I just did not, I did not agree with that, I didn't like that. They had no choice either and I can't blame them for not, you know, for coming in into work. They have their circumstances, I was fighting for my rights though, you know, they had theirs as well so as far as I'm concerned they had their, you know, their own choice, choices to make.

HL: What about your husband-to-be?

SB: My husband-to-be was also a strong union member, he'd also served on the union committee as a rep. He wasn't quite so laid back as myself, he was a bit more zealous. Not, he didn't get involved with any of the nastier side of things. But I can, what I do remember is he got very frustrated because although we were, actually only had the sleep-in, I think, I think it was only about three or four days, we were actually on strike for about three or four weeks, and [00:20] when we weren't actually inside we used to do the picketing outside. And we had various meetings everywhere else, at Sheffield and places like that. And I have to admit in the end because we'd only just got engaged and he wasn't earning any money he decided to leave and go and get another job. So it was during that strike that he actually left the Assay Office and got himself another job.

HL: Why did you go to Sheffield?

SB: It was mainly to try and get support from their union members as well, because I mean all the different assay offices run completely separately from each other. London they, I don't think they had any union, many union members at all. But Sheffield had some and I think that the main thing was to go up to the Sheffield to try and get them to sympathise and perhaps even have a quick walkout or something like that to try and get them to support us. I can't even remember, I don't we were successful. I mean they've got their own ways and obviously. I think they sort of did perhaps a petition or something like that in support. But I think that was the main reason they went to Sheffield, yes. I think that was about it really.

I, although the, I know there was two, there was two different lots of redundancies and I think a lot of the ones that went first were mainly from the Marking Floor and just the odd ones from elsewhere. And I can't really remember a lot of them because I'd only been there about eighteen months or so, two years, and I was still very much getting to know everybody. Because in them days as well you weren't really, unless there was something specific you weren't allowed to go to other floors, so the only time you got to know people mainly was on breaks, so I was still very much getting to know everybody. So I can't really remember a lot of the people that were made redundant unfortunately.

HL: Tell me about the breaks, this is around 1980?

SB: We used to have just one break in the morning and we used to take turns on The Trap so that The Trap was covered in the morning. But we used to have, we used to close for an hour from one o'clock to two o'clock so we all had the same breaks basically. And it was great, we all used to go, everybody used to go down to the social room, not many stayed on in their section. And in them days it was just one, one room. And we just all used to get on really well. There used to be a bar down there of a lunch time, when I first started there was a bar there, and we used to serve drinks of a lunch time because they knew, because everybody got to know I'd worked in a bar of course, I got roped in to be barmaid, one of the barmaids. And we used to have a lot of fun with a lot of things going on. Then they extended it, because there used to be an open section between the two main buildings with, where the newer building where The Trap was above and that, and the older building, which was the older part, you know, where the main entrance was there used to be an open space there and pouring down with rain you used to just get wet so, you know, the men's toilets were at the one end, the ladies' you had to go through to the main entrance in the basement and the ladies' was down there. But then they decided to modernise everything and they completely, they covered it in, put a garage above it and made it a much bigger area so that we could hold much bigger meet... you know, meeting, things going on. Oh, some of the things we used to get up to was absolutely incredible. We used to have Christmas parties, fancy dress, *Stars in Their Eyes*, quizzes, bingo, oh, practically every, at least two or three times a year we used to have parties and various fancy dress things going on, it was great. It was the same, well there again of a lunch time when I first started, unfortunately that was only for the first couple of years or so, we used to have a proper canteen and kitchens on the top floor, and that was great. The food was brilliant and so cheap. We used to have sandwiches for something like [00:25] a couple of quid, no one pound 50p, something like that, and a main meal, proper meal for about a pound or something, and everybody used to go up there because it was such good value. And we used to have such good times, yes.

I can remember in the mornings one of the ladies used to always come round with a trolley with tea and cakes and biscuits on. And she used to go to each floor first thing in the morning and we could all have a cup of tea or coffee at our desks and like sandwiches, little cakes and biscuits and that, it used to be great. And then you used to go upstairs for your morning break and have your sandwich or breakfast, full breakfast and everything. I think, I've got a feeling they even used to come round in the afternoon as well, afternoon tea. And oh it was lovely.

HL: How much work got done?

SB: Daft as it sounds you still worked, because I mean she only just used to pop round, most of the time she knew exactly what you wanted anyway. So you just ordered what you wanted, she'd give it you and you'd just carry on working. I mean you didn't really stop and have a break, you just carried on working and just had a sip of your coffee or tea as you were working, there was no problem. [Laughter]

HL: What did you do after being a counter clerk?

SB: Oh, I was a counter clerk all in all for about fifteen years to, fifteen/twenty years. And gradually things started to change, a lot of, we went through a recession and a lot of the companies in the local trade started to pack up, but there was a lot of the bigger companies sort of amalgamated and new companies started, and so gradually the work, a lot of the bulkier work started to arrive by courier, security vans, and they all, because they wanted a more secure way of bringing the work in rather than just over The Trap they decided to open up the car, they refurbished all the back of the office as well and they had security on the back of the office through the, via the car park and they used to bring the vans in and the bulkier stuff round to the back door. Well because all that work would come in and then go, all that work was booked in what was the new Post Department, which had changed completely by now. And because a lot of the bulkier work was coming in via the back door The Trap started to go quiet. And it was a bit like *déjà vu* because when I was working on the post we used to go quiet during the day, and it turned round that now because a lot of the work was now coming in the back door and going to the Post Section where I was working at The Trap as a counter clerk the work started to slow down during the day, whereas on the post it started to get very, very busy. By this time Phil had died and so I was working on my own mainly as a counter clerk. But by this time everybody on the ground floor was now what they called 'Preparation Operators' and everybody did every, all the same, all the different jobs, everybody learnt every job. And when they refurbished it, everything at The Trap they brought the Progress Department round to The Trap as well, so as all the queries and everything was dealt with at The Trap. And gradually, the same again, with the girls when they were quiet if it was busy on The Trap they'd come and help to, because, you know, they wanted something to do. But

even then after a while it started to get very quiet during the day, and I was back to my old job of just sitting doing nothing during the day because there was three of us working there instead of just one. And it got me, like the same thing started again, and I decided to ask Dave, my gaffer, if it would be alright, if it would be possible to move round on to ground floor as a preparation operator, which had been part of the agreement when I'd been a mobility worker and it went on to everybody being a preparation operator, because they changed the name, part of the agreement was that if I ever wanted to be a preparation operator I was, yes they said I could do. And they agreed and eventually [00:30] I went round on to the ground floor. And we used to have a turn round system where you worked for a month on one job then moved on to another job and then moved on to another job, so it kept your hand in at everything. And one of the jobs was going round to work on The Trap, so although I was round the back working as a preparation operator I still had a turn where I went round to The Trap so I was able to keep in contact with everybody coming in from, you know, over the counter and which I really did like because I knew so many of them. So there was people like A G Green, three generations of them I knew, as I say, Steve and his dad, Steve Millington, Chatterleys, there was so many of them. I'd watch them as children and grow up and they got children of their own.

HL: And what were the other jobs you did as you moved round?

SB: Oh, post. [Laughter] That was one of the main ones because they were really busy by now because of all the work coming in through the back door. It, well it used to come in either via the counter or post. Then it went on to the openings part of the system where the parcels were actually booked in. And from the counter, from The Trap they used to come in and be opened separately. But on the Post they were actually opened on the Post and booked in at the Post so that they were all in different boxes, different coloured boxes so that you knew exactly what was coming in. The Post was grey, The Trap was red, and if they were on special they were yellow at The Trap, green on the Post, so you knew exactly which part they had to come back. Then they went through weighing in. Every parcel, every single parcel that came into the system had to be weighed in and checked. Then it would go through to the, when they were weighed in they were, you had to price everything so you checked through the whole parcel, you would check through the whole parcel to get the weights and prices of everything and to make sure everything was in, you know, exactly what they'd said. And then

once they'd been weighed and priced they were checked again, counted before they went through to the Assay Department. Then they went to the Assay Department, then came down to the Hallmarking Department and then when they came back down to the ground floor they were then weighed in again to make sure that the weights, you know, corresponded. If the weight was out you had to go through everything to make sure everything was checked again to make sure that everything was still there. And then depending on whether it was going to the counter, back to The Trap or whether it was going to the Post. The post you would just send it straight over to the Post Department and then other than that it would go, if it was going to The Trap it would go to the packer, which for many years was good old Rach. Pack, they would pack the parcels and then sent off to... The ones coming back to The Trap were put out to The Trap and had their invoices put on and then put out for collection. The same with the post, they would go on to the Post Department. As soon as the invoices came out they would be packed up and then posted out.

HL: What were the yellow special parcels?

SB: Oh. That was the 24 Hours Special Delivery. If they were brought in before half nine, or if they were booked in on Post in the morning and they wanted them back the next day they would go in special boxes, otherwise it would take... Well the majority of the time it would take about two to three days for the work to go through the system, but if you wanted a fast track sort of a system you would ask for it to be put on special. You had to bring it in before half nine in the morning if it was over the counter, and sometimes if they were lucky it was ready late in the afternoon, otherwise it would be ready before half nine the following day. And the same with the Post Department, if it came in in the morning it would, that would go into a green box and it would be guaranteed to be posted the next day, but very often it was posted on the same day.

HL: Can you talk more about your involvement with the union?

SB: Well, until I started at the Assay Office I'd never been in a union before so I just had no thoughts of being a rep or anything like that. But about five or six [00:35] years after I started they were asking for more, for union reps so I decided to give it a go. And I, I had sort of various times over the years where I would be a rep for three or four years and then I'd want

a bit of a rest for a year or two, but then I nearly always joined again as a rep and did another few years. But for about the last eight to ten years I was a rep continually. Because unfortunately by then the legislation had changed and you had more of a choice whether you wanted to join a union or not, and unfortunately we started to lose members. And of course, nobody wanted the job of being a union rep because they knew how difficult it was because quite a few of them had served over the years and decided they didn't want to do it again. Or they'd moved on to management jobs to tell you the truth, a lot of them went on to management jobs. So I was a continual member, a union rep for about eight to ten years. I was the rep for the ground floor. Tina was a rep for the Marking Floor and she was convenor for a long time. And Diane was rep for the samplers and the Assay Floor.

HL: What did you have to do as a rep?

SB: Basically if anybody had any complaints or if somebody brought something to the committee that we thought the rest of the members ought to know we'd have a meeting and discuss things. Wage negotiations we took, you know, we had to deal with, which was always very difficult. And a few, sometimes if one of the members had a complaint or felt that they were being badly dealt with we had to deal with it, had to meet with the management to try and resolve that, basically any union problems. We tried to have a meeting most weeks with the committee. In the committee we tried, very often we tried to get meetings with the management once a month, that didn't always work, but towards the end we always tried to get it, you know, get a meeting with the management to try and resolve things, but it didn't always work. And basically that was it really, just to try and deal with any problems.

HL: What are your memories of union meetings with the management?

SB: Oh, very mixed. Most of the meetings I had was originally, firstly with Bernard Ward. And he was a really nice man but unfortunately if you didn't really agree with him he used to really take it to heart. And I can't, I can't remember when it was but I know that one particular year we had serious disagreements, serious disagreements and he was so upset and annoyed with us because we just could not get any agreement with him. And when we sort of, I mean obviously then had a meeting with him he had to talk to us, but apart from when we were having an official meeting he wouldn't talk to us. He really, really took it to heart.

That we didn't agree with him, and because we didn't agree with him we had to recommend to the staff to reject his offers or his whatever he came up with because it was nowhere, it was nothing like that what the members wanted. And he got really, really annoyed with us all. It was so strange, so weird.

HL: Any more memories of the Assay Masters?

SB: Yes, the other Assay Master I dealt with, we dealt with was Michael Allchin. And by this time it was mainly just, it was mainly just the three of us, Tina, Diane and myself. And I have to say we had many run-ins with Michael Allchin. He was, well it felt like, I mean I can only say my own opinion. It felt like to us that all he was interested in was the Assay Office and making money for the Assay Office. The actual staff [00:40] you just, you started, you felt like you got the opinion you were just staff and you were just basically a number. Quite harsh I must admit, I had quite a few run-ins with Mr Michael Allchin. But he was very, it was felt by a lot of the members and a lot of the staff that he took away a lot of the things that we had as extras. And in some ways you can understand it because he obviously has got to make sure that the Assay Office makes a profit. But we could see him, we could see that he was spending money on things that would improve the image of the Assay Office but not necessarily improve the standards of the staff. And we felt, a lot of the members felt that he had taken a lot of our extras away from us.

HL: What sort of things?

SB: Oh well, it was under Michael that the health, you know, the health thing went, going and the bonus system disappeared. Split, that was when with Michael the split breaks was introduced. The social side of things seemed to, partly because of the split breaks but just the atmosphere within the place, you weren't encouraged to, you weren't, you were not allowed to go to other departments at all, only certain people were allowed to go to other departments, you had to have permission to go to another floor. So, and because of the split breaks you never saw half the people because if they were on a different break to you, you never saw anybody. So you lost that contact with the other floors and you started to feel that there was very much a 'them' and 'us' with the AnchorCert and SafeGuard companies. Because they had a few little extras, you know, little perks that we didn't have and you always felt that if

anything was going it was the AnchorCert and SafeGuard that were thought of. I suppose a lot of it was because it was, they were new and they were bringing in quite a lot of money and prestige to the company, and you felt that a lot of it, the hallmarking side of things was being forgotten a bit and left out of things, and because of that it felt very much like it was 'them' and 'us'. We were very much the shop floor and they were very much office workers. And that, I think Michael had a lot to do with that as well.

HL: How had it been regarding 'them' and 'us' before?

SB: Well, the Assay, SafeGuard and AnchorCert didn't exist. You know, I mean they were to do with testing stones, marking stones, grading stones, valuations and things like that. Well, none of, we never used to do anything like that so it was very much a new company, it was new companies. And to get up to, I mean there was occasions on the ground floor we had to take something up to there or go and ask them questions, and to get on to the SafeGuard and AnchorCert floors you had to go through a security system. And you had to press a button, they asked you who you were, why you were there and only then were you allowed in. But they were allowed to come down on to the Hallmarking and Assay Floor whenever they liked, and so you felt as if you were being cut off from them. They didn't have the same breaks as us, they had their breaks after us at first, they then, some of them did start to join in with us. And it was very much to begin with any social events that went on they didn't join in at first until they started to get to know a few of us then they started [00:45] joining in. And I think it was this sort of being on the top floor, you weren't allowed up there so, and they were office workers, they had different perks to anyone. You know, they were given one or two perks, we were having ours taken away from us, and it unfortunately it did give that atmosphere of 'them' and 'us'.

HL: Can you talk more about the social life?

SB: Oh, when I first started at the Assay Office we had an absolutely fantastic social life. There was always something going on especially around Christmas, oh, we used to have outings. But Christmas it was always, we always had a Christmas party on the evening, especially when we had the bar, but even after that we used to have, just have a social evenings, you know, parties and that, Christmas parties. But during the day we'd have

themed events. Now the first couple of years when the canteen was open we used to have it upstairs in the canteen. And one of the first ones I can remember doing was the ground floor we did the *Black And White Minstrels*, and about five or six of us got blacked up with the waistcoats and the hats and the canes, and one of the ladies, Anith, was Carmen Miranda, and we won that competition. Oh, another year we did fairy tales and the ground floor was *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, and we all wore dwarf outfits, and there was a Prince Charming and a, you know, a Snow White, and I was the wicked witch. That the, oh God there used to be, I mean just silly little competitions all the time, fancy dress.

HL: Who organised these things?

SB: Oh the Social Club Committee. We'd try and come up with some idea or other. I served on the Committee on and off from, say again, until I sort of really started to get into it apart from when we had the bar and I always used to do a stint on the bar. I was on the Social Club Committee on and off just try, we used to just try and think up of different ways and means of having a good time. And, as I say, it just *Stars In Their Eyes* was another one we used to do. The fairy themed Christmas, we used to try and come, get people to dress up as a fairy of some sort or other.

HL: What proportion of the staff were involved?

SB: Oh every floor, every floor used to do, to try and do something. A couple of the memorable ones was one of the earlier accountants in the office, the office girls, I think they got dressed up as the *Wizards of Oz*. A very memorable Lion, very memorable Lion. Tin Man and everything. But literally all sorts. Various different departments used to get dressed up like Les Haines on the sampler, a very memorable Elvis on *Stars In Your Eyes*. Same again just *Stars In Your Eyes*, Terry and one of the other ladies did a very memorable Greased Lightning.

HL: Management?

SB: Oh yes, some of the management used to get involved, not as many, some of them were a little bit more reticent. It was just depended on the character of the person. Upper

management not so much. Foremen, as I say, John Gilkes in particular. Roy Southall I think got dressed up the once. And same again an accountant. But what you would class then as upper management, no. It was mainly sort of shop floor management apart from the occasional accountant. But yes, every floor used to get involved at some time or other.

One of the things partly through the Social Committee but it was mainly down to Michael Allchin and Michelle on the Sampling Floor. We used to arrange, or well they arranged a twenty-five mile charity walk. I didn't do the very first one but I was involved in about four of them. Oh, it was very hard work. I mean we didn't just do sort of straight little, you know, nice gentle walks. The first one I did was the Three Castles, Three Castles Walk out in Monmouth, Monmouthshire I think it was. And we used to go on a Saturday afternoon. Stop at a hotel, or a bit later on it was at one of the university campuses [00:50] and then get up early the next morning, have breakfast and then do this twenty-five, it was usually twenty-five to twenty-seven miles walk. And we used to have a great time and get sponsored for it and raise lots of money. I think it was for cancer, Cancer Research or something, Macmillan or something like that, but probably, you know, other people probably remember. But yes we had a good time. Except that very first one, that was terrible because it poured with rain most of the time. [Laughter]

HL: Talk about your retirement?

SB: And well, I was sixty seventh of January obviously, and it was a very big disappointment to me that I had to carry on working, I couldn't retire at sixty. Unfortunately I was caught up in the catchment area, time and I officially would have had to have retired I think it was the sixth of November was when I was due to get my new pension, my state pension as such. So I basically decided I would leave a little bit earlier and I went officially on the thirtieth of September, but I left a week earlier because I had a week's holiday.

HL: Which year?

SB: This was in 2011. And I can remember I, as I say, I begrudged those nine months very badly. And of course, the last month in September I had to, because they let me work on The Trap that last Sept..., that last three weeks so that I could basically say a 'goodbye' to all my

customers, because I mean a lot of them I'd known the thirty-three years I've worked here. And so I got to see a lot of my customers and a lot of them to say 'goodbye' to them. And I had a calendar and crossed my days off every day and I left on the Thursday so that I could have a day off before I went on my week's holiday, and finally got my pension on the sixth of November.

HL: Why did you stay at the Assay Office for thirty-three years?

SB: Mainly for the first twenty, twenty-five years because I just loved it. I mean when I first, well, I mean apart from the first six months, where I very nearly left. I loved working on The Trap, I absolutely loved it and I was really upset when it got so quiet that I just felt I couldn't stay there permanently. But I just enjoyed it so much, we had such good social life. The girls, I worked with the girls on the ground floor all the thirty-three years, and the majority of us were there for those thirty-three years so it was just, they were good friends. And even though the last sort of eight to ten years things started to go downhill as far as I was concerned I just enjoyed the company of everybody. I mean we'd still have the occasional days out, the Social Club Committee would try and arrange days out. We'd try and keep the social side of things going even though we were restricted obviously because of the split breaks.

I knew, I mean the customers I mean although I was working mainly on the ground floor I still went round to The Trap serving customers and keeping in contact. I mean one of the customers got me running when I was forty. I started running, decided to start running, we're running round the streets because a couple of the girls in the office got me going, you know, as well, helped me out. And I was chatting to Steve Millington and he knew which side of town I lived on and said why didn't I join Halesowen Athletics Club? I ended up going there for three years and thoroughly enjoying it. I mean it was that, it was one of those customers also A G Green, Tony Green, used to talk about crown green bowling, and since I've retired I've started doing crown green bowling. And it was just so lovely. And even though the last eight to ten years, especially the last ten months, nine months that I worked there I hated it, I still got on with everybody and I just, I just regard them, most of them as friends and we had such good times in those first few years.

[End of Interview 00:54:41]

