

**INTERVIEW WITH ALLAN BURNS**

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**INTERVIEWER: HELEN LLOYD**

*HL: This is Helen Lloyd recording an interview with Allan Burns on the 14<sup>th</sup> January 2015. Allan tell me about your background.*

AB: I left school when I was sixteen. I worked on Frankley's service station, electricians mate. I worked there for eighteen months and the building then were finished, but I was too young to move to Nottingham, so then I had a job interview at the Assay Office, through my father, 'cause he come past the place and they had a board outside saying interviews, er, vacancies. And I come to see Mr Beechey and I started on the 8<sup>th</sup> May 1966. Me nan died on May 11<sup>th</sup>, me birthday's on the 12<sup>th</sup>, so I had two days off, they let me have two days for me nan. And then I started work and I worked with an elderly man, he was in his sixties at the time, called Eli, used to call him Mick for short. Bit of a cowboy, he used to put, the light bulb had gone, them days he used to lick his finger in his hand, put inside the fitting, say "There's juice there." That threw me off a little bit at the time but you learnt things about it and he learnt me a lot of things about the Assay Office, but he used to start off from, me first every job was to replace about four toilet seats. Never done one before, so I learnt how to do it. When I finished work on that day I met me father he worked at Taylor Challons, down the road, he done gear cutting and big horizontal boring, which was like boring a big piece of steel out inside and he used to climb inside with big callipers. He had to finish the job between seven o'clock on the morning til seven at night and I used to be there with him, making a cup of tea. Go home, then weekends I used to go roller-skating and I had a job there. I used to work there Friday, Saturday, Sunday and sometimes sleep there Sunday and come to the Assay Office on the Monday morning. Worked there for four years, I saved up, buy myself a little car, at the time, I was twenty-one then, I'd shot up a bit and me father and mother bought me a car, me mother worked the AA in Hagley Road, Automobile Association, the we, gave me money towards a Mini, so I bought a Mini and I learnt how to do a car through me father. Used to, first I stripped it down in the garage outside, cos we hadn't got a car port, it started to rain, so me father said, "We'll go in to the kitchen, and do the engine in the kitchen." So we'd just had a new carpet in the kitchen, so me father said, "Put some cardboard down on the floor, it'll be alright." We carried part of the engine in the

kitchen, stripped it all down and we found out the oil leaked on the carpet. Me mother came home, she wasn't very pleased!

*HL: I'd like to ask you a bit about what skills you'd got, because you went straight from school to being an electrician's mate, what did you know about electricity?*

AB: I didn't at the time. I used to have a ham radio at home, so I built that up from electrics meself, little kits you used to buy years ago. And this Indian chap, Mr Patel he'd wore a board up to work petrol pumps and he used to disconnect them and say "Make me a cup a tea" so I made him a cup a tea he disconnected them and he give me a drawing and I had to do all the wiring off the drawing, that's how I learnt. But I went to college for just under twelve months, but I learnt more off the Indian man than I did at college.

*HL: Where you at college while you were working at Frankley petrol station?*

AB: I was but I went about two or three times, then the chap in charge said, "You've got to go to learn a bit more," so I learnt more, but in my days, then there was nothing on computer, calculator, it's all up here. I don't like adding up things, I used to try and add it up and I learnt by drawings that if you follow the colour code on a drawing from A to B, a mode wire, it goes in each end and, red or whatever the colours was. But this service station it was quite good. The electricians who worked there, was a place called Youngs, the chap who owned it, his son was working there, I got in with him, he helped me out quite a lot. [00.05] Then I got part of me papers for me electrics, but not all the complete lot. They came and done maintenance but normally, after the, about nineteen years I'd been here, used to have a contractor come in the building and work with us then. He was a friend of my ex-wife, he was her sister's husband and he came and did the electrics here for us. Then I done most of the maintenance work at the Office. Doing, changing light bulbs, toilet seats, unblocking toilets, putting new toilets in. When I first started the actual light fittings in the building was just a single bulb, there was no strip lights or nothing in the building. Then when I done all that and I'd been here quite some time, there'd been, we was quite busy, with the Jubilee hallmark and I helped. Set me up on a press, so I used to go in me spare time and do a bit of hallmarking. I marked scrolls on earrings for ladies wearing earholes, I marked these, a few small silver salvers on a press. Then I learnt by me first gaffer that was here before, about greasing presses and how they work and in them days I went up to driving, I helped go to

some of the places to deliver the jewellery. H.P.J. which don't exist anymore, Curteis Chains, they still exist out in Shropshire and I still do it up today. But going back in the years, everything was, oldy-worldy, there was nothing modern in the building at all. Up here, where we are now in the old Library, used to be the HR person, the personnel man used to be in here and the other side of the wall where we are now, in the other room, the IT room, used to be the photography place, with all the photos. And it's completely changed. Second floor which is now the Laboratory, used to be our old canteen and that's been extended out and if people come, and they're like, what was it like, the canteen used to be in green and black tiles with big windows in. A full canteen, full meals, toast in the morning or egg on toast, or beans on toast or bacon, or anything you wanted, that was all subsidising money. And dinner time, they'd be full meals. Then the canteen, which is now gone, that's a Laboratory. Upstairs, again on the top floor, used to be the kitchen, which is now Safeguard and AnchorCert and the other side used to be the canteen. And when I first come here, it was, if anyone can remember the old Lewis's building, you got a roof and the big wire mesh, that's how our building was outside, like a courtyard on the roof, but just inside the door used to be twenty deckchairs with footstools. Dinnertimes, people would go up there, have a sleep, it would be a one til two dinner. Then coming off the roof then were, used to be the old glass pyramid roofs, you could walk round, now it's all completely gone, now you can't go up there, there's too many pipe works up to modern times and this that and the other. Ground floor, where the new board room in now, half the board room was took away and used to be an office block and the garage that's in front of the building, which is nine cars and when I first started here, used to be a minibus, a small Bedford van and me first big job was putting bench seat in the minibus, with racks inside to put all the work in and I deliver the work out. And then they found out during the course of two or three years, 'cause we used to keep a man in the van all the time, they wanted an alarm put on the front of the van, an alarm put on the back of the van. So if people can remember the old-fashioned dip lights on a car, when you used to dip your headlights, nowadays its flashing, put two of those on the vehicle, one back, one front, so any alarm come off, it was like a big loud claxon. Then the one year they had a new driver, he'd been with us for about twelve months and somebody called him [00.10] back and back and back and he broke all the windows in the back half of the garage. And the reception part is now all been changed. The two big pillars in the front of the office where reception is, the pillars used to be outside the building, not inside the building and they all had sectioning, there used to be little offices, a cashiers office and a little meeting office in there. And going back in the actual, the new part of the office, which used to be the old to me, used to be, by

the windows in the Charlotte Street side used to be all the balances, where they used to do all the weighing, the gold. Then the far side, our carpark side, used to be the Laboratory and used to be a Lab. And going downstairs in the basement, there used to be steps going from the ground floor into basement, which is now our cloakroom, it used to be the refinery and they used to do all the gold assaying in the basement. And when I first come here, there was no fans to get rid of the fumes off the fume chambers and it was a piece of steel tubing, with a piece of pipe on the end connected to the gas and every morning, used to light it and that'd take the smells out. It was a complete refinery, the old-fashioned carbalite glass vessels, used to hold the acids in, used to be in straw and used to put it down on a little frame and fill the jug up with the acid. In the actual basement, where we sit in the one part of the basement used to be open to the sky and there were some tanks what used to catch all the silver and gold and everything else in there. And the basement completely different. The far end of the canteen which is now the old basement, staff canteen, there used to be men's toilets. When I first come here in '66 used to be coal bunkers, 'cause the coal fire, the actual heating was coal. Then a few years after I'd been here, it was changed to oil and every Monday morning I used to go outside, open the lock on the door and put the pipe on and fill all the tanks up with oil. But my old gaffer, he was a jack-the-lad really. Our time of breaks was ten o'clock to half past ten in the morning, he used to disappear til half past nine and the first couple of times I didn't know where he went, he used to go in the kitchen and have his breakfast and cup of tea and bring himself a cup of tea down and he always used to drink out of a measuring jug, a green one, I thought what's he, some tea for me, so I tipped it into my cup and he said, "No that's my cup." And he just went on from then, he was just laugh, him using a green measuring jug instead of a proper cup. And in the basement were people come in now where the security is, that was our actual maintenance shop. Anything run on belts, there was six machines run from one big motor, which was run on a belt driven machine. And when I'd first started, I'd been here three or four years, they used to do their own silver, melt it down to a bar and it'd be eight inches long by inch and a half thick, used to roll it in some rolling mills and you could make four foot, five foot long. Then used to stitch it in a machine, which put it into half inch slices, used to get five out of this strip. Then we used to anneal it, make it softer so we could work with it. On the machine we worked on used to make it into a little quarter square, then you anneal it again and you'd draw it on a draw bench, which used to make it go from, old measurements, about three sixteenths, about two mill, in our talk now, but it used to be two mill, three mill and four mill. And what they used to do, say you'd sent your silver work in and we'd scraped so much off, they used to weigh it when they scraped it off and

we'd give you that piece of silver back in what I used to make downstairs to cut up. And there used to be a little machine, which set to cut it from two inches to four inches or six inches, so we knew a big sauce salver was six inches [00.15] and a four inch one was half the size and the next one down was a small silver salver or something smaller, used to give that back to the jeweller, to say, we've scraped that off your job, we'll return it in good faith 'cause we've scraped off. But going to modern times, they don't do that anymore. They don't even scrape articles anymore, it's gone on to XRF machine, which tests all your carats, what coppers, zinc, or what's actually in the item, 'cause no scraping, they'll scrap sometimes if they have to, but that's going back, into modern times, in older times, it was a man sitting at a bench scraping away. And a funny thing I heard, I'd been here, fifteen years then, that's in the '70s, there used to be man that was here before, I didn't see him but the way he used, I'll say smuggle the gold out, he had Brill Cream on his hair, he'd scrape the gold off the actual article, put his hand in his hair, run his hand on the bench and back in his hair and he'd get home, wash his hair and it'd have all the gold in. And the other one was, I shouldn't say this, but never mind, the other one was, he'd post it back to himself, he'd put some work in an envelope, scrapings, go out dinnertime, 'cause there wasn't that much security, as there is up to date, and go and post it back home to himself. They caught him in the end and they caught the actual man with the Brill Cream as well. But years ago, they used to do, the security now is a bit more better, but when the security people used to be, they hadn't used to be like Group 4 or anybody else, used to be private concern, of the office, private man. So what they used to do, used to get a sack with white balls in the sack, but if you pick the black ball out in your going home time or your dinnertime, the company would pay you seventy-five pence. The one time we had one of the chaps decided to put a black ball in his hand and put his hand in the bag and pull a black ball out, so every day, dinnertime and night time he used to have seventy-five pence.

*HL: I don't understand this, was this a game that the company paid for?*

AB: No, it was a security-wise reason. If there was twenty white balls in the actual bag and there was say, four black balls in there, you'd have to be searched, do the search physically, they hadn't got no machines in them days, but if you picked a black ball out you'd get seventy-five pence. This man the one time, he realised "Oh I can make seventy-five pence, twice a day," so he made his own black ball and they sussed him out. They took out all the black ball, this one particular day and left the white balls in and he put his hand in the bag

and pulled out a black ball out and he got suspended for it. The ball system was a random search, if you was picked a black ball out it was searched and you got seventy-five pence, if you picked a white ball out, you wasn't searched, you went through security as normal. But nowadays, it's a scanning machine, you go through a scanner, you're searched if it beeps and you have the magic wand all over you to see if you've got anything on you. The olden days was, were the Trap is now, where we got bullet proof glass in there now, it's two inches thick glass, years ago it was just a shutter like you have on a house window and it was just boarded across, there was no security at all in there. Used to have a man, bit like Michael Allchin, he used to go and collect the fish on a Friday, which man used to sell the fish on a Friday when I first got here, he'd go the markets before coming in of a morning then he'd sell the fish to the people at work, the staff didn't mind, 'cause the management bought it. Michael Allchin, when he was here, he'd ask people going up the town, the fish market in Birmingham to go and get some fish and he'd get his own and people from work.

*HL: Let's backtrack now to you getting the job, tell me about that.*

AB: My father worked in Taylor Challons in Mary Anne Street, backend of the Assay Office, he seen a job on a board outside the Office and he said "Why don't you try for it, it looks a nice building, old-fashioned building." So I came in on, I think [00.20] 1<sup>st</sup> May I think it was and had an interview with Mr Beechey and I started on the 9<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> May.

*HL: Can you remember anything about the interview?*

AB: I think it was Mr Beechey's first time, because he hadn't long took over from being an normal inside manager to interviewing people on the job and then when he went up to actual Assay Master, they got Alfie Hall, which used to be, where we're sitting now, in the top library, he used to be upstairs, and I went with him afterwards as well. It was mostly, "Will you join the union?" and "Are you in the union anyway or not in the union?" He was a nice man, he listened to what you'd got to say. But when I first came, on the morning, you were just showed round the building, but it was just oldy-worldy, it was nothing like, a lot of the people have never seen from todays, and when it was old, and when I first came here, they'd never seen any of the silverware. I've been so lucky, I even packed some of the actual Matthew Boulton silverware, the candelabras, to shows and last couple of years, I've done security at the show, when they're on show there and helped them out. But the old-fashioned

days was just, it was just unbelievable, the stuff. What you see nowadays compared to what used to be, in them days, its nothing like it. I mean the, when the Office first started, I think it was a pub, we got a big sign in the building, I'm looking at one now, the original one, the one outside's a copy, and it's a pub sign, two or three times, I've had to hang it back up on the wall. And in the old part of the building, where you come into reception, when I first started there was all, Mr Westwood, which was like his father, his father before him, I think there were four generations of Westwoods' used to work here, and there used to be a picture gallery. And then every couple of months, 'cause they didn't employ cleaners, they used to have to take the pictures down, clean them and put them back up again. And there used to be, one top, one middle, one bottom, three pictures in a line all the way up and down. Especially the pub sign, I used to have to get a stick with a hook on the end and pull it across on the thing, hook it off and put it back on again, with a ladder. But the big job we had, is when they changed the building over, upmarket to what it is today, the building is nice in the newer part, but they should have kept the older part in, instead of selling it, in my eyes, because they should have had it as a museum, which they could have done but they've sold it now, the building's been sold and we move to a new building in July.

*HL: What are your memories of the Westwoods?*

AB: Hamil Westwood was a nice man really, when we had the strikes, I were out on strike, he knew I did maintenance in the Office, I've helped him out at his sister's house, out a Harbourne, done some electrical work out there for them. But he wanted his flat painted in Edgbaston and me and my ex-wife, at the time, went up there and painted it out. And he had a shop in Dunster in Minehead, and I went there two or three times to paint it and do a few jobs there. Then he started going out with one of the women, Edna Parfitt, on the marking floor, which was like, nobody knew, then they got married and me and my ex-wife used to go down there to, go out with them on weekends and do work down there. So go on a Friday night and come back Sunday and come into work Monday.

*HL: Am I right in understanding you did some work for him while on strike from the Assay Office?*

AB: Yes, I was a bit naughty but I did, he paid me anyway so it was alright. But he was such a nice man, he'd help anybody out. They all have [00.25] been, nice people.

*HL: He was Assay Master when you arrived in 1966, can you give me some memories of other Assay Masters?*

AB: Yes, Mr Maughan, he wasn't here that long, he came in from cotton, but he didn't know much and he left, then Mr Beechey took over from Mr Maughan. Then Mr Beechey left and it was Bernard Ward, he was here about seven or eight years, I think it was. Then we had Michael Allchin, I think he was a lot longer and Michael was quite nice, he listened to you and he'd help you out, you could go and sit and have a chat with him, if you wanted to chat to him. Then when he'd gone now we've got Stella, the lady. She's very nice, first lady Assay Master since I've been here or for the years, they've all been nice, all been nice people, they'll all help you out if they can help you, they'll help you.

*HL: What has your job title been during all these, nearly fifty years?*

AB: I had to go into a meeting with Michael and was talking to him about job titles, he said you can name what you want and I said I'll be Maintenance Manager, so I've been Maintenance Manager ever since. But now we've got a new boss in with us, he's the Maintenance Manager, so I'm nobody, really at the moment.

*HL: And can you talk about your job title before you became Maintenance Manager?*

AB: I only got a job title, when I started here, after a certain time of years I was called Maintenance Manager. It all stemmed off Ian Hodges, who was the one that said, "Well you can be the Maintenance Manager, I'll be the Manager, you be the Maintenance Manager." I've kept it ever since and there's no problems. I used to have an e-mail address but since people took over, I've lost it. It was on my second wife's computer, now since someone else took over, I've lost that again now so I haven't got one at all now, it's just a mobile phone.

*HL: So your second wife and your ex-wife have both worked here?*

AB: They worked on the same floor. Margaret Burns worked on Hallmarking, on the gold section and my wife worked on the silver section on the other side, my new wife, worked on the other side of the office. They didn't get on but, we'd fell out and tried to get divorced and



I've been with Julie now for fourteen years. We lived in Aldridge, still live in Aldridge now, moved from one side to another side. When Julie's mom was alive, she died, her dad's died and he was a jeweller, David May & Son, that's how they first come to the jewellery.

*HL: It seems to be a feature of the Assay Office, or certainly has been, that people worked in the same place as family members.*

AB: When I first started in '66, there used to be Mary and Ruby was two sisters. The lady what was in the kitchen, her daughter worked in the Office as well. A lot of people met here and married, Les and Beryl and about three other people, I can't remember their names at the moment. I got married here, a girl at the Office, Margaret Burns. Gill and Terry worked here, Gill was on the Marking Floor as a boss lady. Terry was into unions and Health and Safety, and in my time I was working here with Terry and Gill, Terry's brother worked here, can't remember his name, but Terry's brother worked here and Terry's dad worked here as a driver on the vans, when I first come. Two brothers and his father worked here and going back when I first come here, Julie's mom worked at here, I didn't know at the time but Julie's mom worked here, [00.30] helping out. Then a chap named Peter England used to work here, when I first come here in '66. He married a girl from here as well. And there's a lot of sisters work here as well. My ex-wife Margaret, her sister worked here, her daughter worked here, her sister's daughter. Another four people, I can't remember their names, they knew someone or they come here through someone who actually worked here to help out.

*HL: And what effect do you think that has on working lives?*

AB: I think it's more of a family, what all got on with each other, not like it is today, there's people say, "You've pinched my chair," in them days you helped yourself to a chair, if it was there, you helped yourself and no moans and groans. Bit like a dress code, really, in them days, you used to wear the old-fashioned, the ladies overalls, cow gowns. And I used to wear a brown one, to keep up with all the other people, the staff, you used to wear brown cow gowns and once a fortnight you'd have them all washed, you'd have two, one to wash and one to put on. And we used to have a washing machine downstairs in the basement, in one of the alcoves and we rigged it up so we catch all the gold in the bottom, we made a little mesh in the bottom of it, caught the gold in, we used to find little teeny rings, part of earrings in there, or a little part of a brooch in there and that's where we used to do all the washing, we

used to do our own, now it's just sent out the laundry and nothing's checked. Gold isn't floating about as much as it was in them days. The washing machine lasted us about ten, fifteen years, what we converted ourself.

*HL: And up to what level did people wear overalls?*

AB: Normal staff wore brown cow gowns. Then you got the foreman, Tommy Bedford was the main one on the Marking Floor, he used to wear a grey one, all the other foremen used to wear white. Now, all round the building now, in modern times, everybody wears white upstairs in the Lab and I just normally wear black trousers and black t-shirt with Assay Office sign on. But them times, then people never used to bother, people in the Sampling section, scrapers used to have to wear the brown cow gowns but then when it come after the '70s, '80s and '90s, they just wear their normal clothes, the cow gown's faded out. Then the women used to wear, what do they call them, can't think of the name.

*HL: Going back in time again, when you arrived in 1966, you said it was a very old-fashioned building, can you remember things that people working there then, who maybe worked there as long as you've worked there, can you remember what they told you about the Assay Office before your time?*

AB: Before my time, they used to say there was a lot, a few ghosts in the actual Office. Going back when I first started there were, about three or four weeks after I'd started the toilet in the basement, the first time they bought strip lights, instead of the old bulb type of lights and it used to be so cold down there and the gas inside the light used to strobe in the light, it made believe there was someone walking past, past the windows, 'cause there'd be three or four windows. The other story was, where the stuff used to be downstairs in the basement, they had ghosts in there, but what it was, it was the heating, when they first put it in, they had it against some, drilled a hole through the wall, they put in a steel, a little liner, pipe was vibrating in, and they thought there was someone walking, like a footprints, walking along.

*HL: Any other memories of the way people told you things were done?*

AB: The way things were done, it was going back in olden days, where they used to have the acids delivered in [00.35] they said someone had pinched it the one time, there was water in

the actual acid and they poured it into the jug and found it was water in there and someone had pinched it. There were parts downstairs we used to have, the Refinery downstairs and I was told before I came that we used to have a man down there and he used to have pictures of women on the walls and when they came in, he had to move all these pictures because there was a load of nuns coming down from a nunnery and they had to take them off the walls before they came down the stairs. He was an old-ish guy and his brother, there were two brothers that worked down there, in the Refinery down in the basement and they used to play a lot of jokes on people, they were little bit comedians. And before I started here used to be a man do fishing and he used to get his maggots from up the Jewellery Quarter somewhere, a fishing shop, years ago, and he was took ill, he forgot to tell people he'd left his maggots in his locker downstairs, so people coming to work on the Monday morning, they were all swimming with these flies. That's the tale I was told and a few years later, afterwards, someone done the same thing again, but not so many this time, it was confined in one little area, 'cause the cloakroom used to be, what we would go outside now the backdoor for our security, it was shut off and locked of an evening, but people used to leave coats in there and stuff on top of the lockers, and they opened the door and never realised it was full of flies and they had to try and kill them all, but we hadn't got any fly killer in them days, no spray stuff about then. So someone thought about it, like acid, boil it up, so it was giving off vapours and they didn't have any masks in them days, put their hand over their mouth, put it inside the door, left it in there and all the flies had died on the floor.

*HL: Your talk of acids and no masks and no ways of getting rid of fumes and so on, was it quite unsafe working here?*

AB: Not really no, some companies idea, when the gas was on and the flame lit above the gas, it'd give out a fan out the ducting, 'cause from the bottom of the building, top of the building is seventy-five feet to the top of the chimney, so it was pumping it out, it was no problem. But if the gas blew out for some reason, one of the doors opened down in the basement, blew it out, whatever was cooking in there, wasn't cooking there very good, 'cause it wasn't taking the flames out. You go in there, put your hand over your mouth and light gas and go back out again. There was no masks, like there is nowadays, the Health and Safety nowadays is, in the building now, it is spot on.

*HL: And what changes have you seen?*

AB: If we talk about the new boardroom downstairs compared to what it used to be years ago, there was a twenty foot mahogany table, which they sold to Edwards' Shop Fitters and there was ten men carried it from Birmingham Assay Office to Constitution Hill, which is just the other side of the road from where we are now. And they had three benches and that was all changed into a new modern boardroom with chairs and tables in there. But the actual ground floor used to be, when Princess Margaret came to see the Office and do some hallmarking, the hallmarking was on the ground floor, before my time, in them days and the lifts we had to take the work up from the ground floor to the first floor used to be two one side of the building and two the other side of the building and then they changed all of the designs, I mean it was on the Marking Floor, you could see over the top of the parapet, into the actual ground floor, which was done all in mahogany, round one side. And on the Marking Floor you'd have one section for earrings and bangles in gold and the other section is the silver section and the other section had got to be for anything different to that, smart medals and things like that. But them days, used to have the two sisters, Mary and Ruby in the punch box and when you wanted your work, you take your work to them in note, in docket, with the person's initials on for the [00.40] punches, then they used to give you the punches, to you, but every time you'd had your punch, you'd have to give it back and every night, in my day, no one could leave the building, til all the punches were collected and put in to the right order and if one were missing, no one could go out anywhere, til it was found. Well nowadays it's entirely different, it's just, they have four numbers, the same, they take the number with them and take a punch out the rack and put their number in and *vice versa*, they take number twenty-two, twenty-two number out the rack, put the punch back in and take their number back to their department. That's how it changed in them days but they changed it to modern times were four bullion lifts, as we called them, was in a line now, there all in a complete line and the ceiling is all covered over now with the new second floor Lab. It's all changed because the staircase used to run from the basement to the canteen and one level which was the Marking Floor, with a door and you could see people from the top of the stairs from the bottom basement right up top of the building and most of them, still staircase. But in the ground floor cum marking floor, in between the two lifts what used to be down there, used to be a staircase going up and a staircase coming down, a sweeping staircase, like you see in a big posh house. Then up above that, the two left hand side and right hand side was empty and you went into the Marking Floor through two separate floors. The Tool Room, before my time used to be on the ground floor, carpark side. Then when I came it was

upstairs, on the Marking Floor, in between the two room, between gold and the silver section. And before my time, I was told, that the, in the wartime, the Assay Office made Bren Gun springs, springs for Bren Guns, in the war. And the Health and Safety department took over the Marking Floor, part of it, for Health and Safety in the war times. I've been told about that, so I don't know any more about that.

*HL: What memories have you got of the people you worked for directly?*

AB: Eli, me first one, when I came to the Office in '66, he was a nice man. He would just, a phone call to say, "Can you come change a light," or "Come and have a look at this machine broke down." And he left when he was in his 70's, he retired and then we had, Mr Griffiths, Works Manager. He used to have a three-piece copy paper, people used to give him the jobs to do, he'd go and see of a morning, if he didn't want to do the job, he just throw it in the bin and carry on do your other work. Then I had Mr Beechey, the Assay Master, he was one of our bosses as well, used to go to him for jobs to do. Then it came up to date, Mr Ward, it went from him to his secretary or P.A, what they call it nowadays and we didn't get involved so much then, we just relied on phone calls for jobs. Then going back to Ian, more up to date then, 'cause the phone was brought in place, computers in place, you'd have all these jobs on computer and say well, can you do so-n-so. The other chap, John, John Davies, he came, he's been here thirty-five years, and when Ian was here, and we'd split the jobs between us. We'd had a meeting of a morning, we say, Ian and myself'll do a job, or Ian'd tell us, Allan to do a job, John'd be on his own or John'd go with Ian and I do the job on me own, that's we used to work. And then when Ian left, me and John run the company for nine months on our own and we reported to, Em Rogers the accountant and to Michael as well and a meeting with [00.45] Michael, what I could do and what I couldn't do, I said, "Well I'm not an IT person," That's no problem, they'd sort the IT out. We kept it running for nine months, then we had Mark Martin join the group, with us. He worked at Hampton Plating, he came to us. He does the same now, it's all modern, computerised and he get all the jobs on the computer, e-mails and that. He issues jobs, when he wants to issue them out, he thinks he can do them on his own, we wait for a phone call for him to phone us to say, yes you've got a job to do or people phone him and sometime he forgets and it three or four weeks before the job, to do ourself, then he doesn't tell us, we find out off other people.

*HL: How much have you had to work with computers?*

AB: Since five, six years ago. I never used to install them before, but now got to install them, wire them up, fit them on, got a programme with me, all actually our jobs are, just to make sure the screens working, the computers on, the hard drives, anything else in the machine ready and just plug in and go. I've re-wired for the computers, I think it was about two or three hundred ones for the ... I used to have to put in all the wiring from the IT Room, the one on the ground floor, then it come modern, we got one on the second floor where we're sitting now, it's had all the wiring, had to put all the wiring through to wire them up. Then when we done that we had to do all the cameras, there's about three hundred cameras in the building, partly wired most of them myself, which most of the IT work, computers and the cables, 'cause it's an old-fashioned building, then we're getting through twenty inch thick walls, it's a bit of a game, so sometimes we'd have to go outside and come back in again. Well, cables now go from top of the building and some go all the way down to the ground floor, where we are sitting now is the library, behind the door there it the IT Room, so we had to go from the top of the building, the old part of the building, through to the new part of the building and I reckon we put about three or four hundred cables in, in a matter of three or four years.

*HL: You've mentioned a vast range of things you've done, working with computers, even hallmarking, slicing silver and so on, what training have you received during the past nearly fifty years?*

AB: A lot really, 'cause the people we used to have in to do all the electric work, used to watch them and by learning and taking things apart and putting them back together again, computers, computers nowadays have go a little teeny battery inside, it keeps a little bit of the power to work inside of the computer, I didn't know that, til about eight, nine years ago, there was a battery inside. Well, now when the bought the computers into the building, every two years, sometimes we'd replaced the battery but if actual machine had gone down, we'd replace the actual machine, the parts of the computer. I just learnt, if you've got a machine that's making a funny noise, on the roof, you take it apart and look what's wrong with it and replace it, or go downstairs, in the Tool Room, make a part for it, they use the lathe's down there, the toolmakers down there can do our jobs for us but when they're busy making the punches, they can't be in two places at once, so I learnt how to use a lathe, I went to college

with the company, the Assay Office for, six months and learnt how to use a lathe, a miller, grinder, on a course, which helped know what to do, if I had a job...

*HL: Was college in working time or in the evenings?*

AB: Working time. The college we went to in working time was, the engineering one, was in Coventry and they allowed me to go there, I went there Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday for about three weeks. And I learnt a lot from my father, 'cause he was an [00.50] engineer about stripping things down 'cause I used to do a lot of car maintenance, stripping cars down, but when we was there, the car I had, an old-fashioned Marina, the casket had gone, so the chap down there, in between me dinnertimes, 'cause the head had warped because I'd got it too hot, driving from Birmingham to Coventry, it warped the cylinder head. So then he learnt me how to skim on this machine, I didn't try it on the cylinder head when I came home, but I skimmed on our lathe here. I learnt to the college people and in the Office here, striping a machine. Back to modern times, the Assay Office with the machine we've got now, they're hydraulic, which are run by oil and electric and when Ian Hodges was here, he actually designed the presses, these presses now, we've got seven off-sites and each off-site has got these hydraulic presses in and every twelve months we go and do a full service on them. If they breakdown between times, we've got all the machinery parts to replace a part, downstairs. Instead of going to the place and they only have two presses that work, Curteis Chains, we go to. We have to, I take all the spares, with me, and I bring the part back that's faulty, I can repair it here and take the new part down to them and that's now I really learnt, bits and pieces off other people.

*HL: What about when you actually worked with precious metal hallmarking or slicing the silver, what training did you receive?*

AB: None, I learnt it all myself. I was told how to do it by Eli, Mick his name was, how to do it, I done that for fourteen, well about twenty years, drawing the silver down. Used to roll, on the rolling mills downstairs, when they used to do the old assay testings, they used to use an old thrupenny bit, because it'd got so much alloys in it, it was good for the precious metals, and as I say, about ten or eleven, I've still got some down in me shop, thrupenny bits they used to roll in the rolling mill and they used to cut the samples off to put in the assays to test,

to send of what it was in there. I can't quite remember what the actual alloy is in the thrupenny bit, but I used to roll about ten a week, on these machines.

*HL: You mentioned going out from the Assay Offices to sub-offices in different firms, what are your memories of the Assay Office sub-offices?*

AB: Experience really, 'cause some of the companies out in the sticks, like, we start off with Curteis Chains, which is out in Shropshire, it's all on its own, there's nobody around it at all. You'd miss it if you blinked, you're going past it. That was the first sub-office we done but there's now hydraulic presses in, there's two girls work down there, they've gone, someone else has moved in now, another two girls work there. Then we done one at H.P.J, which is in Shropshire again, so two girls work in that office, we'd set it all up inside for those. Instead of our working coming from Curteis or H.P.J to Birmingham, Birmingham was going to them to work in their departments or work in their thing and girls came from the sub-offices to learn how to use the presses here before they went to there, the company paid travel expenses backward and forwards from Curteis and H.P.J. And then we had on at ... we've got one in Argos, it's in Hull, nearby Hull, Leeds, where there's three girls work there and 'cause they're such a big company, Argos, that they have a, they're called picks and when its bank holidays, 'cause my wife works in the Laser Room they have to do laser marking on some of the jobs which they can't do on normal presses, my wife comes in on a bank holiday Monday and gets the work out ready for one of the girls or a man to take work back to Argos. But there's four presses down there and there's four of their girls, well our girls who work down there, live [00.55] down in, by Argos. We used to have on in the Jewellery Channel, which was by Kempton Racetrack, in horses. That only lasted six months 'cause the company went somewhere else. Then we had Gecko, which is down south, they was a few years but now there's a company took over in Heathrow, they gone to Heathrow which is nearer to them. But we've got Cookson's, we've got off-site in there now, Optima, both based in Birmingham, Cookson's is based in Birmingham, Domino we've got based in Birmingham and Optima based in Birmingham. We've got hydraulic presses in, all bar ... Domino, with just a normal flick press, fly press in there. But they're the only company off-site who got a laser machine, to do the laser marks, 'cause part of the company, I think they bought it themselves, where Argos won't buy one, 'cause they're about forty odd thousand pounds each. But all the work comes in, instead of them bringing the work to us, them bringing the van to us, then we mark it and take it back to them, they bring it to us or its sent from the



maker straight to Birmingham Assay Office and we send it back to them, or they used to do it that way. But now its sent, the company, we're talk about Curteis, the company actually make their own gold and silverware, it'll make gold chains, a lot of gold chains up there, 'cause its better to have our Assay Office in their company instead of them coming all the way from Shropshire to Birmingham and carrying the gold in the cars or the big trucks. The biggest one, as I say is Argos, that's a very big company.

*HL: And these sub-offices are staffed by local people who have trained here at the Assay Office in Birmingham, but have you or your colleagues been responsible for maintenance in all the sub-offices?*

AB: We do all the maintenance, we actually do all the actual maintenance for press work. But the lighting in the rooms of the companies are for, their responsibility, the people who own it. So just say the machines broke down today, I'd probably go down on the Monday or Mark'd go down tomorrow, me other gaffer, to sort out the problem. We keep a box in the shop, with all spare bits in to take down to the off-sites in case we know we can't. So we leave it for a week, we can't do that, we can leave a machine down for a week, so we take all the spares we can and try and get it working as soon as possible.

*HL: Can you talk me through a typical day when you first started working here, right from the moment you arrived?*

AB: Me first time here there was, the only security people we had was a private concern there was no Group 4 or anything like that in them days. He used to walk round the building and ask you if you were alright, he was just a normal man. I used to work from eight o'clock til five-thirty in them days. And used to do general work if need be, mop the floor if I had to and help out, collect work up and get ready in the safe overnight. Then modern times then now it's entirely different. Go back to olden days, when you come in of a morning, you'd sign in on a piece of paper, on a machine, so you'd pull a lever back, sign it and leave it for the next person to have a go at. And when you went out of a night, you'd sign out again. But dinner times you didn't need to clock out. Used to have lunch one til two and go eight til five-thirty. Then modern times now I start at seven, 'cause I cover for my gaffer Mark, my wife starts at seven and we leave at ten past four and we have fifteen minutes dinner hour now and

security's more tougher [01.00] now, people get stopped in and out of the building, if they happen to pinch anything. It's just completely modern times.

*HL: How have the meal breaks changed?*

AB: Shorter. A lot shorter, 'cause I say we used to have one til two dinner years ago, now it's fifteen minutes now and they do it two shifts. There's one from twelve-fifteen til ten past one and the others from quarter past one til two. I prefer, meself, the later one 'cause it makes it a longer afternoon, into the earlier one. But the new law now we've got out, is years ago you could, they could smoke at the benches, they could eat at the benches. You can still drink at your benches now, but now the law now has changed through the building, that you've got to eat in the canteen dinner times and you can't eat nothing at your benches.

*HL: And no smoking?*

AB: No smoking, throughout the building, you've got to smoke outside, by the front gates now, that's all gone.

*HL: Have there been many accidents?*

AB: A lady named Carmel, she was working on a press and the old-fashioned wedding rings used to be a complete strip, like a coil and the two presses what she was gonna used was occupied by two girls what had gotta get this job out, 'cause a lot of medals they were marking. She went on an older type of press and got no hole in the back of it to put gold inside so it wouldn't be by her face, but she didn't, as she marked it, it flicked up and went into her eye. That was one accident. When we moved the Office around downstairs, we had to move this, where this big balance used to be, it was resting on a sand block and we had to smash it, take it down 'cause it was in the way, and it was a pyramid sand block. All we had in them days was a big hammer, a big chisel, chisel was two foot long. At the time, my mate was holding it and he left his little finger out, the hammer slipped of the end of the chisel and smashed his finger and the actual skin of his finger, the top half was hanging down beneath and all the bone exposed. I must have been three shades of white and he went on holiday with the money they give him off for the time. That was the only accident I've ever known really. While upstairs, nowadays, modern times, when they do some of the testing of the acids in the

machine, with the working there, they use microwaves. These microwaves, people know nowadays, if you've got a lid on something, it's only partly off, the steam comes out, well these microwaves the same and one girl didn't wait a period of time for it to be cooled down, as she took it out of the thing, in the actual microwave containers they use, little teeny holes, and the hole, she took it out, she actually burnt her neck. She done it twice in a matter of a couple of months.

*HL: Could you list for me all the different jobs you've done for the Assay Office in the past forty-nine years?*

AB: From changing lightbulbs to changing motors, changing parts on bands. I come just at the right time to repair bicycle tyres, 'cause they used to have a bike, the old-fashioned with a basket on the front, for the work. Anything from toilet seats to toilets, meters, press lights, presses. I've done driving, I've drove from Birmingham to H.P.J up the M6, two or three times and got M6 up there to H.P.J to Whitchurch, Nantwich, Crewe, from Crewe then up to Congleton to H.P.J. Then I done H.P.J to Curteis or Curteis to H.P.J, that was me run with gold and silver in the back of the van, all one me own. Got stopped [01.05] once, me sister's friend was a police man at the time and, on the motorway driving side of it. I knew him but I didn't recognise him with his hat on, he pulled me over, knew what I was driving, the van, 'cause I talked to him a couple of months before this because I drive a blue Vauxhall van ... and I told him, he pulled me over at the side of the road and I didn't see who he was and I thought "What have I done?", he said, "Hello," He said hello to me and I said hello to him. He said, "Are you going to H.P.J?" I said, "Yes, I'm going to H.P.J," "So, you follow me?" He led me up the motorway all the way to H.P.J, like a convoy, I was behind him. And I met him a few weeks later, going up there again, but he couldn't help me this time, 'cause he was on a call, he just flashed him lights and I went my way and he went his way. Now I do a, if the chap Barry's away downstairs, I do a Debenhams run, to Debenhams itself, I do an Argos run, up to Hull. I do Signet run, my gaffer normally does it, but I done it yesterday and a few weeks before, I was taking work back to Signet, down the Jewellery Quarter.

*HL: And what about work within the building, with the jewellery?*

AB: Oh yeah, I've done hallmarking, when I was a young lad, I marked earrings and scrolls for earrings, earring wires and a few silver trays, occasionally. Enjoyed it, it was nice. But

nowadays it's just sitting at a machine for eight hours a day and they only move for their tea breaks, but before used to have your cup of tea, your sandwich and if you smoked, smoke at the benches and that, but its changed from ... good times. The old times was afternoon teas, bring the trolley round, I've helped with that, helping there with free cup of tea and a biscuit in the afternoon, about three o'clock, helped the lady out the kitchen. Did two or three times, helped them. But it's just different in, like I say, nowadays it's just a sandwich out a vending machine and a cup of tea out a vending machine, you don't make your own. In them days, you had homemade tea, homemade coffee. What do you want for your breakfast? What do you want for your lunch? And afternoon tea, used to be a treat, now they don't do it no more, 'cause it's modern times.

*HL: And how's the social life changed?*

AB: When I first came here, used to have table tennis, darts and just before my time, I come here, they used to have a rifle range, in the basement. If you've ever been to a funfair and you've seen the steel boxes, little plaques sticking up, it's the same, your pellets, knock them down. Used to be a bar in the Assay Office, downstairs. Of a night, have a drink, or dinnertime, have a drink, before the laws came in, you can't drink. But the pantomime, used to do them, we done *Star Wars*, we done *Puss-in-Boots*, all in the Club Room downstairs, all the staff, used to spend dinnertime making the stages and working of a night. The last one we done was ... *Puss-in-Boots* I think it was, I'm sure it was. A pantomime for the pensioners. One side of the Club Room was getting changed in and the other side was for coming on the stage. I was the spotlight man, the spotlights at the back of the hall and Julie was the sound person. Then we had a chap named Les and he was, his friend worked for Aston Villa football team and we got some sound system put in, so it was better pick up off the stage, all we used to have was our home-made speakers hanging through the ceiling and we had some proper ones they had on stage, I suppose nowadays, in the ceilings and he had a better sound system come through then. We used to have, bingo as well as. Used to have a darts club, of a night when I first come here, most of all was table tennis, ping-pong, they used to call it. Used to play different, big jewellers, I can't remember the name of some of the jewellers but there used to be a team. Terry Billington, been interviewed by Helen, he'll know more about the [*unclear*] side 'cause he was here before me and he was in the team, he was part of the team. That used to be played downstairs in the Club Room, but now the Club Rooms been changed, knocked through, so it's part of the room for Next, when all their work comes in

and we've just got one half of it now, for ourself, for recreation. We'd have bingo, occasionally, and have quizzes occasionally. But it's just gone from four or five games to two things, 'cause pantomime used to be really good. The one pantomime they done, all the staff used to be in it, there's no outsiders in it, used to be all the staff in it and the props, I think fell, or something went on it wrong and just carried on, as though they'd been doing it for years, it was really good.

*HL: And how do you think the work rate compared with the past with how it is now?*

AB: In them days, you've got a, Julie's father worked at a jewellery trade ... May & Sons, but then you got a lot of jewellers, a lot of them had gone, one-man bands, where they come into the office theirselves. Then you got a big place like Argos, or Debenhams, they, in the olden days there was a lot more, I say, one-man bands, whereas today, if you got a big company, there a lot more work in, where one-man band might send four or five items in, in a day, in the olden days, you probably send two or three thousand items in a week, to bring the work in. A lot of jewellers up the trade they've all gone, like Julie's dad's company went and his friends company went, they used to deal in diamonds. And it's just, they move on. And when they say they look after the big boys, at the Office, they've also got to think of the little boys as well, the little boys do their bit of working and the big boys, do the big boys first and the little boys, but it don't work out, they all do the same, all throughout the Office.

*HL: But how hard do you thing people worked in the past, with all the meal breaks you've mentioned and social life?*

AB: I think the olden days, you just used to get on with it. As I say, you could eat at your bench, them days, so they bring their sandwich and do a bit of work, cup of tea there. They could smoke at the benches, in them days. I think it's about the same but nowadays, it a lot more, like my wife working in the Laser Room, Julie and they're all, Fridays in the worst day, because they're all wanting their work out for the weekends. She marks rings and she's been doing these things for the war, hundred years. Been a lot of, a chap in Holland, been on the news, he bought a lot of shells, brass and he's turned to brass now into poppies. I think she's had, well she's still marking some now, up to this day, poppies, doing cufflinks now, poppies. She's made loads and loads of, well she didn't make, she's hallmarked loads and loads of brass, from Holland of these things. Her job in there is just, they want the work out,

push, push and in the olden days, it wasn't it was just, ok, come in on Monday and you'll have it by Wednesday, Thursday, I think they're now, I think they're four days different now, they have to wait four days for their work now.

*HL: And finally can you talk about [01.15] adapting to all the changes you have seen?*

AB: From modern times to old times, I think a little bit was a lot better in the olden days, to the modern times. Modern times is all, you can't just pick a phone up and say, "Can you change a lightbulb?", it's all on e-mail, so I'm not on an e-mail address, so I have to wait for my gaffer, Mark to tell us what to do, and sometimes he doesn't. The old times was really good, 'cause you'd walk through a room and they say, "Can you do..." and you say, "Oh, be ten minutes and I'll come and do that job for you, no problem." But nowadays, you can't go in the room and start playing with a computer while it's on, first you've got to shut it down and they've got to come and put their password in the machine and years ago we just, ok, not a computer, on a piece of paper and write down what they wanted. Nowadays, no-one writes it down, just on keyboard.

*HL: You've had to change your skills and learn new skills all the time, can you talk about that?*

AB: Yeah, I've learned how to use a computer, I've got one at home, I play on it quite often at home. The ones here, they change in the next couple of weeks, they going to put new, eighty new computers in that go into the new building. It's just learning how to use a computer. In my days, there was nothing on computer. We're just learning how to send e-mails and how to pick messages up off the e-mails and, it's just everything going on computer. If the company when down, the computers went down, I don't think anybody in the company would know what to do, 'cause it all went back on paperwork. And they had some time ago, two or three years ago the computer went down and they was all wondering what to do, how to put it on paperwork. Everyone sends messages to each other, or the company, or my wife Julie, in her place they send message to her through her computer, asking her to do so-and-so, if they sent the paperwork in and they want to change some of the paperwork, they send it by e-mail they send it by *[unclear]* and didn't need all that, back to modern times. But the old times, used to be, entirely different, 'cause it was all paperwork.

All paperwork than anything, nowadays it just, modern times, all saved on computer, which is better, but so were the old fashioned times.

[End of interview 01.17.54]