

Transcript of interview conducted May 24 2017

Interviewee: ETHEL OAKLEY (EO)
Interviewer: REBECCA DOGGWILER (RD)
Cobham, England

Transcription: REBECCA DOGGWILER

[00:00] RD: Okay, the date is the 16th of May, 2017. This interview is being conducted on behalf of Kingston RPM by Rebecca Doggwiler with Ethel Oakley. For the tape, do you want to spell that for us, Ethel?

EO: What, just my surname?

[00:16] RD: The whole thing.

EO: Okay. E – T – H – E – L. Ethel. Oakley. O – A – K – L – E – Y.

[00:22] RD: And is that how you've always been known, have you had any different names?

EO: When I was single, it was Strong.

[00:29] RD: I see.

EO: But I've been married since 1948.

[00:35] RD: Just a little while, then. Okay, for a bit of context, do you want to tell us when and where you were born?

EO: I was born in Surbiton in 1927. Anything else?

[00:52] RD: Do you want to tell us anything else about yourself, or shall we just launch straight in?

EO: And I lived there about five or six years and then I moved to Kingston, and I lived in Kingston for years.

[01:06] RD: Tell me about Kingston, when did you live there?

EO: When did I live there? From 1935 maybe, until well after I was married, because I lived in rooms on Clifton Road, Kingston. And then I moved to Chessington for a little while, and then I got a swap and moved back to Kingston and I was there all the time after that.

[01:34] RD: Have you been back recently, has it changed a lot?

EO: Whenever I drive near there I think, *golly, I couldn't live there*. It's too crowded, too many people there now. I love Cobham.

[01:47] RD: When you were in the Kingston area, you worked at the Decca Records pressing plant in New Malden. When did you work there?

EO: When did I work there? [*coughs*] Oh dear, I'm thinking it's when my girls went into the seniors. I can't remember now.

[02:06] RD: We'll take rough dates.

EO: No dates?

[02:10] RD: We'll take a decade, several decades.

EO: No, well, all I know is that I just worked there fifteen years, fifteen years before – oh, that must be 65 – 65 to 80. So, 1965 onwards.

[02:26] RD: Okay, so tell me about your job. What did you do?

EO: First of all, I was listening to faults on records with plugs in all day long. And I did that approximately five years. Then I had Bell's Palsy and I was paralysed here [points to face], and they put me into a little room off centre, checking the records for swing. Cause they mustn't swing because they damage the stylus, you know. And then I did a few years in there, then I did about another five years in a little office sending the new pressings up to London.

[crashing noise as door slams, accompanied by laughter]

[03:05] RD: That was the door shutting, for anyone who is listening to this.

EO: *[through laughter]* I don't believe it, can I shut the door?

[03:18] RD: Better unclip yourself.

EO: Yeah, I've got to shut the door.

[03:23] RD: You've got to unclip yourself.

[crashing noise]

EO: I don't believe it. Can't pull it off.

[03:38] RD: I'll get it off. There we go. Temporary pause while we shut the door that has flown open and then closed again. And reattach the blind that has fallen down. Do you need some help there?

EO: That'll do for now. That was dreadful, I think I better close this up. Sorry about that, darling.

[04:23] RD: That's okay. We can edit that all out, it's fine.

EO: That wind is terrific.

[04:36] RD: Okay, right, here we go again.

EO: You'll laugh when you listen to this.

[04:43] RD: Okay, so you were telling me about what you did at the plant, so-

EO: Oh, yeah. I worked in three different departments when I was there: listening, the off-centre department and then in this little office, the three of us, sending the new pressings up to London to be okayed and then it would go on presses to be pressed.

[05:03] RD: Tell me about the office, about the people in it.

EO: There was two of us in there – no, three of us in there – and I ran it. And it was Joan and – oh, dreadful – she was a lovely girl, and she left there – got the redundancy – and then she went and worked in Bentalls – in the restaurant – and she came out of Bentalls, and fell over and went to hospital and they sent her home and said rest. Well, she got out of bed for her husband to change the

sheets and died. She had a blood clot. And she was only 68. She was a lovely girl. Stella, that was her name, she was lovely. And her husband worked there, too, he was another that had been there years. It was sad that was. And Joan, now, she's still single and lives at Raynes Park, but she didn't want to be in it [the interview], did she, no. She said... she said she's only worked in that little department. I suppose she felt as though she didn't know enough.

[06:16] RD: But you're still friends though, that's nice.

EO: Oh, yeah. We see each other, after all these years now it seems, since 1980 we meet up and we have a meal and swap old [inaudible]. She just lives with her brother and her sister. She's such a nice person. What else now.

[06:38] RD: Was it a nice sort of family then, a community?

EO: It was. We were a happy, happy little family in there. We used to have some fun.

[06:46] RD: Do you want to tell me about the fun? What did you get up to, Ethel?

EO: Well, there always used to be Arthur, he used to bring records in for testing and then we had a little record player in the corner and we used to put records on if we fancied them.

[07:03] RD: We've heard stories that occasionally employees walked off with the odd record. Would you know anything about that?

EO: Employees going?

[07:13] RD: Walked off with the odd record. Took them home.

EO: I bet they did. But I- I never saw anyone steal them.

[07:22] RD: Just played them in the office.

EO: Never dawned on me to just steal them, you know. But I bet you they did, though. How they got away with it, because you never know if there'd be people on the gate to check you as you go out.

[07:39] RD: Was that something they did? Did they check you?

EO: Oh yes, now and again, they'd have a surprise check, then you'd see a few go dashing back in to drop the records off. It never dawned on me, I thought, *oh, what's the use?*

[07:52] RD: What was an average day like, talk me through. You'd get there-

EO: We'd clock on at quarter to eight. Three quarters of an hour lunch and then finish at half four. So that made up the probably forty hour week, I don't know, it was just Monday to Friday. My husband did ten years of nights, night work, and where we lived on the main road it was very noisy so if there were a lot of noise going on he'd go up Bushy Park and sleep in the car.

[08:25] RD: Tell me a bit more about your husband, what was he like?

EO: Well, he was a shop steward. There's not much to tell, you know.

[08:42] RD: Because you've got, for the tape, we've got some photos here of Ethel's husband. So, what is he doing, do you want to describe what he's doing for people?

EO: That one, you pull a thing, and you get a little cake of black and then you put that in the press and the label, that black and the label, and then you'd pull the press down and it takes about a minute and it's ever so noisy, there's about a hundred presses in the room. You had to shout all the time, the

noise. Dreadful.

[09:16] RD: And how many times would he do that, then? Was that like every minute, or every hour?

EO: I should imagine, they didn't take a minute to press those.

[09:26] RD: So how many do you think he pressed per day, then?

EO: Gawd knows.

[09:30] RD: Give a guess.

EO: Hundreds. Cause they'd have to- they'd get a job and two silver plates and they'd put the plates in and they'd make so many and then they'd take the plates out and then get another job.

[09:45] RD: But back to you, and your average day.

EO: An average day?

[09:49] RD: An average day at work. So, you got there at quarter to eight. What did you do whilst you were there?

EO: In the first part, I used to just sit there and listen, there's about twenty odd people being in the listening room, you know, and you'd be listening for faults. All the time. Not to the music, you'd listen to whether there's anything wrong, you know, damages, and I did that for quite a while.

[10:16] RD: Was it sort of scratches. How would you know that there was a damage? What would you hear, that-

EO: Oh, you'd know a damage all right. Clonk [laughter]. But I didn't like listening to old, um, Winston Churchill. Oh, it was dreadful. It's such a crackly old record, I was thinking, why bother to test them? Any old thing will do.

[10:39] RD: What did you like listening to, though?

EO: What did I like? Well, we had a lot of classical. And a lot of ordinary pop stuff, too. But I can remember the one classical I used to like, Tchaikovsky's 1812 overture. Oh, I liked that one!

[11:03] RD: Did you buy a copy of that one?

EO: No, no, I just used to like listening to it now and again, but by the time you get home you've heard enough of music, and when you're working full time and you go home you've got the cooking to do, and the shopping to do, and the clearing up, because everyone sits around, don't they, the two girls, my husband, but Mum carries on doing the- everything. I can't think of anything else.

[11:34] RD: Let me consult my list. You talked about your average day, whether that was listening to music or later on when you were sending things up to London. What about an unaverage day, did anything exciting ever happen, did someone famous visit?

EO: Um. One day, Princess Margaret came with her two boys. No, a girl and a boy, and another time Engelbert Humpledink came. And then, is it the Bachelors – the Bachelors were from Ireland, weren't they? – I'm sure they came. And they sang to us in our lunch break.

[12:18] RD: They sang for you?

EO: Yeah, in our lunchbreak. It was good of them. That was before they got really popular. We had

some laughs there. It's sad though, people worked there, but there's nothing round there now. There's no records, radar, navigator along there now, it's all furniture shops.

[12:40] RD: How many people were employed there?

EO: Hundreds. There must have been hundred in the press room, twenty or thirty in the testing room. Then upstairs, the sleeving, you know, putting them into sleeves, lots of people up there and the office people, oh, it's a big place.

[13:00] RD: Were they a good company to work for? Did they treat you well?

EO: Yes. They were alright. But I never went full time until I went there because I wanted the girls to be in the seniors first, and then I knew that if I finished at half past four I was home before five myself and they were only on their own for an hour.

[13:24] RD: What did they think of you working there? Did they like records?

EO: Yes.

[13:30] RD: Anything in particular?

EO: Rolling Stones *[laughs]* But we used to listen to the Top of the Pops on the television.

[13:40] RD: Did you ever get to hear songs before they were on Top of the Pops because you'd put the record together?

EO: Yeah, I suppose we did really. But then it was pressing, pressing, pressing thousands then. I wonder if they'll ever go back to pressing records again.

[14:01] RD: It's come back into fashion actually.

EO: Isn't it weird, I wonder why.

[14:05] RD: I think it's the aesthetic, I think it's how they look, my Dad would claim it's to do with the sound, but...

EO: A lot of people say the sound is better by that.

[14:17] RD: I can see you've got a CD player now. *[Ethel laughs]*. Did you ever have a record player?

EO: I didn't bother, no.

[crashing noise]

[14:32] RD: That's the door again. When you were working at the plant, you said you'd listening to classical, etc. Did it ever introduce you to new types of music that you hadn't heard before? Such as the Rolling Stones.

EO: Yes, you went from one extreme to the other, from Rolling Stones to very classical music. We had to listen to it all. I liked it alright.

[15:04] RD: Do you have any particular funny memories?

EO: Any funny memories? Yeah, I can't repeat! *[laughs]*

[15:11] RD: Oh, come on...

EO: No...

[15:17] RD: Any suitable ones that you would like to share?

EO: *[laughs]* No, I can't say, no.

[15:27] RD: Well, we'll leave the listeners to imagine.

EO: There's something very funny and you couldn't possibly put that down.

[15:37] RD: We understand. So, you left in...

EO: 80. 1980. January 1980 that whole firm closed down.

[15:52] RD: What was the impact of that? For you, for the community? The impact.

EO: They just said, we're closing down, you've all got redundancy.

[16:02] RD: That can't have gone down to well with everyone.

EO: No, a lot of people didn't like it, no. My husband bought a white van and did his own thing, going around. But then he died in the April so he only had four month of being his own little boss.

[16:17] RD: I'm sure he enjoyed those few months, though.

EO: *[makes noises of agreement]* So I've been a widow 37 years. You know, I used to be up before six every day. You'd do what you could, you know, before you go. Glad I'm not working now, though, couldn't keep up with it. And you've got to work for, how long?

[16:55] RD: Probably a lot less. I suspect you worked harder than I do.

EO: Yeah, but you've got to work a lot longer to get a pension, haven't you? Which I think is so unfair.

[17:10] RD: Did Decca provide you with a pension?

EO: Actually, when I went to my third job in that little office, I was in charge so I was staff so when they made us all redundant I got a small pension, a small pension.

[17:26] RD: So not everyone in the factory was staff?

EO: No, no, a lot of them got redundancy but those that were staff, they got their little pension.

[17:39] RD: So, what was the difference between staff versus everybody else.

EO: Well, I suppose, it was people in charge. People in charge.

[17:46] RD: Okay, so the lower level workers weren't counted as staff, and didn't get a pension, so it was just those who were in management.

EO: So I've been getting a small pension all those years. 37 years.

[18:02] RD: That's nice of Decca.

EO: Nice.

[18:09] RD: So, I guess Decca were great for you, in that regard, but for those who were made

redundant who didn't have a pension, that must've been really difficult.

EO: Well, they get a nice little handy payout. Oh, yeah, you'd get redundancy money. See, you can live off that for a while, and then get another job, well, in those days you could get another job.

[18:34] RD: Do you think the community changed after the factory closed?

EO: I bet it did.

[18:39] RD: Did people move away, or-

EO: Because it was such a busy area, Burlington Road, and at the top there on the bypass is all those factories. Not there now.

[18:49] RD: Can you describe what the factory looked like to me? Because there aren't many photos.

EO: Oh, really? You've got the photo of the offices. What that block. And then the factory didn't look very pretty at all, it's just a dark, low building which has a clocking in area, a canteen, a huge press room, and then other parts all the way down there which I never bothered to go to. But it's a big place.

[19:25] RD: So, there was the pressing on the ground floor. Were there several floors above that?

EO: There was a sort of upstairs part to that. But that was where they were doing the sleeving and all that, you know.

[19:45] RD: Hard to imagine.

EO: I'm not very helpful, am I?

[19:51] RD: You've been wonderful.

EO: Really? I don't feel as though I have.

[19:56] RD: Trust me, you very much have. I think you've very much brought it alive. Anything else you think you want to add? How do you feel talking about it now, does that bring back some interesting memories, feelings?

EO: Yes, it does bring back memories. Sad ones too, because there are so many people that've gone. I bet- They didn't live around, some of them lived at Redhill. They lived miles away, some of them. But there's an awful lot of people dead now. Cause there was an awful lot of people older than me.

[20:31] RD: Were you one of the younger ones, then?

EO: Medium.

[20:35] RD: So were the youngest people there about sixteen, seventeen, or older?

EO: Older. Testing, testing they did have the younger ones, yeah. Oh, dear. The good old days [laughs].

[20:59] RD: Well, just to finish, we'll have a quick chat about the music that you listened to at the time, because you said that before that you liked some of the classical stuff, is there anything else that you particularly enjoyed? Any bands you went to see? You said about the war, that you went to dances?

EO: Dances? Oh, in the war. Oh, yeah.

[21:20] RD: Do you want to tell me about those? To finish off?

EO: Yeah, we used to get on the bus and go to Wimbledon dancing, and then there was an American camp in Bushy Park in the war. And all the Americans were there and then there was another one in Richmond park, but they were English soldiers up there.

[21:46] RD: Did you meet any of the American soldiers?

EO: No. Well, I was only about fourteen, fifteen, you know, no confidence, wearing glasses. You're not one of those. So, consequently, you'd have been whipped up straight away, but not me.

[22:04] RD: The sort of music they played at dances, what was it like?

EO: Oh, lovely. Joe Loss and – oh, lovely – Little Brown Jug, and all. Lovely music they played then.

[22:20] RD: Well, unless you've got anything else to add?

EO: I can't think of anything.

[22:27] RD: Well-

EO: Probably when you're gone, I'll think why didn't say that.

[22:31] RD: Well, you can always give us a ring. But thank you very much, Ethel.

EO: Bless you, darling. Thank you, thank you for coming. Oh, you'll just about catch the four o'clock to get back.

[22:41] RD: Yes. Let's stop this and see how it's gone.