

Summary of oral history interview with Barry Jenkins

Date of interview: 16th August 2021

INTERVIEW WITH: Barry Jenkins

INTERVIEWER: Sarah Gudgin

LOCATION: South London Gallery, Peckham

File number: BARRY_JENKINS_WAV_FILE

DURATION: [01:32:05]

[00:00:00]

Barry Reginald Peter Jenkins born Dulwich Hospital, London on 21.6.1944 during a WW2 rocket attack. Family lived at 23 Grove Park, near Peckham. When he was 6 months old a V2 rocket landed in nearby Warwick Gardens, blowing in the windows in the room where he was sleeping and covering him in glass. After this, his father arranged for the family to go to Whitstable for the remainder of the war.

Father was a sheet metal worker in the Services. Worked for Glover Widford and Liberty in The Old Kent Road. Mother was a cook at the fire station for the Red Watch, which was at the school that Barry attended in Peckham. During the war, the family went to shelter in the underground station at Elephant and Castle.

[00:04:15] He tells a story about being interviewed by a woman, related to a man who was in the concentration camps that made the rockets. She told Barry all about the rocket that landed in Warwick Gardens and other bombs in Peckham and New Cross, which killed a lot of people. The impact from the blast in Warwick Gardens which was a square, affected the surrounding area.

Barry lived in the same house in Grove Park till he was 20. It was an 8 bedroom house which his father rented for £4.00 a week. Father later bought the house and mother rented out rooms as a boarding house. Father died when Barry was 16. Father has his own business in Ivanhoe Road, repairing cars and body work. Barry worked there, left school at 15, started welding at 12. Barry worked for Lomass' in Camberwell Grove, it was a famous firm and he earned 25 shillings a week as an apprentice. They made part of the body for Parry Thomas who broke the land-speed record. After his father died, Barry tried to keep the business going, but he had to sell. Worked for Mr Messnard in Camberwell Green, left there and started working in Peckham where he has been ever since.

[00:09:09] Family were Londoners. As a child, he played with children in Ivanhoe Road and has remained friends with them all his life. Recalls a toy model shop, getting a clip round the ear from Mr Yellowleaf. Used to play on the bomb site near Dog Kennel Hill School, they called it Tarzans. Remembers playing cricket at the Ivanhoe Pub, using the pub wall as a wicket. Played cricket with the Yanks, who had come to knock down an air shelter.

1956 his sister was born. Stayed at school till he was 11, but wasn't very clever at anything. Teacher got them into boxing, used to go to boxing clubs. When a new school called William Penn was built on Red Post Hill, he went there, it is The Charter School now.

[00:15:44] Barry worked for FS Crocker, a panel beater, which was opposite the school. In his later years, Crocker ended up working for Barry and died a day before his 103 birthday.

Rye Lane Peckham was a great shopping centre up until the mid-1970's. There were dressmakers and tailors in Rye Lane where as a young man, he would go to have his suits made. He mentions several shops and department stores which have now gone. There was also lot of manufacturing and sweatshops in the Peckham area, Sterns in Blenheim Grove made skirts for Marks and Spencer's.

Back then people didn't own their own houses, in the 1950's there were Dockers and Printers living in the local area and they were earning good money, Rye Lane catered for them. When they closed the Docks, the Dockers left the area, a lot of the shops left too. The people who moved in were different people and they didn't frequent the same shops.

Remembers a delicatessen at the top of Rye Lane which had coffee beans, owned by a former Italian prisoner.

[00:21:30] Remembers buying a handbag for a girlfriend in the indoor market at Peckham Market on Christmas Eve. It was such a busy place, but it stands empty today. Lord Harris [of Harris Academy] worked there for five years. The shops took great money.

Talks about shops changing. Sainsbury's opened and left. Problems with the carpark. Hannah Barry opened an art gallery. There are very good concerts in the carpark with excellent musicians. Thinks it is good for the local area.

Sainsbury's is now a cinema, but previously people wouldn't park their cars in the car park and it was very hard to access. Remembers being called out to a number of women in the carpark, who couldn't start their cars and wouldn't get out of them.

[00:26:20] After his father passed away, mother ran a boarding house. She sold the house and bought a house in Beckenham. Barry would get the number 12 bus over to Peckham each day. She later moved back to Peckham.

Choumert Road used to be packed with market stalls. Recalls the Tower Cinema, which was knocked down in 1965. Talks about locations of local cinemas. Attended Saturday morning cinema, they never had television. Remembers watching the ascent of Everest in 1953. Describes the beautiful interior of The Tower, they would never allow it to be knocked down now.

All the local pubs have gone. Some buildings have been saved such as the Liberal Working Man's Club by the Peckham Society. He remembers it when no women were allowed into the club and they had to be escorted in by men. They used to have shows, dances and the snooker club in there.

[00:33:30] It was a club for working people. He remembers a man who made batteries in Blenheim Grove. Barry speaks about a job that he had which was to make parts for [Hawker] Sea Fury planes. Tells a story about going to Cuba and seeing a Sea Fury at the Bay of Pigs and being shown round and made a fuss of.

The Hope pub in Rye Lane was the last one remaining. Remembers being in *Hennessey's* when the first man walked on the moon. *The Kings Arms*, was bombed during the war, it's now a block of flats. Mentions a number of other pubs which have gone.

[00:37:50] Barry worked up the road from *The Prince Albert* which is still open and he liked to go there. During the three day week in the 1970's, he earned a lot of money as he bought a generator and was able to work through the night. They went to the pub where Peggy looked after them. The first time he used the generator the police came round to see what was happening.

Barry explains what the three day week was. People were being laid off, recalls a Labour politician who said production went up in the three day week. There were power cuts and people were buying candles and couldn't watch television.

Remembers going to America for the Ali/Frazier fight. He recalls speaking to an American man, who couldn't grasp that there was a three day week in the UK.

Barry explains that he had to remember to turn the electric off on the mains, otherwise the generator would go flying off down the road when the power came on. Remembers being in a bar in New York and seeing Young's Brewery delivering beer by horse and cart on TV. An American man thought things had got so bad in England that the 'Limys' had to use horses instead of cars.

[00:44:30] Barry talks about the Bussey Building and the common mistake people make in identifying which is the Bussey Building. Recalls that there used to be a cinema, a laundry and a J. Lyons café there as well as another one in Rye Lane, which shows you how busy the area was.

Inside the Bussey was a junk jewellery manufacturer and a tent manufacturer. Freeman Motors was on the right and there was a petrol pump. Barry helped to build a car showroom there and he used to do the body work. He recalls the Commercial Plywood Factory and lots of African Churches there. There was a Roots car dealership.

[00:48:48] Barry has a lot of memories connected to the area. The people he worked with there in the 1960's, who taught him everything, were men who had all been in the war.

Recalls buying copper from a firm called Meridian Bronze in Peckham. Barry's son went to Camberwell School of Art and made things out of copper and metal. The woman in the firm liked him and would give him a good price, so if they every needed anything, they would send him round for it. There was a court case because a dodgy dealer had bought metal from them. They shut and moved only two years ago.

[00:52:22] Speaking about the men who he worked with, Barry says they had been wounded in the war. They were living in pre-fabs in Peckham, they couldn't work and they weren't able to get a pension. He remembers their families.

Barry worked for Brendon Kahn Coachworks [?] and Freeman Motors, the men there ended up working for him and they left Barry all of their tools.

In Bellenden Road where the arches are, was a firm called J H Sparshack [?] which was the largest wooden body builders in western Europe. Barry used to do some work for them. The governor used to come up from Portsmouth every day and they were the largest employer in Portsmouth. He said Barry was 'hopeless but good for moral'.

Talks about another local firm called Boyd's who were the top people for Gardener Engines.

[00:57:44] Barry shares his thoughts on the Bussey Building now and says he is the wrong age for it. He also says he can't buy the things he wants, like a shirt in Peckham. He sometimes goes to meetings in the Bussey where they all 'moan about things'. He thinks there are too many restaurants and bars and they have shut the pubs.

Barry recalls some places that are no longer there, including Thomas P. Edmonds where he bought tools and Glover Webb and Liberties in Old Kent Road, who made the coach that Princess Margaret used at her wedding, they had a Royal Warrant, as well as dustcarts.

When Jones and Higgins was being knocked down, Barry was offered a magnificent wooden staircase from the building.

Speaks about a famous photo was taken in WW1 of the Army in Lyndhurst Way on the way to France. Someone organised for it to be taken again in the present day with people in uniforms and 16 horses.

He met a man, who worked in Jones and Higgins, who told Barry that the staff used to live above the shop. Barry speaks about seeing Father Christmas at Jones and Higgins.

[01:02:44] He remembers customers were served by the staff at Jones and Higgins, they looked after the customers. At one point it was called *The Houndsditch*, but it was going downhill then.

Jones and Higgins sold everything from clothes to furniture, you could buy a piano there and there were different departments. At one point the Peckham area even rivalled Oxford Street. Peckham shops took more money than anywhere else. It was so busy that you couldn't get a shop there, it's hard to imagine now.

There was even a shop called Home and Colonial. Michael Caine wrote that he was sad that Kennedy's Sausages had gone. Speaks about the Gandolfi brothers, who were based in Nunhead and made cameras of Cuban mahogany and brass.

[01:07:23] Joseph Conrad who wrote *Heart of Darkness* married a Peckham girl. Remembers a Milk Bar, a pen manufacturers.

There was even an Omega watch dealer in Rye Lane where Barry bought an Omega Speed Master in 1971. It cost a lot of money, but there were good jewellers locally.

What changed Peckham? In the early 1970's/80's London Borough of Southwark said that they wanted to build a town hall in Peckham in a location where there were a mixture of people running the shops, including quite a few Jewish people. As a result they left, but they never build the town hall.

Recalls the tomatoes man, who had a store which sold just tomatoes opposite Marks and Spencer's.

Things won't come back and now people have gone over to online shopping.

[01:13:12] The communities have changed. Bellenden Road was a 'disaster area' so the Council reduced the business rates for the shops, then it turned around like Lordship Lane, which was 'useless'. The Post office, a great hardware shop, the co-op are all gone. Mentions photos of old Bellenden Road which are on the outside of the school.

Where there is a second hand furniture shop now, Barry says there is a wooden structure/building out the back which is listed. It used to belong to 'Sid the safe man' who repaired safes. He couldn't go anywhere without authorisation from the police, who wanted to know where he was at all times. He used to roll his own cigarettes and he said that the one he had in his mouth, had been there since 1936. If he sold you a safe, he would keep a key for himself. He was a professional.

One of Barry's customers brought Peter [Anthony] Gormley to meet Barry. He was looking for somewhere to do his work, then he got a place in Bellenden Road, he turned the place around.

The Butchers opened up, people did cartoons of him, there were long queues outside the shop and it's very expensive. Barry says it's that the people who have moved in who have changed the place. The dry cleaners has just gone, but the laundrette is still there and she does Barry's shirts. He says there used to be more shops there, but they have since gone. Barry says he quite likes it now. Mentions a baker who made used to make the bread behind the shop, which is also gone.

[01:18:37] Barry thinks that what has changed Peckham the most, is the people. He recalls a conversation with someone about how the area has changed. He speaks about Steve's fish and chip shop in Maxted Road. It was a great shop and he looked after the kids, he is terribly missed.

There was immigration and West Indians people came, then the new people moved in, who local people don't like very much. These people think they are special and they have come to gentrify the area. Barry doesn't like the term 'gentrification' and he thinks this is rubbish. They say that they are 'gentrifying the working class man'. He feels that the newcomers have not 'clicked in' with everyone and there are no characters any more. People used to help each other, his customers became friends. Maybe the new comers will tone in eventually. He blames the trains for changing the area.

[01:23:30] Recalls someone making a comment to Barry about fruit and vegetable produce on local stalls, 'the working man likes stuff that is near enough finished.'

Barry doesn't mind the word 'regeneration', but is concerned about who is coming to Peckham. He thinks they need a department store like Brixton which is doing well.

Barry thinks that the people leading the regeneration don't really know what they are doing.

People didn't believe him about there being an Omega watch seller. The Dockers and Print people spent their money and the Liberal Club used to be booming.

Barry thinks that there have been exaggerations about the black community. Recalls playing cricket with two black kids at Chaumert Road School. Fifty years later, a black guy came to see him, who was the grandson of one of these boys. Barry says people did get on alright, although people also got killed. Several shops in Chaumert Road are owned by black people.

[01:28:00] Regeneration money went into the North Peckham Estate, but it didn't work and he explains why and it was a disaster. He thinks they were treating people like experiments in rotten blocks of flats.

The man from Whitten Timber yard came to see Barry when he was selling up and told Barry that he was the last person left now. They have built a theatre where the timber yard was. The largest bar in Peckham is on the roof and Barry went to dancing lessons there. He remembers the canal with wood floating in it from the timber merchants.

Housing has changed like North Peckham Estate, due to regeneration. Mentions a friend who was a doctor and found cockroaches everywhere.

[01:32:42] Barry doesn't think Peckham's bad reputation was deserved. But if he ever had to get a cab to Peckham, he would tell the driver where he wanted to go after he had got in to the taxi

because if he asked them to take you to Peckham, they would say no. He says there has also been trouble with gangs, but they always paid him. Barry also says that Peckham was not a dangerous place to live and you could walk about then, but it is getting bad again today.

He discusses the cleaning and maintenance of Peckham station, where he has a business selling Mexican food. There is a lot of rubbish and it looks neglected and people are sleeping rough. It never used to be like that. He talks about the ongoing plans for the station and the Waiting Room which used to be snooker hall.

[01:38:23] His business is in Blenheim Grove where he lives. When he got it, the house was a ruin and he built workshops at the back. Remembers Dobbin the horse, who used to collect the cardboard and take it to the East End and there was a trotting pony in the back. Barry rebuild the house which is Grade Two listed.

He is now retired, but he still does a bit of work. He lives with his son and grandson who is four. He likes to tinker with very old cars and at the moment he is working on an Elvis, which he bought from the Lord Mayor of London 35 years ago. He is trying to get rid of the things he doesn't want.

He doesn't know if he will see out his days in Peckham, although he has a lot of friends there. The area has changed, but it is due to the recent people. Barry shows Sarah a letter which was written in 1844 by someone who said he had to leave Peckham because it was changing. It's the same story over a hundred years later.

[01:44:43] Discussion about Austin's, a large second hand antique furniture shop which stood on Peckham Rye. Spike Milligan worked there. It was well-known and many people used to come there. Story about a chauffeur-driven car getting lost on its way to Austin's, which had Sean Connery in the back. He was going to Austins. It was a wonderful place.

[01:47:19] End