

Thalidomide: John Carter (2012)

Ruth Blue interviews John Carter for the *Thalidomide: An Oral History* project.

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This is Ruth Blue interviewing John Carter on the 20th November 2012 at his home in Woking for Thalidomide: An Oral History.

John, have you seen and signed the copyright and consent form?

Yes, I have.

Thank you. And could you just start off by telling me your full name, age, date and place of birth.

My name's John Carter, I'm fifty, born in 1962, June the seventh.

And where were you born?

I was born in Sussex, raised in Surrey.

The first few questions are about childhood. Your birth, family and school life and any early medical interventions you had. So could you start off by telling me who your parents were, what sort of work they did and if you've got brothers and sisters.

Me mum, she was a housewife, Margaret. And me dad, Ernest Joe Carter, he was a farmer down in Sussex but up here he was a long distance lorry driver, in Surrey.

What about your brothers and sisters, have you got any of those?

Yes. I've got five brothers, two sisters.

Wow!

Yes. They all live round the area. I've lost one sister through a heart attack. Me eldest sister, she's had cancer since she was twenty-five. I lost me two parents through cancer and the rest of the family, they're all spread round the Surrey area and we see each other now and again.

And where did you fit in line ... are you the oldest, are you the youngest?

No, I was third youngest.

Third youngest?

Second youngest, sorry.

Okay.

Yes.

What about your mum's decision to use the drug thalidomide. Do you know who prescribed it for her?

I don't know. I don't know. All I can tell you is, when I was born the doctors drugged her up, dragged her up ... drugged her, sorry, took me in, said, "This is what's wrong your boy blah, blah" and took me out and when the drug that she'd had had dissolved she turned round and said, "What was that?" [laughs].

Really? So she doesn't know how long she took it for or anything like that or what she ...?

No. But they said the more you took the drug the worse your baby was going to be so I don't whether she took it for two weeks or a week but I'm happy as I am.

Was it something that she was comfortable to talk about? Was she happy to talk about taking thalidomide?

Yes. Yes. She was open with it. She wasn't ... she was proud of what she had, her baby boy and the family was happy with it. But life had to go on didn't it?

Yes. And I suppose she'd already got quite a lot of children so ...

Yes. Because she'd lost me third eldest brother, he died of cot death ...

Oh really?

Yes, and me eldest brother, he got run over up the road when he was a youngster and nearly lost him and then you know who came along [laughs].

The one and only [laughs].

Yes. The worst of all [laughs].

The terror. Where were you born? Were you born in a hospital?

Yes, yes. A little place called Rushington, down in Sussex.

And so go back a bit. You said you were born and your mum was given a sedative probably ...

Yes.

And then did she ask to see you after that?

I haven't the foggiest. All I can remember is that she said that I was there one day and she just looked at me, "Yes, that's my boy" and that's it. The only thing she did do was then they came home, me eldest ... I had four brothers at the time, two brothers, two sisters, and they ... mum said, "Look, there's something wrong with your brother I've got to explain to you." She said, "Look, there's your brother, look, he's got short arms ... short legs and he's disabled, how do you feel?" and they just all coped with it.

They pulled together?

Yes.

That's good.

Now because this is an audio interview only can you describe your level of impairment?

I've got ... I was born with no hips, no knees, heart defect, I've got a murmur on the heart, blind in the left eye, born with one kidney missing, left arm, left leg shorter than the right side but in all, couldn't be happier, you know. You can't change life so you've just got to cope with what you've got.

The heart defect ... is the heart defect something that you might have been born with anyway or do you know if it was an effect caused by thalidomide?

Yes. I think it was affected by thalidomide. The same with the missing kidney and only found that out before I met Joy. I went up to the hospital and they give me tests. They found out ... they said, "Have you had any operations?" I said, "Why?" they said, "You've got a kidney missing" and me joking about said, "Oh, yes. I had steak and kidney last night" [laughs]. And it was one of them hospitals that couldn't take a joke. 'Specially when you start talking about missing bits [laughs].

I'd like to have seen their faces when you said it.

Oh, I did have ... I don't know if you know about ... I had a duck-webbed hand. Well, between the thumb and the finger it was webbed.

That's your left hand.

That's it. It was deformed in the thumb and the finger but what they were going to do was take the skin away so I had all hands on both hands but unfortunately I had an accident and they had to transform the finger and turn it into the thumb.

It looks like it works pretty well actually, it's in just the right angle, isn't it?

Yes. I get a bit of arthritis in there now and again, well I will do, but it works okay. I can make a sign to people and they don't realise. I can go like that and they go, "Urgh."

It's just pointing ...

... and it's that finger [laughs].

I'll look out for that.

Do you know if your parents were given much advice by medical professionals or how long your mum stayed in hospital for after you were born?

No, I don't know how long me mum was in hospital for but I knew ... I know me mum had medical advice on my disability. They said the little part of the leg I had, they could amputate so I could have a better life but as my mum said to them, "If he's got that part of a leg, there's got to be a reason for it." So she said, "No, we'll leave that alone." And I'm happy go lucky.

Did you have to stay in and have any other surgery do you know? Did they have to do anything with your heart or ...?

No. They didn't know I had a heart problem 'til I had to go in to hospital to have me hand done and died on the operating table and they brought me back round. Because there wasn't no house phones at the time me mum used have to run up and down the top road to see how I'm doing and they said, "Yes, he's still asleep, he's still asleep" It was through the anaesthetic and dying on the operating table that I was asleep. It was touch and go at the time.

Would that have been your first operation?

Yes.

And how old would you have been then?

Now you're asking. I would say about seven or eight.

Okay. You didn't have anything done as a baby then?

No, no.

So did you go straight home after you were born, you were taken home?

Yes, yes.

And your parents ... you said your parents and your extended family all sort of pulled together and ...

Yes. If it wasn't for me mum and me eldest brothers and sisters, I'd be stuck in a wheelchair. It's them constantly saying, "Right ..." if it wasn't for me mum picking me up or getting me to walk or me brothers and sisters getting me to walk I'd be stuck in a chair. It was them just continuous ... Because the doctors told me mum I'd never sit up, never crawl, never do nothing for meself, but ...

And they decided otherwise.

Yes. Me mum said, "Well I ain't going to sit about and just let him vegetate, we're going to do something with him," and that's what they done.

So do you think, would you say in general you had a happy childhood?

Yes. I would say I had a happy childhood. Some kids they say, "Oh, no, I didn't have a happy childhood" but I did. I did basically what I wanted to do but as me sister said to me mum, she mollycoddled me. She wrapped me up in cotton wool and they said, "No, you must let him do as he wants, mum, so he knows the facts of life and what's right and wrong out there."

You can see why she'd do that though, can't you?

Oh yes, yes. Because she was afraid that ... there's some cruel people out there and that's what she was afraid of but she did learn me how to cook and how to fend for meself. That's another thing I forgot to tell you, I've got no sense of smell.

Oh, really?

Yes.

Is that you nasal passages?

That's it. Never been able to smell in me life. Because I used to be able to cook but then someone would say, "Oh, there's something burning out there mate" "I can't smell it" and I'd go out there and the pans all black but ...

And is there nothing you've ever been able to do about that? They haven't offered you any ...?

No. well they wanted to operate on me nose and operate on me eye to correct them all and me mum said, "What's the point?" She was so upset, when I was eighteen I wanted to have it all done. And she said, "Look, you go down the pub, and as short as you are, you go down the club, you're having a few beers, someone turns round and goes "What do you want?" smacks you in the nose, breaks your nose, it's all back to square one again" so might as well stay as I am.

I suppose if you never had a sense of smell you haven't really missed it in a way, have you?

No, that's right.

So you probably get used to knowing if something's burning ...

Yes. You use these ...

Sound and ...

You use these and these. If you hear something goes, [crackling sound] you think, "No, that's not right, take it off" [laughs].

Does it affect your sense of taste though, can you still taste things?

No, I can still taste. It's like a mate of mine, he bought a pizza and he thought he'd try one of these with jalapenos on it and he thought, "No, I don't like that, I'll pass it on to John, see if John ..." "A whole pizza?" He said, "I bet you don't eat it" so I sat and ate the lot but the sweat was literally ... it was buckets. And I was sweating like a ...

But I was born with bad teeth through the drug, the first set of teeth came out like lumps of coal, me second lot was white but they were so brittle that if I bit into something they would break and me gums would all bleed. So when I turned eighteen I said, "No, I'll have them all out." That's what I did. Had them all out when I was eighteen.

Yes. So do you have false teeth now or have you got implants?

Yes. Full set ... oh no, I wouldn't have them fitted in. Oh, I don't think me gums would have it.

I watched some film of the process of it being done and it does make you feel a bit funny.

Yes.

Do you know when your mum first knew that your impairment was caused by thalidomide because that probably wouldn't have been straight after birth, would it?

No. I don't know. I don't know because there was a lot of argy bargy about it but then people came and people went and as a kid I was told, "Look, go in your bedroom, play with your toys" or "Go outside. Mum's got people to talk to" and that's how it was. But mum wasn't doing it to be cruel to me, she was doing it so she had the kids away from her so she could understand what they were saying ... what the people were saying to her about me.

Yes. But she must have presumably told you at some point, about thalidomide?

Oh, yes. Yes. We sat down and she said, "Look, you know you're not a normal child." I went, "Yes, I gathered that because my brothers are taller than me and I've got ... they've got bendy bits on their legs which are knees and hips and I haven't got none, why?" So she sat there and explained it to me and I said, "Right, fair enough." She said, "Haven't you got nothing to say about it?" I went, "No, that's life. Got to get on with it"

And she didn't feel bad herself about taking it?

No, no. She did at first but then we just grew with it, you know. Whatever came along, came along.

And do you know if your parents got involved in any of the campaigns for compensation or Thalidomide Society meetings?

Yes. She got to the ... a solicitor got hold of her and asked her, "Would she like compensation?" And she said, "Yes" That was the first lot of compensation we ever got and they got theirs. I got mine and basically that's all I know about it.

And what about the Thalidomide Society? Did she join that or go to any of those meetings?

No. Used to go to the parties. We used to have thalidomide parties at a place called Stoke Poges. We used to call it Pogle's Wood.

[Laughs]. And was that the first time you would have met other people affected by thalidomide?

Yes. No, I used to meet some up Roehampton sometimes.

Oh you went to Roehampton?

Yes. Used to have to go up there quite a lot to the limb-fitting place. But they used to strap me down in all these contraptions and I used to go, "I don't like them." "Try them, see how you get on" and I used to say, "No, I don't like them" So...Right, can we pause it there for a minute?

Yes. Of course we can.

Because mother nature is calling.

[Break in audio].

Right. Carry on with Roehampton.

Yes.

Okay. So John, you were just about to start telling me about Roehampton, your visits there.

Yes. I used to go up to ... well, when I was youngster, but they used to strap me in these weird contraptions and try making me taller and all that but the only problem was when you fell, you fell like a tree. You couldn't ... me wrists and hands used to cop it and if I didn't put me hands out, me face would cop it. Now, I'd end up with like as me wrists are all hurt and all and ... there used to be some horrible contraptions. They used to strap you through them ... your feet, you strap your feet down like a ballerina and then you come up and you have a great big wide strap down inside your leg and then you have a great big wide belt across your waist to hold you in. But it was like I was sitting in them. They'd come up and round me hips and I'd be sitting in them but they were so heavy, it was like being a robot.

So they were artificial legs, basically?

Yes. And it was horrible.

Yes. Did you have to stay there when you were in ... did you have to go in and stay at Roehampton?

When I had my hand operation I had to stay up there but when I was up there having artificial legs done I'd be like a day patient. You go up there ... they'd like strap you in a ... like an Indian hoist and then put all plaster of Paris over you then four or five doctors would come along, take you off of this hoist, lay you on a bed after the plaster of Paris had dried, let you settle for a bit and then come along and just cut them off so they could use them for like ... oh, what do you ... like a plate or something, a copper plate.

Yes. Yes, like a model to ...

Yes. And sometimes it used to hurt. It was horrible. Then I used to have to go up the hospitals and they used to pull and prod me about or see what I've got, if I haven't got it or it should be there, it shouldn't be there, it is there and I said to me mum, I said, "Do I have to go through all this lot?" She said, "No, not if you don't want to" she said, "You've got your own mind son, you do what you want to do. If you feel uncomfortable about it, you don't do it no more." I think I was fourteen / fifteen, I was still at school at the time and I said, "No, I don't want to do it no more." She said, "Don't do it then" and we got a hospital appointment and she phoned them up and said, "Look, my son don't want to do them no more, is it okay to cancel it?" They said, "Yes." And doctors said, "Well, can you come up and see us for the last time?" Went up there and he said, "What's made you change your mind about having all these artificial legs?" I said, "You try walking in them." Because they made a pair like a pair of moonboots, it was like a pair of moonboots on topless stilts, then another foot on top of that so you imagine, you've got your foot there, then you've got your leg coming down like that, then you've got another foot underneath there. And me mum said to them, "How's he supposed to walk in them?" They said, "What do you mean?" They weigh, like, nearly a tonne as we call it, and then you've got to get a pair of trousers to fit them so you've got to get a wider leg so it looked right. She said, "No, I ain't putting my boy through that."

Did you ever use them? Did you ever come away with some prosthetic legs that you tried to use?

Yes. Yes. I tried tonnes and tonnes and tonnes of them. But the only ones I did get on with was, as I say, the ones that I used to sit into and the big belt across the waist and the straps down the legs but in them days that's all they knew how to do and I just couldn't cope with them no more.

And if you weren't in them ... so would you use the legs in your sort of daily life, just getting around?

Yes. I'd use them like for school and all that because the school said, "Look, if he's got them he must wear them at school." But you imagine trying to get onto a coach and trying to walk ... sit down ... I had to like, get onto the coach, get up the aisle and sit on the back seat so I could stretch my legs out because they never bent.

Yes. And a lot of schools also didn't have things to help; there was no disabled access, was there?

Not at that time, no.

So if you had stairs, you've got to get up and down stairs.

That's right. We had ... I went to, as we call it, the little schools down here when I first started school and then they passed me from there to Park School at Woking and we used to have to catch a coach at the top of the road, so you can imagine that, the walk from where I lived across the road, up to the top of the road and then get on the coach, then walk around the school to get in the back of the school to actually get to me class because there was steps to go in and out of the classroom in the hall and all.

And through those years you stuck to wearing the prosthetic legs though, did you?

Yes. Yes, I had to.

Going back to Roehampton a bit, you said that was the first time you met other thalidomide affected children?

Yes.

Did you make friendships with any of those children you met there?

Tell you the honest truth I can't remember. It was such a long time. But I do know a story about a bloke there. I was up there having my legs fitted and ... it sounds weird, doesn't it, having your legs fitted?

Yes.

I was sitting there waiting for the ambulance to come and pick me up, take me home but I sat next to a chap and he'd had a motorbike accident and he'd lost part of his leg from the knee downwards and he sat in this chair, he said, "Well, that's my life over an done with. I can't walk, I can't do this, I can't do that." I said to him, "What's the matter mate?" He said, "Well, can't you see? I've had one of my legs taken away, half my leg taken away, I can't walk no more." I said, "That's poppycock mate," I said, "You can do it if you want to." He said, "Why?" he said, "How do you know, what do you know about?" I went, "Well, if you know what I've got you'd know different." He said, "Why, what have you got?" I said, "I've got two." He said, "Prove it then." So I just sat there, pulled me trouser leg up, I said, "There's me foot mate," I said, "And they come up to here, up to me hip." He went, "Oh, I suppose you've just got the one." I said, "No, I've got the two." So I stood up, he said, "Well how do you walk on them?" I said, "Look, I do this" and I was like a robot, I just waddled and as I waddled I'd swing. I said, "Well, if I can do it pal, you can do it" I said, "Because you've had normal legs all your life, you've lost half your leg" I said, "I've got neither" and he went, "Oh, right." And six months down the line when I got back up there to see the doctor to see how I was coping with my ones I

bumped into him again and he shook me hand and said, "Thank you very much, you've helped me to get over it." And I thought, "Oh, I've done something good for a change" [laughs].

Yes, yes. Well you're one of the few people I've actually spoken to who actually did use the legs for a period of time. I mean, most people I've spoken to actually gave up trying to use the legs much sooner.

Well, yes. I can understand that because I've seen some pictures of my fellow friends, thalidomiders, I've seen some of the contraptions they've had to wear. I think they've been marvellous because they've coped over the years without them, you know. I call meself a lucky bloke because I've got parts of me legs and all me arms. Some of them have got parts missing and some of them have got none of them and I think that's fantastic the way they've coped in their lives.

With whatever they've been given.

That's right. And I say, "Life goes on." But people like us, thalidomiders, we wasn't given the choice of what we wanted to do, we had to do it because of what we was able to do and people say, "Well why do you think that way?" "That's the way I think, that's the way I am and that's the way life goes on for me."

And what would the alternative be, to just give up and ...

Just sit in a corner and vegetate.

Yes, yes.

Life don't revolve around just one person. Life has got ... you've got to think in life ... getting back to me childhood, when I was a child I used to have a great big chip on my shoulder ... temper. My mum said if I could have hit someone I could done them a lot of damage because I'm powerful on the chest upwards, I could have done a lot of damage but my temper was throw things about, bash things about. When I was a kid I used to play the drums, well, I play the drums now but when I was a kid I played drums but I used to have to replace my skins, what, every three months or so because I bashed the hell out of them and that was my temper tantrums. But come eighteen, for some unknown reason, I had a fork in the road and me mum said, "Right, you've got two choices son. You can either take that wrong fork and be a miserable man the rest of your life and people are going to say, "Go away, don't want to know" or take the other fork which is going to be good, you help people out, people are going to like you for who you are" and when I turned eighteen, that's the one I took.

Very pleased to hear it.

I had to.

Yes, yes.

You couldn't keep going round being miserable because I am disabled, that's no fault of anybody else's, that's my problem, that's that. And then, people don't like me as I am, "Okay, stay away" but people accept me as I am, I accept them as they are and that's how we get on.

Like a friend of mine, he was born with a clipped lip and when people say to me, "Oh, look at you, your disabilities, what's wrong with other people?" "Well, hang on. My mate, he's got a clipped lip He don't back away. We talk to each other." I know we should really clash because I'm a teddy boy, I like rock n' roll and country and western and he's a mod. Now them two shouldn't get on together but we get on like a house on fire. And that's how life should be.

But some people just ... like you get people that's got an illness, "Oh, I'm not well" or whatever. Fair play, they call it man flu but you should get on with life, you know. But that's how life should be. It's not a bed of roses, I'm not saying that but you've just got to make your life as you want it, people ain't going to say, "There's your life mate, you get on with it." You've got to build it as you want it. If you want to be a sad person sitting in a corner feeling sorry for theirself, day in, day out, so forth, go and do it. If you want to be the happy go lucky person that gets out and mingles with people ... fair play, there are cruel people out there in this big world. So what? You've just got to cope with that. It's the weights of life.

Yes, yes. You mentioned as well going to the Thalidomide Society AGMs and that you did meet other ...

No. To the parties.

... the parties, yes. And there were holidays as well, weren't there?

Yes. I never went to them. I know we had a holiday village in Jersey, I think it was, and we decided to get shot of that.

Did you ever go to one of those?

No. No, as I said me mum she used to watch me very carefully because, getting back to the world again, there's cruel people out there and you don't know what some people are going to do. If you don't fit into society ...

Yes. Well, mums are quite protective anyway, aren't they, by nature?

Oh yes. 'Specially with their special children, as they call them.

Exactly, yes. Exactly. So ... but do you remember sort of meeting or making any friendships with any other thalidomiders at the Thalidomide Society parties?

I remember going to them but we used to stick with our parents if you know what I mean because we were all, "How do I go about, I'm disabled?" "I'll stay away from them, they might say something to upset me or I might say something to upset them." And I've seen pictures of thalidomiders on the website and they've had a good time on holidays with each other but for some unknown reason my mum said, "No, you stick with us" sort of thing. Yes ... but, we had some good holidays.

So you'd say probably you didn't have a lot of contact with other disabled people as you were growing up? Were you mostly mixing with able bodied people?

Yes.

And primary school. You went to a mainstream primary school?

Yes. Same primary school.

Was that difficult for your mum to get you a place there or do you think she got you in?

I don't know. I don't know. But it was difficult because me two sisters, they was working at the time, but they'd have to get up, get me dressed and all, get me into school and then go to work theirself and then take time off work to come and pick me up when it was time to come home from school, bring me home and then go back to work.

Is that because your mum was working at the time?

No. Me mum was busy doing housework and everything else.

Yes. She'd got her hands full, hadn't she?

Sorry?

She had her hands full.

Yes. 'Specially with the youngest one, the two youngest ones should I say. She had George still in a pram and me as I was and George was just starting to like crawl and walk and he wasn't old enough to go to school yet so she had her hands full with him.

Were you ever sort of put into a wheelchair or anything like that? Did people suggest to you using a wheelchair instead of trying to walk either on prosthetic legs or your own legs?

Well, yes. I had wheelchair plus I could walk with the legs but it was so hard and when I got home from school I would sit on the sofa, take me legs off and just crash out on the sofa. Me mum said, "Are you alright mate?" "I've had a hard day mum." People would say, "Oh you had a hard day" because you was at school so you had a hard day and they would think, "Poor little lad, he's had a hard day." But me mum realised because I'd had a more harder day than a normal child because I had to walk round in legs all the time.

Well it must have been a heck of a lot of effort ...

Sometimes it was ...

... to walk with those big legs.

Yes, because you'd have to, like, shift to one side and as you'd shift, you'd have to kick and sometimes you get very sore and sometimes me mum would ring the school up and say, "Me boy can't come in today because he's so sore" and with the teachers there, they were so understanding it was unbelievable. Even though they'd never met a person with artificial legs in them time of years, they were so sympathetic. But we used to have a school board bloke come round, that's how far I'm going back, and he used to knock on the door, find out why your child wasn't at school and he'd knock on the door and because he's the regular bloke round here, mum would say, "Come in come in, see my boy, see what's wrong with him," and I'd be on the sofa with a blanket over me. Because I couldn't wear underpants or nothing, I'd have to cover meself up because I was so sore and he'd and come in and he'd say, "What's up with today? Still sore?" Me mum would say, "Yes." "Okay then, there's a note for you love" and then he'd go on his way. But then going to big school, like Woking, they were the same. They were so sympathetic because they knew that it was me disability and all that they would compensate for it. Because they had all sorts of disabilities up there, they had deaf people, they had Down's syndrome people, they had dyslexic people, all types of disabilities in that one school that they knew that they couldn't balance whether it was a con or it was an actual illness.

Absolutely, yes. So was your secondary school a special school then, if it had a lot of different disabilities?

Yes. Yes.

So your primary school was a mainstream school and what were the other kids like when you were there? Were they ... how did they react to your impairment?

Which one?

Your primary school, your first school?

The first school? Oh, it was okay. We all mingled in together. I had a few friends there. A bloke called Billy and we had some fun there. Him and his mate used to grab hold of me, put me in this ... had a tiny little

pram at the time, they used to sit me in there and use me as a ram raid. They used to push me in ... Of course where the legs were so stiff, they couldn't bend, the kids would just go, "Bing" and they'd fly everywhere like ping pong balls [laughs].

What would your mum have said if she'd seen?

She used to go mental.

She would have done, yes.

She'd say to me, "What have you been up to today?" "Oh, me and Billy ..." "You and that Billy Tunnel, I'll kill the pair of you," she'd say. "You'll be the death of me"

But you didn't encounter any bullying or unfair remarks or anything like that from kids?

No. Not in them days but I did at Park School. I had a few kids there that used to be bullies but my parents used to go up there and have a word with the teachers but they just sorted themselves out, you know. Kids will be kids.

Was that your secondary school, Park School?

Yes.

And that was the special school?

Yes.

So the primary school didn't make any changes to sort of accommodate you, like with ramps or anything like that?

No. Because in them days they didn't know what disability was.

No. But the secondary school would have been more likely to have those things in place if it was a special school?

No.

It didn't either?

No. Not in them days. As I say, I used to have to get off the coach, walk round the school and come in the back way because it was steps and all, in the main entrance of the school. I used to go round the back and come in through the back exit because there wasn't steps there.

And were there any other thalidomide affected children at your school that you know of?

No.

No. What about your favourite subjects at school? What did you like doing, what were you good at?

It was cooking ... I sound like a poof now, cooking and sewing.

I wouldn't have put you down as cooking and sewing.

Yes? And music.

Oh, music.

Yes.

And did you have an idea of any sort of career you'd like to do when you got older?

Yes. I wanted to be a professional drummer or a long-distance lorry driver.

When did you start the drumming? What age?

Five or six.

Really? That's very young.

Yes, I was playing ... no, sorry, seven. Because I started off with me mum's pots and pans and all I used to do was get a bit of music on the radio, I used to sit there listening to the radio, I used to get the pots and pans out and me mum's wooden spoons, start playing away and a few years later me mum went out and bought a very tiny, junior kit, drums. She said, "Come on then mate, you want to play the drums, I'll buy you

a kit,” and I went, “Oh, what’s a kit?” because I never knew what drums were, all I knew was pots and pans, that’s it. And then mum got me a junior kit and I just done the self same thing, the radio, cassette player or record player. At that time, that’s all we had. And I’d just play away ... “Oh, you’re pretty good mate, ain’t you?”

So then she get me a senior set and I’d play them and in between getting the two ... the senior set ... the junior set I used to play and she said, “I’ll take you to a teacher.” And she took me to a teacher and she said, “Can you teach my boy how to play?” So we went into this teacher’s room and he said, “Right, John, you set your drums up while I talk to your parents” ... excuse me, I’ve got a runny nose ... “and we’ll see what you can do” So he come in the room and he said, “Right, now show me what John Carter can do” so I sat there, playing away. He went, “So, what would you like to do once you’ve finished me teaching you to play and I tell you you can play?” And he had the biggest drum kit I can imagine, if you can imagine, it takes half of that corner up. So it must have been, what, three drum kits in one, a five tier kit, so you can imagine what they’re like, they’re massive. He said, “What would you like to do?” and me eyes just lit up, I said, “I’d like to play them, please.” He went, “You what?” I said, “If you teach me how to play, I would like to play them.” He said, “You’ve got a deal then.”

Fantastic.

He said, “You show me what you can do, I’ll teach you, once it’s over, you can play them.” I said, “You’re joking.” He went, “No.” So he said, “Right, now show me what you can do.” I’m just playing away like I usually do, he put a bit of music on, I sat there, “Right, put it on again, right, got it right” and away I went. I played with this bit of music and he turned the music off, he said, “Right, that’s it for a minute.” So he went out to me parents, came back, he said, “Right, John, show your mum what you’ve just shown me.” So he put the music on again, I played it and me mum said, “Well, what’s that telling me?” He said, “Well, I can’t teach him nothing.” My dad turned round and said, “He’s a lazy little so-and-so, he can’t learn nothing then, can he?” And the teacher said, “It’s not because he’s lazy, I can’t teach him nothing because he knows it” My mum said, “How?” he said, “I don’t know” he said, “He must have taught himself or someone’s taught him.” “No, I haven’t taken him to no teachers.” I just sat there playing away. He said, “Right, that’s it. It’s over and done with” and my mum said, “How much do I owe you?” He said, “Nothing, because I haven’t taught him nothing.” So he said, “Off you go then.” I said, “Does that deal still stand then?” He said, “What deal?” I said, “If you taught me how to play, I could play your drums.” Mum said, “Do what?” “Yes, I said to him if he could show me what he could do and I taught him he could play the drums.” So there I am, behind these drum kit and all you could see is a pair of drum sticks just moving. You couldn’t see me through the drums. I was in my glory. And me mum said to him, “Look, that’s what he’s got to do.” I’ve been ... I ain’t been in bands but I’ve played on stage and I just absolutely love it.

So you basically picked it up by ear?

Yes. Can’t read a stitch of music.

That’s funny, isn’t it? How that works sometimes.

Being partially dyslexic and all, that’s give me a knock back but it hasn’t, because me mum couldn’t read music so the pair of us, we’d just ... oooh, someone’s just walked over my grave ... me mum couldn’t read music and I couldn’t read music but we got together and we used to have jamming sessions in the sitting room.

What did she play?

Yes. Mum used to play organ, she used play piano, any keyboard stuff. Oh, she'd make it sing.

And she'd just learnt by ear as well?

Yes.

Isn't it funny because my parents both played the piano and my dad never had a music lesson in his life, just played by ear. My mum was taught to play properly, reading music and they both played really well but really differently to each other. Neither of them could stand to listen to each other play. My dad would be like, my mum couldn't improvise anything ...

[Dog barks]. My foster daughter.

That's really interesting actually. And so you carried on playing the drums did you, all the way through?

Yes. I've got an electric kit in the computer room. I've got a full kit out in the shed that I still play, as I say, gadget man. I've got two electric sets out there and I just love playing the drums. I played at me sister's party, I played at me wedding and I played at me fiftieth Birthday party and all.

Amazing. That's good. And it's great that you just carried on going all those years as well.

Well, yes. People say, "Well, you haven't touched the drums in years, what can you play?" And I just listen to a bit of music ... my nephew came round for a party ... we've got a karaoke machine out the back and I said, "Have you got your guitar with you Rob?" He said, "Yes, what's up Uncle John?" I said, "Come on, we're having a jamming session." He said, "Do you know this one by ... Greensleeves, or something like that?" I said, "Go on, you play it and I'll go with you" and I'm playing away, he said "John, can we ..." something like that, so anyway, I played with him, he said, "John, I didn't know you knew that tune." I said, "I don't" he said, "Well you just played the drum beat to that music" "Oh, did I?" [laughs].

So you've obviously ... you've got rhythm, basically.

Yes.

That's, that's ... and so you said that you were thinking about trying to become a professional drummer? Did that ever happen? Did you ever manage to find a way of doing that?

No. Every time I went for interviews it would be, "Oh, well, we don't know" because I was rock 'n' roll, country and western drummer, it was a bit one-sided, if you know what I mean? Some people would play classical, some people would play other sorts of music ... but it never just got to it, you know. I tried making up a band myself but never got round to it.

No. And what about the desire to be a long-distance lorry driver?

Sorry? Say that again.

What about your desire to be a long-distance lorry driver? What happened with that?

Well me dad was a long-distance lorry driver and I thought, "Oh, yes. That would be good, away from the house, on the road, seeing the country." But I never could do it because being as I was, I'm not a hundred percent fit so I wouldn't pass the physical.

I guess you'd have to get a lorry adapted, wouldn't you, in some way, as well? Would you have had to do that?

You would in them days but these days you don't because they're semi-automatic and all the controls are on the steering anyway. But, as I said, me physical side would go against me because one, I've got a bad back, two, I've got a bad heart so it was a no-go at the start.

Yes, yes. It's a shame, isn't it, because you had, you know, these potentials, didn't you and things just sort of ...

Yes, I had potentials but there again, another thing would go against me, me dyslexic. Because in them days you had to read the road signs and all sorts of things like that.

I haven't really asked you about the dyslexia. When did you get diagnosed as being dyslexic?

Years ago. When I was about seventeen / eighteen.

And how did it affect you? Was it mostly with your reading?

Well, mainly reading. People say to me, "Well, how do you cope with life not being able to read properly?" Just had to. It's like my wife Joy, she's partly dyslexic, but she's more dyslexic than what I am but we get through life with it. If I don't know ... if I get a letter and I don't understand it, I go up to me sister-in-law and me brother, up the road and say to them, "Look, I've got this letter. I don't understand it. Can you read it to me?" And because my brother is partially dyslexic because he found he had mastoids in the ears and that's

what made him dyslexic. Because they chuckled him at the back of the class, of course, he'd go, "What? What did you say?" That's what made him dyslexic. So his wife helps him get through that. Of course, being the sister-in-law she is, she helps me out and I just got past it until me and Joy got together and that's the way we do it now.

There's always a way round, isn't there?

There's a way and a will.

If you've got the right spirit you can find a way round.

And what about health problems or medical interventions, say up until the time of ... say 'til the end of secondary school were you ... I know you said around sixteen you said, "I've had it with Roehampton" and did you have any other surgery or health concerns until then?

No. You know, you get your colds and your flus and all the normal things that's going about but touch wood, I haven't had no bad stuff.

So your heart murmur and your one kidney ...

And again, touch wood. Me kidney, that's leaking protein but I'm under the doctor for that and me ticker ... is that okay?

Ticker. I haven't heard it called a ticker for a while [laughs].

It hasn't fell out. [Laughs].

Okay, so we're sort of moving now into like early adulthood years and ... how did you feel about your impairment as you were approaching adulthood? Did you feel ... you said you had a chip on your shoulder for a bit. Did you feel like it sort of was holding you back in any way?

No. It was just that with me disability I got so annoyed because other people could do normal things that I had to work around it and it's so frustrating that I had stop, think about what I was going to do, then work round how I'm going to get through it.

Yes. So basically you couldn't take certain things for granted in the way that other people could.

That's right, that's right. You couldn't just say, "Well, I could fix that." I'd have to sit there and think about what I was going to do first before I could tackle it. But then things just got ... I just got round it, that's how it went. Pardon me.

But, as I say, what you haven't got, you don't miss. So if you've got to do something, you work your way around it, say like instead of going through the bush you go around it so you know you're going to get there in the end but it's just getting there. That's what was so frustrating about it. It was like when me brothers used to go out, they used to go out on the motorbikes and all that and I'd say to me mum, "I wouldn't mind doing that when I'm older." She says, "You won't be able to son" and of course I'd sit there and say, being ... not thinking straight, I'd say, "Well why not?" "Well, because of your disability." "What? What's wrong with me?" And of course then I'd think back, "Oh, you stupid idiot, how can you ride a motorbike, you can't even put your foot on the ground?" [Laughs].

But I think that it's really great that you had the attitude that you wanted to still, you know, you weren't approaching life thinking, "Oh, I'm not even going to want to do that because I can't do it." You were always thinking, "I'm going to do that one day" and then kind of going, "Okay, now I've got to find my own way round."

Yes. Instead of going down the motorway, you've got to go down the country roads to get to where you want to go.

Yes, exactly.

That's the only way I can explain it.

I think it's a good attitude, to be honest.

As I say, before I was eighteen I used to have a chip on me shoulder, I just couldn't cope with it. Life wasn't right for me and me mum used to say, "Come on boy, calm down, we'll get around it." But then she could see what I could see. Me dad, he couldn't. He used to say, "You get on with it." He used to say, "You've got your life to live, you get on with it. If you can't cope with it, that's tough." But me mum and me sisters, they used to say, "Look, come on mate, what's the matter? Let's look at the situation, see if we can work round it" and that's how I got to working round situations.

And what about after you left secondary school, did you go on to do any kind of further education, like college or ...?

No. Because in them days, the colleges, they didn't know what disability was. It's not that they wasn't allowed, they didn't know how to cope with a disability.

Yes, yes. Did you think about leaving home around that time? You were still living with your family? At what age did you actually leave home and move out of your family home?

What age?

Yes.

What, when I left there?

Yes.

Now you're asking. I must have been, what ...

Roughly.

I must have been thirty-eight / forty.

And were your parents both still living at that point?

No. No, I had to move because the council said it was too big a place for me and they wanted to move me. They wanted to put me in a flat ... "No, no. I don't want a flat. I want a bungalow." And they ummed and ahed about it. I said, "Look, I'll do you a deal. You give me a bungalow, I'll give you the house." So my house what I'm sitting in now, this became available and I grabbed it.

When did your parents die? How long ago?

Now you're asking. Years ago. I can't remember [laughs].

But basically you stayed in the house that you grew up in until after they'd died?

Yes. Because we all ... because me eldest brothers and sisters were working and I wasn't working, I couldn't work ... well, I say I couldn't work, I had a job, two jobs in one year, that's how bad at work I was. And I stayed home, I did stay home, I had to stay at home because I had no work. They put me on the disability allowance then and then me mum took ill. We all rallied round and helped her because she had cancer of the bones and we had to ... we didn't have to, but we all rallied round, even myself, rallied round, helped her the best we could and then she got that bad that she'd want something to eat, she was hungry, she wanted something to eat but by the time you'd prepared it and given it to her she didn't want it. It got annoying sometimes but you just had to grin and bear it because it wasn't me mum's fault.

It could have been the medication she was on, as well. Was she having chemotherapy or anything like that?

No, she didn't have chemotherapy and that. They couldn't do nothing for her at them time, at that time.

Oh, okay. Yes.

And people said, "Well, how are you coping John?" "Well, coping the best I can because it's me mum." You all looked after your parents. They look after you all them years so it's my turn to do my best.

Yes. Was she ill for a long time?

Yes. Yes. And then she took really bad. She got bed-ridden and then months after that she died over in the old house. But ... it's sad but I look at it that she's in no more pain. She's looking after me big brother now.

How old was she when she died?

I think she was in her sixties.

Okay. Still quite young, isn't it?

Yes. My sister, she was ... I think she was thirty-five when she died of a heart attack. And she died down here at number one.

That's very young for a woman to die of a heart attack.

A heavy drinker and a heavy smoker. And when she died, as I say, I was in hospital having tests done and they found out I had one kidney missing and that's when I cut out the smoking and I nearly became an alcoholic but then I looked at the glass, looked at the bottle and I thought, "Now is it that, or that, I've got to give up?" So I thought, "Well that's got to go, that's got to be cut right down."

Because it was affecting your kidney?

Yes. Plus I couldn't drink certain spirits because they'd give me nose bleeds. I couldn't believe it. Went up the doctors, I said, "Look, I'm having these bad nosebleeds," it was like someone turned a tap on and go up the doctors and they said, "Well, what's happening?" I said, "All I do is just sneeze, or just rub me nose and out it come. And it was all because I was drinking so many spirits that it was making a vein weak in me nose and it give me nose bleeds because I was building up too much blood, it was thinning me blood so it had to go.

Did you stop drinking completely forever?

No, I'm not a tee-totaller but I'd rather stay out of a pub or a club because you get ... as I call it now, all these young boys, they want to drink the world dry, take the world on. And in my condition I can't, I can't ... what's the word?

You can't compete with that sort of thing?

No. I can't have them like, wanting to have a swing at me or something, you know?

No, exactly.

And being me age and all I don't need it. So ...

No. And when did you start drinking? What age would you have been?

I was eighteen when I started drinking.

Right.

The same as smoking.

And were you drinking heavily at eighteen, do you think?

Not at first but then because I lost me mum I started drinking heavily and then me big sister, well, me eldest sister and then me dad and then me best mate and I thought, "That's it. Sod life." Down the pub, twenty-four seven nearly. And then, as I say, back to the kidney stage, found that out, "No, no, no, no. Life's got to go on. You can't be sitting there with a bottle in your hand, twenty-four seven"

How much do you think you were drinking at your worst?

Me worst? I'd get up in the morning, have something to eat, lunch time, down the pub ... I'd be there from, what, say, twelve 'til three, go home, have something to eat, sleep it off and then back down the club again, seven to eleven. And it wasn't doing me no good.

Was it mostly like pints you were drinking?

Pints and shorts.

Pints and shorts.

Like, I'd start off half way through the evening three pints and then, have a short and you have a short and a pint so you're drinking double the quantity.

So you're probably getting through maybe like, ten pints a day?

Easy.

And ten shorts?

Yes.

So that's probably about half a bottle of spirits ...

Something like that.

... and, yes. You couldn't carry that on for long.

And plus, if I was on a downer, I'd have drink indoors. And I'd look at it and think, "No. No good."

No. How long did you do that for, that sort of level of drinking?

About six months.

Oh, okay. So not a terribly long ...

No. As I say, because I come in here and I thought, "No, I need money for taxis and buses and all" because I wasn't driving at the time and I thought, "No, something's got to happen here." And then me sister took ill and I brought her into my home because she'd lost her home ... that's another story ... and she helped me out, I helped her out and with the illness I had, they took me in hospital, they found out I had one kidney. She said, "Right, that's it" I said, "Yes, drink is going to start knocking it down" and that's how I done what I did.

Well, you would have done yourself a lot of damage if you'd carried on, wouldn't you?

Oh yes. Because there's only one kidney doing the work for the two, it wasn't doing me no good.

Well, the good thing is you didn't do it for too long, you know. If you were going to say something like ten years ...

No. The thing what scared me was ...

[JC3]

... for ten years I was going to say, 'Wow!'

Sorry?

If you were going to say you'd been drinking at that level for ten years I would have thought, 'Wow!'

No, because they give me the shock of, "Oh, you were born with one kidney missing" ... that's it. And you think, "Ooh." Been smoking that heavy, been drinking that much, something could happen. Like drink ... and I cut it right down. Now, if we go out, if I know I'm driving somewhere where Joy don't know, I'll drive and I won't drink. Now vice versa, if we're going to Ripley, Joy will drive and I have a few beers, or a few shorts, but I know me limits. I know I don't want to cuddle up with that toilet [laughs] it's not very nice ...

No. You don't want to go there do you [laughs]?

Okay. So you moved out from the house down the road, your family home, into this home where you are now and you said that in terms of jobs you had two jobs in one year.

Yeah.

What were those jobs?

It was ... you know when you get a knife blade and it's a serrated edge? Well, when it comes out of the machine it's got all the little bits still left on it and I had to clean all them little bits off.

Okay. So it was basically like a sort of production line job?

Yes. What I had to do ... ladies from one section would cut all the blades out, they'd bring them to us this section and we'd sit there and clean them all.

[Joy comes in briefly. Break in audio].

And how did you get that job?

Well me mum used to work for the firm and then one of me brothers was working there. She phoned them up and asked them, have they got a job that I could do and they said, "Yes, we'll put him on production line, doing knife blades." And within half a year I lost the job because me hands, because they were deformed, they wouldn't let me do the job quick enough ... but they just couldn't keep me on the job no more.

And the other job?

That was doing lenses, microscope lenses. And what they'd have is a big box, well, a big plastic tray full of these lenses ... another one, section line. A bloke would ... up the other end of the factory would make these lenses but they'd be all smeary and all that. What I'd have to do is put them in this little machine, it was like a drill head, and pop them in this drill head, press the button and it'd go to the other end of the machine and it'd polish them up and you'd put them in another box. And again, because me hands wasn't quick enough I'd lost the job there. Went to social and at that time they turned round and said, "Well, if you can't hold a job we'll put him on disability" and been on there ever since.

Did you like going to work?

I did but then you had sarcastic people ...

[Joy] Brown or white bread?

Brown please.

... you had so many sarcastic people there, "Oh, you shouldn't be doing this, you shouldn't be doing that" and you felt really small in a big production place, you know? But you just got on with life but then you thought, "Is it really worth going to work or what?" you know? I coped until the day they said I couldn't ... well, what had happened was, I was doing the job and I was on like a big stool, I'd say about that high, now what would you say, five foot?

Yes, yes.

So you imagine me being three foot nine, I had to climb onto that seat to use the machine so I moved round to do something and slipped, so you automatically put your hands out to stop yourself, don't you? But when I done it, I put one hand on the machine, other hand on this plastic box I thought it was going to hold me weight but all it was, was a little container that's half inch thick and that ain't going to hold no weight and down I went. But I took all these microscope lenses with me and I got up, "Oh, what have I done?" And me hands are hurting because I've put me hands out to stop meself falling and I got up, like that, shook them, went to me mate and said, "I fell off me stool" so he said, "Are you alright?" I went, "Yes." We went back to

me work station and there were all these lenses all on the floor, yes, but they was all crushed, weren't they? Because where I got up, didn't look around me, I just walked across to see me mate and I crushed all these microscope lenses.

Isn't it weird to think that now they would never let anybody with a disability ... they'd never put them on a stool, standing there to do a job, would they? There's always be ... you know, there'd be something ... it's not very safe, is it, to be honest?

No. It wasn't very safe. All it was was just like a normal chair, a normal stool, but when I went to go and save meself from falling this box just give way and I just went down.

So that was the end of your job?

Yes. Yes, boss man came out ... because I had to sign accident book and all, he came out, "What happened?" blah, blah, "Sorry mate, you're going to have to go." They give me a full month's ... umm ...

Wages.

Wages.

And sort of around this time as you were getting older, did you have anything to do with the Thalidomide Society then, or attend the AGMs or ...?

No. I've just started. Because the laptop's been available and ... they've sent me letters and all but getting back to being partially dyslexic I just looked at them and noticed, 'from the Thalidomide Trust,' okay, file them up. I'd have files, files of thalidomide letters but then I'd get me sister-in-law to come up and have a read of them, and she'd say, "Oh this has happened, that's happening." "Oh, okay" and just put them back in the files. But because we're all talking on the internet, even the AGM people, what meetings we're having and all that, we all sort of clump together and talk about it. That's what I like because then you can say what you want to say but because they had meetings like up north and stuff like that, it's hard for people to get up there. So when they start sending letters out saying, "Could you sign this so we can do so-and-so and so-and-so?" I read it out and say, "Yes. Up the sister-in-law's, have a word with her," she'll say, "Yes, all that's got to do with John is meeting here and there, would you like to go to the meetings? or we're doing x amount or whatever. All you've got to do is just sign it, send it back." So all I do is sign it send it back.

So mostly your contact with other thalidomide affected people would be through social networking like Facebook and things like that?

Through Facebook and stuff like that, yes.

And what about relationships? Girlfriends?

Wife. Dear beloved wife.

So how about before her? Did you have any girlfriends before her?

Yes, I had a few girlfriends but, you know, it would ... me mum thought they were taking the mick, you know. I'd go out with one girl, she'd say, "I don't like her mate, she's a bit dodgy." And I'd think, you know ... I'm not the brightest light in the light bulbs but, "She's a bit dodgy?" [laughs].

I know, it's funny, isn't it?

I come from a dodgy family, she says they're dodgy! [laughs].

Do you think she was concerned about things like, you know, people knowing that you had your compensation money through or anything like that?

Yes. She was worried about that they were going to take me for a ride and all that and I said, "Oh, have they got a car then?" She said, "You know what I'm on about boy, there's some nasty people out there" I said, "I know there are mum" but that's what she was worried about that people would swindle me out this, that and the other, you know.

[Joy brings in sandwiches].

Thank you.

Let's go over that a bit more.

So John, you were saying about your mum being a bit worried about dodgy girlfriends and you mentioned just now about she was worried about them maybe taking advantage of your compensation.

Yes. She was worried about that ... they'd take me for me money and if I did get married to her and she didn't get on with me mum that if I bought a house and my mum was living there, she'd get me to kick her out. No way, if she couldn't get on with me mum, she couldn't get on with me because in my eyes, my mum was number one. No matter what she did wrong, she was my mum and that was it.

It sounds like you had quite a nice close bond with your mum really, over the years.

With me mum I did but me father, we didn't have a really good relationship. But I think it was because of me disability that he couldn't hack it. Me mum had to because that's what mums did but me father, he just stood back a bit, just let me mum get on with it. As you see with your own eyes, I got on with life.

You certainly have. Yes, I should say for the record that we have a massive selection of horses around, four dogs ...

Yes, four dogs, a fish tank ...

... a gigantic fish tank ...

A tropical fish tank.

A gigantic tropical fish tank and some birds I can hear in the kitchen.

[Laughs]. You've got two [?tymonies11:27], miniature parrots and a fish pond out the back full of fish.

So where does the love of animals come from? Is that something you've always had?

Yes. Because me parents always had animals, I've always had animals and because the love of my life, Joy, she had animals when I met her and we just clashed and that's how we come ... we've got the animals now. We did have a big aviary out the back with a mixture of birds out there but because I'm getting older now and Joy's getting older and we was worried about the way the weather's going now, it's knocking things about, that the aviary was going to be blown down and the birds could get hurt or something like that so we just said, "Right, call it a day with that" and sell the birds on so we know they're going to safe homes and go from there.

So tell me about meeting Joy, the love of your life.

Oh, the love of me life. Well, I started driving at the age of forty. I think it was forty.

So would have this be your first adapted car?

Yes. And I started driving about and I got a phone call from my ex-sister-in-law saying my niece was having a birthday party and this was down Kent in ... I can't remember where it is now ... she says, "Would you like to come?" "Yes, I'll come down there for a laugh." Of course me and my nephews, nieces, we all got on together because we've all grown up together and they know Uncle John as 'Little John.' Never call me Uncle John, always 'Little John.' Even me grandkids, they call me 'Little John' or grandad. Right, I went down to this party and because I was driving, I wasn't drinking ... I wasn't on soft drinks, I was on coffee so me sister-in-law ... ex-sister-in-law as I say, said to me, "I've invited my neighbour" so I went, "Okay." She

said, "She's bringing her sister, just wondered if you'd be interested in chatting her up?" she said, "Because I know what you're like with women, you've got the gift of the gab" so I said, "Oh, go on then, I'll have a go."

Anyway, I'm playing the fruit machines, Joy and Pam walked in and me sister-in-law come up to me and said, "They've just walked in and they're having a coffee. Do you want to come over and have a chat?" "Oh, go on then." Well I got over there, I said, "Hello Pam, how are you?" because I knew Pam, but I didn't know Joy at the time and Pam said, "Oh, it's my sister, Joy." I said, "Hello Joy, how are you?" she said, "I know you but you don't know me" because Pam used to live next to my sister-in-law and the pair of them used to sit up in the bedroom and watch me go in and out of my sister-in-law's drive and Joy used to say, "That's a nice little midget, innit ... ain't he?" And her sister used to say, "I wouldn't call him a midget because he ain't a midget." "Oh, right," she said. We're stand there chatting and before I could open me mouth to say, "Would you like to go out one night?" my ex-sister-in-law said, "Do you want to go out with her? Where do you want to take her? What date? On a date. Do you want to go on take her on a date tomorrow night?" And I went, "Yes, okay." I said, "Is that alright with you, Joy?" "Yes, okay" she said. So that was our first date. So I had to rush from Kent back down to here, get washed and changed because I was seeing me brother up there at the time, get down here, washed and changed, go to the bank, get some money out the bank, get back up to Kent to take Joy out that evening [laughs].

Wow!

Yes. And we had a fantastic evening. We sat in a pub, as I say, because I'm not a drinker, I said, "Joy, what would you like? Would you like a soft drink or would you like a coffee or tea?" Joy went for a cup of tea, so I went, "Fair enough, I'll have a coffee." So we sat there, we had a meal and drove her back to her place. When we got ... when I was taking her down to the pub it was weird because you'd get down the road and it would be foggy and then you pass that bit of fog and it would be like a clear road then it'd be another bit of fog, then another bit of clear road and I said to her, "Oh, ain't it spooky." She went, "Yes, good, innit?" Anyway, got back to my ex-sister-in-law's place and I said to her, "Well, there's me phone number. If you want to give me a ring, we'll go from there." She said, "Yes, okay" So I'm sitting in my sister-in-law's place and she said, "How'd it go?" I said, "Well, I think it went fine." I said, "That phone's going to ring in a minute and I'm going to ask her out again." She went, "You what?" I went, "Yes. Watch." And out of the blue the phone rang and it was Joy and Joy was going to talk to me and say, "Okay, I had a lovely evening out but I don't want no more" but before she could get in, I got in there first and said, "Would you like to go out tomorrow night?" And she went, "Yes, okay," and it just snowballed from there. And then ...

And how did you know she wasn't 'dodgy' then? What made you think ...?

I don't know. It was something about her.

Was she the first one that you thought ... the first person that you met that you thought ...?

Yes. Joy was the first one I met on me own. I'd been through disabled dating agencies and all and because me sister-in-law was taking over me mum's role I would take ... I'd get a pamphlet through with all the names of the girls that would like to meet me. So I'd take it up there and it's got all the different illnesses or disabilities these ladies have. Pardon me. So I'd go and meet some of them and I'm not being funny, I know I'm disabled, but some of them were in worse condition than what I am and I always look on it that I want someone that can look after me as well as I can look after them, not me just looking after them. So I met

this girl through the internet, through this disabled dating agency. I'd been going out for a few weeks and my sister-in-law said, "What's wrong with her?" I said, "I don't know" because all she'd put down was she'd got a disability. So I said to this girl one day, "What is your disability then?" She said, "Oh, don't you know?" I went, "No," I said, "Because all your form says is you've got a disability. Well what is it? I can't see it." In my eyes she was normal but then she rolled up her arms like that and she'd got all scars all up her arms.

Oh, so like self-harming?

Yes. Schizophrenic. And when I went back and told me sister-in-law she said, "What is wrong with her then?" I said, "She's schizophrenic." She went, "What?" And she nearly blew a gasket. I said, "Well, what's wrong with that?" She said, "Let's have a look at you." "I'm standing in front of you. What's wrong?" She said, "Lift your neck up." I went, "Why?" she said, "You're going to have a scar from there to there before much longer." I went, "Why?" She said, "Because she could cut your throat any time," she said, "You could be sleeping and all of a sudden [sound of throat being slit]." "You what?" She went, "Yes, that's what one them are" I went, "Oh, right." So me sister-in-law's on the phone because the agency are putting other people in danger because she could turn any time. So me sister-in-law rung them up and said, "Look, do you know this girl's got schizophrenia?" He went, "Well what's that?" Me sister-in-law explained it to them and they said, "Oh! We didn't know that" So they took her off their books straight away.

Weren't they checking people when they put them on the books though?

Because all she put down was she's got a disability. She didn't have to put what her disability was, you know. So, they said, "Oh. Well, that's different. We're going to strike her off," and they said, "Oh, fair enough Mr Carter, sorry about having problems like that. We'll refund all your money." So that's what they done. And I thought, "I'm glad about that" but then I met Joy and something ... it all fitted together, if you know what I mean.

Yes, you just knew something.

There was something there that ...

Yes.

I know me family had words with Joy, of saying, "What would like in life with John?" and all that and Joy said, "Look, I just love the fella to bits. I don't want nothing off him. All I want is his love." That's the way we was. And it snowballed from there and I said to me sister, I said, "Shelia, I've got some good news for you." She said, "What's that?" I said, "You're baby brother's getting married" she went, "You what?" I went, "Yes" I said, "Getting married." "Joys' getting married again?" I went, "No. Me." She went, "What? Say it again." I said, "I'm getting married" and it went from there. But then we both backed off and said, "No. We don't want it" because Joy's family wanted to help everything, my family wanted to help everything but Joy, it got on top of her. So we both called it off and said, "No. We want to do it our way." So then we told all the families, "We're not going to do it at the moment. We're just putting the brakes on." And Joy said, "I still want to marry you but I want to do it my way."

So we sat there one day, she said, "Do you still want to get married?" I said, "Yes" So we looked on the internet, we looked for cars, the photo blokes, the caterers, the bands, you imagine it, we did it. The only thing my sister-in-law ... me sister done for me was got us a hall. Me sister-in-law, Joy's sister, she made the wedding cake for us and all the rest of it, we done ourselves.

That's fantastic.

And all through the internet. And been happy ever since.

And how long have you been together? How many years?

Been together, I think it's ... we've been together eight ... nine years, we've been married nine years and been together eleven years. Hang on ... no, that's wrong. We've been together ten years ... ten, eleven, twelve ... fourteen years we've been together because we was going out together four years and then we got married.

That's a lovely story to add in to your life, actually.

Yes?

Yes.

Yes, I thought I was going to be ... is it an old spinster? Or is that a woman?

Bachelor.

That's it, a bachelor. I thought I was going to be a bachelor all me life. I've been here and there, yes, fair play. I've seen ... I know the facts of life [laughs].

Yes. You had some experiences.

Oh yes. Some good ones, some bad ones. But Joy has been the love of my life since the day I met her and I keep telling her day after day and she says to me "John, shut up!" "Why love? I love you to bits?" She says, "I know that, you told me that yesterday and you told me that the day before. Do me a favour, don't keep saying it."

She probably likes it really. If you stopped doing it she'd miss it.

Yes, she'd say is something wrong?

Yes, exactly.

And children. So I guess if you got together when you were ... so let's think, so you're fifty? So you got together with Joy when you were thirty-six?

Ish, yes.

Did you ever think about having children?

No, because when I was a youngster, they didn't know if I could have ... thalidomide children could have children themselves. So me mum said, "Well, what's going to go on?" They said, "Well, you can do tests" and me mum asked what sort of tests and when they told her she went, "No, we'll leave it at that. If he can, he can, if he can't, he can't." But I've never tried for children because it's been the basic of I don't know if I can have them but then it's stuck in the back of me mind, what happens if I have a disabled child? Is the mother going to put it down to my disability? But I've seen pictures on there ... now, what's his name? Kevin ... he's got a bonny lovely child, a lovely little kid and couple of them on there got some lovely kids and they've all turned out normal, as I'd call it.

Yes. Well I think it sort of has been proved that it won't cross across into a child.

Yes. It wasn't genetically passed on.

But you might not have known that at the time.

That's right. At them times me mum said, "If he can have children he can have them, if he can't, he can't." But when I met my dear beloved Joy, she said to me ... I said to her, "Right, how's things?" She said, "I want to ask you a question." "Go on then." She said, "Do you want kids?" I said, "I can answer you two ways there." She said, "Go on then." I said, "If you can, I would, if you can't, I don't." She said, "Well, I can't but I got three." So, I've got them then.

Okay.

There you go. And that's the way we went.

So when you talk about grandchildren, they're children from Joy's pre ...?

Yes.

Okay, yes.

I think it's thirteen we got, thirteen or fourteen we got.

Thirteen grandchildren?

Yes. And another one on the way. Yes [laughs]. So you can imagine what it's like at Christmas time.

That's a lot.

Oh yes.

And so when you met Joy were her children still young at that point or ... ?

No, no. I think the youngest was ... she must have been in her early twenties and Sarah, our eldest, she had two children at the time and she had Jacob ... oh, he's a bonny boy, poor lad's got Down's syndrome but bonny lad. And then she had little Leisha, she was like a little doll when she was born. You'd like hold her in two palms of your hand, like that. Bonny little lad ... lass, should I say. And Louise, she had Dean, but when she had Dean she swore black was white she wasn't going to have no more kids but her and her partner went their own separate ways and then she met Mark, her former boyfriend now. He's a lovely bloke. You give him a piece of wood, he'll make it come alive.

Really?

Yes. He's a carpenter by trade but then she phoned up, Lou phoned up here one day, she said, "Is mum there?" I said, "Yes, what's up?" she said, "Can I speak to mum?" "Yes, okay love" and you could hear it in her voice that there was something wrong. I said, "Joy," I said, "It's Lou on the phone. There's something wrong, love." She said, "What's up Lou?" she said, "There's something wrong there, ain't there?" She said, "What?" She said, "There's something wrong. What's up?" She said, "I've got some good news for you mum." She said, "What's that?" She said, "I'm pregnant" [laughs]. That was ten years after she had Dean. And Colin ... he's had a few partners but the one that he's with at the moment, Natalie, she's got two from a previous friendship but the third one is Colin's and ... nice girl, I get on well with her, she gets on well with me. Colin says, "If you can't get on with me dad, you can't get on with me." But me and Natalie get on like a house on fire.

Here's another story for you. We had a barbecue and Colin brought Natalie round, said, "Look mum, dad, my new girlfriend." "Yes, fair play. So Nat, how do you do?" I've always called her Nat, no matter what goes now. She said, "Dad, you're the only one that calls me that." I said, "Are you offended with it?" She said, "No, because you're the only one that calls me it." So we had this barbecue and we had a plastic table, I don't know, about two foot off the ground and we put the beers and the cocktails on it and what we were doing was, we were mixing a mixer with vodka and we wasn't just having short glasses, we was having pints. So you can imagine, yes. We were totally hammered.

Happy.

More than happy. We was ... well, let's put it this way. A normal person would be legless ...

Yes. I would be.

I was sitting on my bum, that's how bad I was. Natalie had put these two cocktails on this table and I banged the table and knocked one over and of course when it fell over it splashed all up her leg. Of course, I'm half tipsy at this time so she said, "Now look what you've done dad, you've splashed all that up my leg. What are you going to do about it?" So I pulled a chair over, I said, "Sit on that for a minute, Natalie." She said, "Why?" So I grabbed her leg and started licking it off her leg [laughs].

I knew you were going to say that. I don't know how, but I knew.

But my son just stood there and went, "Dad, what are you doing?" I went, "Well instead of wasting it, son." He went, "Yes, okay then." Natalie went, "Come on then, there's the other one" [laughs]. Joy's standing there, she says, "That's not my husband, that's not my husband, that's someone that's in his body."

Yes, so he's been taken over. So they call you dad?

Yes. Yes, they all call me dad.

That's interesting.

Even that one out there. My step-daughter ... I can't remember her name now ... she calls me dad. Her two kiddies, they call me dad and ... when they come round ... no, her kiddies call me granddad, sorry [laughs]. And she adopted us, we didn't adopt her because what it was is, she lived at Ripley with her parents and young brother and they had to move out of there to the house across the road from me because their house was being built. They was knocking the old houses down and re-building them. So they lived over across the road from us for six months to twelve months. Of course where they used to come ... when she used to come over and talk to us lot and I used to have the Playstation out here, her brother-in-law used to come over and play the Playstation and we used to have good old fun but then they moved back to Ripley. She always used to come back over here and stay with us for a little while and then go back home and then come stay back here and she adopted us. That's how come we've got her now.

You've got another extra bit of family.

Yes.

Isn't that funny? So you spent all those years living at home without having a relationship and then suddenly, in ten years, you've suddenly got this huge new family.

Yes. And love it.

Yes.

Just love it. People say, "How do you cope?" What's to cope about? I said, "They're all my kids. I provide for them as they provide for me. They help me out." Now ... here's another one. My son said to me, "When are you getting a new shed then dad?" I said, "Couple of weeks time. It's ordered, it's just got to be delivered." He said, "You give me a ring and I'll come up, help you put it up." I said, "All right." So it came, I said, "Colin, the shed's arrived." He said, "Dad, you come and pick me up, I'll put it up for you." My mate Mark, with the hair lip I was telling you about, he come round, he said, "What's Colin doing?" I said, "Putting my new shed up." He said, "Colin, want a hand?" He said, "Yes, I could do with a hand." I couldn't do nothing because the way I am. I could hold the side of a shed up, that's it. So the pair of them just put me new shed ... took the old shed down and put the new one up. I said to him, "Right, what do I owe you Colin?" He said, "Dad, see that?" the palm of his hand. I said, "Yes." He said, "You're going to get it right up side your ear if you keep asking me what I owe you." "All right" I said, "What do I owe you Mark?" He said, "Nothing." He said, "What are friends for if they can't help out?" And that's how it went.

Well, what goes around comes around John, so you've probably been good to them and you know ...

Well, it's like Mark round one day, he said, "John, I've got a problem." I said, "What's that?" He said, "I've got juice in me motor" he said, "But it'll get me from here to home and it'll get me from home to here but I can't go to Woking and back because it ain't going to get me there." I said, "Right, jump in the motor, I'll take you" because I had plenty of juice in mine. I took him to Sainsbury's at Byfleet.

We had a bit of fun there. Don't know if you know about, as I call them, funny fellas, like dressing up in women's clothes, well, we go into Sainsbury's and I went to Mark, I went, "Oh, you've picked the wrong time here mate." He said, "Why?" And I was messing about. He said, "Why, what's up then?" I said, "You know, you get the old funny fellas coming out at this time of night." "What do you mean 'the old funny fellas'?" I said, "You know, the old bendy wrists and them sort ..." "No," he said, "You're pulling my leg." I said, "All right, you watch." So around the shop we're going and I've got a trolley strapped to me wheelchair and my mate's pushing me so we go around doing the shopping. I said, "Look out, here comes one. Look, look." "Hello," he said, "Hello, hello." I went, "There you go boy, look, look." "You're joking," he said, "You put him up to it." I said, "All right." You pick the next one. He said, "What about that one?" I went, "Yes, you watch." He went, "I don't really know about that." I went, "There you go, look. You're well away there." "You get out," he said. A wheelchair's never gone round a shop so quick. And we got into the one aisle and Mark's that side of the aisle and I'm the other side of the aisle waiting for him to put stuff in the trolley but as I'm sitting there, the trolley is strapped to me wheelchair so you've got to imagine it's twice the length of it. A bloke is trying to reach over to something on the shelf, "Oh, sorry," he said, "I'm very sorry." I went, "There you are Mark, there's another one for you." "Cor," he said, "I'm off," and as he got to the counter and he said, "I bet you you're going to say that one is." I said, "Yes, he is, watch," and as I did he looked at me just like that. I went, "There you go," I've never seen a wheelchair and a shopping trolley or shopping go through an aisle so quick [laughs].

Yes, okay.

So this massive, big extended ... this is probably what you've always wanted, wasn't it, do you think, to have your own big extended family like that?

Yes.

Because you came from a big family, didn't you? So there was always a lot of stuff going on.

Yes. There was twelve of us, yes. And as I say, with me niece and nephews and all that, now I've got my family.

So would you say people and having people close to you are very important to you in your life?

Yes, yes. Yes. It's like if someone says to them, "Oh, John's not very well," they're round here like a shot to see what's wrong.

That's nice, isn't it?

It's like, we had a blocked drain and Joy rung me brother Tony and she said, "Tony, do you know any drainage blokes that'll come out and unblock a drain?" "Why, what's up?" Told her ... told him and knock on the front door five minutes later we've opened the front door, there's me brother Tony with the old hammer and chisel and a pipe cleaner to clean the old pipes out. "What are you doing here bruv?" He said, "I'll do your pipes for you"

It's good to hear, you know. It's good to hear that those things still happen in people's families.

Oh yes. Well I fell out with one of me brothers. I won't say what I call him because it's not nice on tape [laughs].

Yes, yes. *But something not very nice.*

Yes. Not very nice. That's all I call him by now. I don't call him by his name and I don't ... I wouldn't associate him as my brother. But we had fall outs years ago and we haven't spoken since. But my brother Roger, he lives ... I would say next road up from here; brother Tony, he lives up the big estate I would say about a five minute drive from here and me sister Sheila, she lives at Farmingham. I phone her up, say, "Oh, need help," she can't drive. Now her boyfriend, John, he's a godsend. He's been with me sister through thick and thin. She's had cancer left, right and centre, she's had everything taken away, from her breast down to everything else and she's like they've got a scalpel and just gone like that. She's got so many scars on her it's unbelievable. But her boyfriend John, he's a godsend. When I first met him my sister

was living in a mobile home and she said to him, "I want you to meet me brother but he's disabled." He went, "Yes, so? What's disabled about him?" So when I met him, he went, "You must be Sheila's little brother John." I said, "That's me. How do you do?" We both had a good old chat. It was nice in the summer so we sat outside drinking coffee. "This is a bit boring, this, isn't it?" "What do you mean?" I said, "Could do with something a bit stronger." He said, "Yes, okay." And the pub was just like across the road, it's like from here to across the road from the pub so we went across the pub, had a few beers. He said, "Shelia said you could drink but I didn't think that much" and I was two pints in front of him and he's only got on his second pint [laughs]. Bit I wasn't driving at the time, I was on a pushbike. People say, "How do you ride a pushbike?" "It's easy. You put one foot on the pedal and just pedal them round"

Do you have to have the pedals any ... ?

No. I have a child's bike. I have the seat very low.

Yes, of course. Of course you would. I mean why not? Yes, yes.

That's what people think, they think, "Oh they have blocks and pedals" and stuff like that.

Yes, yes. You know ... talking of getting around, you mentioned you got your first car when you were quite a lot older, didn't you?

Yes. Because me parents said I couldn't drive and so I took it for gospel that I couldn't drive because of the way I was. I went to a special driving school ... can't remember where it was now and they had different types of things, they have how strong your hands were, how your reactions were, what your basic needs could be and all that. That's how far I'm going back. They had the first Ford Escort estate, that's how far I'm going back. So you can imagine what it was like. And my mum said, "No, you wouldn't be able to do it, mate." So I took it for granted I wouldn't be able to do it so the first thing I done when I come out of there and me old man said, "So you can't do it, off you go." I know what I can do, pick a pint up. That's what I did. Went in the pub next door, few pints down me neck. Me mum said, "Come on mate, it's not worth it. Come on, let's go home." Right, life went on but being a passenger all these years I picked up different things like how to get on the white line to ...

You're good at that. You're good at picking things up, aren't you? I've noticed that. Like there's a number of things you've told me about throughout the interview where you ... you know, it's not always been easy for you to go through the mainstream routes but you're very good at just picking up what's going on and learning ... teaching yourself, aren't you?

Yes. Because my driving instructor when I went for me driving test, he asked me, "Was I driving for another school?" because he thought I was a spy in a cab, sort of thing.

I'm not surprised you said that, yes.

Yes. Because as I say, where you learn to get onto the white line to do a right or emergency stops, things like that and signboards. And I'd get up the road [coughs] excuse me ... and my driving instructor would say, "Right, I want you to do a right up here," and it'd be about a mile away up the road. So I'd look at the road signs, road say right, you've got to do a right here, so I've put me indicator on, get on the white line and do a right. He said, "What are you doing?" Excuse me, I've got a runny nose. I said, "You told me to do a right." He said, "Yes, but I didn't tell you to get on that camber of the road to do a right or put your indicator on. Where have you learnt that?" I've just been watching people all these years and just picked up on things and that's how I've gone through life. You watch someone do something and it's like a mirror image. You just copy that mirror image and away you go.

But that's a skill in itself. Not everyone can do that. A lot of people need it all written down and they follow instructions and they learn stuff but you're using a different part of you to assess what's going on around you and find a way of doing it ...

Yes. Use that, that and them.

... doing it your own way.

Use your eyes, your brains and your hands and no use saying to me, "Do that, that and that" because someone ought to take heart and see what I'm saying.

Well, no. He's showing his hands and his brain, yes.

Yes.

Okay. No, I'll definitely take that away with me about you, is that you're somebody ... I'd call you somebody ... you improvise and you find your own way around doing things and you learn how to do things through your own routes, you don't give up and close the door.

Yes. You have to in this day and age. There's no use sitting there going, "Well, I could do it that way, I could do it that way." There's no use sitting there making a plan out. I tried that. It don't work. You can sit there and do a plan, "Yes, that bit goes there and that bit goes there," but you might as well get a bit of paper, screw it up, put it in the bin because you do it by eyes ... eyes and hand co-ordination.

But I don't think everyone can. I'm just saying that, it's just, you know ...

Oh yes.

I think people learn through different ways, don't they? Some people like to have it all written down and follow instructions but you're very much someone who's learning from experience.

Yes. Because ... getting back to me drumming ... because I've learnt by ears and eyes, that's probably how I've coped through life.

Yes. It's interesting.

Okay. So moving on to ... I'm writing that down, "Learning through ears and eyes," I like that. So moving on to sort of present day, how about any on-going health concerns or medical problems as you're getting older, dare I say?

Yes. You know, man-flu.

Wear and tear. Man-flu.

Yes. Man-flu. Yes, aches and pains, as you usually get.

Has that got worse as you've got older, do you think?

Sorry?

Has that got worse as you've got older?

What, having colds and all that?

No, aches and pains, those kinds of things?

Yes. Yes, because of ... as I say, with me hands being not as they should be you get arthritis in them, in me wrists and me ankles. I find these days, since I've got older, I can't stand as much as I used to be able to. I don't know if it's through me weight, through me being older, me bones getting older or something like that but I used to be able to stand quite a lot but nowadays I can stand but two / three minutes then I've got to sit down. But then, I sneeze and because I've got arthritis in me coccyx I jump up, "Arrgghh" running round about two foot taller [laughs].

[Laughs]. That's a funny thought.

That's how the pain ... the way I can explain the pain is, it's like someone's drop-kicked you in the bottom of the spine. That's how I can explain it. I have to sit here, on a lap-top, messing about on something and I go, "Achoo!" I go, "Ooh, ooh, ooh" Joy'll go, "Are you all right mate?" "Yes, I'll be alright in a minute, arrgh, arrgh!" I wonder round like an old man, holding me back, "Ooh, oww ..." and then all of a sudden Joy'll go, "Here you are, here's a painkiller," or I just stand there and rub it for a bit, about five minutes, gone.

Yes. Because you walk and you walk very well, I've seen you walk. Is that your normal mode of getting around or do you use a wheelchair as well?

I use ... I've got a chair. If you look in the back of the car, I've got a chair in the back of the car.

So if you were going out for like a big day out with lots of walking you'd probably tend to use the chair?

Yes. I'd use the chair. But, as me mum used to do, I used to say, "I can't be bothered to this today, all I just want to do is just lay here and vegetate." And she'd say, "Come on, get up, move that butt of yours, come on, get up." There's a story for you. Getting back to illnesses and all, I've suffered with me back quite a lot and ...

That could be maybe because of those years of the prosthetic legs, do you think, putting a strain on your back?

Probably. I suffered with me back for a couple of days and I said to Joy, "It's not getting no better, love. I'll get doctor out if it's not getting no better." "All right," she said. I went to the toilet and I got off the toilet quicker than I got on it, because I sneezed and, of course, jarred me back and all and because I was in pain anyway and I couldn't take no more painkillers because I'd been taking too many. Anyway, came in here ... I was fully dressed ... came in here, and our friends were here at the time and I buried me head in the sofa but you imagine, I was like an 'L' shape, I've got me feet on the floor still, but I've bent over the sofa and I said to Joy, "I can't move." I said, "Me back's locked up" she said, "What do you mean?" I said, "I can't move, love," I said, "I cannot physically move." I said, "You're going to have to either get a doctor or an ambulance out." So she rang 999, of course ... can you say thalidomide properly?

I can.

Can you?

Thalidomide.

That's it. But Joy can't.

Okay.

She can't say it properly so when she rings the doctor's up she says, "He's disabled." "What's his disability?" Now how can you say thalidomide if you can't say it properly?

Well, you can't.

Joy turns round and says either, "He's a drug baby" or "He's a flid" [laughs]. That's the only way to do it. Anyway, they said, "Oh, we can't do nothing. Can he come up here?" "Hang on, he's doubled up on the sofa, how can he get in his car to come up there?" "Oh, right." So they said, "Ring for an ambulance." So we rung for an ambulance, ambulance people come out, two women, and one stood there and one stood here, our friends sat over there, and Joy stood there and the woman said, "Right, what's wrong with you Mr Carter?" I said, "Me back's locked up, I can't move." So they give me the old funny thing you ...

Gas and air.

Yes, whatever. They might as well have given me helium for what I knew about it. Anyway, I'm sucking on this tube and one of them said, "Come on then Mr Carter, now let's bend them little knees and get you up off the floor" and Joy said, "What did you just say?" She said, "Well, get him off ... bend them little knees and get him off that floor." "What knees?" And of course, the poor ambulance driver that's standing there, she just stood back and then realised that I've got no knees and she went, "Ah," like that, opened her gob. My friend's sat there and she just roared up with laughter and the ambulance driver said, "It's not funny. It's not funny, you know. This man's in pain." But Carol could see the funny side of it and Joy could see the funny side of it and said, "Please, don't laugh because you'll make me laugh."

And that's the last thing you want to do.

Yes. Because I'm in pain anyway. And she said, "What do you mean he's got no knees?" Joy said, "Well my husband's got no knees, no hips so how can he bend his knees when he ain't got none?" "Oh, right" she said and I'm trying to laugh and me back's going like that because I'm laughing, I went, "Ooh, ooh, ooh. Quick give me it" and I've started sucking on this air. She said, "Don't ..."

That makes you want to laugh as well. They call it laughing gas, don't they?

Yes. And I was sucking on it like a good 'un. I went, [sucking noise]. He said, "What's the matter?" I said, "I'm in pain but I want to laugh." They got me up on the sofa but they plonked me on the right-hand side where I sit on the left-hand side, as you can see, they plonked me on the right-hand side and they went. I went, "Joy," she went, "What?" I said, "I can't move, I'm stuck here. Can you move me over?" She said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Can you give me a hand and move me over?" She said, "Hang on." So our Mark that lived up the road from us, he got one side, Joy got the other, and they just shimmied me over to where I'm sitting now. But it was funny when Joy said he's got no knees or hips and the ambulance driver just stepped back and her gob just dropped to the floor. If I could have seen it, that's the way Joy explained it, but I couldn't see it because I had me back towards her.

Yes, exactly. So they thought you were kneeling on the ground but, no, you were standing.

Yes. I had feet flat on the floor but they thought I was kneeling. I thought, "Yes, right." Like my son, he's got to be six foot seven, easy.

Wow.

Yes. And he'll say, "That's my dad" and they go, "Who's the dad?" "The little fella, that's my dad." And it's so funny when we go out it's Colin and Joy then me and it goes down in stages but it's amazing that he's such a lovable bloke.

Six foot seven is really big because I've got a brother who's six foot five and that's big so that's ... six foot seven is really big.

Yes. My daughter, Louise, her boyfriend didn't even know who I was and when he met me he went, "You Lou's dad?" I went, "Yes." He went, "Oh. My name's Mark. How do you do?" "Hello Mark. Take me as I am or don't bother." He said, "You seem a nice bloke any rate." We all get on like a house on fire. My son-in-law Brian, we call him brains of the family. You give him a computer, what he can't do to a computer or what he don't know about computers, you could write on the back of a stamp. He's like a genius ... You know Brains out of Thunderbirds? It's like him. He knows everything you need to know.

[Stepdaughter] Does anyone want the toilet?

No.

No. It's all yours.

[Stepdaughter] I'm going for a shower. Is that all right?

I thought there was a funny smell round here.

[Stepdaughter] Yes, it's me. I stink.

[Laughter]

That's her name, Mel.

Okay.

It's short for Melanie.

Hello Mel.

You're being taped.

[Stepdaughter] Oh no.

Oh yes. My life story.

Yes. You've just been on tape saying that you stink, or he said that you stink.

Yes. You stink. Smell like a skunk.

[Stepdaughter] Can you delete that bit?

She drinks like a fish.

Yes. I can actually [laughs].

[Stepdaughter] Thank God for that.

No.

[Stepdaughter] I smell beautiful. As lovely rose flowers.

Who told you that?

[Stepdaughter] Do you know who's life story's a bit short? [Laughs].

[Laughter]

See what I've got to put up with [laughs]?

Yes. Exactly.

Yes. So she adopted us, we didn't adopt her.

Yes, right. How about ... [dog makes a noise into microphone] hello, that's a little dog sound by the way.

[Laughs].

That's a funny little noise, isn't it?

She's got problems with her breathing sometimes.

What about ... have you been interested to learn about the origins of thalidomide and you know, say it's connection to German scientists and those kinds of things? Is that something you've ever been interested in over the years?

No. When I was a youngster I said to me mum I want to get hold of the doctor that prescribed her the drug. She said, "Why is that?" I said, "Because I want to put him six foot under." She said, "You're probably too late mate, someone's already done it." He probably died a natural death but you know ... [laughs]. You feel like you're getting old. You've got to put the blame on someone but then it's not just him you've got to blame because he's only the one that prescribed the drug. Then you've got the scientists that made the drug, you've got the ... getting into parliament, it's their fault as well for giving them the licence to actually prescribe the drug to people so you don't know who to blame, you know?

That's true. But have you felt that kind of natural anger towards people or have you been more accepting?

I've learnt to live with it, you know?

Yes. Okay.

It's everybody and nobody's fault if you know what I mean.

Yes. And what's your favourite way of spending your time now, as you're getting older? What do you like to do the most?

Well, if it's not out in the car driving different places like, I used to go down the coast quite a lot in me car, seeing mates down there. If it's not out in the car it's either on me laptop, on me desktop in the computer room, on the Playstation or just watching the telly.

So you're quite an indoors ... you quite like the indoors stuff as well?

Yes. Because ... as I say because I have back problems I don't dare go travelling or nothing. I'll go down to Kent and I go down see me grandkids and me kids down Kent. And we used to travel up to Wales but it's about a three or four hour drive up there you're just sitting there driving and you're just sitting there just seeing the road just disappear in front of you. But yes, been up there a few times and I love driving, don't get me wrong, but then where a normal person's sitting there using their feet on the pedals or one foot on the throttle and one foot on the floor where they can stable theirself and with me, with just having like little legs, I'm sitting fully on the seat and me leg goes to sleep. Of course then I've got to shift about and of course with shifting about it's doing me back in and then I start getting angry with meself because things are starting to ache and all that. Is it worth doing it?

Yes. No, I can understand that.

And what about hopes and wishes for the future? What would you like to come up next in life?

I don't know. Just to be in good health and watch me grandkids and me kids grow up and be happy, you know?

So more of kind of ... more of what you've already got in a way.

Yes.

Do you think?

But then you just sit back and watch your grandkids grow up and you think, "Cor, how lucky they are with the life they got." Some people have a bad life but as I say, getting back to my stage, when I was a kid I had a good life, yes, but then I want to pass that on to my kids and my grandkids and hope they have a good life and all, you know?

Yes. That's good. Those are good aspirations.

And is there anything that you'd like to add that you think we didn't talk about or that you think was really important that we haven't covered, you think, "Oh, I wish she'd asked me about that" or ... ?

Nothing I can think of at the moment.

Well I'll have to come and annoy you again and do a follow up interview.

Yes? That will be fine.

So when I've done the transcript I'll look through and if I see any areas and think, "Oh, I should have asked him about that." Or if you think of something when I've gone, "Oh, I should have told her that story" or something.

There's plenty of stories to tell but it's just thinking of them at the time.

Have a think before the next one and see if anything's stuck in your mind.

Being married to Joy now is a godsend because we get on like a house on fire. Me and the kids get on like a house on fire. It's just a happy family.

That's really good to hear.

But some families, their mother and father ... if the other partner's got baggage, you should accept that. If they don't get on with you, it's their life. You can't force them to get on with you but, touch wood, I get on with all three of my kids, well, our kids. Colin, he can't do enough for us because he wants to move from Kent to up here. His excuse is, "You and mum's not getting much younger and you'll want my help more soon so I'm going to try to get a place up here." Fair enough, whatever you want to do, mate. Brian, if I need any help on laptops or ... at the moment I'm looking out for a new mobile phone and he's looked out something for me and he's great if I need any help on ... even being up there, he helps me out. He has back problems un'all. I feel sorry for him sometimes because all he's got to do is move and that's his back gone.

But I've had it. I've gone up the surgery, I've gone up the doctors to do something else and he's said, "Oh, we'll see what your weight's like." I've got on the scales, went to get off and me back's gone and I've gone out with a back problem I didn't have when I went in there [laughs].

Just from being weighed.

Yes but I can't think of anything else at the moment.

Well, if you do, we've got next time as well.

Getting back to the driving, when I was taught to drive he said, "Right now ..." this is the driving instructor, he said, "We'll take you for your test." "You what?" "We'll take you for your test." "Right, fair enough." So he took me for an hour's lesson first to refresh me memory and all that and he said, "Right John, it's down to you now. I've taught you all I can so get in there and show me what you can do." So I went into the driving school. He said, "Right, John Carter." "That's me." So he's got me in the car ... he's gone round the car, literally, knocked all the mirrors out of place. "What you done that for?" You know what he done, he wanted to watch me set all the mirrors up.

So he could see if you could do it.

Yes. So I set all me mirrors up. He said, "Right, away we go then. I want you to go out of here, do a left to the roundabout, do a right." Done all that, got back to the station, he said, "Right. I've got some good news and I've got some bad news." I'm thinking, "Oh no ... what's the bad news?" He said, "The bad news is your driving instructor won't get no more money out of you." I went, "All right then," thinking that's the worst, "What's the good news then?" He said, "There Mr Carter, there's your pass." I went, "What? Have I passed?" He went, "Yeah."

That was a bit of a mean way of telling you, wasn't it?

Yeah. He'd gone round the bushes, as I say, gone round the houses. And I was in a little Vauxhall Corsa, that's what passed it and I went, "Yeah!" and I punched the air like that but I didn't realise ... I wasn't even in this world, I was in me own little place. I punched the air like that but I didn't even realise I was sitting in a car and as I've gone like that I've left my thumb print ... you know how you put your hand on the top of the car? I punched that and I left my thumb print in this thing. He said, "Mr Carter, what's that? I'm glad I told you you'd passed because the state of that thing there, I wouldn't have liked to have told you you'd failed."

So I said, "Right, make a face like I've failed." He said, "Why?" I said, "Because Kevin, my driving instructor is standing over there and he wants to see what's going on." So I got out and I'm all glum-faced and he went, "Oh man ... no." I went, "No, I'm afraid so." He went, "Afraid so what?" I went, "You ain't getting no more money, I ain't going to pay you no more." He went, "Why not?" "Because I've passed." "Oh good, good!" But there was three of us went in there, two able bodied and one disabled. One person passed their test.

You.

Yeah. And old Kevin went, "I knew I was going to win." I said, "Why was that?" He went, "Them two ain't going to get it, you have." So I went to me sister-in-law and did the same thing, held me head down. She said, "Oh man, you ain't passed, have you?" I said, "Yes I did!" The first car I bought was a Ford Mondeo two litre. I thought Christ Almighty, I went to pick it up but me brother ... because I couldn't drive at the time, he drove me over there and I looked round the car like that and he went, "What's up? You scared of driving?" "Oh, it's big!" [Laughs]. Because what I'd passed in was a little Vauxhall Corsa and then I went to a big estate car. I thought, ooh ... and then I traded that one in and got a ... now what was it? A Vauxhall Zafira, like I've got now, a minibus type, and then I had that ten years and traded that one in for this one.

So how long have you had that one now?

Sorry?

How long have you had that one?

I've had that one about a year at the moment.

So it's still a pretty new one.

Yes.

So you like your cars.

Yes, I like me cars but I like to keep them if you know what I mean? Some people, they have a car for about ... like you get them on Motability, you have them for three years and then you trade them in to get another one. But I can't see the point in that because about three years you've run your car in but after three years you give them back to the manufacturers and someone get the joy of having a car that's already run in.

And you don't get anything like the money back that you paid for it, do you?

No. Especially if you've got to pay a deposit for it. It's absolutely ridiculous what people pay for deposits. My one, I haven't got a deposit on that so I don't have to worry about that but I just love driving now. When I first passed me test, I had the buzz for it, I was virtually living in me car. I lived in it nearly 24/7 and ... there's a story for you ... you said you felt funny with someone driving with his feet ...

Yes.

I went up to the curry house one night, took me brother up there. And there was a friend of ours, Lee Shaw, he must have been a big, what, seven foot easily, but he was like a beanpole. He said to George, me brother, he said, "George! George!" He said, "What?" "Do me a favour." He said, "What's that?" He said, "Take me home, I'm too drunk to walk." He said, "Lee, I can't take you home, I haven't got me car." He said, "How did you get here then?" He said, "John brought me." He said, "Ask John, he'll probably take you." He said, "John, John?" I said, "I'll take you home Lee. It'll cost you two pints of Coke but I'll take you home." "All right," he said. Well, I come out of the road next to us and I'm coming along the main road and all of a sudden, Lee has grabbed hold of his seat with fear. I said, "Lee, what's the matter?" He said, "You're doing that with your steering wheel, you're doing that with your hand pulleys, the pedals going up and down like that but your feet ain't touching the floor. What's happening?"

So when I got to his place he was pure white, you know, you could see the colour had drained from him. I said, "What's happened mate?" He said, "You're doing that," I said, "Yes, that's the steering wheel." He said, "You're doing all of this, pulling up and down," I said, "That's the throttle and brake." He said, "And you're doing all this, wiggling up and down," I said, "Yes, that's because I'm pulling the throttle up and down with me hand controls. Lee, you know my feet can't touch the floor." He went, "Oh, all right." So when he got out he was shaking like a leaf and I couldn't believe it.

I got him one night. He was walking past my place round the corner that you know about. And I could see him walk past my place through one window and I could get to the front door before he could get past. So one night I thought I'd have a bit of fun. So when he went past, I opened the letter box and I could see him just passing my front door. So I shouted out, "Lee, are you going down the pub tonight? I'll have a beer with you." And he was like that, looking around, seeing who was watching. And I creased up. So he's walked back round, past my place and he's walked back again. And I done it again. I said, "Lee, are you going to

have a beer tonight? I'll have one with you. I'll see you down there." And he ran to the pub and an hour later I got in there and he was like that still and he's knocked four pints down his neck.

Waiting for a ghost to come and join him.

Yes. I said, "What's up, Lee?" He said, "Your place is haunted." I said, "What do you mean it's haunted?" He said, "Yeah, it's haunted." I said, "What do you mean? Tell me what?" And he said, "I heard a voice coming from your place telling me I'll see you down the pub in a minute." I said, "Ooh, that's strange mate, isn't it?" And he was shaking like a leaf, his hair's going grey and I said, "I'll have a pint with you, Lee." He said, "That's just what that voice just said." I said, "Oh, did it, Lee? After it said I'll see you down the pub?" He said, "That's right, how do you know?" I said, "Well, if you looked in my letterbox, you'd see a little pair of eyes peeping through." He said, "What was that, the ghost?" I said, "Yeah, called John Carter. You could see me ..." "You little sod." And when he told his mates, his mates just cracked up.

That's brilliant.

Like me brother, he had an old car out on the road on a trailer all ready for the scrap yard, no engine, no wheels, no axles, no nothing, ready for the actual car to go from there to the scrap yard. But he wanted some more bits taken out of it. He was at work and he phoned me and said, "John, can you do them bits for me? Take them bits off?" I said, "How am I going to do that? I've got no tools." He said, "Get my toolbox, take it out to the car." So I got me dad's sack barrow and I lifted this toolbox on the sack barrow and I dragged the sack barrow out to the car. And I'm there working on it – I could stand in the engine compartment because there was no engine there. Then it started raining and I thought, "Damn this, I ain't going to get wet." So I dragged the toolbox under the trailer. Of course I could still see the toolbox where I was standing. I thought, "I'm getting wet" so I pulled bonnet down, without being on the catch, so I'm just sitting in the ... standing in the compartment. I could hear this voice saying, "Oh, you're a beautiful car, aren't you? It's a shame you're going to the scrap yard." I thought, "Ooh, a bit of fun here, mate." I went, "Yes, I've had my day on the road. I've got no tax and insurance no more. My owner don't want me so I've got to go to the big scrap yard in the sky." He went, "You're a beautiful car, aren't you? Shame you're going." I said, "Well, I've had my best days, I better go now." He said, "I'd better go now." I said, "Bye, bye, see you later." He said, "Yeah, okay." And I'm standing in the compartment and I could see him walking away [laughs].

And he just talked to the car! [Laughs]

[Laughs] Yeah! He must have been a right nutcase or something. Of course I'm standing there wetting meself laughing and I'd taken these bits off ... I don't know if you know about cars or nothing?

Not much, no.

Well, you've got like a dispenser where you put the brake fluid in. I'd taken a bit off, just stupid bits. I'd done that, gone back in the garden to put the toolbox away and me brother came in. "John, did you take them bits off?" I said, "Yeah, Darren. I had a bit of fun un'all." He said, "What did you do?" I explained it to him and he went, "You didn't." I went, "I did." And he just cracked up and he told his girlfriend at the time, my

sister in law Nell, he told her what I'd done and he said, "You didn't do that, John, did you?" And I said, "Yeah." We just cracked up about it.

What I can't believe is the bloke just talked back to you.

Yes, he must have been thinking about Kit car on the telly.

Yes.

I couldn't believe it though, so funny. [Laughs]. We used to have some laughs. I had a little motorbike, a monkey bike, and we used to ride around on the garden and me dad, being like he was, used to say, "Right you lot, you're not having your bikes out today." "Why not?" "I've had enough of you tearing up my garden. Of course mum knew the bikes were for the garden so, "Yes, all right, all right." So we'd have a hole in the shed, I'd say big enough to put a big box through this hole. Now, my little brother would hop in through this hole, go in the shed and unbolt the bolts off the door so we could open the door. Dad put a padlock on the shed and took the key with him. So all we would do is unbolt the bolts from inside the shed, undo the door, get the bikes out, have a race round the garden, put the bikes back in the shed, bolt it up and then come back out the hole.

But one day, as we called him the old man, left the shed keys on the side. Of course we decided to get the bikes out and over the road there were these big sheds – that's how big they were, you could get four cars in each shed, big workshops. We got these bikes out and George decided he'd had enough of racing around the garden so he'd put his bike away and me old man's come out, he's effing and blinding, "Put those friggin' bikes away, I've had enough of you tearing up my garden." "Oh, all right." So I've gone in the shed, put me bike in the shed, the wind's caught one of the garage doors, pulled it round and as it did so, I've hit it with my bike like that. I've hit the shed door, the shed door's hit me dad like that [claps hands], knocked him in the shed so I've dropped me bike and run indoors. They said, "What's up?" "I dunno. Dad's outside, I think he's out cold." "What do you mean?" I said, "You best go and see him." He was like, "What happened?" She said, "You silly old fool, you've hit the door." And there's my bike lying on the floor, she said, "I told him to put his bike away." So ... [dog barks]. She said, "I told him to put the bike away ages ago and he did." She said, "You must have walked into the door." He said, "No, no, he's had it out five minutes ago" and I had, I'd had it out but I hit it into the door. [Laughs].

He got hit by a phantom bike.

Yes, yes. It's like we used to get locked in, we used to lock our paddock, me dad used to lock us in so we couldn't get out because coming up and down this road, when we were kids, we used to have big haulage lorries trundling up and down this bit of road here. So you can imagine if we were kids, we could run out and bump, be hit by a lorry. He put a big twelve foot tennis court fence up, so you can imagine how big they are. But we used to get out. How?

Underneath?

No. [Gestures climbing].

No.

Yep.

How?

With me arms. Because I'm so powerful from the waist upwards ...

I suppose you've always used your arms a lot.

Yes. And because I was skinny at the time and me brother was, we used to put our fingers through the fence like that, up over the top and down the ... out ... do whatever we want to do, back over the top and in. Of course mum knew that we used to do that but she never said nothing. But one day we were on the fence. I said to me brother, I said, "Oy ..." I don't know if you ever get the feeling that someone's watching you?

Yes. You kind of know, don't you?

That's right. Well I had this feeling and I said, "George, someone's watching us." He said, "No they're not." I said, "There's someone watching us, I've got that feeling." He said, "No, come on, let's go." Up and over the fence we went, down the other side and we went out. [Mobile ringtone] Is that your phone going?

No, it's not mine. It's not my ring.

Yes. And we get up and over the fence and go out and do whatever we was going to do, back over the fence and that would be it. But the next day I said, "There's something wrong." "What?" I said, "Something's wrong." So we go up to the fence, got to the top, fair enough, up and over the other side. And as we got up and over the other side, the fence bent outwards and there we was up in mid air and George says, "What do we do?" I said, "I dunno, I think we just drop." He said, "What, at twelve foot? You must be joking." And I tried to get as far as I could into the middle and come down. We didn't do it no more, we were so scared of being up there but Dad had a big gate but neither of us could reach it. But we could if we stood on each other's shoulders so we took it in turns of who's going to open the gate.

You found a way.

Yes, there was only one little problem. You open a gate, what does it do?

Swings.

Yes. And what's between the gate and you?

Thin air?

Yes. And we went pring! Like a pair of tumbling blokes.

Okay.

Yes, we had our fun and games when we were kids.

All right, John, I just spotted the time. That means you've been talking to me for three hours.

Have I? Good God.

Are you pleased with yourself?

Yes!

It's been brilliant and I really look forward to coming back to do the follow up with you as well and ask you some more questions and stories.

I'm sure I'll remember them.

I'll have some as well. I'm sure I'll have some from what you've said so far. But thanks ever so much for today, it's been fantastic to hear all your stories.

It's been fun telling some.

I like it when you get onto the funny stuff.

[Laughs].

Thank you.

The things they say you shouldn't do but you can do ... they say you can't do this and you can't do that but you got to do them in life so you just try getting on with them.

That's been your way, hasn't it?

Yeah. I think it's the way I'm going to be.

That's going to be your epitaph.

Until the end of it but that ain't for a long, long, long, long time.

Okay, well thank you very much.

You're welcome.

END OF RECORDING

Due to health reasons, John was unable to do the follow-up interview.