

One & Other Project

My name is Verusca Calabria and today is the 22nd July 2010 and I'm here at the Wellcome Trust in London to interview John Bishop about his time on the plinth. So this is a post-plinth interview we might call it. So John, thank you very much for coming to meet me today.

Thank you, it's very good.

So basically I transcribed your pre-plinth interview and I've got a few questions I wanted to ask you on your life story.

Yes.

First of all you talked about going on the plinth to support the Fire Service Charity and The British Heart Foundation.

Yes, that's right.

How much did you make?

I think I made ... my target was £999 because of the 999 connotations for the fire service but I think I made around about £880 in total and the fire service had a big chunk of it and the Heart Foundation, yes, 10% or something. I can't remember exactly but that was about £880 pounds in total.

How many people did you have following you for this adventure on the plinth?

Not very many because the time slot that I was given was 1 o'clock in the morning. I think it was, if I remember now, it's a long time ago and I tried to get a few friends to come but the time situation didn't help. A lot of things were at short notice. Eventually I think there was my wife, my two sons Graham [Bow] who was a fire fighter colleague, his wife that was basically the support crew, that was it.

I know that you mentioned the Facebook as a way of connecting again with fire fighters. Did you get much support through the site?

Yes, I had a lot of people donating money, obviously firemen that knew me donated some money via what's it what's it called? *Just Giving?* That's right, they sort of did it, well most of it was done online so it was *Just Giving* so a lot of the ex-fire-fighters I knew sent money for that and friends and relatives who saw what I was doing and thought it was a bit crazy so they sent me a few quid, that was it really.

You know when you got given a place you were sent a booklet that encouraged people to connect to the media, the local press and so on to let them know about what you might be doing on the plinth?

Yes.

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Did you do any of that?

Well I've got my own website so I sort of promoted everything that I was doing. I pushed onto my website and onto Facebook and most of the people thought I was a bit crazy and thought ... didn't know who Antony Gormley was so I was quite surprised that a lot of people didn't know who he was or what it was about or what the fourth plinth was or anything really. So maybe it opened a lot of people's eyes to that sort of thing.

When you say a lot of people didn't know who you were, you mean amongst your friends?

Yes, a lot of people I lived with who I ... you know my sort of I mean I know a lot of artists now, but at the time a lot of fire fighter friends didn't know who he ... hadn't got a clue who he was, Antony Gormley, they didn't know anything about him at all. But since I've left the fire service I've become more arty generally so people I knew ... obvious they knew who Antony Gormley was.

Just to bring you back to the experience of the plinth. What was it like to be up there?

It was very strange. I was kind of hoping that I'd get a daytime slot because with the fire service charity thing that I was promoting ... the daytime, if I'd have done it in the daytime it would have been much better for me because we've got a lot of helmets that are charity items and Graham was willing to be there and we wasn't there to sell anything but we was going to say that they were gifts and if people wanted to donate a pound for a helmet then they could. So I think in the daytime we may have sold about 800 of those, you know, but I really do think if we'd have had a midday slot or Saturday or something they they'd have just sold but being 1 o'clock in the morning it was a bit difficult. It felt very strange; I'd had quite a nervous time before I actually went up. I was sort of in and out the, you know, toilet stations and things like that for a good couple of hours. I got very nervous but once I got there actually it seemed quite natural, it was all right, felt quite good, I enjoyed it.

I enjoyed watching it back myself and seeing the way you were interacting with the audience and talking about your life story in many ways and perhaps at this point I'll ask you about your son because in the pre-plinth interview you mentioned and also on the plinth that one of your sons was doing an exam in order to join the army. What has happened since?

Yes, he actually did all the exams and he got accepted but the position that he wanted to go into was unavailable which was a certain field in the army that he was really interested in doing and he'd done all the studying for it and he'd done all the preparation to go into that particular regiment and when he actually went to sign up to join, to put his name on the dotted line, they told him that this regiment wasn't available any more. And they just said either you go into this other one ... so they tried to fob him off with another regiment which he didn't want which I was quite pleased that he actually didn't accept and stood by his morals and he wanted to join this particular regiment so he then sort of got a bit of a cold and I tried to talk him out of it because I know I sound political but I don't agree with what we're fighting for

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there. So I did sort of talk him out of joining and we had a long conversation about two days before he was going to sign up and he phoned me two days later and said, "I've changed my mind." So whether I'd had anything to do with it I don't know or whether it was his own, he'd made up his own mind I don't know but since that I mean a year's gone by now and he's not very happy what he's doing with his work and he's thinking of joining again. So he's just done the exam again, he's got to go for a medical now and I don't know what they're going to offer him this time. I think he's trying to get into that regiment that they said he couldn't before so I don't know. At the moment, as far as I know, he's going ... that's it, but when, where, how, why, I don't know.

What regiment did he want to join?

It was something to do with the mapping, specialised mapping, they go and make maps of ... I tried to look at it on the Internet but it was above my head to be honest.

And how old is he?

He's twenty-one now, he was twenty-one in June so he'll be twenty-two next year and I'm a bit happier that he's older because he was going to join when he was seventeen and I didn't want him to join. I mean he was seventeen because I didn't think he was old enough, didn't think he was responsible enough. I didn't know what he was about and then he was twenty he ... that's when was going to join, when he was twenty because it was last year and I thought, "Well, he's a bit older and he must know what he wants now." But now he's twenty-one, he'll be twenty-two next and so it's up to him really.

Why do think he's interested in joining the army?

He's always been interested in it, he's ... my father was in the army and my grandfather; his uncle was in the army. I don't know I think it's a brilliant career but it's just ... a dangerous one.

You mentioned you don't want him to go out there and you're referring to the possibility ...

Yes, of course. Well he will be sent out there, there's no shadow of a doubt. It doesn't matter if he joined in Scotland or Ireland or wherever, as soon as he was trained and ready they'd send him to Afghanistan I doubt it at all.

How about your other son?

Stuart is my wife ... I'm remarried with so Stuart is really my wife's son but I ... we do I just call him ... he's still my son but he works in Hackney. He's in Lloyd's Bank ... banking, he does lots of things with computers in the banks but he's just told me today that he was thinking about going to Mozambique because he doesn't like the thought of working for a bank. He wants to go to Mozambique to maybe volunteer. They're on about, I don't know, quite I think it's something to do with photography documenting probably what you're doing yourself something to do with the people

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wanting photographers and he's done a lot of photography courses so he's thinking of packing up this job that he's doing now, that he gets quite a good wage for, and going to Mozambique. He has to find his own flight but they pay for his accommodation and everything and then he's going to stay there for six months but he doesn't know ... he's 36 but if he doesn't know now I don't know.

So how do you feel about him going to Mozambique?

Yes but he's 36 ... he can, I think it's great. I think it'll be brilliant for him, really good.

Fantastic. Thank you. So just to ... back again, what it was like to be on the plinth, how did you feel up there for an hour, what happened?

It seemed a long time, it seemed a lot longer than an hour and after about thirty minutes I was absolutely exhausted because you probably read my history. I've had a lot of heart problems and I'm still not brilliant, well I had a really bad turn when I was on holiday the other week, so I just about survived that again but on the plinth I just pushed myself, you know. I just keep pushing and people told me off and told me to sit down and slow down and I tried but I get bored ... but I did really enjoy it, I thought it was great and I'd sort of ... when I got back because I'm a big fan of The Moody Blues as you probably noticed from my talk on the plinth and they're still touring The Moody Blues after I don't know how many years they've been touring forty years maybe, more. And after my one hour on the plinth I thought I sort of thought, "God, I know what it must be like if they get a buzz, you know, out of performing like a rock show you can just stand up there for an hour. I got quite a buzz out of it." So they must have like a tremendous feeling with all the fans and that. It was good I enjoyed it.

Do you remember what it was like when you came off the plinth?

Yes, I was shattered, I was exhausted, I just wanted to go to bed I was absolutely whacked.

Did you have any conversations with people or anything like that?

The only person I had a conversation with was the people that gave us a post-interview sort of thing, is that the right word and John, you remember John, the sort of ... the groupie of the plinth, the young dude, the guy, he came and spoke with me for twenty minutes.

Do you mean Captain John?

Captain John yes.

What did he ask you about?

He just said he'd enjoyed what I'd said and I'd given him a helmet and he quite liked it and he was wearing it and saluting. It was very funny. He was a nice lad.

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Yes, did you know that in fact there are a couple of groups of people that participated in the plinth project on Twitter and on Facebook who are still talking to each other and meet regularly? Do you know that?

I do know about them, yes I do.

Have you participated in any of those?

I think I joined the 'I Plinthian' thing, but just for a laugh really but I don't particularly want to be travelling around and meeting people like that. I've got enough to do really.

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So have you made any new contacts or friends from the plinth project?

No, no I haven't, only you.

There you go! Just to move on to your profile, actually I noticed you had so many comments so I assumed that this was the main way in which you promoted your project is in the profile page. What was it like to have people write about your performance?

It was interesting, it was nice, feedback is always interesting for an artist, I consider myself an artist really now not a fire-fighter but I don't know, it's always nice to get some positive, even negative, things if people put negative. But there wasn't really anything that was negative.

Were you following the project at all?

Oh God yes, all the time. I was watching it from day one really. I was interested in what everybody was doing. I really liked the Godzilla I thought that was fantastic, absolutely brilliant, I was very impressed.

Would you say what you saw had any influence on what you decided to do?

No, no, because I was going to do something ... I've been taking photographs in a field where I live for about five years now or more, six years and I've been taking photographs there and if anybody happens to be walking past I ask them if they mind having their picture taken and it's like an ongoing thing, it's like winter, summer, spring the seasons and just basically this one field that I think looks like a typical Warwickshire landscape really and it's ... I find it really nice I stand there sometimes and have a chill out and I watch the farmer, what he plants, and what he harvests and take photographs and what I've been ... what I was going to do ... originally my original tack was with the arty farty sort of tack and I was going to recreate the field on top of the plinth and then it just seemed a bit difficult and then when I got the time slot as well because I'd worked that I was going to go on the plinth before I'd even got the, you know, I thought, "Oh, I can go on there and I could do this and I could do that." And of course when you get the actual invitation it's quite a bit of a shock so you think, "Well, I've actually go to do something now." And so I could do that and

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then because, as I say, the time slot was so inhibitive that I decided that I would donate to that one hour for the to talk about loyalty to all sense of duty to other people and like my family history really so but talk about my mother and father and grandfather really that's what I did.

I wanted to ask you about that. In fact, as you mentioned about a few members of your family were working in the fire service and also you mentioned, before we put the recorder on, they also were involved in the army.

Yes.

So would you like to tell me the story of your family?

Yes, well as far as I researched my family tree just before my mother died because my mother never knew who her ... my mother's father left her when she was three so I decided to research my family tree to see whether I could find anything about her. My mother's family, which was the 'Bracebridge' side, which I managed to find ... her grandfather and photographs of him, he was actually a policeman in Birmingham, which I was quite shocked about. And when she was eighty I showed her a photograph of this man in a police uniform, Victorian sort of policeman, and I said this is your grandfather and she was really shocked cause she didn't even know he existed. Anyway that was what I was doing, the family tree, but I'd always known about my father's side because it's pretty well documented that my father was in the army, he was in the fire service, his brother was in the army, his other brother was in the RAF in the WWII but my grandfather was in ... my grandfather actually left home when he was sixteen, ran away from home, I don't know the reasons but I think his father was a policeman, my grandfather's, this is my great-grandfather who was a policeman I think. So whether my grandfather was getting rough treatment at home, whether he was getting beaten up or, I don't know, but he ran away from home when he was 16 and he joined the Warwickshire regiment and he went to India and Afghanistan, fighting the Afghans and then when he came back he did his ... I don't know how many years he'd done twenty odd years or something.

So in 1913 he left the army after having completed his s amount of years and as he got back home WWI broke out so they recalled him, so, you know, he basically went straight from leaving the army to going onto reserve and then they called him back to the colours is what they used to say, 'Were called back to the colours.' So he went back and he went with the British expeditionary force to France with the Warwickshire regiment and he fought all through WWI. He fought at Mons, the retreat of Mons and the Somme and Ypres and all the way through WWI and he even went to Italy. At one point he was wounded four times but I think he was mentioned in dispatches about three times and he won the military medal which was for gallantry so he was like Superman as far as I was concerned when I was a kid ... and then, of course, he joined the fire service or I think he might have been a fireman at some point. But he actually joined the fire service after WWI but once he'd come out of the trenches, so he actually joined the fire service in Birmingham when there were horses and steam engines and all that and then my father was a fireman, he followed on his footsteps. Then WWII broke out so my father went to the war, his brother was killed in Burma in the RAF and my mother and my grandmother was ...

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never recovered from that as my father always said and plus my mother was in the fire service she worked in fire control in the war and then, of course, I joined and so on and so on really.

How did your mum and dad meet?

I think they met at a dance. I'm sure they said. They met at a dance, a war dance or something like that, you know, but they got married in 1942. I think they got married Boxing day.

And why did you choose to join the fire service? If you just talk ...

Why did I join? I think I'd always intended to but I sort of rebelled a little bit so I grew hair long and was following the rock bands and things like that and my dad was always shouting at me to get my hair cut and do something useful you know. But I think because my dad wanted me to join and he sort of kept on about ... I sort of kept distancing myself from it and then when I was twenty-one I thought, "Oh" and I was in a rubbish job, "Oh, I can't do this any more." And I thought about joining the army when I was seventeen and I'd applied to join the marines. I applied to join the marines, I was 17, and this man came to the house to ... as a sort of soldier came to the house to talk to me about it because I'd filled all the paper in and he was about six foot six this bloke and he comes down the path and I remember my mum said, "Oh, this there's a blooming big soldier coming to the door, what does he want?" And of course he scared the life out of me this bloke he was like huge and so I didn't join and then when I realised my job was rubbish I applied to join the fire ... I didn't tell my father actually, I never told him that I was I going to join in case I didn't get in and then I would have been sort of embarrassed I think probably if I hadn't achieved joining. But I went for the interview with my really long hair and a beard and they said, "Oh, if you've come for this job why haven't you had a shave and cut your hair?" And I said, "Well, if I don't get the job I don't want to cut my hair." And they said but they say I'd got in and I did the exams and got in so then I joined and was forever cutting my hair then. Was always too long.

So what was it like joining the fire service then? Which year was that?

1974. Yes, it was just sort of joining the army I believe ... I imagine everything was on the double, 300 miles an hour yes, it was a bit of a shock but I enjoyed it, it was good.

What I got from your pre-plinth interview ... that it was a job that you loved very, very much. And I'd be really interested in capturing your views of the perceptions of this kind of group from when you joined, for example, when your father was there, when you joined and what it might be like now.

When my father was in the fire service it was a very ... there was a lot of ex-soldiers, they were all ... they'd either come out of a service like the Navy and they'd gone straight from the war, you know, and because they were regimented it was perfect for the fire brigade so they went from this. They'd already got discipline so they took it in and channelled it into a different thing and it was the fire service and the ambulance

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together when my father was doing it because they'd got the discipline. I think that they were good at it, you know, they were good, they did a good job and it was very family orientated, they all worked together and lived together and a lot of them sort of lived in flats, blocks of flats that were owned by the fire service so they were very community organised even in the street where I was born, which was 1952, there was like block of houses and they were all fire fighters so all the families at the top of the crescent with which was [?] at the top of this crescent there was a block of houses where the firemen lived maybe twelve houses and then at the other end of the crescent there was another block of maybe twelve and they were all firemen so we were ... all lived together and slept together and partied together and had bonfire night, you know, everybody ... they all sort of ... it was a very community based thing.

And this was before they got married presumably? Or found partners?

Well, they got married in the war so it was ... he was a soldier when they got married so when he left the army, when he got demobbed from the army he went to the fire service and then they took on, you know, this fire brigade family thing then it was became but ...

Were you brought up in Birmingham?

I was born in Birmingham yes.

Okay. And what was the name of the Street again?

'Chardin' Crescent I was born, it was urban, right on the edge of the of the city then I was like urban one side of the house and then you go over this fence and there'd be like the countryside so it was, like, to me it was like, was great because you'd go ... I mean the city was only a bus ride away but you only had to go over the back fence and there was, like, countryside and the river and it was just fantastic.

So your neighbours were people that had worked in the fire service?

Yes.

Did you grow up with their kids?

Yes, yes, of course, yes. There was lot a couple of them became fireman but not very many, a lot of them seemed a lot brighter than I was. I'd always felt that I'd never had any intelligence but that was my take on it. And they all seemed much more, they were all going to college and the university and a lot of the ... and I just, I don't know, it didn't seem to happen for me ... I couldn't do the maths. I was never good at maths ...

What was it like to join the fire service for you?

I was very scared. I was really scared. I was always a bit soft maybe I'm a bit soft and it was difficult really to ... because I was a bit soft my sister always thinks that I

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should have been the girl and she should have been the boy but that was like an ongoing argument we've always had, she always thinks I'm a bit sappy. But I don't, I thought when the crunch came I was always ... did my job, so that's the main thing but it was very challenging it was ... of course you have to do everything, you know, go and fight fires and you know ... it was different then because a lot of the buildings then were all pretty old and rickety and falling down. It was great, I loved it, it was just fantastic and the blokes ... the guys you worked with, it was just crazy really, you know you just like ... maniac maniacal, it was mad, you just did things and thought about it afterwards.

When you mention about struggling with some of the things can you give me some examples?

Well, I didn't drink, I never drink, I didn't drink alcohol, never have. I didn't smoke, I liked to draw so it was, I was ... I liked poetry so at the time if you didn't smoke, you didn't drink, you know ... it was difficult it was the sort of ... but it was okay, I did okay, I got through.

Did you start to drink and smoke?

No, no never no.

Never.

No, never smoke or drank ... rather have a cup of tea.

You mentioned about the discipline in the service. In what sense was it very disciplined?

It was like the army, it was like you do as you're told and if you didn't do as you was told you got put on a charge, you know, you have to face ... go and face the consequences and go and see somebody higher up and they'd reprimand you or whatever ... but I was never that way. I never ever did anything that I shouldn't do so I didn't have to go down that path really. I just ... if anybody said, "Stand on my head." I would stand on my head. It's a different ... it's not like the army if somebody told you, "Shoot somebody." I might be thinking, "Why?" but in the fire service it was more like you're going in there to help somebody so you just did it, you didn't think really, as long as you did it as safely as you could.

Have you got any memorable stories from those years that you worked as a fire fighter?

No not really, they're just ... it just all sort of congeals into one massive thing, just the ... I think it's changed now. I speak to people who are in there and they say it's changed but that's ... everything changes but it was just I liked, I mean we just did everything together really, you know, we played sports together and we'd go running and football and cycling and swimming and rambling, mountain everything when we was off duty, you know, we just like four blokes who says, 'What we doing this

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week?’ and then we’d go to Wales and [?] climb up Scotland, go to Scotland, go climbing and I was just good. I miss that really.

When did you stop working?

1991. I left my job, well, I lost the job in 1991 after the first heart attack so ... which was quite tough ... so I was quite poorly for a couple of years so but ...

What is your heart condition caused by?

It’s caused by hereditary, that’s it. Didn’t smoke, didn’t drink ... yes. That’s was it, that was when you in the hospital they show you a film about all the things that you shouldn’t do. Well I was a vegetarian, I didn’t smoke, I didn’t drink, I used to run ten miles every other day, cycling, swimming, I was eleven stone seven. I was as hard as this table and when I said to the doctor, “Well well, where’s my film?” he said, “My film, where’s my film?” because it was like don’t eat and don’t drink and don’t smoke ... he said, “Well we haven’t got a film for you, it’s just bad luck.”

Is there other people in your family with the same problem?

My father had one when he was fifty-one and researching my family history I found out that there’s been quite a few on my mother’s side so ... that’s as far as I’ve got.

Did you get any warning?

No, I was fit as a fiddle. Absolutely fit and I was, I was working at the NEC at the time because I was doing three jobs. I was fire fighting, I was working at the NEC in security and I was doing a bit of scaffolding for somebody else so I was busy but I didn’t have any warning. I was at the NEC and the Take That concert was on and I just didn’t feel very well and I went across to the little ambulance desk and they said I’ve got the flu [?] carry on ... well, I knew it wasn’t the flu, I couldn’t walk. That was it. And then the next day I was putting my son on the play bus because he was, can’t think, he was three and I was trying to get him dressed, my wife had gone to work, I was trying to get him dressed to go onto the play bus and I couldn’t ... I was in that much trouble and I had to go and fetch the neighbour and says, “Can you take my son to the play bus I’m going to go to the hospital.” So I took him down next then I drove myself to the hospital and they gave me a check and they said, ‘Well, yes, you’ve got angina, we’re going to keep you in.’ And crazily I thought, ‘Well, if I’m going to have a heart attack, I’m going to have it here.’ So I went down to the day room and started doing press ups and squats until I had a heart attack.

Was there anyone there around you?

Yes, I just thought if I’m going have a heart attack I’m going to have it here.

You self-induced?

Well, it wasn’t ... I didn’t sort of ... I didn’t plan it but I just thought that was in my head that I’m in hospital I feel really bad and if I’m going to have one, I’m going to

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have it here rather than out on the street and nobody find me. So I went down to the day room and I did press ups and squats and a few other bits and bobs and then I just about made it back to my bed before I grabbed hold of the nurse and said I told her I was dying, get the doctor and the doctor come and said, "We all have to die some time." That's the truth.

What happened after that?

I was in intensive care. I don't remember much else for about three days. So then they flushed me out with the with all the right bits and bobs and then I felt great then because I'd lost a stone which I thought was fantastic, I looked like Arnold Schwarzenegger because I was like so fit and I'd lost a stone. I thought, "Jesus, I look fantastic." And so I was running around the hospital then, sort of taking all the trays to all the other patients, trying to help everybody who wanted water because I felt great. I felt fantastic. And then ... I didn't really feel like I was ill until they gave me all the tablets that I had to take. They sort of ... I sort of sat in the outpatients department and then they gave me this great big bag of medication and said, "There you go." And I thought, "Shit, I am ill." And then when I got home, I had another one, a minor, a really minor one after about two weeks at home so I went back in again and I remember saying to the surgeon, "I'm not right." And he said, "Ah, there's nothing wrong with you, you're fine, you're fine and we've done the, you know, angioplasty." where they put the balloon in and they cleared the arteries and I said, "Well, I'm telling you that I'm not right," brilliant bloke, don't get me wrong, this bloke, Dr. 'Vatey' his name was and absolutely fantastic, loved him and I kept saying to him, "I'm not right, I'm not right." And he said, "Look at me again," so he gave me another examination and they found that it closed up again so they did it again and then I was okay then for a few years and then I had another one about 2005. None before that, I can't remember about the dates and I've had about three now so three bad ones and little sorts of tremors.

So what's the prognosis?

I'm going to die. No, the prognosis is, I don't know. I just keep doing what I'm doing. My friend seems to think that eventually I'll have to have a bypass but at the moment I don't want to go down the bypass route. If I have to, I have to, just do what they tell me. Some days I'm good and other days I'm not so good.

You mentioned you weren't very well a couple of weeks ago?

Yeah, I had a bad turn I was actually on a holiday and I sort of ... I thought I'd had another one, to be honest, and when I went to the doctor a few days after I got home from the holiday he said he didn't think I had and he gave me, last week actually, some more test and they didn't find anything that was pointed into that to having had another heart attack but for some reason or another my blood-pressure keeps dropping irregularly, it just ... I can be fine and then all of a sudden the blood pressure will just drop away and then I'll pass out but I feel like I am and according to the doctor, everything is exactly the same as a heart attack, but I'm not having the heart attack. Though all the symptoms are the same so that's why I start panicking because everything is exactly the same sort of thing apart from the pain.

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So '91 was a turning point in your life then.

Yes.

And you then went to college?

I came off the rails a little bit once and I started to get ... I decided that I hadn't seen anything so I wanted to travel so I started to see where wanted to see. I'd never ... when I was in the hospital lying in bed I remember thinking I hadn't seen the Grand Canyon and I really wanted to and I thought, "I'm not going to see it." So that was like the first thing I did, I went to America to see the Grand Canyon and then I went off the rail a little bit and then I had a few problems with home life and then once I got my head back together I thought, "What the heck can I do?" so I actually went and did O level art because that's all I could think of to do because I'd always drawn and I'd always written poetry and I'd always had this artistic side but never told anybody about it really. Nothing, done anything with it so I did an O level art and then went on from there really.

Then you went to university?

I went to Birmingham Solihull University and did a degree in 2007, yes. Fine Art, I also did Graphic Design and I won a ... when I was at [Paulsy] Green College I won a scholarship to go to Florence, so I went to Florence for six weeks ... it was like a ... they wanted a sort of a person from my background really that's what they were after to have the opportunity to go and it was this trust fund that had been set up and I did it and so I went. Yes, it was great.

I was very impressed with your website and your blog and everything you can do video production, to audio, to website design. And I looked at some of your art as well. And your [?] I just wanted to find out from you what does it feel like having this different life now that you have all these different skills and things that sort of match a 21st Century digital economy in a way?

I'd rather be fighting fires but I'm not fit enough any more. I'm too old anyway now but I still think that was worthwhile, you know? Does that make sense? I still think that actually being having a job like my father said, "A real job" that pays the mortgage and gives you a feeling of contributing is more important. I missed that and I've actually doing some voluntary work at Compton Verney ... the art I was doing ... well I have been I haven't been for a few weeks because I haven't been too well but I've been doing voluntary once a week there.

Where is that?

'Compton Verney is in Warwickshire it's an art gallery like, trying to think the right words to say, but it's just got a huge collection of ... there's a lot of ... my brain's gone there.

You were saying you were doing some volunteering.

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Yes, I'm doing some voluntary work, I'm trying to think what their collection is, it's like my brain's not thinking ... like a social history collection as well. There are things that ordinary men and women have painted and collected and things that they've made. I'm trying to think of the right word but I can't and it's like a huge ... it's the biggest collection in the country, it's really, really interesting. You'd probably like it actually.

Is it the [?]?

It's like that yes, [?] had a big collection of stuff you know her? You know her work?

I think so yes.

Yes, and it's like basically things that were made, like, made for shop fronts or just in the house people would use them like a toast rack or a toaster or silly things that had just coddged together and they'd done it artistically. But they were worthless but still brilliant and there's a lot of paintings that are really, really terrible artistically, you know, people would say, "What is that?" But they were brilliant because they're statements of ordinary people, you know, that even some of them in oil paints have got a lot of little bubbles coming out of the mouth of the words like, "What fish did you get at the market?" and things. Brilliant, but they're terribly terrible paintings I mean who am I to say? But they're fantastic.

So what do you do there when you go there once every week?

I was working in the galleries but I found it really tiring. I found it extremely tiring just standing in the gallery. I was doing like a few hours and then because I was out of that I said, "I still want to come but I can't do this, it's just killing me you know, I can't do it." So then they put me on some project like there was in the office doing some sort of, you know, paperwork and bits and bobs like that and then just before I was not too well again I was going to do some work with some of the children, sort of painting, of whatever they needed me to do and that's what I'm supposed to be doing but I still haven't gone back yet. I'm working to going back. I sent the girl an email yesterday saying, "I want to come back but I haven't been too good."

Are you working on any other art work?

All the time yes, all the time. I never stop. But as I say I've been taking pictures in this field and it's kind of ... there's just sort of off the wall really. I did it for myself and then people actually sort of ... they email me now saying, "Can I have my picture taken?" So it's just gone a bit silly and we're doing an exhibition in October. There's four of us we've remained together, there's sort of four of the students that I've met out of the past years and we're doing a show in September or October in Solihull in the [Lobby] Theatre. The one girl's a really good painter and the other girl does sculpture and another girl does pin-hole photography and there's me and I was going to do my painting, I was going to show my paintings but when we met the curator me and this other girl met the curator, she just didn't seem very interested in my paintings she was a bit sort of cutting edge I think. I think she wants something a bit more, you know, crazy so I gave it up. I decided that I'm going to take the field into the gallery,

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I'm hoping I can take a piece of the grass and take it into the gallery space and project either the field behind it or have a big picture of the field and I was going to get some of the little photographs I've taken of people in the field and display those. and then people will be able to stand on this piece of grass and have their own pictures taken with the field behind them and they can say, 'Well I've stood in the field.' And then once I've got all the digital images of these people standing in the gallery I was going to take the images back to the field so it would be like a cycle.

Sounds fascinating.

So then you'll have a gallery in the field of the people that were having their pictures taken in the gallery. Forever, you know it's like perpetuating. If that makes sense, is that the right word 'perpetuating'?

You mentioned about artworks earlier, the two hundred pieces of artworks you made for the plinth.

Yes, what I ... because of my slot again it was a problem that I'd made two hundred pieces of art and I'd put them into envelopes and numbered them and I was going to try to get donations for them really. But because of the time slot there was nobody around to do it for so I ended up with like a hundred and ninety pieces of work still at home that I've got nothing to do with but they're just stuck in the envelope and I'd actually done one for you I brought it today but I've left it with my son.

Aw. Thank you.

I will post it to you.

That's really nice.

And inside of this piece of work was a piece of lino from my mother's house, my mother and father's house, it was a really old piece of lino that was left from... because when I sold the house ... if I can talk about other bits of work I'd made, I'd made a film, don't know whether you watched it but my mother's house, did you watch it? Probably didn't.

Not yet.

I've always been taking movies and I took movies at my mums house and when she was eighty I took a little bit of film and then when she died I'd actually taken some movie on the funeral day of the flowers on the lawn and things like that just because that's just what I do really and then I took ... I went round the house and took a movie of the house with my mum not there, just that all the items still in the house. And then when the house was sold and empty I went round and filmed it again when it was empty and it actually took me a long time to put it together the film and it was not very long, it's only like two minutes but when I actually watched it after I'd put it together it killed me. It really, really unnerves you and then I actually did ... when I was at college I did a thing called a Happening like they used to do in the sixties.

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Kaprow wasn't it, the founder of the Happenings?

Could be, yes, you could be right ... and I did one at college and I actually put posters around and what I'd done was everybody thought, "What the hell's this going to be like?" So I decided I was going to ... I bought a load of cakes and I made tea and everything rather than be [?] so I bought all the cakes that my mum would like [?] so I bought all the cakes and tea and I decided I was going to show the films that I'd made. All the kids thought I was a bit crazy like and then I'd had what I did with all my mum's ... a lot of the stuff I gave away that people would want like neighbours, or sisters or friends or whoever had lots and lots of the important things but there was lots of rubbish that could have been taken to the tip or you know like knickknacks and things but what I decided to do was wrap them up so I wrapped them all up in brown paper and then labelled them 'Love from Mum' and then I put them into a big lucky dip so all the students that came to the Happening would have the tea and the cakes and then we had the lucky dip so they all got something from my mum's house.

I saw that you had that plastic blue horse at your ...

Yes it wasn't plastic is was actually a ... do you remember [?] they're a famous sort of ... they're quite expensive really but my mum had all these horses on a window ledge and whenever ... she had them from when I can remember. I mean, she had like, they were quite expensive sort of collectable [?] and she was always, "Don't you touch my horses! Don't you touch them!" so I was always knocking them over, I was breaking them and then sometimes I'd glue the leg on before she come home so she didn't know. She always knew but while I was playing with them [?] when I was a kid and what it was that I'd made a decorative piece for my ... I made a [?] for my degree piece. A Butsudan is a Japanese shrine and inside the shrine you renovate your family and that's what I did and I painted it bright red and I put all images of my family and the fire service related things inside this Butsudan and inside it was a record player so it played actual music that I liked and music that my mum and dad liked and stuff like that and it had candles and, quite crazy really, and then what I did was I burnt it. So I filmed it from the start, from the day I started to create it until the day it was just a piles of ashes, I filmed it and it was like ... another once again about a two minute film from its creation to its destruction and the horse really was one of the only things I'd got left and I painted them blue. I don't know why I painted them blue I just like it. I think it was just people kept saying, "Why is it blue?" and I said, "Well, I don't know, I just like blue." That was it really not really arty farty that, is it? But I decided that when I said I was taking it up on the plinth my wife was going, "No, no, no, you're not!" I was, "Yes, course I am!" So because I wanted to represent my mum I wanted it to be up there for her really.

So I sense that you've also mentioned to me before the way you were, you know, from a young age you wrote poetry and were interested in the arts, what has it been like becoming an artist later in life for you?

I don't consider myself an artist. People say I'm an artist and it's just rubbish isn't it? I'm just me; I say that I am, just something to say really. People say, "What do you do?" and I say, "I'm a retired fireman." I never say I'm an artist and my wife always says to me, "Tell them" you know, "Tell people what you do." It's just what I do.

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I suppose I'm trying to understand the effect this had on you going to college, learning somebody's, you know, sort of formal learning about how you make art, what sort of impact this had on you and what you do as art? That's really what I meant.

I don't think it's had any. I've learned that what I was doing has got an interest and strange things that I would have I found interesting other people think they're art which is quite ... has become quite strange because I didn't ... I mean I really wasn't taught anything at school. School was rubbish, yes, it was rubbish, you know, I was a bit slow, a bit fat and, you know, there was brainy kids and I might feel like I'm griping but they were only interested in teaching the kids that were bright. That's how I felt if you were a bit slow, you was a little bit fat and you were a little bit not interesting they weren't interested in you and that's what I felt, that's how I felt about school. I wasn't a brilliant footballer but I liked to play but because you weren't brilliant you were sort of pushed aside. Maybe I'm wrong but that's how I felt.

How does it compare for when you have been back to college later in life?

I've always just done what I do. I can't explain it really. If somebody says, "And what is it?" If somebody said to me tomorrow, "I'll give you five hundred pounds if you paint a picture of my house or my son" I wouldn't have it. I wouldn't want to do it because it's not what I do. Does that make sense if somebody says, "Oh, I'll give you a thousand pounds I just want to you to paint this picture." I can't be bothered; I don't want to do it. I'd rather paint something, I wanted to paint or I mean a lot of the paintings I haven't sold them, I've given them away, people have given me a few quid for them, you know. I've never really sort of said, "Oh I want five hundred pounds for that" or that just somebody says they like it, I say, "Well have it, take it."

Thank you for that, that's really interesting. You mentioned also that on the plinth you had these two toys that you ...

They're not toys!

I don't know, what do you call them?

They're not toys!

Puppets?

They're not puppets!

What are they?

They're alter-egos.

Here they are! As we're doing an audio recording here they are.

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This is Upton.

Okay, hello!

And he likes the ladies very much. And this one, this is Alf and he's an alien.

Hello Alf.

He's three-and-a-half. You're as mad as I am. He's three-and-a-half-million years old Alf. Upton's not. Ladies.

Upton's just given me a kiss.

Okay.

I don't know what ... they're just something that my wife and I have adopted and they just ... they just to have fun really they're just fun. We take them everywhere and people think it's very strange and then people enjoy them with us so it's good. Actually one story that I have is I went to Germany with them and they're the German people were all sat round this table, a bit like this really and we was drinking beer and everything and there was a man there with a younger woman whether it was his wife, I don't know. But it's a bit strange, it's quite funny, and I was having [?] taking the pictures because you're going to have your picture taken in a bit and they take the pictures with them to just have a laugh really and the man didn't want to know. He didn't want to know, not interested and eventually after he'd had a few beers, not me, but him, that I managed to get the photograph of him with them and I said, "What do you want the contact email, the web address so you can see the photographs later when you get home?" Didn't want to know, didn't want to know and I couldn't show them to him so I just ... I don't force them on people but he didn't want to know and then as we was leaving the building it was really bad snow outside and as we was leaving he was on his own this man and he came across to me and tapped me on the shoulder and he said, "Could I have the address?" So he obviously didn't want the young lady to know that he wanted to see his photograph which I thought was quite brilliant actually. It was very funny. But I've been all places with them like New York on the Subway and people have their pictures taken.

How long have they been around in your life?

About twenty years or more, a long time now. They're just silly your sort of ice-breakers, they're just people actually. The one friends when we was on holiday invited us to their wedding but they didn't invite us, they invited them. So we had an invite to the [?] 'we invite Uppy and Alf to our wedding and you can come if you want to.'

So you mentioned on the ...

They're a bit crazy.

You were planning to sell them on eBay to raise money for the fire.

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Oh, no, no, not Uppy and Alf! No. I had a teddy bear that was donated by the fire service people, you know, they've got a bear called Blaze and he's like their mascot, the fire service. So that I'm not totally crazy am I? The fire service have got a bear which the children ... and what I did was that my wife decorated [?] embroidery, cause she's brilliant with embroidery so she embroidered the date and everything on his tunic so he was ... it was only one in the whole world that was on the plinth of this particular type of bear and then I actually auctioned him on eBay. I think he got about sixty or seventy pounds I think.

Fantastic. I got confused there.

I wouldn't auction them [?] here's a badge for you.

Thank you! The badge says 'I love Uppy Alf'. With pictures of the two characters also on the badge. Thank you.

The collectors' edition, he's one of one hundred. I make so many every few months. I just do all the design and everything then make them. So there's only like one hundred of each particular one. There's all sorts of different ones though over the years that I've made them.

Fantastic.

They had some for the plinth so in the packet with the bit of lino is a poem about the my mum's house and there's a badge which says, 'I was on the plinth.' With One & Other, but there was only a limited edition of those but they're all in these packets so if anybody wants to donate they can have one. To the fire-service or the Heart Foundation fund they too can have put on piece original art work with the badge. ...

Just to bring you back to the fire fighting community and you mentioned in the previous interview that you've been using Facebook to reconnect with people. How many people have you found?

There's probably about ... you don't lose touch really. I mean we still ... we have, when a person retires, you tend to give to the network that not just Facebook but through the fire service benevolent fund and through the union and through the retired fire-fighters thing, you know, that so-and-so is retiring and he's having his or her do now. If so-and-so you know you can go or you don't go probably though about twenty or more different people. Some of them I mean, some of them have gone to Scotland and who live in Scotland, it's great Facebook really for that I mean a lot of people trash it don't they and say its ... and says it's you know scary or rubbish but it's not really it's if you right it's fantastic.

So are you many people via Facebook?

Facebook, yes lots, they're mostly artists and retired firemen and ... big fan of the Moody Blues so I got a lot of friends all over the world really who follow the Moodies. I always go to Amsterdam and if the Moodies come, because I used to go every

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concert. They came to Birmingham but the Birmingham venue is rubbish now, absolute rubbish, so I don't go any more. If they play Oxford I got to Oxford because the venue's really small and it feels intimate so I like that. So I'm going to Oxford this year when they are coming and I'm also going to Amsterdam. I think it's September isn't it? They're playing Amsterdam two nights I'm going there and we just meet, there's lots of people who come from America and they come from Canada and we just get together and have a chat and a laugh for a couple of days and I'll go home. But we stay in touch on the Facebook. The one chap I met actually, going back five or six years, from Bulgaria, he was in the Russian army and he said that he used to listen to the Moodies on illegal radio because he was in the intelligence but he said he used to listen to the West and rock music on the airwaves. You wasn't allowed but I mean he's said since, you know, they would come down and they come and stay and everything. We've become really good friends me and this chap and he actually came to see the Moodies about four years ago on the bus. He came on the bus from Bulgaria two days and two nights and we actually went to meet ... the band were opening [?] just so a coincidence they were going to reopen their store in Cobham and this chap had come and he said, "Oh, can we go to see them at the store?" And I said, "Oh." I didn't want to go because I know that all the crazy people are there, you know. But I couldn't deny him, could I? I mean he came two days and two nights on the bus to see them so I decided we would so we went to Cobham to meet the band and we had to stand in this queue for like two hours and then at one point this man came up to us and said, "The band's got to go, I'm sorry you won't be able to meet them." And I was a bit upset, I said, "This man's come from Bulgaria" I said, "If the band goes now I'm not going to be very happy" so we met them and it was good, he got his picture taken with them and it was great.

Fantastic. So we're coming to the end of the interview I just wanted to ask you another couple of things about why did you choose to call your website what you did, I can't pronounce it.

Oh, [? website name] It's always been a bit strange it was ... you just have to think of something that nobody else has got really and I've always worn this hat ... that's it really. [? website name] rather than, that's it, just something people would remember but nobody does. They spell it wrong, can't get it right, so it doesn't really matter, I'm not that bothered if they don't find me.

And what would you say your poetry was about?

Well, I haven't written anything for a while actually now, for about twelve months or more but up until that it's been about everything, my life and family and anything that ... if I see something in the street and it makes me smile I'll write about it and anything and everything especially if I'm travelling and see things and I'll write about them ... bad things and good things. My wife seems to think they're all about bad things ... seems to think they're all a bit dark but I don't think they are.

So when did you meet your second wife?

I've known her a long time really so we we've been together about fourteen years now.

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So that was after you had your first heart attack.

Yes, as I say, I went off the rails a little bit ... I won't go into that.

That's fine if you don't want to. Okay then, so just as a closing question what has it been like here to talk about your time on the plinth and your life story today?

Yes, it's been nice sort of a remembering, yes, it's good and it was nice to meet you and chat.

Thank you.

And they're very impressed.

Very nice indeed! And what would you say has been the impact of going on the plinth?

None. None at all. I've not changed, I've had no impact really. It was just a really interesting experience. It was just one of those spur of the moment things, you think, "Oh, I'll apply for this thing." Got no dog's chance, have you, getting that opportunity to do it. To be honest, at times I thought, "What am I doing this for?" You know, pointless, and then, you know, people say to you, "Oh, you can't not do it if you've been offered." And that's when really I sort of ... I would go for the fire service [?] really and the family and the duty and try to say that, you know, sense of duty is really ... I've not been good at it all the time but, you know, it's still worthwhile I think. I don't like to think that the poor kids are dying for it but I don't know, I can't ... but it's still worthwhile in the communities like the fire service especially and the ambulance service and paramedics and anybody that's sort of involved in it so I mean the guy that's ... the nurses and everything at the hospital that saved me really, they were brilliant, they've always been brilliant and people have knocked them, the National Health Service, they're just fantastic, I've never had any complaints at all, they've always been wonderful.

Had you been raising money for the British Heart Foundation before?

No, I haven't no. It's something I would do if I get the opportunity but just, you know, just don't seem to get the, you know, too many things keep happening don't they? And you just keep putting one foot in front of the other, you know. Not very nice when you think you're okay or the next day you're not too well so you just have to keep being careful really. Which is difficult.

Well, thank you very much. I've really enjoyed the interview.