

INTERVIEWEE: Chris Wakefield [formerly Rogers]  
INTERVIEWER: Jacqueline Contré  
CAMERA OPERATOR: Dean Whiskens  
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### **Interview Part 1 – 20 April 2017**

Q: Could you tell us about your background prior to Banner?

CW: I suppose I could say that from school I was quite musical. I was in choirs and I did a lot of solo singing for school concerts and stuff like that. Not particularly talented, but I was interested in music. I went to university in London to study French and Spanish, and while I was there I met Dave. I decided when I'd finished my degree to come back to Birmingham and do a teacher's degree at Birmingham University, BGC. When I was there I was put on secondment at the school, teaching practise, which was then called Shenley Court. Shenley Court was the school that Roy Palmer was at. His subject was French. He also became the deputy head of the school as well. He'd started a folk club in the school. When I went into the French department, finding out I was sort of interested in music, he said, well why don't you come along to our folk club in the school, and also, have you heard about this folk club in the centre of Birmingham, the Grey Cock? I hadn't heard of either so I went along and he got me to go to the Grey Cock Folk Club. For me it was something completely different, it was a type of music I wasn't at all familiar with. The thing about the Grey Cock at that stage was the music itself, traditional music, just blew my mind. It was a new form for me. I'd heard obviously a bit of Irish rebel stuff in my university days, a few protest songs, and a bit of American music, but it hadn't hit me the same way of suddenly finding that there was a British tradition there that I wasn't really familiar with. Hearing all these songs and I think the enthusiasm of some of the singers as well and their respect for the tradition, that sort of hooked me really. I dragged Dave along to the folk club and at first he was a bit reluctant because there was quite a lot of unaccompanied singing, and I think both of us felt there should be more accompaniment to bring it more into this century really and make it more

accessible to people. But we still generally enjoyed it enough to sort of get involved. We were invited to go along to Pam and Allan's sessions that they held in Moseley on a Monday evening to get people singing. It was sort of like the MacColl's critics group really, where people went along and worked on songs and they were helped to improve their technique. That I didn't find particularly helpful at times because I found some of the critics far too critical for new people. It was not an encouraging environment for some of the people who went. There were people like Doug Miller there, and Charlie was there and he was very nice but he was intimidating to me because of who he was and what he represented. I was from a working class background and several of them came across as quite middle class. I thought, I'm not quite sure that this is for me. But we stuck with it and we got to know Pam and Allan very well. We started doing a bit of singing at the club, nothing particularly serious. Then Pam and Allan wanted to travel to India, and Dave and I decided that we would give up our jobs as well and travel to India. We bought a land rover together and we traveled overland with the idea that we were going to try and collect some folk music, listen to folk music in different countries while we're away. It was going to be a six-month journey, but in fact Pam and Allan came back after six months and brought the land rover back but Dave and I stayed for 13 months altogether. We then traveled around on public transport and went to all sorts of obscure places, tribal areas and all sorts. We heard a lot of music but we'd also taken a guitar with us. Whereas before we didn't play instruments, we started to play the guitar while we were away. We'd also taken some folk books and started to learn some folk songs as well. So while we were in India we actually built up quite a repertoire of songs. When we actually came back in 1972 we decided we were going to have a change of direction. Before, I'd been a teacher of languages and Dave had worked in computers. We wanted to do something different and we wanted it to be with music. So we became more involved in the Grey Cock and after a while we also got a contract doing folk music around schools through the education department. So it was quite a change of direction but we also had to earn a living. There was very little money at that stage so I did some home teaching and we sort of survived hand to mouth, because there was no funding at that stage for any of the activity. During the time getting interested in folk music we came across the radio ballads, obviously meeting Charles Parker and everyone talking about The Big Hewer and all the different radio ballads. We listened to them and we were so blown away by how they tucked into a working-class culture. Instead of the working class being put down, as they

often are in cultural situations, this was a celebration of the working class and the different trades and the different professions, and the lives of the people and their lifestyles and their histories. It was just a sort of incredible experience to hear this. When Charlie said to us, well we're going to put on The Big Hewer but call it the Collier Laddie basically, and we're going to stage it, would you like to be involved? Well we sort of jumped at the idea. We couldn't see how that was going to transfer from what was then a record onto a stage. It was quite a leap to think, well how on earth are they going to do that? But when they said that they were going to take slides as well, so you've got a changing backdrop of slides that we were going to sort of transcribe the music and use it, then Rhoma was going to sort of get it on stage basically, then we thought, ya it might very well work then. I think as a first production it was very successful but thinking back on it, it was quite static. It tended to be someone getting up and saying a bit of actuality and retreating into the shadows again, and then songs and there was recitative and there was music going on in the background. It was an exciting form. We had some amazing experiences traveling around the coalfields doing performances. I think that was my introduction really to Banner. I think the success of the Collier Laddie meant that everyone felt that they wanted to carry on and do other things. Some of us thought, we're not sure whether this is really going to work, we're not sure if we're going to be able to reach the audiences we want to. I think through a lot of Charlie's contacts in the coalfields when he'd been recording The Big Hewer, we actually managed to get out there. We went to the Kent coalfield, we went to the Yorkshire miners' gala, we went down to the South Wales coalfields, so we actually did get to a mining audience. I think that was my sort of introduction into A, folk music, and B, into banner really.

Q: When you said you went to India with Pam and Allan Bishop, I seem to remember that one person we interviewed said that had taken a really strong body of musicians away from the Grey Cock Folk Club. He said it took the club quite a while to recover from that, because playing music accompanying songs had been very important. It sounded like the musicianship and the ideas around songs developed in a very important way for the club. But you seem to say that you developed your musicianship while you were India, so there seems to be a contradiction here.

CW: We personally didn't play instruments before we went to India, but we recognised there was a need for musicians in the club. There was a friend of Joy's called Roger, who was a very good guitarist. He came along to the club and he felt the same as us, that you needed accompaniment. A whole evening of unaccompanied singing was not acceptable to a lot of the audience in this day and age. He felt the need for accompaniment, and other groups were doing it as well. It wasn't all unaccompanied singing with your finger in your ear by this time. There'd been a big development for having accompaniment, and some very skilled accompanists as well. We had quite a lot of guests who came to the club as well that were really good musicians and you thought, we need this in our club as well, we can't sort of be stick-in-the-muds and just avoid this question. Quite a lot of people started coming along and learning to play instruments. We had people who could already play instruments. John Wrench became an accompanist at the club as well. John was never a singer but he was a very skilled accompanist. So we made use of people who had the skills in order to make the music more accessible.

Q: Would it be fair to say that you helped create the climate where this could happen?

CW: I think so. Pam was already a musician and there were certain people in the club who it felt like they were a bit resistant to having accompaniment. Eileen, very good singer but didn't want to be accompanied. Roy Palmer sang unaccompanied, Charlie sang unaccompanied. I remember one evening where the three of them were in a group together and by the end I was like, I can't stand this any longer. There was a coup on that evening. Alan had actually said, if they sing unaccompanied up to the interval, we're going to get up and sing some accompanied songs. There was, there was a coup. In fact, Roy never reconciled with that at all, he never came back as a resident. Charlie and Eileen both did but I think they were quite hurt by it. It felt as if it was something which had to happen, because otherwise nothing would move forward – you would have endless evenings of unaccompanied long Scottish ballads. There wasn't that thought about programming, that you need some humour, you need some contemporary stuff, you know. You need to introduce things in a way that relate to the lives of people, you can't just see it as a little package of history. Very important history, but you have to somehow make it relate to the people who are coming to see you and paying to see you. So I think that was why lots of

people in the club felt there was a need for a change, and that change had to be bringing it more up to date, getting more contemporary material in. The critics group in London, many of them were writing some very good material. We thought, well it's not happening here, we ought to be doing it as well and we need to be showcasing that as well to link with the people who are coming to the club more. So that was the sort of change that occurred before we went to India. When we came back I think we felt more committed to spending more time on music and on song writing as well. Dave and I started running a workshop at our house on a Monday evening. Pam and Allan had gone to live in Manchester at that stage so there wasn't a workshop. Our workshop was completely different. Anyone could come along and you didn't tear them apart because they didn't hit the right note and say, you've got to sing it through your nose, or you know. We just tried to get them to look at what the song meant and try to interpret the song and make it an enjoyable experience instead of having people going out in tears, which had happened when we were at School Road. Some people got really upset about the criticism that they were given, and I thought that's destructive, that is not constructive criticism. So our workshop changed. Also then Kevin Murphy got involved. He was a very good musician and he came and did an instrumental workshop for the first half hour. I don't know what our neighbours must have thought because there could be as many as 30 of us in the room, all playing quite badly, instruments. But it brought on people as accompanists and it gave you something to work for. You thought, ya I'll try and learn this tune by next time or try and accompany someone who'd worked up a song. So it was a way of bringing on musicians as well as bringing on singers.

Q: How much of that translated into Collier Laddie?

CW: I think by the time Collier Laddie came along there's several of us who were playing instruments. There's Doreen, there's John Wrench, there's myself, Joan Santana played the whistle. So we'd already got a little group of us who had some skills on instruments. Collier Laddie was one of the most challenging things I ever did. What I did a lot of the time was I listened to the recording of The Big Hewer and I transcribed the music. Some of it was quite difficult, way beyond my technical ability at the time. But you just worked on it and worked on it to get it right. I think that's the most intensive time I've had working on instruments, certainly on the concertina, because there were some very complicated concertina parts for

it. The exciting thing was to see how people rose to that challenge, people who hadn't been experienced performers or instrumentalists necessarily, and certainly not being up on stages and performing to mass audiences. Suddenly there you were. You saw people with particular skills you'd never realised before. Joy, for example, her use of the actuality was so powerful. She told stories before, Albert and the Lion type things and that sort of thing. She'd done it at the club and she was very good. But the power when she handled actuality was just amazing. It was mind blowing, you suddenly heard these words coming out of Joy and you thought, that's our Joy, and look what she's doing. It was the same with other people. Doreen's instrumental skills came on a bomb as well. People singing, standing up and singing solo and stuff, it was absolutely amazing. People like Bob Etheridge as well, dear old Bob. People always related to Bob because he was clearly a working-class guy. A lot of people would come up to him afterwards and say, you were a miner, weren't you? Because of how he spoke the words, because he identified with it, that was how it was basically. We were lucky to have a combination of people who were committed and worked hard and had talent. But the main thing was they believed in what they were doing, and that came across to the audience. That's why I think Collier Laddie was so successful, because your commitment to that material and to the people that it came from was apparent. That's not always the case when you go to a theatrical or a production of any kind really.

Q: What I understand is that in Collier Laddie the musicians were on the side. The people speaking the words or singing the songs played instruments on stage, is that right?

CW: They didn't start off with. Yes, you are a little group on the side together. But people who are musicians also may be singers or may deliver actuality, so they would then put their instrument down and they would go onto the stage. But in the later shows you would have an instrument with you and you weren't necessarily in the little enclave of musicians. But that's how it had been planned and in some ways it gave us a strength. We weren't experienced, this was our first show. We weren't experienced at doing this and coming in and out behind some of the speech; you've got musical tags and stuff behind the speech. We were not at all experienced at it and I think the fact that you were together as a little group, it gave you a bit more confidence. But that developed later.

Q: So the actuality was spoken by people, but not by the actual informants.

CW: I'm not sure whether we had one piece which was recorded by one of the Welsh miners, but the actuality that had been used in The Big Hewer we delivered ourselves. You made it your own, I think that was the good thing. The songs that had appeared in The Big Hewer we sang ourselves, so the whole thing we really did ourselves. The difference was obviously it was on a stage and you had the backdrop of slides. I think the slides were one of the things that made it very powerful because they'd been taken in the coalfields, they'd been taken of miners going to work and coming back from work. So that was a very powerful image. Instead of having as set, that was your set.

Q: Who put together the slide script?

CW: I think in the early ones it was Charlie. He did a lot of the work on putting together Collier Laddie as it was with Rhoma. None of us had the skills to put it on the stage. Charlie wasn't the sort of person who could do it and we certainly hadn't got any of the experience. It was Rhoma who had that vision about how it could be presented, and the future shows as well. I think through her drama training she had the eye, which none of us had. We had the ear. Charlie certainly had the visual thing about slides, he had a real gift for choosing the right slide for the right section. In the early days he did a lot of assembling of the slides, but that caused a lot of problems later on. I remember one particular show, Dr. Healey's Casebook, he was still working on the damn slides about ten minutes before the show, putting them in order. Someone else had to click the button, I don't know if it was Larry Blewitt or I can't remember who was doing the slides on that occasion. But he was still changing the order of the slides. Rhoma went absolutely ballistic. She said, you shouldn't be doing this, you're performing on this stage, you should not be trying to compile a slide script ten minutes before a show goes on. But Charlie did a lot of the work on the slides.

Q: Why was he working to the last minute? Was that perfectionism?

CW: A mixture of perfectionism and disorganisation. The trouble is, all of us were involved in so many different things. Charlie was still trying to earn a living so he was doing some

freelance documentary stuff. He wasn't actually officially working for the BBC then but he was doing some documentary work. He was all over the country, you never knew when Charlie was going to turn up somewhere. He'd obviously got his family as well, and then he was trying to fit in all these different things. He was a resident at the Grey Cock, we all were, you were sort of residents at the Grey Cock. You were rehearsing shows, you were putting together shows, you were traveling to shows – it was pretty manic. I think a lot of it was he just, there wasn't enough time in the day to get everything done, so I think that's why this last minute thing. We all wondered at times the night of it whether we were going to get things together. Sometimes people couldn't turn up for rehearsals, and Rhoma would hit the roof because someone was missing who was crucial, or someone hadn't learnt their lines. It was that sort of thing. With actuality, it was crucial that you got it right. You couldn't just wing it, you had to actually, that was the ethos of the whole thing, that you gave back the words that the people had given to you. You couldn't just think in the middle, well I'll just improvise this bit. The interesting thing in the later shows was people came along who you'd recorded. They would look and suddenly there'd be this lightbulb moment, they're my words. It's absolutely amazing to see when they recognise that these were the exact words that they had said. I think that was one of the strengths, you were giving back and respecting the people who had given you that material.

Q: What kind of shows, for instance?

CW: Well the one I remember in particular, because I did a lot of the recording for it, it was The Housing Game, which was about the Direct Labour Organisation in Sandwell. Interviews were set up by a man called George Hickman. George was quite a character. It was one of my first shows where I did a lot of interviewing and transcribing, and then I worked on the script as well and worked on the songs. But George Hickman had arranged for me to go to a building site in Sandwell during the lunch hour, because the guys had an hour's lunch break, and record three guys about working for the Direct Labour Organisation. I got there on time and there was this hut. I went to the hut and knocked on the door but there was no reply. I peeked in through the window and there were three great hulking builders fast asleep. I just felt like turning and going. Am I going to wake these guys up to record them? Anyway I thought, no I've come here to do a job and I'm going to do it. So I hammered on the door

and they woke up and let me in. It was honestly one of the most amazing recording sessions I have ever done. They were, I can't describe it. Their vocabulary, their description, the way that they spoke, their description of the job, of the people that they worked for – it was just so powerful, but hilarious as well. So much of that recording went into the show, because these guys were terrific. It was one of them, the three of them actually came to the first show that we did. I could see them in the audience. It was that moment when they clearly twigged that that was their words and you saw this sort of beam come across them and a look of pride as well. Afterwards I remember one of them came up and said to me, oh that was busting. He said, and that's what we said. I said, ya I told you that was what we were going to do. He said, ya but I didn't understand it really. Until he heard it he hadn't actually realised, nor did he realise that you then took phrases from what they said and put them in songs as well. So not only was it in the speech, it was in the songs as well. Then seeing all the pictures of the work that did and photographs of them working in these really rundown properties, and the before and after results, that sort of thing, it was absolutely remarkable. I think that was one of my most powerful memories of the strength of actuality and actually recording people who are the experts in that field. They would never call themselves that you know, but giving them the sort of pride, ya this is what we do, this is what we feel, this is our background, and someone is actually for once recognising that what we do is of value.

Q: It would be great to find the recordings and splice some of them into your interview.

CW: They were amazing. I fell about laughing a lot of time, some of their stories were so hilarious. I remember them saying that they were supposed to move people out of the houses when they did the houses up. They said there was this one old dear, she refused to move, she was gonna stay. They described her sort of sitting in the middle of winter in front of a two bar electric fire, freezing there in her coat and everything. But no she was going to stay, she wasn't moving. They kept phoning back and she'd have to walk across this plank on the floor, but she was gonna stay. They saw the incremental repetition that they naturally did, and the pictures that it conveyed in your mind were just incredible. I think that was for me my first really intensive experience of the power of actually going out and recording people. Charlie had spoken about it but until you do it yourself and you get someone who can speak in that way, it was quite lifechanging to realise that that is the power of language

and that is the power of ordinary people. Those ordinary people don't think they've got that power.

Q: For Collier Laddie, the songs were already written by Peggy and Ewan. Did you change them?

CW: No we didn't change any of that. There was some traditional stuff, the Blantyre explosion and stuff like that, they were in as well. There was some traditional mining material but Ewan and Peggy wrote quite a lot of that. They'd also written the music. We didn't really change the music, in fact we tried very hard, without the skills they've got, to imitate that music. We actually did a very good job of it, but it was a challenge. But we didn't write the songs.

Q: Do we have a recording of Collier Laddie?

DW: I don't know because I don't know what there is and what there isn't.

Q: When did you start writing songs, or when did Banner start writing their own songs for their own shows?

DW: Well I think after Collier Laddie. We didn't decide to do another radio ballad, we decided that when we did another show it would be something of our own and therefore we had to write the songs for it. There'd been some song writing in the Grey Cock Folk Club and we'd held some writing competitions at one stage. I got a second prize for a song about camping, which is called The Simple Life. Kevin Murphy won first prize that year. Everyone had a go at writing songs. We'd had song writing workshops from various people, so people had sort of dabbled with song writing. Ewan and Peggy had come up to Birmingham and done various workshops, including singing workshops. I can't remember exactly whether they did the one on song writing or someone else did, but we had workshops on techniques of writing songs and things. I think after that we thought, right, we've got to learn and we'll do our own. Because Charlie had seen the process in the radio ballads of how Ewan used actuality as a basis for the songs, I think what we did was we went around and recorded

people, transcribed it, got a shape for the show, and then we thought about the songs that we might include and what the content of those songs was going to be. Then we would use whatever bits of actuality we could within the songs themselves, and once again you felt that they would then seem like authentic to the people who were coming to see you and who had provided the material for you.

Q: What came after Collier Laddie?

CW: I was pregnant with Katherine when Collier Laddie was in production. I was eight months pregnant when I went down to the miners' gala in South Wales. They'd said they were going to accommodate us, and when we got there it was a marquis with a gale blowing through it. When we actually performed on stage they'd built quite a small stage with the musicians on the side, and it was still blowing a gale. I remember we put our scripts down and the wind came and just blew all these scripts everywhere. We had to actually obtain clothes pegs to peg the scripts so they weren't going to blow away. That was sort of the conditions that you were put under at the time. While I was in hospital after I had Katherine, Charlie appeared with a little dress for Katherine, a typewriter and a cassette recorder, two tapes, and some earphones and said, do you think you could translate some Victor Jara songs while you're in hospital doing nothing into English for me? I think I was an absolute idiot to do it, but they were writing Viva Chile at the time and they wanted to base it around Allende, but using the songs of Victor Jara. So having a baby two days old, I was translating Victor Jara's songs in the maternity ward. The night that I got home from hospital they'd arranged a rehearsal of Viva Chile, which I was going to be performing in. I came home from hospital and they said, well we've arranged it at your house so the baby will be alright. That was Banner, and that was one of the reasons why people found Banner very difficult, because they never thought about you as an individual, they thought about the show and what the needs of the show were. That was a very common thing and that was what a lot of us as women felt. I did it and I performed in Viva Chile. We didn't just use the songs of Victor Jara, we started writing song material there. I think that was the next show that I was actually involved with and that's one which hasn't been included on your chronology. Viva Chile came in '74 because Katherine was born in '74 I know very well; I was translating songs for the performance. So that was the next thing and then The Race Show, I was involved in

that as well. I didn't write that, I said having a baby and doing all the other things that I was not going to be involved in the writing of that show. So I think it was Womankind that was the one I was really next involved with. I wasn't involved in the Vietnam but I was involved in Womankind. Rhoma, Charlie, myself and Dave did most of the work on the script for that and we wrote quite a few of the songs. I remember at that stage I used to keep a notepad on my bed because when you get involved in writing things for a show, in the middle of the night you get this lightbulb moment when you think, oh that's a good line for a song. So I started jotting down and I remember I wrote a song at about 2 o'clock in the morning, because ideas actually started coming. We'd discussed what the content was going to be and suddenly all these ideas about writing came to me in the middle of the night. It took me about half an hour to complete the song, and it was ready for the next day when we worked on the script. So it was then we started doing more of the writing. I think people had written for The Race Show and the Vietnam show as well, but I hadn't been involved in those particular scripts.

Q: What was your motivation for doing those particular shows?

CW: I think it was whatever was a really current issue. Sometimes it was because we were asked to do a show. There was a great feeling about Chile and we actually performed with a group called Inti Illimani down at Digbeth Civic Hall then. We did the Chile show, fantastic Chilean group, exile Chileans. They were performing and it was just an electric moment. Chile was very much in the news at the time, a really frightening situation how a democratically elected Socialist had been overthrown by a military regime. It seemed at that time politically that it was the right thing to prevent the dangers of this happening. That was why we did Viva Chile, I think. Obviously things like the Vietnam War were very much in people's minds, the suffering of people in Vietnam. I wasn't actually involved in that show but there was so much in the news at the time about Vietnam that I think it was felt that that was another show that needed to be presented. It's nearly always a theme that at the time was very prominent and we felt needed to be looked at and analysed and presented, and presented often in an alternative way to that presented by the media.

Q: What motivated you and people in Banner to do things in that way?

CW: I suppose that the unifying thing amongst all of us in Banner was that we were obviously to the left of centre, some of us quite a long way to the left of centre. We had a political motivation because it was something we believed needed to be presented as an alternative to the views presented in the national media often. Certainly the miners' strikes and things like that when we did shows about the miners, all the media presentation was putting down the miners, criticising the miners, saying the miners were violent and this sort of thing. Our recordings found different views and different attitudes to what was going on, so we were able to put a different perspective to those views. I think that was one of the things which motivated all of us, that we wanted to redress the balance and put an alternative view. Also, people who'd been knocked down, we wanted to give them some stature and some standing and some respect. I think that was one of the unifying things as well. I don't think there was a single person in the group who wouldn't feel that that was an important thing to do at that time.

Q: Womankind?

CW: It was a time of a lot of interest in feminism – a lot of interest from women in feminism, not necessarily from the men. I think there was a feeling amongst the women that we needed a show which looked at the role of women and looked at the potential of women and looked at the way women were treated in society. **Womankind** was our first attempt at doing that, and that was a mixed male and female show. The later women's shows were when the women themselves decided to put on a show about women's issues. It was interesting. When we decided that we were going to do that, you saw the sexism within the organisation. Several people said, oh you won't do it, you'll never load the van, you'll never drive the van; who's going to put up the set? We said, well we're going to do it. They said, but you can't do that, you've never done that before. Doreen and I had been going along for years with John and Dave and the rest of them in the early group to put up the set and to set the screens and things like that. We'd climbed up ladders, we'd threaded this blessed big screen that they had in the early days, which was ridiculous. It wasn't a popup thing, you actually had to lash this thing to a big frame and you had to build a deck for your own frame. We'd done all that, yet there was this attitude that women can't do it.

Also, after the shows there used to be a discussion about the issues in the shows. In nearly all the shows we did, there was an after show discussion for those who wanted to stay, where you talked about the issues that had been presented in the show. They said, oh who's going to lead the discussion? Well we're going to lead the discussion. And we did it and it was successful. We did two women's shows just women. We toured it and we went all over the place. We arranged our own bookings, we did our own get ins, we did our own striking the set, driving the van, coming back at 2 o'clock in the morning – all that stuff, we did it. But initially there was quite a resistance from Banner, from the main group, as to women doing it on their own.

Q: How reflective of the time was that? Was that unusual or was it average?

CW: I think it was average but I think it was a shock to us as women in Banner, because I think we expected more from the men. I think we expected them to be more supportive and more understanding. One of my personal criticisms of Banner is the politics was everything but the personal politics was missing. A lot of people I think experienced that. The show is all, we've got to get the politics right in the show. But sometimes the way people were treated in that process was absolutely appalling, and I've been on the receiving end myself of that lack of consideration. Dave and I were the first to have children. The anti-child attitude amongst Banner was appalling, I couldn't believe it. It made life very difficult for people. They wanted you to be involved but they wanted you to be involved not as a parent, as just an individual, not taking into consideration you had to think about your children. I can remember being in core group meetings later on, and most people were understanding. Pete and Charlie were understanding of the fact that you had children and you needed to go and pick them up from nursery or school at a particular time. But I remember saying, I'm going to have to go now, it's time to pick up the children. [Someone] said, you can't go now, we're in the middle of a discussion. I said, I can go now and I'm going. I said, the understanding is I am a mother first and I don't have any choice about what time I pick up my children, and I will care for my children. But just that attitude, the thing about coming out of hospital and a rehearsal being arranged at your house. The other thing was I had a knee operation while they were working on the Put People First show. The first night that I came out of hospital on crutches, I've got two young children, and Dave said to me, oh by

the way I'm going out tonight, I'm going out for a meal. I said, oh? He said, ya Frances has invited us all over to hers for a meal. I said, well that's very nice of her. I'm on crutches, I've been up stairs once on crutches, I've got two young children, you'd better go out for your meal. There was no question about I shouldn't agree to that. They were going to discuss some performance or some booking or something, so they were meeting together. That was a common thing, and I wasn't the only one to feel that. It affected me a lot because I was so heavily involved in Banner – I was part of the core group, I was part of the song group. Sometimes we had three shows in repertoire, you could be rehearsing three different shows and performing three shows and traveling around. Clearly, having children you have to make sure your children are looked after. It became easier later on because when other people had children suddenly they realised, oh they started kicking up a fuss and said, oh we can't do this. They said, we'll have to think about how we solve it. They didn't about how we solve it for me, because I was the first one; they thought, solve it yourself. But they had to do it when other people started having children, and realised how difficult it is to be involved, to perform, to travel when you've got tiny children. I think this thing about never thinking through the personal politics was difficult for me. That was an issue which I found hard and I'm sure other people will mention it.

Q: One of the huge challenges was how long it took for personal politics to develop. This thing about sexism wasn't just the men. Some women, including myself initially, completely anti-children, couldn't understand it. I'll put my hand up to that, how long it took me to not only ?, but how hard we had to work at those things. We'd started the women's group by then but always at the same time we also had black politics coming to the forefront of challenging ourselves personally on those received ideas, quite a steep learning curve. I just want to say I'm really sorry that I contributed to that. But I hear what you're saying about how ignorant people were until their own personal politics changed.

CW: The one memory I have was that we used to rehearse quite a lot at Holyhead School in the studio there, because Rhoma was positioned in the school and we used the studio. I used to take Katherine along when she was a baby. Normally she'd go to sleep so you could do the rehearsal. She was still very small. But this one occasion we got there she would not go to sleep. She was in this little side sort of alcove where they kept all the equipment. She

usually slept through things but this one occasion she didn't. John Wrench, bless him, I mean John was probably the least child-friendly in many ways. He wasn't hostile to you but he wasn't experienced with children at that stage at all. I remember I was needed on stage and Dave was on stage as well, and we couldn't cart this baby around. I remember John Wrench with his kiddy carrier on his back with Katherine in the kiddy carrier so he bounced up and down, to keep her quiet. Gradually she did go to sleep. But we had no alternative. We couldn't afford a babysitter, we had no money whatsoever. So you had to take the baby along as long as you could. Dave mom and stepfather were absolutely brilliant, but you couldn't be driving over there all the time. They often had the baby on weekends. But you had to take the baby along. Some people were very good, I'm not saying that everyone was hostile. But some people were really hostile that you've got a baby. So that made life very difficult.

#### Break

Q: So we were talking about recognition in the current history and how many gaps there are, how much work goes unrecognisable because of poor resources, and what you were saying about Charlie and Rhoma.

CW: I always found Charlie and Rhoma extremely supportive when you worked with them. They could both be very frustrating, they would fly off the handle and things like that when you were working on shows. It was never quiet and calm; in a way people had to fight their corner a bit. But it was done in a, at the end of the day you always felt supported as a human being. They always recognised me as a person and as a mother, and they valued my contribution as well. We had incredible battles. Charlie wasn't the best songwriter and he came up with the most incredible doggerel at times. We'd all go away and write a song for a particular part of the show, and we'd come back and we'd expose our efforts. Some of Charlie's lines were pretty appalling. He was wonderful with actuality, he was wonderful with slides, but his song writing skills were probably the least of his skill. But if you'd have said to him, Charlie, that line needs replacing, he would've fought to the death to try and keep it in. So what you had to do, you learnt the psychology thing, you had to come up with an alternative line that fitted the metre and fitted the rhyme and everything and then say, do

you think that might work there instead of that line? You never challenged Charlie head on because it would lead to the most big explosion. Rhoma did challenge Charlie head on and sometimes the battles between them were quite horrendous. Charlie would question how Rhoma was going to present something on stage. I can remember times when you felt that they were going to end up strangling each other because it was so intense. But they were always loving and caring towards you, and that was the thing about the early Banner group.

Ya okay, when I was the first one to have kids I didn't find people particularly supportive, but they were friends and apart from the childcare issues, by and large they were supportive and loving people. We were a unified group. In the early days, no matter what happened – and there were some terrible things happened . . . One memory was Charlie arranged a performance on a Friday evening down in South Wales. People didn't finish work until 5 o'clock in the evening. He said, well if we start at 7:30 you'll be okay, you'll make it. Well of course they didn't. We went early to set up. He insisted on building this small stage because the stage that was there was too high, it was six feet off the ground and you can't be that high, you've got to be in front and close to the audience. So we made this stage of tables and we lashed them together and we put the Dexion. Come 7 o'clock and no other cars had arrived. There were about half a dozen of us there out of a cast of about 20 and we thought, they're never going to arrive. This is a Friday evening and traffic, they're just not going to get here. Charlie had insisted that it was quite feasible to get down to South Wales in this time. I remember going on stage and another carload had arrived. We all used to wear black and we had long skirts and things. They disappeared into the loos, put the costumes on, charged onto stage, and we started the show with two carloads of people missing. I was suddenly realising that the next bit of music that had to be played, I didn't normally play it. I had to suddenly play a piece of music, because the musician was missing, or we had to spring up and do actuality that wasn't our actuality, or you had to sing lines that you'd never sung before. This was a public performance. That was Banner. There was an expectation that people could drop everything, drop their personal lives, and not eat. Charlie would say, well you'll get there if you don't have anything to eat, if you don't stop for food. These were people who'd been working all day. This is another thing about not taking into account people's circumstances, to expect people to work in a job all day long, drive down to South Wales without eating, and get up on stage and perform. But we did it. It was a crazy life. There were these ridiculous situations where you were going all over the country and

performing. After I'd had Katherine, we performed in the Kent coalfield, there was a Kent coalfield then. It was in December and in those days there were no disposable nappies. I had to carry this blooming nappy bucket with me and a traveling cot and everything down to the Kent coalfield. I said, look, when I'm on stage and Dave's on stage, who's going to look after my baby, a baby who was six months old. Oh right, will she sleep? I said, she may sleep, she may not sleep. Anyway, they eventually, Joan Smith was in the show as well at that stage, and it was agreed that we would ask for someone to be in the room, and then Joan would sort of take over and look after the baby as well. But that was the thing, it was a crazy lifestyle, absolutely crazy. Okay Dave and I were sort of working part time – I was doing home teaching and we were doing this folk music project, so we were sort of part timers. But people working full time with fulltime jobs were having to travel half way across the country to do a performance, and get back at 2 or 3 in the morning and go to work the next day. But they were committed. How they did it, I don't know. I was totally knackered and I'm sure they were totally knackered as well. But people did it, and I think it was because of the commitment to the show. But also it felt almost like a big family, there were so many people, and they were lovely people as well. When we were doing The Race Show with George Gordon, there'd been talk about what happened if there was a national front attack. I remember George Gordon, he's sort of 6'2" and broad and everything, wonderful character. I remember us saying, we'll all line up behind you, we'll be right behind you George. But there was always this fear that there could be attacks because of what you were doing. It was for the time quite controversial, a lot of the stuff you were presenting. When we were singing at rallies as well, we sang some songs that were fairly challenging. I remember, I can't remember his name, the guy who was in charge, someone Barlow, who was in charge of UCATT at the time. Ken Barlow I think he was, ya. We were doing a rally in Aston Hall in Aston Park and there was a song called Say It With Flowers. It was about what flowers you'd give to various politicians. I sang this. One of the politicians was actually at the rally that I sung the verse about. Ken Barlow came up to me afterwards and said, that was a bit naughty, Chris, because I'd sung this verse. But we did a lot of songs that were challenging as well, we did a lot of material that was challenging. We busked the miners in the centre of Birmingham. I remember there was a group of us and I remember we were playing things like Bella Ciao, which sounded great and brought loads of people to listen to you. This one man came up afterwards. We were collecting for the miners and we got a lot

of notice. This one many came up afterwards and he said, that was fantastic music, and he put £5 in the box. He said, I don't support the miners' cause but I support music. It was just nice that you felt that you were doing something, and somehow the music or the form you were taking could win over some people who were not necessarily supporters. That was good. You didn't always have people in the audience who were supportive. During the discussions afterwards sometimes there were some quite challenging questions and people who were clearly opposed to the message that was being put across in the show. But it was good to challenge people as well.

Q: Of the songs that you wrote, which ones do you remember?

CW: I suppose Saltley Gate, I wrote a lot of songs for Saltley Gate. I don't think it's ever been recognised that I wrote a lot of the songs for Saltley Gate. The first song where it sets the scene about the sun coming up over Saltley Gate, I wrote that song. There was always an atmosphere with that song against the slides in the background and this complete peace at the beginning, and this song comes out. That one was so evocative, it's the one I'm proudest of in many ways. It set the whole thing about the miners coming to Saltley Gate and everything first thing in the morning and the pickets arriving. A lot of people said when they heard that it made hairs stand up on the back of their necks. I think that was the one that I remember as having probably the most impact in a show because of where it was and how it started the show.

Q: What song was that?

CW: I can't sing the words now but it was a lyrical song which set the scene for Saltley. It was the very first, we started it with that song. That was probably the one song that if I'm looking back I would say I'm proudest of that one, because of how it set the scene for the whole show. I think the thing about Saltley Gate was we had the rising song at the end trying to encourage people to come on stage. I remember one performance where every single member of the audience got out of their seats and crowded onto the stage without a single person left. So we were singing to an empty auditorium, because all the people were on stage. That was the power of a performance and you thought, well we created that.

Those are the sort of things that you feel proud of. I was involved in the song writing, I was involved in the recording, I was involved in transcription, I was involved in the song writing, the script, and then the performance – the whole thing basically. You think, ya that was important.

Q: What songs do you remember?

CW: I'd have to look at the scripts now to remember. I remember in Womankind I did a song about, you know when you're expecting a baby the pressure is on you to buy everything, all the stuff you don't really need as well. So I did this ridiculous silly song, a humorous song about all the things you have to buy: cozy toes and dicky bibs. That was the one I wrote at 2 o'clock in the morning in half an hour. It was just all these things that you're bombarded with that you have to have. I did a song for the show about the cuts. I went to interview some dinner ladies. It was chopping and slicing and peeling and dicing, it described the work of women working in a kitchen to prepare school meals. I remember the women after they'd seen and heard this song, obviously I'd been and recorded them and transcribed all the tapes. Then I wrote the song based on what they said about their job. When they came to watch the show it was another one of these jaw-dropping things. That's what I said there, that's what I told her. Suddenly it came back to them in the form of a song. It was the sort of thing you remember, when you write a song, it's feeding back to people the power of their own words really, but in a different form.

Q: I recorded Marion Oughton and Dory Glynn on the same day, and that was the song that Dory recalled. We tried to sing it and we couldn't remember all the words, but that's a song that stayed with us. They were really memorable songs. Would it be okay when we meet again for you to have a look at the songs that you wrote? I wouldn't mind having a list.

CW: The thing is, when I stopped being with Banner I haven't got any of the scripts. I gave all my scripts back and I didn't actually keep copies of a lot of the songs. I regret it now but at the time I couldn't cope with it and I just said, take the scripts. So in fact I haven't got copies of a lot of the songs that I wrote. I'd like to see some of the scripts again because I wrote a lot of the songs. Dave and I between us wrote most of the songs for the shows, but

without looking through the scripts I wouldn't be able to say now which ones I actually wrote. You're talking about 30 years ago, longer than that.

Q: John Fryer has given us a box of scripts and Kevin also has some scripts, then there's the library. So between us we might be able to do that in the second phase. I'd like to have that. Dave's will have two songbooks out soon so I think we need to go and look about other contributions as well in the spirit of trying to have a complete history. That would be great. So we got up to Womankind and Saltley Gate that you co-wrote. Then The Great Divide, have you got any other stories around The Great Divide?

CW: The Great Divide, Doreen was involved in the script for that. Because of the timing, I seem to remember I was pregnant again with Keith at that stage so having one young child and being pregnant, I didn't want to get involved in the writing. Doreen was involved in the writing of that. I'd be interested to see how Doreen felt about working on that script.

Q: In the old Banner website it says that The Great Divide was written by Charles, Chris and Dave.

CW: Doreen worked on one of them.

Q: It might have been the first one.

CW: The Great Scapegoat maybe, oh maybe it was. Yes because it was '74. Yes perhaps I must've worked on it. I worked on so many of the shows it's difficult to remember. Yes I did, because the Wind Rush song is in that, and I wrote the Wind Rush. So I did work on that. I know I was pregnant with Keith at the time. It was one of those I was sort of pushed into doing a bit. There were not many people available during the day who could actually work on scripts. It was incredibly time consuming. It was such a longwinded process to do these. You're recording people, you're transcribing, you're working together on the shape of the show, you're writing songs and everything. It was quite a lengthy process and once you'd committed yourself to it you had to stay with it.

Q: How long?

CW: You're talking about, I mean we worked intensively, we worked every day on it when we were working. For example, Rhoma would come in for some evening stuff or weekends because she had the input on the dramatic side. She'd look at what you'd done and think about whether things needed to be changed around because they wouldn't work dramatically on stage. But when Charlie, Dave and I worked on stuff we were working from early in the morning until often late in the evening. It could be over a period of several months really to actually get the piece done. Then of course you went into rehearsals with the cast.

Q: How did you manage to do that?

CW: Lived on nothing basically, because we didn't get paid for the work initially. The first person to be paid when we got a grant I think was Bernard as an administrator, because we recognised we needed people to take that burden of organising shows and bookings and grant applications and that sort of thing. We needed someone to do that side because we were working on the performance and writing scripts. There wasn't time to do that work. So Bernard was the first one.

Q: Why Bernard? His background wasn't admin, was it?

CW: I don't really know, I'm actually very hazy about that decision and why. I'm not sure but I know he was the first to get some salary. We were quite late on, Dave and I were.

Q: My understanding is that the money that was raised for the Handsworth Project was to try and support some of the infrastructural work of the company. I remember that Pete was the first paid coordinator of the Handsworth Project but then was it you? Did you take over then?

CW: Ya I was a rep coordinator for the Handsworth Project. I ran a music workshop as well, which was teaching instruments, singing and song writing as well. We split the Handsworth

Project into four separate groups. There was the photography group, the drama group, the technicals, and Pete was in charge of the technical and I did the music side. Part of the money that was raised for the Handsworth Project therefore was to pay for those people's input into the project.

Q: Was Larry one of the coordinators?

CW: He wasn't a coordinator, he did some work on the photography. I think he and Charlie between them sort of did work on the photography. They involved people like Geoff Little, who went on to work part time with Banner on technicals afterwards. He gained an interest through the Handsworth Project and he actually became almost like an apprentice to the group. He did some of the technicals for the shows as well, so Geoff got involved through that. I think the Handsworth project was a case in point that there was never recognition of the importance of that as a project. There was amongst the kids that it involved. The kids when they performed and got a good reaction, they were just, it boosted them so much. The views of Handsworth at the time were all negative and everything that you heard about Handsworth was all negative. So to see kids who came from Handsworth and from different diverse backgrounds and were working together and relating well together, there were talented kids, getting up and performing on stage. We were carting around at one stage about 23 kids. They weren't all kids, there were some older people as well, but a lot of them were kids, young people. They learned to play instruments, they learnt to sing, they were acting on stage when they'd never acted before. They were presenting a completely different image of the community that they came from to the public. That was so powerful. You've got people like Roshan Doug was involved. Now Roshan Doug went on to write poetry and he became like a poet laureate for Birmingham or something like that. But Roshan started with the Handsworth Project. They were incredible. I remember we used to have to go around and pick them up. Doreen, Naomi and myself, we had this series of cars going around Handsworth trawling kids to take to performances. One day I went to pick up this lad called Suresh, whose father owned a shop in Handsworth. He came out and said, dad won't let me come today. He said, I've got to work in the shop. He had quite an important part in the show. They improvised little scenes and he had a big part in it. He was a great character, larger than life. I thought, oh my gosh, this is going to be a disaster. So

when we got to the venue and I hadn't got Suresh in the car I said, I'm sorry, Suresh can't come today, his dad said no, on this occasion he's got to work. They sat there together and they just carved up his part between them, and they got on stage. I think it gave them a real challenge. They were not going to let the show down, and off they went. They got on the stage and they were absolutely amazing. At the end of it they were high as kites because they'd covered up the fact that a member of the cast was missing. But it was so important for these kids. Therefore, what annoys me is the fact that it has never been recognised, the importance of that project.

Q: How did it start?

CW: It was partly because Dave and I and Rhoma had some contacts in the education department through the folk music that I did in schools. It started off with the music department, I think it was, that we were employed under. But then it moved to for some reason the English department. There was a school inspector there who sort of liked the folk music that we were doing and I think he knew Rhoma as well, he knew that she was at Holyhead School. We said we'd thought about trying to do something with young people. When we'd been going around schools Dave and I had been asked to work with young people instead of just performing, to actually do workshops with young people, getting them to explore their cultural backgrounds in terms of their traditional music. We'd in fact started doing that. Instead of the focus being on performing, we'd actually gone into schools like Benson Road, we went into Kingstanding Junior and Infants, Nечells Primary – we actually started doing workshops where we got the kids singing. In Nечells we did a little show which was about the background – it's a very diverse school – the backgrounds of where the kids came from. They wrote some of their own songs and we put it on for the parents. It went down a bomb. I think Larry did some slides as well, so we did a little mini Banner. It was fantastic. Nечells was under threat of closure at that stage, and we were involved in the campaign to stop it closing, which it did; it still exists now. All the parents got involved locally and the kids were all involved. We had sleep-ins at the school and the kids performed their songs. We performed at the town hall as well because every year they had the school's prom and the best schools for music in Birmingham were represented, and our kids went there and sang. So we'd been involved, we'd been seen quite a bit doing this

work. I think it was the idea of doing a project involving some older kids perhaps. We'd been asked to do something by a man called Cunningham at Watville school. He asked us to do some work with some young people there, which we did. Then the idea of doing something in the evenings for kids was mooted and we said (I think he was called Hawksworth, Mr. Hawksworth, the inspector, Reg Hawksworth seems to ring a bell but I'm not quite sure about that) that we'd like to do a project. He said, well we'll see if we can get some funding so that you can get it off the ground. So we got some funding from Birmingham and then I think the arts council were quite impressed by it as well, because we were working with young people. So I think we got some funding from the arts council as well. I know we got the first Banner van theoretically for the Handsworth Project because we were transporting so many kids around that we needed transport for them.

Q: Where did you recruit the kids from?

CW: From local schools largely. Some came from Holyhead, some came from Wattville. We put up notices and generally through our contacts in the area we put up notices that there was going to be a youth multimedia group where they could learn skills in music, drama, photography. The first meeting we must've had probably about 20 came along. Some dropped out and some brought their friend, so we always had quite a lot of kids involved. A similar sort of Banner format we used – the backdrop of slides, songs drama, more improvised drama than actuality. We did do some actuality and they recorded some of their parents as well and people in the community. Charlie did a recording project with them, took them out and they went to various places and they recorded people. Some of that was put into the show but the actual sketches were improvised sketches based on the actuality. It was an exciting project.

Q: Who ran the drama workshops?

CW: Rhoma.

Q: How long did that go on for?

CW: Well the thing is, I dropped out, I finished my involvement with Banner in '84. I'm not sure what happened after that. I literally cut off. I know we'd had Milton Godfrey came to work with the group at one stage; I think he found things difficult with Banner. So I'm not quite sure where it went after that.

Q: Do you want to keep talking or do you want to stop and do another session?

CW: It's up to you. What do you want to do?

Q: I've got loads more questions and they're all about going back a bit. I'd like to talk more about the women's group and what the work was. I'd like to go back to talk about how Banner was organised. The other thing is about how Banner evolved from the main group.

CW: It might be better to reschedule because I've got something I have to do this afternoon.

### **Interview Part 2 – 18 May 2017**

Q: Tell us about the women's shows and the themes you were exploring.

CW: I suppose the first one wasn't just the women involved in it, it was Womankind. I was involved in the writing of Womankind, Rhoma was involved as well and Dave was involved. I think it was a time when we were writing the show that there was a lot of interest in women's issues. There was sexism in society and women were unfairly treated, and we wanted to have a show which explored some of the issues that there were for women at the time. It took on an interesting form in that it's something we'd never done before. We'd performed in mumming plays, St. George and the Dragon and things like that at the Grey Cock, which were in rhyming couplets. For some reason they idea came up that it would be a different kind of format, that you'd use a kind of mumming play format but with some actuality as well and with some songs, some of which were going to be written songs that we wrote ourselves and some of which were traditional songs which involved the situation of women through the ages. We spent quite a long time and lots of arguments during the

production of that script because it was so different from other scripts before. The whole idea was of doing it as a fairly lighthearted piece but with very gritty issues as well. One of the issues was a sort of rape scene, which was actually quite controversial because I think some people disagreed with the idea of putting something like that into the script. But we thought it was important to say there is violence against women. If we're talking about the condition of women we need to portray all aspects that we think are relevant and important. So we did this show. It was great fun to do. Rhoma directed it and there was a lot of movement and mime and stuff like that. Basically it was about women trying to be everything to everyone – be a wife, a mother, a worker, when you were given the opportunity to work, for lower pay than everyone else as well. All the things that were impacting on people's lives, the expectations of you, plus the whole thing about beauty and the idea of the ideal female as portrayed in the media at the time. It's very hard to sort of try and live up to those and we felt that it was really unfair to put those sort of pressures on women to aim advertising at women. It's even worse nowadays with social media and everything and the whole celebrity thing, but at that time there was a lot of trying to emphasise that women must use this kind of makeup, they must buy these sorts of clothes to be acceptable. All those issues we tried to combine in a show. It was quite successful. I remember we had one awful scathing report, I don't know if it was the Evening Mail or some newspaper, which said it went from the embarrassing to the ridiculous, or something like that. But that wasn't the effect it had on the audiences. We even got a booking to go to a wedding and do it. There's a hotel on Hagley Road by the casino and there were some people who'd seen the show, and they were getting married and wanted it for their wedding reception basically. So they book it for the wedding reception and it went on really well. It was quite a lively show, a lot of movement, quite humorous bits in it, there's singing, there's instrument playing and bits of actuality. So I think it was entertaining but also got the point across.

Q: Did it have slides?

CW: It did have slides.

Q: Could you describe the relationship between the slides and the singing? Is there a particular scene that you could use to give us an idea of what the style was like?

CW: I'm trying to, it's such a long time ago. Certainly. When we did the bit about the advertisements and makeup and things like that, it had got pictures of the ideal female and things like this, of products. Charlie would assemble products and take slides and everything. It was that sort of thing that whatever happened onstage it was being complemented by what was on the screen behind. I can't remember a particular thing. The one thing was, I was always facing outwards and not seeing what the slides were behind me. The people who put the slides together had really more knowledge of what was going on at the time in terms of the backdrop, whereas to me I knew it was there. We never had time. With the shows it was madcap because you were writing the script, you were rehearsing the show, and then suddenly you were into performance. I don't remember any occasion where we actually sat down in any show and actually watched a sequence with the slides that were going to be behind us. The only time I remember being very aware of that was in Saltley Gate in the opening sequence where you had the morning and the scenes of the sunrise and things like that and the industrial scenes in the early morning. I remember those quite vividly. But apart from that, to me I don't remember much of the slides because I wasn't involved in that process. I can't really comment on what the slides were and how they related. I know that they all related or they made sometimes a comment on what was on stage. It wasn't always that they were just a depiction of what was happening, sometimes it would be quite an ironical slide to make the audience think about it. So they weren't always straightforward representation, they were more challenging than that.

Q: What traditions did Banner draw from for the mumming plays?

CW: The mumming plays are very small plays which are performed traditionally throughout the country and still are performed in certain places. A lot of them were to do with St. George slaying the dragon and things like that. It was the triumph of good over evil, that was what they were all about, and the fact that in the worst of times there would always be something which would come which would be positive and would lead to a positive life. They were very extravagant, they were in some ways quite bizarre. They were done in

rhyming couplets; I'm not sure if they all were but certainly the ones that we saw and we performed were all in rhyming couplets. It was based on the old Italian commedia dell'arte form. You had those sort of extravagant characters, you often had a clown character or a jester who would comment on what was happening. It was a very long tradition which had other forms in other countries that it was actually based on. But it was about the renewal of life, the winter ending and spring coming, looking forward. It was that sort of form. They often had songs in them and they were accompanied by traditional musical instruments as well. Very over the top in the way that you performed them – over-exaggerated gestures and that sort of thing, and costumes. That was the traditional form.

Q: In what way was it based on the form of the mumming play?

CW: Well because it was in rhyming couplets, it had very extravagant characters. It was very different from previous Banner performances because it was over the top in many ways, like a mumming play. I think some people originally found that quite hard to take. I can read you the opening bit of the script. You had this woman on the stage who was sweeping the stage and complaining that everyone made a mess all the time. Then the presenter comes leaping in and she says, I lift the ?, I venture in, I beg your pardon to begin. We're here to play for your delight, our pantomime on women's rights. I think that sort of sets the tone of what it actually was. It was a whole thing about women's rights from the cradle to the grave, how women were treated in society at the time. But it was in this format of the mumming play, a very extravagant and over the top sort of format. I think it made it also quite humorous and it made it quite accessible to people as well. Some of the rhymes were obviously quite corny. When you do something like this you're aiming to make people laugh a lot of the time, so you deliberately look for a rhyme that was going to be slightly ridiculous. It was that kind of show, very much over the top. Rhoma directed it and she got people doing things that they'd never really done before in a Banner show. They all tended to be a bit stiff and starchy in the early days where you all stood there and said your actuality and sang your song, and you didn't move around very much. This was the antithesis of that really because it actually had a lot of movement in it, and a lot of humour as well. But it was dealing with quite serious issues as well.

Q: Did any of that change of style transfer to later shows?

CW: Yes I think it did. It transferred to the show that we did for NUPE, the public services show. There were sort of jester characters in that as well who had a role of being quite provocative and being humorous at times and saying outrageous things. It was a bit like this was a forerunner of that really – some of the ideas from Womankind then went through into that production. I don't know the sort of shows in Banner after '84 but certainly it had that influence at that time.

Q: What about the title, Womankind?

CW: Well there's a lot of discussion about what you should call a show. It encompassed a lot of aspects of women's lives. The word Womankind just wasn't used, but mankind was used. So it was just thought, well why don't we actually call it Womankind, sort of just to emphasise that this for once is about the condition of women. I think that's how it came about. I remember there being, as there always were when you're preparing shows with Banner, there was a lot of heated argument and discussion trying to decide what was going to be the content and what was going to be included, all those sorts of things. But the title was always a key thing because it had to be something that was catchy and was going to appeal to people but was short enough as well. There was always quite a lot of discussion about what you were actually going to call the shows. I think this was one we actually did all the agree on, when we came up with it eventually. But there were probably some pretty awful earlier attempts at finding a title.

Q: What was the other women's show you were involved in?

CW: Women at Work, was it '82? Womankind involved a cast of male and female and I think there was a feeling amongst the women that we actually wanted to explore some of the issues affecting women ourselves. There was quite a lot of discussion amongst the women in Banner about the degree of sexism that there was. Several of the men seemed to think that women were not capable of putting a show together. I remember comments like, well who's going to drive the van, and who'll put the set up? Well I'd been putting sets up

for years. When you're in Banner in the main group, whoever got there first had to start putting the set up. That meant doing the whole lot. You were carrying this equipment, in the early days we were assembling this blessed screen and lashing it and setting up the projectors and everything. It was quite insulting to think that people thought that you couldn't do this. There was a bit of a feeling amongst the women, we are going to show that we are capable of doing this. I think also this was the only show that women were writing themselves; it had always been a male or two males involved in the writing of the shows. So that was another thing that we actually wanted to say – we're quite capable of putting together a successful show ourselves.

Q: Was it '81 or '82?

CW: It may have been '81, I'm not sure.

Q: Who was involved in the writing?

CW: I was involved, I think Rhoma was involved in that one as well. Was Doreen involved in that one? I can't remember. I know that one of the problems about writing the women's show was other shows had been written by people who tended to be freer during the day. When it came to the women's show, it was women having to work in the evenings and weekends in order to write the show and do all the research and everything. That was because there were not many women in the core group who were actually available to write during the day. I think I was the only person, so I tended to do quite a lot of the research as well during the day and recording of any actuality that we needed. Then we all came together and worked on the script. I've got an idea that Doreen was involved in writing that, and I think Rhoma was. I can't think of anyone else who was actually involved in the writing process.

Q: What themes did you explore?

CW: We decided that that show was going to be looking at women and work throughout the ages. It started off with some of the traditional folk songs, a sort of snapshot of the

women's working songs from traditional times up to the present time, to show that women had been involved in work although they're often faceless in the workplace. It went on to describe about discrimination against women in the workplace, about the legislation which had been brought in about equal pay but women weren't getting equal pay, about what happened during the war years when women were expected to take over the jobs that men had been doing while they were away fighting and when the men came back the women found that they were no longer needed. They'd been expected to do even heavy jobs like welding and those sorts of things but they still were not seen as being important enough and were expected to go back and become a wife and mother after that. And the feelings of women who had been put in that situation, knowing the skills that they'd developed and suddenly finding that they were not valued in the workplace any longer. I think it was all that and looking about the whole thing about . . .

Q: So who was involved again?

CW: It was myself, Naomi, Doreen, Joan Smith, Mogs, Joy. Then we had the technical team. I've got an idea that Val was involved in it certainly. I don't know if Lynne Routh was actually involved in the technical team, because her husband Julian had done quite a lot of the technicals on other Banner shows along with John Fryer. Lynne was involved at one stage I think in doing some technicals, I'm not sure if it was on this particular show. I know one of the strengths that people said about this show was the fact that A, it was all women doing it, and another thing is we had an age range of women as well. Joan Smith, she handled actuality in a particular way because it was often over personal to her; she'd lived through a lot of the things that were talking about. It was a bit like having Bob Whiskens and Bob Etheridge and Bill Shreeve – it gave an authenticity to it. It wasn't just middle class women coming to tell us about the history of women in the workplace and the struggles, sort of some feminist claptrap or anything like that, because it contained actuality and things about legislation and that sort of thing as well. The actuality and people like Joan Smith as well I think made it a very immediate and powerful thing for the audience.

Q: Did you write all the songs?

CW: No, there was quite a lot of traditional material in it. For example, we started off with a medley of songs about women in the workplace: Fisher Lassies, The Doffin' Mistress, If It Wasn't For the Weavers, those sort of songs. We started off with a verse of traditional songs put into a medley to show that women had in fact through the ages worked in different industries. There were other songs that had been written, for example, I Am a Class Struggle Widow was in it. I don't know who actually wrote it but it was one of the critics group, we didn't write it. I know Naomi sang that in the show. So it was a mixture of sort of traditional songs. The Jute Mill song was another one. Often it was about women doing a lot of work for very poor pay, and struggling to survive, and the fact that women's wages were different from men's wages. If there was going to be any people sacked, it tended to be women. We interviewed a woman from BSR and she was talking about what it was like working in BSR. That formed a lot of the actuality for the show because it was actually so powerful and so accurate for the time about the way women were seen in the workplace and the differentiation of jobs so that women were kept in the lower paid jobs and the men got the senior posts. They didn't have to pay them equal pay because they said, oh well you're doing different jobs and yours are more menial than our jobs are. There was all that sort of thing which came out from those recordings, which then we put into the format of the show.

Q: BSR?

CW: I can't remember what it stands for now. It was machine parts that they worked on for motorbike, a motorbike company. They were working on machine parts for motorbikes, but they were always paid less. The positive thing about the show is towards the end we showed that the struggles that there had been to try and get equal rights, the Dagenham women and things like that, through the ages there'd been of course the match girls down in London as well. We outlined some of the struggles there had been which resulted in success and said, we have to fight for equal rights for women and equal pay. It was quite a powerful production. Every single bit of it was done by women, and that was a very important thing to us. Even the whole thing about taking the van, loading it up, driving there, putting up the set, doing the show, conducting the discussion afterwards, all the organisation as well, we booked all the shows. So it was the first time that had actually

happened in Banner. It certainly I think shook up some of the men who'd actually thought that we'd never manage to do it, but we did. We had a lot of performances.

Q: What was the reception like?

CW: The reception was very good. I don't ever remember going and feeling, oh my gosh, that was plummeted. I think it was quite an uplifting show, and certainly it was for women. Women would come up to us at the end and say, wow I've never thought of things that way, that was fantastic. Once again, like most of Banner's shows, the message was keep struggling – we have to get our rights and we have to make sure that women are not going to remain low paid and unequal. So all that went into the show. I think for some women who came out, we often went to unions and performed to groups of women there. Some of them said, it gives me the feeling I want to carry on the struggle. Sometimes you feel like giving in because it seems too enormous and you don't know if you can fight for it. But a lot of them said, it made us see we've got to.

Q: When you performed for the union, was there a woman's role in that? *[JC to check recording to see what the actual question was]*

CW: What we tended to do, I think the women from the BSR that we interviewed were involved in the union; I think that's how we got to go there was through the unions in order to speak to women who were already involved in unions. I think because we did that, they were in contact with other women in other places so they then said, these women have got a show about women in the workplace, how about putting the show on? So I think we built up a bit of a network partly through the people that we'd interviewed for the show.

Q: What about historically? Where did you find the materials?

CW: There's a lot of stuff that you'd go to the libraries and you'd research. You'd research the 1970 equal opportunity act and you'd find out relevant sections which you thought were punchy enough to actually go in the show, things like the beverage report. You'd go through all those and put those around the actuality that actually dealt with those particular issues.

Q: Who directed the show? Who dealt with the slides and who did the teching?

CW: Well the teching, I know Val was involved in the teching. I think Lynne Routh was [also] involved in teching. I'm sure that Marian Nelson at one stage was involved in some teching as well. I can't actually remember about the direction of the show. I've got an idea that Rhoma wasn't involved in it. It may have been that Marian Pyke was involved in that, but I honestly can't remember who directed it at that stage.

Q: Do you remember discussion around the costumes?

CW: I think there'd always been this black thing in Banner and I think that we decided that we were actually not going to do that, and it was going to be therefore something different from what had come before. Womankind hadn't had that black thing but the other shows tended to. I think we could wear bright clothing. I seem to remember we stuck to trousers but fairly bright tops I think it was. I remember I had a sort of flowery thing that I tended to wear, which was probably a bit garish. But at the time it was a bit of a move away from the traditional Banner costume.

Q: There was a discussion about that somebody had to wear a skirt.

CW: Ya there was that.

Q: So it would be representative of all women.

CW: I think that was true, ya. I'd forgotten about that. I know most women for performances, and certainly when you're hauling gear and stuff like that and putting a set up, you felt it was easier if you wore trousers; they were more comfortable. But ya I remember there being that discussion now.

Q: How long did the show tour?

CW: I think we started touring in '82 and we must have gone up to about '84 when the second women's show started. We had quite a lot of performances and of course at that stage you weren't just touring one show. There were other shows on the go that you were involved with. At one stage I'm sure there were three shows in repertoire, and you were doing those shows. On top of that, Dave and I had a contract with Birmingham Education Music Department doing folk music in schools and folk workshops, and I had some home teaching which I had to do, because we couldn't survive financially unless I did it. And there was the Grey Cock and a Banner song group. So all those things, your whole life was subsumed by Banner and the Grey Cock and you were lucky if you had a night off when you weren't rehearsing for something. You're in a group for the folk club, you still had to go and have rehearsals with other people so that you could run your Sunday at the club. The Banner song group had to have special rehearsals because that was another entity, it wasn't part of the shows. Then you went out and did performances for the Banner song group as well. So there's a whole load of different activities that you're actually involved with. Your life was taken up with Banner and the club basically, plus Dave and I ran a singers workshop on a Monday night at our house. We sometimes had up to about 20 people crammed in our living room, all of whom wanted to sing. Then Kevin came along and he did a music workshop before the singers workshop to bring on the skills in terms of musicianship. You had all this going on, so it was a huge part of your life.

Q: Why did you do it?

CW: Well sometimes looking back now I actually wonder why. I think when it started off, I mean nobody ever knew what it was going to grow into. The idea was to do Collier Laddie as a one-off performance. It was so successful that people said, well we've got to do more of this, we've got to tour the coalfields with it. We got requests, so we started doing it, and then suddenly the whole thing started to snowball. You were working with people who were friends that you'd known for a long time, you'd worked with at the Grey Cock, they had similar interests, they had similar politics. They believed in an oral tradition, they liked this new form that there was. Nobody else in agitprop theatre was using actuality in that way, and it came obviously from the radio ballads. We'd all heard the radio ballads, we'd been bowled over by the power of the songs and the language, and to suddenly have an

opportunity to do this. People had talked about how powerful the oral tradition was, particularly the songs, the strength of the ballads and folk music. Then suddenly there was this new dimension, which was Charlie and Ewan presenting vernacular, the power of vernacular speech. We all realised that was as powerful as the songs were, and it was a belief in the need to culturally put that forward, present it, and to present it in a form that was also visually appealing to people and that moved people and inspired people. And it inspired us; I think that's why we started. Then you got swept up in the whole thing. Instead of just doing Collier Laddie, suddenly oh we'll do a show on x and Viva Chile, there's an issue in Chile and we need to do something about Chile. Then you start doing performances of Viva Chile while you're still doing Collier Laddie. It suddenly snowballed. It all started before we had children and I think it was certainly very exciting. We were working with people we liked, people we respected. We had our disagreements; Charlie was incredibly difficult to work with at times but we loved him to bits. Same with Rhoma, Rhoma could have a hissy fit at times but she was very talented, very committed, and a lovely person. The thing about the early days when we weren't professional at all, nobody was in it for the money. We were in it because we believed in it, we shared the same sort of political outlook. Even if we had conflicts and arguments at times, we still respected each other and we got on well as a group. We felt wonderful when we had successful shows, knowing that we were going out to an audience that not many people went to. It was like a big family in many ways and people supported each other, they were incredible in the way that they did support each other. I think if it hadn't been that supportive sort of group it would never have developed in the way it developed.

Q: In terms of feminist politics, there was still a need for shows about women's issues, because there was a third show, wasn't there?

CW: There was a third show, yes, You've Got No Sense of Humour. My recollections of that are actually very sketchy so I can't really comment much on it. But I think the whole thing was women at that stage, if they struggled for feminist issues, were seen as being po-faced. There was always this thing, oh you've got no sense of humour; what are you making an issue of it for? It was not felt that it was a serious issue, that women were taking themselves too seriously when they were saying, this isn't fair and we're not going to tolerate this. I

think that's how we moved on to that after Women at Work. But as I say, for some reason, I think because of the turmoil in my life at that time, it's not something I have very much recollection of.

Q: That third show was in 1984?

CW: '84.

Q: When did you leave?

CW: I left in '84.

Q: You worked on all the shows up to then, didn't you?

CW: Most of the shows. I didn't work on On the Brink, for example. That was the motor trade show, that was one I didn't work on. But I worked on a lot of the shows. I didn't do some of the agitprop sort of smaller productions that they did, like the street theatre type things. I think having a family and commitment and I was already up to my eyes with everything else, with other performances, and the folk club and the song group and things and later on the Handsworth Project of course. So certain things I didn't actually get involved with. I didn't get involved with Colby Steel, although I think there's one of the songs that I wrote for Colby Steel. I was given the actuality and information and I did produce one of the songs. So most of the shows I actually did work on, up to '84.

Q: Can you take us through the process of writing a song? Do you start from the actuality?

CW: Yes. The first stage in preparing for the show, take the housing show for example, was to go out and record people widely. Our initial contact was George Hickman and he was very keen that we should do something on Direct Labour. So George Hickman, we had a meeting with him and he said, I can set you up some contacts to talk about people who are working in the Direct Labour organisation, what's happening in the housing industry. Then when we'd got the recordings and we'd transcribed all the recordings we each knew, because

we'd done some of the recordings, the powerful bits, bits which were going to have most impact. So then we would share the actuality. Obviously, transcribing as you know, takes forever. So we did the transcribing, we shared the transcripts, we said what we thought were the important things. We discussed the issues that had come out in each individual recording, then we sort of got a shape for a show as to the line it was going to take. Then we thought, well we need a song on that and we need a song on that. So then we would actually, in some cases we'd sort of allocate to a person and say, can you go and start working on this song. Or in some cases, we'd each go away and work on the same song and then we'd come back and compare what we thought were the merits of each one. Well not always the merits, because some of them were pretty, some terrible lines came up. We used to fight over our own lines. Charlie was the worst for this. He would try and cram too many syllables into a line, and then he'd defend it to the hilt saying, you can sing it, it is alright you know. In the end it wasn't worth arguing about. So what you did is you went away, you worked on that particular line, and you came back and said, do you think this would fit the metre a bit better? Then he'd say, oh perhaps it would. So instead of getting involved in a complete and utter argument about it, which was totally counterproductive because everyone defended their own corner, you'd sort of go away and work on it and just come up with an alternative. But then it was decided which song suits it and that sort of thing. Often they contained lines from the actuality. Some of the most powerful songs that we've written have got quite a bit of actuality in them.

Q: Do you have memories of the ones that you wrote?

CW: I'd have to look at the scripts, but certainly the one to me which sticks in my memory is the lyrical one which opens Saltley Gate, because that was not what people were expecting, we a completely lyrical picture of a scene in the early morning. When I first worked on that song there was a sort of consternation from the others saying, we can't start the show like that. I said, why not? I said, surely you're trying to set up an early morning scene of complete peace and stillness, with all this to come later on. Isn't that exactly what you want? They actually then agreed. But it took a while to convince people that that was the right approach. I think some wanted to go in all hell for leather, more of a macho style, and I wanted something lyrical. And it worked, it worked extremely well. So that's one example,

and that did contain some of the words that people had said to us about what it was like on that morning and what it looked like and the things that they saw. If you put in little bits of that and then when they're in the audience and they see it they say, I said that, and they realise that you've written a song around something that they actually said. That was part of the power of Banner, was them receiving the words they said but also you using their words to create another art form.

Q: Do you remember that song?

CW: I would have to have the words now.

Q: Do you remember the tune at all?

CW: I can't at the moment.

Q: How many songs have you written over your ten years of involvement?

CW: I don't know, I must've written about 30 songs I suppose. The thing is, without going through the scripts and looking, as I say I've sort of erased quite a bit from my memory. I gave all my scripts back, so without going through I couldn't say, well ya I definitely wrote that. The one I do remember, because it is the opening to Saltley Gate, I often think that was in its context one of the best songs, because it set a particular scene. People always commented on the opening of that show and I thought, well I did that. I had to fight for that, as well.

Q: Another one that sticks in people's minds is the one about the cooks.

CW: Chopping and slicing, peeling and dicing. Well that came from going to interview women who were dinner ladies and talking about their work. That was for the public service show. I did a lot of interviewing for that one and it went to ambulance drivers and all sorts. But some of the most interesting were talking to dinner ladies and how their service had been stretched and the cuts that had been made, their commitment to providing a healthy

meal for children, and what they wanted to provide and what they were being pushed into providing, the whole cuts in public services. So ya I wrote that song. But the thing was, when you were working on a song you lived with it and it was buzzing through your head so much. So you'd go to bed and think, no that line is not right. I used to have a pad by the side of the bed and in the middle of the night I'd think, ah that's a better line, I'll write it down or I'll forget it by morning. So you lived with the whole process really. But you had to immerse yourself into the actuality to actually find out what was the essence of what they were saying and what you therefore wanted to put forward.

Q: What does immersing yourself actually mean?

CW: It means being completely familiar with it. I'd done a lot of the transcriptions so I knew what was in it. You recognise. Charlie always said, when you get a people's bard you recognise it. You go in there and you think, wow, that person has got a real power in the way that they speak, they've got a real insight into the way that they relate to their work and they're able to communicate it to other people in such a way that it just grabs you. Sometimes you went in and it's like that. I think I told you last time about the three builders that I interviewed, and that is one of the best interviews I've ever done. I came out and they blew my mind. You know how you have prejudices about people and you think, oh they're only builders you know. I didn't think that but a lot of people would've thought they're sort of ignorant builders, that's all they could do is build buildings. No, they were amazing the way they spoke, the way they used language. It was almost Shakespearian some of the stuff that they said. When you're sitting there it just blows your mind and you think, people's prejudices about working class and here we have people who have this power of speech and can inspire you when you're sitting there and listening to them. They make you laugh, they make you cry. The emotions that came out and the power of their feeling about the way they related to their job. This came across the board when you went and interviewed people. Interviewing the women at BSR for the women's show, their strength of feeling about the way that they were treated in comparison to the men, how they knew they were being paid and they knew they were being kept in subservient roles so that they wouldn't have to be paid the same as men, and yet they knew they were doing exactly the same kind of work. It was that sort of thing, the power that came across. I think this was the strength

of Banner using actuality and then being able to put it through in their songs. But the other thing was always the visual element. As I say, I always had my back to the screen so you didn't actually analyze what was going on on the screen. But we had some very skilled people on the technicals, and that was an important role. Some people said that they felt almost ignored, the importance of technicals was almost ignored. We never should've made people feel like that, because it was another dimension and it added a depth to the productions.

Q: Do you have any views on the use of music and songs in the shows?

CW: I think we all came from a folk tradition and we believed in the power of music. Before Banner I came to the Grey Cock and I heard songs which sort of I'd never heard before, I'd never heard anything like that. It was the humanity which was contained in the songs. Sometimes you would sit and listen to a song and it would do something to you. The hairs would go up on the back of your neck and you thought, this is really powerful, this is a way of communicating with people. I think therefore the songs and the music added a big dimension. It was one of the things which made us of course very different from other groups as well. We had some amazing musicians, amazing singers, and that was always an impact on the audiences. The music always helped people to identify with the content of what was going on on the stage, just the power of it really.

Q: Did the Banner song group exist from the beginning?

CW: Not at the beginning, it came later. I think the first time we started doing stuff was when we knew we needed to collect money for the miners. You couldn't take shows out into the streets to collect money, so we decided that we'd play some music – sometimes play music and sometimes sing as well. We also knew there was a need for something which was much more portable to perform at rallies. We'd performed shows at rallies but it was very difficult. We went to the miners' galas and we did Collier Laddie there. But Collier Laddie was quite a long production, and people sitting out in the cold or something, it wasn't easy to do open air stuff really. I think we felt there was a need to support struggles by going along and performing songs and music, so that's how it actually came about. I

know we put up some miners at our house a couple of months when they were down from Yorkshire. We used to go out with the song group on weekends and perform in the centre of Birmingham and things like that. Then we went to the rallies of the miners as well that they were holding. I think that was to me how it started really, and it was very successful. Then we started getting bookings in our own right, to go along and perform at a particular evening, a union evening or something like that, go along and sing songs which related to that particular union and that particular struggle. So it latched onto whatever was current at the time.

Q: Do you remember who was involved in the early days?

CW: Me, Dave, John Wrench was involved, Pete was involved, Charlie was involved. I'm wondering if there were any other women actually. I don't know if Doreen at any stage was involved in it.

Q: Pam?

CW: No. Pam was never really directly involved in performing with Banner. She's always been sort of roundabout but she never actually got involved in any of the shows and she certainly wasn't in the Banner song group. There were only about five or six of us. We performed at a lot of different rallies. We did the people's march for a job in Hyde Park in London and I think there was something like 50,000 people there. You get up on the stage and you look out and there's just this sea of faces and you thought, oh gosh. It was quite a daunting thing, certainly the biggest thing we'd ever done. It actually went down really well but it was hard work. These sort of outdoor things with lots of people I found quite daunting, quite scary really.

Q: Did you perform with slides, or just songs?

CW: No, it was a much more portable thing. It was where you couldn't go with a show so you actually just... Unless we were performing in a venue like a hall, we wouldn't carry a PA

with us, but people would have PA at the rallies. You'd have to use their PA and stuff like that. In the centre of Birmingham you just stand up and busk basically, just acoustic.

Q: Did you take your own technicians with you when you performed for these gigs?

CW: I'm trying to remember. Well of course Pete was very good on the technicals. I think what tended to happen was that we went and we had like a sound check with Pete, but then Pete also played because he was an instrumentalist. I think sometimes in fact he didn't play with the group necessarily, he actually did the technicals. If it was a big performance where you were doing several different songs and things like that, I think Pete tended to do the technicals. But sometimes he would be obviously an instrumentalist as well.

Q: Did the group have a name?

CW: Banner Song Group we just called it. That's all it was. You never had a particular name. I think we wanted to preserve the name Banner because we wanted the association with Banner Theatre. You always went and took loads of information, leaflets for later shows. So when people came up and said, I really enjoyed that, have a leaflet, we're also doing this. That was a good way of publicising the other work of the wider group.

Q: With the women's shows and doing it all yourselves, was there a learning curve?

CW: I think so. As with all Banner shows, people could give different levels of commitment. They often stated that at the beginning, that they wouldn't be available for working on the show, that they would be available for rehearsal and going out to performances and things like that. They had to do that because you had working mothers, you had people who were teachers, you had people who had everyday jobs, some part time some fulltime. So people could give different levels of commitment really. But as with all Banner shows, I think you found that people, because they believed in what they were doing, they committed themselves as much as they actually could. But you did have to break it down into what people's skills were, what their abilities were, what their interests were. They didn't come along and say be put on technicals if they wanted to get onto the stage, or they didn't want

to be thrust onto the stage if they preferred to do technicals. You had to take into account people's skills and wishes. Sometimes you had to work with people if they wanted to do a particular thing, you had to work with them to enable them to do it. If someone wanted to sing you had to say, right, well we need to do a bit of work on this song together. We had to do that quite a bit in Banner because you wanted to involve everyone in what they wanted to do but you couldn't let someone get up there who perhaps couldn't sing in tune. Or you might say, well come in on the chorus of this to start off with, and then hopefully at a later stage when they improve you could say, right you sing this verse. You had to bear in mind that people were at a particular stage of development and often needed a bit of help to move to that next stage. I think it was the same with song writing. Some people, when they started writing songs, they needed a bit of constructive help with how to do rhymes and metres and things like that. I think Banner and the Grey Cock were particularly good for that, trying to bring people on, because they actually had workshops, there'd been workshops for a long time to help people with particular skills. Right back when I joined the folk club they used to have sessions with MacColl and Seeger where they'd come up and you had to sing a song and they'd sort of tear it to pieces, which wasn't constructive. I remember people going out in tears because of the criticism that they received. And that happened when we went to Pam and Allan's on a Monday night. You had Doug Miller, Roy Palmer, Charles Parker, they would be sitting there like the three magi. If you sang a song sometimes I found it very destructive criticism, and it put some people off. You had to be pretty committed to actually stick with it. I think when Dave and I started our singers workshop we didn't want that kind of destructive criticism. We hoped that it was going to be more positive so you'd build people up and give them confidence to work on things and actually develop. But there were the facilities within Grey Cock and Banner to try and develop people's skills. I think a lot of people came along and they realised they wanted to, say, be an instrumentalist as well. They might start on a tin whistle or something or they might start learning the guitar, and then they'd come in and do a few of the songs as another instrumentalist. So all the time you're trying to develop people's skills. Sometimes it was a case of having to because there was no one else to do it. I was thrown into the recording thing. I went to some recordings with Charlie when he was doing it, and sort of sat at the feet of the master and watched him, and realised how skilled he was. But some of that brushes onto you then and you begin to think, ya I think I could actually go out and do

recordings. When we started working on shows you had no choice, you're thrown into it. So you picked up skills along the way. You went to workshops to learn skills, you learned from other people, and you learned by joining in with other people. Sometimes you had a professional come in and you actually had someone to help you develop the skills as well. But a lot of it was learning from each other.

Q: You said that the first woman's show used movement and forms that weren't familiar.

CW: It was familiar in that we'd done a mumming play previously for the folk club, so we'd used some of these sorts of skills. We'd done some performances in the open air of that. I can't remember where they were now, but I remember performing at social things, and we performed outside and done a mumming play. So we'd done a bit of this but certainly it wasn't part of Banner's normal format. When Rhoma came along and got us working on this, it was quite a lot of work to do to get people to do it. Some people were very good at it. Bob Etheridge was brilliant at that kind of thing. You wouldn't think so, but he could play the fool. He didn't mind being larger than life. Some people were more timid and found it much harder to be that extravagant. But Bob used to have me in fits when he was doing things at times. But Bob could be as difficult as the next person as well, but he was a character and that always came across with Bob, that he was a character. He threw himself into that kind of thing with great gusto, whereas some of us felt a bit more wary about doing it. Rhoma was very good at bringing that out in people, getting us to do something which was perhaps out of character and not familiar.

Q: So the skills that you developed, that was done both as a personal goal and as a collective theatre troupe.

CW: For example, you'd want people for the final song of the show, you might want everyone up on stage singing. That we did in Saltley Gate, you wanted the whole cast up there actually singing the final song.

Q: Could you repeat that?

CW: Saltley Gate, you didn't want someone sitting on the side who wasn't going to sing. You actually wanted everyone there. I remember the final bit of Saltley Gate was to invite the audience up onto the stage. It was when the workers came, close the gates, close the gates. You wanted us all to be there and singing it, so you didn't want someone who was sitting on the side and wasn't part of that when you were trying to get your audience to come up onto the stage. We did, we got people coming up and sometimes we had the whole audience on the stage and nobody left in the auditorium, and they're all clamoring to try and get on some tiny little stage with these great screens. Therefore, you wanted people to be at a particular skill level but some people didn't want to sing. Some people worried about handling actuality on their own. If they didn't want to do that, you didn't put them into that situation. John Wrench tended to be a musician, and he was brilliant as a musician. He did a bit of acting and he did a bit of speaking on some things, but he didn't want a major part in actuality; he didn't feel that that was his forte and that wasn't what he was there for. He supported the politics of the show and was always committed and reliable. But there were people who were like that. Joy wouldn't want to sing a solo but Joy's actuality was just stunning. So you built on the strengths that you had but also on people's wishes. If someone did wish to sing, I mean Joan Smith was always a key point. Joan sung at the folk club and she'd sung for years, but she wasn't a brilliant singer if we're all very honest about it. But she was a convincing singer because of who she was and the way she put things across. But she hadn't got a very strong voice. If in the show it was needed for her to be able to sing a bit on her own because that was right in the show, it was fine for Joan to sing it. But I don't think Joan ever expected to be one of the major singers in the show. I think that's how it was with people. They recognised people's strengths and they often thought for the benefit of the show we want the best that we can actually produce. So some of the most powerful actuality they'd say, well Joy is going to be better at handling that than anyone else. You would pick on the strengths of the group but you would give other bits to people and they would gradually do more as they'd come along and contribute. Bob Whiskens, Bob Etheridge, Bill Shreeve, their use of actuality on the stage was just incredible. It was much more powerful for them to do it than perhaps some of the other people who were sort of more Banner regulars really.

Q: Why was it powerful?

CW: Because it was the way that they, because it came from a background which they full understood. Like On the Brink, they worked in the motor trade industry, they understood what it was about. There's something about talking about something that you've been integrally involved with which gives you a power and an authenticity. Some people could imitate it, Joy could probably imitate it because she was so good with actuality, but some of the people couldn't come near that. The persona as well, you recognise them as being ex motor trade workers or current motor trade workers, and it gave a feeling that this is real, this is how it should be. They identify completely and understand completely the issues which they're dealing with. I think that the strength of having amateurs involved in the early performances gave Banner a terrific advantage over other groups, because people identified with them. You went to a working class audience and it was like, click, we are going to listen to what they say. I think it as a power that came across. Other people developed it. I can't say that me and other people and Doreen and others didn't also communicate through the actuality, because we did. People believed in it and the felt the power of the words. But there's something about someone who has actually worked in those situations or experienced those emotions or been through that process that makes it more powerful when they deliver it.

Q: Can you talk about when you went out and started using your teaching skills in the very different environment of the Handsworth Project?

CW: Dave and I had done some work in schools. It originally arose the music department. We got a contract to do folk music around schools, and we started just going and doing performances in various schools in Birmingham wherever they wanted us to go. We'd go and talk a bit about what folk music was and we'd sing some songs, just the two of us basically. Then for some reason the funding changed and we got put with this English department instead of music. We came across a guy called Mr. Hawksworth. He came to one of the schools when we did a performance in Handsworth and he said he would be interested in, because we said we loved working with young people. We'd already started doing workshops in schools by then, and one of them was Wattville Secondary School. We were doing some song writing with them and singing with a group who were basically, the

first group we worked with there were dropouts. Nobody wanted them in their class so they said, right, on this particular afternoon you can go and do some song writing. They sort of shoved them in the classroom with us, and we did some basic music and song writing with them. Mr. Hawksworth heard about this work and he knew that Rhoma was involved with Banner and we'd talked about getting a project on the way for young people to explore what it was like growing up in Handsworth basically. Handsworth at that particular stage was a no-go area of the city; that's what everyone from outside felt: oh it's all drugs and crime. That's how it was felt to be but it wasn't like that at all, but that was the perception of people. They were aware that it was a diverse area as well with lots of different cultural issues. We thought that there was nothing much for young people in any case and we thought how nice it would be to have a project which involves young people looking at what it was like to live and grow up in Handsworth. We actually floated this idea with Mr. Hawksworth and I think the arts council were also approached on it. I don't remember the exact early funding issues but I know we got some funding to eventually do a sort of pioneer. I think they wanted us to do a year's project doing workshops at Holyhead School. There was a guy called Malcolm Curry who facilitated it as well. He managed to get us some money. He was involved in the Acocks Green Project, he knew of Banner, and he had some sort of involvement at Holyhead School and he said we could use the facilities there. Of course Rhoma was teaching at Holyhead as well. So we were offered the facilities to do weekly workshops with young people and to do a Banner type show basically, to develop the skills groups and then to put on a show in Handsworth. So we had four groups. We had originally a sort of group based around Charlie, which was on recording the local community. We had a photography group who learned photography skills, largely with Larry Blewitt at that stage when he was reliable enough. Pete did a bit of work on that as well I think. We had the drama group with Rhoma and we had a music group with me. I did singing and instrumental skills and song writing. So those were the groups. Then later on when we had a show we had a technicals group as well, who did all the technicals for the show. That involved largely Pete doing that and teaching his skills to other people. It was amazingly successful. There were not many facilities for young people in any case, and we recruited quite a few people through the work we'd done in schools. We put up posters, we went and talked about what was going to happen. Rhoma recruited people through Holyhead School as well, and we got a large number of kids involved. We had about 20 or 25 people, and it

wasn't all kids because we involved adults as well. Doreen came along, Naomi came along to the music group, anyone could come along but it was focused on what it was like being a young person growing up. I think people came along to support. You came along, didn't you, for a time as well. The kids became quite committed to it I think. They were an amazing bunch of young people. We had quite a mixture in terms of different ethnic backgrounds. We had African Caribbean and we had some white kids as well, not as many white kids, but we had several Asian kids as well. As a group they gelled incredibly well together. I think a lot of that was through the work that Rhoma did with them, because Rhoma getting them all to work together as a group. I suppose I did as well because of the music group, because we had a mixture within the music group as well of different people. But Rhoma in particular was a powerhouse really in terms of the Handsworth Project, because they loved the sessions. They did a lot of drama exercises to give them confidence and get them to work together. Then she got them handling actuality and things as well. She got them developing improvisational skills, because we didn't have a fixed script as we had in a lot of Banner shows. A lot of it was scenes, and you'd know where it was going and what was going to happen, but they improvised it. But they did use actuality to link it as well, which was often based on them going out and recording their grandparents or their parents or their neighbours. So it meant something to them as well that they were actually able to portray this on stage. We then started getting bookings and taking the group out and doing performances. It was a long project, much longer than we ever thought. It was a success. Mr. Hawksworth came and saw a performance and was absolutely bowled over by it, so he said they would fund it for longer. It went on like that. So that was how it started and got off the ground.

Q: The first show that was developed for the Handsworth project was based around oral history, wasn't it?

CW: Ya. Well it was a lot about where their families had come from and things like that, the roots of the people who had come together. But it was also about their experiences of what it was like growing up, and the prospects for them for the future. Quite a few of them were very worried about what job opportunities there would be, about racism. There were quite a lot of attitudes of people towards people of different colour and a bit different

background. So it was able to explore some of those issues, the issues which were pertinent to them.

Q: Could you talk about the relationship between the project and the rest of Banner Theatre?

CW: Some people saw it as being a diversion, being peripheral to Banner, which I find very hard because I actually took over the coordination of the project and realised what a powerful project it actually was and how important it was to local people who saw it and also to the kids who participated in it. At the same time however, there was for example touring of the Banner group. The Put People First show, for example, started touring. The problems which arose when, I think it was Wednesday nights we ran the Handsworth Project, and you had to have people to run the sessions. So sometimes you would have to say, well people were committed to it, Charlie was always committed to the Handsworth Project, Pete was committed to it. Dave wasn't involved in that project because he babysat when I was involved in it, but he recognised the importance of it that other people didn't. [Others were] hostile towards the whole project. I felt very sorry when Milton Godfrey took over the project, and the hostility which came across towards the project I think was very difficult for him to actually handle. By that stage I was sort of out of the project and withdrawing from Banner in any case. But I think some people said, well what has this got to do with Banner? Some people said, oh well it's not dealing with the big political issues of the time. Well it was, it was dealing with what it's like to grow up, what a lot of people's lives are about. But there was this thing, the personal politics were always neglected in relationship to what was happening in the political world outside. I think people didn't realise the importance of personal politics. Personal politics where neglected within Banner, and that was right from a very early stage I think. That was one thing I found hard to reconcile, that you were dealing with people who all their interest was in the next show and the next performance and what the political line was going to be at a particular event or a particular show, not how it impacted on people's lives and what they were experiencing at a particular time. To me, the important thing about Handsworth Project was you were dealing with young people, and they would come to you and talk about their lives and they'd talk about their problems. To me that is personal politics, but that was not seen as being an

important thing. I suppose that's what came across, that it was sometimes seen as an inconvenience and not in line with the thrust of Banner's main work.

Q: Were there any difficulties involved with the fact that it was seen as a black project or there were ? to give it autonomy as a separate black led project, which was also a very difficult and complicated process?

CW: It was because it started off the workshops were all, apart from Larry being involved with the photography side, they were white-led. I think there was a feeling that it would be good if there could be more black led input in the Handsworth project, and in fact Milton Godfrey was black and he was employed to take over and coordinate the project. In some ways I would say it would've been nice from the start if we had had those people available. If we'd have had a George Gordon who had the time and the skills, it would've been absolutely brilliant. If we'd have had a Baghat Singh to lead the workshops, brilliant. But we didn't, and we had to face up to that. You either undertake a project or you don't undertake it. I think the feeling was, let's get stuck in there, do what we can. You got so much from the kids, you learnt so much from them. They were developing in such a way you thought, this is a valid and valuable project, whatever people say. When you went out to perform it, the reaction from audiences! And the kids handled their own discussions as well after a while. You know how you always have the discussions after the show, well we weren't leading the discussions. After the first couple, they were away. You got a little group of them up on stage sitting there, and they were answering all the questions very honestly, very competently and everything. You thought, these kids have moved several stages. They have gained lots of confidence. They are portraying what it is like being undervalued in society, and let them be strong people, talented people. If we can put that forward and get that across, that in itself is a valuable thing to say. Yes it would've been nice to have more black led workshops and input at that stage, but in the absence of it we did what I think was right to do.

Q: The project ended around 1990, so it was quite...

CW: It was a long project, ya. I finished in '84 but it had only originally been a one-year project.

Q: That is a testament to its importance.

CW: Ya, and the fact that people kept coming week after week to take part in it. But you're right, it was seen as peripheral by certain people and you did feel a hostility.

[ END ]