



The Friends of Chain Bridge Forge Building Flower Parade Floats

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Comprising the following recordings

| File identification | Date | Interviewer/Interviewee |
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| VN680037 | | IB/Geoff Dodd |
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Facilitator:

So, it's a further meeting with Geoff Dodd and it is 24 November. Today, we're actually going through a video of the flower parade. Now, this dates from 1988 and it involves the construction of the various floats. What I'll be doing is asking for Geoff's recollections of what it took to actually construct these floats. There was no sound on the video, so, we'll be stopping at various points and Geoff will be highlighting what's actually going on in the pictures.

Now, the flower parade started in the early 1950s and although Geoff wasn't involved in the first flower parade, from the second one, his involvement increased really exponentially, where he was getting involved in the designs and also the construction, most importantly, of the floats.

So, the first thing we come to, Geoff, are the drawings. What I'm looking at is one for Kodak and they really are quite elaborate. Can you talk us through you receiving a drawing and what you would then do with it?

Interviewee:

Mr [van Riel], who was already designing floats for a parade in Holland, was the natural man for the flower parade committee to get in touch with. One of my customers - that was Stassen's, who were a mail order bulb wholesaler and retailers, who were already - they were already one of my customers, decided they would like to have a float. Mr [Keller], the manager, or perhaps owner of the business, brought Mr van Riel down to see me and said, I think this is the chap you're looking for. They showed me some drawings of the float that Stassen's had chosen. I built that one float and one other that year - the Post Office and Interflora co-operated on sponsoring another float - and I built those two floats outside the workshop on the road.

It was completely new. I did ask Mr van Riel - there were absolutely no constructional details on the...

Facilitator:

No - because what I'm looking at here, just for the record, it can't be seen on the tape, obviously, but what we're looking at is a very - if I can say - stylised drawing of an old-fashioned delivery van, it looks like. Very ornate, very bright colours, lots of pennants and ribbons and decorations. So, very nice - would look very nice on, for example, a children's bedroom, for example, or - as a picture, but you're saying that there were no actual details of...

Interviewee:

No constructional details at all but the floats were powered by a tractor - a small float - that would be the float, but for sponsors with more money, there was a 30 foot trailer behind that, so that the whole float from back to front could be as much as 60 feet or a bit more.

Facilitator:

Because what I'm looking at here is, there's a - one chunk of the float, it looks like perhaps a third of the total length, presumably that's where the tractor would sit...

Interviewee:

That's where the tractor is and we...

Facilitator:

...pulling a float.

Interviewee:

...that's it. Yes - and realised quite early that rather than build the float around the tractor, that the better way to do it would be to build a basic framework which - rectangular, box-like framework to fit on - that could be mounted on the tractor and then build the float onto that.

Facilitator:

Because the one I'm looking at now, it looks like something out of - I don't know - Katie Price's wedding, or something. It's very - there's a very ornate coach with horses. It's very - almost like a fairytale.

Interviewee:

Well, absolutely, yes. Yes. Yes. Many of the floats were of that style, yeah.

Facilitator:

So, how would you go about translating a drawing into feet and inches, basically?

Interviewee:

Yes, well, the working drawing was on a type of graph paper, scaled in centimetres and millimetre squares. Originally, Mr van Riel used the scale that he used in Holland, which was 25 - no, was roughly the equivalent of a centimetre to a foot, which was a little bit difficult because one millimetre was one and a quarter inches,

approximately. Two millimetres, two and a half. Then, the next one, three millimetres - they didn't quite correspond with imperial figures and I persuaded him later to alter the scale to a millimetre to an inch, which in real terms was almost exactly the same as the scale that he was using in Holland. The actual 60 foot float only came to not much more than perhaps 18 inches longer than it would have done in [unclear] upscale.

Facilitator: Yes, because obviously, the Dutch would have been metric, whereas, at the time, we were still working in imperial.

Interviewee: I was still working in inches. The working drawing simply showed the outline of the float, the outline of the figures and he'd probably give me a - we're looking now at a panda. There would be a scale drawing of the whole float and he'd probably give me three dimensions of a figure on the float.

Facilitator: Yes - because the question really arises that how do you get it from - so, you've got the drawings, so, I can see that that's a panda. You've told me that's a panda, but it's - you've got to have an eye for detail to actually transfer it from the page into something that's three-dimensional.

Interviewee: It wasn't possible on the scale of things to incorporate fine details because the metal framework that I made was then covered with a straw mat, which would probably be an inch thick, sometimes more and then a layer of flowers on top of that. So that a figure that was 25 inches across finished, I had to make a framework which was probably four or five inches smaller than that, which did upset the scale of things. So, it didn't quite look right very often.

Facilitator: We're talking about - this just happens to be the 1988 flower parade but presumably, a similar thing happened each year. Who would have actually done the drawings by the eighties?

Interviewee: Mr van Riel Senior, his son, who was an art student when Mr van Riel first came, when I first knew him, joined his father later and after his father retired, then [Kase] van Riel took over the designing of the floats. As technology developed and I could put the working drawings into the photocopier at Springfields office and make acetate copies and I adapted an overhead projector so that I could project the drawings at full size onto large sheets of cardboard which we propped against the wall and...

Facilitator: They were your working drawings.

Interviewee: ...made a working drawing for me but that was - that made the job much easier - but that was some years after we started. Sometimes, Mr van Riel would give me a full-scale drawing on brown paper, spread out on the floor and make the iron framework to fit. At least you've got a single dimension at the start - quite often found that sparks behind me had dropped on the brown paper and it was ablaze.

Facilitator: Would he have delivered these in person, or were they posted?

Interviewee: Oh yes. He would come over, certainly well before the parade and talk to the committee, produce these visual designs in colour, a three quarter view of the float as he envisaged it finished and would take a selection to prospective sponsors who would chose the one they would like to have. Later on, as he came to know the sponsors, he knew the sort of thing that they would like and he could design a float specifically for a particular firm.

Facilitator: So, these were really - if I can put it like this - they were off the peg designs that the companies would choose...

[Over speaking]

Interviewee: They could make suggestions, too, as to what they would like. Once they'd decided on the float they would like, then he would produce a working drawing for me, which was simply three views of the float, just an outline on the - we produced the tractor frameworks. Then, in the early days, we were using borrowed farm trailers and quite

soon realised that we'd be better off with purpose-made trailers, which I built and we put the floats on those. That basic framework was pretty well standard.

Facilitator: Yes. These drawings, they're extremely colourful and presumably, there would be flowers that would be matching the colours that I'm looking at - I'm looking at black, I'm looking at vivid greens, there's yellow - would there have been a flower for everything, or would...

Interviewee: Pretty well. Greens, of course, we used leaves.

Facilitator: Yes. What about black?

Interviewee: Oh, there are black tulips.

Facilitator: Okay. It's not just a myth.

Interviewee: Not many but - there weren't an awful lot of black tulips on most floats, but growers did co-operate and if - a particular colour perhaps Mr van Riel would have liked, the growers would put down an acre or so of that particular colour.

Facilitator: Was there a move - did floats become more ornate as the years went on?

Interviewee: Certainly, they did.

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Facilitator: So a further continuation. What we have here is somebody - it looks like they're painting the metalwork Geoff. He's got a paintbrush in his hand.

Interviewee: Oh yes, that's Mick and he's painting it with glue.

Facilitator: Ah right. I wondered what that was.

Interviewee: Actually, the way he usually did it was to paint the sheets which wasted a lot of glue in between the strips of iron, but it was still the quicker way of doing it.

Facilitator: In the long run that's the cheaper way to do it.

Interviewee: He's actually painting parts of the float that would not be covered with flowers. Yes, the ornamental ironwork that's what he's doing there. That's a seat he's painting there, that's the back rest. Then the wooden plywood seat. He'd bolt seats on later on.

Facilitator: The parade itself that was each year that was just a one off?

Interviewee: That's it yes, just the one.

Facilitator: So it wasn't like it was on a succession of days?

Interviewee: No, no.

Facilitator: It was a one-time event for that year and then see you again next year.

Interviewee: That's right, yes. They're in the summer sometime [unclear] to take to pieces.

Facilitator: Is that a job you didn't like or?

Interviewee: Not particularly, no. I always likened it rather to Judith spending all of a morning producing a meal and an hour and a half and it's over.

Facilitator: You've got the clearing up to do.

Interviewee: The floats - all the work and the fact it's served its purpose and no point in being sentimental about it. It was a job of work. Yes, that's the shearing machine.

Facilitator: So yes, this chap here...

Interviewee: Again I made equipment for the job.

Facilitator: What's this chap doing?

Interviewee: He's just cutting off lengths of iron.

Facilitator: I see.

Interviewee: [Mick Dack], he helped me for several years. There's a gate on the machine this side and it's worked with a treadmill and later on when we moved to a place where there was compressed air on top I fitted a cylinder.

Facilitator: But that was something you had to devise from scratch, there wasn't a piece of kit that...

Interviewee: I did have one, a manufactured machine which I adapted and it didn't last ever so long. I made something on a similar principle, more substantial.

Facilitator: Maybe you should have taken it on Dragons Den.

Interviewee: Perhaps, perhaps.

Facilitator: This chap here is?

Interviewee: That's Mick now putting the foam on. So he's glued all those strips.

Facilitator: That's a job in itself. Because I mean that's very time consuming.

Interviewee: Yes. It actually was easier using the foam sheet because you've only got a certain thickness. But I mean Pete Bell when he put the straw on, he was very good. I mean he could easily have spoiled the shape. I had taken trouble to get it as near as possible. He could have spoiled it. Then again of course and often they did, I'm afraid, but the ladies who put the straw on and put the flowers on the straw, in their mind they weren't making a teddy bear, not that they - quote those, a cat, say, they weren't making a cat. They were just pinning flowers into straw.

Facilitator: I see, yes.

Interviewee: Often the shape.

Facilitator: Who would have been responsible for making sure that that bit of the construction, so putting the flowers on, who would have been responsible for making sure that it was still part of the design?

Interviewee: That's it. There was usually one person in charge of a float. In case of [Adams] or [unclear] who were doing their own float, one of their foremen or forewoman would take charge and just keep an eye on things to see that they were making as good a job as possible.

Facilitator: So once you'd got to the stage where the float had been constructed and you'd got the covering. Whether that was matting or whether that was the plastic that we see here, when that was on that was your involvement pretty much done or was there still?

Interviewee: Yes, fairly well. Although of course there were tractors to fit and usually took a bit of interest on the day the floats were being headed there were always little jobs and problems.

Facilitator: Because it really was very time consuming. Here we've moved onto, it says, tulip fields and head gathering. Now this is something that you don't really see in Spalding anymore.

Interviewee: Or think about.

Facilitator: It's given over to other crops of whatever description.

Interviewee: That's right. Just after the war I think there were 6000 or 7000 probably more, 7000 acres of tulips.

Facilitator: That's a lot. It would have been a lot more colourful place.

Interviewee: Oh it was indeed and the visitors for tulip time, there was an organised 30 mile route through the tulip fields. But tulips - and traffic was head to tail not around the whole route but often for several miles, particularly on [unclear] could be [unclear] somewhere I believe of nose to tail traffic. But tulips can only be grown for a number of years on the same land. So immediately after the war when production started again, the growers were able to use fields which were close to a suitable route. But gradually they had to be moved away. So what were actually growing were bulbs rather than flowers.

Facilitator: I see.

Interviewee: So to produce a bulb the tulip has to be headed. If there was a good trade for cut flowers then they probably would crop them and send them to market. Then replant that bulb for another year.

Facilitator: The Spalding area doesn't do it now because other people can do it cheaper, better, more efficiently?

Interviewee: Possibly. But see this was before the coming of garden centres when people can go out and buy plants and a much bigger range of cut flowers coming into the country from abroad, from Africa and America, or South America.

Facilitator: This machine here we're looking at, it looks like it's taking off all the heads.

Interviewee: Yes.

Facilitator: But not the stalks.

Interviewee: That's it yes, because the stork will die back down into the bulb and add to the size and strength of the bulb.

Facilitator: It's like a rotating drum.

Interviewee: Well much like a combine harvester really. Except it just takes off the heads. Then the heads have to be taken away from the fields because of problems with disease.

Facilitator: I see. We're back to what looks like the workshop. We've pretty much got the finished float, not with the flowers on at that point but they're actually putting the flowers on now. The one we're looking at now are the Olympic rings.

Interviewee: That's it.

Facilitator: Which would have tied in '88 - what was that, the Seoul Summer Olympics?

Interviewee: Yes.

Facilitator: So it would have been in people's minds. You've got 10s of people putting flowers on each float.

Interviewee: That's it, yes. There could be a gang of 30 women on a big float.

Facilitator: Yes.

Interviewee: It would take them - a few people would start on the - perhaps do tricky bits on the Thursday or bits that needed scaffolding to work from. Then the scaffolding can be taken down out of the way and the bigger gang work on the lower parts of the float.

Facilitator: How long would it have taken to cover the float?

Interviewee: Well it was all done on the Thursday and the Friday.

Facilitator: Wow.

Interviewee: On some floats working very, very late or into the early morning.

Facilitator: Because presumably, thinking about it, what you're pinning on you want to be reasonably fresh.

Interviewee: Yes.

Facilitator: Otherwise it's not going to look at its best.

Interviewee: Nothing you can do. We did see people spraying them with water but I don't think it really had much.

Facilitator: They'd be better off with coloured dye maybe.

Interviewee: Yes. On my working drawing there was always an indication of what flowers would be needed. I mean I case worked on a figure of 10 x 10 to each square foot of float. That was 100 flowers on a square foot. It depended a lot on the size of the flowers that varied a lot obviously.

Facilitator: Here we're looking at a float for Kodak. So as Eastman Kodak they were celebrating their centenary it looks like 1888 to 1988. It's a perfect representation of a box of film. Yellow with some red, again all picked out in flowers.

Interviewee: Well not quite. That is a painted sign.

Facilitator: Ah now here we are. This is what looks like - is this the panda?

Interviewee: This is the panda yes.

Facilitator: So these are the black...

Interviewee: There are tulips.

Facilitator: The actual heads or the actual petals?

Interviewee: Well the whole head, yes.

Facilitator: I see.

Interviewee: But they would probably have made sure that one of the growers would have had enough black tulips to do it before they undertook the float at all.

Facilitator: If I may say, it's a very faithful representation of the drawings that we were seeing. So we mentioned that there was a very ornate carriage. A child's idea perhaps of what a horse drawn carriage would be, and I'm looking at a carriage complete with the horses. It really is quite fiddly by the looks of it. What sort of pins are they using?

Interviewee: They're rather like a square ended hairpin.

Facilitator: I see.

Interviewee: About 2.5 inches long and not quite - half an inch. That lady is pinning them around the stem. The safer way to do it was to put it through the base of the flower itself.

Facilitator: Would some of these volunteers have done it year after year after year?

Interviewee: Oh yes, yes, yes. The Born Flower Lovers Club came for many years. They would undertake to head a float - this is in later years, in the early years it was all voluntary labour. But they would undertake to head a float for a figure for their funds.

Facilitator: What we have here, was my favourite, which was the galleons in full sail. There's some amazing flower decorations there as well.

Interviewee: That was the last operation once the float had been headed in various spots. Indicated on the design was a wire - a metal holder which took a little flower trough. The local flower lovers' ladies, they made all the arrangements to go in there.

Facilitator: Here we can actually see the drawing, it just happens to be the one with the crocodile and the one with the panda behind it. But the drawing is actually in the mouth of the crocodile. So we can see that it's a pretty faithful representation of the figures. I can see that the green that you've used are the leaves.

Interviewee: Leaves, that's it.

Facilitator: You mentioned that.

Interviewee: Evergreen leaves, a laurel I imagine.

Facilitator: Again we've got the - this is where my knowledge of flowers falls down. So you've actually got two huge tulips, but the actual stamen or the inside presumably that's your metalwork, that's the...

[Over speaking]

Interviewee: Yes and the tip of the stamen has been covered with a little bit of material. You couldn't do it in flowers, it would look too clumsy.

Facilitator: Yes. But that just, for me shows just how intricate - it's not just the framework of the outside of the flower for the petals and so on, but you've even got the detail of the stamen. People are putting the sponsored signs on.

Interviewee: The sponsored signs on the float, yes.

Facilitator: So how many people were involved in the parade all told would you say?

Interviewee: I wouldn't like to guess. I mean obviously it was more than I could manage single handedly and I had casual help, evenings and weekends when I needed it. Mick there was the handyman at Springfields; he's putting the signs on. But he would have put on the foam covering over the weeks before the parade.

Facilitator: Do you think your position as the blacksmith and the Forge being here, you being somebody all the locals would know, did that help you in the job that you did here? Did you feel that it?

Interviewee: No, I wouldn't say that it did. What I would say was that when Flower Parade cropped up, it was a salvation. The work that - I talked about being a reluctant blacksmith, but the work that I was doing in the workshop just wasn't stretching me and not being a particularly good businessman I wasn't making an awful lot of money either. But the state of the workshop didn't help at all. I was put to a choice of either moving into better premises and almost making a fresh start, or throwing my hand in altogether and that's when the flower parade cropped up. It gave me a job that did stretch me mentally.

Facilitator: I can see, yes.

Interviewee: Also it didn't make me a fortune but it was one big job that I put a lot of long hours into, and so financially solved part of my problem at the same time.

Facilitator: Yes. Were there any floats that in your memory were particularly difficult and you could almost curse under your breath thinking, I wish we hadn't have even started this?

Interviewee: No I don't think so. The floats became more elaborate gradually I suppose. As we discovered techniques and ways of getting around problems.

Facilitator: That was part of the fun.

Interviewee: Oh yes, absolutely yes. Often it could be a challenge how to achieve something that Andrea wanted. I think on the whole...

Facilitator: Of the floats that you've done - so your involvement in the flower parade was for well over 30 years.

Interviewee: 43.

Facilitator: 43 years. How many floats do you think you would have constructed in that period?

Interviewee: I have thought about it. I think I must have averaged certainly 12 or 13 a year, I mean at the parade at its very biggest had 23 floats in it I believe. I wasn't quite involved in every one of those.

Facilitator: 450 over that time?

Interviewee: That wouldn't be...

Facilitator: It's a bit like somebody saying, do they have a favourite book or a favourite this that or the other. Is there one that really strikes you as you were particularly proud of being involved in?

Interviewee: Several, I think, of the bigger floats. The float of Adam's which was a bit of a mix up really. Because it was Arctic and Antarctic. We had penguins and polar bears and a polar bear on the...

Facilitator: So Attenborough wouldn't have been pleased.

Interviewee: On the same float. But nevertheless that was a very effective float. But one that I really enjoyed making and perhaps it wasn't one of the most spectacular floats, but was an enormous octopus. The body of the octopus was obviously high up on the float and then the tentacles were - I enjoyed making that. Sometimes the floats were a bit solid, a bit of a lump. But this one with space underneath it on the trailer, difficult on the tractor of course because you've got the lump in the middle anyway which we couldn't avoid. But certainly on the trailer and to see the space and the lines of the tentacles.

Facilitator: I know this is a silly question but if the tractor is underneath and there's somebody driving it, presumably there's a chap looking out through...

Interviewee: Very small holes sometimes.

Facilitator: The visibility wouldn't be...

Interviewee: One or two - one float the driver, and it wasn't my idea; the driver actually used a scope thing.

Facilitator: A periscope?

Interviewee: Yes a periscope, yes that's right. He used a periscope and the vision was often very limited. Of course the float was very big and he couldn't see the extremes of the float probably from where he was sitting.

Facilitator: Were there ever any mishaps in your memory?

Interviewee: Nothing very serious. I think a young lady fell off the Young Farmers float, but I think she'd probably had just a bit much to drink.

Facilitator: I see.

Interviewee: Celebrating.

Facilitator: Right, I see, yes. Here's the parade itself and we've got some very strange looking, what looks like parrots playing musical instruments.

Interviewee: They were great favourites in the parade.

Facilitator: They're now dancing.

Interviewee: Something old boys, I've forgotten now. But you can see why because - oh you can't see it but usually behind there was one of the...

[Over speaking]

Facilitator: ...District Council.

Interviewee: Pulling a truck with a barrel of beer on it.

Facilitator: Yes.

Interviewee: To keep them going.

Facilitator: This is lined with people.

Interviewee: That's George Adams, yes.

Facilitator: Lined with people. There are really quite a few people on each of the floats aren't there?

Interviewee: Sometimes yes. We had bands riding on the trailers as well.

Facilitator: That's the end of the video. Well thank you very much for sharing your recollections. It's very interesting just to see how intricate some of these designs were.

Interviewee: Yes.

Facilitator: Taking it from the drawing through to the various stages of construction, to actually seeing them in use. So thank you very much.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

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Facilitator: So, just a couple more questions, if I may, Geoff. All the metal framework that we were talking about, how much would have been used to construct a particular float? Have you got any figures?

Interviewee: Well, I would think for an average year at the peak of the parade, we were probably using over six tonnes of metal for the whole parade and I did, on a matter of curiosity, as I had to - brought down the metal as I used it and added the whole lot up for one parade. In length, most of it, the very, very light strip that we used for the figures - but heavier stuff, as well - but it added up to twelve and a half miles of metal. In a small float, probably it wouldn't use much more than a hundredweight. I did, in fact, build - the St John's Ambulance people were always good supporters of the parade and always turned out on the route and we built a modest float for them one year. Given the basic framework, I actually built the tulip float itself in a day, two big roundels, representation of their Maltese cross and one or two other little bits to fill up the space and actually made that in one day, but an average single float, just a tractor unit, probably would involve 150 hours. I have spent, on a big double float, certainly, 250 hours of work in the float. Probably not - some of it was the casual help I had, but up to 250 hours.

Facilitator: So, considerable time and your day would have been, especially at the peak time, quite a long one, I would imagine.

Interviewee: Oh, yes. Yes, yes, yeah.

Facilitator: Were you working into the late evening?

Interviewee: Yes, late evening. To probably 10 o'clock at night when we were really busy. I was not able to persuade the organisers to let me start earlier. Part of the problem was, of course, finding premises for such a long period and a bit of an idea, I think, that they got better value for money if they pushed me. I'm sure that was in the back of their minds, nevertheless.

Facilitator: Yes. Good. Thank you very much.