

Stephen Parkinson Interview Transcription (RAW Audio Time Stamps) – 30/09/23

Interviewer – Penny Briggs

Swearing warning - [0:15:13.0]

PB: Good morning, this is Penny Briggs for the Peterson's Project, recording Oral Histories, on Saturday 30th September 2023. And I will pass on to my interviewee to introduce himself.

SP: My name is Stephen Parkinson, the recent owner of Fred's Fisheries, worked in this building for many years, and I'm so pleased this project is going on and hopefully my information can be beneficial to the project.

PB: Thank you. Could you tell me what's your connection to Building 89 on Wharnccliffe Road?

[0:00:43.4] SP: As far as I can recollect, we moved into that building, my father died in 1968, we moved into that building before that. I can't remember the exact time, I was 13 years old and still at school. So when we moved into it, it was nothing like it was when we moved out of it of course. We sublet it from Tim Middleton, a fish merchant, and he took the lease off from ABP and he sublet it to my father. When we first moved in, it was different, it had like an air raid shelter in the far corner which I gave a little help, I was only 12/13, when they had to knock it down to make a bit more room. We had just got the ground floor at this time, so there was an office in the far corner from Wharnccliffe Road as you come in there was an office on the right hand side. And that's what we rented off him until a few years later, and then time goes by, and we progress from there.

[0:02:10.0] PB: What kind of work did you do, what was the business involved with?

[0:02:14.0] SP: We were a local company, we were on Freeman Street Market and Top Town market, so fish retailers. My father and I, when I left school, went to the Fish Market and we bought the fish, barrowed the fish back to the premises and processed it, and then the day after we took it to each market and sold it retail, so fishmongery.

[0:02:39.0] PB: I know you said your father was involved in the business, were any other family members involved?

[0:02:44.0] SP: Oh yes, all the family, the family was born (*into it*). To go all the way back, I was born in Victoria Street, where we got burnt out the wet fish shop when I was 18 months year old. That was my mum and fathers house. When my father died when I was 13, my mum took over the business with my two brothers in law, that was Les Parker, no longer with us, and Malcolm Pritchard. They took over and they ran it with my mother until I was 15 16 and left school. Course all my sisters were involved as well, all three worked on the stall, I have photographs of them behind the stall, it's still on one of the vans going around the docks. I had it put on the back of my van, a lot of people would have seen it in Grimsby. I don't know where it is, because it's no longer my van. All my sisters, mothers, brothers in law involved because it was a family business. My mum passed the business itself over to me when I was 18, cause I was a man. Got classed as a man at 18 years old.

[0:04:09.0] PB: Did you work anywhere else in the industry? Or was it solely to do with Fred's Fisheries?

[0:04:14.0] SP: No it was just me, it was mine. I was going to join the army but when my father died at 13, my mother WAS quite straightforward and said 'right it's your business now, we're keeping it for you'. So I was a little bit caught I think, because I wanted to do others things, but I couldn't do it

because I was the man of the family. I had four sisters and they were relying on me to keep the business going, although I did enjoy it. Although always good times and bad times.

[0:04:55.3] PB: Could you describe a typical working day in the height of your business? What would it have looked like?

[0:05:02.0] SP: Everyday was the same but different if you see what I mean. Monday morning we would get up about 5:30/6:00 and get down the dock. The dock sales would start at 7:00 then we'd buy the fish we thought we were going to need or what was acceptable for us to buy price wise and quality wise. Then we would go back, that was me and Malcolm at the time, take back to the store, and then we'd have a cup of tea. And then we got stuck in till finished, there was no time limit. If we got 10 boxes finished, we had ten. If we had five, we had five. So, we finished around tea time, I wouldn't get home before 6:00 at night. And that was a Monday! Do you want me to go through the week?

[0:06:00.0] PB: No that's fine! Now you said ten or five boxes, what were you doing with the fish?

[0:06:07.0] SP: Filleting it. you would get it from the market as a whole fish, gutted most of the time. You would prepare it, fillet it, pack it into trays, put it on ice, put it in the chiller, ready to go to market for retail on the next day.

[0:06:25.0] PB: Can I ask, how did you get to work?

[0:06:28.9] SP: We had little Suzuki vans, we had a couple, a pickup and Suzuki carrier and just drove to work. Quite simple really.

[0:06:41.0] PB: We've talked about a typical day, do you remember the feelings around the day? The sights, the sounds, the smells?

[0:06:56.2] PB: SP: Do you know, it was horribly good. Bloody good. It was cold in the winter, it was very aggressive at times, people would be, but that was the dock life. If you went down the dock and there was something wrong with you, there was no sympathy. If you was ill, they'd say 'get your finger out and get the work done'. The smells, you went home and I didn't smell it, nobody smelt it on the dock. I'd take money into the bank and they'd say 'argh this smells' and I'd say 'look at it this way, it may smell, but this money pays your wages, every pound that comes across here...'

PB: So the actual notes used to smell?

SP: We used to take cash to the bank, not on the docks on itself, but Victoria Street, and you used to stand in line and hear 'this smells of fish' and you'd go 'yeah this is me and its good honest work'. But that was the dock, people used to walk down there with their leggings on. It was great and it's missed.

[0:08:14.7] PB: How busy would you say it was in the heyday of your business?

[0:08:16.4] SP: It was busy before I got down there, at one time I think there was 30,000 kit landing. And that's every day for 5 days and sometimes they'd do it on a Saturday. Then when I was there in the late 70's it was still an ant nest basically. But like a lot of things, the fishing industry was always undervalued anyway, but that's another argument you can get into, the overfishing.

PB: Did you notice a difference in your working years in that business?

SP: Oh yes, even though it wasn't 30,000 they were still landing 8000-10,000 boxes per day every day. And it used to come all the way through the dock and every part of the dock when I was there,

fish was landing on it. And I think when we finished a couple of years back, you'd be lucky to get hundreds, 200 boxes landing and of course it's not coming by the ships its coming by over land containers because we lost the industry in the late 70's as you know.

[0:09:48.7] PB: Had your customer base shrunk?

[0:09:52.2] SP: It did. I remember the market on Freeman Street market alone, and we used to have four staff on a Friday and we were serving non-stop. It used to take me an hour and a half 2 hours to set the stall out and I'd never put my blinds up till 8:00, and I was there at 6, and I'd have people waiting and we'd get busy. Then my staff would come in around 9:00 and we wouldn't stop until mid afternoon and we'd have to the stagger the dinners, the breaktimes. There would be queues, because fish was cheap, everybody ate fish cause it was Grimsby, even though people said 'we should get it for nothing because it's Grimsby'. But we weren't expensive. Decline in everything.

[0:12:59.0] PB: Where did you spend most of your day? Was it on the docks or on the markets or was it an even split?

[0:13:19.0] SP: On a Monday I was on the dock and on Tuesday at the market? Saturday basically was, I wouldn't say was a knock out day. We would start at 7:00 on the market and we would try to get rid of all the fish by Saturday afternoon to get rid of it so it wasn't old. Then Sunday I had off. Then it would start all over again. The high time was probably working 80-84 hours a week, but that's what you do when you work for your business. My dad did it for many years, even though he died early, and this was another reason why I thought if I get a chance, I'm selling and try and enjoy life. I can now look back on all these times and think yeah I did enjoy life on the dock, but now they're gone.

[0:14:17.0] PB: Did you find certain times of the year busy? Was Easter a traditionally busy time?

[0:14:25.0] PB: SP: Oh yeah, people used to say 'you must make a lot of money at Easter?' and you did, people would queue up, but you'd realise a week before Easter your fish would started going up, salmon going up, your earnings would go up two three times but so would your bills. So the profit wasn't there. Someone just starting up put on the fishmongers, he was just asking advice and the advice I gave him was - be true to yourself, don't bullshit, and don't try and earn a quick buck. Just get a good relationship and it will come in time. And that's my advice for anybody listening if they want to accept it. I enjoyed my life, I wouldn't change any of it and you can't. The fishing industry was good to me, but it's like anything else, you get out what you put in.

[0:15:57.0] PB: On your ledger, you have all the different companies, were you selling to or buying from?

SP: Buying from.

PB: So you were buying from 10-12 merchants? Including Peterson's? Which is a nice little tie up between the two.

[0:16:53.7] SP: I can remember we used to buy off, father used to buy off Mudd's. Father used to deal with them. At one time, even on the market we were selling frozen peas, frozen carrots, diversifying. Well why not, you have a freezer there.

[0:17:21.0] PB: I noticed in your ledger from 77-78 that you were selling other items, other than fish?

[0:17:32.0] SP: At one market at Freeman Street, we had a 24 ft stall, and we had a bit of space at the end for a 6ft freezer, so we used to buy frozen peas, chips, fish fingers and cakes. I think it was H Mudd's. We used to bag them up, put them at the end of the stall and sell them in the freezer.

[0:17:59.0] Many years ago I remember my father didn't used to sell fish at Christmas even though he was on the markets. He used to pack up a fortnight or three weeks before Christmas, and would go off and buy a load of Christmas trees and sell them, because no-body wants seafood then, or at least from him. I remember going to the farms, cutting them and then they use to throw me in the back of the van on top of the trees and we'd go to market. And then we'd start selling fish again in January.

PB: So the fish stall became a Christmas tree stall. Steve thank you so much for your time, it's been absolutely fascinating. We very much appreciate it.