

Bob Collins Transcript

Speaker 1:

What is your full name?

Robert Michael Collins:

Robert Michael Collins.

Speaker 1:

What year were you born?

Robert Michael Collins:

1946.

Speaker 1:

Where were you born?

Robert Michael Collins:

[Archway 00:00:12].

Speaker 1:

What did your parents do for a living?

Robert Michael Collins:

My dad worked in the printing industry and my mom was a machinist.

Speaker 1:

That's cool. Please tell us why you decided to work for the Royal Mail.

Robert Michael Collins:

I decided to work for the Royal Mail because I was working in another trade what was closing down. And I saw an advertisement in the paper for post people and I just applied and that's why I went in.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about any family members who work for the Royal Mail.

Robert Michael Collins:

My family members? I haven't got no family work in the Royal Mail.

Speaker 1:

Okay. What did your family members think about your decision to work for the Royal Mail?

Robert Michael Collins:

Well, my wife was very pleased. My children was quite happy because it got us a stable living.

Speaker 1:

Tell us how you started walking for the Royal Mail.

Robert Michael Collins:

How I started? I started by going to a school down in Kings Cross where we had to learn sorting, learn how to tie bags, had to lift bags properly. And we'd done that for two weeks. And then we went to Royal Mail, into Mount Pleasant.

Speaker 1:

Okay. Describe the training you did.

Robert Michael Collins:

The training. The training I had done was, first of all, we had to have a card index on a big frame. And on this frame was... I think if my memory takes me back, I think it was about 70 boxes. And within these boxes was broken down and the object of the training was to do 15,000 letters in 10 minutes. 1500, sorry. Not 15,000. 1500 in 10 minutes. That was the object.

Speaker 1:

What was the first job you did for the Royal Mail?

Robert Michael Collins:

The first job I did when I went into Mount Pleasant was I was on a contraption called 52 table. Which was a table where you sorted bundles and letters and you sent them all around the office.

Speaker 1:

Interesting. Tell us how you felt on your first days at work.

Robert Michael Collins:

How I found them. I found them very well because the people I met was very nice and I've never worked in that kind of environment before. So for me, it was a nice place to be.

Speaker 1:

Describe your work in those early days.

Robert Michael Collins:

My work in the early days, I would say, was a bit physical. We had loads of heavy bags and that kind of stuff, but you soon got used to that, so it was not a problem in the end.

Speaker 1:

What was the atmosphere like at the work in your early days?

Robert Michael Collins:

I really liked it. It was happy. Met some real nice people, friends that I've still got today. So I was happy there.

Speaker 1:

That's really nice. What kinds of people are you working with?

Robert Michael Collins:

All kinds of ethics, all... The only thing we never had when I first went into the post office was females. We didn't have a lot of females, but we had loads of ethnic people, Asians, people from Africa, Caribbean, and I liked that. So the diversity was really good.

Speaker 1:

What sort of equipment did you use in your work?

Robert Michael Collins:

Sort of equipment we had... After I come off 52 table, which wasn't really equipment, it was just a box frying exercise. We went on to franking machines, which is something what would frank the letters. As you see them on your letters, it would date it. And then a little while after that we had a machine come in, which was called a CFC, which was canceling franking machine. Where we didn't have to do it, we just threw it, bags of mail in this machine. It sorted what we used to do on the frames.

Speaker 1:

Describe your uniform.

Robert Michael Collins:

My uniform? Drab. It was blue, blue shirt, navy trousers and in the office all postmen wore either a brown smock or a gray smock, which is a long coat.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about the skills you needed for your job.

Robert Michael Collins:

The skills. Mostly you needed a good memory. That's what you actually needed. So when you was sorting your letters, you knew if, say, it was going to [Berkshire 00:05:17], you knew Berkshire was there. And if it was going up to [Northumberland 00:05:21], you knew Northumberland was up there. So memory was one of the skills you really needed.

Speaker 1:

Describe a typical day at work.

Robert Michael Collins:

A typical day. A typical day for me was a little bit different because I worked on the night shift. I worked on the night shift for 27 and a half years. So on my typical evening was I would come in, go to the sorting front, sort letters for an hour, come off the sorting frame, and then I would go to what we would call a

platform. And on the platform I would lift heavy bags into post office vans all night long. After 11 o'clock, that was what I done. I just lifted bags on, off, on off.

Speaker 1:

What were your favorite things about your work?

Robert Michael Collins:

My favorite things. My favorite things at work was the people, which I really enjoyed it. I enjoyed when I joined the committee at the union, which I really enjoyed. I enjoyed that. And it being in Mount Pleasant, we had the greatest sports things you could do. You name it, in Mount pleasant you could do it. From playing darts, to growing plants, to making wine, to playing billiards, we could do that. So it was a place to be.

Speaker 1:

What were the difficult things about your work?

Robert Michael Collins:

The difficult things. Difficult. I should imagine lifting the heavy bags, originally, was the most difficult thing I found. But that just comes, after a while you get used to how to do it properly. So that was quite difficult.

Speaker 1:

Can you tell us about any discrimination you experienced or witnessed?

Robert Michael Collins:

Well, I could because I was a union rep, so for me to answer that is a little bit... I had to deal with that quite a few often, discrimination against people.

Speaker 1:

Tell us a story that stands out from your working life.

Robert Michael Collins:

A story. A story. [inaudible 00:07:46] a good story. I could tell you of a good story. In Mount Pleasant we had an IS section, which is inland section where I worked. And we had an old PS section, which was parcels. Going under the building, which a lot of people don't know, Mount Pleasant was originally a prison. So you could go under the building and go and see cells. Actually go and see prison cells. And part of in the parcel side, which a lot of people would never believe, had a shooting range where you could go and practice firing guns. So that was interesting. I found that was a little story a lot of people wouldn't even know, unless you worked in Mount Pleasant a long time ago that existed.

Speaker 1:

[inaudible 00:08:43]. What were some of the naughty things people did at work?

Robert Michael Collins:

Naught things? Get drunk, don't turn up on time. What else would we used to... Go missing from what we used to call [inaudible 00:09:03] should've been in A, and A wasn't there. So we had a lot of that going on.

Speaker 1:

Talk us briefly through the different jobs you did while working for the Royal Mail.

Robert Michael Collins:

The different jobs. Right. First job I done was sorting. The second job I had done, I was on the machines, which was franking. Stamp canceling. Then I went up on to the nights. On the nights I worked on a device called a spewer, which spewed out these heavy, heavy, heavy bags from [Holland 00:09:43]. So I'd done that. And then after a little while I went to, I was explaining, I went on to a duty where I sorted for an hour. Then I went on to the platforms and I was splayed on that, mostly, for the rest of my kind of career in there.

Speaker 1:

Out of all of those what was your favorite job?

Robert Michael Collins:

My favorite job? My favorite job was working on a division called the beds, which was for Bedfordshire. I liked working on there because it was a one man operation, just one postman, one PHG, and one governor. And I liked being down there. So that was good.

Speaker 1:

How did you progress in Royal Mail?

Robert Michael Collins:

How did I? In Royal Mail they have a system where you start as a postman and you go as a PHG, which is a postman higher grade, and if you want to go further than that you go to [LLA 00:10:53] and then you can go further. But I didn't want to do that, I just wanted to be a postman. But what I wanted to do was join the union branch, which I had done. So that was an achievement for me.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your relationships with your colleagues.

Robert Michael Collins:

Well, being a union rep... Not just to repeat myself, but being a union rep, I was always in demand with colleagues and I got on quite well. And I still meet people today that say, "Thanks Bob for...." "Remember when you done that for me?" Or, "You remember when you had done that?" So I still get thanks from people.

Speaker 1:

That's good. Tell us about your experiences of joining clubs at work.

Robert Michael Collins:

Clubs at work. Well, as I say, we had a big social thing. We had a social secretary who used to organize holidays, if you go on holiday. But mostly I liked the swimming, we could go swimming. Or you could go football or you could play darts. Any sport you really wanted to do, you could do. And it was good because the post office would pay you to go and play it. So you get time off and get paid. So it was good.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about any other opportunities to socialize.

Robert Michael Collins:

To socialize. We had a Christmas, we always had a Christmas party where your family come along and your children come along. And that was really good. Still now we have meetings for retired postman for [inaudible 00:12:38]. I still organize retired members meetings. So that's good.

Speaker 1:

What made you join the union?

Robert Michael Collins:

What made me join the union? When I was working with me mates on the floor, I used to be called nosy. [inaudible 00:12:59]. So I used to read all the notice boards up on the union, come back and tell the people I was working with this is happening, that's happening or whatever. So they said, "Well, you're interested, why don't you just go and join?" So that's what I did. And being on nights, no one was going to oppose me. So I just got in there and joined the union, which I spent many a good years I really enjoyed.

Speaker 1:

That's really good. Why is the union important for postal workers?

Robert Michael Collins:

It's important because you need the strength of the union's ranger because sometimes it can be a bit daunting in the post office. It could be a little bit if you're new or that. And also we had to try and get the working hours down. When I first went in it was 44 and a half hours a week. So now it's down to, I think it's about 30 something. For wages, we had to go on strike to get better wages. So that's what the union done for the workers.

Speaker 1:

What part did the union play in your life?

Robert Michael Collins:

In my life? In my life it gave me a very broad education. I mean, I went on nights, I went to be the health and safety officer. And to be the health and safety officer I had to go to school, nine weeks of school. And you had to pass one, two, and three, which I passed to hold disposition as the officer because you had to know everything about health and safety.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about any strikes or disputes you were involved with.

Robert Michael Collins:

Well, we was involved in quite a few at Mount Pleasant, quite a few. A lot of it was over pay and conditions.

Speaker 1:

What was your most memorable moment at the post office?

Robert Michael Collins:

My most memorable moment. That's a good question. I think going to... Where was we? I'm just trying to think because I've got something a little bit different. I done a course which I enjoyed and I spoke in front of about four to 500 people. And that always sticks in my mind because it just made me more outgoing, which is good for me.

Speaker 1:

What was your most challenging moment at the post office?

Robert Michael Collins:

My most challenging moment was when we had the... It's a bit before your time, when we had the [ROI 00:15:55] bomb scares. And being the health and safety officer, that was challenging. When we had the bombs coming through the post office. And that was most challenging and quite frightening for not only for me being the health and safety officer, but for the workforce because part of the health and safety in them days we had to get into office and you could be getting people out. So that is what I would say was quite a memorable frightening thing.

Speaker 1:

I agree. Over your working life, what were the main changes at work?

Robert Michael Collins:

Mechanization. The biggest change in the office. We went from maybe, I think it was about when I went in there maybe 1700 people, and now they've got 700. And that was standard mechanization of... The sorting of letters was mechanized, coding the letters mechanized. So that was the big change.

Speaker 1:

In what ways do you think the job has improved?

Robert Michael Collins:

The job has improved? Well, in the office down there it's brighter, the layout is more healthy, the working conditions are better, the pay's much better, and the hours are better.

Speaker 1:

In what way has it got worse?

Robert Michael Collins:

Worse? That I could not say because I don't work in the office anymore, so I can only go by what people tell me. But if you're asking me another question because of privatization, the kind of work is a little bit different for the post people now.

Speaker 3:

In what ways?

Robert Michael Collins:

In that they are more stricter to rules and things that I used to do would not happen now.

Speaker 1:

What would you think if your child wanted to work for the Royal Mail?

Robert Michael Collins:

I would say yes. I would say yes. But to do it to go not my way, but to go another way to do what I said, just try and get a better grade of within the Royal Mail.

Speaker 1:

If you were the boss of Royal Mail, what changes would you make?

Robert Michael Collins:

If I was the boss in the Royal Mail. That's a good question because I would have to do it as a union man and not as a businessman. So what could you do? I don't really know. Because the workload has changed within the post office now. It's not so much letters now, its parcels. So what I would do as the boss of Royal Mail, improve how the parcels get from A to B to the customer. That is what I would improve.

Speaker 1:

Looking back over your working life. What has working for the Royal Mail meant to you?

Robert Michael Collins:

What has it meant to me? It's meant education, friendship, and it gave me an outlook in life I would not have had if I never went into Royal Mail.

Speaker 3:

Before you ask that one, I've got a couple of... They're not really questions. They're just asking you to sort of explain a little bit more and expand on some of the things you've said. You just mentioned heavy bags from Holland [inaudible 00:19:42].

Robert Michael Collins:

Oh, sure. Yeah. Well, we had, it's a machine and these bags come on to the platform and they come up on a trolley thing. And these bags was magazines, solid magazines, and they was about this high. But they was... I don't know how many pounds or kilos you call. They was heavy. And we had what we used

to call a circle of... You would call them wheelbarrows. And you just have to lift the bag, put on the wheelbarrows, get four or five because that's as much as you could put on it, then you would take your trolley and then you would real it round the office to the point it was supposed to go. And that was heavy work. It was heavy work.

Speaker 3:

And you mentioned the platforms as well.

Robert Michael Collins:

Yeah. Platforms is where the transport comes in, your van would come in, which you would unload and then you would load it. But in Mount Pleasant we had three platforms. One was incoming, one was outgoing and on the other side was for sundry kind of work. So that's what we had. That's what a platform is, it's where the vans come in, unload a new load.

Speaker 3:

And also, you said that your favorite job, I think, was beds. Could you give some more detail.

Robert Michael Collins:

Well, within the Mount Pleasant system, the office was divided into the western division, the northern division, the southern division, and the west midlands division. And the beds come under west midlands, but down there it was only one postman, one PHG, and one governor, which I liked. So I wasn't in a big crowd of people. So we could just do our own little job down there.

Speaker 3:

So what was the job? What were you actually doing?

Robert Michael Collins:

My job was to go to the point of where the trolleys was, wheel them over to my PHG, he opened the bags, and then he sorted all the letters what was going to Bedfordshire. Time all went up, put them on a bag, I'll put them on a trolley and then I would wheel the trolley to the platforms and they would then distribute it to Bedfordshire. And that happened all around the office, in all divisions.

Speaker 1:

Thanks very much for answering our questions. Is there anything you would like to talk about that we have not covered in our questions?

Robert Michael Collins:

Not really, because I think you've answered some very good questions and I think you covered most of my work and life there.

Speaker 1:

Thank you.

Robert Michael Collins:

Thank you.

Speaker 3:

Any questions from the group? Anything you would like to know?

Speaker 4:

Have you ever been on the mail rail?

Robert Michael Collins:

Yes, I have.

Speaker 4:

How was it?

Robert Michael Collins:

Oh sorry. You've actually been on a mail rail. Did you sit in it?

Speaker 4:

Yes.

Robert Michael Collins:

Oh. In my day when it was working, you couldn't sit in it. I've been down there and see the workings and how it works and that, but you couldn't ride in them. The mail rail was quite a good invention and whoever put that in place. Because it used to run for Mount Pleasant, used to go all the way down to East London and West London, North London, and then they cut through the tunnels out, so it was just going east.

Speaker 3:

I mean, did that impact you at all? The mail coming in from... Because that's Mount Pleasant, isn't it?

Robert Michael Collins:

Yep.

Speaker 3:

So it was all going to Mount Pleasant. And would you actually have to sort it from there?

Robert Michael Collins:

No. Their operation down there was outward, not inward. Our work, they had a special shoot. Well, we called it a shoot. Where you'd say if it was going to the old E1s or the E office, you would just put it down and shoot. It goes down to them and then they put it in the mail rail and then distribute it.

Speaker 3:

Okay. Okay. Everyone happy?

Speaker 4:

Yeah. [crosstalk 00:24:14].

Robert Michael Collins:

Just before you go. The only other thing what was good at Mount Pleasant was the TPO, the Traveling Post Office. All them people used to work on the Traveling Post Office used to come into Mount Pleasant at Christmas for two weeks. And it was the most funniest and happiest times you've ever seen when they're coming.

Speaker 3:

So could you explain to the novices what a Traveling Post Office is.

Robert Michael Collins:

Well, a Traveling Post Office is where the mail from, say, Mount Pleasant, we used to take it down to Houston, Kings Cross, [St. Pancras 00:24:46], [Paddington 00:24:48] and I load it on the train, and during the night the postman on there would sort the letters. And that was called the TPO, Traveling Post Office. But what a lot of people didn't know, at Christmas they closed it. They never work Christmas. So all them people who worked on the trains, they come into Mount pleasant and had a holiday for two weeks in Mount Pleasant. Well, we though[inaudible 00:25:14].