

## John Hart Transcript

Speaker 1:

What is your full name?

John Hart:

My full name is John Steven Hart.

Speaker 1:

What year were you born?

John Hart:

I was born on the eighth of January 1960.

Speaker 1:

Where were you born?

John Hart:

I was born in London.

Speaker 1:

What did your parents do for a living?

John Hart:

My father was a bus driver for London Transport and my mother worked in a factory.

Speaker 1:

Please tell us why you decided to work for Royal Mail.

John Hart:

I ended up working for The Royal Mail because I was applying for job applications at the time and I was successful in applying for London Transport, British Rail and the post office. And I choosed the post office because someone very near to me said, "Take the post office, they've got a nicer uniform."

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

I am the first person in my family to work for The Royal Mail.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

I think that they were very pleased because back in those days working for the post office as it was then was seen to be a very prestigious job, and also, it was one of the few jobs at that time that paid the working people a pension.

Speaker 1:

Tell us how you started working for Royal Mail?

John Hart:

I started work for Royal Mail on a Wednesday on the third of June 1987.

Speaker 1:

Describe the training you did.

John Hart:

The training in those days in the post office was very longated and it had a lot of different levels you had to go through before you were made an established postman. The minimum to become an established postman was 12 months and you had a lot of training processes you had to go through which was three months, six months, nine months and 12 months. So every three months you had a review which you had to go through with a manager and he evaluated your performance for the previous three months. And that taught you the role of being a postman which is completely different to being a postman now, except the part where you deliver the mail.

John Hart:

Things were a lot different then, first of all there was no machines, everything was done by hand. In the area where I worked which is the West End, they had midnight deliveries and a midnight delivery went out at seven o'clock in the morning and at the end of this, I've still got my torches from when I used to do that. Now, I'll show you the torches at the end and I'll explain to you what the torches were for unless you want me to explain it now? We had to take a torch on delivery with us.

Speaker 3:

Explain that.

John Hart:

The reason for that was, because a lot of the preparation was by hand, the mail was prepared during the night so you had extra deliveries. You actually had three deliveries, we had what they called the midnight delivery that went on at seven o'clock, you had a GP delivery that went out at 9:15, and you had a second delivery that went out at 11:15. So when you went out on the midnight one which means you did a delivery after working all night, when you went out the streetlight was not as good then as it is now and you had a torch. And the purpose with the torch was two things, right? So that a lot of houses didn't have lights on their doors then so when you got to the house number, you shone the torch to make sure you're putting the mail into the right address, and also you shone the torch at the letters to make sure you're putting the right letters in the right address.

Speaker 1:

What was the first job you did for Royal Mail?

John Hart:

First job I did for Royal Mail, I was uselessly employed. When you went into The Royal Mail you didn't get a uniform then because you were what they termed a trainee postman. They gave you an armband with a number on it and you had to wear that here, it had a number on it. My number was 1471, you had to wear that at all times. When you saw... Because you didn't have the proper training to go and do a delivery, they gave you a range of menial jobs to do which will be things like tipping the mail sacks out with the mail, pushing the work around to people who are more experienced that could sort the mail and things like that. So, what it said on the signing on sheet was you were usefully employed, right? But everybody else termed you as uselessly employed because you didn't know what you were doing.

Speaker 1:

Tell us how you felt on your first days at work?

John Hart:

My first day at work was a very strange one, why? And the reason I know the day I started it is because I started on a Wednesday, and to this day I don't know anyone who started a new job on a Wednesday. I started a new job on a Wednesday, so I had all that worry from the Friday up until the Wednesday, right? Starting a new job, what's it going to be like? I would have much rather started on a Monday and got it out of the way. It's like everything else isn't it? Your first day at school, what's the best thing about the first day at school? You went to school and you've done the first day, you knew what it was all about. So the sooner you could do the first day the better it is, isn't it? So I always remember I started on a Wednesday.

John Hart:

The second thing that happened was I had letter, right? So I had to go to the admin department on the first floor in Rathbone Place which is just off Oxford street. I had to go in there with my letter and I showed it to the admin manager and the letter said I'm to report for duty on Wednesday the third of June 1987 at Western Central District Office. West Central District Office is in New Oxford Street and I'm in Rathbone Place because the admin for West Central was in Rathbone Place on the first floor. So I went there, I produced my letter and the admin manager said to me, "Go report to the third floor." And I said to him, "Excuse me, my letter says West Central District Office, this is Western District Office." And he took my letter and it's the first time I'd seen the famous red pen in action, he got his red pen and he crossed out WCDO, he wrote on it WDO, handed it back to me, he said, "You're now a Western District Office postman, 3NE, report to the third floor."

Speaker 1:

Describe your work in its early days.

John Hart:

Oh, it was very interesting, it was a learning curve like anything in life if you haven't done something before it's a learning curve isn't it? So it was very interesting, of course then when I joined, it was the post office, it didn't become the Royal Mail until, I can remember off the top of my head, I think '93, '94, I can't remember now. It was the post office, so the variation of the jobs that you did was huge, now it's very functionalized. For example, I work in delivery now, I work in delivery land as we termed it, but back then the range of jobs you did was unbelievable. I'll give you an example, we used to have a

delivery called Datapost, when the Datapost which was a business product, when it missed a connection for the vans, it got missorted or it turned up later, had the wrong address on it, we would be given a rail warrant to go on the trains from King's Cross, Euston, Paddington and Victoria and go and deliver it to the office that it should go to.

John Hart:

And one of the experiences I had because I was very new then, and it was very worrying at the time, they sent me to Oxbridge. So, I went to Oxbridge, had my rail warrant which meant free travel, to travel free because you've got a rail warrant. I went to Oxbridge, I got to the delivery office from the train station, I found where it was. There was no Sat Navs in those days, you had to use [inaudible 00:10:13] and solve it, and I got to the office and it didn't exist anymore, it was closed down. So what was I going to do now? So I had to start asking people, if you can imagine this happening now, I had to start asking people. I'm the postman and I'm asking people where the post office is, right? It usually works the other way doesn't it? People come and ask the postman, "Can you tell me where the post office is?"

John Hart:

I eventually found that it was on an industrial estate in West Stratton, I'd never even heard of West Stratton, so then I had to get two buses, I got there eventually, I delivered the pouch to the manager, got a signature for it, but then I had to make myself all the ways back to Rathbone Place again, back in Oxford Street from West Stratton which is in Middlesex. And I got back at quarter to eight if I remember rightly and I was charged with being missing from point of duty since 1:43.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

There was a great atmosphere, there was a great camaraderie, there was a great social life attached to the post office. They had a huge range of activities outside of work, they had all sorts of clubs, chess clubs, art clubs, music clubs, football, all different sports. You could name any sport and they had it. I've also got a glass, there's a name for it.

Speaker 3:

Trophy?

John Hart:

Sorry?

Speaker 3:

Trophy?

John Hart:

Yeah, but it's a glass, it's a kind of a glass, I can't think what the name is for it. It was presented to the London Postal Sports Association on the 100th anniversary in 1987. I didn't bring that today because I was afraid I might break it. Crystal, it's crystal glass.

Speaker 1:

What kind of people were you working with?

John Hart:

Well the first thing that I noticed in the post office was the diversity of the workforce. In the post office you will meet every nationality in the world. So the workforce was very diverse, there wasn't a lot of women who worked in the post office back then because the labor was very manual, as I said previously, there wasn't any machines, but there was women that worked there and before the days of equality the women that worked in the post office got paid less than the men. And because they were a woman and obviously the physical attributes are different, right? When a woman went on delivery she carried a smaller bag than a man, and seemly the excuse they got paid less was because they didn't carry the same weight out on the delivery. Of course that's all changed now in these days of equality. My own personal opinion is that the women who worked in the post office back then didn't get the recognition that they deserved, that's my opinion.

Speaker 1:

How diverse was your workplace when you started?

John Hart:

I would say it was probably between 65 and 70% non-English.

Speaker 1:

What sort of equipment did you use in your work?

John Hart:

Well that varied and depended on the job that you were doing. They've got a term in the post office that if you haven't got the right tools you can't do the job, right? So that was depending on the job that you were doing, right? Obviously an easy example is if you're going to do a collection you need a van, right? If you need to do a delivery, there's different equipment for example you probably see people on the street for example, they're pushing what they call a postal trolley or the right term for it is a high capacity trolley, but you've also got delivery spanners which is basically, it's got two wheels on it and you can hang three bags on it, and it's like a golf trolley and you can carry it along. But that would depend on the job you're doing, for example, what we used to have to do, when they would bring the mail in from the collections, the one o'clock collections, the three o'clock collections, four o'clock collections, five o'clock collections, right? We would have to change the hand stamps every hour because the time it came in would have to be stamped.

John Hart:

You've got to remember, there was no machines to stamp the mail so we had to do it by hand. So you can imagine the size of the workforce, you had to have a huge workforce because everything had to be manually done. So for example, just to do that alone you had people who just stamped the mail when it came in. And the stamp that we'd put on the envelope, where it was posted and what time it was posted, and that would relate to what that collection was. So say for example it was three o'clock, then you would stamp it and it would come up. When you get a letter delivered in your door, it would say posted in... What's the nearest pillar box here? Would be Greyson Road wouldn't it? So it would say

Greyson Road, three PM. That letter was posted at Greyson Road at three PM and then it got delivered to your house we'll say in just for example Kilburn.

Speaker 1:

Describe your uniform.

John Hart:

Well if you look at the uniform I have on now, yeah? I don't like it, bar the tie which I'll explain about the tie later. I don't like this uniform, why? First of all I think I'm too old for wearing a uniform like this, the purpose of having the extra pockets is for carrying things. One of the biggest problems you have as a postman when you go on delivery is you put things down and you forget them, that's why a postman's uniform has got so many pockets in them. And in actually fact, because of the hot weather, they want to introduce high viz vest with multiple pockets in it. Something I'm not too keen on either but that's one of the things that they would like to introduce. So the reason a postman has got so many pockets is because you've got to carry pens, you've got to carry cards.

John Hart:

You've got also various different cards, you've got the card you put through the person's door to let them know that you've called and you couldn't deliver the item, you've also got another kind of a card which is called leave it at the neighbor card, why? If a person has informed the post office that it's safe leave their mail with the neighbor, they give the neighbor's name and contact details and you deliver the item say for example next door and then you put the card in the person's door to tell them the item's next door. So I don't like the uniform, I think it's trying to be trendy and I think it should be more officious because that's... If you like, the culture I grew up in the post office, it was more official, it was more along the lines... To say it's along more military lines would probably sound too harsh, but it was very regimented. I have a picture of me in my original uniform which I'll show you at the end and then you'll understand the difference between this and that.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about the skills you needed for your job.

John Hart:

Well that depends on how you want to progress because obviously as you go to different levels, you need different skills don't you? And then you have to learn them skills, so that would depend on the job you were doing and to give you an example, when I started in the post office you couldn't go from being a postman to becoming a manager, that wasn't allowed. A bit like now, whereby they've got all these different grades in the Royal Mail, they also had all these different grades in the post office. But to become a manager you could only become a manager, you had to become a postman higher grade first. And a postman higher grade, the badges were different. I think I've got one of my old badges with me and the difference was is that a postman's badge was gold color, called brass color, and the postman higher grade's one was the same but had a blue line on it, and it was the same regards to the uniform. A postman higher grade, he would have a blue shirt but along the top here he'd have a piping, there'd be a piping color along the pockets that designated him to be postman higher grade.

John Hart:

And obviously postman higher grade did more of the admin work whereas say a postman did more of the manual work. And obviously the reason it was called a postman higher grade was because he was higher than a postman. So, it would depend on the job you were doing, so the equipment you would use would depend on the grade you were. Now, in the post office they had so many different grades, they had telegram boys that started at 15, you had postal cadets that started at 16, you had postmen that started at 18, right? So you had a grade at 18, you had a grade at 21, you had a grade at 23, and you had a grade at 25. And at one time, you didn't get the full basic pay until you were 25, and then over the years they gradually reduced it. So there was different grades, for example a postman was called a PMN, a postwoman was called PMW, postwoman. If you were a driver, you weren't a postman and you weren't a postwoman, you were a PMD.

John Hart:

So they had multiple grades and as I said, it was very much regimented back then, they had uniform inspections. So when you came in in the morning, you could be called for an uniform inspection and if you hadn't a full uniform on or an aspect of the uniform wasn't deemed up to the standard by the manager, right? You would be sent home and the clock would stop from the time you went home to the time you returned to be reinspected, in other words, you didn't get paid until you returned, you didn't go back on pay until you returned.

Speaker 1:

Describe a typical day at work.

John Hart:

There's no such thing as a typical day in the post office, every day is different. Every day is different, the only thing that's typical about it, it's not going to be the same because you have to be flexible. For example, if you're doing a delivery in a van for instance, you can't park in the same place every day. You don't know what the traffic conditions are going to be. You see it yourself, don't you, coming to school, yeah? Roads are closed, diversions, in other times we had problems with... For example if you've got protests going on, you have to make different ways of delivering the mail, got roadworks. And sometimes unfortunately you have more serious things like where people are for example unfortunately particularly in these days, you have also got a lot of things such as, to use for want of a better word, terrorist activity which also diverts everything.

John Hart:

Do you know that there is a post room in the House of Commons? It's got its own post room, it's got its own post people, the House of Commons. The Queen's got her own post room, anything to do with the Queen is dealt with separately. When people reach 100 and they get the Queen's telegram, it bypasses the normal system and they usually pick a postman, they usually do it on age and they will send one postman just to go and deliver that item, that's given priority because it's from the Queen. And when that is delivered, an email has to be sent straight back to the Queen's secretary that that item has been delivered, what time it's been delivered at for example. So, there's no such thing as a typical day in the post office. If you're a person and you want to go to work and do the same thing every day, the post office is not for you. The most typical thing about a typical day in the post office is every day is different and you have to be flexible and you have to adapt to that because people expect their mail.

Speaker 1:

What were your favorite things about your work?

John Hart:

Well that's a very good question that one. I suppose I am very lucky because I do a job that I like, I like the job that I do, I like the way that you can start something and finish it. For example, I didn't like working in the mail center because you never finish your job, you start doing one thing then you're moved onto something else. What I like about the delivery aspect of the job is you take ownership of a number of streets to deliver the mail to, that's your responsibility and you start it and you finish it, and there's a satisfaction in that. And obviously you've got to be a people's person to a degree, you have to have a certain skill set. For example, if you don't like getting up at four o'clock in the morning, I don't think you're going to get a lot of job satisfaction. But I'm a morning person, I like to get up early and I like to be finished early, so it depends on how job satisfaction works for you as an individual. For me, it's ideal.

John Hart:

The strange thing about it, when I started in the post office it was just after getting married. And I had a baby I think which was maybe nine months or a year old at the time I'm not too sure, but I had a newborn baby, it was just after getting married. And my mentality was I've had a baby, I've got to get something a bit more solid, a job that's more solid. And I took the job on the basis because I was young then. I was 26 going on 27 I think, and I was young then and my mentality was, "Well, this will do me until I can get something better." But most people I've met in the post office all started off with the same intention, they were young, "Oh this will do, this is good. This will do me for a while," and then as I learned more about it I decided that no, I'm not going to do better than this, this is the job for me.

Speaker 1:

What were the difficult things about your work?

John Hart:

I suppose the obvious one is of course customer complaints, isn't it? That's your obvious one, the biggest problems are always going to be if somebody's not happy with the job you've done and at the end of the day, people want their mail delivered and they want it early and there's many reasons why a customer will complain and they're not always accurate in their complaints, but obviously human error does come into it, people do make mistakes. And obviously as well as that you've got the managers, if you haven't got a good relationship with your manager, then that can be very difficult as well. But I've been lucky over the years, I've had very good managers, but that's the biggest one is that when you get complaints. And there is frustration because I think one of the reasons why, and I think it might have been set up, it might have been designed, I don't know, in this way back in the day that they did make it very difficult for you in the first 12 months because they wanted to see if you were going to stick it out, right? They didn't make it easy for you.

John Hart:

For now for example, you don't even have to do sorting tests to be in the post office now. When I went into the post office, we did five sorting tests. You had to do a local test which was your local office test, you had to learn all the streets. So West One, I work in West One, right? It's the smallest area delivery in the UK, but because of the high profile of the customers it carries enormous influence, and also at one time it had all the big companies were in West One, so the bulk of mail they got against the size of the



area was huge, it was very, very important and it still is now in regard to the products that we give to the customer like special deliveries. So, it was... To work in West One was a very prestige area and obviously because of that, you had to be very committed in how you done things. So, if you want to put the question back to me again, that question?

Speaker 1:

What were the difficult things about your work?

John Hart:

Yeah, well West One is very high profile, so the customers are very important so mistakes had to be to a minimum. You had to take time, you had to be diligent because of that because the customers are very, very high profile.

Speaker 3:

You were saying that you had to do five different sorting tests?

John Hart:

Yes, in regard to the sorting, you don't have to do any of that now. We had to do tests in regard to, first thing you had to do, a bit like a cabbie, first thing you had to do, you had to learn all the streets in your postcode. In West One there's 400 streets so the first thing you had to do, you had to do that for three days or five days, and then you did a test at the end of it. And if you got more than three wrong that was the end of your post office career. And the second one you had to do was called London District Test where you didn't have to sort by street then but you had to sort by postcode, because as you know, the post office invented the postcode in 1970, right? And the post office still own the copyright to it. So you had to learn to sort by postcode.

John Hart:

So to give an easy example, you've got North London, N1 to 22, so anything that came up N1 went in the N1 22 box and that's southwest and all of it's across London. Then you had the OPS one which was the counties, so you sorted by county postcode like Middlesex, AJ1, AJ2, AJ3, Lancashire L1, L2, L3, L4 and so on. And obviously because of my background, I was reared in Ireland, I was taken to Ireland when I was 18 months old by my grandmother, so I am Irish and obviously I didn't know the counties. But the one thing I was very fond of because I'm very sports orientated, I was very fond of cricket, because of the cricket I knew the counties. So when I did the interview for the post office and you're interviewed by a panel of three people, one of the guys said to me, obviously he said, "Coming from where you come from, you're not going to be familiar with postcodes," because they didn't use postcodes in Ireland because the population is much smaller. "You're not going to familiar with postcode," and he said the counties, and I said to him, "Well if you want to talk about it, we'll see who knows more about the counties between me and you."

John Hart:

And it turned out he wasn't interested in cricket. And the other thing is, my best subject at school was history and geography which back in those days wasn't of great use to you if you were coming from a working class background in regards a working class person. The things you wanted and needed to be good at was practical things like carpentry, woodwork, metal work, which I wasn't, but it turned out it

worked to my favor because I had an A in history and a B in geography, I was very knowledgeable and that helped me a lot in regard to knowing the counties. And then of course then you've got the worldwide postcodes as well. Of course all this is done by machine now, it's times past.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

Well I think it would be wrong for me to sit here and say there wasn't discrimination because there was. I remember a time no manager was of an ethnic background, and that all began to change in the 1990s and then it might not be the most appropriate word because I don't know what the word might be but there was kind of an explosion of change in the post office, and all of a sudden you had managers, West Indian background, African background and they went on to prove the point it's about ability, isn't it? It's not about where you come from or what color you are, it's about ability. Can you do the job? I think what people have got respect for is quite simple, can you do the job? It shouldn't be a barrier to someone because they come from a certain background or they're a certain color or whatever and the same regards to disability.

John Hart:

The one great thing about the post office was that if somebody got injured and they weren't able to do their job anymore, right? As a postman, because the employer was so big and the range of work was so big, they could always find a role for you elsewhere and that's pretty much reduced now because as I said, now it's mainly around for example delivering the work. I suppose the easiest example I could give you is there's only one mail center in London now. There's only one mail center in London, the Royal Mail tried to make out they've got five but they don't because they use places like Greenford for example which is in Middlesex, right? I'm not sure if the one in Croydon is still there or not, but Croydon technically was in Surrey until 1965. Dartford, last time I checked was in Kent. There's only one mail center in London now and that's the one just at the back here, Mount Pleasant.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

Well that would depend on my audience wouldn't it? Obviously we've all had different experiences in regard to work. We've all got different experiences in regard to work, specifically there is many. I'll tell you one, when I first started when I was a trainee, they took me off the floor and they told me go out and assist to do a collection which meant in a van and you went and done the pillar boxes, it was a pillar box collection. In those days the driver didn't get out of the van, the only thing the driver did was he drove it, the van assistant did all the manual bits. So to speed it up and so that they'd have more time in between collections, so for example if you were doing the three collection and you had so many pillar boxes to do and you'd have it numbered by ones you had to do, where they were on the streets and that, that's okay if you knew it.

John Hart:

Back then I didn't wear glasses because I was too good looking, right? So we get out there, we're up around the edge of our road on the border of West Two and the driver says to me, "I'm going to drop you here, you go and do that pillar box on that side of the road, and you do that pillar box on the other side of the road. I'm going to go down there and do these other pillar boxes and I'm going to come back and pick you up on this street corner here." And this is in the winter, so when we went out it was quite bright, but by five o'clock as you know in the winter, it's now dark. I don't wear glasses, so I wait and wait and wait, there's no sign of him and I'm standing there with a mail sack in one hand, I'm standing with the keys for the pillar box in the other hand and I'm getting worried now.

John Hart:

I've only been on the job a couple of weeks, I haven't got a uniform, I think I'm going to get arrested by the police for standing there with the mail, I haven't got an uniform. There's no sign of him coming back, unknown to me what he's done is he's gone to the betting shop, he's watching the racing, he's watching the horse racing and I'm waiting for him to come back. So I start to panic, next thing I see a post office van coming past and I think it's that van and I start chasing it. Of course, it turns out it's not that van at all. I am now lost because I'm in West One and I don't know the area, I don't come from West One. Back then in 1987 I was living in Queen's Park and I didn't know the West End so now I'm lost in West One, I can't find him.

John Hart:

So now I have to figure out what am I going to do now, right? But I knew that if I kept going straight I would get to Marble Arch and I knew that the office where I was working was at the end of Oxford street. So I went there and I got on the bus and I went back. Now in the meantime while I am going back, the driver is going around trying to find me. So now they can't find me, right? So now, as I said there was no mobile phones then, so he's come back to the office, he's told the manager that I'm missing so now they think, "Oh God." The driver's panicking now because he's had a break in protocol because he shouldn't have left me, and he don't want to tell the manager why he's left me, so they rang the police because they think I've had an accident.

John Hart:

Now you've got to remember back then, there was about 2,000 people working in the place because this place was huge, the amount of people. So I've come back now and I don't know that they'd put out a APB looking for me and I turn up and then they said, "Where the effing hell have you been?" And I said, "I'm sorry, but I got lost because I don't know the area." And they said, "Well, you're one idiot, we're not sending you along on collections again. How can you get lost in West One, that's the smallest area in the UK?" But what I didn't want to admit was... After that I started to wear glasses to make sure that I had the right van.

John Hart:

If you think about it, look at the amount of red vans there is just in the post office alone. I don't know the number plate. If you look at a post office van very closely, you'll see they've all got numbers on them, they have all got a number on the van, I'm not talking about the registration number, they've got a number on the van, usually it's on the back of it. That number designates the rules to the area. So for example, if you were van 41 for example, of course I didn't know any of that then because I wasn't in the job very long and as I said, I had no uniform or anything because they wouldn't give you an uniform unless you qualified, and then at the end of 12 months they gave you what was called your

establishment papers. Unfortunately I threw all these things away when I was young, stamped and you were off, that was your establishment paper.

John Hart:

And then when you had your establishment paper you went to the uniform stores to get your uniform. So I go down to the uniform store to get my uniform, I've got my sheet of paper, I'm now an established postman, I'm a proud man now. I go down there, I go into the uniform office and he says to me, "What can I do for you?" And I said, "I'm here for my uniform, there's my papers." He said to me, "Do you see the wall behind you?" I go, "Yes." He goes, "Stand against the wall." Now I didn't know, it was so technical back then, they had all the different heights marked out with a pencil on the wall, so I stand against the wall and he says to me, "How tall are you?" I go, "Six foot." He shouts into the back, "Jim, he's five foot 10. What's your chest size?" I was very young then, I was very thin. He says, "What's your chest size?" I said, "I'm a medium, I'm a top heavy." "Jim, he's extra large."

John Hart:

But the only thing I came out of there that was the right size, well it wasn't actually because they didn't do half sizes, I didn't come out with anything. I don't know if you remember a comedian called Charlie Chaplain, he used to play the tramp in the old movies, everything was too big for him. And I said to the guy, "Are you for real? I've got a coat that two people could get into, I've got trousers even the belt won't hold it up. The shoes, I'm a half size." I wear bigger shoes now because my feet have swollen from the job over the years, I was a 10 and a half and they gave me size 11, everything. You know what he said to me? "Don't worry about it son, you'll grow into it." Look at me now, look at the size of me now. I'm now six foot, I am extra large, the trousers do fit me, and the shoes, and an extra large jacket so he was proven right.

Speaker 1:

What were some of the naughty things that people did at work?

John Hart:

Well people do a lot of things to cut corners don't they? Now I suppose the easiest example I can give you in regard to that is that now if you go to Mount Pleasant now, they've got a museum haven't they? They've got a post office museum, I don't whether you've been there or not? Because of COVID it was only just opened when I got closed.

Speaker 3:

[inaudible 00:46:02].

John Hart:

That's even better, so did you go on the underground railway?

Speaker 1:

Yes.

John Hart:

Right, okay. Well back in my day, you could only go down on the underground railway if you were postal railway stuff. I find it ironic now that the underground railway is now a tourist attraction, and back in my day if you got caught in the railway you could be dismissed. And what they used to do, they used to challenge one another, obviously because you've been down there you would know that the way it used to work was, the railway, it's a miniature railway wasn't it? And where the mail sacks used to go, had two... How would you put it? It's separated like this to put the sacks in. So what they used to do is they used to dare one another and they used to climb into it, usually when they were drunk, and they would travel the railway from Paddington to White Chapel which was a very dangerous thing to do because you could get killed. And the tunnels were so small as well, I think they made them bigger for the tourist thing.

John Hart:

And when people came out the other end, some of them had to go to hospital, they were battered from the thing bashing up and down all the ways along. But yes, I remember a postman being on the night shift, he was supposed to start work at 12 o'clock, he went to the pub first. And what they used to do in those days was the managers used to man the barriers to make sure that the morning delivery men didn't sneak in on the Friday night for work on the Saturday morning and go to sleep in there. So the managers used to man the gates. So this guy went around the back, climbed up the fence, fell off, broke his ankle and he was charged for trespassing. Follow up on the charge, it was going to suspend or dismissal on top of the fact he was out of work for three months. Those are some of the things. You've got to remember as well, people were very young then.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

What a good question. I started off as I said usefully employed then I was a trainee postman, then I became a postman, then I became a driver. As I said earlier, I used to do the warrant runs, I worked in the mail center. Obviously I worked in night shift, the jobs you do are different, it depends on the different things you do. There was also some very mundane ones as well like for example, some of the jobs are very manual. For example, when the vans would come in, we had to take the bags off the back of the vans, put them onto the platform, then we would put them down the chutes and then the escalator would take the bags up onto the floor. Then when the bags would get up onto the floor we had these two big massive machines were called the [segregators 00:50:03] and basically you tipped all the work into these two big massive machines and then they broke the mail down into between packets, flats, letters, et cetera.

John Hart:

Now if one of the chutes broke down what you had to do, you had to get the work up onto the floor obviously because the bags would be too heavy and there's too many of them. So you had to get the bags up onto the floor and the way you did it was, we had chains and each chain had a hook attached to it, I suppose it would be similar to the way they used to work in the docks in the old days. So you attached the bag to the hook, then you would pull it, and then the pulley would start taking it up and then you hang up the next one, and the next one and then that would bring it up onto the floors that way. Because what people used to do is, if they put too many bags on the chute at the same time, they

would jam and sometimes it would cause the escalator to overload, usually caused by heat and it would break down.

John Hart:

And then what people used to do because they want to get finished earlier, they would go and climb down the chute and try and dislodge the bags themselves which is a very dangerous thing to do because it should be done by the engineers, but that's some of the things people used to do. And you end up getting burnt because a lot of the basis of the chutes were aluminum, and one thing with aluminum it keeps the heat. And when people used to go down there and they'd try and dislodge the bags, they'd usually end up getting burnt. So the job is very wide ranging, had a vastness to it. The other thing they used to do for example, if they were short in the post office in the street, they would send you down there to go and work down there and help out down there because then the post office was the same.

John Hart:

And back then as well, as now is known as British Telecom was a part of the post office. And if you look at some of the things in the street where they've got the telephone cables, you see the plate on top, it will say PT, post and telegraph. So now it's not like that, it's very functionalized now. You work within your function, it was a lot more varied then, the job.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your favorite job.

John Hart:

Well originally it was driving and the reason for that was the most prestigious job you had on the postal side was driving if you were a postman, that's the job you wanted to get to and that was a job that was usually held by the people who were senior, in other words how long they were there. Unfortunately because of the changes in the West End in regard to driving, it's now the worst job you could have. I wanted to be a driver, yes, that's what I wanted and that's what I became. I started in 1987, I became a driver in 1994. Now of course they won't employ you unless you're a driver.

Speaker 1:

How did you progress in Royal Mail?

John Hart:

Well as I said, originally a progress in Royal Mail was very difficult because it was very regimented in regard to how you could progress, and it was even more difficult depending on your background because it was a bit of a closed shop. That became easier when society began to change. There is other things I could have done within the post office, but as I said I wanted to be a post office driver, that's what I wanted. I'd made my mind up, that's what I wanted to do. There was other jobs I could have done but that was the one that I wanted and as I said, it took some years to get there, it's not like that now. Now you have to be a driver to get a job in the post office. It was a lot more difficult to progress in the post office back then, it was very much done in-house and you didn't have the equality controls you have now, basically people could pick who they wanted for the job in regard to progression I mean.

John Hart:

In regard to within your grade, you got the job on your seniority, so for example just within your grade, say for example you've got 20 delivery walks and the best one is Greyson Road, right? Well the person who was there the longest got the first pick. So if he wanted Greyson Road, he would get Greyson Road. So the longer you were there the better it got because a lot of it's based on as they now call it, long service and when I started it was called seniority but seniority doesn't exist in law but long service is recognized in law.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your relationship with your colleagues.

John Hart:

I like to think that my relationship with my colleagues is good because I like to think that I'm very open to other people. And I suppose it's like anything else, isn't it? You meet people you get on with and you meet people you don't get on with, but regardless of whether you get on with someone or you don't get on with them, now there's two things apply. One, you still have to respect the person and the second one is, you have to be professional because people are depending on you to have their mail delivered, so you still have to remain a professional courtesy to someone even if you for whatever reason, you don't get on. And that might be just down to a simple thing as the football team they may follow you don't like, I'm just using an easy example.

John Hart:

But my relationship with people is pretty good and I think that if you want to do what I term a job in public service, then you have to have that mentality. So from my point of view, it usually becomes a problem if I feel a person doesn't have that ethos of a public service. And what I mean by that is, you meet two type of people in the post office. You meet those who see it as a livelihood which is me, and you meet the other type who see it as a job.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your experiences of joining clubs at work.

John Hart:

I didn't a lot to be honest because I liked to have a life outside of the job, so I didn't join a lot of the clubs at work other than the one... The only club I was really probably quite keen on was the one where we went to the pub after work.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about any other opportunities you utilized.

John Hart:

I have had different offers over the years to do different things within the post office, I've had the opportunities which I didn't avail of. I was offered managerial roles, I wasn't interested in being a manager. I liked the satisfaction of being a postman, I did have other opportunities but I don't regret any of the opportunities that I didn't avail of because I'm satisfied with what I've done in my working life, also for the years that are left in my working life, I'm satisfied with the job that I've done, I'm proud of working for the post office, I believe in public service. I believe the Royal Mail should be nationalized,

renationalized, I don't believe in it being a private company, but that's just my personal views on that. So I'm quite happy with the life I've had in the post office and I don't regret any of the opportunities that I had that I didn't avail of.

Speaker 1:

What made you join the union?

John Hart:

Well I've got an example in the book I've got with me. The reason I joined the union was quite simple, I wasn't expecting that question I guess that's why I didn't bring anything union related with me. The reason I joined the union was I was quite fiery when I was young and I used to complain a lot about what I perceived to be not right, about things not being done right. And the union rep at the time said to me, "Well if you think you can do a better job then why don't you go and do it?" So, I did. I started as a union rep in 1988, September 1988.

John Hart:

I believe in fairness and I believe that if you can help other people you should. I was brought up with that mentality, that you should give. People these days are obsessed with I should receive. Very important thing is to be able to give of yourself and sometimes you get very disappointed because you give of yourself and people take advantage of it for example and sometimes you get let down by people. But what keeps you going is that the human spirit will always prevail, if you look for good in people you'll find it.

Speaker 1:

Why is the union important for postal workers?

John Hart:

Well the union is very important to postal workers, I've got a book with me which was written by a great friend of mine which is obviously in the British Library now and it's the history of the postal workers in London and it was written by a great friend of mine and he very graciously actually mentions me by name in the book which I'm very grateful for from the point of view that he's a person who recognized how important the union was to me. And one of the reasons for that is, you would never ever get anything in life if you're not prepared to fight for what's right. And one of the reasons why there's a union in the post office is because in the beginning people were treated very poorly and going back particularly the Victorian era. In Victorian times there wasn't a union and people were treated very poorly. There is a great expression, in unity you will find strength.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

I was in quite a few, I was involved in some famous ones as well or infamous depending on which side of the fence you were on at the time. I suppose the last big one I think was 2009, we were out for 18 weeks and you really have to have a very strong belief to not get paid, and you also got to remember back in the days, in the 1980s and I think into the '90s, working people didn't have bank cards, you got paid by



cash. So, you lived from week to week on the money you earned, so if you were on strike you had no money coming in from nowhere and that could be very difficult. But I do remember one strike, I'm not sure what year it was, it might have been 2009 because that was the last really big strike in London. A manager called me in off the street and he said to me, "John, when this strike collapses and this strike is over, you will not get a contract of employment."

John Hart:

And what that meant was when you go on strike what you're doing is you're breaking your contract of employment, that's what you're doing. So technically when you go back if you like, you're having your contract of employment handed back to you. And the manager said, "I've been told higher up when this strike is over, you will not get your contract of employment. If you want to go out now and tell them to call this off," and I said to him, "We will see what will happen after, we will prevail in regard to what you've just said." Which what he said to me was this strike will collapse, well it didn't and what did happen was, on the day we went back to work, he didn't come to work. He was told to go on leave. Of course that was a very worrying time because I thought I wouldn't have a job to come back to.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

Oh the changes have been huge, I suppose the biggest one of them is mechanization and modernization I suppose is the biggest on there. They're the biggest changes isn't it? We used to do everything by hand, didn't we? For example, when we used to go out and we used to have to get the, as it was called then the registered post, which is now called special delivery post, we had yellow slips of paper which were written in ink and the customer had to sign it before you gave them the registered letter. The problem was if it started raining first of all the ink faded, and secondly they fell apart. Now you've got a machine, haven't you?

John Hart:

Machine just scanned the barcode, all the person's details are already on it and they sign it. And even if the machine goes down, the information is lodged somewhere isn't it? I believe one of the things it's called it's now up in the cloud, and if you understand how you can get that information back, it's there. New technology is not my strongest point but I believe you can access anything once you've stored it. So the biggest change is modernization and mechanization, they're the biggest changes.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

I'd put the workers in charge.

Speaker 1:

Looking back over your working life, what has working for Royal Mail meant to you?

John Hart:

I would think my father, before my father became a bus driver my father started as a soldier when he was 15 years of age. He came out, in those days you did three years, and he was 18 when he came out. Back then you couldn't sign to go into the forces if you were under 21 unless your father signed you in. Now his father, which is my grandfather, fought in The First World War. So my grandfather, he signed my father into the army when he was 15 probably said he was older, in those days they didn't check things like they do now. So when my father came out he went and drove for London Transport. When he returned to Ireland he went back into the armed forces, he was in transport and that gave my father... My father's identity was wrapped up in his years that he was in the military. So, the long answer to your question is, my identity is wrapped up in the post office, it's given me the identity I have because that's what I've done for so long.

John Hart:

I think anybody, if I reflect back on my father, people would have said, "Mr. Hart was a soldier." I think people would look at me they would say, "Mr. Hart was a postman." My son, none of my children are in the post office. One of my sons, he did his work experience in a post office. My eldest son is a railway manager, my second son is a school teacher, my daughter is a receptionist. So my identity, I think my identity is in the post office.

Speaker 1:

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

John Hart:

Well first of all, I wasn't expecting the range of questions that I got. Secondly, I wasn't expecting to be asked anything about the union side of my work and it's not really for me to talk about my union side of work anyway, that would be for other people to talk about in regard to that part of my life. The only thing that I would like to add is that there was something I wanted to bring today but I couldn't find it. And obviously all of you are very young, you have the rest of your life in front of you, but for those that are older would remember at the time that Princess Diana was tragically killed in a car accident, everyone from all around the world wanted to send her sympathy. And in those days, I think it was '90 something, my memory's not great. In those days everyone would either send a postcard or they would send a letter. So the Royal Mail had to set up a separate warehouse because they couldn't cope with the demand of all these people who wanted to send these sympathy cards, these sympathy letters to Diana's family.

John Hart:

I remember at the time she was divorced. I am not a royalist by the way but my wife is so I'm very educated on this subject and as I said, so everything had to be separately set up to deal with the amount of mail that we got. It's very hard to imagine it now where everything would be put on social media, wouldn't it? You'd put all your sympathies on social media. And this was coming in from all over the world, there was just millions of it and we had to deal with all of that, collecting it, processing it, it had to be bagged, everything had to be separate, right? And it was sent to Earl Spencer, her brother. It was sent to him, there was tons of it. And as well as that, all the condolences books that were set up in the post office was sent there as well.

John Hart:

Now I don't know about what happened to all the letters and the cards and that, but I do know the condolences books were kept from all the different areas where it was sent from, I'm sure British Rail, Underground would have probably done the same, but the one thing I couldn't find and I know I've got it at home but it's not in the house itself, it's in storage somewhere, is that he sent a letter thanking the postal workers for what they'd done over that period. And on his headed note paper and that was sent in to the different offices that were a part of that which my office was, WDO. And the reason it's called Western District Office is because every area has got delivery offices, right? But within our door's delivery offices, you've got the head office which is called the district office. For example, N1 to N22, the district office was N1. North London number one district office, it was in Oxford Street and my one was WDO, Western District Office.

John Hart:

So I've got a copy of, I haven't got the original obviously because... I've got a copy of that letter that Earl Spencer sent and it's stamped on it, the WDO stamp is on it and I wanted to bring that today but I couldn't find it. I know it's in storage somewhere, I just don't know where I've got it, but I've got it and I wanted to bring that. But that's something that I think is worth mentioning because that shows you the difference between the world we live in now technology wise with social media and how it was back then. It was millions and millions of cards and letters sent.