Zara:

What is your full name?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Raymond Middlesworth.

Zara:

Wow. Bless you. What year were you born?

Raymond Middlesworth:

1957.

Zara:

Where were you born?

Raymond Middlesworth:

I was born in Birmingham, in the Midlands.

Zara:

What did your parents do for a living?

Raymond Middlesworth:

My father was an engineer, and my mother was a housewife.

Speaker 3:

Can I just move your chair a little bit just because you're looking sideways. Let me move you right over. Yeah, okay.

Zara:

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

Raymond Middlesworth:

What happened is when I was 16 I was looking for a career, a job. And a friend of mine at school, his father was an engineer in the post office. He suggested to his son and myself that we consider that as a career because he said it was good work and it was good pay, so we phoned up and went along for some interviews, and we both ended up working on the Royal Mail.

Zara:

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

Raymond Middlesworth:

I am the only person in my family who worked on the Royal Mail.

Zara:

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

Raymond Middlesworth:

They thought it was a good job and had good prospects, so they were pleased.

Zara:

Tell us how hard you started working for the Royal Mail.

Raymond Middlesworth:

How hard?

Zara:

Or how you started working for Royal Mail.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, as I said, I applied for an interview and I did a series of tests and verbal interviews. And then the very last thing was a medical examination to make sure I was fit to work and then they sent me a letter saying I had been taken on as an apprentice. And I started working September the 2nd of 1974.

Zara:

Describe the training you did.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, the apprenticeship is three years. What they do is they give you time at college, block release, to study the theory of engineering. They send you to three or four week courses at their own training school to learn different elements of engineering. And they send you out in between time to assist engineers in the field to learn how to work in the field and to... The general feel of the job out in the real world.

Zara:

That's really interesting. What was the first job you did for Royal Mail?

Raymond Middlesworth:

I suppose the first thing I did as an apprentice is I worked with the electricians that were doing light and power. They were doing lights, plugs, and sockets, and things like that. That was the first thing I remember studying.

Zara:

Tell us how you felt on your first days of work.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Very nervous, I thought I would get it all wrong and I'd get sacked straight away.

Zara:

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

Raymond Middlesworth:

It was very good. The post office is a big organization. It was an even bigger organization then, so you feel a little bit lost because everyone in different parts of the Royal Mail, on engineering, are like little communities. And as you moved from one to one you felt a little left out. But you had the other apprentices and your training officers, so that was your little family within the Royal Mail. But it was interesting. It was challenging because I had working with people who had been there their whole life, and it was long tradition in the Royal Mail. So as a youngster, it's all quite daunting.

Speaker 3:

Ask him what the people were like you were training in?

Zara:

What were the people like when you were training, or...

Raymond Middlesworth:

They were very nice. They were helpful. They tried to guide you as best they could. The actual engineers who taught you, who worked for the Royal Mail, usually what they were, were the best at their job in the Royal Mail, and they'd put them to one side and send them to teach at the training school. So they were usually at the top at their particular field, whatever it was. And most of them were very good. As I said, they had to work with us as young apprentices, so they needed to adapt their style to help us to learn.

Zara:

What kind of people were you working with? You kind of already answered that, but yeah.

Raymond Middlesworth:

All sorts. You had all sorts of people. You had quiet people, introverted people. You had very boisterous, outgoing characters. You had just people who were quite relaxed, and some people who were more agitated, and [inaudible 00:04:52], and worried about things. So you had the normal spread of people. You had all different kinds of characters, because it was a big organization.

Zara:

How diverse was your workplace when you started?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Reasonably diverse. We had all sorts of people of different backgrounds and religions. Religion really wasn't a big talking point, but we had people from all different backgrounds. The main thing was, we were all engineers together, so that was the main thing. It was very much a feeling that we were all male engineers.

Zara:

Describe your uniform.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, as an engineer, my uniform was a pair of overalls. And they varied from nice, new, and clean to filthy, horrible, dirty according to how long you had them and how many times you'd washed them. But that was my uniform, a blue overall.

Zara:

Tell us the skills you needed for your job.

Raymond Middlesworth:

To get into the job, they tested your engineering ability in as much as your attitude, whether you had an engineering outlook on things, you'd tackle things from an engineering point of view. Engineers tend to have a way of looking at things.

The second thing they looked for was mathematical ability, because mathematics plays a large part in everything, but particularly in engineering.

And the last thing was a sort of IQ test. I don't know how it fares on IQ tests as being a very technical examination. Some of the questions seemed ridiculous, but anyway, there it was. And those were the three things they looked for to get into the job. And once you were there, they'd expand on that. They'd teach you electronics, mechanical engineering, materials and processes, electrical theory, motor theory, power theory, a whole range of different subjects.

Zara:

Describe a typical day at work.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well that would vary according to what year you picked. Over my 43 years, any particular year, day, could be different.

Speaker 3:

Ask the Mail Rail maybe.

Zara:

Yeah. With the Mail Rail, what that felt like?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, I'll give you a day on shift when I was involved in maintaining the railways. I was stationed [TO 00:07:26], which what that meant is that the railway used to be shut down for two hours a day. It used to run for 22 hours. For two hours a day, it'd be shut down where the maintenance workers, the track workers and the other maintenance workers would repair everything that needed repairing. They'd check the trains, they'd check the track, they'd check the control circuits. And for the other 22 hours of the day, there'd be people like me who would sit in a control room, and if anything went wrong, they could stop the trains running. During that period, we'd have to go and fix it.

So on an ideal day, I would sit for my entire shift reading the paper, doing nothing because nothing went wrong. I'd be happy, and the Royal Mail would be happy because nothing had broken down. On a bad day, I'd be answering the phone every five minutes and rushing around trying to fix things. So it would vary... I've had both of those kinds of days.

Zara:

What are your favorite things about your work?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well for me, I was always interested in engineering. I was a bit of a born engineer, if you know what I mean. That's what attracted me to the job. And it was a huge play set for me. I had all of these wonderful machines to play with, all these wonderful tools to use. They even gave me me own railway at the end of it, me own train set. So for me, as an engineer at heart, I had the best engineering place that you could imagine.

Zara:

What were the difficult things about your work?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Time pressure was the thing, because the Royal Mail obviously has to get the mail delivered on time. Time is of key element, so when something goes wrong, it needs to be fixed fast. Like I said, when you get a phone call saying something's broken down, you'll go and attend to the problem, and you'll get another phone call five minutes later saying, "Have you fixed it yet?". And another five minutes after that saying, "Do we need to do something else? Can you fix it? Do we need to do something else?" So you were under a lot of pressure to get things fixed very quickly because as an example, if a train stopped on the station, for some reason it wouldn't leave, these automatic trains, all the trains behind it wouldn't move. So eventually, all the trains across London on the post office railway would stop because one train was still on the platform and wouldn't move. So you had a lot of pressure.

And what they would say after about 10 or 15 minutes, "Do we need to move the work, the mail, to the vans?", which means they'd have to get a fleet of vans ready to go to all of the offices, all the drivers. They'd have to tell them all the work's going to be coming on the loading platforms from vans instead of off the railway. So it was a big call if they said, "Can you fix it?".

Zara:

Can you tell us any discrimination you've experienced or witnessed?

Raymond Middlesworth:

I used to hear, occasionally, you didn't so much at the end, comments which weren't very nice, and I didn't approve of it, and you'd make people know that you didn't approve of it, because it's just ignorance. Some people can't help themselves. Some people don't know better. And I think it's ignorance, and it needs to be addressed and pointed out as that.

I've always been a believer that you remove ignorance by educating people. I don't think you can beat ignorance out of people. But you educate them. That's the biggest weapon you have against wrong thinking.

Zara:

That's exactly how I am. I like to be political. People say that a lot to me, but the only reason why I'm so political is because I like to educate people who don't know any better.

Raymond Middlesworth:

That's correct. That's 100% correct.

Zara:

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

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, there are so many stories. I've told you one about the trains stopping at the station and all the trains piling up behind it, waiting to go.

Speaker 3:

Did that actually happen to you?

Raymond Middlesworth:

That happened to me.

Speaker 3:

[crosstalk 00:11:32] to say how that felt. Just tell the story as... Take your mind back to it.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, one day I was on the night shift. And our night shift was from 7:00 in the evening till 7:00 in the morning, so it was a 12 hour night shift, so a long day. At about 1:00 or 2:00 in the morning, I got a phone call saying... It was called a failure to reset. What that meant is, all the trains, they looked to see if there is nothing in front of them before they move off. And a failure to reset means a train still appears to be sitting on the track when it's left. It hasn't reset, so the train behind it won't move, because it thinks there's a train, quite rightly, ahead of it. It will not move. That is quite often caused by iron filings because you've got metal rails and metal tracks getting onto the tracks and shorting them out. And so it looks like there's a train there, but there isn't.

So I turned the power key off so it was safe, and I went down the tunnel to that area, and I'm looking with my brush to brush the iron filings off the track. And do you think I could find it? No, I couldn't. I was there for 10 minutes now, and I'm getting the phone call on the radio saying, "What's going on? What's going on?" By now, I already had five trains in a row in the station, and they were getting a bit panicky, so I thought I need more time. What I did... You can, from the control room, manually put power onto the train to send it out.

So my idea... I knew there was no train ahead of it because I'd been into the tunnel, and I'd seen it was safe, it was an electrical fault. So what I thought I'd do is I'd power those five trains off into the tunnel safely. And then that would buy me the time to find this electrical short, these iron filings. In a dark tunnel, which is dirty anyway, finding little slivers of metal just resting on the floor is not easy.

Anyway, I was doing this, and by the time I'd moved the second train, sent it on its way, it itself had disturbed the short. It must have knocked it off. And so the line went clear, and all the trains started

moving. I was the most relieved person in the world. So I phoned the office and said the fault was cleared. I went back and sat in my control room, my little office, and had a quiet nervous breakdown.

Speaker 3:

Any other stories you wanted to tell? I know you were going to think about a few.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, this is not really an engineering story, but this is some of the things that would happen. We did... Because a railway is such an unusual setting, it was used for quite a lot of film sets. It was a good background. And we made a film in 1990 called Hudson Hawk with Bruce Willis in it. They came down to the railway and they hired the railway because the mail must go through, so they had to do it all on a Sunday. So this huge hoards of people came down, descended upon the railway, and transformed it into The Vatican for the day. They did the filming, and off they went. It was very interesting, got to meet Bruce Willis and Andie MacDowell, because they were the stars of the film. And I saw [inaudible 00:15:10], I was an engineer. Saw all these film things going on, and it was amazing, amazing things to see.

Anyway, the consequences is that they paid the Royal Mail 50,000 pounds for the day to use the railway. And that money is sitting in Mail Rail's coffers, but the Royal Mail is only allowed to take money for delivering letters and things like that. So this money, they decided they were going to use it to do some parties at Christmas holidays for children. And that's what we got involved in.

We transformed one part of the platform into a Christmas Grotto, and we had all sorts of lasers and smoke machines, and all sorts of things to make us all look like a show. We'd take people on the train. I think you guys have ridden on one of the trains, haven't you? The original train was a bit like that, and we'd take them round the station, and on the other side there would be a grotto with the presents and the largest postman we could find dressed up as Santa. They all got quite good presents because obviously it was a lot of money. In those days, it was a lot of money. They were getting Walkmans and things like that. They were all getting really good presents, and then they'd go up to the staff hall and we'd have children's entertainers, and they would have a big bonfire. They'd have a whale of a time up there, and they'd play party games and all sorts of things.

We used to do two weekends. We did it for four years. The money lasted for four years, and we did it two weekends. The first time was for children of the staff, and the second weekend were for children in care, so we'd find a local care home or a children's charity, and we'd take their children out for the weekends onto the Mail Rail.

We did that for four years. And as I say, I'm an engineer. And we had engineers dressed up as the Pink Panther and a dragon, and were working snow machines and lasers and smoke machines and all sorts of weird things totally different from what we normally do. But, it was a amazing experience I'll never forget.

Zara:

It sounds really fun. What are some of the naughty things people did at work?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Naughty things. Ooh, I don't know if I can tell you about those. Some of these, their names have been changed to [inaudible 00:17:23] guilty. Right. Well, people would doze off at their bench. I think people fall asleep at their desk in every job, don't they? People would doze off occasionally. People would be

late in coming back from lunch. Woe betide them. Who would believe that would happen? That would be the most common things.

People were quite conscientious with their job because obviously people could get hurt or damage could be done if they didn't do their job properly. But things like that, people come back late from lunch, I think was probably the naughtiest thing. Or practical jokes. Sometimes there'd be practical jokes. Some of them not very safe, like putting a firework in someone's locker.

Zara:

Oh, no.

Raymond Middlesworth:

And on a timer, so it blew the door off. Not very safe. I wouldn't recommend that to anyone. But some of them would actually do that.

Zara:

Tell us your favorite job.

Raymond Middlesworth:

I think at the end, driving the loco on the railway, because I had my very own loco I could drive on my very own railway, because I was the last loco driver. They trained some more up. But for a while I was the only person who knew how to drive the loco, and I had me very own personal train, so that was a treat I will always remember.

Zara:

How did you progress in the Royal Mail?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, the two key grades in engineering were Technician 2A, which is what you've passed when you became an apprentice and a technical officer. After that, you become management, so you'd wear a suit, and you wouldn't be an engineer anymore. I became a technical officer. I did work on a railway, and I did work on designing bits of electronics because that was sort of my hobby, and programming computers for some of the train controls, so I did a broad range of things. And I didn't really want to move into management because then I'd have to give up engineering, and it didn't really interest me at all. I was quite happy to do what I was doing, and I think they were quite happy for me to do it.

Zara:

Tell us about your relationship with your colleagues.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, we had the whole range of people. You know you get people. Some people are easy to get on with, and some people are difficult to get on with, and some people are introvert and extrovert. And we had the same range. So I formed a close group of friends, and other people... We're professional. You have to work with people even if they aren't your friend, but you do form strong friendships, especially

after working for a long time. A colleague of mine, who I met for a coffee a few weeks ago, I first started working with him in 1978, and we're still friends now after all these years.

Zara:

Tell us about your experiences of joining clubs at work.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, they did have a huge amount of social activities. There was all sorts of clubs you could join. There was clubs that would go on holidays together, and there was pool clubs, sports clubs, football. All sorts of things, all sorts of different clubs. I wasn't really a big one for joining those particular organized clubs. But I did... Our club was the beer club after work. We used to meet my friends for a drink after work.

Zara:

Tell us about any other opportunities to socialize at work.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, a lot of people, because we worked together quite closely, and some people would become close friends, they would end up going on a holiday together and their families would go on holiday together. And so some people, it extended way beyond work. They were actually friends above and beyond work, so there was that element to it, and some people even met their wives and husbands out mixing socially.

The post office tends to become your social life, part of your life because you knew so many people and you met them outside. And because you were there for so many years, it's not always like some people, if you joined an office and only worked there for a few years, you wouldn't get that close to someone. But if, like myself, I'd known someone for nearly 40 years, well over 40 years, your social life and your work life become intermingled.

Zara:

What made you join the union?

Raymond Middlesworth:

The union? Well, at the time, I did believe that unions were a good idea. I still do. And the post office is a very good employer, and our pension scheme is excellent. That's why I was lucky enough to retire when I did. You can say that's due to the union. And if it wasn't for the union through the years, pushing for these things, we wouldn't have them, and that's true of many jobs. So I wholeheartedly believed in the union and what it stood for, and I still do.

Zara:

Why is the union important for postal workers?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Because it is a large organization, and it would be easy in any large organization to get lost in the numbers. An individual, their particular case or cause might not get argued, because they're just one

among so many. But a union gives you that ability that an individual or a small group, their case can be brought to the attention of the company.

The Royal Mail are generally a pretty good company. I stayed out and worked for them for 43 years, so I couldn't have thought they were a bad employer.

Zara:

What part did the union play in your life?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, as I said, most of the benefits we had were fought for and gained over many years, many years before I joined, by the unions because they changed the face of the workplace across the country and the world. So most of the benefits we had were through the union. I went on a few industrial action strikes and marches with the union. Not so much in recent years, but I've done it in the past, in the '70s.

We did it when we were arguing because of industrialization. We were arguing for shorter work week, because we could see that mechanization would take over and there would be less work for people, so the way that should be dealt with is people work less. The target was a 35 hour week. This was back in 1975. We went on strike, and we got a 37 and a half hours week. But then the economic mood changed, and that took a back burner. And so to this day, they still work 37 and a half hours a day, which was only ever meant to be an interim on the way to the 35 hour week.

But the world's changed anyway. People work from home now, and computers are a large part of peoples jobs, so it's changed anyway.

Zara:

Tell us about any strikes [crosstalk 00:24:41].

Speaker 3:

Just talk to him about [inaudible 00:24:44].

Zara:

Okay. What was the most memorable moment at the post office?

Raymond Middlesworth:

The most memorable moment, I think it has to go back to when we were doing the filming, because you'd stand at your place of work with Hollywood film stars walking around next to you. It was just amazing.

Zara:

What was the most challenging moment at the post office?

Raymond Middlesworth:

The most challenging moment was when we had to reprogram the computers around the railway. We updated the controls, and we had to reprogram the computers, and I was doing that job. I was the only one really, because the people who'd originally done it had left, and I was the only one doing it. I was sort of learning it as I went along. And I changed the memory chip on one of the boards in the

mainframe, and everything went black. The whole railway stopped. Everything stopped. And my heart sank, and I thought, "Well, that's it. I'm [inaudible 00:25:53]. That's it. It's over for me," because I wasn't sure what had happened. I think in an emergency your mind races.

What had happened is I had changed... They were using an old computer program to reload the database. If you think way back, you wouldn't [inaudible 00:26:13] Database Four, like a spreadsheet, and you'd put all the data in it. And I'd changed one of the numbers. I only wanted to change one of the numbers. But the peculiarity of this program is if you change one of the numbers and don't put the others in, it writes zeros everywhere.

So I programmed this chip, and it was full of zeros. So when I plugged it into the computer, none of the stations would talk to the main computer because they didn't have its address. When I realized this, I hurriedly unplugged the chip, rushed off to the terminal, put all the missing data in the little boxes, plugged it in, and it all came to life. All the little transmit lights started flashing, and the railway was running again, and I still had a job.

Zara:

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

Raymond Middlesworth:

The main changes is that the post office, from its work, shrank. We used to have many, many more workers than we do, and the offices. The post office had huge buildings, because it came together in the Victorian era, really. All the huge buildings across London, I worked in many of them. They didn't need all these big offices anymore because the letters volume was going down. And the approach changed. They would rather have big super offices rather than small district offices. An office that would handle the mail for one area, one district, they converted to big super offices. So, all these smaller buildings disappeared.

So the two main changes were we lost a lot of our buildings and quite a large proportion, maybe a third, of the staff. So it shrank in size and in its real estate, to use the American term.

Zara:

In what ways do you think your job has improved?

Raymond Middlesworth:

My job at the end, I was just taking care of a piece of history, the railway. That didn't really change, but overall I think the job has modernized as much. They're using computers much more, and it's more up to date, the role now.

Zara:

In what ways-

Speaker 3:

Just do that one and then not those two, and then the last one again. [inaudible 00:28:33].

Zara:

Looking back over-

Speaker 3:

Do that one first. Sorry.

Zara:

Oh, sorry. In what ways has it got worse?

Raymond Middlesworth:

I think job insecurity now, because when I joined the post office, they used to say it was a job for life, because unless you did something seriously wrong, you could have your entire career on the post office. But that was a little bit of a privilege and a treat that most people aren't afforded. And that is true in serving the post office now, because the post office can't say what it's going to be doing in five or 10 years. No one can in the modern world. So you can't sit there and say, "Yes, this is my job for life. I'll always do this." So there's an element of insecurity there, but that's shared by the workforces everywhere. It's the nature of the modern world.

Zara:

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

Raymond Middlesworth:

Very much, it's guided my life. It's given me a good living all my adult life. I've met an enormous amount of friends. It's given me a change to practice my interests in engineering in ways I've never have ever been able to do. And I've seen and experienced some amazing sights and things.

Zara:

Thanks very much for answering our questions. Is there anything that you haven't talked about that you would like to explain to us?

Raymond Middlesworth:

I think we've covered most of the bases really. I think we've covered most of the elements of working on the Royal Mail. My story is one, and there's many others out there, and they would have a very different set of experiences from me.

Speaker 3:

Can I just jump in because, because we had a chat yesterday, I got a really good sense of your working life and I feel like we haven't quite got it in the interview. I just want to... There are three elements, because I talked to her on the phone last night so I could get a few things. Yeah, have a drink, mate.

If you could just talk a bit about what you were doing. It seems like you two main phases of your work life. One, and stop me if I'm wrong, you started off as the apprentice and then you were working in different sorting offices, keeping machines going. And then Mail Rail. So I wonder if you could start off, if you could speak to Zara still, just talk about that first phase when you were-

Raymond Middlesworth:

Yeah, the code sort. Yeah.

Speaker 3:

What you were working on, all of that stuff. And then I'll [crosstalk 00:30:54].

Raymond Middlesworth:

Yeah. Because the Mail Rail maintenance engineer is particularly... You're there for faults, and if no faults develop, you don't have anything to do, which is ideal because that means nothing has gone wrong. But that's an element of engineering.

The other one is maintenance and monitoring. On the code sort equipment, that's the letters that write codes on letters, and then they pass them off to a sorter machine that reads the codes, printed in phosphor dots on the letters and sorts the mail out. Now that's a different kind of work, because those machines are used in the afternoon, when the mail is collected, because the mail's usually collected in the morning and at lunch time. And the mail starts to come in in midday to be processed. And so as a maintenance engineer, your job is to make sure those machines are working correctly for when the mail does come in.

For example, working on a sorting machine, you go to that in the morning and you'd have some test letters, so you'd run those through and you'd see how it would perform with those. And they had an electronics panel. You could read out what it saw when it looked at the phosphor dots, and you might need to adjust a thing called a photomultiplier. It was an electronic eye. And it had a [inaudible 00:32:17] on it, a little controller, and you could adjust the voltage. The more voltage it saw, the more sensitive it was. You would have to adjust that so it could read the dots accurately. You would look for any worn tires, all the letters were running along through on belts, with a belt and a little rubber tire on top of it, and you'd look for worn tires and worn belts. You would look to see if the belts were tracking, because belts can move side to side, and the letters would move side to side.

You had a thing called a diverter. Each box that the letter would go in had a little plastic arm called a diverter. And when that letter was due to go into the box, the diverter would lift up, and the letter would go in the box and then it would shut. And you'd have to make sure... There was 144 of those on each machine, and you'd run a test routine to make sure they all opened and shut at the correct time. And you'd have to check the timing of the letter from when it was read to when it got to the box was the correct time. And you'd have to check to see if it was oiled and greased, all the moving parts were oiled and greased. So, it was quite a busy morning. That was all the sort of things you'd have to do before they started using the machine.

When they started using the machine, you could monitor its performance from a remote terminal. You could see how many letters were being rejected. They'd end up at the end box because they didn't know what to do with them. How many it couldn't read, so it would be rejected. And if it jams because if a letter got stuck in a diverter, the machine would stop because it had jammed. And you would get called out to clear the jam, and you'd have to monitor that because that could be caused by belts tracking or worn tires.

So through the middle of the afternoon, you would be monitoring those aspects of it remotely, or you could stand and watch it on the control panel.

Speaker 3:

And where would you be based for this work?

Raymond Middlesworth:

On each sorting floor, you had banks of machines. You had the coding desks where the operator would read the letter, the address, he'd type in a post code, and it would print phosphor dots on it. And at another bank of sorting machines, it would read those dots and sort the letters. And in the corner of that floor would be the circuit room where the engineers sat.

When I was at Croydon, we had new idea they had. On the wall was a big mock-up of the floor with a little light for every machine. When the machine went wrong, the operator could just flick a switch, and in your circuit room, the light on that machine would start flashing, so then you could go out... Say your machine had a fault, and you could go out and ask him what the problem was, and then attend to it.

Speaker 3:

Okay. And then the other one, you gave me a really nice description yesterday of how quick, how many trains were coming through. Could you maybe start from the beginning, just tell us Sara what Mail Rail was-

Zara:

Zara.

Speaker 3:

Zara. Sorry. Sorry, sorry, sorry. Tell her what Mail Rail was, what it was for, and just kind of paint a picture of it for Zara.

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, Mail Rail is the post office's own underground railway in London. It was put together in 1909. The idea was put forward because the roads were getting so congested, they took ages to get the mail across London. And they weren't talking about cars and vans. They were talking about horse drawn carriages. Even then, they had congestion in London, so someone had the bright idea, "Let's build a railway. Underground railway, crossing London, connecting all the different district offices." And they started to build this railway. They got the money from the government, and they built this railway, and it opened in 1927.

The idea was a letter could be taken from say, Mount Pleasant, Central London. And say it had to catch a train in Pennington to go to the north of the country, they could send it down to the railway, down a shoot, in a mailbag, labeled up, they'd throw it on a train, gently. The train would then head off, and 20 minutes later it would arrive in Pennington. They'd take the mail bag off. It would go up in an elevator to the platform, because we were underground Pennington Station. It would go out, and it would be thrown onto the train, and off it would whiz up the country.

If they'd had to put it on a van, it would have had to be loaded on a van on the platform, the van would have to negotiate all through the traffic, get to Pennington, then they'd have to unload the van, then they'd have to take it to the station. So, it was a much quicker way of moving mail across London. We could move mail from one end of London to the other in 25 minutes. And there's not many things that can say that.

The consequence of that is the trains had to keep moving. On each platform, if you stood on a platform, a train would come in every six minutes for you to either take... You could read the label, take the mail off if it was for your station, or put mail on if you had mail for another station. And so you'd have maybe 18, maybe 25 trains going around in a big circle because the postage rail was a big circle. All

going around following one another's tails. And every six minutes, that's why we call it a six minute service, a train would pull up in each station.

The problem was if one of them trains failed to leave, it had a fault on it or there was a control fault, all the other trains would gradually stop. And then all of this massive operation would come to a halt, so it was a very important operation, and it was very important to keep it running smoothly.

Speaker 3:

Just briefly, all the stations, or was it the mainline station [crosstalk 00:37:59]?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Well, we had the big offices. We had two railway stations, Liverpool Street and Paddington. The rest were district offices. We had Mount Pleasant. If you go to the end of the line, I can do it in sequence for you. You've got the Eastern District Office, EDO. That's White Chapel. And then you travel along to Liverpool Street, which is a mainline station, and that's all we did there is we took mail from the station and put it on the station, the mainline. You go along from there and you've got King Edward Building, which used to be postal headquarters, and that's by St Paul's. You come along from there, and you've got Mount Pleasant. Was once the largest sorting office in Europe in its heyday. You'd leave there, carrying on West, and you'd go to New Oxford Street, which is the western central district office. It's in literally New Oxford Street. You go along from there, and you get Rathbone Place, which is on Tunnel Court Road, just off of Tunnel Court Road. That building has been knocked down now and Facebook has got their headquarters there.

I was there when they had to protect our tunnel because they were knocking a huge building down above us, and obviously they didn't want to disturb us underneath because they're building on top of an underground railway. That was quite interesting.

You carry on going west and you've got Old DO. It's called the Old District Office. And Old PO, the Old Post Office. They were shut in 1966 when Rathbone Place opened, so they were shut down from the '60s. But they were still there. We still had to fix the lights and the pumps there. So we're still there. And then finally you go off, you turn right at Hyde Park Corner, and you head off to Pennington and you'd be underneath Pennington, which had both a sorting office and a railway station. That was the railway, six and a half miles long.

Speaker 3:

Okay. I've got one more question, then I want to open up to everyone. Any other questions? We covered a lot of stuff in here. [crosstalk 00:40:09].

Zara:

I just want to say you answered all the questions, a lot of details in the guest yesterday. But it was really interesting listening to you go on.

Raymond Middlesworth:

I do go on, some people say.

Speaker 3:

Just one more thing you talked [crosstalk 00:40:22].

Raymond Middlesworth:

Thank you, very kind.

Speaker 3:

One more thing you spoke to me about yesterday was the role of innovation of the Royal Mail, because you could've got a job anywhere, and you ended up with the Royal Mail. Why Royal Mail rather than British Rail, or anywhere else? What was the reputation of Royal Mail in engineering terms for you to take?

Raymond Middlesworth:

Royal Mail does have a history of innovation and a lot of... Because it was a government owned company. It was part of the government, really. We had our own minister back in the early days, so it was really a wing of the government, an arm of the government. And our original employees got civil service pensions. And the government have taken over my pension. I'm paid by the Cabinet Office, of all places. We were a big part of the government, so whenever they had any little engineering jobs or experimental jobs, they'd hand it over to the Royal Mail because it was the biggest group of engineers that they actually had control of. And they set up place called Dollis Hill, which was an experimental lab that were doing all sorts of experiments in electronics. We've got engineers who worked on the earliest of computers. A guy called John Flowers was a post office engineer. So we have a lot of history in engineering and innovation.

Speaker 3:

That's great. And just the very last one. You just mentioned that Mount Pleasant was the largest sorting office in Europe. Can you say when that was, and about how many people would have been working [crosstalk 00:42:00]?

Raymond Middlesworth:

That would have been in about the '70s, in the early '70s. And I think the staff was about 4,000 staff, postmen in the sorting office.

Speaker 3:

Very interesting. You happy? [crosstalk 00:42:15].

Raymond Middlesworth:

Yeah, I'm happy. I hope it came over. I do go on a bit, don't I? But it's because I'm enthusiastic and you ask such brilliant questions.

Zara:

I like people who are like that. When it's just like, "Yes. No," it gets boring.

Raymond Middlesworth:

I'm a big fan of the railway, and the post office, and what I did. Nothing's perfect. It wasn't perfect, but I think it's a good thing.