

AGE EXCHANGE UK

INTERVIEW WITH BILL BACKHOUSE

Q You were a stevedore, weren't you?

Bill We were the elite.

Q The show is about memories from docklands and it'll be interesting for kids in schools who don't know anything about it, but it'll also be interesting for older people because they'll remember what it was like before the speculators came in. One of the things we don't know is, what was the difference between a stevedore and a docker. We know the stevedores were the top ones.... So what was the difference?

Q: What was the difference between a stevedore and a docker ?

Bill: The stevedore loaded the ships. And discharge. But the dockers really done most of their work on the quay. And also (I mean, I'll probably be killed for saying things like this, but it's true) if you was a shipping agent, and you insured that cargo that went out, if it was loaded by stevedores the rate was cheaper than it was if it was loaded by dockers. Because it was safer. This is a fact. And I mean they don't like it. And the other thing is that we were the second oldest union in Great Britain. The Dockers Union (which was The Transport and General Workers Union) they did everything to try and smash our union up. They even offered a golden sovereign to every person who would leave our union and join their union. This is how they become great you see.

And our constitution is founded from our own government. Our constitution is very democratic, see. And when we went to work in the morning we never used to show our card, dockers card, we always showed our union card. And if, say for instance you forgot to bring your card out, and I wasn't at work, and I was what they called "Shaped in the Road" ... the foreman always stood in the road. The foreman and all the celebrities used to stand in the middle of the road. And we all stood on the pavement like that. On the pavement, you dare not walk off the pavement (this was the stevedores you see) and the foreman would come out and he'd call the men. He might say, "Brown, Smith". And you'd all be pushing and shoving. And as I say we used to hold up all the buses that used to come by, all the traffic was held up, while we was "Calling Off". You see, as I say, your foreman stood in the road. Well we was so, what can I say, "Democratic", that if you never had your union cards you didn't go to work. You always pulled it out and you could demand the union foreman to show his card.

We also had, if you did something wrong in the union, such as ... if you was piece work, you had to stay on that job. If there was plenty of work about and you thought, "Ooh there's a better job up there, I can earn more money on it", you couldn't do that. But some of them did. And if they was caught they was taken in front of not the masters but men like me, who was a delegate. And you sat round a table and discussed ... it was a proper, just like judge and jury. And if you was found guilty you was probably fined £10, which in them days hurt your pocket. So discipline in our union was really strong as opposed to the other union you see. And if you didn't pay

your contributions in our union, after three quarters, you used to pay so much a quarter, then you were erased and you couldn't work in the docks. You lost your card.

But with the other union they never paid their contributions. They had so many branches they would go from one branch like in Lewisham ... perhaps they belonged to that and they didn't pay it, they'd whip in to Blackheath Village and join up there. You see this is why we say our discipline was absolutely 100.%. You'll find that the word discipline has gone out of our books today. Out of the dictionary, you see.

CHATTER: cards, quarters. Article.

Bill: I finished in 1976. There's my union card. You never had the same card every quarter. You had a different colour. And if you showed that they'd say "Oh no no. That's last quarter's. That's a red one,,,"

Bill: The Lightermen were also very very strong in their union. At one time they belonged to our union and (then) they broke away from our union.

(CHATTER docker's cards, stevedore's union cards.)

Q: What time would you start in the morning?

Bill: Before the war you was "Called Off" at 7.45. That was quarter to eight, when you all stood in the road. You wasn't paid for that. You done that for nothing you see. At a quarter to eight. Then you used to walk round the job. Most of them used to go and have a cup in all the canteens that was all round there. And you'd start at eight o'clock. All jobs you'd work from 8 to 12. Lunch 12 o'clock to 1 o'clock. And then you would work on then to 5 o'clock. Overtime was from 5 to 7. But if you worked all night, and we did all night, I mean a lot of these people don't know what they are talking about when they talk about lazy dockers. We worked from 8 o'clock in the morning. The lunch hour from 12 to 1. And then at 1 o'clock we'd work right round to 8 'clock at night, non-stop. And then we went home for 3 hours, that's what they called Supper. And we worked round till 7 o'clock the next morning, carrying out big cheeses and all things like that. That was the hours. But not every ship like. It was only mostly the cargo ships such as the Cunard ships and the C.P.R. boat and the Furness Line who carried food stuff. But in Surrey Commercial dock of course it was mostly wood, timber ships you see.

We had the right then to go where we liked. We could and go work in any dock we liked. But of course when The National Dock Labour Board came in after the war we was allocated to one dock alone. See you had the choice to say "Well now I want to go in The Surrey Commercial Dock". And what happened was (I felt it was a good thing and I think its proved to be a good thing) if there was no work in Surrey Docks, and they had plenty of work in the Royal Victoria Docks or Millwall Dock, they would send you (if there was a hell of a lot of you) they would send you by coaches over to whatever dock it was. And you would go there to work. They'd pay for that. They would also pay for your ... sometimes they bought you home at night ... but

They didn't always pay you. They always paid you for your fare, like returning home. And you stayed on that ship until the ship was finished see. Perishable cargoes would have to be unloaded fast and of course we loaded as well.

Q: Difficult to join the union ?

Bill: Oh yeah. Your father had to be a stevedore. You was initiated. What happened was this, sometimes you had to be 18 and over. And then they altered it till you was 21. Then they went back to 18. But that's beside the point. But your father used to go to your branch. See there was various branches. You had so many branches. I think we had about three branches this side of the water and about three the other side you see. And your father would go there and put your name down to be initiated you see. And I think it was 5 shillings your father had to pay. Well then after a time you would be notified, your father would, they'd say, "Bring your boy over". Our head office was in Mile End Rd near the Rotherhithe Tunnel, our place was almost there. And there you sat there with the delegates, all working delegates. I mean I've done it myself like Fred Sage's uncle, him and I'd be working together.

We'd work to 7 o'clock and then we sometimes had to walk through the tunnel, before there was buses, to go and represent the men and sit there, about things that they couldn't do and what they could do. And negotiate such things like wages and anything like that you see. And then finish up about half past ten at night. Our union was nearly always opposed to lots of things that the T & G (Transport and General) thought was good.

My Union never believed in shop stewards. One of the reasons was that most of the shop stewards never attended their branches. So they didn't know anything about the constitution you see. This has proved our point because today, that strike the other day with Fords, the council was going to recommend to accept what had been offered them. And yet the shop stewards stirred the men up. See and some of them don't ever go to the branch.

Q: You never had shop stewards?

Bill: We had to in the end. But in the days when I first went in there and before the war no we never had shop stewards. We had what they called an outdoor delegate. He's a full time paid man. And if you had a problem you'd go round his office. And if he was on a job, he was confined to Surrey Commercial Docks, Millwall had their one and The Royal Albert Group they had their one you see. And we had problems, say this is a ship here and there's another ship over there, well you would pop round if he wasn't in his office (he had an office in the dock) and say, "You're wanted on 52 Pagoda Gardens, we have a dispute". And when he'd settled that dispute over there he'd be round to you. You see. And he was a paid officer. Full time man.

Q: No way in without relatives ?

Bill: Not in the Stevedores Union no. No way at all. Obviously we've got to accept the fact that it was a closed shop. It was amalgamated. You see the dockers used to belong to us and the lightermen. Then of course they broke away under Ernie Bevin. And a lot of those was offered a golden guinea if they changed over from our union. Another time ... the docker's tanner is very interesting. We were getting

more, always got paid more money than the dockers, our rate was always higher. And we came out in strike once over a docker's tanner, not over our tanner but we supported them. And we was getting more then they were. So we had everything to lose and nothing to gain. We supported them, that was before my time, obviously.

Unfortunately, due to the pressure of the Transport and General Workers Union we had to close. Because we never had enough finances. And you can't run anything without finance. This happened roughly about six, seven eight years ago. And there's a branch (what used to be my branch) they still carry out the constitution in that branch, although they are attached to the T & G as if they were. Because we say that the sort of things that they do we would never dream of doing you see. It's nothing for the government to say about voting ... if you look in our constitution there you had to vote every year for our general secretary. But you didn't have to do that and you don't have to do that with the transport, he's there for life. You read that, it tells you in there that every three years branch officers, that was men like me who was working as well as doing that job, we were voted in every year, see.

Mostly we used to work in Surrey Docks, Millwall Docks and The Royal Albert Docks see. I started somewhere about 1933. And another thing there was such a thing as what they called "Nonners". It was a slang word meaning that he didn't belong to our union. Well when we called off at a quarter to eight and we couldn't get enough men the foreman would still stand in the road. He would stand there till five minute to eight. And in 1934 when people were out of work, when the depression was on, when we couldn't enough we used to take anybody. And so the poor foreman who stood in the road with the labour card, they used to rush him and get him in the corner and get all the cards in his pocket! They never had a trade union card. They was what they called "Nonners" you see. They could be a milkman, they could be a painter. This is pre-war, not since the war. And sometimes the poor foreman would be on the floor. Because as I say during the depression people wanted a day's work (and) you got paid every day then you see. Money was roughly about 13/6d a day see. And some firms, if you was a good worker, they'd give you a shilling more. And you got paid every night. They were all small people running these firms. And there was a firm called Uncle Dan, he was the governor, he was a Catholic. And if he had a ship ... he did all timber ships. And when you come off the ship you got 13/6d. And if the foreman told Uncle Dan that you was a good worker you got another extra shilling, see. And we used to get what they call a badger. A badger was, at mid day you used to get your badger. That was out of the 13/6d, or your wages, what you earn. That two shillings was for your dinner and they called that a badger. Used to come round the office and say six men used to work in the hold of the ship, four men in a barge, and if it was two men on the steam winches they was two men on the winches and foreman on the top. That was the 13. So they all got 2 bob for what they call a badger. Everyone was paid every day, that was before the war. Because then this came in after the war you see. I mean while I was away during 1945 and all that, see, I was in the service for six years.

They created this by ... one of the greatest trade unions ever, the fuhrer they used to call him. Dickey Babb (?), that was his name. But then these came in you see.

Q: Weekly after the war?

Bill: Yeah. Weekly. You wasn't guaranteed no more work. But the good thing about it, as I've explained, if you had no work in your area, you could be sent to somewhere else, which is quite good. And I did lead a deputation ... I've been to the House of

Commons with about a dozen of our chaps, stevedores. Two, three times. Because we used to go "Bumping On" twice a day. If there was no work available we used to go in the box, The National Dock Labour Board, and they would send you to various little jobs. Perhaps one firm would only want one man. Well you'd go to that job. You got paid on a Thursday. See they all had your number and they used to bring it round in a packet. But if there was no work at all, it varied, went up and up, but you used to get paid. I forget how much it was now because it changed so many times. You used to get so much per bomber. See in here you used to have a book. And it would give you two a day. Like Monday morning and Monday afternoon. That was ten and one for Saturday morning. So if we didn't go to work (I forget how much it was, about £11 a week) if you didn't find a job on Monday and Tuesday but you found a job on Wednesday you still got the amount for those two days, what we call Bumping on Money, which was added on to your wages what you earned. Most of these firms was non-existent after the war. But they used to pay the money in to what we called The National Dock Labour Board, they did.

The firm who you worked for had your details. Every day they would come round with a note. If you went to work on Monday and you worked a full day (most of it was piece work) if you was to work on Monday, sometime during Tuesday a note used to come round. And on there was the details of what you earned the day before you see. So many hours day work. And sometimes you'd have a row with the foreman. He was what they called a ship worker. If he only booked in two hours day work or six hours piece work you'd probably have an argument saying, "No we never worked six hours piece work. We only worked five". So you had to come to some discussion about the odd hour that was owed you see.

Q: Who worked the machinery?

Bill: Oh we had our own. Now my mates both of them were crane drivers (but) belonged to my union just the same. Oh no you had your own crane. Like these men used to stand in the road before the war.

Q: They didn't drive one crane permanently or anything like that?

Bill: Oh no. No. Not with the stevedores. See he was part of the 13 gang. If he was working with a crane, unless you had to use the winches, you only had 12 men. That was 6 in the hole. 4 in the barge. The crane driver, if he wasn't working the winches. And the foreman. That made 12. So that note was shared between 12 people.

Q: So you always knew your crane driver?

Bill: Yeah you knew him because he was in your union. You didn't know him because he was your regular crane driver. Some of them had what they called regular gangs. They weren't regular as it means that, it means that that particular 12 men followed that particular foreman. They didn't have to. And he didn't have to give them a job. And a lot of the bully boys foremen (if they felt that you was a good worker and you was getting on a bit they would eventually sling you out) oh these things happened and they'd take me on because I was much younger you see. Oh

yeah you had a lot of corruption with the foreman, see. But as I say the crane drivers was your own mates. If someone chose to drive a crane ... See most of the time I was in a "Slave", we all called it a slave you see, hard work.

Q: The owners of the ships, how did they get to hire the men to do the job?

Bill: Well, before the war, say you was Uncle Dan; he would get his job to unload (a particular) ship from the offices in the city you see. And he would know when that ship was coming in. Within reason. I mean it could miss the tide or something like that. Well when that ship came in he would have employed a man, known as a superintendent, to hire a ship worker. Now a ship worker was the actual man who was in charge of the ship. If you had 4 holds of a ship and you had 4 gangs with a foreman to each one of them, that foreman with his 12 or 13 men were only on that particular hold of the ship, not on the whole of the ship. But the ship worker was in charge of all of the men you see. And that ship worker would walk around and find a foremen. He might come up to you or me and say, "Would you take a gang for me this morning?" This is at half past seven men used to get out at 7 o'clock the morning, the foremen, to be able to get a job from the ship worker. See the ship worker, Uncle Dan would say, "I want 4 gangs tomorrow morning". So we would be out early and he would pick 4 gangers. And the gangers, they would get the men. They would be the men that stood in the road and called off Brown, Smith, Green. That's how it worked.

But of course when the Board came in (The National Dock Labour Board came in) there was no more call. That was done away with. So you got your work from whatever firm you worked for like Furness, that office. And they allocated the work from there.

Doing away with the procedure of "Calling In" on the road, the docks ceased to be that way. When they first made it up you could put in for a firm for that you would like to have worked for. Maybe you got there, maybe you never, but that was your permanent firm now. You didn't have to go on the call to be called off at a quarter to 8 and all that in the morning. You used to go and stand outside the office of the particular firm that you were working for. But of course if you was on a ship before, the day before, and it hadn't finished, well then you went and reported to the ship to start work normally. And if there was any missing (maybe there was somebody ill) well that ship worker he would come to the foreman and say, "All your gang there?" "Yeah." And then he'd go to the other one. "All your gang there?" "Yeah. We are all here". He'd go to the third one, he'd say, "No Jack I'm one short". So that foreman would then get in touch with the office and say, "Look, I'm one man short". And so they would send that one man round you see. But as I say the system its so confusing that you might think to yourself, "Well I don't know what he's talking about". But you see it was such a great change from the system of standing in the road you see. As I say you used to have to report to the office then. See there were firms, such as Furnace, Scruttons, Maltbys (or) the P.L.A.

Q: Before the war how often wouldn't you get taken on?

Bill: Oh very often. You could go 3 months without a job. You see the wise birds, like myself, you put a penny on the shelf, if you understand what I mean by putting a

penny on the shelf. You didn't sling your money away. In them days we used to have beer boys. Go and out and get tea and beer. And the pubs were open in the morning. The pubs was open at 6 o'clock in the morning. So all the beer people used to go and have their drinks. I had an uncle that did the same but I never used to go in there. And then you had a teaboy. One of your own gang. You sent him out to the various coffee shops to get slices of toast, rashers of bacon you see.

Q: So it was fairly precarious?

Bill: Oh yeah. As much as 3 months.

Q: Did that depend on who you knew and whether the foreman liked you etc?

Bill: Yeah. You've got a good point. You've never worked in the docks but you've got the idea! Yes there was a certain amount of corruption. It wasn't all what you know, it was who you knew. And they used to pay the money out sometimes in the pubs before the war. And if you didn't buy the foreman a few beers then you never got a job the next day.

Q: And presumably if you upset the foreman, you were out.....?

Bill: Not everyone. (But) if you stuck up for yourself you wasn't wanted in the morning. And there's another thing you see if you were day work (this is before the war) if your firm had 2 or 3 ships on see (they couldn't do this if you was piece work) but if you were day work and they finished about 3 ships. They would send orders round to say

you, whose ship was not finished, "Tell your men, 'Don't walk out in the morning'". Now what that meant is that although you was with that man and the foreman was out in the road, and if he shouted out, "Don't walk out outside" you had to stop where you were. They would take the privileged men who were on the other ships in your place. But only if you were day work. They couldn't do that if you were piece work. Because in as much no stevedore could leave that ship and go to another one. Not legally, through the union rules, you couldn't do that. But also the foreman couldn't sack you if you were piece work you see. As I've already explained. If you left a piece work job and you think, "Oh I'm not going to have that any more, that's a dirty job, I ain't getting a lot of money". And you creep up the road and find a better job, if you were found out, well then you was summoned by the unions. See they'd come along and say to me, "Backhouse, I'm having your number". "What's that for?" "Well, you left a piece work job". And then you see they would take my number, the branch that I belonged to. And then you would go to the head office. Our union was the only union that ever did this. And that's when you would be fined. Might be £10 or a fiver. But men never held that against you. I mean the next day I fined you £5 for leaving piecework job. But it would only be 1 in 100 that would be ... who'd say, "I'll do you". But you know you accepted it if you did something wrong and you accepted it. You disciplined your own members.

Q: Dropped out means being sacked ?

Bill: Yeah. One of the biggest things was "Don't walk out in the morning". You'd just stand there and he'd call all the privileged in front of you. So you might have done all

the hard work and started the job see. Then the next day if they had another ship on you see the privileged would be taken off of that ship.

Bill: Our union even today you've got to pay your dues.

Bill: The lighterman was the man who bought the barge to the ship. He would explain to you how he wanted the barge loaded. He may want it put up against the bulkhead. Or he'd say, "Come one away". He would give you all the directions. Maybe it was what they called a "Hatch Barge" which had hatches on, you see. When you wanted a barge shifted he would be the man, you mustn't touch a barge. You could help assist him. However the four men that worked on the barge they were your mates, they were stevedores. They was part of the twelve or thirteen man gang. See 13 gang was for the winches that was used on the ship. That was 13. But if you used a crane you only required twelve men.

So you had two men on the winches, assuming it was what they called the winches. You'd have two men on the winches, six men worked in the hold of the ship and four in the barge. And the foreman. That made 13. Now if the cargo you was discharging was going ashore, that's in the quay and not in the barge, the cargo would then be taken away when you landed it by the dock workers, the dockers on the quay.

If the complete cargo was going ashore, whether you was on winches or a crane, you would only have 12 men see, cos you didn't have no barge hands. In that case you'd have eight men down the hold, one on the quay, nine, two winchers and a crane driver. But as soon as you went over-side you'd have to have another man you see.

When we'd loaded that ship it may be pulled away by a tug. That was not our concern. That was the lighterman's job. See he'd push it off, away from the ship, and then we'd get another barge underway. Or, if it was going on the quay, you see. All the gear, the rigging of the gear, like ...

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