An interview with Ron Cook

Ron Cook, age 94, photographed by Martin Rosenberg

This interview with Ronald Cook (RC) was conducted by Ann Silver (AS) and Martin Rosenberg (MR) in the Department of Physiology, Development and Neuroscience, University of Cambridge on 25 March 2009.

MR: First of all, thank you very much Ron for coming and before we get to your career and association with physiology we’d like to hear a bit about your family, where you grew up, your early schooling, family interest, what happened before Ron?

AS: Parents!

RC: Well, yes, I was born in 1914 and I went to the Perse School.

MR: Where were you born?

RC: In Cambridge. And my father was at the University Library where he spent 50 years, and I went to the Perse School and I went to Fitzwilliam College. Didn’t like it very much, and I, perhaps my opinion hasn’t changed a lot, I thought university people were a lot of funny old dudgies. But I was very interested in making things and doing things, so having done all that I worked in London with an electrical firm and I couldn’t keep fit and my father, who was fairly influential, he found me this job in physiology labs.

MR: What, you father was a Chief Librarian, or ...

RC: Second Under-Librarian. Yes, he had quite an important post.

MR: What were his interests, in literature and books and so on? I mean, what were his interests?

RC: His department was the periodicals section and of course he brought me books out and so on. Well, then he got in touch with the Welfare Officer and they said, ‘There’s a good vacancy at Physiology with the Rockefeller Unit’ as it was called in those days, which comprised Alan
Hodgkin and Andrew Huxley, Richard Keynes and Peter Lewis. And I joined that group making electronic apparatus to start with. Should I leave it there, or?

AS: No, no, go on.

MR: I mean, you haven’t said anything about your mother.

RC: Well, of course, she is really the basis of the whole thing, isn’t she? What am I to say about her?

MR: Well, was she a housewife? Was she …

RC: Well, before she was married – which seems a long time ago, doesn’t it? – she worked at Robert Sayle’s [the department store, now John Lewis]. She was a … seamstress. Making clothes and so on, that sort of thing. And of course when she married my father she left that job and they moved to a small house in Garden Walk, which is over in Chesterton, where I was born. And my sister, who was older than me, she went to the Perse Girls’ [school], then to Newnham [College, Cambridge], and she became a very distinguished writer; her obituary was in The Times.

MR: What was her name when she was …

RC: Olive Cook. She was very well known and she died about five years ago. And she was slightly older than I am.

MR: Any other brothers or sisters?

RC: No other family.

AS: Just the two of you.

MR: And that, when you joined, that was sort of early 30s wasn’t it? When you, you were born in 1914 …

RC: Yes, that’s it. I think I left school at about … 18 years 10 [months], and I’d got the matriculation, I went on to Fitzwilliam – I didn’t like it a lot, but …

AS: And what happened in the war?

RC: Yes. During the war I went to Pye’s and we worked on electronic apparatus including radar; enjoyed every minute of it. And at the end of that period, which we’re now getting onto 1947, I’d had enough of that, and that’s when my father found me this position in Physiology.

MR: Where did you learn your electronics?

RC: At Pye’s.

MR: What, did you go to evening classes or …

RC: Yes. And that’s how it all worked out.

MR: So Pye’s is in Cambridge?

AS: Yes. But you’d always been interesting in making things.

RC: Always been interested, right from a very early age, I was always making things and …
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MR: You made things at home?
RC: Yes.
MR: What sort of things did you make at home?
RC: Well, my interest, right from 9 has been in clocks. Antique clocks, which I still carry on doing.
MR: Well, that’s very rewarding. What kind of clocks? I mean, big ones, little ones?
RC: Well, I do all clocks – only antique clocks – bracket clocks, long-cased clocks ...
MR: So when you see the Antiques Road Show and you see clocks on there ...
RC: Well yes, but I haven’t, but on the Antiques Road Show I haven’t seen any particularly outstanding clocks. I have a good collection of clocks at home and I do quite a lot of clock repairs now.
MR: Do you belong to the Horological Society?
RC: Yes, I belong to the Antiquarian Horological Society and the British Horological Institute. But you see, even in those early days, my father was bringing out books on horology from the library.
AS: Is it difficult to get, when chimes go wrong and things, to get them synchronised again?
RC: Well, it depends who’s doing it? To me, it’s child’s play. To you it might ...
AS: Be impossible.
MR: So that involves a lot of workshop work, making ...
RC: I’ve got a good workshop, yes, and I’ve got two acres of garden, which is another hobby: gardening.
MR: Two acres? Goodness, that’s a size.
RC: I enjoy life very much ... I’m in the Veteran Car Club, where I’ve been ... Treasurer for 41 years, and I run a 1910 Singer motorcar, in which we do a lot of very nice rallies, meeting the Royal Family and that sort of thing. In fact, the Queen actually sat in my car.
AS: When was that?
RC: At Sandringham. Yes, we went to the Queen’s Garden Party at Sandringham. Both Queens came round ...
MR: When was this roughly?
RC: When was this? I can’t remember the exact year. Back in the 1970s I think this was.
MR: Oh that was the time of her Jubilee?
RC: Yes, and both Queens came round and shook hands, and the Queen said, ‘May I sit in your car?’ which I allowed her to do so.
MR: She didn’t drive it off, did she?
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RC: So there we are. And later on, we did the Sandringham party again, and it was the Duke of Edinburgh this time with Princess Anne. And the Duke of Edinburgh was pretty blunt because he said, ‘Do these bloody things go?’ But that’s briefly my story.

MR: Are there any photographs? Any press photographs of these things, when the Queen sat in the car?

RC: Well ... I get [the] Veteran Car Club’s Gazette [which] comes out four times a year. I expect if I looked back in that I would find the pictures.

MR: Any other specialist hobbies; we’ve covered quite a few. Photography?

RC: No, I’m not interested … I do National Trust stuff and I helped to found the farm at Wimpole.

AS: Oh did you?

RC: Yes.

AS: And I believe you were interested in marine biology?

RC: I forgot to tell you, because that was very important in this job. I think I joined the Marine Biological Association in 1939. And I did regular trips to the laboratory and I had a large aquarium at home and of course I’m still receiving the journal from the Association.

AS: In Alan Hodgkin’s book he said it was initially difficult to keep the cuttlefish alive, but you …

RC: Oh yes. I’d had cuttlefish at home for some time and I’d been able to transport them, and when, because I helped do this aquarium here, and … we had cuttlefish sent up from Plymouth and it worked out very well, and saved the expenses of going to hotels in Plymouth, because they have quite large nerve fibres. And that was all very exciting.

AS: And did you, I was going to ask you, when Alan Hodgkin and Andrew went to Plymouth, did you go with them?

RC: I always went with them, because I set up all the apparatus and stayed a few days with them. In fact that’s some of the apparatus there. Look, because the picture is taken at Plymouth.

AS: And I gather … they went before the war and then Plymouth was bombed, wasn’t it?

RC: The laboratory was bombed but when we first, when did we first go? 1950, I think … was the first trip; it had all been restored. The Director’s accommodation at the laboratory was completely destroyed. But … most of the laboratory escaped.

AS: And did you go out in the boat?

RC: Yes, I went out quite a lot and, with the trawlers, and saw the dissection work, which was always done on the boat. And the mantles of the Sepia were put into a thermos flask for further dissection in the lab.

AS: And was the ink a nuisance when you were trying to dissect them? Did the ink cloud everything?

RC: Well, that’s you see, it was rather brutal because … when the cuttlefish was caught, its head was cut off. And although prior to that it may have been squirting, as soon as it was taken out of the tank, it was squirting ink madly all over the place, sometimes in people’s faces. But
once the head was taken off, it was finished and the mantles were then dissected. The, I think, the diameter of the large fibre nerve in the cuttlefish is about a 25th of an inch.

AS: Big.

MR: Tell us something about the people, something we can’t read in their papers. We’ve got a list of people, haven’t we?

RC: Well, we had Andrew Huxley, later Sir [Andrew]

MR: I mean, and how did you get on; do you have any anecdotes about …

RC: Oh do I know of any anecdotes? Well I know a lot about …

MR: You can be as indiscrete as you like …

RC: I can tell you a lot about Sir Alan.

AS: Yes, go on. That’s what we like, because we get …

RC: In fact, I maintain if he hadn’t been a great scientist, he’d have been one of the most noble men I’ve ever met. I was very keen on skating, and he came to see me one day, and he said, ‘Oh, shouldn’t you be off skating?’ Then on another occasion I didn’t like some apparatus in his room, and I modified it, and he wasn’t pleased. Then he came through later on and he said, ‘What you did was very sensible.’ And then, although he was, he’d got his Nobel Prize, he was so modest he said, ‘Can we still be friends?’

MR: Really?

AS: I always had the impression that he was a very nice man.

RC: He was a Quaker; lovely man.

MR: He was never angry or never rude.

RC: I’ve never seen him … that was the only time I saw a little bit touchy, when I altered this apparatus. The other occasion when he was a bit disturbed was, and it was one Saturday afternoon when he was working. He’d gone over to retinal physiology then, and I’d made a very ingenious camera and he rang up Saturday, the Saturday afternoon, they were in the middle of experiments, and he said, ‘It’s not working.’ And all the experiments had been ruined. They thought they were taking pictures and they weren’t. And I came down and got it right.

MR: And that was a mea culpa, was it?

RC: Yes. He often gave me a nudge about it. And I thought he was a most wonderful man.

AS: And I believe he moved over to retinal physiology when it became the PRS [President of the Royal Society], because he couldn’t get …

RC: Yes. No, it was a bit later on. What he said was, ‘Look here: everyone else is doing nervous conduction; I’m going to do something different.’ And he went over to retinal physiology.

AS: And did that involved quite a lot of you in making quite a lot of new gadgets?

RC: Lots of new things.
MR: When he said, ‘I’m going to do something different’ was that something that interested him or he just thought, ‘Ah, I’ll look down the list.’

RC: Well, I think he’d been interested in it because Professor Rushton had also been working on retinal physiology.

MR: How far did you get with retinal physiology? Were they the pigments he was working on, or electrophysiology?

RC: What was done there was, and a lot of this was developed by […] Dr Lamb. He went over to retinal physiology.

AS: Oh what, you mean Trevor Lamb?

RC: Yes. And he devised a means of sucking in the cells in a pipette for recording impulses. I don’t think they got all that far with it. I’ve got a copy at home of the last article that was written.

AS: But we’re talking about other people. Now, did you have much to do with William Rushton in the lab at all?

RC: No, no.

MR: Did you have any interaction with him?

RC: I had nothing to do with Professor Rushton.

AS: He was a bit of his own man, wasn’t he?

RC: Yes ... I liked him very much, but I did drop a gaffe once at one of his lectures, you know, and he was, without realizing what I said, I suddenly said, ‘No, that’s not right’ out loud.

AS: But he took it all right?

RC: He took it well, yes. He took it well. But actually, later on, he agreed with me.

AS: And what about Lord Adrian, the first Lord Adrian? Did you have much to do with him?

RC: When I first started, Professor Adrian was head of the department. Of course, you didn’t meet him …

AS: I knew him from The Physiological Society.

RC: …but a lot of people were frightened of him. I got on very well with him. I found him genial. And he was a very nervous man, actually, but he was a nice man. Even his son was frightened of him. But I got on well with him, because I wasn’t frightened of him.

AS: No, no. And then did you ever do anything with Richard Adrian, his son.

RC: Yes. He had his own helper, but when I designed some cathode followers, he had some, he copied them and made them, had them made for himself. I didn’t really have much to do with him.

AS: And what about ... did Bill Smith look after his …

RC: He was Richard Adrian’s assistant in this.

AS: Yes. What about Les Hatton?
Well, initially I shared a room with him. He was assistant to Lord Adrian but he was a very, very nervous person and, can I say much more about him really?

No, say everything about him ...

Well, he had a cancer on his neck, you know, and radiotherapy treatment, and it ultimately killed him. But he was very frightened of Lord Adrian and, you know, Lord Adrian, he was constantly asking Hatton for a hot water bottle. And do you know, from the time I went, started work, there was a kettle simmering away all day in case Lord Adrian came in and asked for a hot water bottle.

Why did he need a hot water bottle?

For when he was working on rabbits.

To keep them ...

Oh, oh, yes.

But Lord Adrian’s room –

That’s father Lord Adrian, yes?

Yes. It was all blacked out and his operating table was a chunk of wood mounted on four sewer pipes, and it was so dirty, but on one occasion some Americans came and said, ‘May we see Lord Adrian’s room?’ and they were shown in, and the chap said, ‘What kind of a joke is this?’

Now, didn’t Granit work with Adrian? [...] Because they were working on single fibres and ...

I can’t remember him. Adrian’s final work was on the olfactory organs on rabbits. But I liked him.

Yes, I remember him from Physiological Society meetings; I remember him being in the chair at dinners and things.

Yes, yes.

Was he funny? Did he have a sense of humour?

He was an extremely good speaker at dinners and that sort of thing, and he could be amusing. But of course I was mainly with Alan Hodgkin.

And Alan Hodgkin, did he have a laugh? Or was he a bit serious all the time?

I wouldn’t say Alan was a humorous sort of man, no. He wouldn’t laugh much ... Originally my salary was paid by the Rockefeller Unit, a grant, and later it was paid by the Royal Society – and Alan called me in one day and he said, ‘Have you ever thought what’s going to happen to you if I die?’

Well, I said, ‘the thought had passed through my head …’

So he said, ‘What we’re doing: your salary will be paid by the University in the future.’ And then he, later on, he said, ‘you’ll be joining the academic staff’ – which was awfully nice of him – and all that was arranged. I became a technical officer, and then finally when, of course, the academic people retire at 67 – I don’t know if that still holds good – and when
that age was reached, he said to me, ‘I’d like you to stay.’ And he said, ‘I’m staying on and I’d like you to be with me.’ So I finally retired at 73, which made quite a considerable difference to the pension.

AS: To your pension: it would.

MR: Well, you have a larger final salary pension.

RC: Yes.

MR: Oh my goodness.

RC: And I thought it was jolly nice of him. He retired sort of soon after that, but of course he had this dreadful illness; he had the trapped nerves in his neck. And they were removed at Addenbrooke’s [Hospital] and, you know, when you’re walking, the mind, or the brain, must know the position of the feet. And by cutting these nerves, this facility was destroyed and he never walked again.

AS: Yes, it was his proprioceptors that went.

RC: Yes. He never walked again. And that was dreadful. In a chair.

AS: Yes, because he had a year, didn’t he, of running the department.

RC: Well, while Sir Bryan Matthews was away, he took over the department, and I thought he was marvellous.

AS: Everyone thought that … he was very popular.

RC: Under his jurisdiction we had the first Christmas party, which Sir Bryan Matthews was always opposed to, you know. Sir Bryan was what I would say a member of the old class; he didn’t want staff and assistants mixing. This, Sir Alan shattered that, and he gave one of the most marvellous Christmas parties, with hired waiters. It was really in the Hodgkin style. He lived in Newton Road at one time. When he was made Master, he moved to the house [the Master’s Lodge at Trinity College], and he took his own bed with him. I remember that. And he said, ‘I don’t want to sleep in the same bed as Butler’s been sleeping in.’

As: Rab Butler. [The Conservative politician R. A. Butler preceded Alan Hodgkin as Master of Trinity College.]

RC: And then at the Master’s Lodge, he gave wonderful Christmas parties. It was marvellous.

AS: Because I remember, again, when Ian Glynn was head of department, we didn’t have any kind of parties like that, and Andrew Huxley and Richenda [his wife] had what they called a Spring Event, I remember it was called a Spring Event, and that was in the Trinity Master’s Lodge. But was that after you’d retired?

RC: Yes. You see, Andrew Huxley as Master followed on Alan Hodgkin at the Master’s Lodge, but the parties were never the same. Well, there we are really ...

AS: And I was going to ask you about now, Geoffrey Harris was in this department, but he was sort of reproduction ...

RC: He was with Rushton at one time.
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AS: Was he? Was he?
RC: Yes. Yes.
AS: And what about Mrs Adair? Because she was quite a character.
RC: [...] She was very outspoken.
AS: The thing I remember about Mrs Adair: my sister in law, Marian, she told me that Mrs Adair was on the stairwell looking down the staircase, before the lift was there. And she had an enormous dessicator and she perched it on the railings, the banister thing, and she dropped it. And it very, very nearly fell on James Hickson and Dick Hardy, who were coming up the stairs.
RC: [...] She was an extraordinary eccentric woman. Yes, we had a laboratory supervisor: Major Fitzgerald.
AS: Ah, yes.
RC: And in her sarcastic way she said, ‘The only army he’s ever seen is the Salvation Army.’ That’s all by the way, really.
AS: And then … there was a supervisor called Ken … Norman.
RC: [...] He lived at Histon. We didn’t like him at all.
AS: And when the tearoom was made, Robert Comline always called it Ken’s Cafe [sic]. [...] And who else do you remember apart from Mrs Adair. Who else do you remember as eccentrics?
RC: Everyone. Who else was there? Well, Professor Rushton was an extremely eccentric man.
AS: At meetings he always had his name badge on the back …
RC: On the back. Yes, do you remember that? And … I sometimes copy that, you know.
AS: It was sensible.
RC: But his idea was that if you’re in a crowd, you see the name on the back, that’s Cook. Oh yes, and you walk away. But on the other hand, if it’s on the front, it’s too late.
MR: But he was always assuming that nobody wanted to speak to him.
RC: Yes. But I think my time with Alan Hodgkin was the loveliest time of my life.
AS: Yes, well if you’d like to tell us more about that and any particular highlights and things.
MR: [...] How about Andrew Huxley then, before we come to Alan Hodgkin? Did you have a lot to do …
RC: A brilliant man: he was marvellous at making things. He was brilliant.
MR: He had a lathe …
RC: He had a lathe in his room, to which Lord Adrian took quite an exception. He said the vibration was disturbing him, but it was miles away. And at Plymouth there was one occasion when Alan, he was so engrossed in what he was doing, coming back from his lodgings one
evening – there was a blizzard raging – he was in shirtsleeves and was so absorbed he didn’t notice at all. He just walked to the laboratory.

AS: And what about, you said you used to take the apparatus down to Plymouth and things. Now, there’d be petrol rationing still ...

RC: I don’t think it was then, I don’t we had any trouble. But it was all carefully packed and I reassembled it all and got it all going. And then I stayed a few days, and because I was so interested in marine zoology, he said to me, ’I think you’d better spend a week down there’, which I did. And I built this aquarium here and it was finally, I thought, vandalised by Ian Glynn.

AS: Oh. Why?

RC: He had it all destroyed.

AS: Now, I was going to ask you about Richard Keynes. When he was in this department, did he have electric eels here?

RC: That was another of my jobs: I used to look after these eels. He went to South America, I think with Professor [Carlos] Chagas [as Visiting Reader, to work on how electric eels produce electricity].

AS: Oh yes, yes.

RC: And we had these electric eels here, and in fact, we had one scene in which I was in, was on the BBC with Raymond Baxter: do you remember him? Yes.

AS: Yes, yes.

MR: Yes. What was that about?

RC: That was demonstrating the electric eels, and I demonstrated putting a frog in, for instance, and how they found it. And the BBC thought that shouldn’t be shown because it was cruel. But yes, we had lots of electric eels here.

AS: But when Richard moved to Babraham, he had a disaster one night because ... something went wrong with his tank and the temperature, I think ...

RC: Oh I don’t know what happened there.

AS: This was at Babraham: the temperature went up ...

RC: I don’t really know what happened at Babraham. I didn’t know he continued with that research at Babraham.

AS: Yes he did, he did. And then he came back here, thankfully.

RC: There was one occasion when the eels arrived at Heathrow and he dropped the container and he went to pick the eels up, and I’d given him gloves, and much to his amazement, the gloves were conductors. And he fairly cursed me, you know.

MR: You can get quite a voltage, not just a current ...

RC: Oh yes, quite a high voltage. And all that was absorbingly interesting, really.
MR: So did he do the work on the eels where they showed that all the layers were connected in series?

RC: Yes, yes. And that was demonstrated once at the Royal Society. And Alan Hodgkin put on a show indicating the conduction of nerves and Keynes put on this show with the eels, and I remember Lord Rothschild came round and he pointed to nerve conduction experiments. He said, ‘That’s pure science.’ He pointed to the eels and he said, ‘That’s hocus pocus.’

AS: Did you go to quite a few things at the Royal Society …

RC: Yes, because at one time my salary was paid by them. He [Hodgkin] was made […] Fullerton Research Professor, and then he won the Copley Medal, and one afternoon when he’d, with Andrew Huxley, he’d got the Nobel Prize, a party was given at his house and naturally considerable alcohol was consumed, and he said, ‘I think you’d better stay overnight’, which I did. But he gave this marvellous party; but once, a little later on, when I was coming into the lab – he was going out and he said, ‘Oh, by the way, have to look on your desk – you’ll find your share of the Nobel Prize.’ The Prize wasn’t very large in those days – it was only £6,000 – but somebody asked him what he was going to do with that money. And he gave the most extraordinary answer: he said, ‘Oh, I’m going to buy a Rembrandt – there are still lots of them about.’ But he gave me a pretty good chunk of that prize. And later on, when his wife was writing to me, she said he couldn’t have done it without your help, and I felt very flattered.

AS: I’m sure that must be right.


RC: I thought he was the most marvellous … I suppose I’m all right in saying I loved him. That’s, he was such a marvellous man.

AS: Because he had such a … I mean, I didn’t really know him obviously very well, but he always had such a benign sort of face.

RC: He was so straightforward too; honest. Decent, that’s what I think, absolutely decent. And I think during his period of being head of this department, he was greatly liked, and the relationships greatly improved. I thought he was just wonderful.

AS: Was there quite a … there was a big divide in this department originally between, I mean … The technicians and the academics had their own tea rooms.

RC: Well, you see. This was the assistants’ tea room, and on the floor above, was the academic staff room. And Professor Matthews would not have them mixing. And I think that was a bad policy, and this was all cast aside by Alan.

AS: This was the same at Babraham, when I first started at Babraham, and there was this big division between the assistant staff and the academics, but we all had to call each other by, I mean, I would call my fellow people in the lab, I would call them Miss so and so; and the technical staff I would call my technician Miss Leonard, and Miss Leonard would call me Miss Silver. So it was all, it was very formal, but even so we didn’t mingle.

MR: You say you didn’t have any connection with Babraham? Was that I de burgh Daly?
AS: Yes.

RC: The only thing I can say was a connection: I designed a very excellent electrode puller.

AS: Oh, you were responsible for that?

RC: And that was copied at Babraham. Later on I saw a very similar one made in Japan.

MR: Was this a straight pull or was it with wheels?

RC: No, it was a – let’s imagine a big solenoid with the glass tube grips, but the first thing it did was to give a very slow pull, and there are two types of pulls and then finally it went like that.

MR: Because Palmer made one; was that based on your design?

RC: Not at all; not at all. No, I think they did gravity.

AS: Yes, that’s right. There was a gravity one, wasn’t there?

RC: I’m pleased with mine. I believe there’s one in the lab still now in use, and it was, well, I consider it was an excellent one. And no end of these were made and used in the classroom.

MR: Did that take a lot of trial and error to get it right?

RC: Oh yes, yes, yes. A lot of experiments, but it was excellent. What was ... the other thing I did for Richard Keynes was pulling very long glass rods and, I suppose, it was about two feet long, and when he went to Babraham he had it copied.

MR: Did you have a glass blower, a professional glass blower?

RC: We had a good glass blower but they couldn’t do this kind of work. Before we had the electrode pullers, researchers used to sit for hours ... Hundreds of them were useless. It worked well. And I designed these cathode followers in which the electrode was fitted. [...] They were pentodes ... They were a very small valve: a little acorn valve. I can’t remember the name ... It’s so long ago now. You see the whole thing was in quite a small case, and it was a small acorn pentode valve. I really can’t remember now what it was.

MR: You should have been at Bletchley; they’re sort of restoring all the equipment and trawling around for all the old valves.

RC: Oh yes, I wonder where they found them?

AS: Did you ever go to Lisle Street in Soho to get ex-War Department spares?

RC: Yes, we did a trip there once. Yes. We bought hundreds of resistors and that sort of thing there. Yes.

AS: I remember the people building little pre-amplifiers. You’d use a tobacco tin to base them on.

RC: Well, they were film tins: round film tins. Do you remember that? That’s ages ago.

AS: And James Fitzsimons has got one in his drawer.

RC: Good heavens!

MR: One of yours?
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RC: No I never did anything ...
AS: Well, I think it’s one he made, but tears come in his eyes when he sees it.
MR: You did a proper job.
RC: Yes we had super apparatus and ...
MR: Who were the other, I would say, skilled people with specialities? You had carpenters. I mean, who were the other people who made things whose names probably don’t always get ...
RC: Oh well, we’d got a ... workshop and the head of that was a Mr Hall. He wasn’t a very nice man.
MR: In which way wasn’t he nice?
RC: He wouldn’t let anyone else touch anything. You see, this is why I had a small workshop for myself, and researchers could then come along, drill a hole as required, whereas formally if you wanted a hole, you’d got to go to Mr Hall and it might take two or three days before he got down to it. So I established this little workshop and researchers could come and drill the holes and make things and it worked out well.
MR: That was very generous of you because people don’t usually like sharing their workshops.
RC: Well, that’s how ... we found that a great advantage. And Mr Hall got slightly annoyed about it but that was his fault.
AS: Now what about Brian Secker’s father, and grandfather, I believe.
RC: No. Father. He was in chemistry. But there was, yes, I believe his grandfather – I never met him – was a head assistant here at one time.
AS: Yes, because in Alan’s book it mentions something about Brian Secker and it said something about his father and grandfather, I think.
RC: Yes. I didn’t know anything about the grandfather. Alan Secker, Brian’s father, was in Chemistry and Brian, when Mr Hall finally retired, Brian took over the workshop.
MR: What is a Head Assistant?
AS: No, well, Head Assistant – this is the workshop we’re talking about.
MR: Yes, so what is that post; what does it mean? I mean, is it a ... 
AS: Well, he was head of the ...
RC: I think this Head post has been dispensed with now, hasn’t it?
AS: Yes, I think so.
RC: There wasn’t really sufficient work for them.
MR: So how many people were in the main workshop in those days?
RC: Only two.
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MR: Just two?
RC: Yes. I don’t know what’s happened to it now.
AS: Oh, it’s been completely … we lost it completely.
RC: What is it now?
AS: Well, they just, this very minute, they’re turning it into a place for zebra fish to live in because …
RC: I think it was a fatal mistake closing it.
AS: And what was such a shame was, ours was the best-equipped workshop. It had lots and lots of apparatus. Because we were not in very good favour with the university at the time, and they thought they might even close this department, they said that we couldn’t keep our workshop and it went to psychology, experimental psychology. And the first thing they did, having made people in this department redundant, was to advertise for new people for the experimental psychology one.
RC: Extraordinary.
AS: Yes.
RC: I think all departments should have an adequate workshop really, shouldn’t they?
AS: Oh yes.
RC: I mean, it’s quite, it was part of economising, you know.
MR: Well, you had to make things then, now you buy them.
RC: What can I say about Sir Alan, really?
MR: What students came through the lab? There must have been a lot of PhD students and co-workers.
RC: I don’t know how to answer that question, really.
AS: I’ve written down about Brian Nunn, who died in 1987.
RC: Yes, he came here and worked with Sir Alan on retinal physiology. He died at quite a young age.
AS: Yes, he had, he was born, I think, with a hole in the heart.
RC: Yes, that is so.
AS: It was very sad, and he went back to the States – he was from the States – and he got pneumonia, which you know other people would have just … thrown off. But because of this condition he died very quickly. And because of his congenital problem he’d never been able to take life insurance, and so when he died he had a widow and two children. But Sir Alan started a fund for him.
RC: It was very sad. He was a brilliant fellow.
AS: Yes, and a very nice chap.
An interview with Ron Cook

RC: Very nice, yes. He was very nice.

AS: And now were you with Alan when Silvio Weidmann was working with him.

RC: ... He wasn’t working on the retinal physiology; it was on giant fibres. And he came from Switzerland.

AS: He was another very nice man.

RC: Very knowledgeable; very nice man. I can’t remember all the people. We had, well, there was one amusing American fellow, and I can’t remember his name. This is an informal remark, really. And he said, ‘Isn’t the weather dreadful here?’ ‘Well,’ I said, ‘It’s this rainy weather that’s made the British tough.’ And he said, ‘Absolute rubbish: it’s your toilet paper!’

RC, MR and AS proceeded to look at some photographs. Speaking of Alan Hodgkin:

RC: The Quiet President. He was. He was so, how can I put it really, considering his greatness, he was modest every time.

AS: And very, very gentlemanly.

RC: Very gentlemanly. He was a Quaker.

MR: Was he religious?

RC: Quite religious.

AS: Well, was he? Because I thought it came out in his book that although he’d been brought up as a Quaker, that he wasn’t, it must have brushed off on him, on his Quakerism …

RC: Well, I found him quite religious. He was a socialist. I said to him, ‘Why are you a socialist?’ And he said, ‘I think it’s due to guilty conscience.’

MR: Are you religious?


AS: That’s Melbourn?

RC: No, I got to Shepreth.

AS: Oh do you, why?

RC: Because, interesting you should ask me that, because we, in Shepreth, we use Cranmer’s prayer book, which cannot be surpassed. And these modern things, you know, they give me the pip.

AS: I go to the 8 o’clock communion service …

RC: I go to the 8 o’clock.

AS: ... which is fine.

RC: Where are you then?
An interview with Ron Cook

AS: I’m at St Mark’s in Newnham. And then we have, I’ve hardly ever been to the 10 o’clock. It’s very modern and sort of happy clappy.

RC: I don’t want it.

AS: And I find it very difficult. And then we have a proper evensong.

RC: We do, yes. Our 8 o’clock communion is from Cranmer’s book and the evensong is also from Cranmer’s book. The sort of service I dislike is what they call ‘family service’.

AS: Yes, well that’s what our 10 o’clock ...

RC: Which I think is obscene.

AS: But I tell you something that I do miss is, because nobody ever has matins now, there is such nice …

RC: Strange that you should mention that because in Fowlmere, which isn’t far from me, they do.

AS: Ah, because I miss the nice canticles.

RC: And if I’m reading the lesson, which I do once a month, it’s [the] King James Bible.

AS: Yes. Well, I have a problem because I read the lesson in evensong, every fourth Sunday, and I read from King James. But sometimes the preacher has based their sermon on another edition.

RC: Yes, I know.

Resuming after a tea break.

RC: I was just going to say, when Lord Adrian was here as Professor, there was no cleaning in the lab whatever, and it was utterly disgraceful. He used to bring his bicycle – his room was down on the lower floor – he used to bring his bicycle right down inside the lab and leave it outside his door down there. But it was a filthy place. It’s a revolution now. But this was one big tea room for the …

MR: What, this room? Oh, it’s been divided up.

RC: Yes, it’s been divided. This was for … assistants in here. Academics were in a room along by the professor’s office. And there was no mixing.

MR: So you called each other … you spoke formally?

RC: Well, do you know the old term for laboratory assistants was servants.

MR: Yes, they say that, don’t they?

RC: Laboratory servants. And there’s a feeling of snootiness with that, isn’t there?

MR: And so did you have to address the professor as Sir or Professor or …

RC: I never called anyone Sir.

MR: But were other people expected to?
An interview with Ron Cook

RC: They did, yes. But I thought it was, what I would say, kowtowing.
MR: How did you address Alan Hodgkin?
RC: Well, that’s another thing; yes. When he was made a knight and I called him Sir, and he said, ‘For heaven’s sake, don’t call me Sir. It goes with the job.’
MR: So how did you address him before that, or did it just not arise: you just spoke to him?
RC: It didn’t arise much. But I never called anyone Sir.
MR: But when you spoke of him to other people?
RC: I would have called him Sir Alan.
MR: Right. Or before that? Professor Hodgkin?
RC: Doctor.
MR: Doctor Hodgkin.
RC: Yes. He was so modest. ‘Don’t call me Sir.’ He didn’t like it. ‘It goes with the job.’ He was an OM too, you know, which very few people get, the Order of Merit.
MR: And what was nice is that you shared in his pleasure.
RC: I shared everything. I did his clocks at Trinity, too. He was one of the kindest and noblest persons I’ve ever met, I think. Really. Straightforward. No deceit. That’s why I think he was religious.
MR: But Huxley is also very nice and he’s famously not religious.
RC: Huxley, not religious, but …
MR: He was a humanist.
RC: But he lost his wife; it was very sad. He was marvellous at making things.
MR: Oh yes, he was the head of the department I was in at university.
RC: And he, I think his son, now runs some sort of factory for making scientific apparatus at Milton [actually Cottenham; Huxley Bertram Engineering]. And he [i.e. A. F. Huxley] designed two things: he designed a section, what do they call those section cutters?
MR: A microtome?
RC: Microtome; the Huxley microtome, and the manipulator.
MR: Well, they call it the Huxley manipulator.
RC: I wonder if they’re still in use? I thought they were rather clumsy myself.
MR: I think they’re manufactured under those names. I think so; or they were. Yes, because he was very good at optics too.
RC: Absolutely brilliant with microscopes. He could make all the lenses and tubing, and cutting the threads, all that sort of thing he did on his … he got a treadle lathe.
MR: Treadle lathe?

RC: Yeah: Drummond treadle lathe. And he did everything on it and he was literally marvellous. I don’t know what he’s doing now. Probably spends his time making things.

MR: Well, he had his 90th in, not last year, the year before.

RC: Yes, you see Keynes has just turned 90.

MR: Is he still …

RC: Well, he’s not a well man. He’s had cataracts, hips, heart. Well, I’ve had the heart bypass …

Resuming

RC: [...] I enjoyed very good health in the lab, really.

MR: Are you one of the people who never had a day’s illness?

RC: I think that’s so, yes. I was never away. But I liked it when he [Sir Alan Hodgkin] came in and said, ‘Look here, shouldn’t you be skating?’

AS: But I … can’t remember whether I asked you, but in the War, because you’d been at Pye’s, was that a reserved occupation?

RC: Yes.

MR: And were you old enough for military service, weren’t you?

RC: I was in the Home Guard. I kept, yes …

MR: What age were you? I mean, I should work it out. 1914 …

RC: I think that at the beginning of the war I was about 25. Yes, I kept the invaders out.

MR: Where were you Home Guard? Here in Cambridge?

RC: … we lived in Luard Road, off Hills Road. And I was in the B Company, which the headquarters was the County School on Hills Road.

MR: What are your memories of that? The Home Guard. Who was in charge of your unit?

RC: He was a History Master at the County School who was in charge. But you see, at Pye’s they had their own Home Guard, and it was considered the right thing that everyone who worked there should be in the Pye Home Guard. And the officer there sent me a, what do they call these things, not prosecution, what’s the word? It was a prosecution for not attending the … parades there. Well, they didn’t know me, but living near me was Colonel Dale, one of the high-ranking officers in the Home Guard. And I went round to see him and he gave me a note to say, ‘This man must remain in the Hills Road section.’ And of course I took that to Pye’s and they didn’t like that at all. They said I was the only person who had ever bettered them.

MR: So what are your memories, because I worked in electronics, I worked for Elliott’s, I don’t know if you know Elliott Brothers in Borehamwood?

RC: I’ve heard of that name.
MR: Because I worked at the benches as an engineer for a few years, and I wondered what ...

RC: What we did there was the radar and the ground control, our speciality.

MR: So that was not the actual magnetron?

RC: No.

MR: This was the control the circuitry that controlled it.

RC: The other thing I was involved in with a bit of designing was called the Light Infantry Set. But I was given a pretty good free hand there.

MR: Yes, how did that work? Were you given a problem to solve?

RC: Yes. They liked what was I designing and doing. And there were other things I made for them: they wanted, they worked for a long time on a device that sounded near the pilot’s ear if the landing [gear] hadn’t gone down. They tried all sorts of methods ... And I was in Halfords one day and I saw a tiny little horn that fitted on a bicycle, and I rigged all this up and they bought thousands of them. They bought all the press tools from the company and turned all these things out.

MR: So it operated a switch and sounded the horn?

RC: It sounded the horn. They had all the parts made at Pye’s, and had all the press tools, and in the Home Guard – I don’t know if you remember – there was a machine called the Spigot Mortar; do you remember? Imagine a tube in which a bomb slides and there’s a projecting pin. Well, the pin shouldn’t project. If that pin projected, it would go off. Well, we had a lot of accidents, and I designed – and they were awfully pleased with it – I designed the equipment on that, that the bomb could not be inserted if the pin was out. Because where our parade ground was, on Hills Road, on the Perse field, a chap put one of these bombs in, and it went right across the field and killed people having a tea party. So that was appreciated.

MR: So to come back to Pye’s. You worked at the bench. Did you work on your own?

RC: No, with teams. With teams. Yes.

MR: So you were given a problem.

RC: I was given a problem and we sorted it out. Yes. And the other thing I did was designing a micro switch; that was entirely my idea. But I’ve always been pretty good at designing things and inventing things.

MR: And at Pye’s did you make it or did you send it to the workshop?

RC: Made, and then it was copied.

AS: Did you ever go with the radar work? You never went down to Bawdsey, where it all started?

RC: I didn’t go down to Bawdsey, no.

AS: Because I grew up near Bawdsey and there used to be all these rumours ...
An interview with Ron Cook

AS: ... about, because they wanted to keep people away. And there were all these rumours that if you drove along the road, your car stopped and it never would go again, and things like this. And I can remember seeing those enormous pylons.

RC: No, I liked Bawdsey. It’s a lovely beach there. I remember all the pylons. No, I didn’t go down there.

AS: Because Alan was in radar, wasn’t he?

RC: I think he went to America.

MR: And Huxley. Andrew Huxley?

AS: No, he was near ...

RC: I don’t know what Andrew Huxley did. Keynes ...

MR: He did guidance.

RC: Because Keynes also went to America.

AS: Keynes, I remember, Keynes was involved in degaussing and it brought home to me ...

RC: Well, the degaussing apparatus was designed at the Cambridge Instrument Company.

AS: Was it? Because you know you would think about people being your contemporaries, but you realise with the war, that even if somebody is just four years younger or something, that they don’t know what you’re talking about.

RC: The degaussing really was pretty simple. It was just a big copper wire right round the ship.

MR: Did you use this on your clocks? Well, I’ve heard about watches being magnetised so that ... or is that just an old wives tale?

RC: Oh, I think that’s an old wives tale. Where I went in London, you see I’ve been mad on clocks, and yet my madness on clocks has really, how can I put it, brought vital changes in my life and has been beneficial to me. Because I was so good at making things it gave me this work here. The firm I worked with, which was the Synchronome Company – they are very well known. You have an electric master clock operating dials throughout the building. And at our factory, as it was, all the free pendulums at Greenwich were designed there. And as you know, they’ve kept time for the whole world over 25 years. A pendulum, swinging in a vacuum, maintained, and yet recording the time. Not electrically. I mean, not with photoelectric cells, but it had a slave clock – they’re still in use – a slave clock alongside it doing counting and the free pendulum kept the slave clock perfectly synchronised. And they were used all over the world in observatories. I’ve got about five master clocks at home with a range of dials throughout the house.

MR: And another chap who’s keen on clocks was the previous head of Marks & Spencer’s: Lord Sieff. I remember they presented him with a painting showing him with his clocks. I wondered whether you had any contact with him?

RC: No, no. We have a local section of the Antiquarian Horological Society. We meet in Bury St Edmunds, but that’s irrelevant.

MR: It’s not irrelevant.
AS: It’s everything to do with …

RC: I did Alan’s, all Alan’s clocks.

MR: Because it really shows, as they say now, where you’re coming from, you know? That you have all these skills which are all …

RC: Well, I’ve always been a busy sort of person; not sitting idly. And making things.

MR: And also growing a garden as well by the sounds of things.

RC: Garden, yes.

MR: Two acres.

RC: Two acres of garden.

MR: Do you still do that?

RC: Well, I’ve had a man to help me, but I think he mainly comes for the coffee break. You see, he’s 86 and he’s just been taken away from me with bladder cancer. You know that can be fatal. He’s had the operation but it will be four months before he’s with me, but in the meantime I’ve found someone else. Much younger: only 40. But you see, I love the garden. I love working on the clocks. And music; I love music. The ballet. The church.

AS: What are your tastes in music?

RC: All classical. I write, yes I think the thing, of course you see all this is irrelevant really. Years ago I saw a film with Alastair Sim. He was in a film called Alf’s Button Afloat and the music they played in that sent me mad. It was Rimsky Korsakov’s Scheherazade, and I bought the records of it. And people were tortured. They said, ‘Is that Scheherazade again?’ And this led me onto … my next piece was Schubert’s Unfinished Symphony. I then went onto Mendelssohn and now I’ve got every composer, really, but I find now Tchaikovsky I think is my favourite composer because he has that sentimental flavour, you know.

MR: Do you have any musical skills yourself?

RC: I learnt the piano, yes. My sister was also a skilled pianist. And, yes, I love music. I don’t think I could survive without it. And the ballet: I always go to Casse-Noisette in London. Do you like the ballet?

AS: No, I’m not much of a ballet person. My nieces and my great nieces are, but …

MR: Opera?

RC: Ooh, yes I love the opera. I’ve got recordings of all of the, how can I put it, the well-known operas. I think my favourite one is still Tosca.

AS: But what about Wagner?

RC: I’ve got no Wagner. Somehow Wagner to me is always associated with Adolf Hitler. Wagner was not a nice man.

AS: No.
An interview with Ron Cook

RC: No, I’ve got no time for Wagner. And yet sometimes when they’re playing the Ride of the Valkyries, that sends shivers down my spine.

AS: It’s quite exciting.

MR: You have to be a Wagner addict, don’t you. Some people go to all …

RC: I think so yes. I don’t like him.

MR: And his characters aren’t very nice, are they?


MR: Where does modern start with you?

RC: I don’t know but sometimes at the Promenade concerts they play some dreadful stuff.

MR: Benjamin Brittan?

RC: Don’t like him. But my sister, with her husband, Edwin Smith – he was a great photographer, very well known. And he did the pictures, stately homes and all that sort of thing, you know. And she wrote dozens of books. For Chatto & Windus. And all incidentally, you’re Newnham, all her, they call them The Olive Cook Papers, they’re now all in Newnham.

AS: Oh, are they? Yes, I’m only Newnham in that I live in Newnham village.

RC: Oh, I see, you weren’t at Newnham?

AS: No because I did my degree in Edinburgh.

RC: Edinburgh is a medical place, really, isn’t it?

AS: Yes, I suppose it is. I really enjoyed Edinburgh tremendously. Does your wife come from Edinburgh?

MR: Yes, yes. Yes, we’re often back there.

RC: I’ve enjoyed life, really.

AS: Well, you put a lot into it.

RC: And I’ve got a lot more things planned. I don’t know how much longer I’m going to keep on.

MR: Which was the best period? I mean …

RC: The period here, with Hodgkin. Yes.

MR: How long did that last, that period?

RC: 42 years.

MR: Really?

RC: It’s a lifetime, isn’t it?

MR: So you saw him from a young man until the end really.

RC: Every day. And I used to come in, and he said, ‘I’m sorry, there’s another one in the family.’
MR: What did he have a big family?
RC: He had quite a big family. Yes.
AS: Four, I think. Three girls and a boy.
RC: His son, Jon, I think is distinguished; he’s an FRS.
AS: I was very surprised in Alan Hodgkin’s book when they talked about going to Stockholm to get the Nobel Prize, the Huxleys – there are six Huxley children – and they were taken, and four Hodgens’. And they didn’t know each other. So that perhaps Hodgkin and Huxley actually didn’t really do much socially.
RC: Huxley didn’t go down to Plymouth much. He was rather on his own. His research was always on muscle; the muscles.
AS: Yes. When he moved from …
RC: He did get the … he was on the giant fibres at one time.
AS: At the beginning.

Resuming.

RC: I’ve got the, what do they call it? Chronic lymphatic leukaemia. But the count, the normal count is 8000 per cubic millimetre, but mine went to 90. Well, a bad reading for leukaemia is 500,000, and that was over 10 years ago and originally I went every 3 months and no treatment was necessary at that stage. But when I had, this Saturday when I was given another cell count at Addenbrooke’s, it had dropped down to 25. I’m in recession.

AS: Yes, yes. That’s good.
RC: But it’s a killer.
AS: Eventually, yes.
RC: Of course the nurse at our local surgery, she cheered me up. She said, ‘It’s all very well for these doctors to say these things, but you are sitting on a time-bomb.’ And she reckons it could go ‘bonk’ at any minute.

AS: Well, you seem to be doing pretty well in the meantime.
MR: She means you won’t make 150 … maybe not.
RC: Well, the doctor, my doctor’s a nice chap; he said, ‘I think you’re going to die from old age.’
AS: What about your family: your father and mother. Were they, did they live long?
RC: They both lived to 95, so that deadline number is looming on the horizon.
MR: Well, you’re a horologist. When’s the alarm set?
RC: I can’t alter it. But with a bit of luck I could carry on.
AS: But I mean Horace Barlow, who I share my office with …
An interview with Ron Cook

RC: How is he?
AS: Well, he shares an office: he’s fine. He’s in every day and ... yes, I’ll go up and see if he’s ...
RC: Is he? He’s getting on though. He must be about 80 now.
AS: Oh, he’s well over 80 but not as old as you. I’ll just go and see if he’s there and bring him down.
RC: Lovely chap. But I think the, I attribute my long living to coming here.
MR: Yes? Clean life, no smoking.
RC: Clean life; sanity.
MR: Total abstinence?
RC: You see, in these university buildings, people live in a kind of sheltered world, immune from the horrible outside atmosphere. They don’t care who’s in parliament or anything like that. It’s a sheltered life, isn’t it?
MR: It is in many ways. Maybe not these days so much.
RC: Not quite so much, but it was in those days.
MR: In those days many people ... I mean, did Alan Hodgkin depend on his salary to live, or did he have a private ...
RC: Oh yes, entirely. Yes, yes, entirely. I shall have to get home. Yes, it’s been a good time here. I loved every minute of it. I was very sorry when it was all over. Hmm.
MR: So you didn’t have anything to do with the undergraduates did you, at all?
RC: Well, sometimes I demonstrated the pulling of electrodes and that sort of thing, and how the things worked. And how we recorded these action potentials; we did all that.
MR: How did they receive all this?
RC: Well, pretty well, because it was, it was all part of the course. Every student did this, and no, it was all good fun. Some people were pretty hopeless.
MR: You don’t remember any of the students then?
RC: Well, yes. Now when I had the heart done, triple bypass at Papworth, the anaesthetist came through. I knew him: he’d been here.

Horace Barlow (HB) joins them.

RC: My dear fellow, what a pleasure!
HB: What a pleasure to see you. Looking just like you used to.
RC: No I’m not. I’m classed as an antique. 95 in September.
HB: 95? Well, that’s jolly good.
An interview with Ron Cook

RC: You reckon so? Well...

RC: How are you getting on?

HB: Okay, I think. I’m, I still feel pretty well.

RC: You’ve officially retired?

HB: Yes, for a long time now. I’m not so far behind you. You know, I’m only 12 years behind you or something. Less than that. 95? Eight years behind you.

RC: Well, I was talking to Mrs Dinnach? Do you remember Mrs Dinnach? She … did the books. And we mentioned Clive Hood, remember him? And apparently what he said to her was, when he met her, he said, ‘You were always old.’ [laughter]

HB: That is a bit much, isn’t it?

RC: But the place has altered so; it’s all so clean now, isn’t it?

HB: Yeah.

RC: But the dear old tea room has gone, and that’s sad. Do you remember Babs, the tea lady?

HB: Well, yes, we had a lot of tea ladies in our time.

RC: Her daughter still writes to me.

HB: Oh, right. Yes. Are you still doing your five hours work in the garden, is it, every day?

RC: Yes, I’ve got two acres of garden. I do my clocks. I do, I’ve been Treasurer to my Veteran Car Club for 41 years.

HB: Oh wow. Now, there was an old Austin. Is that Baby Austin, was it?

RC: No. Veteran cars. Mine’s a 1910 Singer. No, Baby Austins didn’t come along until much later. They’re not veterans. You see, if I, I often say, ‘If I cease being Treasurer, my standard of living would collapse.’ But it’s good seeing the old place where I spent so long, but how different it all is.

AS: So what were the cars that Peter Lewis, no, not Peter Lewis, Bill Balfour and James Hickson and...

RC: Have they all gone? Is Peter alive still?

HB: Peter Lewis? No.

AS: No, he died a year ago.

RC: Parkinson’s.

AS: Yes.

RC: Is he gone?

AS: And she died beginning of this year, Joyce did. No, but James Hickson and Bill Balfour and somebody else – Dick Hardy – they all had some kind of...

RC: Hardy had a heart trouble. Nice chap though.
AS: Some sort of rare car they had; all three of them: red.

HB: Oh yes, what was that? That wasn’t a vintage one.

AS: No it wasn’t vintage.

RC: Oh, and Merton. He was another chap. Excuse me calling surnames; it’s just my manner. And ...

HB: He had an old Morris Minor for a long time. Yes. But he had a Bullnose Morris before that.

RC: He had lots of cars but they don’t come onto the stage of classification of veterans.

HB: No, no, no, no. We’ve got to have standards.

AS: How old does it have to be to be veteran?

RC: Less than 1918. But the real veteran is up to 1904.

MR returning introduces himself to HB

MR: I’m the official recorder for The Physiological Society.

RC: It’s marvellous here. I don’t think I’d want to come back again really, but ... How do you think it’s all going here? I was gratified to see that that awful thing in the hall is gone. That grotesque sort of mask thing, wasn’t there?

MR: Oh yes, the thing with the sort of ...

AS: ... which somebody tried to make us believe initially that it was meant to be Hodgkin and Huxley, but I think that was completely wrong.

RC: Oh yes.

After a discussion of medical complaints:

RC: But I’m still about, you know.

AS: And we’ve learnt so many interesting things.

MR: Yes, you’ve been very valuable.

RC: I’m a very busy man; got lots to do. I married a Russian lady; that was another big experience. In Russia I was, I was addressed in Russia as Your Eminence. And I came in close contact with the KGB who, I’ve even bought a suit of clothes for a KGB officer.

AS: What year was this?

RC: Well, I’ll tell you all about this. I went to Russia in ’89, I think it was. And I was fascinated with our tourist guide. Her English was impeccable, and on the last day I was scheduled to come away, I found myself bursting into tears. And I liked her so much, and when she said, ‘Will you give me an invitation to come to England?’ Because you see you couldn’t leave Russia without an invitation. And when I got home I sent her an invitation and I used Physiology
note paper. And the authorities said, ‘She can’t sleep in Physiology.’ And they rejected it. And she found out, there were some more people coming to – the Crimea is where she lived – and she found out there were some more people coming, and I went up to Heathrow and handed the correct invitation to these people, and it all worked out marvellously. She wanted to leave Russia and I’d no intention of marrying anyone, and I said the only way for you to leave Russia is for me to marry you. And that’s what happened.

HB: That was in 1989?

RC: And I found it was too expensive. But in Russia, she had, I think, because you see the Intourist is part of the KGB. And she, when I went to look – have you been to St Petersburg?

HB: Yes, I have.

RC: You saw the great Catherine Palace? There was a great queue outside there and she spoke to the attendant and I was instantly whisked in front and he bowed to me, and he said, ‘Your Eminence.’ And I found this happened everywhere. We went to see the ballet at the Mariinsky Theatre. We went on the bus – and we had a taxi, and she said, coming out, she said, ‘We’re not going in a taxi: it’s too expensive.’ She stopped the bus and she whispered to the driver and he drove straight to the hotel. And I found this was … And later on, I was the only person to ever stay in a guide’s flat. And, this is when I experienced the activities of the KGB. And I bought, apart from this suit I bought this man, I also bought a device which clamps under the table for listening to people’s conversations. So it was all wonderful but … She’ll be coming to see me this year. We were separated.

HB: What was she … what was her position in Russia?

RC: Intourist guide. But she’s now gone to, she’s now got a very good job in California, Monterey, do you know? There’s a language college there.

HB: Is that right?

RC: And she’s now become a professor teaching Russian and English to, they have all sorts of foreigners. And I think this is part of American world domination; to get to know all the languages everywhere, you know. She’s got a wonderful job. And but she still likes cash. But her English is absolutely impeccable, but …

HB: You mentioned Clive Hood. Is he still around?

RC: I spoke to him the other day.

HB: Well, when you see him, give him my regards.

RC: He’s had a lot of ups and downs with this, what do they call this?

AS: Migraine.

RC: Migraine. It’s a bit better now, but he’s tried all sorts of remedies. It’s easing at the moment. I gather as you get older, it tends to die off, doesn’t it?

HB: Well, I thought so, yes.

RC: But he’s not free from it.

HB: Because he must be getting on now, isn’t he?
An interview with Ron Cook

RC: He’d be about 78. You see, people get older, don’t they?
HB: Yes they do, don’t they?
RC: You know, this is the snag …
HB: Even the youngest of us.
RC: I mean, I’m younger by a few months than Alan Hodgkin, and but you see I’m old. Ninety-five in September. I mean it’s ghastly …
HB: There are fewer and fewer of one’s contemporaries left.
RC: Yes, this is the trouble. In fact, I have one cousin left, and he said – I thought it was a little bit sarcastic – he said, ‘Most people of your age are dead.’ We had a very, very extensive family and they’ve died off. Of course this is inevitable isn’t it, really? But I don’t know how much longer I’m going to keep on.
HB: You’re looking pretty well.
MR: Many people make the 100, don’t they?
RC: I think the secret of long living is to keep busy. Don’t sit around. Keep at it.
MR: Yes. One thing that keeps us young is we belong to the University of the Third Age, which is very active in London. A lot of retired academics …
RC: But I still think the years I spent here were the best. The best time I’ve had, really.
HB: How many years were you here, actually?
RC: 42 years.
HB: 42? Wow.
RC: It’s a lifetime, isn’t it? It’s amazing how the years slipped by.
HB: So you must have come …
RC: I came in, what was it, ’47. Somewhere around then. Yes, I think it’s about ’47. Lord Adrian was the Master.
HB: When I started my PhD it was about ’47.
RC: You came at ’47?
MR: [Speaking to HB about the Oral History project] You’re, I think you’re on our list, aren’t you?
AS: Yes. You’re on our list to be done.
HB: Oh, I’m going to be done some time, am I?
MR: You can give us a trailer …
RC: It’s a lifetime ago, isn’t it really? Well, I think, what’s going to happen? Are there any people here of my vintage, do you think?
AS: Not really. I mean, you and I are the oldest people here, I think.
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HB: Yeah, I think that's right.
RC: You see contemporaries like Andrew Huxley, they’re all getting on for my age. And Richard Keynes.
HB: I see Richard Keynes and Andrew. Richard must be a couple of years older then me, so he must be pushing 90.
RC: He’s about 90 now; he’s about 90.
AS: He’s very arthritic and he’s had both knees and both hips ...
RC: He’s had so many things done: he’s had cataracts; his heart; and his hips. And he also had a very severe arthritic spine. I don’t know how that is now.
AS: And he also had that carpal tunnel thing.
RC: Yes. His father was 95 when he died. Sir Geoffrey. So you see, who knows?
HB: Was she as old as that? I didn’t realise that.
RC: And so he said to me, he said, ‘I think I’ve got a sporting chance.’
MR: I think we should formally thank you, Ron, so much for coming.
RC: Well, there’s been a lot of irrelevance from me.
AS: No, it all adds up.
MR: No, it’s interesting.
RC: And I’ve become a bit of a gossip, you know. It’s one of the results of being old, I suppose, really.
HB: I don’t think he’s repeated himself once since I’ve been here.
MR: No. We’ve repeated ourselves but you haven’t. Thank you for coming.
RC: As you get older, you get quite a lot of privileges. People stand out the way for you and all that sort of thing, and I rather like that. And you know they think, ‘Poor old soul.’ But I think that the killer is these wretched skin cancers. In the Dermatology [Unit] at Addenbrooke’s, that’s the major operation they’re doing.
HB: Is it?
RC: Why is it they’ve become so common? Some people say it’s the destruction of the ozone layer.
MR: Let’s end on a happy note, shall we? Say something happy; optimistic.
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RC: It’s a marvellous day! And I’m going to get home; I hope to get started in the garden soon, and get cracking on that. I, of course, the other thing is, for 25 odd years I did cross-country skiing in Norway, and I think that has helped me a great deal physically. The cross-country skiing demands much more stamina than just going up a slope and coming down, you know. I’ve got a certificate in the hall: 121 km in a day. How’s that?

HB: That’s not bad, is it? Yes, that’s pretty good.

AS: Was that Norway?

RC: Norway. I love Norway. It’s the only sensible country left: they didn’t join the silly Common Market; they’ve got an extraordinarily high standard of living and it’s just a lovely country. I often wish I’d retired there. It’s too late now. But I’ve gone every year, 25 years on the run. And I’m still a speed skater. I went in this last, we had a last session recently in February, you know, on the fen. Bury Fen, Earith. I got my speed skates out and went round.

AS: And then unfortunately it thawed quite soon, didn’t it?

RC: Yes, before competitions could be held.

AS: But that’s pretty good.

MR: That’s good.

HB: Yes. Speed skating at 95 is pretty good.

RC: And I got my skis out also for the snow on Royston Heath, did a little bit of cross-country skiing. The beauty of Norway is that you – which is so much superior to downhill – you go through great forests and see wildlife and beauty. And you go with a team of people, and it’s lovely.

MR: Thank you very much.

Ron Cook with Martin Rosenberg, Ann Silver and Horace Barlow.
An interview with Ron Cook