Oral History Interview with Thomas D. Wilson

Interviewer: Lai Ma

Start Part 1

LM: This is Lai Ma speaking. I am interviewing Tom Wilson in his home in Sheffield [United Kingdom] for the ASIS&T oral history project. I'd like to start with your family background and childhood. Could you tell me your date of birth and what your childhood was like.

TW: Okay. Well, I was born on the eighteenth of January, 1935.

LM: You share a birthday with one of my sons.

TW: Oh really!

LM: Yes.

TW: Oh, well that's an interesting coincidence.

TW: Yes. I was born on a little railway station in County Durham, in the northeast of England, where my father was a railway worker. He was what was called a plate-layer. That is a person who laid and repaired rail tracks in the district. And subsequently he was a track walker; a track walker walked a particular length of rail track every day, checking for problems on the rail and correcting them, and so forth. So I grew up in a little country railway station which only had, I think, five houses, including the station master's house. So it was a very small community in what was generally a mining district. County Durham was one of the main mining counties in England at the time, although I think almost all, if not all, of the mines are now closed. And I went to school in a nearby village, which was a mining village. My grandfather was a miner, various uncles were miners. And from there I went to a grammar school in the county town, which was Durham City, which is an ancient city with one of the finest cathedrals in the country, a Norman cathedral, the site of the tomb of the Venerable Bede. So it's an historic town. The school was on the opposite side of the river to the cathedral and the castle. This was the environment that one learned in, a very historic environment. And basically the childhood was

entirely happy and unproblematic, and nothing really much to say about it, other than that I was a happy child.

LM: That's good. Do you have any siblings?

TW: No, I had no brothers or sisters. My nearest relatives were cousins. My mother was one of six daughters born to her mother, and I had three female cousins, and that was it.

LM: So in terms of schooling, so you just went to this grammar school…

TW: Primary school first, in the nearby village of Bowburn, and then to the Johnston grammar school in the city of Durham.

LM: Were there any influential figures that you…

TW: Well I think the headmaster at the primary school was quite an influential person; he was a veteran of the First World War, an officer in the First World War. The fact that he had survived was unusual, since the average lifetime of an officer in the First World War was about six months, so to go through it all and survive was quite remarkable. And he was a very imposing figure, but he was a very straightforward man, who did not want to be called 'sir.' He wanted to be called 'Mr. Holmes(?).' He said, 'I am not a sir, I am not a knight, I do not deserve to be called sir.' And this was a saying which stuck with me through my life, as it were, that people have to earn the way you treat them rather than it be automatic, which is what he was in effect saying.

So, from a very early age that was an interesting influence. In grammar school I don't think there were any teachers that were particularly influential in my life. They were a mixture of people who had been too old to be enrolled in the Second World War, or they had just returned from being active during the Second World War. And in one way or another they were, many of them, not really fit for the job that they were doing. We had a Latin teacher who'd been shot through the jaw in the war, and

when he became angry he lost control of his facial muscles. This made him a figure of fun for all the boys, so he had a very hard time. But I don't think I was particularly influenced by any of the teachers.

LM: From your Website, I saw that you became a library assistant in the county library…

TW: That's right, yes.

LM: After O-levels, I think; that's the British system--I came from the British system too--but I took the A-level…

TW: Yes, there was the ordinary level certificate of education, as it was called, then the advanced level. The O-level was taken at sixteen, and the A-level was taken at eighteen, two years later.

LM: Two years later. Yes.

TW: But I left school at sixteen.

LM: Right. So, can you tell me a little bit about how you became a library assistant?

TW: Well that's the way one became a library assistant at that time. That is the way in which the vast majority of people entered the profession in the UK at the time. They left school, most of them, at sixteen and became junior library assistants. And then they started studying for the qualifying examinations of the Library Association. At that time, the only university library school in existence in the UK was in University College London. That was the only school, and it was entirely postgraduate; it didn't offer undergraduate programs, nobody offered undergraduate programs in librarianship at that time. Everybody took the qualifications of the Library Association and you studied to become an Associate, and then you studied further to become a Fellow. So it was an entirely professional progress rather than an academic progress.

LM: I see. So right from the beginning it's a professional track.

TW: Yes. This was common in a lot of professions in the UK at the time, in areas that are now thought of as academic, like accountancy, business studies, nursing; a lot of these areas were in fact controlled

by professional bodies, and the professional bodies organized the examinations and the tests for proficiency in a particular profession. It's only in the last, I suppose, fifty years, that virtually all of these professions have made the move to graduate entry, so requiring people to have a degree before they undergo any professional testing, professional examination.

LM: Why librarianship?

TW: Why librarianship? An interest in books, which is the usual thing. Because the opportunity arose at the time; the county library advertised for, I think, six positions, six new positions in the county library service--might've been ten. There were, I think, 120 applicants for the ten positions, and I was fortunate enough to get an appointment. There were two series of examinations and an interview in order to get a job.

LM: That's remarkable. So the library school is not actually a library school, per se…

TW: It wasn't a library school.

LM: But you became a library assistant and did you have to take any courses…

TW: Yes. What happened was that after the Second World War, a number of programs were established in tertiary education colleges: colleges of commerce, colleges of technology, and so on, which have now disappeared. They were all merged into the polytechnics and then the polytechnics were changed into universities. A very stupid move on Mrs. Thatcher's part. And these courses were both full-time and part-time. You could either attend a college to take the examinations of the Library Association for a period of a year, or you could take them part timeover a longer period. And eventually, after doing military service--National Service--you did National Service at the age of eighteen for two years.

LM: But that was a requirement.

TW: That was a requirement, yes. After that, I had a year back at the county library, and then went to what was then called Newcastle School of Librarianship, in the College of Commerce, Newcastle, for a

year, and took the examinations of the Library Association. I'd already taken one part of the examinations while I was serving in the Air Force, and I'd studied for another part and I took that in the first term that I was at Newcastle, so I only had two parts of the examination left to do by the time I finished. So that was not really a problem at all. The big influence there was the head of department, Mr. Caldwell. He was a Scot, he worked in Glasgow Public Libraries and at the Mitchell Library, which is the big reference library in Glasgow Public Libraries. And he was a very thorough teacher. He was not naturally endowed with a humorous approach to things, but he was very thorough. And he was… I borrowed the notes that he had used for teaching on one occasion from him, and even the jokes were written in the margins [laughter]. So, nothing was impromptu, shall we say, everything was carefully thought out beforehand. And I think it was probably he that was the influence in me becoming a teacher, ultimately. But after taking the examinations of the Library Association, I then went back to the county library service and an opportunity came to become a college librarian within the county. And I was librarian at Stockton Billingham Technical College for two or three years. Then I moved into industry to be librarian at the nuclear research center of C. A. Parsons and Company, which was, at the time, was one of the biggest employers in Newcastle; it had something like twelve thousand men working there. And the nuclear research center had been established because Parsons was one of the companies that was involved in building the first atomic energy plant in the United Kingdom, called Calder Hall generating station. And the chief executive of C. A. Parsons believed that atomic energy had a future and so built and staffed a nuclear research center to carry out work into the fundamentals of nuclear reactor construction.

LM: So, let me back up a little bit. So you came back from the military services, national services, and that was around, let me see… You were sixteen in 1951…

TW: Right.

LM: when you joined as a library assistant and started a career in librarianship…

TW: Yes.

LM: and then you had two years…

TW: I did military service from '53 to '55.

LM: From '53 to '55, and then you came back and did the…

TW: I did the further year with the county library service.

LM: County library service.

TW: So I must've gone to library school in about '57.

LM: Okay.

TW: Academic year '57-'58. Or it might've been '56-'57, I can't actually remember.

LM: Yes. That's all right. I'm just trying to sort of… And then the technical college: how long were you there?

TW: I think I was only there a couple of years because I went to C. A. Parsons in 1959.

LM: Okay, so this one is clear.

TW: Yes, that one is clear. Basically that was the start of a new library and information service, because the research center had only then been established. In fact the managing director of it had not been appointed when I took up my position.

LM: Right.

TW: He was a Dr. Monty Finniston, later Sir Monty Finneston, a metallurgist from the Atomic Energy Authority at Harwell, so a strong background in the field. And he subsequently went on to be chief executive of the British Steel Corporation. He was a very well-known man. Had quite a considerable influence, again, very organized. He wanted to know exactly what was going on, even in the library, although he was running the organization. He wanted to know that the library was being used. He

thought it was an important part of the organization's activities, and when I met him--when he started as chief executive--he said he expected me to spend twenty-five to thirty percent of my time walking around the laboratories talking to people, finding out what they were doing, and so on. Which I think was quite remarkable for the time. And it proved to be extremely useful, of course, not only to me, but to the organization. Because everybody else was in their closed little laboratories, and I was the only one walking around them, so I saw what was going on in all of them. And on some occasions, I found that people were working on the same problem, but they didn't know that they were working on the same problem. Because one was in the electronics department and another was in the fluid flow mechanics department. And when I put them in touch with one another, they found they could work together, in fact. So they could actually save money in the organization by being more aware of what was going on in other departments. So it was Finniston who really introduced that role to me. And of course it's a role that now goes by the name of knowledge management. [laughter] Which I think is a nonsensical concept, but we needn't worry about that. So, yes, Finniston was quite a significant influence, and every month I used to present him with the statistics of use of the library and information service, but whenever he had a visitor, and these were usually scientific visitors, he would bring them into the library and ask me to get out the statistics. Because he wanted to demonstrate to potential clients that the staff of the research center were kept informed, kept up to date. So, my work… he saw my work as a librarian and information officer central to maintaining the scientific viability of the organization. Because he saw that without effective information flows into the organization, people's skill levels would not be maintained, if they didn't know about the latest scientific developments. So he was a very influential figure, Finniston.

LM: Yes. So what other things did you do as a librarian there, in what capacities… did you do all the work, was it one person…

TW: No, no, it wasn't one person; I had three people working with me. And I would do the liaison with departments. I would deal with most of the reference inquiries that came along, and the liaison with the chief executive, Finniston. And my colleagues would do the basic library work and some of the reference inquiry work and so on, maintaining the journals, periodicals, this kind of thing.

LM: Was it called special libraries back then?

TW: Yes, they were called special libraries at that time, yes.

LM: Okay. So you have been in a county library, which is more or less like a public library…

TW: A public library, yes.

LM: And then a college library…

TW: A college library

LM: And then a special library…

TW: And then a special library, yes.

LM: And then…

TW: But in the county library I served in pretty well all of the departments, including a branch library initially, where I was face-to-face with the public. And then most of the other departments of the county library. The county library at that time had no formal in-house training program, so basically I manufactured one for myself; I used to go to the county librarian and say, 'I think I've been long enough in this department, can you move me somewhere else?' And so, by doing that, I ensured that I worked in every place. I did cataloging, acquisitions, binding, services dealing with extramural classes that we provided book boxes for, I worked for a time as the librarian of the agricultural college which was part of the county library service, and so on and so forth. So I worked in all of these areas.

LM: Wonderful. Okay, so… and then that's from around '57 and move on the nuclear research center, that was around '59…

TW: '59 to '61

LM: to '61, and then, in 1961 you got a fellowship of the library association.

TW: Yes, yes.

LM: And it is over that time that you keep taking courses…

TW: Examinations and courses

LM: With the Library Association.

TW: With the Library Association, yes.

LM: So that's like you are moving from also a library assistant from the county library to Associate at some point…

TW: Yes.

LM: And then you get a Fellow(ship) when you finish.

TW: Yes.

LM: So that was the way of making progress in the profession?

TW: That's the way people progressed. I mean, many people didn't bother to take the Fellowship examinations because you could become a librarian, you could become a county librarian, just with the Associateship, you didn't necessarily have to have the Fellowship.

LM: I see, okay. That's new to me, I didn't know about that. All right, and then you, let's see… Now, you say you took courses from the Newcastle, the College of Commerce…

TW: Yes

LM: So that's '61, and then I saw that you actually moved on to teaching.

TW: Yes, in '61.

LM: In '61. And you left the nuclear research center.

TW: Yes.

LM: So why did you make the move?

TW: Well, there were two reasons, really. One was that I thought I might enjoy teaching, and secondly, my salary was not being increased in the… in industry, whereas if I went into teaching, there was a guaranteed annual increment.

LM: Okay, I see.

TW: You were on a pay scale, and you got an additional amount each year. That was not guaranteed in industry. And, in effect, they broke a promise to me, in industry, because they told me that when I got my Fellowship they would increase my salary, and they didn't. So, I thought, well, these are not people I want to work for.

LM: All right, makes sense.

TW: So, and at the time, the library school in Newcastle advertised a position and I applied for it, and got the position.

LM: They must've liked you because of your very good experience in…

TW: Well I'd had, yes, quite wide experience in relatively few years, and I was already interested in research, although research was not something that the library schools did at that time; they were not involved in research, either here or in the USA or anywhere. If you look at the 1959 International Conference on Scientific Information that was held in Washington, there was nobody who gave a paper who was from an American library school, nobody.

LM: They were all from…

TW: They were all from industry.

LM: Industry…

TW: Yes. They were mainly scientists practicing information work in industry. The American library schools were doing nothing at all at the time.

LM: What were the schools back then? They would be Chicago…

TW: They were basically the training programs for librarians…

LM: Right.

TW: And a lot of them were predominantly producing school librarians for the states that they served. But there were more library schools then than there are now in the USA.

LM: But they were not called information scientists or anything like that.

TW: No, no, they were called library schools, or sometimes graduate school of librarianship.

LM: Right, I think that was the name of ours.

TW: Or library science, as they call it in America, which is nonsense of course, there's no science [laughter].

LM: There's no science. So what were… the research part of that particular time period were from scientists practicing information work in their own domain…

TW: Yes. They were practicing information workers, yes, in their own domain.

LM: And then they were not librarians, either.

TW: Some of them were, some of them were trained librarians.

LM: So like your position…

TW: Yes, for example, in that 1959 conference there were people from the atomic energy research establishment in Harwell talking about the information needs of atomic scientists, essentially. And they were professional librarians, but working in industry. Others were scientists who were working as information people in industry, but without any professional librarianship background. So at the time, it

was very much practitioner-driven; the research was very much practitioner-driven, rather than academic-driven.

LM: Right. So it's mainly in the scientific field… even medical sciences…

TW: Even medical sciences, I think, were not too strong in terms of information-related research at the time.

LM: At the time.

TW: It was predominantly industry, and research-based industry: pharmaceuticals, atomic energy…

LM: Right.

TW: The big science-based industries.

LM: And then toward… you're really actually making progress and making profits at the same time, I'm guessing.

TW: Yeah.

LM: Okay, wonderful. So that was '59, I'm trying to trace the time.

TW: So '61 I went to Newcastle.

LM: And then you started teaching.

TW: I started teaching.

LM: But there was no research component.

TW: No.

LM: I think that was why we were talking about…

TW: There was no research component anywhere at that time.

LM: It was only teaching.

TW: Right.

LM: So, basically, it's the teaching that… So, those courses were the courses that people worked toward to get that…

TW: The Associateship of the Library Association.

LM: Right. And were there any accreditation-type of things, so…?

TW: Well, no, you didn't need accreditation because the examinations were the examinations of the professional body itself.

LM: I see, I see. So you can take courses anywhere or you can study by yourself, almost, but you just have to take the examination.

TW: Yes, yes. The only courses available were those of the Library Association.

LM: I see. So, these courses were all based on the examination, pretty much.

TW: Yes, yes.

LM: Okay. So, what were the courses that you first taught? Do you remember?

TW: Oh, pretty well everything. I mean, I left C.A. Parsons on a Friday, and I started teaching twenty-three hours a week on the Monday.

LM: Phew. [laughter]. That's not possible.

TW: [laughter]. And it was possible, you had to do it. Because they were all teaching programs, there was no research component. So, I was teaching the whole of what was called the First Frofessional Examination, which were the examinations you took before beginning on the Associateship examinations. And that was a part-time course for all library assistants. And I don't know that I can remember all the elements of it, but it covered virtually the whole of librarianship: cataloging, classification, historical bibliography, modern book production, you know, everything. I was also teaching cataloging, classification, and practical cataloging and classification for the Associateship

examinations. I also went on to teach special librarianship, the bibliography of sciences, at one time as well… just about, I've taught just about everything.

LM: Almost everything.

TW: Almost everything, yes. At one time or another, yes.

LM: Cataloging, now this is almost my personal interest, back then there was no AACR2; AACR2 was seventies, I think, so it was a different system that you were teaching.

TW: No, we taught Anglo-American rules in 1909, which was the only code before AACR2.

LM: Oh, okay, and the classification is DDC, I think, mainly…

TW: No, no, we taught theoretical classification, covered… well, at that time, classification was emerging as a theoretical topic, and so that provided the basis for teaching classification theory. And we looked at all of the major cataloging classification schemes: Dewey, UDC, Bliss Classification scheme, Colon Classification scheme. And the students could choose which of these classification schemes to use in the practical examinations.

LM: Okay, wonderful. Much better than what they do now.

TW: Well, the notion of teaching much of practical relevance seems to have disappeared from the syllabus. Certainly the practice of classifying things, and cataloging, has disappeared from the syllabus. Cataloging is beginning to come back in because of developments relating to metadata and so forth. But teaching people to classify seems not to figure largely in…

LM: Not too much at all, right?

TW: Because the classification… rather cataloging data are brought in these days. So the need for in-house classification is very, very much reduced. It's still needed in academic libraries, of course…

LM: And special…

TW: And special libraries, as well. But special libraries are disappearing as they become merged into the information systems activities of companies.

LM: Okay. Now this part I don't really know, but...

TW: Yes. If you look at a big pharmaceutical company, GlaxoSmithKline, they used to have a world-wide network of special libraries. They're pretty well all gone, because they've been merged into information systems. The people who provided information services are now providing those services through the systems departments.

LM: So they don't need individual special libraries within that organization anymore.

TW: Because everything is electronic. I imagine the vast majority of companies these days don't have paper journals at all.

LM: Okay, so you move on to teaching, so let's start from there, how long were you teaching in Newcastle?

TW: I was there until 1970.

LM: So it was a good almost ten year, nine year period.

TW: Yes. And in 1970 I was asked to go to the University of Maryland as a visiting lecturer.

LM: Right. So in 1970 you went to Maryland, but I saw from your CV that in 1970 you also got your Bachelor's degree in economics from the University of London.

TW: I'd been studying independently for a degree while I was working.

LM: Okay, I see, so you were actually doing a full-time job, working on a full-time job, at the same time studying for a degree. So was it distant? I don't know the map of England too well.

TW: Well, I was just doing it independently, I was just doing the reading. I wasn't taking classes or anything.

LM: Alright, and that was quite an undertaking

TW: Quite an undertaking, yes.

LM: And why economics?

TW: Well, because the University of London at the time was the only university offering external degree programs, and they offered an external degree, the Bachelor of Science in Economics, which was a kind of polymathematical degree program, because you could specialize in areas other than economics. So although the degree title was BSc Economics, I specialized, in fact, in sociology. So that, I had to take…you took, economics…

LM: Basics, like micro, macro…

TW: Like micro, macro economics, yes, but you also did sociology of modern Britain, sociological theory, an essay on a sociological subject, political philosophy, political history, etc., etc., etc. You did psychology, you did something in practically all the social sciences as part of the degree.

LM: I see. So those were all done independently, and I guess, what was involved, so you submit work?

TW: No, no. You just read the books and then went along and took the examinations.

LM: Okay! Wow.

TW: The University of London didn't do anything for you; they just gave you the reading lists.

LM: Oh, so you read, and then you went for the exams, and at the end of the day then you got the degree.

TW: Yes. And the exams were in two stages. You took the first part of the examinations after, I think, three years, and the last part of the examinations after the fourth year. As an external student.

LM: I see. So it was over a four-year period.

TW: Well, I took five years, because…

LM: You were working full-time.

TW: I was working full-time.

LM: Yeah, that was extraordinary.

TW: And of course it wasn't, shall we say, the easiest way to get a degree. It was the only way at the time.

LM: Because I was looking at… how could I fit that in, because I didn't see it.

TW: Right. Yes, it would be noticeable by its absence.

LM: So you were working, teaching, 23 hours, that was the contact time.

TW: That was the contact time, it went down after some years, because as you move through the teaching grades, I was lecturer grade A, lecturer grade B, senior lecturer, principal lecturer, right? So, you moved through these promotion grades; as you moved through the promotion grades, your administrative responsibilities increased and your teaching responsibilities reduced. So, it ended up as being less than 23 hours.

LM: But then you had more admin work responsibilities.

TW: Yes, that's right. Because I was responsible, ultimately, for everybody who taught in the classification and cataloging area.

LM: I see. This was developing the curriculum...

TW: That's right. And during this period, the first degrees in librarianship were introduced when the polytechnics were established. This, I think, would be, I don't know, 1969, perhaps? When the polytechnics were established? And I was made responsible for putting forward a proposal for the first degree program to be offered in information science.

LM: I see. So that was a bachelor's degree in information science.

TW: Yes. And I was liaising with the science departments in the polytechnic, to produce a course which would give the students--bachelor's students--a basic scientific understanding, together with the professional competencies of information work. And that was a proposal to the Council for National

Academic Awards. This Council was established to provide the oversight for the competency effectiveness of the polytechnics. The polytechnics did not award their own degrees at the time. The degrees that they awarded were sanctioned by the Council for National Academic Awards. And they ran the examination process. They appointed the examiners, for example. And so, I was made responsible for preparing this degree program, which was approved, and it was the first degree in information science to be approved in the UK.

LM: Okay, so that's a bachelor's degree, and the polytechnic, it was not Newcastle, it was…

TW: It was called Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic.

LM: Okay, I see.

TW: And that was created by…

LM: But it was created during the time you were teaching there.

TW: Yes, by the merger of the previously independent colleges. The College of Art and Design, the College of Technology, the College of Commerce.

LM: So back then…it was the '69 you mentioned, around '69. By then, I think, so this is the bachelor's degree, but there were others like postgraduate degree, elsewhere, but there was no…

TW: Yes. There were only two graduate library schools, in fact, at the time. They were University College London, which had been established in the 1930's, and Sheffield, which was established in 1963.

LM: Okay, that's right.

TW: And that was only the second postgraduate library school to be established in a university. All of the other courses were running, by then, in the new polytechnics. And they were still preparing people for the Library Association qualifications until all of them introduced the new graduate programs, which replaced the Library Association qualifications.

LM: Oh.

TW: The Library Association accepted the undergraduate programs for entry into the Library Association for membership of the Library Association. Someone would have to undergo further training and would have to maintain a kind of record of their professional activity in order to move from being a member of the Library Association to being an Associate of the Library Association. Which means that they could put the letters ALA after their name. Just as they put BSc or BA after their name.

LM: Right. In City University back then…

TW: Which?

LM: City. City University London.

TW: City University? At the time, City University was offering a postgraduate degree in information science.

LM: Yes. I think they were the school that actually didn't have a library school background. They started as…

TW: Didn't have a library school background, no, no. They started with part-time courses in information science, organized by Jason Farradane, who really coined the notion of information science. Although the term information scientist was devised by Leslie Wilson, who was the head of ASLIB at the time. So it's interesting that the notion of information science and information scientist is a British invention. [laugh]

LM: I just figured out, I was tracing how, I always thought that it was because of the Shannon/Weaver theory in the States after the '40s, but after I read your work, it seems to me that it was quite actually earlier than that, and in the UK.

TW: Yes, yes, it was in the UK. Jason Farradane perceived the information scientist as being a scientist who worked with an industrial research group, providing information services to that group. So he

didn't see them as being in a library, he saw them as a person who was a member of the research group. But with a specialized function in that research group. To be the information gate-keeper, if you like, for the group.

LM: So, it's very much like when you were working in the C.A. Parson's…

TW: Exactly.

LM: So this is the definition of what an information scientist can do.

TW: Exactly. I was working out of a library, a special library, working with research groups, and helping research groups. Jason Farradane's concept of the information scientist was somebody who was in the research group.

LM: Himself a scientist

TW: Yes

LM: Say, if it was physics, with a physics background.

TW: Yes, exactly, if it was a group of metallurgists working on research, then the information scientist would be a metallurgist first and an information worker second. This was the original concept of the information scientist.

LM: That makes a lot of sense.

TW: It's changed a lot since then.

LM: We don't know what that means anymore.

TW: Right, right, exactly.

LM: Or at least I don't know. [laughs]

TW: It was a very precise definition, and his course at City University, at the time, was intended for scientists.

LM: Yes. So, but let's take us back to Newcastle first. So you wrote the proposal.

TW: Well, with my colleagues; I…

LM: Right, and then there's this new bachelor's degree in information science, but with some component of the library school.

TW: Yes. We were teaching indexing, information retrieval and so on. Scientific literature…

LM: Which means that, but now people who were enrolled in the bachelor's degrees, they would be members of the Library Association but not necessarily working toward to become an associate or a fellowship.

TW: Yes, yes. They might go on and get jobs in very different kinds of settings.

LM: Right. So there was an invention back then, in terms of a new profession, that you can take the knowledge to work in industry or other places.

TW: Yes. We also sent them out to work in industry as part of the program.

LM: Right. So there was the bachelor's, and then from what I have read, then you got a tenured, two-year position as a principal investigator, a PI, in Sheffield.

TW: No, I was in Maryland for a year before that.

LM: After...

TW: Well I was still employed by Newcastle, but I was given leave of absence to take up the position in Maryland for a year. I was given a year's leave of absence. The reason for this is that, at the time, the dean at Maryland was a man called Paul Wasserman, very well known in the field as an innovator. And one of his beliefs was that nobody knew how to teach classification in America. And at the time he was probably right. Because even… I shan't mention the name of the university, but it is a very highly recommended, well-thought-of university, I was told by somebody who studied there, at the time, that classification was taught by the lecturer reading out the schedules of the decimal classification scheme.

LM: Oh no. [laughs]

TW: And this was all that anybody did even at the Library of Congress using their classification scheme. Now, at the time, in the 1950s, people in the UK were very strongly interested in classification theory. Largely as a result of visits by Dr. Ranganathan to the UK. And visits by some people in the UK to India to talk with him about the development of faceted classification. And people in the UK were to the fore in the development of these ideas, of the production of faceted classification schemes in different fields. For example, I think Library and Information Science Abstracts still runs on the faceted classification scheme that was devised for them in the 1950s. There was a faceted classification scheme devised for the British Catalog of Music, a music classification scheme. And Paul Wasserman recognized that there was something going on, which was more theoretical than anything that was being done in the USA at the time. And so he started bringing in teachers from the UK to teach the classification courses, and he had Jack Mills, who was a very well known worker in the field of classification. He was editor of the last version of the Bliss Classification scheme, for example. Derek Needham, who was a lecturer at Polytechnic of North London; David Batty, who was a lecturer at the Aberystwyth school; and me. And I taught at Maryland for a year, including the summer school, and again, that was quite… that was a very interesting experience because it was, of course, a totally different setting, organizational setting. You know, at the time, the University of Maryland had 35,000 students, whereas Newcastle Polytechnic probably had about a thousand or two thousand. [laughs]

LM: Big university.

TW: So, the scale of things was enormously, enormously different. But also, there was a great deal of social unrest in the 1970s in America, as a result of the Black movement in the USA. In 1970, for example, F Street in Washington, the main shopping street, had been torched, burnt. Many of the shops burnt. The University of Maryland was one of the southern universities that protested against the introduction of blacks into the universities.

LM: Okay. It was during that time.

TW: Yes.

LM: They were celebrating the…

TW: By the time 1970-71 happened, there were black students in the university, but the university had actually held out against introducing them. So, there was a racist background to…

LM: And it was right after the Vietnam War, too.

TW: Yes, yes, exactly. So, there was, it was a problematical institution. There was a great deal of, well, black protests against various things happening in the university. Which were not only black; the white students were working with the black students to bring about change. And you had an administration which didn't want, necessarily, the kinds of changes that were being asked for. So in 1970 there were riots on the campus; in 1971 there were riots on the campus. They spilled across US Route 1, which ran through the campus, and held up the traffic on US Route 1 for hours. The National Guard was called out, there were tear gas grenades thrown, it was, you know, it was an interesting time. [laughs]

LM: Were you safe?

TW: I stayed home that day. [laughs] But yes, the University was closed that day. Some people who went on to the campus did suffer from tear gas effects. So it was an interesting time, very different from Newcastle upon Tyne Polytechnic, as you can imagine. And there was a great deal of dissent within the school itself; there were factions that were working against one another. It was, there was so little agreement on the faculty, that I was made chair of the curriculum development committee.

LM: As a visiting…

TW: As a visiting lecturer, because they couldn't agree as to who on the regular faculty should be chair of the committee.

LM: How big was the school back then?

TW: I can't really recall. It must've been, I suppose, about 25 to 30 full-time and adjunct faculty, yes. It was quite a sizeable school. And a very well-known school. Lots of demand for it.

LM: Because they have to do a lot of archival work. I think that now, archives is one of the main components of the school, I suppose.

TW: It may well be, yes, yes.

LM: I'm not totally sure now; but because of the location, they are supposed to do a lot of work with the government.

TW: Yes, yes. I was one of three visiting lecturers during that year. One of the others was Dagobert Soergel, who stayed on. And another was Hans Wellisch, who also stayed on. He worked in cataloging. And, again, such was the lack of collaboration in the full-time faculty, that the pro-seminar program, which was a double-length introductory program to librarianship and information science, that was devised by Dagobert and myself. Two visiting lecturers and we ran the pro-seminar program with other people coming in to give lectures throughout the period. But it was we who organized it. And the Dean at the time was an acting Dean, Mike Reynolds, who was a brilliant man, one of the brightest people I've ever known in my life. And he was the victim of character assassination by the Black Student Caucus. [laughs] So his position as acting Dean was never confirmed as Dean, and he took over from Paul Wasserman in 1970. But by 1971 they were looking for a new Dean. Another member of staff, Margaret Chisholm, was appointed Dean at the end of that academic year. It was a very messy time.

LM: It sounds very messy. A lot of changes, a lot of unrest.

TW: Absolutely, absolutely.

LM: But you and others who went there, you built the program there.

TW: Yes, yes, we built a program there, and it stayed, it remained. That pro-seminar program that we devised lasted at least five years, or possibly longer.

LM: Yes. '70-71. So, okay. Let me backtrack a little bit.

TW: What's the time… Oh, let us have a cup of coffee, shall we?

LM: Sure.

TW: We'll take a break.

Tom Wilson Oral History, Interviewed by Lai Ma

Start Part 2 of 3

Lai Ma: So let's see… We stopped at Newcastle, when you… about the bachelor's degree in information science. And then you went to Maryland.

Tom Wilson: Yes.

LM: And there was one full year in Maryland.

TW: Yes, yes.

LM: It was one full year in Maryland, and then, I think we can start from there, and then you came back.

TW: And then I came back to the UK, after teaching the summer school there in 1971, and I went back to work at the Polytechnic, and about three weeks after I got back, the head of department here in Sheffield rang me up, Wilf Saunders, and asked me if I would like to come down to Sheffield to run a research project. And I said, 'Whoa, I've just got back from a year's leave of absence; I'd better talk with Bill Caldwell about this.' And he said, 'Oh, I've already talked with Bill.' [laughs] The two of them had already agreed that I could have, in this case, a further two years' leave of absence from the Polytechnic in Newcastle to take up this principal investigator position in Sheffield. So this is what I did. I came down to Sheffield in January 1971, to run a research project on local library cooperation. This was funded by the Department of Education and Science, as it was called at the time, which was the national agency responsible for education in the country. And we were looking… the rationale for the project, as I understood it, was the Department of Education believed that money could be saved if

local libraries collaborated more closely. And they were thinking specifically of close collaboration between public and university libraries. And Sheffield at the time had the public library, which was a very good public library (it's deteriorated sadly since then, because of the financial cuts that we've undergone); it had the university library, the Polytechnic library; it had an Institute of Education library, which was a separate library within the university system, an autonomous library system, and it had two teacher training colleges. So there were, in all, six libraries that we examined in various ways. We did many small research projects including things like catalog overlap studies, in-library use studies, information needs investigations in all of these places. And I had a team of three people, plus a secretary, working with me on that project for two years, and we eventually published a report for the Department of Education and Science specifying what might be done. And I had become interested in doing this, coming from a sociological background, my interest was in finding out about organizational collaboration in general; what does the literature have to say about organizational collaboration? But interestingly nobody had taken this approach to library cooperation before. There'd been no fundamental examination of library cooperation. There were stories about library cooperation and how we did it, and all the rest of it, but nobody had looked at it from any kind of theoretical perspective. And there is a whole body of work on inter-organizational collaboration, and corroboration, dealing with, largely stemming from, the Johnson administration in the USA, when a lot of money went into social programs, which depended upon collaboration among social agencies in the USA. So there's this big body of work about inter-organizational collaboration, which I tapped into. And on the basis of that, drew up… and on the basis of the research that we'd done, drew up a program which could be implemented locally, which would encourage further collaboration among the libraries. So that was accepted by the Department of Education and Science, and later, it served as the basis for the introduction of a number of schemes of collaboration all through the country. And locally, we

implemented the collaborative program among the libraries in Sheffield, which, by the time we finished, were reduced to three.

LM: Okay.

TW: The public library, the Polytechnic library, which now included the colleges of education, and the University library, which now included the Institute of Education as part of the University Library Collections. And by this time, by the end of the two years, the lectureship had become available here in the department, and I was appointed to that lectureship. This was a step down financially, because I was two rungs higher up the system in Newcastle, but I felt like it was worth taking the financial hit in order to continue to work in the department here. And initially, I became a member of the Sheffield libraries coordinating committee, which was the body that was established on the basis of the research. It was chaired by the Vice Chancellor, and after a few months, the Vice Chancellor got busy with other things, and he asked me to take over the Chair of the committee. So from being a researcher on library cooperation, I found myself being the Chair of the committee which was trying to implement the ideas of the research program, which was interesting. But that committee did some very useful things; it established, for example, the possibility of people being referred from the public library to use the University library or the Polytechnic library, for researchers in the Polytechnic to use the University library and vice versa. So it got a lot of collaborative activity going within the city, and it also got a collaborative training program going. So that courses were developed, or lecture series were developed, in which people from different institutions came together to hear the speaker and so forth. So it generated quite a bit of collaborative activity.

LM: Interactions…

TW: And interactions between… it led to the development of, for example, a union list of periodicals held in the different libraries in the city. And so it was, I think, quite a successful research project

because it had a practical outcome. And it not only had a practical outcome locally, but it informed the development of similar schemes all around the country.

LM: So was that your first research project?

TW: Not really the first research project. While I was at Newcastle, I'd carried out an investigation into cataloging and classification practice in public libraries in the UK. I never got around to publishing it because nobody published anything at the time; you just used it in teaching.

LM: Okay. So, even though back then the responsibility was to teach, there were no research components, but you did research on your own?

TW: Yes, yes, yes, if you wanted to, and I was the only one who did. [laughs] I was the only one who wanted to. Nobody else bothered to do anything. They did their teaching and that was it.

LM: Okay. But when you were invited to Sheffield, then you started on this project, and then it was implemented not only in Sheffield and…

TW: nation-wide, yes.

LM: but nation-wide as a model.

TW: Yes, yes.

LM: So you stayed in Sheffield then. That's the local library cooperation project, and then you stayed in Sheffield as a lecturer here.

TW: Yes, yes. And then Senior Lecturer, and then Reader, and then Professor,

LM: Right! Now, there's one thing I need to fill in the gap as well. Here I found that you got the PhD from Sheffield in '75, so you joined as a principal investigator in…

TW: 1971

LM: '71. So how did that come out?

TW: Well, I used the research project that I was working on for the PhD.

LM: I see.

TW: I collected additional information from two other cities, myself, and used that data along with data from the research project here, which I was directing anyway, you see. And on the basis of that I wrote a PhD dissertation on local library cooperation. From the perspective of inter-organizational theory.

LM: Okay. So that, that actually used your work, your degree from University of London because of all the sociological work…

TW: Sure; yes.

LM: …that actually supported your work. Okay. So did you have a PhD advisor at all, how did it work?

TW: No, I was a staff member. As a staff member you don't have a supervisor.

LM: Okay.

TW: I would talk to people, of course.

LM: So it was just like, in some ways, how you did the bachelor's degree.

TW: That's right.

LM: So you did the work on your own.

TW: I'm entirely self-educated. [laughs]

LM: That's just wonderful. [laughs]

TW: In fact I think it's basically stupid; if I could've done it any other way, I think I would've done it some other way, but this was the only way open to me, so this is what I did.

LM: At a certain point you said you wrote this dissertation… I suppose, there would be examiners…

TW: Yes, there were two examiners. Again, as a staff member, I didn't have one external examiner and one internal examiner, I had two external examiners. And they were the head of the school at

Loughborough University, Peter Havard Williams, and the librarian of Newcastle University, but his name escapes me at the moment. Both of them now dead. Yes, and I got the degree, and that was it.

LM: Okay. And that's why you didn't really mention those too much at all because it was just a process.

TW: It was just a process; I was just doing it as I was working, yes, yes.

LM: Alright, and then… let's see. So you moved on from… that's the local library coop…

TW: Oh, let's do something. Sorry, excuse me.

LM: Sure, no problem.

TW: I've forgotten something.

LM: Alright.

TW: Okay, and at the end of the local library cooperation research project, I became a lecturer in the department, and I started teaching in the management area.

LM: Okay.

TW: Yeah.

LM: So was it a switch? You were teaching library topics…

TW: Well, I devised a new course because--- the reason the position was advertised was that Sheffield was given a number of post-graduate studentships from the Department of Education and Science to create a post-graduate program in social science information studies.

LM: I see.

TW: There was an MSc in information science already, in the department, and money was given to create an MSc in information science (brackets) social sciences [Note, i.e., MSc in Information Science (Social Sciences)]. And so I was to teach on this, so we were devising a new program, and I developed the program for management. And I made it a program in general management, with an emphasis on the

information function in organizations, rather than a library management program. So, the course was designed on the systems theory basis, looking at organizational theory, social psychology and organizations, and so on and so forth. Because of my… I had a background in sociology, economics and psychology, it was, you know, obviously to put that knowledge to use, it was better to do that in the management field rather than in what I had been teaching, which was information retrieval, basically.

LM: I see. So you started teaching there, and then what was the research? So you have the teaching…

TW: Well, the research I then moved into, the work on the local library cooperation project, had involved quite extensive studies on information needs of the academic institutions, interviewing a sample of academics and also using… on the basis of the interviews, developing a questionnaire. Again, this was on the basis of my bachelor's degree, which had had courses in statistics and research methods, social research methods, as part of the degree. So I was putting to use things that I'd learned. And, we had… earlier, while still at Newcastle, I had become interested in information-seeking behavior as a field of work. While I was at Maryland, I also developed these ideas further. For example, in the graduate… doctoral seminar that I gave while I was there, I developed a model of the information-seeking process, which formed the basis of subsequent modeling activity. So I was interested in this; I was interested in the problems of social workers in particular, because it was evident that the information issues in this area were considerably problematical, particularly as it related to the problem of child abuse. Because whenever there is a case of child abuse, one of the recommendations is that agencies need to exchange information more. All right? And you get case after case, year after year after year, and the conclusion is always the same. And just this year, there was another case here in the UK, and the conclusion was exactly the same as it had been ten years ago. It seems no progress can be made on this problem, because a child is the responsibility of several agencies. They're in school, they're in the family. If they are at risk in any way, the social services department has to step in; if

they're a bit older and they get into trouble, the police might be involved, alright? So, the number of

agencies that can affect a child is quite considerable. If they suffer from health problems then medical

services become involved. If they're abused, medical services may become involved. So it's a very

complex area, this problem area. And I was interested in doing some work in social services. So, I

wrote a proposal to the British Library Research and Development Department, which was the funding

agency for the field at the time. That, sadly, is now gone; there is no specialist funding for library and

information research. People just have to take their chance with the British Humanities Research

Council or the Economic and Social Research Council. We got what would now be a very large grant.

Because we had a three-year program funded by the British Library R and D department, and there was

myself, principal investigator, three researchers, and a secretary. You can imagine how much money

that would cost now. You couldn't get that kind of funding now. [laughs]

LM: No [laughs]

TW: You couldn't get that kind of funding now. And at the end of the three-year period, we went to the

Department of Health and Social Security, as it was called at the time, and got a further two-year

funding to actually implement the ideas that came out of the research project. And that was the INISS

project - information needs and social services. So, in all, it was a five-year research program. A great

deal of work done, some novelty in the approach, because we started off using structured observation as

the research tool, something I'd picked up from Henry Mintzberg's book on management, *What

Managers Do*, which I discovered entirely accidentally. I found it… we shared a house with another

research project, and the principal investigator's secretary had this book on her desk, waiting to be sent

back to the British Library. And I looked it, and I thought, 'oh, this is interesting.' So I borrowed it for

a while, and built the ideas into a research proposal, doing structured observation followed by

interviews, research interviews, as the principal research methods. And the British Library Research

and Development Department took some degree of persuasion that this would be feasible, because they didn't think we would get people to allow us to observe what they were doing. In fact it was quite the opposite; they welcomed us with open arms as observers. Because they said, 'this is much better than filling in questionnaires.' [laughs]

LM: It was in the seventies.

TW: From their perspective, as people working in agencies, it didn't take them away from their jobs. They didn't have to spend time… all they had to do was to carry on what they were doing, just their ordinary daily work. And we might ask questions from time to time, but basically we were observing what was going on. And we structured the observation in terms of what we called communication events. So, for example, a communication event might involve the social work of reading a letter and writing a response to it, to a client, for example. Or a telephone call to a regional director of social services from his boss, in which they go over a number of topics, would be several communication events, depending upon how many topics were dealt with in the course of the communication. And we used Mintzberg's analysis as the framework for analysis, but inventing a couple of additional categories that he hadn't thought of from his work with managers; we identified at least two that I can remember, new categories of behavior that he hadn't found. He used the term, for example, resource allocator, and we found a new function, that of resource-seeker, all right? People, before they're allocated resources, have to seek resources. Whereas in the situations he was looking at, people were handed down budgets, and they then managed them. But we saw that people actually had to go out and look for resources rather than simply receive them. So that was a novel project in a variety of ways. It used structured observation, which had never been used as extensively before, and it looked at information behavior within a general communications framework. That was, I think, entirely novel.

LM: That was novel.

TW: Until that time, we're talking about 1980, when we were doing this. A lot of people date the shift to person-oriented information seeking from system-oriented, to the ARIST chapter by Dervin and Nilan.

LM: That was '86.

TW: Which was a good deal after we, in fact, had introduced it. So the shift to the person-oriented perspective was actually in the INISS project.

LM: That was way before the… you also introduced the social research methods in studying the behavior.

TW: Yes, yes.

LM: I think… even though, I think, that the switch from quantitative, the so-called quantitative, to qualitative, was much later…

TW: At the time, the whole orientation from the end of the Second World War onwards, was positivist in approach. And I think that the INISS project was really the first major investigation using qualitative methods. And at the end of it, advocating qualitative methods. Well, not even the end of it, because by 1981, I was publishing about the need for qualitative methods. But even later, a good many years later, probably still… it might've been '88, '87, '88… I was sponsored by the British Council to do a tour of the Canadian library schools. And then, when I talked about qualitative methods, from some people there was a degree of hostility towards the idea. Everybody, at that time, in the '80s, was still thinking about information science, as a science, and positivist rather than as a social science, and qualitative. Now, the pendulum has swung too far in the other direction, as everything is qualitative and not enough is done which is quantitative. So, we get lots and lots of qualitative investigations, which bring forward ideas which ought then to be investigated quantitatively with big numbers. Because the qualitative research simply cannot be generalized to populations in general. They only relate to the subjects that the

researcher has dealt with, and that's it. They can't do any more. It's argued that if a number of

qualitative investigations are carried out in the same field, then you can begin to generalize if the

findings replicate one another. But this is only the case if these investigations are carried on within the

same frameworks, using the same tools.

LM: Yes.

TW: Because if you ask different questions, you don't know that you're getting the same answers.

LM: Or can you say that they represent the same ideas?

TW: You can't say they represent the same situation if they're carried out in different situations.

LM: And I think, back then, the qualitative work that you undertook was… the scope was much wider,

and it took a long time, as well.

TW: Yes, yes. Well, you know, a five-year research project employing a total of five people, is just…

LM: Yes. And I think, now, a lot of qualitative work…

TW: is just tiny, twelve interviews. [laughs]

LM: Yes. [laughs] And there's a reasonable doubt, sometimes, when you look at work like that.

TW: But we had 21 observation subjects, I think it was, and then 150 interviews, which were

quantitative… well, mixed. They were some closed questions, some open questions, in the interviews.

And the interview schedule was based directly on the observational experience. That was, no, 21 weeks

of observation studies. Not 21 people; 21 weeks. And the observations were planned so that the

researchers were observing people who might be expected to meet at some time, or at least communicate

with one another.

LM: Right.

TW: So we would have a basic social worker, a specialist, who might be a specialist in childcare or

handicapped persons, or whatever, who would act as an advisor to the social workers in dealing with

their client group. We would have the social workers' line manager, and we would have, perhaps, the line manager's line manager at the regional level. So, all of these people might be expected to come into contact with one another during the week of observation that we were there.

LM: It was a research project.

TW: It was a big research project, the like of which rarely gets funded anymore, because the vast majority of research is predominantly doctoral research in the field. And people don't stay in the field in which they do their doctoral research; this is another problem. They get jobs and the exigencies of the job means that they have to start teaching other things, and…

LM: And maybe doing smaller things. [laughs]

TW: And they're doing smaller things, and the funding agencies that provide the money, in this country, don't exist any longer. Which is why the [British Library's] Research and Development Department is gone.

LM: Okay. That's just sad. [laughs]

TW: Well, it means that the scope for large-scale research projects is considerably reduced.

LM: Yes. Increasingly smaller and smaller grants that we can get to do things...

TW: Yes.

LM: But that also means that you cannot plan for bigger…

TW: It doesn't happen everywhere; I mean, what I'm currently working on in Sweden is a research project, which I largely wrote, into e-books, in Sweden, and that got 12 million Swedish krona, which is about 1.6 million dollars.

LM: That's a lot of money!

TW: Which is a lot of money, yes, and that will last for four years.

LM: Oh, wonderful.

TW: So it is possible in some places, still, to get significant project money.

LM: Right. Okay. Wonderful. So that was, let me try to get that. From 1971, that you were back in Sheffield, until the early '80s, and then you… there was a lot of internationalization that you were involved in, too; you were invited to many places.

TW: Yes. Well, this had been established by Wilf Saunders, Professor Saunders, previously, when he started the school. It was a very small place. When I took over as head of department in 1981… no, 1981?

LM: What I have is 1982…

TW: 1982

LM: Then you were there 15 years.

TW: Yes, yes, I was 15 years as head of department. When I took over in 1982, there were only eight and a half staff; eight full time and one part time. So it was a small school. And this was at the time when the Thatcher government was introducing major financial cuts in higher education. I think in 1981 we had cuts of 15 percent in the university budget, which was really massive. And the… it was very difficult to get new staff, well, impossible, because there was a freeze. So if people left, then you couldn't replace them. And, we had severe difficulties in the '80s simply in surviving. There were two occasions on which we were going to be merged into other departments, because we were small. The approach of the University was that small departments couldn't be afforded any longer. Several were closed and others were merged. All of the different departments of history, for example, were merged into a school of history, or the language departments were merged into a school of languages. And all this was going on all the time. But I was able to defend our position, shall we say, to survive, and realized that the only way the department could survive was, in fact, by expanding rather than by trying to stay the same. And so we began to devise new Masters programs, attract more students. Eventually

we started undergraduate programs. And it was only by that expansion and diversification program that we actually managed to survive as a department. Without that we would have been wiped out. But we had a strategic plan, we were required… all departments were required to produce strategic plans; at one point these were reviewed, and if the plan was sound, then you got support. If the plan wasn't well-designed, you didn't. So in order to produce the strategic plan, I did surveys of future personnel needs in libraries. So we did studies of academic and public libraries to find out how many people they would need, nationally, for the future. And on the basis of this, I could say that because of our reputation, we could attract people, and, although… I think I found that, if all the students were distributed equally over the fifteen library schools… no, not fifteen; twelve, I think, library schools existed at the time, each library school would be able to find a job for eleven people a year, right? And they were taking in intakes of 30 people. So, they were going to be in trouble. So I had, in other words, I'd done my homework in this respect, and the strategic plan was approved. In fact, they said it was probably the best strategic plan they'd had from anybody. And we survived, and continued to grow. So by the time I stepped down as Head of Department, from eight and a half staff, we'd grown to 15 staff.

LM: That's substantial.

TW: Substantial, yes. And without the diversification, without the new Masters programs… we had a Masters program in information systems jointly with the computer science department, we had two undergraduate programs jointly with the business school, we had a health informatics program jointly with the medical school. So we extended our contacts within the University, created joint programs in which we were the agency that actually ran it. The other departments contributed, but the locus of the program was in the department. In other words, we were able to keep control of things while… because the student numbers were shared out to the contributing departments. So they got income to those departments, but we kept control of the program.

LM: So this is also largely based on the experience in special libraries and information management…

TW: To a degree, yes. I mean, it was… yes. I mean, everything I've done, I think, has been based, essentially, on the bachelor's degree that I did. Because it gave me a very wide grounding in the social sciences, and access to literatures that were relevant in managing a department, managing programs, and so forth. Dealing with people, and all the rest of it.

LM: So how was the environment in Sheffield when you first took up the job? I think I read that… how did you become the head? [laughs]

TW: How did I become the head?

LM: And stay there for 15 years?

TW: Yes. Well. I became acting… well, Wilf Saunders retired, and a new head was advertised for, a professorial position was advertised. By the time the professorial position was advertised, I had been given the personal chair, which is awarded on the basis of research activity. And so, the administrative chair was not of any particular significance to me because I was already a professor. But I was asked if I would be acting head, and I said, 'no, 'I won't be acting head, I'll be head, temporarily. But I won't be acting, I'll be doing it.' And so I was head for a year, but they couldn't find anybody.

[My wife wants me at something here. Oh, is lunch ready? … Yes, we're just about ready to adjourn, yes.]

And then after a year, there was another financial crisis, and they decided they couldn't afford another one [director]. So I was asked if I would stay on. And at the same time, the University introduced a system whereby heads of departments were elected from the senior staff by the members of the department. And that election, approved by the Vice Chancellor, or not-- if the Vice Chancellor thought that the person wasn't up to it, then he would say, 'go away and think again.' But mostly, people who were elected as head of department were appointed by the Vice Chancellor to be head of

department. And so, at the first election, my colleagues asked me if I would stand for election. So I said, 'well, I've been doing the job for two years, then.' So I said, 'okay, I'll do it this time.' But by the time I'd been doing it for five years, I was reasonably competent at it. And my colleagues kept asking me…

LM: 'Will you do it again?'

TW: 'Will you do it again?' So that's why I ended up doing it for 15 years.

LM: Wonderful. [laughs]

TW: Well, not really. [laughs] Not really. I never really wanted to be the head of department or whatever, but I just wanted to get on with my research and teaching. But I was doing the job reasonably successfully, and it seemed to me that if my colleagues were happy with what I was doing, and the University was happy, and the department was thriving, then I might as well carry on and do it, because nobody else wanted to do it. Nobody else had any great desire to be head of department, because it's a terrible job.

LM: That must be also because they had a great leader.

TW: I don't know about a great leader, but, you know, collectively, we got things done.

LM: Wonderful. Okay. So, I think we can stop here for now.

TW: Yes, take a break.

Tom Wilson Oral History Interview

 Interviewed by Lai Ma

Start Part 3 of 3

Lai Ma: All right. So.

Tom Wilson: Where did we get to?

LM: Where did we get to? I think we talked a lot about…

TW: About the growth of the department, from 1982 onwards.

LM: When you were the head of school.

TW: Yes.

LM: So, do you have anything to add during that time? Let me think about that… it was the time that you developed a lot of programs and developed a bachelor's degree…

TW: Yes.

LM: …in the department, and what else did you do? Maybe you can tell…

TW: Well, there were research projects, of course, that I was involved in, as well, and I kept on…

LM: So the Center for Research on User Studies, that was well before then?

TW: That was well before. That was established, I think, probably part-way through the INISS project; I can't remember exactly when. It'd be in the literature; there's a paper about CRUS there. That… I was the de facto head of that, although it was actually run by someone else during the period. In fact, three people. One person stayed for just a short time; the other one was Jeffrey Ford, who had done work at Lancaster University that was of relevance. He ultimately became librarian of Bristol University, died just recently. And then the next guy became librarian of Manchester Metropolitan University, ultimately. So, people made good careers out of being involved in CRUS, and it had quite a lot of research projects over the time it existed. It basically depended upon a grant from the British Library Research and Development Department to keep it going, as well as bidding for projects. And ultimately the amount of money that the British Library had available for centers like that reduced, and it just had to come to an end. There was no way to keep it going. But I continued to put in research proposals in various areas. A number of them in information management areas, rather than

information-seeking behavior, because I became interested in the concept of information management. And in fact, we changed the name of the social science Master's to MSc in information management, fairly early on in that development. I think it was the second program in the country to be called MSc in information management.

LM: When was that, around what time?

TW: In the 1980s.

LM: '80s.

TW: Yes. Exactly when I can't recall, but in the late 1980's, probably. 'Eighty-seven, '88 perhaps. And that interestingly attracted a different kind of student from the previous degree program. It attracted people who wanted to work in business and industry, and so forth, with more diverse academic backgrounds than previously had. So it was successful in attracting a different kind of student, new students, more students. And then we started the MSc in information systems, jointly with the computer science department, because they didn't have an information systems program. It had come to my attention that the business school was thinking of starting an information systems program.

LM: So it was just in the '80s; before then, business schools didn't have information systems.

TW: No, didn't have… So I thought I'd better move quickly in order to make sure they came to us rather than to them. And the MSc in health information management, which became the MSc in health informatics, which still… all of these programs are still running. And then, for a while, there was an MSc in chemical informatics, because a strong research orientation in the department from the early days had been in chemical informatics, because the first researcher to be appointed, Michael Lynch, had been head of research at the Chemical Abstracts [Service]. And he had been responsible for the development of the indexing system used by chemical abstracts. So, there was quite a bit of funded research in the department into chemical information systems, compound retrieval systems, doing work

for the pharmaceutical companies. And that was extended subsequently by Peter Willard, Professor Willard now, who was Michael Lynch's research student. And he found that the algorithms used for the comparison of chemical compounds could be used, with some adjustments, to do similar searches for protein structures. And so his research diversified into the protein structure area, which of course becomes important, again, for pharmaceutical companies, in respect of genetic therapies, gene therapies. So, the department had a very diverse approach to the field, more or less from the beginning in 1963. And it was, if you like, an I-school, before there were I-schools.

LM: Yes, it's really…

TW: Just as [Syracuse?], you see, was an information school, long before the other schools caught on to the idea.

LM: I think that… Were they the first to become an information science school?

TW: Probably, yes. They were very early as a school of information studies rather than a library school. Yes, yes.

LM: A library school. Yes. Okay. Now, perhaps we can move on to your very… your footprints on the earth [laughs].

TW: [laughs]

LM: That there's a substantial part of your career… It's remarkable what you have done for Sheffield, and then for information-seeking behavior research. But you are also very broad in research in many ways…

TW: Yes, yes.

LM: and, I think, the first article that I read from you was from a management class, and I loved it.

TW: Right.

LM: Yes. And then, later on, people will talk about you as an information-seeking, information

behavior person. And I said, 'really?' But it seems to be [laughs]… and that's a lot of things, but…

TW: I think it's a matter of circumstances, you see, because in the circumstances in which we found

ourselves, in the 1980s, under great financial pressure, you had to go where the money was. So, you

diversify your research activities in order to get the grants, rather than to pursue a particular area of

research whether or not you can get the grants. Because if you don't get the research money, if you

don't get the research grants, you don't get the publications. And with the research evaluation process

coming in, in the 1980s, departments couldn't afford not to be performing.

LM: Right.

TW: So you had to go where the money was.

LM: Okay. That's good advice.

TW: And social research methods are sufficiently wide in their applicability. But if you think of

yourself as a social researcher, rather than an information scientist, you've got more scope for getting

the grants, because you can write a proposal for anything, on the basis of social research methods.

LM: And do something useful.

[TW: I need to let the cat out.

LM: Sure.]

TW: So, footprint. Which footprint are you interested in?

LM: You were all over the world; you visited Turkey, Morocco, I think… Did you hold any positions in

those countries? But Portugal…

TW: No, no. These visits were largely at the behest of the British Council in the early days. Wilf

Saunders forged very strong links with British Council, and, in fact, he was chair of one of their

committees, for the British Council, the Libraries committee of the British Council. And we had, in the

'70s and '80s, a lot of courses that we ran, summer schools, for the British Council. Wilf did a lot of visits abroad on behalf of the British Council. So we had a lot of international connections built up during Wilf Saunders's time. And I took that on, following Wilf's retirement. So it was really down to Wilf for the fact that we had such excellent connections. It wasn't that connections disappeared, but the role of the British Council changed, again, as a result of the Thatcher regime. Instead of spreading the word of Britain abroad, Thatcher changed the British Council into an income-earning activity for Britain. And from being a major library information provider in many countries,--I mean, in some countries--the British Council library was the only public library in the capital. Instead of performing that role, more and more attention was devoted to the English language teaching courses that they ran as a means of earning income to pay for their activities. That was extremely short-sighted activity, just as it was similarly short-sighted to reduce the scope of the BBC World Service, for example, which, whenever you travel abroad, people… you talk to people, and what they listened to for news was the BBC World Service, because they know that they're getting a better service than any local provider is going to give them. [laughs] Less local bias, shall we say. So, these moves to reduce the influence of the British Council and the BBC World Service, are, in my view, criminally stupid. But, the role of the British Council changed, and so our work that we did for the British Council disappeared, and subsequently, some of the connections that the Council created for us continued, some of them just disappeared, and new opportunities didn't arise through the British Council, because it was changing. So, the basis for our international activities then became the research that we were doing, and also for the educational programs. So, people traveled in order to advise on curriculum development and things of this kind, and to give lectures on programs, to act as external examiners in some places, for example. Ethiopia was one place that we had people go to. And I also developed connections with Portugal.

LM: Right. So that's one of the strongest…

TW: That was one of our strongest connections, and that started in about 1978, and continued until I

stepped down as head of department in '98 or whenever it was. And that started on the basis of doing

some consultancy work for an agency in Lisbon. And from there, I was involved in the development of

a training program for people working in Chambers of Commerce in Portugal--information specialists in

Chambers of Commerce--which was quite successful. And that was based on some research funding

that my Portuguese partner, Dr. Ana Maria Correia, received. And from that we decided to offer the

information management degree in Portugal, not in an academic institution, but in this organization I

was working with, which was the National Engineering Laboratories in Portugal. And we offered the

two intakes of the MSc in information management there, which I think was the first information

management program offered in Portugal. But when other universities saw what we were doing, the

Portuguese universities started to offer degrees in information management.

LM: So they would also spread out.

TW: So it spread out from what we were doing. And those two intakes were very successful. We ran

them as eighteen-month programs instead of one-year programs, because everybody was doing it part-

time in Portugal. And that was very successful; in fact, one of our graduates out of that program, Nunes,

is a lecturer in the department. And in fact… no, we have two lecturers in the department who were

involved in that program; one of them as a tutor, and one of them as a student, who are now lecturers in

the department. So it was a strong connection that we had. That continued, well, my personal

connection with it continued, until the organization underwent reconstruction, because of problems in

the Portuguese economy. But by that time, I had been invited to help develop an MSc program at the

University of Porto. Again, as a result of one of the students on the MSc program, becoming librarian of

the Faculty of Engineering. And she persuaded the faculty to introduce a master's program in

information management, with help from Sheffield. And I became, with the grandiose title, Professor

Catedratico Convidado in the Faculty of Engineering in the University of Porto. And that course still

continues, although the Sheffield connection has diminished, unfortunately, because I think that they

could've built on it, and done more, but people didn't want to go to Porto and do teaching, so, okay. So,

the continuation is now through a PhD student of mine who works in the business school at Leeds,

Leeds University Business School, David Allen, continues to teach on that program. But he, of course,

is no longer connected to the department. So the connection is now with Leeds. But since I'm also

Visiting Professor with Leeds in the Business School, that means that I know what's going on.

LM: Okay. And then you have connections with the Swedish School, so you're now a visiting…

TW: Yes, yes. Well, just before I retired, the then-Head of Department at Borås asked me if I would

like to be visiting professor for them, so I said 'yeah, fine.' Because, again, they wanted help in

developing the research programs, and they had a very curious history from this point of view, because

the doctoral program in Sweden, at the time, was only through Gothenburg University. But Gothenburg

University only had a professor, nobody else.

LM: One.

TW: One professor. And this one professor had about twenty-five PhD students.

LM: Impossible! [laughs]

TW: Mainly part-time, and most of them on the staff of the Borås Library School, or the Swedish School

of Library and Information Science, as it became called. So, Borås and Gothenburg reached an

agreement whereby the program, the PhD program, would actually be based in Borås, and the professor

would become head of research for the school in Borås. Now it happened that the professor was an old

friend of mine from Sweden, whom I'd known since the 1970s, so we had a good relationship. And I

was helping him to manage this caseload of doctoral students, in effect, by sitting down and talking with

them all on discovering where they were at and reaching my own conclusion on how likely they were ever to complete, and I eventually went along to him and said, 'well, I think you've probably got a dozen people you can actually focus on, and get through this process. The rest of them are probably never, they're going to retire before they finish. And that worked, because I think everybody that we focused on after that has now completed. And as a result of that, they have more people with doctorates in the department. More people as professors, and therefore more people who in the Swedish system can supervise PhD students. And the School has now acquired the right to offer the PhD program itself. So, the school, the Bibliotekshögskolan, has University status, although the institution as a whole does not. It's a very curious system. Individual programs are given the right to offer the PhD, but not the institution as a whole. So there are PhD programs in library and information science, in waste engineering, and in textile design, but these are the only PhD programs in the institution. And they have to be renewed every so often; you don't hold them indefinitely. All right, so they have to keep generating PhD students in order to continue to have the right to do it.

LM: So if they have a period of time where they don't have any PhD students…

TW: They could lose the right to offer the PhD.

LM: They could lose the right to offer… interesting. Wow. And you go there so often now.

TW: I go about three times a year, for a couple of weeks each time. Originally I was going there to do seminars and to help [?] with the PhD supervision, do doctoral seminars on research methods, for example. But also to try to generate research activity. And since I've been there, we've been involved in three European research projects, we had two or three small research projects from the institution itself, and now we have this large grant from the Vetenskapsrådet, the Science Research Council.

LM: Okay, wonderful. So, we don't have a lot of time left. Let's talk about retirement. You were head of school 1992 to 1997 and then you retired…

TW: 2000.

LM: 2000, but you haven't retired at the same time.

TW: Oh, no.

LM: This is quite obvious. [laughs]

TW: Not exactly what most people would think of as retirement, no. Well, you know, simply if you enjoy doing something, why not continue doing it?

LM: Yes, exactly.

TW: I mean, orchestra conductors don't retire, actors don't retire, you know?

LM: Do you feel like you do more than before the official retirement?

TW: No…

LM: It's different.

TW: It's different, what I do. Everything I do is completely within my own control, which wasn't the case before, because you're a member of an institution, you have to do what the institution wants you to do. And I have no responsibility for people, which is always the worst part of managing anything, dealing with people problems. We didn't have many people problems, and very often when there was a people problem, by the time it was surfaced and dealt with it was no longer much of a problem. It's always the people problems that cause you sleepless nights. It's never the financial problems, because there's nothing you can do about that, you just have to accept it. But the people problems are people you work with, whom you know, and so you have to deal with them differently.

LM: And, but that's a large part of the work that I haven't mentioned, and you haven't mentioned, is *Information Research*. And as I read about it, you actually… *Information Research* is not the first publications that you have…

TW: No, my editorial experience started off all in my twenties, when I was the assistant editor of *The Assistant Librarian*, which was the organ of the Association of Assistant Librarians, which was a division of the Library Association. Then in the '70s, early '80s… early '80s probably, I started the *Social Science Information Studies* journal. Because at the time, both here and in the USA, quite a lot of funding was going into the social sciences, all practical community change activities and so forth, and generating information-related projects. And so there was… I saw a need for an outlet that would take a social scientific approach to information science. And persuaded Buttersworth's, the publisher, now part of Elsevier, like almost everything else, to found the journal. After a relatively short period of time, the money started to run out of social science research funding, and the volume of material we were getting, which was never great, began to reduce. And when it got to the point where, under various pseudonyms, I wrote almost the entire contents of one issue [laughs], I decided it was probably time to make a change. This was at a time when information management was emerging, and so I persuaded the publisher to change the title to '*The International Journal of Information Management'* and continued to edit that for a few years, until the work of being head of department became just too much, and I gave up the editorship of 'The International Journal.' But I think there were about four journals started at about the same time, with information management in the title. There was the 'Information Management Review,' for example, which was a very good journal, but disappeared. I think 'International Journal of Information Management' is the only one that survived, which is interesting. And then, when the World Wide Web came along, this was at about the time… yes. What happened was this, that when the Center for Research on User Studies existed, we were publishing a newsletter carrying short accounts of the research projects going on in CRUS (it was called 'CRUS News'). And when CRUS ended (We sold it, as well; we sold it on subscription. I mean, you know, a small amount of money, for a newsletter.), several things happened. CRUS disappeared, so we continued 'CRUS

News' as 'Information Research News,' advertising short papers on work going on in the department, generally. The University said that we had to charge twenty-five pounds subscription, because they would not deal with checks smaller than twenty-five pounds; it was not economic to do so. And I looked at this and I thought, 'well nobody's going to pay twenty-five pounds…'

LM: for a newsletter

TW: 'for this quarterly newsletter. This is not on. So, we'll make it free, instead.' And because this was happening as the Internet was developing, and as the World Wide Web was just emerging…

LM: It was the late '90s.

TW: This would be the early '90s.

LM: Okay.

TW: I decided to turn it into an electronic newsletter. And then I thought, 'well, what's the point of having an electronic newsletter, we might as well turn it into an electronic journal, and we'll still have papers from the department.' And from the first volume or so, it contained only contributions from the department. And then I started inviting people to submit papers, so I had invited papers. And then, in about the third year, I think, or fourth year, I advertised it as openly available for submissions. And from that point on, it developed as a normal, peer-reviewed journal.

LM: So you did it during the time that you were still head of the school.

TW: Yes, yes. '95 we started the journal.

LM: You started. And then…

TW: We'd been producing the 'Information Research' newsletter electronically before that, but in '95 we started the 'Information Research' journal, and it would be one of the first open-access scholarly journals.

LM: And definitely… I would guess definitely, the most reputable one in terms of, I think… I don't

know about impact factors, I didn't look at the scores and all that, but…

TW: Yes, I rarely bother with impact factors, yes, it's such a nonsense…

LM: But in any case, you are competing with all those other journals, like JASIST and JDOC, and in

some ways you have the same status, but at the same time it's open-access journals.

TW: Well, we have the same referees, you see, we have the same people on the editorial board. It's the

same kind of journal. But instead of costing a fortune, it costs nothing.

LM: It costs you.

TW: Well, only time. And I'm retired, so. Not only me, I mean, we have the associate editors who

contribute their time freely. And we have the referees contribute their time freely, as they do to other

journals. We have volunteer copy editors who contribute their time. We now have volunteer HTML

editors to do the same thing HTML files. And, you know, I don't understand why academics in every

discipline are not doing the same thing. Because it is so easy. You know, before I started appointing the

regional editors, I was just doing the whole thing entirely independently. One person can produce a

scholarly journal, if they know a little bit of HTML.

LM: Right.

TW: One person could do it.

LM: And you have a good network of people to review the papers.

TW: Yes, yes. We use the referees that everybody else uses. We use double-blind peer review, we have

associate editors handling the papers from different parts of the world, and all of this costs nothing

except the time that people contribute, and they gain the usual reward from doing that because they gain

reputation, which is the usual reward from scholarly publishing. And their institutions are happy that

they're doing this because it's a mark of significance for them. And… the academic world has been

extremely remiss in not taking scholarly publication into its own hands in this way. Instead of which,

most of them are still in hock to the publishers, who are making fortunes out of the raw material that

they get for nothing. It's the only industry in the world which doesn't pay for its raw materials. And

then charges money to the people who provided the raw material. It's economically absurd. The

scholarly community ought to be absolutely ashamed of itself for not seizing this opportunity and doing

it properly, and freeing up scholarly literature so that everybody has access to it.

LM: Yes. I agree. I totally agree with that.

TW: Absolutely. It's a nonsensical situation.

LM: Okay, now. Let me try to find. There are a lot of things we didn't cover. You were awarded an

honorary doctorate by Gothenburg University…

TW: Yes.

LM: And somewhere else. I lost a page in between here. [laughs] That's why I have some handwriting

here because when I printed out this, and then I said 'hey!'

TW: You had missed a page. Yes, the University of Murcia in Spain, yes, with which I'd had contacts,

helping them to think about their programs, develop their programs, going and talking, giving lectures to

students and so on and so forth.

LM: So were you very pleased?

TW: Oh, yes, of course! There are not many people in our field who have honorary degrees from

foreign universities. [laughs]

LM: Definitely, definitely.

TW: So yes, this is very… Yes, it's very pleasing that this should happen. It is very curious that I seem

to be more honored abroad than I am in my home country, but there you go. This is, as they say, the

prophet is without honor in his own country. Not that I would see myself as a prophet. But, no, it's very

pleasing to receive these awards, yes.

LM: Right. And from internationally-recognized work.

TW: Yes, yes. And also the ALISE award that I had, which was, I was very, very honored to have. And

being appointed one of the first fellows for the SIG-USE Academy, or whatever it's called. Yes, yes,

it's nice to get these. I don't put them on the walls, but…

LM: Oh! [laughs] And have you had a lot of doctoral students?

TW: Over time…

LM: Over time…

TW: I think probably… well, I still have some, of course. I've got two at Leeds at the moment. And

yeah, I must be getting up to about thirty, I think.

LM: Wow.

TW: I haven't kept count. But I think it's up there somewhere.

LM: Wow, that's quite a few doctoral students, over time.

TW: Yes, yes.

LM: All right. And then…

TW: But my colleague Peter [?], for example, must've had twice as many, at least. Really, I mean he

was a doctoral factory, on his own. [laughs]

LM: [laughs] Okay, wonderful. And this is more of a curious question, so, because we were talking

about you were all over the place, and you write about information science and information systems in

many areas, if you want to put a label on yourself… [laughs]

TW: Whoa, if I wanted to put a label on myself, what would I call myself. I think I would stick with

social researcher.

LM: Social researcher.

TW: Yes. Because that's what I do. I apply social research methods in whatever they can be applied.

Yeah.

LM: Okay, wonderful. So it's not information behavior or information management…

TW: No, that's just one… that's just another, you know…

LM: Application of social research…

TW: Applications of social research methods.

LM: Wonderful. Okay. Now, I hope that I didn't miss too much. But, do you have anything to add?

[laughs]

TW: [laughs] Anything to add… I think we…

      LM: I was missing a page, so…

TW: Yes. Well, it might be of interest to just recount the first time I came across the notion of

information science.

LM: Okay, that would be wonderful.

TW: Because this happened when I was working in the nuclear research establishment at C.A. Parsons.

And, I had a colleague there who had a degree, a science degree, and she had received information about

a new organization which was going to be established called the Institute of Information Scientists.

LM: Right.

TW: [laughs] And she came to talk to me about this organization, saying, 'you know, why don't you

join as well?' And I looked at the material and I said, 'well, I can't join, I don't have a science degree, I

don't have any degree at all, so there's no way I can join.' This was the first announcement of the

establishment of the Institute of Information Scientists by Jason Farradane and Leslie Wilson and others

who had got together to establish the Institute. So it was rather ironic when, some years later, this

organization, which I wasn't able to join because I didn't have a degree, gave me an Honorary

Fellowship with the Institute. [laughs]

LM: Wonderful.

TW: So, I found that quite amusing. That I should not be entitled to join, but I could be an honorary

fellow.

LM: So they did have the requirement that you would have to have a…

TW: You had to have a science degree. This was the basis of the original Institute of Information

Scientists.

LM: So that was what you were talking about how Farradane…

TW: When ASIS&T was still called the American Documentation Institute.

LM: Right, yes.

TW: [laughs]

LM: Wow. You bring me back then. [laughs] That's wonderful. So, there are a lot of institutions

actually in the UK, and they are not as well known in the States.

TW: No, not known at all, no. Well, this is because American scholars are very parochial. If you look

at their citations, for example, you know, ninety percent of them are to American work. They

completely ignore what's going on in the world.

LM: Now that I… More and more, I am finding this out.

TW: It's very parochial. Now, English, or British, research is also parochial in a different sense. It's

parallel with the American because the American research is also linguistically parochial. And the

British research is also linguistically parochial. Very rarely do you get foreign work, non-English

language work, cited in British information science research. To a certain degree that is beginning to

change as involvement in European research projects happens. Because there you have collaborative

papers with people in Italy, Germany, Sweden, wherever. And so you get more references to the non-English literature coming in. But that's not happening, I think, in the USA. Unless you get… Well, somebody like Ron Day, who knows the European literature, and knows the European philosophers, and cites them and quotes them.

LM: Right.

END OF INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT