

EDITED EXTRACTS FROM INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN MCCREADY, ENVIRONMENT MANAGER FOR  
WARRINGTON EAST (INCLUDING BIRCHWOOD) AT WARRINGTON BOROUGH COUNCIL

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SF: where did it all begin for you, coming to Birchwood?

KM: Well it must have been in the late seventies – '78 or '79; I think the way Salford was going ... I can remember, as a young kid, going to cubs, down all the terraces at the back of Langworthy Road – but they were all nicely looked after, you wouldn't call it a 'bad area' at that stage. But I think as time went on – I don't know if there was compulsory purchase orders on the terraces but they started to get a lot of landlords and lets, and the quality of the properties and everything went downhill and with it, the feel of Salford did. So my mum and dad were concerned, with us – although I was sixteen by the time we actually moved. So I think they decided they wanted to get out of it, and then ... from memory, there were adverts on TV at the time – was it Eileen Bilton, all that kind of thing, the commission for New Towns. So they went up to Birchwood to have a look; my mum in particular liked all the ... 'Dunnock Grove' ... 'Bird Lanes', as she called it. But when she applied, they had no idea – you didn't have a choice of where you ... they took what they were offered. So we moved from Salford when I was about late fifteen, early sixteen – in 1980. So Birchwood – Oakwood – was fairly well developed then; we moved to Whitworth Close and I think the roads across the way - is it Woodhouse? Mansfield? – all that sort of area, they were still developing building them, we'd get sent across to pinch flags off the building site to do your garden and all that kind of thing! When we first arrived – I'm the eldest of three, I had two younger brothers – if I was sixteen, they'd be like thirteen, fourteen – and we ... were a bit resistant, being that age ... isn't a good age to move, you're just making friends, you've just left school and – we didn't find Salford a horrific place to live, we quite liked it. The bit of Salford we were in was quite green – Buile Hill park off Eccles Old Road, near what was the old Salford Grammar – so it was quite green, where we'd left - people imagine, you come from Salford, 'dark satanic mills' and terraced streets. But we arrived in Birchwood, the first thing ... - we'd been offered a house, so we'd go up and see it and the first thing

that struck us, it was a very odd – have you seen the houses on Whitworth Close? – the front elevation, where your front door is, there's not one window.

SF: Is it ... a wooden façade?

KM: Yeah, you've got a wooden triangular piece at the top, and to us ... a house – bay window, door, front – like any other house; *these* were ... - looked a bit like you were walking into a shop unit or a factory unit from the back. But the house inside was okay. And I can remember, going down to ... - being a bit excited, we went from there to Birchwood Brook and thinking how good it was that there was a brook that ran, not far away. There was no train station at that time ... I'm trying to think, I don't think the big shopping centre had opened then, in the early eighties ... there was the '7-11' shop, I remember that opening and thinking that was really good ... it was like an American shop to us, with hot dogs and microwaves and drinks machines, a slush machine – we had a traditional corner shop in Salford where you went for your sweets and that kind of thing. So we were ... we liked it in a way, but we'd keep going back to Salford to see mates, you were trying to make that transition – you didn't have any friends in Birchwood, as you were just saying, you don't know anybody, all your neighbours are new, you're new; my youngest brother went to Padgate High, so he tended to have a bigger circle of friends - there were people in Oakwood who he knew ...

SF – of course, Birchwood High wouldn't have been built at that stage either, that was '86, that opened.

KM: I think they were building it; I can remember them building it, I can remember being fascinated by all the planting that was going on, so everything just looked like lots of little 'sticks' in the ground, what I now know are 'whips', but at the time ... – and just the massive scale of this going on. I'd applied to Salford parks when we were still there and didn't get in – I always thought, wouldn't it be great to get a job with the people that ... the landscapers planting all this. In the end I ended up getting a job with the borough council, taken by the ear by my mother, to Sankey Street, Priestly House - the Borough Council had offices there, I think it was Manpower Services Commission. So ... YTS schemes, youth opportunity schemes – and that was based up at Walton Gardens and when you first went working up there they get to know “ – you

live in Warrington, you've not been here long, you live in Birchwood, and you're Salford overspill are you? – Bet you've never seen so many trees!" – well, if you see Buile Hill park, this was about 300 yards from the big terrace we lived in in Salford – there's as many trees there as - ! But they just had this view of Salford just being smoky, chimney pot park, that kind of thing.

SF: There's also – the big park I know in Salford is Peel Park, that used to be fairly grand in its day –

KM: Yeah, where they – well, it has a reputation as being one of the first municipal parks in the country, Peel – is it Sefton, and that one – people argue which was the very first municipal park. But we used to go there – there's a big obelisk in the middle that shows you where the flood waters, when the Irwell flooded, it shows you where the flood waters got up to. I can remember – I was saying this to Karen, my wife – as a young kid, the house we lived in was built in 1876 and it use to fascinate me as it was a big, grand house but we rented it – that was another reason we ended up moving to Birchwood, we didn't have very good tenure, the landlord wasn't very good, nearly all the other properties on the street had been converted into student flats for Salford University so to us – we were a pain for the landlord –

SF: He was waiting for you to move out.

KM: - one family in one house – although we had my gran on the lower floors and us on the upper, when he could have had – I think there was twelve rooms in that house, excluding the cellar. So he, in his head, he could have had six, eight – maybe twelve, different flats in there. So that was another reason why we moved out. Peel Park – you know the museum that's there, the library – I can remember going as a kid - strange to think, going on my own, going in and researching who used to own, who first owned that house we lived in – I can't remember his name but he was some rich cotton merchant. And he would have had servants, you could still see the old ring-pull things, the bells – and I think the servants were downstairs and they'd ring from upstairs. So I found it ... a drain, when we moved from Salford to Birchwood, initially; we'd lived in the same house all our lives – and you'd still go back, it was a strange feeling, you'd go back expecting ... I don't know what feeling you expect, you go back to where you used to live, you're there and you're a complete stranger, it's

absolutely familiar but ... there's nobody there you know any more, it's not the same thing. So life as a teenager in early Oakwood especially was pretty ... boring. I think ... latterly ... they had "Jojo's" youth club ... the Black Hole ... the arcade place at Spectrum Arena ... we had Spectrum Arena. But before that, we'd literally spend ... - if we went out for a drink on a Saturday night – that strange age where you go for a drink but the next day you're back to being a kid again, literally "where shall we go? Shall we go and have a look around Risley Moss?" and we'd walk miles up to there, walk round there for hours on end, bored to tears – there was nothing for sixteen, seventeen, eighteen year olds to do.

SF: What I've read, and obviously, my experience – it was all so focussed on young families, all the rented ... the Development Corporation stuff – and the private stuff obviously, but – it was so much to do with young families, if you're not a young family then ... yeah. There's ... that thing of ... the appeal of the green space, exploring, slightly wild planting – feeling like you're really exploring some woodland - that would appeal to a child more than a seventeen year old!

KM: But I think I liked it because ... we lived near Buile Hill Park, that's where we spent most of our time as kids – I used to volunteer and go in the pets' corner, and we went on birdwatching trips with the school. But I wasn't that typical, especially of kids coming from Salford, to there – they would probably find it quite strange.

[...] So you started on a YTS?

KM: Yes, started on a YTS – one of the other managers did the same thing, he reckons we were on a YTS for six months, and there was about twelve of us, and I think six of us were kept on. And then you went from YTS to be ... I think they called it a 'garden boy' – it was still very Victorian, continued in that tradition at Walton Gardens. I'd been lucky; they'd had a problem looking after the zoo at Walton and said "we need someone to go in there" and one of the other kids that was working with us – I at that stage wouldn't have put my hand up and said anything – said "he used to work at the zoo in Salford, he told me he's done all that kind of thing". So they said, "Right, you go in there then". So again, by accident of fate, I end up working in the zoo - so I'm separated

from the other twelve. So then when it came to ... “we’ll keep him in the zoo”, you get a full time job then, but you’re a garden boy. Eventually they told me that they were going to shut the zoo and I either went with it or ... you just go over on to the garden side. So I did that, and then got shunted around from ... - you usually go from Walton Gardens to Victoria Park to Bank Park, they have depots that they maintain, bigger areas... So that went on from 1980 to well into the late eighties; this New Town thing was starting, they were starting to talk about the land being moved over to the Borough Council. A job came up for one of the gardeners working for the borough Council to be transferred, to be based in Birchwood Park, which to me – I think I was at what we used to call “Stalag 17” at Capesthorpe Road in Orford, and it was just a horrible little depot, with a horrible foreman working there –

SF: Is that the one that’s been really done up in the last years, with a massive kids’ playground put in ... the NHS building ... is that ... Orford Park ... ?

KM: No ... I did do a spell there, Orford Park – I could tell you funny stories about that place! – no, Capesthorpe Road itself, it just looks like a little factory unit from the outside; it’s been sold now, the council sold ... they don’t have enough staff to keep it manned, so they sold it - I think it’s some kind of a gym now. So ... based there, this job comes up and I think, ‘sounds good, working in Birchwood Park’. They say “you’ll have all your own equipment, a freight container there with your mowers in, you’ll be based there”. The foreman absolutely hated it; he used to call me the ‘new-age hippy’ – no, *moon* age hippy, he used to get everything wrong, videos were ‘VIE-deos’ – “letting that moon-age hippy go in that park on his own, you can’t trust him to come here in the morning ... !” Anyway, I spent about ... I think it was four, maybe five years there. That taught me a lot – I used to have my tea, my breaks, with Gaynor and at one stage there was three, four, possibly five rangers based working for New Town working in the Birchwood building -

SF: Where was that? Birchwood Forest Park?

KM: - the big changing room, visitor centre, the ranger centre as we call it. The first couple of days, I’d be sat outside at the nursery garden having my sandwiches with the likes of Gaynor, saying "...why don’t you come inside and

have those?” – you know, you’re getting used to it and they’re getting used to you.

[...]SF: What was your view of that way [the ecological planning approach] of landscaping at the time?

KM: I liked it. You could see ... you’d work somewhere like Orford Park, which was more or less an old, traditional Victorian park, with flower beds, ornamental shrub borders rather than natural – and they’d take an awful lot of work; when I was at Orford Park there was me, the full-time or senior gardener and a park-keeper, just based in that one park and it was far smaller than Birchwood.[...] But one way or another we’ve always struggled to maintain the kind of standards that New Town did.

[...]SF: As regards as ... your job *now*, what input do you have on maintaining Birchwood’s green spaces?

KM: Well, what’s my job title – area environment manager for east Warrington, which is Birchwood, the whole of everything basically to the borough boundary –

SF: So from here to Woolston –

KM: - and the whole of south Warrington as well, Lymm, Appleton ... all that way. I suppose ... slightly removed from me is the tree maintenance side of it, we have a trees and woodlands section.

SF: In the Borough Council?

KM: - and they have a thinning team within that, which only exists because – you wouldn’t have a thinning team if it wasn’t for New Town and the way that they developed these places. But one of the problems they’ve got is, the thinning team is what they call ‘capital funded’ so they can only ... - as long as there’s ‘capital works’ that can cover the cost then they’re okay; other than that, they can’t do any routine work –

SF: Can you just explain that in more detail? When you say “capital funded” ...

KM: Yeah – like one-off projects; e.g. they’ve got a big pot of money for what was Gateworth tip; they kept the tip, planted it all up with trees and woodland ... they’ve got money to do that kind of thing. What’s needed in Birchwood, in Oakwood or any of these New Town areas – when they were originally planted, one of the things that they tended to do was massively overplant the total number of ... if you wanted to end up with *one* tree, they’d plant ten, just in case of disease ... and because they couldn’t foresee that the amounts of money ... – it’s like the Borough Council with the ‘capital project’ – they get a load of money and they throw everything at it ... once you’ve gone through the initial building and creation phase, there very often becomes an issue in the latter years with how to maintain this thing. So New Town had this theory that you plant it up, mimicking the natural succession of a woodland where you’ll plant birch and maple – soft, fast growing stuff to shelter the oaks and the ash and the long-term stuff – but if we were doing it again you would say, plant your trees – if you want ten trees, only *plant* ten trees – it’ll be far cheaper in the future if someone chops five trees down to plant five more trees; the problem we’ve got now is we’ve got massively over-dense ... - the best analogy is, it’s like a big seed-tray and there are far too many seedlings in it and we haven’t the time or the money to weed out the extra seedlings that need to come out. So I suppose the plantings now are at an unforeseen stage of development; it was never planned that they should remain so dense.

[...]KM: I think if they said to us, “right, here’s the Birchwood layout without any landscape in it, you decide what you’re going to do” - I think we would do very similar things but we’d have rules like, don’t build ... - don’t put any kind of planting immediately up against a footpath. Just little simple things like, always have two metres of grass between the edge of a path and planting. Don’t plant anything right up against anybody’s boundary – in fact I’d probably say ... have separate zones – this is the woodland natural bit, and that’s the domestic bit, keep the domestic bit looking reasonably under control. And don’t plant it massively dense, thinking that half of it is going to die or be vandalised, because it probably won’t – and keep cutting it, and dealing with it is very expensive, whereas if you lose the odd tree, you can soon replace it.

