



Recording Work Memories: the 60 Voices Project

Interviewee: Keith Sullens

In 1962, fed up with exams, Keith Sullens decided to skip University and start his career in the civil service. He immediately joined the Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance as a short-term benefits supervisor, overseeing about eight members of staff in Lewisham, commuting from Hassocks, near Brighton. Two years later, in 1964, having transferred to the Paymaster General's Office, he became a supervisor of a Civil Service pension section in Crawley. A year later, because of passing a computer aptitude test, he became a computer programmer in the department.

Keith helped program the systems which paid the pensions for civil servants but also pensions for teachers, NHS retirees and those in the armed forces, dealing with a payroll of over a million public service pensions. He eventually became a senior programmer and assisted with analytical data, later becoming a project leader. Moving across from the computer group in 1973 he became head of a pensions division.

Still working in Crawley, Keith had been promoted to Establishment Officer around 1985, before becoming Assistant Paymaster General roughly five years later. By this stage, there were over a thousand employees in the Crawley office, and the department also dealt with government accounts alongside pensions payments.

In 1993, the office became an Agency, and subsequently Keith was made Chief Executive following a public competition. The Agency was due to be privatised in 1997, and Keith led a team to try and buy the office. However ultimately his team was outbid. Therefore, he moved in 1997, to work for EDS, one of the winning bidders. Keith worked for EDS for around two years and then managed to secure his redundancy. He would travel a lot for his role as global data protection officer for EDS going to places like Germany and the United States.

During the earlier part of his career in the mid-1960's, Keith was an integral part of the construction and growth of the Civil Service Retirement Fellowship, as upon the inception of the charity, his section sent out letters to all civil servants, notifying them of the charity's existence and seeking recruits. Keith had built a relationship with those involved with starting the charity and ensured that the relevant people knew about the Fellowship to get it off the ground.

Keith retired from EDS in 1999, before rejoining the Civil Service a year later in the new millennium, working for the civil courts in a part time back-office role for three years. He was doing data entry at this time which he found to be his most difficult job ever. Several of his colleagues were trained typists able to input the relevant data at a much faster rate than him. He then officially retired in 2004.

During his long career in the Civil Service, Keith enjoyed many highlights, including being the chairman of the restaurant committee during his early days. He also remembers some of

the preparation for the computers going into the year 2000, because of the paranoia surrounding the Y2K bug. Meeting the late Queen when receiving his CBE was of course a particular highlight.

A particularly funny memory that Keith has from his career: One year on Red Nose Day, employees were messing about and pulling pranks, throwing, and breaking eggs on to the road outside. However, one brave colleague decided to break an egg over Keith's head whilst Keith was the head of the office. Keith eventually saw the funny side, but he was unable to get the person back.

Since retirement, Keith has been able to spend his time going on holidays, and also enjoys looking after his garden. In his garden he enjoys growing vegetables like asparagus, potatoes, and French beans, alongside fruits like raspberries and blueberries.

A keen sportsman, Keith enjoys an active lifestyle and also enjoys playing football and tennis, something he still does today, at the age of 80. He plays five-a-side matches with friends of a similar age every Monday night. Furthermore, he is a big fan of Brighton and Hove Albion, being a season ticket holder for many years, and he still goes to home matches.

Keith also meets up with his local Mid Sussex CSRF group monthly to meet and chat over coffee and cake at a café to discuss their lives and stories from their careers. Keith enjoys the sense of companionship that his local group provides, and he particularly enjoys hearing about the wide variety of different experiences others have had working for different Departments of the Civil Service.

The advice Keith gives to other civil servants is to have something to look forward to, and to start getting involved with those types of things prior to retirement, to make the transition more seamless. Preparation is key!