

GEOFF GARNER: born 1940

Interviewed by Tony Wright: 18-2-07

[TRACK 1]

Can I ask you then what your full name is, and where and when you were born?

My name is Geoffrey Robert Garner – Geoffrey with a G – I was born in Dagenham in 1940, and I worked at Ford Motor Company for...thirty-four years.

I left school when I was fourteen, started work on the farm where I stayed till I was twenty-one and then I did various jobs travelling round the country on building sites, whatever was going.

Me dad never – he never really knew where I was until I came home [laughing] you know, so yeh – I had a good life, it was interesting, no complaints.

What kind of farm was it that you worked on?

[someone coming in]

I started off on arable farming, all the various parts of that, early morning milking – we started at quarter past four in the morning, then I ended up on a pig farm in Suffolk – that was interesting, that I enjoyed. It's always given me a love for pigs, let's put it that way! They're one of my favourite animals.

What work did that entail then, raising – doing pigs?

Pigs was breeding, rearing, cleaning out, feeding...when that was done first thing in the morning, yes, we used to go out to you know, various jobs – doing various jobs on the land, then we'd start again of a night-time, back for cleaning out, feeding then of course we had the castrating of the litters and things like that so, yes, it was – like everything else, no two days were the same – it was interesting, I enjoyed it, but at the time I think I was earning three pound a week you know, which, yes...I also managed to keep a motorbike on the road for early morning milking 'cos I lived six mile away from the arable farm and dairy, so I had to get there early enough, so yeh, I managed to keep a small motorbike on the road, mind you I think at the time, I think petrol was only about 10p a gallon!

Then, various jobs you do – none sometimes as good as others, but I worked for a supermarket firm – I was warehouse manager on the night shift, in charge of the fruit and veg and the packing, getting the goods to the stores and I got made redundant from that, so that's when – I'd been doing the hand-carved leather just as a hobby, and when like I say I got made redundant from the supermarket firm, I went to Cordwainers College in Mare in Hackney to learn handbag design, handbag making, construction, various things like that, so it was just basically to combine the hand carving part with the handbag side, and I started doing craft fairs and you know – country fairs and things.

When was that?

That was in...1970..the very early seventies, yeh – and as I say I went to Cordwainers, I got all me bits of paper that you're supposed to need, left the college, I got a job in a light leather goods firm – that's making wallets, note cases, various stuff – I was there for two years and I was taken on originally to build the firm up, because at the time their monthly turnover was £800 a month; I had six girls working alongside me and in two years I'd built it up to over £2000 a month, but what I didn't know at the time was we were one of three companies, and one day two gentleman walked in with briefcases and said 'send your girls home – we're closing you down' and it was the taxman because the owner of the companies had been using the company I was running as a tax loss against the other two companies – he hadn't paid company tax for two years on it, so came out of there, still kept me own, you know, little hobby side of it, but then all the machinery from the firm was sent to auction, which was sewing machines, diving machines and varying other hand machines, so I went to the auction and bought them all back again! And then I just used to do it sort of spare time you know, at the time it paid the bills and everything, and then I went to a heavy leather goods industrial, industrial leather goods firm, and that was in Beckenham in Kent and we used to do a lot of government work – Ministry of Defence stuff and yes, again, I managed to work meself up to...factory manager and then my managing director at the time wanted to get out of Kent, wanted to get out of London shall we say, so he moved up to Telford and I could not get on with Telford – God awful place! So I gave him three months to set the factory up, I kept staff so he

didn't have to be looking over their shoulder every five minutes, and I came to Hebden Bridge.

Why did you choose Hebden Bridge?

Well when I was at the college in Hackney, I made a lot of friends and they were from Skipton, Silsden, Steaton from all round there, and they kept on saying 'come up, come up, come up' so I did do – I came up here to Hebden Bridge and they are the three main friends – two are in Japan and one's in Australia, so I moved up and they moved out!

When did you move to Hebden?

1989 – January 1989, and I opened for business on January the 9th and in my first week I made the grand total of ten pound, and I thought 'what have I done?' [laughing], and I've been between Walkleys and Mytholmroyd and Hebble End here – that's where I've been ever since. All my work is all commission work and I seem to get enough work in just to keep me head above water, pay me bills which I'm quite happy about, so yeh – it's not ideal, but I'm happy enough.

So can you tell me a bit more about the work involved in leather work then?

Well as I say most of my work is all commission work, and I do – if I can show – I do that sort of work which is for – that's for the front of a pair of clogs. [showing Tony his leather work] I do a lot of work

for Walkley's Clogs in Mount Pleasant Mill. [more leather work]
These are for the Spanish Civil War Society which I do quite a bit of work for – I do work for The Sealed Knot Societies, I do archery, motorcycle, shooting fraternity and one of the – one of the jobs I've just finished, if I may get it out [unpacking some work] – these are for a gentleman who's got himself a 1929 Chrysler 75, and these are the bonnet straps that fit over the bonnet and there's two – one at front, one at back, and the end of this month, February, he's off to China – he's having the car boxed up and shipped over to China where he's doing the Peking-Mongolian Rally in it, so he needed these in a certain way so that when he does the Mongolian Desert, he can just undo these and take the whole bonnet off to put in the boot, because seemingly it's going to be quite hot there, so I do those and I'm doing a bag at the moment here, I've got three bags on the go from briefcase I've got on the go, I've got to do a gun belt holster for a gentleman, various repairs, you know – put new zips in bags for people and make sure the bags will last them for another few years which has given me a good overall knowledge I suppose of the leather trade.

What kind of and where do you get the leather?

Well I use all different kinds of leather – there's...I use hides, cow hides, mainly shoulders which is the part of the leather – there's the back and then the shoulders which they have got the least amount of scratch marks and stuff like that on them. I use upholstery leather because I re-cover stools and things like that, clothing leather – I've got a coat in here that a gentleman wants repairing, where I've got to replace a whole panel in the coat

because he's ripped it and torn it, you know, climbing over barbed wire fences, things like that, so...and I get the leather from Skipton, Manchester, right down to Margate in Kent – it all depends what I'm actually looking for and working on at that particular time.

Are there like different grades of leather?

Oh yes, yes – there's Grade One, Grade Two, Grade Three and the Grade One is the top, and then that is split which then comes down to the Grade Two and it is sanded all over to make it nice and smooth, then you come to the Grade Three and then there's the suedes and things like that. At the moment I'm using Italian leather which is beautiful leather, but then you come down to the Spanish which is not so good, but again it – it tells you in the price; the leather I'm using at the moment for these belts and also to do the gun belt and holster, at the moment you're talking...the one I'm using is four pound sixty a square foot, now I buy them in shoulders or butts and it is about eighteen square foot. *A big piece then* Big piece, yeh. When I use the upholstery hide, I have to buy it in a whole hide which is – can be from forty-five square foot up to fifty-two square foot and that is working out at the moment – you can get that round about two pound seventy-five a square foot, so it's all money going out, you know, that's why I get people come in and they say 'oh you've got a bit of scrap leather' well there's no such thing as scrap leather looking at it that way, because I've had to buy the whole hide, so you know when you're cutting – when you're cutting the stuff out, you try not to waste any, or waste as little as possible shall we say. Normally I have a tub outside the door you know – large off-cuts and I sell them for 50p,

you know people come in and 'oh that'll come in handy for what I want' and they're quite happy, so am I!

To go back about this Grade One Two and Three, is Grade One really thick then?

No, leather's – when the leather goes into the tannery, right, they've got...orders of what they need, you know, and they will tan than and depending on what orders they've got for it, they will split it, stretch it, various you know – various things. The thickest, the thickest leather I use is about five-mill thick and then you go down to the very thin stuff which is eight point nine, which you can make wallets and note cases and that sort of thing out of.

Do they do all that in the tannery then?

They do all that in the tannery – the hides come in, they're washed, the fat is scraped off them, like I say they're washed again, tanned – if it's veg tanned they tan it with the you know vegetable oils and that, and then there's chrome tanned which is really hard leather you know, so yeh – it, it's what orders they've got for the hides that they've got coming is you know, controls the thickness and whatever they want.

How do you split a hide then?

They've got a great big machine, and it is enormous and you lay the whole hide on this machine, and it's taken through and it's set to whatever thickness they want, so as it goes through it takes the

underside off to leave the top that thickness and then, yes, they could put it through again, but you can...some leathers you can get and they're just like tissue paper, whereas like I say, other leathers are - they're thick, heavy, they make 'em...banding belts and sanding belts and that sort of thing out of.

So is the thin stuff more expensive because they have to process it?

No – very often the thin stuff, again- depending what leather it is, if it's seal skin, which yeh is expensive, but small stuff which I can show you here [getting some leather out] – that is expensive, that's a lizard skin, that's a full lizard skin that one – tail, back legs, front legs, back, but that is expensive – you're talking about thirty pound for one of them, and then you come down to [getting some more out] things like that, snake skins – you can get snake skins with the head still on them *can you?* yeh, and then you come to very thin – this is just like tissue paper; that's a snake skin again but it's so thin, and to do anything with those, you have to put a backing on, and then as I was saying, there's a small piece of seal skin – it's quite tough.

What kind of backing do you put on the snake skin?

The snake skin, it's a iron-on backing, it's like a cotton iron-on backing, it just gives it – it just gives it that little bit more thickness so you can you know work it.

Do you have any problems with people complaining about using

like animal products, that sort of thing?

Yes you do get people coming in – they don't exactly...they don't exactly complain, but they always say 'don't you feel...ashamed?' and I always give them the same answer 'with the cow hides and stuff like that, the leather is a by-product because the animals are killed for the meat trade, so what are you going to do with the hides – just let 'em rot, burn 'em? That's why when we had the foot and mouth on...my leather went up practically twenty pence a square foot every day because there was nothing going through the abattoirs because they were just slaughtering the animals and burning the whole lot, whereas in the sixties when they had the foot and mouth then, they were cutting the heads and the feet off and still using the rest of the body, so there was still hides going through, but this time the whole lot was just burnt and my supplier, he was going all over the world to sort of get leather because, yeh he wanted to stay in business – he had customers to supply, and he was going everywhere to you know – he'd hear of some and off he'd go, but – yeh we kept going, but it's the same old story – everything goes up, you never see it turn round and start coming down again! [laughing]

So why is Italian leather the best – what do they do to it?

It's just in their tanning, it is absolutely – I can show you...where are we [finding some Italian leather] this is stuff I used for belts and cases – I make hand-made jewellery boxes and cases and stuff like that, which are all hand-stitched, but this has got – it's soft and supple but it's got the thickness there, and yeh – with Italian

leather against Argentinian, Spanish and stuff like that, you've got very very few – you might get...you might get a horn scratch or something like that, a bit of barbed wire, but you've got no – Italy, English leather – you've got so little diseases that you know, to put marks on leather – you've got...in Spain, Argentina and places like that, very often you've can have a great big hole in the leather because that's where one of the weevils, you know, burrows under the skin, so of course you've got a mark on your leather, but...and then you get the leather coming in that's still got the skin on and the hair on. I had a lady recently buy herself a skin – it was black and white and she wanted me to make a particularly kind of bag so that the pattern on the skin was you know in various places, so yes, I made her that – I'll show you this [getting more leather out] that is a calf skin with hair still on it, but I don't – I don't make anything out of these because they're such nice skins that I keep these to show – we have school children and you know – school children come through, we have the Jewish children, they come through and they like to see that they would not normally see. That's why I keep the you know, various snake skins and lizard skins and stuff like that.

So is it mostly for showing kids then rather than making things out of?

This – yeh, yes, they like to see, like I say, things that they wouldn't normally see, you know – most people, when I say to children 'where does leather come from?' and they automatically go 'cows' which...but then when you say 'what's this?' and show them the lizard skins, and they don't realise that yes – everything is leather,

you know – you and I are leather because...I'm waiting for the day when somebody comes in and says 'this is me grannie you know, can you make me a suitcase out of her! The Japanese did it, the Germans did it in World War Two – they made lampshades out of human skin so yeh- lizards, there's even a firm now that do salmon skins and they make – there's a firm down in London making shoes out of them and they're over a thousand pound a pair, and to show you how resilient leather is, there's another firm that are making bags and things like that off the leather from the Mary Rose which was Russian leather. *Really?* Yeh, and that's been what...in salt water for about was is it...three hundred years? And yet the outer of the bundles, but the inner because of the way they were packed, the inner ones are perfect, yeh.

How do you know it was Russian then?

Well that's – I'm going by the information that came when they brought the Mary Rose up, but as I said, it was Russian leather, yeh, the inner bundles were fine – it was just that the salt water had got to the outer ones, I mean to say, Roman – they go on Roman digs and they'll come up with Roman sandals, leather sandals, so it shows that once it's...once it's made, yeh, leather will last forever as long as it's – as long as you take care of it.

I have people come in and bring cases in and say you know 'it's gone dry and it's starting to crack' – that's because it's leather, you've got to feed it because it is a natural substance, you've got to feed it. People come in and say 'how can I make my shoes... waterproof?' Well as long as they're leather, you just go to the

chemist and buy a little tin, a little jar of ordinary castor oil and just rub a bit in and that will waterproof, and if they've got – if they've got a leather sole as well, you can do the sole with it, so that will make, like I say, that will make it, it will soak in to the fibres and it will seal them.

Do you have to do a lot of processing of the leather when you get it then?

No, no – that's all done you know, I've got the finished item, all the different processes that it goes through at the tannery are already done.

So do you do a lot of – the designs that you have for the shape of bags and this sort of thing, and like holsters and whatever – do you work out your own designs?

I work t, yes – that's why I went to Cordwainers College for, and that was a course of design of bags, construction of bags, how to cut the patterns to you know, whatever shape and everything you want, One of the things I always say to people is 'if your paper pattern doesn't go together, then your leather pattern never will, and all my patterns are cut on just you know fairly stiff brown paper, but – could you pass me that carrier bag behind you? [getting carrier bag] This is one I'm working on at the moment – now that's a case I'm making for a chap; it's just waiting for the top and handles stitched on; I've got – 'cos what I do, I work on them until they're – I work on them in here to a certain stage, then I take them home and sit of an evening while I'm watching television and

do all the hand stitching which is down there and there, but that – that case there, that is all the patterns for that case, and everything, where the – where the locks, where the straps and everything, they're all marked on your paper patterns [looking through patterns] – where they go and everything, what sort of – you know, what sort of construction you're going to have – you mark everything on there, you know, the paper costs me what... those patterns there have cost me, that paper's cost me about 15, 20p but this bag, when it's totally finished, it going to cost the customer about a hundred and forty, hundred and sixty quid you know, so – and this that I showed you right at the beginning, this leather is for – what did I say – four thirty, four forty a square foot, so by the time you've got all your bits and pieces, there's quite a few square foot there.

Then again, whether I'm going to construct – put it together on me sewing machine or whether I'm going to hand stitch it, you know, everything has got to be taken into account.

How do you decide that then?

The customer tells me what they want, then it's my job to produce it, you know – how long they want the – how long they want the handles, whatever. This bag I'm working on – I've got so many jobs on the go [getting bag out] then you've got a lady who wants this bag, now this is machine stitched – now she wants it – told me what length of strap she wants, she had a rough idea of you know, how wide, how deep and everything, so yes – when it comes down to the actual patterns, that's my job – to – the idea that she's got in

there, then I've got to make it come to life. One thing I do love about my job is the fact that no two days are the same; as I say, the next job I've got, to come up – that's me pattern, you work it all out, and work out the curve, and that's for the belt, for the gun belt and holster. Me holster pattern's up there because you...again each gun's different so you've got to cut the pattern in a different way.

They're for the – you know, these Western societies and stuff like that, Country and Western clubs, but it's just one of those things – the gentleman with the car, he brought his car in – I had to do all the measurements, where everything – you know, where he wanted everything to go.

Did he have a..like the original straps?

No, no.

So you had to work out how it should fit?

Yes, I had to work out – you know, he told me that – yes, the bonnet had to come off and this had to go, so yes, you've got to work out everything to you know, because sometimes – it's like yourself, sometimes you've got an idea up there but you don't know whether it'll work, so it's down to me – I've got to make it work for you.

I get ladies come in and they say 'Oh I've got an idea for a bag but I don't know whether it will work' 'right, lets get together, let's draw

- you know, let's draw a rough sketch' and from that sketch if she says 'well I want it so wide or so high' then it's up to me to get the cutting of the patterns so everything is how she wants it.

I've got a hand-carved guitar strap to do for a gentleman who's just been in the honours list because he does a lot of work for charity, and I made him a strap, oh quite some time ago but he reckons he needs a new one now because his old one's getting too well known, so I've been making him another one.

Here's another one I'm working on, that's another guitar strap

I must come in and look at that detail. [pause] So do you work out those designs as well?

Yes, very often the people come in and say – you know, they say 'have you got a favourite design' or 'have you got a design in mind' and they'll say 'no, I wanted something Celtic' so you know, again, you work out the pattern, they get in touch and come down and say 'yes, that'll be brilliant'.

How do you do that kind of work – do you carve it out or..

No, nothing is carved out; it's all beaten down – you put your pattern, 'cos leather is its own drawing board, you know – and it will just leave a very faint stain so you can see my nail going like that – well you put your pattern on to the leather and then you cut round the whole of that pattern so you're pressing everything down to leave the pattern raised, nothing is taken out, and then when

that's finished it's all got to be dyed and painted to various colours.

What kind of paint do you put on?

It's – it's the background is a spirit dye, a leather dye but the actual colours on the pattern itself, they're like – they're like acrylic paint but it's specifically for leather. Unfortunately, a lot of these – a lot of my stuff for this work originally came from – the only place you could get it was in Fort Worth, Texas so I just sent off originally for a starter, you know, they do a small starter kit and then it's like everything else, what starts off as a hobby, it takes over, you know.

You said you worked in the clog factory as well.

Yeh, I help - when she's got special orders, she sends 'em down to me and I do all the hand carving and you know, various patterns that people – there's your Morris Dancers and the Clog Dancers and everything, 'cos they all belong to various dancing troupes and of course most dancing troupes have got their own design that they're known by and it's up to me to you know, put it on to the leather for them, and it's like everything else – depending what size clogs, because you've – you've got to allow an inch and a quarter all the way round the clog so that when they put them on the last and stretch 'em round to shape the clog, you know, it's not good having a pattern that hangs right over the edges because you'll get some of it cut off, you know, so you've got to work out how much room and where the pattern's got to go and everything. Celtic is the most popular, but I've done – I've done clogs with

elves on, and the stipulation from the young lady that I did that pair for was the elf had to have a happy face. I did a pair of clogs with a galleon in full sail and they were – they were dyed green, and the full sail was in white and the gentleman was getting married in them, so you get - you know, you get all different – you get everything.

I've done them with snakes on, I've done them lions on, horses' heads, dogs, flowers, it's just what that person wants.

Is there like a Guild for leather workers?

There is a Leather Workers' Guild, yes and there's also...

[someone coming in] Hello, we're looking for advice. Interview stopped then resumed.

So some of these tools that you've got up there, what are all those tools for – how do you use those?

That's what they call a round knife, that's a paring knife, that's what they call a French paring knife; why they call it a French one, I don't know, then up there you've got your various punches, these here, they're called saddlers pricking irons and depending on when...they mark the stitch for when you're hand stitching and I've got – I've got five – I normally use five six and seven, but they do go right to about twelve to the inch which is very very fine, but I – with the leather I use being more robust, you know, normally you know, five or six you can get away with. The – as I say, they just mark how many stitches you've got in a line so that when you start

hand stitching, you get your awl and you push it through and you get your two needles and one bit of thread, and just keep on going down this way; you'll always find people who do hand stitching, they – down the side of their little finger where they're pulling the waxed thread all the time, you know, it gets nice and hard. But that tool there – that's for doing the end of belts, you know cutting your end to make it a nice, a nice end.

Does it have a name?

[pasue] Do you know, I honestly don't know...been in the trade over thirty-odd years and...but I'm one of those people who sort of - I know what I need to do it with, you know – they come in, you can get them in all various sizes and various shapes, whether you want you know, a dead pointed end or a slightly rounded end, and things like that. It's just – some of my tools, in fact, most of my tools originally were given to me by a Lithuanian prisoner of war, and when I worked in the light leather goods factory he used to do all our framing for purses and bags and stuff like that, and unfortunately when he died, his wife got in touch with me and said he'd left me all his hand tools, and I've got a drawer full of them there, and you go on to you know, different stages and I hardly use any of them these days, because...yeh once upon a time I used to do a lot of framing on purses and that, but, like a lot of firms, they do a minimum order and you know, I could have – if it's say a hundred frames I could have – I might only want one, you know, so there's a lot of things that I have stopped doing that I used to do, you know.

What is framing then?

Framing is putting the metal frame on purses – I haven't got any to show you, no – shows you how often I do it when I haven't got anything to show you, but it puts the metal frame you know, so you can open your purse and close your purse and that, and again, it's all different – it's all different facets of leatherwork, different – each one is a different skill.

What's your favourite task then?

My favourite – well I've got two favourites – pattern cutting, which, yeah you'll, because you have to use that (pointing to his head) and then the other one is the hand carving, because it's very therapeutic because you can sit there and if you've had an argument with somebody, you can bang bang bang bang, you know – they're my two favourites; working out – I've got a picture to do of...Nature of an American Indian, I got to carve that on leather and then it's got to be coloured and everything, and then it's got to be framed you know. That is the template of you know, everything as you can see, everything is worked out on paper first, where everything's got to go – I've got to carve that in leather, then I've got to paint it and then it's got to be framed.

So that's going to be like a picture on the wall?

Yes. I do – not so much, I haven't done any this last year – I do hand carved clocks and things like that you know – leather with a backing the I get the clock works and you know, mount it all and

again, I've been asked to do elephants, frogs, lions, unicorns – you just sort of go through your books or work out you know, work out the pattern and everything – where it's got to go, because when I said – the carving, because you can see what you're doing start coming alive you know, you'll put – you'll put a little mark on it you know, and that'll bring that part up – the picture is growing as you're doing it, then the pattern cutting – yeh, cut the patterns and then you see this gradually growing and coming to – the idea you had in there ends up there.

I was asking you about the Leatherman's Guild.

Yeh, there is a...Leatherworkers' Guild and then down in... Wolverhampton and round there, there's a leather museum and then there's the saddle makers, shoe makers, there's various – you know, there's various ones. As I say when I was at college and I got the bits of papers that you need, they show you that you've reached that standard, but then it's – you've got to build on that standard to you know, to be able to do all the various types of jobs that you know, get coming in.

I make jewellery boxes for people you know, and you've got to work out the size of the lid and you know, everything – binocular cases I've made. Each one has got its own...slightly different you know, way to do things.

Is this trade a dieing trade do you think?

...the leather goods trade, no, because...most things now are

mass produced you know, I get people go to Tenerife, you know, places like that, and they come back and say 'oh I bought this bargain – it's a bag and can you put it back together again 'cos it's falling to pieces' you know, because they don't use the same types of material, thread and stuff like that you know.

China...a lot of their leather that's coming out now is what they call fibre pulled, which is...all the scrap leather which is all churned up into you know, bits and pieces, then it's mixed with the resin and rolled out in a sheet. Yes...you can say it's leather, but...then it has a finish lacquered on it, but after a while you can get that finish and just pull it apart you know, that's why you'll see a lot of belts these days – they're thin but suede underneath with a lacquered finish, with a piece of cardboard in the centre, yeh. After a while, the leather is so thin, it just breaks and falls to pieces, yeh, but they most likely only paid about three pound for that belt – one of the cheapest belts I do is fifteen pound because I know it's the good quality, best leather that I can get you know, the buckles I buy – again they come from Italy, they're solid brass and then the chrome ones are chrome over brass, you know they're the best ones I can get at the moment.

I consider, yes, people might say some of my stuff is a little bit over the odds, well yes, when you can go and buy a brand new belt for three pound, but I can guarantee that my belts nine times out of ten will see you out! I've got one belt – I made this about eighteen years ago; it comes off these trousers, goes onto me dress trousers, comes off them, back onto me working trousers – it's the only belt I've got, plus the fact that I can't afford my stuff! [laughing]

But yeh...in...when was it – in the sixties, you used to get an awful lot of plastic stuff started coming in and it was cheap, but again, people, when they realised that the plastic doesn't last because after a while it dries out, it cracks, right? So they started creeping back to leather but they thought that they could have leather goods for plastic prices, but you can't, you now – they needed re-educating shall we say.

I know you said you showed some of your stuff to children –do you think that what we've talked about today, do you think it's important to kind of – say this, the kind of work that you do and this information?

Yes it is, because [pause] people – it's like every trade, if there's nobody taking to it, after a while that trade starts dieing out and, same as today – there's an awful lot of saddlery stuff coming from Poland, but it's subsidised and it's cheap. A friend of mine went to...Royal Saddlers College, and he...I think he done altogether, I think he done about four years and the saddles that he made were absolutely – you couldn't find a finer saddle anywhere...and he went a few years ago, he went and did the Yorkshire Show for the college; they asked him you know, if he'd go, sit there and demonstrate a bit of you know, hand stitching, talk to people, things like that about the college, you know, what they try and do – standards that they try and reach, and he said 'yes, certainly, I'd like it' and he sat there all day and he was talking and a horse box pulled up next to where he was, and they lowered the back tail gate and that was full of saddles, bridles – all from European, and

people – he said people were throwing money at it and at the end of the day, that was empty – put the tail board up, drove away – saddles, bridles, cheaper than he could go out and buy the leather.

Is that Eastern Europe?

Most of it is Polish these days yeh, he said it's just not worth it.

So is the quality good?

It's passable, you know – nine out of ten people, they want a saddle, you know – yes if you want just an ordinary every-day saddle, yes it'll do, but if you want something you know, a little bit different, better quality English saddle – no, you can't compare them. It's the same old story, like everything else, if you want the best stuff you've got to pay for it, but these Polish saddles – yeh, they do the job they're asked for, so yes – you, you know, that's one more – he's working in a glass company in Bradford now. As I said, if he wants anything doing he brings it to me, so that's one more we've lost – one more person, yeh. But like I say, you get all these purses, bags and stuff like that from China, Taiwan, you know – you can understand it, but it's carrying on all the time, you know.

So the other practices or these colleges that teach the leatherwork, are they still going then?

Well, the Cordwainers College which was...handbags, light leather goods, purses, note cases, footwear – they've now been

amalgamated in with the Royal College of Fashion, so yes they're still going, but under another side, you know, it's now the Royal College of Fashion whereas before, Cordwainers College, they got students from all over the world there, yeh.

I would say yes, it is a dieing art. I've got a customer of mine who comes from Middleton, Manchester and according to him – how true this is I don't know, but according to him there isn't anybody between Hebden Bridge and where he lives at Middleton who does the same sort of thing and the...variety of stuff that I do, you know. A lot of people yes, they do it for a hobby but of course they're doing it for a hobby – I'm trying to earn, I'm trying to keep me head above water like, you know!

Is Hebden Bridge then a good place for...

Yeh, yeh – I find, because Hebden Bridge is unique because... everything I look at is an art and you've got an awful lot of artistic residents you know – just in here, we've got Robin makes candles, we've got Donna who is an artist, we've got Stuart next door who makes jewellery out of old coin of the realm and things like that, yeh – he used foreign coins, again all his stuff is hand done, yeh – you know, you don't just get a stamp and 'bong' – he's there with his little saw and his little file all going round the – you know, the fleur-de-lys on the old thru'penny bits, the galleon, the robin on old farthings – each one is cut out individually you know, and...yeh, it's nice to see because again, people can come along – nine times out of ten they can see us working, they can stop, they can ask questions and things like that, yeh.

And then you know you get enquiries of – ‘oh, can you make – can you make this, can you make that?’ ‘yeh course I can’ and then the people go, you think ‘how the hell do I do that?’ like you know [laughing], but you know – that’s one of the things that you stand there and you tear up an awful lots of paper until you get it right.

Right okay – is there anything that you would like to say that I haven’t asked about?

No, I think we’ve covered – practically covered everything...yeh, I started off leatherwork as a hobby...and one thing leads to another, and yeh- you just do it you know, in your spare time but then it gradually comes a bit more and comes a bit more, comes a bit more and you fall out of the... you know, when I was saying I worked for the firm who did an awful lot of government work and Ministry of Defence, I was – I was working seven days a week and I was out of the house fourteen hours a day. I still work seven days a week but there’s no pressure on me. I say to my customers ‘right, I’ll get it done as soon as I can’ and they’re quite happy with that, you know, but if I’m getting anybody saying ‘oh I need it by such and such’ well go somewhere else pal! I’ll get it done for you but I’m not going to say in the, you know – the first month or so, and yes, if I want to take a day off, yeh I’ll take a day off; I’ve got nobody on my back saying ‘you can’t do that’ – you watch me!

Yes, I’m quite happy in my own little world shall we say. You get to a certain stage in life where there’s nothing really you want, and as you can see, I know where most of the stuff is; some bits yes, I

have to look a bit harder, [laughing] but I'm quite happy with it.

Okay well that's great – thanks Geoff. I'll just turn that off.

And the lady who brings that in, she...she goes round antique fairs and any leather stuff that...I'll do it up for her and you know...

That's the top hats?

Yes, that's the top of – an old Victorian top hat case.

[END OF TRACK 1]