



## *About the project*

**Langholm Made** sought to explore and celebrate ‘making’ past and present in Langholm — a town with a rich textile history that remains vibrant in craft and making today. For Langholm Made, artist and filmmaker Emma Dove collected stories and memories of the weaving industry, whilst maker Deirdre Nelson explored ‘making’ in Langholm in its widest sense.

## *Making Connections*

Langholm Made formed part of a wider project entitled Making Connections, initiated by Upland with local partner organisations, The Langholm Initiative and OutPost Arts, to enable artists and makers to explore and highlight Langholm’s rich history and heritage in textile manufacture. Making Connections consisted of two artist residencies, undertaken by Dumfries & Galloway based artist Emma Dove and Glasgow based maker Deirdre Nelson, and a schools project led by Kirkcudbright-based textile artist Morag Macpherson.

## *About these booklets*

For Langholm Made, Emma Dove recorded conversations with a number of local people who contributed stories and memories relating to the textile heritage of Langholm. This booklet is one of a set of seven, each containing a printed conversation transcript, existing as a way to capture and share the personal reflections and memories which celebrate a unique heritage, deeply embedded in people and place.

## *About the text*

The conversations in these booklets have been transcribed using the ‘clean transcript’ standard, whereby ‘fillers’ (such as ‘um’) and repetitions are mostly edited out so as not to distract from the main content. However an effort has been made to try and keep as much of the natural flow of conversation as possible within the text. Any spelling or formatting relating to dialect has been transcribed as true to the spoken word as possible. Use of dialect words vary throughout each conversation (so for example the word ‘you’ might be spelled ‘you’, ‘ee’ or ‘yow’ at different points within one transcript). Spelling and formatting choices have been made at the discretion of the transcriber in each instance.

The start and end of some transcripts — as well as some short sections within the conversations — have been edited out when considered to be informal pre-amble, post-amble, or an unrelated tangent to the main conversation. In a very small number of instances, a word, phrase or sentence has also been retracted from a transcript if considered that it could cause unnecessary offence.

## *Glossary of Langholm dialect*

a — I	ken — know	deef — deaf	faither / fither — father
mie — me	ee ken — you know	auld — old	freen — friend
ee / yow — you	ken't — knew	cald — cold	mucker — pal
hie — he	tell't — told	sair — sore	fook — folk
oor — our	ca' / caw — call	deid — dead	weemin — women
yir — your	ca'd / cawd — called	yince — once	booyee — boy
oo — we / us	ta'en — taken	ony — any	lassie — girl
ain — own	siee — see	nane — none	naebody — nobody
whee — who	gie — give	maest — most	thegither — together
yin — one	git — get	mair — more	maitter — matter
twee — two	mind / min' — remember	aw / a' — all	toon — town
thrice — three	cairry — carry	ae — always	heed — head
fower — four	hing — hang	wie — wee	hair — heart
twal — twelve	scoorin' — scouring	sic — such	han' — hand
hunners — hundreds	skelped — hit	stert — start	mooth — mouth
thoosand — thousand	dae / div — do	afore / afoor — before	moothfa — mouthful
nae — no	dae ken — don't know	after — after	soon — sound
aye — yes	dinna / daen't / divn't — don't	doon — done	threid — thread
an — and	didnae — didn't	lang — long	yairn — yarn
o' — of	disn't — doesn't	a'hint — behind	patren — pattern
eet — it	canna — can't	ower — over	coorse — coarse
tae / 'ae / 'a — to	couldnae — couldn't	wi' — with	claiths — clothes
fra — from	wid — would	forra — forward	dookie — swimsuit
fir — for	widnae — wouldn't	throw — through	caird — card
joost / jist — just	wouldae — would have	roon — round	barra — wheelbarrow
dae — do	wasnae / wan — wasn't	fer — far	reid — red
daein / dain — doing	werenae — weren't	aff — off	cairt — cart
ga — go	wunna — won't	oot — out	pert — part
gan — go / going	hadnae — hadn't	doon — down	wa' — wall
hev — have	shaire — sure	affa — awfully / a lot	flair — floor
hed — had	wrang — wrong	oor — hour	hoose — house
teeke — take	feart — afraid	pun' — pound	tiee — tea
meeke — make	weel — well	mam — mum	breid — bread

## *Alan Miller*

*25 May 2021*

### *SPEAKERS*

*Alan Miller, Judith Johnson, Emma Dove*

A conversation with Alan Miller recorded at his premises at Yarns to Yearn For, situated in a former mill in Langholm.

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Alan Miller    | The yarn store was the bit I liked to be in.  |
| Emma Dove      | Well, that's worked out well then!  |
| AM             | Exactly, a know, aye. I always liked being the organiser in the yarn store, gettin' it all nice and tidy.   |
| ED             | I can relate to that, I think I'd be happy in the yarn store.   |
| Judith Johnson | Well Duncan was saying how important it was at Arthur Bell's that the yarn store was well organised and everything was in the place — you knew it was going to be in the right place.   |
| AM             | That's it. Exactly. We had box numbers in Reid & Taylor's — it was like that, you know — but there was rows and just box numbers. So it was all computerised — you'd find a batch o' yarn in a certain box, you know, so, if you went there and it was gone, then it was either used or out on another job, you know, so... |
| ED             | So how did you get started then? What was your route in?  |
| AM             | Pretty much... I delivered groceries for a company in the town at the time — Balfours. An a used to deliver to Ian Little who was the mill Manager. So when I was   |



AM cont. like 17, he said to me, he says 'Are you looking for a job?' — And a'm like 'yeah'. He says 'Well, there's one going in the yarn store if you're interested.' So I just went and done my colour blind test and pretty much started straight away. So that got me into the start of it.

ED So right before you start, you've got to check the eyesight's good?

AM Yeah that's it, you do the colour blind — 'cause if you're colour blind in the mill then if you're looking for a red or a green, it could be difficult.

ED Actually, I was speaking to Katrine Eagleson, and she said that she hadn't initially realised that she was colour blind, but she was having trouble with the yarns and that's how she realised that she was. And she actually said she was keen to work in the weaving, I think, but she — or I'm not sure which role specifically — but it was a role that she would have had to be able to...

AM Ah right. A've actually got the colour book for testing your colour blindness.

ED Oh do you? Like the one — the sort of original one?

AM There's numbers and that, that's in it, so, aye.

ED Can we have a look at it?

AM Aye. I think a've still — a've got it in there, I'm sure...

JJ So which was that — the first job — which mill was that?

AM That was at Reid & Taylor's, and then I was there for — I think it was about five years — and I got offered a job wi' Neill Johnstone's, who were pretty much next door. And they took me on to learn to warp. So I done that, and then I took off travelling. Came back — ended up back in Neill Johnstone's — which I done a couple o' times, and then it was Reid & Taylor's and Neill Johnstone's, so they sorta amalgamated, so I was asked to go back in and look after the Neill Johnstone's side of the business. And then, it sort of progressed from there that, a year before it closed, I was the Production Manager, trying to oversee all the work that, you know — that's the sad thing about it — the order book was full, but we just couldn't afford to get the yarn in to do the jobs, you know. So we were stuck in this Catch-22, you needed money in to pay for the next lot o' yarn and we just couldn't do it. So that

AM cont. was when the administrators ended up coming in.

JJ What year was that?

AM That would be 2013? Yeah, it would be, 'cause a've been eight years full time here in August. So... You seen it over the years, how things went. When I first started in the yarn store, there must have been 50, 60 tonne o' yarn. You know, at least. It was just chock a block wi' yarn. Whereas it went on, you know, money became tighter, so instead of buying 500 kilos of a colour, you would buy exactly really what you needed for a job. So say you needed 20 kilos — you would just buy your 20 kilos. Whereas I remember, like, you know, half a tonne, a tonne coming in of one colour. And you knew it would get used through time. But I suppose the way it was the money just started to dry up and you had to be a bit more savvy wi' what you bought in, so, you know.

ED So would you have known a lot about the industry before you started? I mean, did you grow up in Langholm? Were you sort of surrounded by it?

AM A did, a did. And ma mum was a darner, you know. My dad worked out for the Buccleuch Estates, so I didn't really know much about the mill itself. All

I can remember as a kid was — mum would darn fra home, so she would have a darning table. All I remember is like crawling under the table, you know, as if it was like a tent. So, that was it, but a'd never really set foot in a mill until going in that day to be offered the job.

ED And do you remember what it was like, sort of that first experience of being in the mill?

AM Just — it's the smell and everything I think that, you know, got to you. Like the yarn and you know, you had — it's like an oily smell I suppose. A lot o' the yarn comes in oil. But no, it was just — and the amount o' people, you know, in them days. That was '89 I started. But even then, you know, a dunno how many would be employed. It could have been 80, 90? And then of course, they halved the workforce and then sort o' halved it again, so it became a lot quieter.

But as I say the yarn side of it — the yarn store was just full. And just, as I say, just through time it got less and less. Some o' the stock takes you had to do, you know, if you had four hundred and eighty kilos o' yarn in these boxes you had to get it all out, weigh it, put it all back, so... So no, it was, it was really good times in there and the people you worked wi', you know,

AM cont.      you had a good sort of rapport wi' them.

ED              And what was it about working in the yarn store that really appealed to you?

AM              A just think it was the organising, you know. When you're stuck at a machine, you're just, you know, there all day. Whereas the yarn store you had that sort o' freeness to walk about, you know, do your job — you weren't sort o' stuck at the one place all the time. So yeah.

ED              And it's probably changing a lot — you've got to keep, you know...

AM              That's it, yep. You know, you were getting sort o' — setting jobs up, you'd be putting jobs away, you know, all that sort o' stuff. So no, it was, it was good, aye. So now a've got ma own little yarn store!

JJ              And how did this come about?

AM              It was just... It was Neill Johnstone's at the time. We always — it's the fancier yarns, started — We always had tonnes leftover. You know, you could have 100 kilos, 200 kilos, leftover fra certain jobs. And there was a guy used to come up fra — it was Yorkshire — and he'd pay a pound a kilo and he'd take tonne upon tonne away, you know. And you sort o' thought, well, there must be a market out there — or

you'd like to think there was a market — for people using it.

So, just started to experiment wi' some o' the leftovers. And it did — it sold. Quite surprising getting into it more that — they were synthetics, you know, acrylics and all that — whereas most people want natural fibre, you know — the wool, the silk — things like that are your better sellers. Some people cannae wear wool, of course, you know. Some people come and say that they're allergic to it and that. But no, as a say, it just sort o' grew fra there — just buying, sort o'... I did work for Neill Johnstone's near the end when they were closing, and instead of getting paid money, I got paid yarn! [laughs]

ED              So you were in transition...

AM              That's it exactly, yeah, so I think I ended up wi' about three tonne out o' Neill Johnstone's at the time. And then it was like through Reid & Taylor's. There's a place up in Peebles closed — Robert Nobles — that I ended up getting a lot o' stock from, so, no it... But now, the tough side is that there's not as many mills there tae get cheap yarn. So you have to go to suppliers and pay full price and just try and you know, work it that way. But nah, it's still doing all right, you know.

JJ And you do have some of your yarns woven next door, don't you? And you've gone into the collectibles side of things.

AM Aye, a've got like, tartan — the two tartans there are two that a've done — like the Yarns to Yearn For and Langholm tartans, so, that's a side o' the business... And again it just started up by — a piece o' fabric I sold to a lady who came and collected it fra sort o' Brampton, and she showed me what her mum made, and that was one o' the bears. And it just sort o' stemmed from there. I asked her to make a couple in the tweed, and then it's grew and grew to — I think there's about 130 plans or something... [laughs]

JJ And the designs for the new Muckle Toon tartan and your own tartan — local designers have been involved with, haven't they?

AM Yeah, it was Ronnie Laidlaw done the Yarns to Yearn For one — sort o' sat down wi' the colours that we were gonna use for that — and it's to do wi' the logo and the writing. And the Muckle Toon one was just trying'ae work out colours related to the town, and then we took the Armstrong design and replaced the colours. So that's where that stemmed from. So no, it's went down pretty well.

JJ You've gone for very bright colours for your own logo and your own tartan. How did you choose those colours?

AM It was actually Paul Gardner. He — I spoke to him about, early on —

JJ Graphic designer.

AM Aye. Yep. I spoke to him and he came up wi' the logo, you know. And it's like, the amount o' people that comment and say how good a logo it is, you know, bright an —

JJ It's very modern isn't it? In a traditional industry, it's modern.

AM It is, it is. Yeah, that's it. So, no... So I was aware of the tartan when a first sort of saw it on the loom — it's like, a wee bit in your face. But it's like anything, it grows on you, you know [laughs]. Aye.

JJ Just back to the yarns, you send them out all over the world, don't you?

AM Yeah, it's like — I did count up last year, I think it was about 38 different countries that it went to last year. And even now, Brexit's been a little bit of an issue, but it's still, you know, going here, there and everywhere. Yesterday I sent to Israel, Germany, France. And then, what have I

AM cont.	— a've got one, a've got a box going to Holland today. So no, it's still going, you know... America's quietened down and I think it's more postage. Postage has gone sky high to these sort o' places and it's just, you're payin' as much postage as you are for the actual yarns. But if they want it they'll, you know, pay for it — that's the thing. So they do come along, so...		Italian spun, you know — probably dyed over here, but no, it doesnae... I suppose it's like — Italy is renowned for its silk, so if anybody says, you know, 'produced in Italy', then it has got the appeal, you know.
		JJ	What's this thing — big thing up here that you've got?
ED	So what is it about these yarns that make people from all over the world want to get hold of them?	AM	This is the winding machine. So this winds from your large cones o' yarn — say it's a kilo cone — this is what breaks it down to 100 grams, 200 grams. And this — this was originally in Neill Johnstone's, and then it went to Reid & Taylor's, and then it ended up down here [laughs]. Cost me 300 pound.
AM	I think because, what I do is... Your big suppliers will sell kilo cones. Whereas wi' me, you can come and buy 100 grams or 200 grams. So you can buy a small amount, you know, just... A lot o' the people that are hobbyists, craft people, just want a small amount, you know. So if you want a kilo, you can come to me and get 10 colours, rather than going to a big supplier and you know, having to buy, say, 10 kilos of 10 different colours. So no, that's the good thing about it.	JJ	Quite a big piece of machinery.
		AM	It is, and aw it's... It's such a good piece. I think it was 1938 is when it was built. So it's paid for itself thousands o' times over [laughs]. It's one o' these old machines that, touch wood, very rarely goes wrong, you know. And it can do anything — it does your fine silk to your thicker yarns. Whereas a lot o' your modern machinery, it can't do your thicker stuff. They're built for finer yarns and when they get thick stuff it tends to, you know [chuckles]... So no, no, it can accommodate both.
JJ	Do you get the feeling — is it important that it's coming from Scotland? Is that a selling point?		
AM	A don't think so, really, because a lot o' the yarn's actually produced in Italy, you know, the silks and silk linens are		

ED And is this the purpose it would have been used for, or have you kind of repurposed it?

AM No, pretty much it's... It's like, back in the day, when you're warping, you need — you've got your design, whatever you're doing — and you need a certain amount o' cones. So if you had 10 kilos o' yarn and 10 cones — you maybe need 50, or you maybe need 100. So that's where that machine would be there, to make the extra yarns. But now — obviously that was your old machine — nowadays, there's so much more — they wind, you know, to length. Whatever length you need for a job they'll wind, so there's not much waste. Whereas wi' that you sort of — it was guesswork. You know, you'd work it out and add maybe 10 or 20 grams on and you'd have all these little bits left at the end. So what d'you do wi' them? You know, you'd wind it up and have hundreds o' knots, or, you know [laughs]... So that's how it sort o' changed that way. But no that was the thing as well — winders, you know — there was loads o' people just winding cones o' yarn all day. And then at the end it came about there was — I think there was one person winding, you know, because it was the machine that done it all rather than, you know, the people.

JJ We were talking earlier with Eenie Maxwell and he was saying that they're hoping to get some apprentices, because they are busy, and he sees a future for the industry. But in the short term — it's attracting people in, you know — there's older people who say they would go back and work for nothing because they remember the good old days and they loved it. But getting younger people involved is really hard. Do you, you know — do you have any thoughts about the future of the industry, either your part of it or weaving in general?

AM Certainly — there is certainly a future there, it's just, you know, getting the people in to learn the skills. You know, they're dying out, that's the thing nowadays, 'cause it is an older generation. You know, so I think it does need — as I say, Robbie shows that, you know, there is a business for, you know, tweed and fabric and that sort of stuff, it's... No, I think my role is I just keep going as best I can. It's just, you can't plan too far ahead I don't think. It's just, a've always got little projects on the go that, you know, try and build things up. A've got tartan scarfs at Schofields, a've got — even the Langholm tartan snood should be here this week! [laughs] Y'know, so... So see how that turns out. And then, it's like, Langholm being such a small place, I feel that you exhaust some

AM cont. of the things that you do. So it's like, nice to just keep adding to your collection and stuff like that.

ED And are people aware of the work that you're doing within the town? Do people know that you're here and what you do?

AM I think there is — I think most people do. But you get the odd person coming down and saying 'Oh I didn't even know you were here', you know, so... But no, it's like — taking the pop up shop on the High Street at Christmas and that, you know, people get to see the sort o' stuff. And I don't know if they feel that a'm out of the way down here that, you know, they're not welcome or you know, something like that? It's your own space. But I always try and advertise, you know — come in and visit — all that, so

ED It's a lovely space to work in.

AM I just love it. You know, I just love the unit itself.

JJ Does it feel like home?

AM It does! Well, it's funny, because when I ended up renting the place, Neill Johnstone's used to rent it as a storage space for their excess yarn. So we'd end up coming down here and you know

taking yarn back to use and stuff. So it's like, gone round in a full circle, and a've ended up in here...

ED Yeah, I was gonna ask what this space would have been like, kind of, in previous iterations?

AM Yeah, well, I think it was like the spinning and carding o' the yarn was in the sort o' next sheds. So, I don't know — I can't remember if it was the carding or spinning was next door — 'cause there was big pits, you know, wi' the big machines and that in, so... And of course, there was a door up the top end that connected it all up. But, nah... There's somebody's signature in ma office. I think it's — is it William Harkness? — and it's '1925' written on the beam. And it's — I don't know if you know Elspeth Zemla? — it's her dad, you know, so it's like, all these little things, so... I can't remember what job he done in the mill. But no, it's funny, all these little things that pop up.

ED And it's nice to be — as you say, you were in here previously.

AM That's it. Yep. A've even got photographs o' the day a was sort o' moving in and there was nothin' in here! It's like, that's totally changed.

ED So everything that's in here you've brought in? It was just an empty space?

AM Yep. Absolutely. Yep, yeah.

ED Amazing — I love the smell as well.

AM I know, aye, that's it.

ED The smell of the fabrics and the yarns, it's quite particular.

JJ I think everybody we've talked to has mentioned the smell of the fabric. And it was so funny talking to the darners, you know — all the gossip and funny stories and the tricks they got up to.

AM That's it. No it'd be a Monday morning, I suppose — it'd be all whatever'd been happening over the weekend, wasn't it?

JJ And the Friday lunchtime, washing the hair and putting the curlers in, ready for the Friday night.

AM Aye, aye.

JJ But I mean, you're probably a lot younger than the ones that we've already talked to.

AM That's it, aye.

JJ Are there many people of your generation still here, and what sort of things would they be doing?

AM Eh, there probably is you know. There's a lot o' people, like, that I worked wi', you know — there's Jason Hall, Russell Bell — these people that have moved on, you know — social worker, fireman, all these sort o'... So they were all in the mill when I started, you know. There's David McVittie, he was a warper.

JJ Yeah he was at Neill's, wasn't he? He's a paramedic now.

AM That's it. He was at Neill Johnstone's as well for a bit. So no, there is.

JJ So are you the only one still in the industry, d'you think?

AM A think so... Yeah — my age — that I know of anyway. You know, you've got slightly — Paul Mitchell, you know is obviously up at Lovat Mill — he's a couple o' years older and stuff. So no, there is, there's very few my age that's...

JJ Don't some of them from here go down to Carlisle?

AM Yeah, there is actually — Linton Tweeds. Martin Tomlinson, he's younger. He's



AM cont. down there.

JJ Yeah. Is he a weaver?

AM I think he is, yeah, yeah. So I think half o' Langholm worked in at Linton Tweeds for a wee while, you know.

JJ Well, before COVID they were in touch with me and they were very busy, and they were looking to take people on.

AM Yeah, yep.

JJ Put the word around up here, but...

AM It was rumoured at the time that Reid & Taylor's closed, that Keith Walker was looking at actually having a place up here as an extra weaving, you know, shed — that could have been set up or kept going through there, you know, but...

JJ Eenie was also saying how hard it is to get the younger generation interested. And we were talking about the power of social media, and that young people are influenced by what they see. But of course, the older generation, and you know, no disrespect, but Eenie and Robbie and people of that age don't use social media. It's alien to them, it's not part of their lives, and they don't realise that if they want to get messages out, that's

probably the way to do it now.

AM Yeah it is, yeah.

JJ You're very active on social media, aren't you?

AM I am, yep, I like to — I don't do it all the time — but I do like to take me wee bear somewhere and get a photograph.

JJ And Yarnie the bear appears in very strange locations! [laughter]

ED I'm going to have to follow this now.

AM A know, aye, exactly! Naw I take even — sometimes a'll take a bear, it'll be a tartan bear, if a'm going somewhere, you know, that maybe has some sort o' meaning to a place. It's like, we're going up north in a — is it next month? — and a've got a Loch Ness tartan. And I think we're gonna be travelling past Loch Ness. So a'm gonna probably, you know, get a photo at Loch Ness and things like that. So...

JJ That's the way to do it.

AM Aye, that's it.

JJ But I just feel like the traditional generations aren't clued into that.

AM Aye. Cause a've spoke to Stephen along at Drove about having like a Facebook page and stuff. And he has said, you know, 'we will go down that line'. And it just shows, you know, the outside world what's actually going on as well, doesn't it? You know, put a few seconds of a loom weaving and...

JJ Mmm — because Linton Tweeds do it. Yeah. And you know, Glen Isla — who finished their scarves in here — they're very active on Instagram.

AM I'll need to follow them.

ED One of the questions I've been asking everyone is whether they still have remnants or reminders of the industry within their own homes. So I don't know if you do in your own home! But you've obviously got a lot of — can you talk about some of the, some of these things — this sign up here for example?

AM The sign was, a dunno, would it'a been... A think it was in the darning flat, you know, at the end. So it's like, every time you went up the stairs, this sign would be up to remind you, obviously, you know, to be careful.

ED So it says 'You are making the world's most expensive twist suiting cloths. Be careful.'

AM Yeah that's it, exactly. But a've got, you know — they were just showpieces, the big woven selvedge<sup>1</sup>. You know, there was a big display, which sort o' fell down.

JJ But that would be in the selvedge of the actual cloth?

AM It would be. As I say, that was just made big, just for the display purpose. But no, it's like — a'll see if a can find that book. A've got my little museum here... So this is the — this is the test for colour blindness. So obviously, when you went into the mill, you would be shown that and as long as you can read the number, you know, you were fine. So — but a lot o' people you show them that and they can't read it.

JJ Mmm. I think it's particularly men — between red and green — sometimes struggle, don't they?

AM Yeah that's it. Yep. I think one of my pals, James — Jess — James Johnstone. He's colourblind a'm sure. You know.

ED And you might not have realised until —

AM No that's it, yeah. If somebody showed you that — 'what number's there?'

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<sup>1</sup> referring to an oversized piece of black and white selvedge ribbon displayed on the wall, with text that reads 'THE MOST LUXURIOUS CLOTH IN THE WORLD'

AM cont. It's like, 'number... ?'

ED It must be quite a shock!

AM Well that's it, exactly.

JJ Well I suppose you've never known any different if it's just what you've always seen or not seen.

AM So yeah, so that was one. That's probably the book that I was tested on.

ED So this is the same book that you basically would have used?

AM It is. It is, yeah.

ED What else have you got in your wee library? Let's delve in!

AM A've got a thing, a think, about scales — that's probably the yarn store, weighing stuff. And then there's all different books and shuttles, you know.

ED You've got a little archive here yourself.

AM I have, it's just... A'd love it to be out somewhere else, you know, on display, rather than in here — because a've got all these, you know, boards and things as well, that would make a great display. And there's one o' them, which is... So we've

got 'Wool and Whisky Galore, Gleneagles' — so that was '73 — so there's the pattern book — Whisky Galore, '73.

JJ Mmm, fantastic.

AM But no I did, I salvaged quite a lot o' things when — 'cause at the end o' Reid & Taylor's there was... I remember a guy comin' in, and he was just helping his'sel to anything really, you know. So I was lucky that I did manage to salvage quite a few things. A've got a wages book from the '50s — dunno if you wanna see it — ma mum's in it, and ma papa's in it, you know, so it's... [retrieves book] So this is the wages book.

JJ Wow. It's painstaking work, isn't it?

AM [laughs] I know.

ED And where's your mum and papa?

AM So — is that the darnin'? So that's 1957, so ma mum would be...

ED Beautifully kept.

JJ Very neat, isn't it?

AM It's unbelievable isn't it?

JJ I prefer books like this to spreadsheet.

AM See, that's — that's ma papa, William K.

ED Let me get a wee photo. Can you point to...? And this is from 1957.

AM So it just shows you how many darners there was at the time.

JJ That's unbelievable isn't it?

AM I know. It's like, in my — I think when a first started it would be maybe, what — 15 to 20, possibly? And then at the end there was, four? Three or four, you know, so...

JJ I think Robbie's<sup>2</sup> got three hasn't he? Two or three?

AM I dunno when — ma mum was born in '43, so '58 she'd be 15 — would she be 15?

ED Did she start quite young?

AM Yeah, yep. Probably just straight out o' school I would think... There's the weavers, you know, it's like...

ED And is there quite a variation in terms of the wages — in terms of what people were getting paid?

AM A've not really studied it that much but...

JJ You had a great deal of foresight to get these things.

AM Well I know, that was it, 'cause as a say, there was a guy from — I think Bradford or something — that would come up. And you think — well if he's taking it, where's it gonna go, where's it gonna end up? You know, so it's better to keep it in the town and then at least you've got —

ED It's not got personal relevance to him.

AM That's it, exactly. It just makes you wonder what has actually gone, you know, because you couldn't salvage everything from it, so... Dunno if I can find ma mum...

ED Maybe a wee bit later.

AM I know...

ED And did she do darning for her whole life, or...?

AM She done it for quite a few years, but then she worked in, like, the guest house in the town, and she was a cleaner at the Thomas Hope, before she retired. I need to remember to look for her maiden name — she was a Kay as well so...

JJ There's an army of teddies. Actually I think if you were in here at night it would be a bit scary!

ED [laughs] With a torch...

AM I know! — Now there's ma mum. So there's Jeanette Kay, which is — there's no wages next to her. No wages next to anybody. That must have been them getting ready for the next — the summer holidays coming up, the week ending 23rd of July.

ED And it's so kind of, just seeing everything on paper like this, it sort of feels quite fragile as well, doesn't it?

AM I know, that's it, aye. You just think how sort of particular it had to be, wasn't it? You know, sitting down and doing all those wages every week.

JJ It was real people — yeah, manual, people-focused, wasn't it? It was real labour. Not just tapping on a keyboard or...

AM That's it, yeah. Exactly, no...

ED Can I get a picture of you with the book? [laughs]... Thank you, that's brilliant. And you said you've got a thing for scales?

AM I know, I have. It's... A've got scales everywhere. Like, electronic, you know...

ED They're beautiful items, though aren't they? These old scales. And the weights for them as well... And what about these up here?

AM They came — again, they're part of the woven selvedge. So, depending on what you were — what cloth you were making and what the design was, some customers would ask for a certain colour in the selvedge, so all these were the different ones that would be set up to do it. I just managed to salvage that box. I helped clear it out last year of all the rubbish that was left. So that was in one of the departments, I ended up sort o' managing to salvage that as well.

ED Just last year? Right. Makes you wonder what's still kicking about...

AM Yeah, well that's it, I was lucky that I was able to go in and go through the departments, you know, just see if there was anything of a value of sorts. But there was just so much rubbish as well you know — that was just dumped. It was quite sad to see you know, big piles o' rubbish on the floor that had just been left and...

ED 'Cause it is quite dilapidated, the building...

AM It is, and it's — some of the windows up the stairs had slid, so, you know, all it would have taken was just to pull them back up, but the water that was coming in and you know, it was quite damp in some o' the places, you know. But I don't know if it's

AM cont. been made watertight. There was talk of it, you know, that was the first job to do. But again there's — one o' the rooms, the offices — that we couldn't touch because there was possible asbestos in there. So again, that was gonna have to be tested before anything could be cleared out. A dunno if anything came o' that either. It was that big thing always that came about wi' the asbestos. I remember even — it would be Roddy Innes going round and boarding things up, and labels on, you know, to say there was asbestos in it.

JJ I think it's okay if it's not disturbed.

AM That's it, exactly. Yep.

JJ And of course, you know, we're led to believe there are plans for the building for the future.

AM Yeah. Well that's the old building<sup>3</sup> — that was Reid & Taylor's, you know, the big building that burnt down. So it's...

ED Ah, okay, yep.

AM So that's it on there as well.

ED Oh, yeah. Wow, quite an incredible building, wasn't it?

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<sup>3</sup> referring to a poster on the wall depicting the original 'Factory' building

AM It was. I think, was it '33 I think it burnt down?

JJ Wasn't it... Didn't it happen twice?

AM It quite possibly did, aye... They always say it was an insurance job. But so is a lot of fires, aren't they? [laughs]

ED So it's interesting having — 'cause you were, you worked in the building — and then sort of going back in. You're probably one of the few people who did work in there and have been in since.

AM Well that's it, exactly, yeah, and I think — 'cause I was quite quiet at the time, a said a'd be willing to give a hand. And I think they liked the fact that I knew the place, you know. It was easy sort o' to get lost in the place but a knew my way around it and stuff. So no, it was good — good to go and help do it.

JJ Did it bring back memories of when it was buzzing?

AM It did, it did, yeah. It's like, being in the yarn store and things like that. The yarn store itself was just massive, you know — I think there was something like 1,200 wooden boxes, you know, so you think o' the size of the place.

JJ Some of the other people that we've talked to have also mentioned how busy the town was, when the textile industry was at its height, you know, number of shops.

AM Yeah, it's just hard to believe now how busy it actually was, you know, wi' the amount o' mills there was, and the amount o' people employed. You think o' the high street and that being, you know, really busy. I always mind the suspension bridge — finishing at Reid & Taylor's if you're heading up town. It's like, you would meet the sort o' Ford Mill and Bell's Mill and them — all them that lived on the other side — so you'd all meet on the suspension bridge! [laughs] You'd try to beat them across. So yeah...

JJ It's all changed now, isn't it?

AM It is, it is. And just the demise one by one wasn't it really? You know, that was the thing, so...

ED How were the names<sup>4</sup> chosen? I mean, this one is kind of quite obvious — 'Whisky Galore'.

AM I really, I really don't know. It would be a collection they would make each year. So — see some o' them, like, a dunno if it'd be a customer... 'Cause it's like, the peacock era, and... 'Chippendale'.

<sup>4</sup> referring to names of Reid & Taylor fabric samples hanging in Alan's workshop

ED Yeah, it's interesting kind of looking at them all. What's that one, 'From —'?

AM 'From the Peacock Throne'.

ED From the Peacock Throne! I mean they're quite... 'Blue Mosque'...

AM 'Chivalry'...

ED Would it be the designers that named them?

AM It could be aye, it could easy be. You know, they probably just — I think a lot o' them would just have a name, you know, for a collection each season or something. So maybe depending where you were gonna show it as well, you know, which country you were going to travel out to and...

ED And did you ever travel at all with your side of things?

AM I think the furthest I ever got was Yorkshire.

ED Oh well! Yorkshire.

AM A know [laughs]. That was... That wasn't the best o' times — that was when we were sort o' in a bad way, nearly closing. You know — so going down to meet one of our people that we owed money to...

ED	Wasn't such an exciting trip.	AM	James Harkness.
AM	Nah, that's it exactly.	ED	And so who was that again?
JJ	Oh you've even gone into lampshades.	AM	Eh, I know his daughter. She now lives in New Zealand, and I met her a couple o' times when I was out there. So it was when I saw that up there, I messaged her on Facebook to say 'this is on ma office beam'. She says, 'ah', she said, 'that's my dad, I recognise the writing', you know, so...
AM	A've to keep them warm 'cause they bubble. I think it depends on the actual tartan. I think a lightweight tartan doesn't go so well. Whereas a medium weight tends to hold it better. 'Cause I think the sorta cold air just tends to get tae it, you know, so... But the lamps — sold a few lamps at Christmas, some home furnishings...		
ED	You mentioned that signature in your office. Can I get a photograph of that? Or is it hard to reach?	JJ	Aw.
		ED	It's a nice signature, isn't it? Very swirly. Do you wanna see that?
AM	Well, a dunno if you can — aye you can probably see it.	JJ	Oh yeah.
ED	Is it up on the beam there?	ED	It makes you wonder what else is hidden away behind the facings and things.
AM	Yeah, so... Can you see that? A dunno if its '25 or '28?	AM	I know well that's it, aye exactly...
ED	I'll zoom in with the camera, maybe can see it a bit better... Hang on. I can zoom in a bit more.	JJ	And there's Alan on the front cover of Dumfries & Galloway Life.
AM	Maybe it looks like an '8', is it?	AM	A've got the second one o' them. That's the Langholm Tartan one. And then a've got one — there was one bear travelled all over wi' Simple Minds. So it went on tour wi' them.
ED	It does maybe look more like an '8' — yeah, I think so... Yeah. It's hard to tell 'cause it's on a crack. But I think '28.		



JJ Was it Melanie who sent them that?

AM Aye it was. Melanie gave him — gave Jim Kerr it at Blackpool and then it appeared just about every night at the drum kit!

JJ [laughs]

ED Love it.

AM That's a photo of my Grandad — at Reid & Taylor's actually — he was the engineer.

ED So it really runs in the family.

AM [laughs] Yeah... I always remember actually bein' a kid — goin' up there wi' ma mum. I used to love going up into Reid & Taylor's, 'cause they'd the dam — you know, the water runnin' through it? And a always remember going up, must have been early '70s, I think it would be. 'Cause the sad thing about it was my papa died the night he retired.

JJ Aww.

AM He retired on the Friday and he died that night. You know, so...

ED Goodness.

JJ Mmm...

ED And so what were your memories — your childhood memories of being in Reid & Taylor's?

AM Well I remember him being an engineer and he used to make me things like hammers and that, you know, it's like — I used to love going up there and seeing what he was making.

ED Uhuh. Must have been amazing being in that kind of space as a kid as well?

AM Well that's it, I know. 'Cause there was something nice about the workshop, you know, that he worked in — go in and he's got everything laid out, you know, in his order and...

ED Could you remember it like, sort of, in your head? Can you picture it really clearly?

AM A can, yeah, yep! As I say, I used to love just walking up the side — because the water that used to come under the mill, and it would run into the Esk, and they had the sorta, the dam area there that I used to love, and just go and look over...

ED So you could see down to the water that was running through?

AM Yeah, yep, yep.

JJ Is there a wheel?

AM There is, there is. Aye, a dunno, I take it they would maybe — could block it off so far? You know, to build the water up, you know, back years ago. But even, I remember the — one summer holidays — the actual — it flooded. It must have backed up or something, and the water came up through the floor into what would be the old pattern shop. So of course we had all the yarns sitting in there and a lot of it got — even cashmere and that — got ruined then, so... I think that's when pallets came into force, that you put everything on a pallet off the ground!

ED What's your favourite of the tartans?

AM It's hard to say really. Don't know if — I think a've seen that many that, you know... There was a really nice one, Loch Lomond, but I can't get that anymore unfortunately. It was probably one o' the first ones I got. There's so many that are quite similar as well, that's the thing, it's...

JJ But your own one's very distinctive.

AM Yeah it is, I do, I like the Yarns to Yearn For one. Actually, Leanne and Emma<sup>5</sup> are making me a pair o' trews in it. A've got a pair o' tartan trews in the Langholm, so I just thought I might as well get it in the

Yarns to Yearn For as well — just to have something different.

JJ I think they've just got into making trews, haven't they?

AM They have, well, I think that probably one o' the first ones they would make would be my pair. And then I think Les Murray got a pair and, yeah, yep...

JJ Oh they're doing well. And they love being down in the mill.

AM I know, I was in on — was it Friday? — handing the tartan in, and they said they just love being in. Just wi' the buzz o' the place? You know, it's... No it's great to see Robbie just being busy again, you know, up and running, and you know, work coming in. It is quite good that, you know, most of Bell's is quite textile, you know...

JJ It is! And most people in Langholm don't realise it.

AM Aye, that's it, a know, aye.

JJ You know, they think the textile industry is finished. And it is finished as they knew it all those years ago, but there's still opportunities, and there's still little pockets of industry.

AM That's it. Yep.

JJ We've got a really good cross section of memories — male and female, different departments, different job roles. And the DVD that Mick made is a really good, historical document<sup>6</sup>.

AM Yeah, yep.

JJ You know, the raw wool coming in at one end and the suiting going out at the other — because it was finished and everything all in the one place.

AM Yeah, that's it, aye. That was the thing wi' Reid & Taylor's when they had the actual scouring area, you know — they reckon one of the things about the finishing of the cloth was the Wauchope, you know, the river. Yep, so...

JJ Mmm, the water, mmhmm. Actually, somebody said 'it was the sparkling waters of the Wauchope'.

AM Yeah! [chuckles]

JJ Where do you think raw wool mostly comes from?

AM It's hard to say really. You know, I think places like Turkey and that, for spinning

<sup>6</sup> A film made by Mick Ryan depicting the various processes at Bell's Mill, during his time working there as Boilerman.

wise, are pretty big, you know. But it's whether — I don't know about Australia, 'cause I don't know if a lot o' the wool'll come over, you know, Merino type and... I had somebody comment on Facebook about the scarfs being made in Merino. She says, could you not do something wi' local wool? Because she said that they get nothing for it.

JJ For the fleeces, yeah. There is a lot of discussion going on at the minute about the feasibility of processing wool locally, because all the farmers are in the same boat. It's really just for the welfare of the sheep that they're shearing, because the money that they get only covers the costs and they don't get paid until the following year. So there's a cash flow thing as well.

AM It's like that poster up there — the poster o' John Armstrong of Hillhead, you know — and it's Cheviot, Cheviot wool. You know, so, it was obviously —

JJ Because it used to be Cheviot in Arthur Bell's, wasn't it?

AM Aye, that's it.

JJ But I think there's a lot of — is it Blackface? — around here, and that's quite coarse. More a carpet quality.

AM It's just finding, you know, what it's good for, isn't it, really? I suppose what you can use it for and...

JJ And there's new uses of it, like insulation. And I read about tree guards being made of wool — you know you see the plastic green tree guards around young trees? There's a company pioneering the use of wool.

AM A'right, yep.

JJ And then it's biodegradable.

AM Aye, aye.

ED Lovely place to work. Does it get really cold in winter?

AM Aw, it's unbelievable. Trying to drag me out the office at times! [laughs] 'Cause the office is insulated so a go in and shut the door and a'll print the orders off and then reluctantly come out and put the machine on.

ED And in summer does it get really hot?

AM Yeah, it's both extremes really. And I have to watch in the summer because having the north facing windows — the sun comes round. So of course, where a've got the yarn, you have to watch for it.

JJ So it doesn't get faded?

AM Aye, 'cause a've been caught out a couple o' times with it. You know, you go to one and it's like totally discoloured. So no, it's difficult as well, 'cause I used to have my shelves full of like 200 gram cones. But in the winter, they're heavy. In the summer, they're lighter. You know...

JJ Is it the moisture?

AM Aye, it obviously dries out. So if I do it in the winter, an a've to do them at 225 grams — just cone and 200 grams o' yarn. And if you're posting overseas, you have to try and get your weight limits — so 250 grammes is your first one not to go over. So if I wind it to 225 — say it was in the summer — in the winter, it could be 232, 233, so that takes you over wi' the packaging. But then the other extreme in the summer is like, it could be 218, 217.

JJ Wow, it's quite a variation.

AM So if somebody gets it — I mean you do get people that'll weigh it, and they'll think they've been shortchanged, you know. So you could explain and say, look, there's no difference, the length of yarn'll be there, but you just have to — I try and sort o' wind to order more than anything nowadays. 'Cause no it is... Until, you

AM cont.        know — I used to always sort o' wonder  
how it's, you know, getting lighter or  
heavier, but that's what it'll be. You know,  
just that moisture, and the warmth in the  
summer just dries it out... Probably my  
good months are in the winter when it's  
heavier, you're selling less! [laughter]

ED                Great. Well thank you for your time.

AM                Not a problem.

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