

## **Conversation with Douglas Joss, March 2012**

I retired from the RAF in 1968 after serving 30 years. I was serving at RAF Halton at the time and wanted to stay in the area. First I got a job working for Handley Page at Radlett for 18 months, but then they went bust. I had previously met the then Aylesbury Town Clerk, Reg Maxwell at some social event, so I wrote to ask him if he knew of any work. He called me back and said "We need a new secretary for the Mayor". So I had a job; it basically involved doing whatever the Mayor needed, drafting speeches, attending to ceremonial, making arrangements, whatever; there were no rules. Subsequently in 1975 the job became secretary to the Chair of the District Council.

There had always been a close relationship between the old Borough Council and Stoke Mandeville hospital. When the Borough was abolished we even gave the hospital all the old leather chairs decorated with the coat of arms from the old council chamber. Stoke Mandeville hospital was always on the itinerary for any visiting dignitaries to Aylesbury and every year the Mayor would attend the National and International Games, either to open them or as an official guest. I became very closely involved with the hospital over the years and got to know Bob King who ran the Sports Centre there.

It was all very casual back then. They would ask for the RAF apprentices at Halton to help with moving things and putting up equipment, like the archery butts; the archery always took place at Grange School on King Edwards Avenue in Aylesbury. I was always very interested in watching the bowls and would often go back there in the evenings; there were a few people I got to know there and the Bowls centre was run by an ex-RAF man.

In 1984 there was billeting taking place all over the place. The County Council had a farm school, Hampden Hall on the Wendover Road, and that got used to put people up.

Then the 1984 games were about to take place. I remember being called into a meeting with the Chair of the District Council. He must have said something like, "The Americans have let us down. You've got three months to sort it out; 60 countries will be involved. Are you happy to take this on? You can forget out your main job for the while, just concentrate on this."

I had had no real experience of organising games before but I was given the job of organising all the local volunteers to help with running the games. I got in touch with the Bucks Herald and we advertised there for volunteers and on the local radio. And we got swamped by offers of help, both locally and from miles away; in the end I had to limit it to 60 people. I even had one girl contact me from Sunderland and she was going to come down and camp and help as a volunteer. I got in touch with a local farmer (who also built me all the litter bins for the Games out of chicken wire) and she camped on his farm.

I decided to call the volunteers the Blue-Banders. I picked the name almost by chance simply because I found a box of blue arm bands in a cupboard at the district offices and decided we could use them to identify the volunteers. I wrote to Blue Band Margarine after I had chosen the name to see if they might be interested in sponsoring us, but they never wrote back or offered to help.

I had to organise the medal girls; I had six of them and we took them to Marks and Spencer and said, can you sort them out with a uniform? They had to check with their HQ, but then they gave us these smart uniforms for them. I left it to one of the girls, Rachel, to choose what they wore. I told them

“Leave it to her; her taste is very good”. And then they also supplied us with the cushions that we laid the medals on.

My volunteers worked from 8.00 in the morning until 9.00 at night while the games were on. I particularly remember all the kids in the Boys Brigade; they were so good and anything I asked them they would rush and do.

I remember one lady turned up with all her kids and offered them as runners. I asked her, “Will they do as they are told?” She said, yes, so I took them on. This was pre-mobile phones so we always had about 8 runners on hand each day of the games, ready to shoot off with a message to someone the other side of the stadium or whatever.

Some of people who turned up offering their services were a bit suspect and I wondered if they were perhaps only there for the free meals. So I had this little test I used on some people to see if they genuinely wanted to help or not. Between the dining room and the old entrance to the stadium there was a sloping area that was always littered every day with loads of fag ends. So I would say to my would-be volunteers, “Sweep that up; I don’t want to see any cigarette ends on it.” And if they did that then I would give them a proper job like helping directing the car parking.

There were hardly any car parks as such so we had to go around and identify streets where there were plenty of likely spaces, often in between council flats. It was all very unofficial, filling up whatever spaces you could find; I remember the residents of Henry Road were very tolerant and let people park in their drives. So the volunteers who did that needed to be firm chaps who could direct people around to the nearest spots. I only remember one complaint about the car parking. This chap driving his wife in a wheel chair, he came up to me and said “I want to speak to the person in charge”. I told him that was me. He was irate because he had had to park about a mile away and wheel his wife over to the stadium. I told him, “There’s over 600 disabled people here in wheelchairs; lots of them have had to get themselves that distance from their cars. You are the only person who has come and complained about it.” Of course the whole area was packed for the two weeks of the games and particularly crowded for the opening ceremony.

So many individuals and companies and organisations were so generous; I was amazed by the kindness. There was one Tring firm who, when I needed a flag for the information tent with a big I on it, not only gave us that but provided a collapsible flagpole as well.

Of course there was no real question of security back then. There were no guards or anything like that, just a few local police about. Certainly I wasn’t aware of any incidents where security was breached. All the different teams just milled about in Aylesbury; you could tell when you heard them speaking that they were from all over the world; the place was full of wheel chairs for the fortnight; and some people were even getting about on little horizontal carts. Though I remember the Iraqi team ended up being disqualified and sent back home – but I forget quite why.

One of my other achievements was getting the council to put in crossovers and lower the kerbs all around the town. I remember thinking how here was Aylesbury which had had all these Wheelchair games taking place annually for years and then when the athletes came into the town they had to struggle in their chairs to get up the kerbs. So I drafted the letter and got the chair of the District



This is Prince Charles laughing as he is leaving the games. I had just tried to crack a joke with him; I asked him, "So you haven't competed today, have you sir?" His detective in the middle was bit grumpy. I had my hand behind my back because I was holding one of those enormous early mobile phones, so he was very suspicious of that and wanted me to keep my hands out front where he could see them.