

BDOHP Biographical Details and Interview Index

WILLSON, John Michael (born 15 July 1931)

CMG 1988

Career (with, on right, relevant pages in interview)

Early life and entry to Colonial Service	pp 2-4
Northern Rhodesia, 1955-64	pp 4-9
Ministry of Overseas Development, 1965-70	pp 10-12
First Secretary (Economic), Malta, 1967-70	pp 12-13
Joined Diplomatic Service, 1970	pp 13-14
British Consulate-General, Johannesburg, 1972-75	pp 14-16
FCO (W Indian and N American Departments), 1975-78	pp 16-18
Special Counsellor for African Affairs, 1978	pp 18-19
Secretary-General, Rhodesian Independence Conference, 1979	pp 20-23
On staff of Governor of Rhodesia, 1979-80	pp 23-25
Counsellor, Bucharest, 1980-82	pp 25-29
Ambassador to Ivory Coast, Burkina and Niger, 1983-87	pp 29-35
Seconded to Royal College of Defence Studies, 1987	pp 35-37
High Commissioner in Zambia, 1988-90	pp 37-44

Comments on the role of Colonial and Diplomatic Service wives, pp 44-47;
comments on aid to Africa, pp 48-50.

JOHN WILLSON CMG

interviewed by Jimmy Jamieson on 3 March 2005 at Charlbury (Oxon)

Education and decision to enter the Colonial Service

JJ: You were at Wimbledon College and from there you went to do your National Service; you then went up to University College Oxford where you got an MA. What did you read there?

JW: Law, or Jurisprudence, as it was officially known.

JJ: Was that a useful beginning for any ambitions you had for joining the Foreign and Commonwealth Office?

JW: Yes, although becoming a civil servant or a diplomat had not crossed my mind at the time.

JJ: But then you also, cleverly I think, went to another College. To the other place - Trinity Hall, Cambridge?

Assignment to Northern Rhodesia (Zambia)

JW: Yes, let me explain. When I was at Oxford in my last year I applied to join the Colonial Service. I had wanted a job abroad and this looked an interesting career. The procedure was that you had various interviews in your last year. Subject to you getting a degree and then subject to your passing an exam at the end of your year's special training, you were accepted. I was told before I went down from Oxford that I had been accepted, and that I was being sent to Northern Rhodesia. Now my two first choices had been Malaya or the Western Pacific so I had to look up Northern Rhodesia in an atlas. I did not know whether it was on the coast or inland. And you went for your year's course to Oxford, Cambridge or London Universities, depending which colony you were assigned to. It just so happened that those going to Northern Rhodesia went to Cambridge. Had I been going to Kenya, for example, I would have

stayed at Oxford. Had I been going to the Far East I would have gone to London, so that explains my two universities.

JJ: I see. So this was really preparing yourself for the Colonial Service?

JW: Yes. It was called the First Devonshire Course (named after one of the Dukes, when he was Colonial Secretary) and you did things like language, history, law, anthropology. As I say there was an exam at the end of it which you had to pass in order to be accepted.

JJ: So this was in effect the prior training that you needed before you put on your khaki shorts and became an important person out in the bush, or whatever it was? But before that you had done your National Service?

JW: Yes between school and university.

JJ: Was that of any use to you?

JW: I think it is, particularly of course with hindsight - from the point of view of my mature years. It was much more fun, given that you had to do National Service, to do that between 18 and 20 and then go on to university at 20, because you were more resilient at 18 to be chased from pillar to post in the army, as you were. And you enjoyed university much more at 20.

JJ: You were probably more mature and able too?

JW: Yes. And you knew how to handle a bank account and all the rest of it, which apparently the students of today find impossible. And nobody tells them what to do, so they have to ask for advice or just drop out.

JJ: So you went off to Northern Rhodesia in 1955 and taking with you your wife, Dawn, who you'd met and married in Oxford I think?

JW: Yes, we did. She was reading social science at Oxford and we first met singing. We were in the Opera Club and the Music Society. We married in September 1954, and first of all I had to ask for permission to get married, because usually it wasn't granted to new entrants; then I had to ask for permission to stay a bit longer, because I was due to sail out in July and our first son, Simon, was born on the 8 July. So they kindly allowed me a month and we all went out on 8 August. And then it was a question of a 14-day trip on a Union Castle ship, and then four days on the train from Cape Town into Northern Rhodesia. And then either a 'plane or a vehicle to your eventual destination.

JJ: So what happens when you get to your post when you are assigned an area? Were you what's called a District Officer?

JW: Yes. I ought to explain first of all that Northern Rhodesia was not a typical colony in that its main product and export was copper, which meant that along what was called "the line of rail" and where copper mining took place, it was more like South Africa, but on the other hand by far the larger part was bush, and my first station was a place called Lundazi, which lay against the border of what is now Malawi – in other words in the east of Northern Rhodesia. The district was 12 thousand square miles in area, had 96,000 native Africans, and about 12 whites. It was three hundred miles from the nearest tarmac. It had no electricity and no running water. We used pressure lamps and fridges that worked on paraffin – they were the bane of one's life. But it was great fun. The set-up there still was, if you like, a hangover of Lugardism – after Lord Lugard, the Governor of Nigeria. He coined the phrase "the paramountcy of native interests", and if I may say so in your questions you seemed to think we were a fairly hairy bush lot, but this is not true at all. It was all very highly organised. You had provinces and the provinces were run by Provincial Commissioners and the districts were run by District Commissioners, and I was a District Officer – in other words the number two in the district. You spent two weeks in every four out on tour, round a particular part of the district. There were tax registers of every male of tax paying age – it sounds rather biblical, doesn't it? And you went round with the Chief's Court Clerk who was then very important; he called out the names and the villagers had to say where this chap was if he wasn't there to put his hand up. And a lot of them of course went down to South Africa to work on

the mines. I can even remember the phrase “waya ku migodi” – he’s gone to the mines. Others worked in the copper mines in their own country. You looked at village hygiene, and you looked at housing, and you looked at the medical situation, and whether they had sufficient food for the coming year.

JJ: When you say you looked at them – what does that imply? What were your particular responsibilities, in other words?

JW: They were general rather than particular in that you tried to make sure that they had as good a standard of living as was possible. There were certain laws laid down about hygiene and latrines and this sort of thing and you had to make sure they were properly carried out. And of course their crops – make sure that the fields and the gardens were cared for because we had cattle there; yes we did have cattle there. In many places you had tsetse fly, which was fatal to cattle, but we did have some there. And you would go round – they expected this – once every, I think it was once every three years you aimed to cover every chiefs area in the District. We had three different tribal groups. And by the way, at Cambridge I had learned a language which was spoken in the Northern Province of the country, and they then sent me to the Eastern province where nobody spoke it and nobody understood it. So I had to start all over again.

JJ: What was that language?

JW: The language that we learned at Cambridge – which turned out to be no use to me – was ci Bemba. I then had to learn ci Nyanja, spoken in the Eastern Province. And then ci Tumbuka was the local one. To leap forward a long time, when I went back as High Commissioner, they hadn’t come across a European for years who spoke the language, because it was no longer a requirement. And when I went to the village and greeted them in their own language, they nearly fell over.

JJ: That was a big advantage for you?

JW: It was one up, a Brownie point.

JJ: So, as you've described it John, it was a rather well organised colony as part of the Federation?

JW: Yes, it was part of the Federation, but the federation did not impinge on a remote district like Lundazi. Federal government was only responsible for certain things. They were not involved in African education, or African agriculture. They were still territorial responsibilities. They didn't cover District roads; the main roads were a Federal responsibility, but the District roads were territorial. We were part of the Federation, and we were aware of its existence, but it didn't come into our day-to-day dealings with the locals.

JJ: So there was a District Commissioner and he supervised several District Officers?

JW: Yes, there were two of us, and then there was a District Assistant who was an officer on contract. A lot of them were retired colonels from the Indian Army or the British Army, and knew exactly how to conduct themselves in these surroundings. I spent eighteen months there, and then I went to Mufulira which was a copper mining town, and of course completely different. I hadn't seen a traffic light for eighteen months. I think I drove through the first set that I came across. There were tarmac roads, street-lights, cinemas, pubs, hotels.

JJ: An industrial town in fact?

JW: Yes, complete with a mayor and council. I was trying to remember last night the white population. I think it was about 3-4,000, many of whom were from South Africa. White South Africans came up to work in the copper mines while the black Northern Rhodesians went down to work in the gold mines. That's why I say it was an untypical colony and a colony of contrasts from that point of view. It was during the period of Apartheid so many South Africans were fleeing oppression.

JJ: So overall you got around quite a lot? You covered quite a lot of territory?

JW: Yes, you usually moved in a 3 year tour. Eighteen months in one place and eighteen months in another. I was twice stationed in towns, Mufulira and Broken

Hill, which was another mining town. From there I went to Serenje, which was bush, and then I went to Fort Jameson, funnily enough, which was the provincial headquarters of the Eastern Province, and during that time – I think it's actually in "Who's Who" – I changed from the Provincial Administration to the Ministry of Home Affairs, because by then we had black District Commissioners who ran things rather differently from the way Colonial Office had done it. I wasn't happy and I moved. I became a Provincial Information Officer.

JJ: But the black officers – was that a fairly recent thing when you had arrived?

JW: They weren't there when I arrived. It happened, let me think ...

JJ: This was part of developments – running their own country?

JW: Yes, the Federation had broken up when that came.

JJ: But did you and Dawn find it congenial and have a good relationship with the people?

JW: Yes we did. You see because as I said to you in the first place, this doctrine of the paramountcy of native interests – they had their own courts, they had their own policemen and you had a limited amount of power to contradict or to counter order what they wanted. And you had a hierarchical situation of chiefs as well. You had chiefs, and at the top you had paramount chiefs who were acknowledged by perhaps more than one tribal grouping. They again were a cross section. Some were always so drunk you couldn't talk to them; others were excellent. One of them whom I knew well had been in the Agriculture Department and got his area going very well when he became chief. They were a very interesting bunch. But to give you an example: one of the things I did up there was to build a game camp. One of their greatest assets is the enormous amount of game they have, particularly along the rivers – the Luangwa, the Kafue and the Zambesi. I talked to the chief in whose area we wished to build a game camp to get large sums of revenue from rich Americans. We talked and talked and talked about it and eventually the chief said: "What I don't understand is why don't they stay and watch the elephants and lions in their own country". Nobody had

bothered to tell him, myself included, that we didn't have any except behind bars, and what they wanted was to see the fauna in its natural habitat. In those days you could get a licence to shoot one of each of the big five, lion, leopard, elephant, rhino and hippo. I remember Schultz, the game ranger who was running the camp, saying to one particular American, who had started on the gin at breakfast: "Look, there's an elephant over there. What about having a go at him?" The American replied: "You line 'em up Schultz and I'll mow 'em down". This phrase has gone into history.

JJ: Ernest Hemingway would not have approved. And the Governor – he was in overall charge. Did you have annual meetings? Were there things that had to be done that he thought of, or ..?

JW: When I first went out there were various departments, some recruited in London, some locally. I'll show you (produces 1959 Staff List).

JJ: Yes, the structure you show me looks just like Whitehall, in fact.

JW: Well it is. Whitehall in miniature. With internal self-government black ministers took over. And then you had a black Prime Minister. You still had a Governor until independence.

I happened to be in a district – Broken Hill – where Kenneth Kaunda's party – the United National Independence Party, known as UNIP – held their first annual meeting, and I had to lurk in a rather off hand way at the entrance just to see who was going into this meeting. I pointed out to him 25 years later (when he was President and I was High Commissioner) that he and I were probably two of the few who'd been to the first and the 25th meeting of his Party.

JJ: You were in Northern Rhodesia for ten years.

JW: Yes, just until after independence, 1955-64. I came out in October 1964.

Education of children in Northern Rhodesia

JJ: You had children there? You and Dawn?

JW: Three of ours were born there. In fact Richard, my younger son, found it so difficult to try to explain that Broken Hill in Northern Rhodesia, his birthplace, was now Kabwe in Zambia, that eventually when he renewed one passport he put Bournemouth or Eastbourne and nobody picked it up. Because not only did the name of the country disappear, but they changed the names of a number of the towns.

JJ: Yes I can imagine. So they ran around, but I suppose they went to school locally as well.

JW: Let me think. Simon, my eldest, went to a Church school in Broken Hill from the age of 5 to 8. Then he went back to Britain at the age of 8 to prep school. Richard, my second son, went to school in Broken Hill and then Fort Jameson. I've got a photograph somewhere. They wore trilby hats and grey flannel shorts. Richard's school in Fort Jameson had five nationalities – English, African, Indian, South African and a mixture of any of these. White education in Northern Rhodesia was federal of course, until the Federation broke up. Black education was territorial.

JJ: What next?

JW: I came back to Britain with no particular idea of joining a Government Department.

JJ: Presumably you had to report back to the Colonial Office?

JW: No, they'd finished with me. I got a small pension.

JJ: Why was this?

JW: Because I'd retired.

JJ: But why did you retire from the Colonial Service?

JW: Because it was rapidly folding up.

JJ: We'd run out of colonies?

JW: Yes, very nearly.

Employment with the Ministry of Overseas Development, 1965-70

JW: I looked around and didn't find anything to interest me, and then a friend of mine who'd been a colleague in Northern Rhodesia, his father worked for the then Ministry of Overseas Development. He edited the Colonial Service magazine called "Corona" and he had to go into hospital for quite a serious operation and so through his son he rang me and said: "Would you come and keep my chair warm while I'm away?" Which I did. And then there was another temporary job, and another temporary job, and eventually they said: "Well you can't really stay here unless you become P and P" – permanent and pensionable. So I took the Home Civil Service exam and I passed, and became a Principal in the Home Civil Service, working at ODM.

JJ: And so you were there from 1965 to 1970? Who was in charge: who was the Minister?

JW: Barbara Castle. And a first class Minister she was too. I had great admiration for that lady. And the Permanent Under-Secretary was Sir Andrew Cohen, who was well-known then. He'd been Governor of Uganda and came back and became, in ways I don't know about, Permanent Under-Secretary in a British Whitehall Ministry.

JJ: He was quite an eccentric man?

JW: Yes he was. He used to read his papers lying on his stomach on the floor of his office.

JJ: He had back problems possibly? I heard about this.

JW: It was a curious Ministry. Most of the people of the equivalent of Head of Department rank in the FO and above were retreads from somewhere or other. We had so many knights. We had dozens of KCMGs clanking their swords and medals all over the place. We also had some of the fallout from the CRO/FO amalgamation, for whom there'd been no room. My first head of Department was a man called Angus Rae who was ex- Foreign Office.

.

JJ: So what was your main function there?

JW: It was like the Foreign Office. It was divided into geographical and functional departments and I was the desk officer for ODM's only white customers – Malta, Gibraltar, Greece and Yugoslavia. You may remember that at that time there was a terrible earthquake in a place called Skopje in Yugoslavia, and we had a big aid programme going there. Malta, because they had the highest rate of British aid per capita in the world, although there were only, what was it ...

JJ: Not many of them. Very small population.

JW: Anyway it was really rental for the base.

JJ: Ah the famous naval base?

JW: All three. Even when I arrived there in 1967 there were a couple of squadrons of photo reconnaissance RAF and there were two battalions of Army. When I was there it was 3 Para and the Royal Anglians.

JJ: And of course at that time it was still a very important strategic base for British Forces and for the British Government generally.

JW: Less so. I mean it started to lose its importance once we stopped using coal to fire our naval ships because it was mainly a coaling station, and then I suppose a diesel station. But it played an invaluable role in WWII, mainly in support of the North African campaign.

JJ: But there were arguments with the Maltese Government many years after that about using ...

JW: There was a very good dry dock there. One we liked to use. So this aid was, if you like, rental.

**Administration of British aid and appointment as First Secretary (Economic)
British High Commission Malta, 1967-70**

I wrote a minute to my Head of Department in the ODM saying that I wasn't happy with the way that British aid was administered in Malta. I thought there was a whiff of corruption about where it was going, and a couple of days later I got a summons from on high. I went up to see Andrew Cohen who was lying on his stomach on the floor, and he said: "I've read your minute. I've arranged for an extra post to be created at the High Commission and you better go and fill it". So somewhat taken aback, we packed our bags again and went off in 1967 to Malta where I was First Secretary Economic at the High Commission, mainly doing aid work.

JJ: And did you spot the corruption? Was there any corruption?

JW: Not a lot. I think there had been more under the Labour Government. But while I was there Borge Olivier was the Conservative Prime Minister. He was known as a man who never took "yes" for an answer. You could never get him to negotiate.

JJ: So Mintoff hadn't arrived on that scene?

JW: He'd been there before earlier; he wasn't Prime Minister while I was there.

JJ: That was perhaps a relief. He was a very difficult man; certainly as Prime Minister.

JW: Yes, literally the son of a sea cook. And he'd been a steward in the Navy.

JJ: So you spent quite some time there?

Transfer to the Diplomatic Service in 1970

JW: Three years – 1967-70. And during that time I decided I didn't want a career in aid because it – how can I put it – it effects the whole of your work, because always it's the hand stretched out, so I'd contacted the FCO and said: "Can I transfer?" And they said: "Yes in principle, but it will take five years". So I then said: "Can I do this thing called the Supplementary Open Competition", which is designed to attract people in to the Foreign Office in mid-career, to bring a bit of new blood. And they said "But you're civil servant already" and I said: "Well as far as I can see there's nothing in the Regulations that says I can't do it" and they checked and said: "Oh very well, all right. You can do it". And so I went back and did that and luckily got in. There were six of us. There were 900 applications and six of us got in. I then had to go back to Malta for a bit because they changed High Commissioners and he said: "I'm not taking over here with somebody who knows nothing about the aid programme". So I went back for four or six months.

JJ: Who was that?

JW: Sir Duncan Watson. It had been Sir Geoffrey Tory before and then he retired and Duncan Watson came out and said: "I want Willson back at least for a period because I've got a new aid man and I'm new to it". So I went back, by myself – no family.

JJ: Dawn had to put down roots again for a while. And so you entered the Diplomatic Service in 1970?

JW: I'm never sure what it was called. There were so many different names at that time.

JJ: And you stayed in London for two years. How did you find that? I've heard of others who found it – who'd been in the Colonial Service, or Colonial Office, or Commonwealth Office, who were pretty uncomfortable with the Foreign Office style generally and clashed – you know the concepts were different and attitudes?

JW: I think the most difficult thing was getting used to a third room because as a Principal in the Home Civil Service you had your office, people knocked and called you “sir”, and to come into this chaos – three people telephoning, dictating, talking to visitors and so on. I found it rather difficult to get used to.

JJ: And no knocking on the doors?

JW: The door was open. And no “sir” unless it was the top man. That took some getting used to as well. But it was probably good for one – a good dose of humility. I was in Export Promotion Department which did, I suppose, what it says it does and I was a desk officer in the third room.

JJ: And with a lot of liaising with the Department of Industry presumably?

JW: With everybody in Whitehall and business. I worked with the Export Credit Guarantee Committee and in fact the Bank of England representative when I first went there was Eddie George who subsequently rose to great heights.

JJ: But did it involve travel as well?

JW: No, it was a London based job. A lot of extra-FCO liaison as you said with other Ministries and with businessmen, but no travel.

Posting to Johannesburg in 1972

JJ: That gave you a good background and connections on the economic trade side which perhaps bore fruit when you went on your next posting in 1972 to Johannesburg in the Consulate General. That was mainly a trade post, was it?

JW: Yes, let me explain that. The main fact was that the Embassy in South Africa moved every six months. It spent six months in Cape Town and six months in Pretoria and all this yo-yoing up and down – we stayed where we were. Our Consul-General was an Under-Secretary.

JJ: Was the move related to when the Parliament was sitting?

JW: Yes, hence the move to Cape Town. The Consul-General was an Under-Secretary grade 3 and then there was a grade 4 Deputy Consul-General and then there were five Consuls – grades 5 or 6.

JJ: So it was a very important trade post?

JW: Oh yes. They were very big customers and we were very big suppliers and we had lots of these visiting businessmen who came out on Trade Missions for a fortnight, and we had to organise their trips and meetings and have receptions and this sort of thing. It was a very busy post. When I first went the Consul-General was a Foreign Office chap called Hal Brown and then he was succeeded by a man called John Jardine who had come out from the Department of Trade and Industry.

JJ: And did the Foreign Office people and the DTI people get on well with each other?

JW: Yes, they certainly did. We were left largely to our own devices by the Embassy. And when the Embassy was in Pretoria, we used to go for weekly meetings with the Ambassador who was then Jim Bottomley. The Embassy was only 30 miles up the road.

JJ: He did become a High Commissioner somewhere else I believe. I suppose the way that the export promotion business ran at that time was quite straightforward? You didn't have monthly targets and the number of visits you had to make and record – writing market research reports?

JW: Obviously you were expected to make a number of visits to big South African companies, and write up the stuff which then went back to interested customers in the UK. I visited steel works. I went down a goldmine. I visited wine growing areas, which was rather nice and all sorts of other things. Quite a lot of visiting because I was the Commercial Consul. There was a Consul Admin, a Consul Commercial, a

Consul Economic, a Consul Information and a Consul Consular. It was quite a big office.

JJ: It's probably expanded again now?

JW: I dare say. I don't propose to pay £20 for an up-to-date version of the FCO staff directory!

JJ: What about the political background while you were there? Did that impinge?

JW: Not a lot, you see, because the Embassy handled that side of things.

JJ: And in Southern Rhodesia particularly with Smith in charge Unilateral Declaration of Independence was declared.

JW: We were not a political post. The Embassy handled that.

JJ: Yes I know. How did it affect your relations with the South African Government – well perhaps it didn't?

JW: It didn't impinge much on the commercial and economic side. Obviously there was a very high-powered political team at the Embassy.

Return to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in 1975

JJ: So after your spell of commercial work in South Africa, you reported back to the Foreign Office in 1975 to serve. Now was this two different Departments, or was it one Department?

JW: It was two different Departments. I was Assistant in both these Departments. West Indies and Atlantic was the first one. Obviously the West Indies did -

JJ: The Falkland Islands?

JW: Yes, Ascension, St Helena, Tristan and the Falklands as well as the West Indies - All the non-independent West Indies, that is.

JJ: You did that for a year and moved to the North America Department?

JW: Yes, the North America Department did what it said. United States and Canada.

JJ: That's a bit unusual to send -

JW: No. You said that and I looked up entirely by coincidence the next man after me alphabetically in there, Wilmshurst, and he'd done exactly the same thing. I think perhaps if you're an Assistant they're shifting you round just to keep an eye on you - "is he going to be promoted" sort of thing. So they wanted you to move. Perhaps more so in my case because I was relatively inexperienced.

JJ: You don't get much time to get your teeth into it and know the dossiers as they say? Perhaps it wasn't a very busy Department?

JW: West Indies and Atlantic wasn't all that busy. I remember the Falklands - there was a desk officer there who corresponded mostly about sheep and tussock grass, long before the Argentines showed an interest. But then of course the North America Department was busy. A lot going on there, including a presidential visit. We had Carter. President Jimmy Carter came over while I was Assistant there. I got involved in that. A lot going on with the Embassy - the American Embassy in London, as you can imagine.

JJ: The relations were very close? They always are. Aren't they?

JW: There was a man called Raymond Seitz whom I saw quite a lot of who subsequently became Ambassador, the first career Ambassador London has ever had from the States.

JJ: And one of the most successful.

JW: He was.

JJ: And also he wrote a very good memoir. So that was a fairly short stay?

JW: Learning, if you like, to understudy the Head of Department.

JJ: But no major crises came up?

JW: The Falklands was long after I'd gone. No, there weren't really. Unfortunately I was there in a time of one of our economy drives and I never did any travelling to the West Indies at all, but I did get a couple of trips to America when I was Assistant in NAD which was interesting and useful.

JJ: What did you go for?

JW: To some extent to get acquainted.

JJ: Did they give you a trip round the State Department and the -

JW: Yes, I went to Washington and New York. I also went to Ottawa and Toronto. I was there for a couple of weeks. Quite interesting. I remember I stayed in the Head of Chancery's guest room in the summer in Washington and there was no air-conditioning in the guest room. It was terrible.

Appointment as Counsellor for African affairs in the FCO

JW: A lot of people have asked exactly what the job was. We had four or five different African Departments in the Office and I involved myself in matters which covered more than one of them but which did not merit the attentions of an AUS. They wanted somebody at a lower level to pull a few things together. My AUS was Philip Mansfield. I really liaised with the Heads of the various Departments. A lot with Brian Barder who was the Head of Southern Africa Department. And then of course increasingly with Renwick and Powell, both eventually ennobled – Robin Renwick and Charles Powell because they were running Rhodesia Department.

Rather less with the North African and East African ones. But that was it really. Threads needed pulling together from more than one Department, but which didn't merit the attentions at AUS level. It was such a big and growing problem in Africa generally. There was Rhodesia. There was South Africa. There was Kenya. There were famines and everything else and Philip Mansfield would otherwise have spent too much time really on fairly low-level stuff. Not Under-Secretary stuff.

JJ: Was it necessary to have meetings bringing representatives of these Departments together?

JW: Yes, from time to time; and I would sit in on their meetings as well. I had no staff apart from a secretary.

JJ: So that meant you tried to persuade a Department from doing something which was bitterly opposed by another Department?

JW: Yes, more or less.

JJ: Which was the case I remember when I was in the Commonwealth News Department and dealing with Gibraltar, the Foreign Office had Spain, naturally, and the two Departments didn't see eye to eye.

JW: Well you see this can happen. Of course with something the size of Africa you can't let it happen. Also I worked quite a lot with Ted Rowlands who was then the Minister of State dealing with Africa. I used to sit in on meetings concerning Africa in general.

JJ: Presumably, if we can call it that, the Rhodesian problem, was beginning to bubble up at that time?

JW: We had to make sure that the other African Departments knew what Rhodesia Department was doing.

Secretary General of Rhodesia Independence Conference, 1979

JJ: You were then made Secretary General of the Rhodesian Independence Conference. Late in 1979 after Ian Smith had done a deal with Bishop Muzorewa and produced a new Constitution a conference on independence was being planned.

JW: Well, I think you've got to go back and say it all started with the change in the British Government, with Margaret Thatcher coming in in 1979, and with Carrington taking over as Secretary of State from David Owen. Carrington was I think a first class Secretary of State, absolutely first class – because he wasn't on the greasy pole. He had nothing to lose either way. He could retire – he owned half Berkshire. So he was entirely disinterested and he persuaded Mrs Thatcher – a) to go to the Commonwealth Conference in Lusaka and b) to call *this* Conference to see if they could get some sort of compromise between the contesting parties.

JJ: The background to that of course was that Ian Smith in Southern Rhodesia had drawn up a new Constitution which in fact kept control in the hands of the whites. They held all the levers – the army, the police and the judiciary and so on, and Bishop Muzorewa was the first black Prime Minister and people I suppose like Joshua Nkomo and Mugabe were not happy with this arrangement.

As you said, having Mrs Thatcher coming in and Lord Carrington, wondering whether – and the Foreign Office I think took the view that having Muzorewa as Prime Minister was not a good arrangement because they saw that the Southern Rhodesians would not be content.

JW: It was wider than that. None of our ex-colonies in Africa were happy about the Rhodesian set-up and of course people outside – the United States, Australia, the UN – so Carrington obviously realised he had to come up (or Britain had to come up) with some sort of solution which would not only satisfy the parties in Rhodesia, but also those outside who were anti what was going on and what had been proposed by Smith.

JJ: Obviously the whites and Smith in particular wanted to keep the reins of power, but there must have been fears that the whole thing would end in dreadful bloodshed right across these countries, involving South Africa too.

JW: Yes, although Vorster, who was then Prime Minister of South Africa, tried to persuade Smith to see reason. He realised that any sort of conflagration on his northern border would do his country no good, and they met, I think, on the middle of the bridge over the Victoria Falls – had a conference there, and he tried to get Smith to see sense.

JJ: But it didn't work.

JW: Not on that occasion. Anyway, as I was saying, I came back on leave in September 1979 and was told to go and get the conference organised at Lancaster House. Inevitably there was trouble about who sat where. Eventually it was agreed that the top was the Brits – Carrington, Antony Duff, Renwick and other people. On their right you had Smith and his lot. On their left you had Mugabe, Nkomo and his lot. And at the bottom the fourth part of the square was the Secretariat.

JJ: Which is where you were? You were in charge?

JW: Of that side of things. It meant basically getting the minutes of the day's proceedings into the pigeonholes by the time they came in at eight the next morning. So you burnt a fair amount of midnight oil. It was the only time the Foreign Office provided me with a car to go home when I was doing this conference. We used to work until two or three in the morning.

JJ: Yes I can imagine writing the minutes of meetings – so many people against each other – must have been a very delicate and difficult task. Trying to please everybody.

JW: Yes it was. The sheer volume. We had four or five people in the Secretariat who took turns in taking notes. We also had it all on tape and we compared notes with the tape. And then got the minutes out for the next morning.

JJ: You must have worked late every night on that? Were you reasonably successful? People would want certain changes no doubt – emphasis on this rather than that ...

JW: Most of them were happy. We didn't have a lot of changes to make. One or two. You can't please everybody all of the time. But we didn't have many changes because somebody from our delegation used to come in early just to look through them to make sure they were all right. Eventually – it took time – they worked round to a compromise.

JJ: What were Carrington, and Mrs Thatcher – what were they trying to get actually?

JW: Carrington had persuaded the Prime Minister that she couldn't go along with this sort of fictional Smith-Muzorewa arrangement; that they had to have an election at which there was universal suffrage, and that the result of the election, well you just had to let it happen. If you didn't happen to like the people who came out top, well hard luck.

JJ: The first election had not been a one-man-one-vote election for everybody?

JW: I can't remember, because, as I told you, I wasn't involved in the detail of Rhodesia at that time. But certainly that first election had not involved Mugabe and Nkomo, because they were still fighting a guerrilla war, so it was a less than satisfactory election as far as they were concerned. And remember that we had to please not only the parties round the table, but the people outside – the UN, the OAU, Australia ...

JJ: It wasn't patently a free and fair election for everybody who wanted to vote, possibly?

JW: What, the second one, you mean?

JJ: No, the first one.

JW: I agree. They were too busy killing each other.

JJ: So how did that work out?

JW: Eventually they got round to a compromise. Smith and Muzorewa agreed to step down and to have an election on universal suffrage. They wanted Britain to keep an eye on things and at some stage – I mean I wasn't privy to this – at some stage they got Christopher Soames to agree to go out as Governor in the interim period while the final bits of the election were being thrashed out, and for the election itself. I in fact was hauled away before the end of the conference to go out with Soames.

JJ: Yes, he was governor and you were his Chief of Staff?

JW: No, I was one of his understrappers. Nigel Sheinwald took over as Secretary General for the last bit of the conference and he's in all the pictures where they are all signing everything, with fixed grins on their faces. And we went out – there was Soames, Duff who was Deputy Governor, and then there was Renwick and Byatt on the political side. The lawyers in attendance were Henry Steel and Michael Wood. There was Nick Fenn and James Allen on the information side and then there were two or three counsellors, who, as it were, understudied essential Ministries - in my case Power and Transport, because you've got to remember the Kariba Dam, which provided power not only for Zimbabwe, but Zambia as well. During the whole of UDI, Smith, to his credit, never cut power. He could have just pulled the switch and put the whole of Zambia into darkness and shut the mines. He never did this. Although the switching station was near Salisbury (Southern Rhodesia) ...

JJ: But that would have caused enormous eruptions right across the country.

JW: Yes indeed. That had all been done by some complex Order in Council that I had to go and try and sort out. I went up to Zambia once or twice and spoke to the people up there and Henry Steel and Michael Wood sorted out the sort of legal side of it.

JJ: There was somebody called Sir John Boynton?

JW: Yes, he came out with us. He was the elections expert. He advised Soames on the electoral law.

JJ: And Major General Acland?

JW:– He was the head man on the military side. The second man was a lowland Scot whose name I forget. The third man was a major in the Household Cavalry called Andrew Parker-Bowles.

JJ: What was their view?

JW: They liaised closely with the Rhodesian army chief, General Peter Wall because he was regarded in some ways as a bit of a menace. But they made it one of their main tasks to establish good relations with him.

JJ: I think I read somewhere that he was thinking of plotting against ...

JW: I'm never quite sure who that was, but certainly it was broadcast around that time. But other people said that he was one of those who kept Smith in line. I met him once or twice. He was quite a nice chap, but the army was the army. They dealt with each other.

JJ: Anyway you were taken away from the outcome which was the election in 1980. You weren't there for that?

JW: No, because they reckoned our job had finished. All the Ministries were sorted out and I was hauled back and they said: "Where do you want to go?" and I said "Anywhere except Africa". They looked at the book and said "Bucharest?". I said "Why not?"

JJ: Well anyway Smith was out, Muzorewa was out, Mugabe -

JW: Got in by an enormous majority. Interesting sideline on that. All the hacks did a forecast of what they thought the result would be and the one who was nearest, I think

within two seats, was Bridget Bloom of the *Financial Times*. We had a lot of quite well known hacks following this story, as you can imagine.

JJ: Anyway you missed the great “love in” that I read about between Mugabe and Soames.

JW: Yes, he was a large, bluff chap, Soames. They used to say he didn’t really need satellite phone. He could speak to London and they’d hear him anyway. But he did get on well with people. He was matey and back-slapping. I don’t know whether he helped Mugabe or not, but the results are what count.

Posting to Bucharest as Counsellor Commercial, 1980

JW: My predecessor but one, Mark Russell, had been Commercial Counsellor there, and they had set up an agreement for Romania to assemble BAC111 aircraft and to fit Rolls Royce engines. This put Romania in an entirely separate category as far as Iron Curtain countries were concerned. Ceausescu was in power while I was there, and in so far as you can be communist and independent, he was independent of Russia and all the others. For instance, the only Israeli Embassy behind the Iron Curtain was in Bucharest. Ceausescu did a lot of trade with the Middle East for oil and he exported mainly livestock, fruit and vegetables to the Middle East. But he was a Communist. You could see it when you went to meetings.

JJ: But he wasn’t in love with the Soviet Union was he?

JW: No he wasn’t!

JJ: Did he establish relations with China?

JW: No. No, with neither of the great Communists. He ploughed his own furrow. But when you went to meetings – Ambassadors were always invited to Party meetings and when I was Chargé I went along to a couple – the invitees just sat there and at a signal they all got up and chanted “Ceausescu PCR”, (which means Partidul Communist Român), and anybody who didn’t stand up was noted. There were chaps

at the end of each row just checking that you were all standing, even diplomats. It was an extraordinary place. The ordinary man in the street had no independence at all. And they had not only different coloured number plates for diplomats' cars, they also had a different shape. Most countries have different colours, but our plates were oval where the ordinary ones were oblong, and ours were white with red lettering. We were not trailed, but there was an observation post at every entry and exit to every village, and if you went into one and didn't come out the other end in the usual time, they would cause enquiries to be made about where you had been. When I went there I did a lot of travelling. Both of us, Dawn and I, were interested in the Orthodox Church, and they've got some marvellous sixteenth and seventeenth century monasteries there with wall paintings and altars and so on. And we used to go and stay at a convent or monastery near these churches. But after about 18 months when I rang up, they would say "I'm sorry there's no room". "What about next month?". "Sorry there's no room" again. Two months later, "Sorry". They'd heard. The Foreign Minister said to my Ambassador "A very enterprising chap your Counsellor. He gets around a lot". So we were stopped. On the other hand the Embassy did have a chalet up in the mountains where there was ski-ing and we could use that at weekends. We still did some travelling but you were discouraged from meeting the locals. The chalet was great fun. It had one of those tiled stoves that went up through the three storeys of the building.

JJ: Did you have to get written permission before you went off for the weekend in any direction?

JW: I think you had to notify the Foreign Ministry, as far as I remember. And as I said they didn't trail you, but when you came back you found either a cigarette end in your loo when you didn't smoke or a new chisel mark on your front door; and you were bugged. There was no doubt about it, you were bugged.

JJ: One had to be fairly careful about what one said?

JW: Yes, I remember on one occasion saying "Bloody loo. They've been twice to fix it and it still doesn't work." Half-an-hour later there was a knock at the door and one

of the sort of workmen from Foreign Affairs came and said “I gather you’re having trouble with your loo, Sir”.

JJ: A classic story, but true.

JW: And also when you went to stay in hotels you always stayed on one particular floor. One floor in every hotel was bugged. So diplomats were always put on that floor. It might be the second here, the third floor there, but you knew.

JJ: What about your housing? Were you all housed in one compound?

JW: No, the houses were rented through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. We had the house of a millionaire, an Armenian who had fled. I was on the ground floor, the Military Attaché was on the first floor and the British Council man was on the second floor. It was an enormous house and we had centrally heated garages because otherwise your car would freeze. So among ourselves it was great fun, but it was pretty depressing otherwise.

JJ: And so what sort of contact did you have with the people in the Foreign Ministry for example, or the Trade Ministry?

JW: In my case more in the Trade Ministry.

JJ: They wanted to do business?

JW: Yes. And we had visiting delegations of British businessmen coming out and the Ministry would always see them and lay on a reception.

JJ: Were these fruitful meetings?

JW: The big one was the aircraft, obviously, but there were other things as well that we exported to them. I’m not sure what we took from them. Not a lot, anyway.

JJ: Agricultural produce possibly, tobacco?

JW: Yes, and some wine.

JJ: Were you able to visit Romanian industries?

JW: Yes, I was able to visit factories as long as I gave lots of notice. I visited steel works, petrol refineries and so on. There was no objection made to that.

JJ: Was it all rather antiquated compared to the British?

JW: Yes. I mean it would all have been closed down in Western Europe.

JJ: Health and safety.

JW: Yes, but one had to see what was going on. And of course in the villages, once you were away from the capital, it was like going to what I imagine Ireland was like in the 18th century – mud roads, the odd horse, little cottages made of perhaps brick or stone, thatched roofs. No amenities at all.

JJ: In Bucharest particularly I suppose it was a fairly miserable life for the Romanian people?

JW: Oh yes, for them it was. Very miserable.

JJ: Food shortages?

JW: Yes, and power cuts. I had studied Romanian a bit before I went and then in Bucharest I had a professor in the university to come along and teach me – come to the house once a week and I said “Is there anything I can get you?”. He said “The colour supplements from the Sundays”, he said, “it opens another world to us”. So I got him the Sunday colour supplements.

JJ: So there was no international television then? Was television generally available to people?

JW: Only Romanian. No satellite.

JJ: And all government controlled programmes?

JW: Yes, and all government controlled press. Like all the dictatorships – European, African, whatever – the headlines on press and TV were the comings and goings of the beloved leader.

JJ: So pretty turgid and dull. What about the British Council? Were there representatives in Bucharest?

JW: There were. As I remember there were two UK-based officers and a number of locally engaged staff. One curious thing about the locally engaged staff is that, in my time there, I think five of them went on leave to Britain and forgot to come back. Which made the Romanian government look a bit sideways at us, but it was nothing to do with us, I can assure you. But certainly a very strong desire to learn English, either in classes on the spot at the British Council, or better still scholarships to England, very popular from that point of view.

JJ: Was language teaching British policy at that time? No great cultural events or ..?

JW: There was the odd exhibition; this, that and the other, but nothing outstanding. It was mainly English. They all wanted to learn English. Dawn obtained a TEFL qualification, and taught English.

Posting as Ambassador to the Ivory Coast, 1983-86

JJ: Shall we move on to your next post where you were Ambassador to the Ivory Coast?

JW: It was rather amusing because you know that when you are in post you can't say where you're going next, and people kept asking me at farewell parties. And I would say "Well I can't tell you. All I can tell you is I've sold all my ski-ing kit, so that eliminates quite a number of countries".

JJ: Yes indeed. So there you were in 1983, you went as Ambassador to the Ivory Coast but also to Burkina Faso (which had been called Upper Volta) and to Niger, the Republic of Niger.

JW: It was Upper Volta when I arrived. It changed its name during the time I was there.

JJ: Why was that? Politically correct?

JW: Yes. Thomas Sankara got in and didn't like the name. In fact again there's a story there, because I had my letters of credence sent by the Office to present to Thomas Sankara, and before I could present them he was deposed and shot. He was eliminated. So I had to present the letters to the next chap, so I had to get new letters in another name, so I've still got in a frame the original from the Queen which I never presented to this chap who was no longer "en poste".

JJ: The Ivory Coast was one of the more successful of the old French colonies?

JW: Yes it was at that time. I wrote in my opening dispatch to come from Bucharest to Abidjan was like coming from a dark, gloomy, foggy street into a brightly-lit theatre. We had a resident Ambassador in the two main Francophone states, Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire and then the man in Senegal had five others and I had two others. But really there were few interests there. Again the British Council were omnipresent. We had Council-sponsored people in Burkina Faso and in Niger as well as a big post in Abidjan itself. But of course the French, as you say, were the main protagonists there because, as I don't have to tell you, their idea of independence is not quite our idea, because I never, for instance, saw the Minister of Finance without at least two French minders sitting in the room, and that was twenty plus years after independence.

JJ: I think, if I recall, there were more – it was stated as a fact that there were more French people living in the Ivory Coast after independence than there were before.

JW: Yes, down to bakers, dry-cleaners, and hairdressers.

JJ: And also, all the minders. The discreet civil servants in every Ministry. They had people who took on the IMF and the World Bank and did all the wheeling and dealing before reporting back to President Houphouet-Boigny.

JW: But you've got to remember that it went in both directions. Houphouet had been Minister of Health in Paris and he'd also been leader of the French delegation to the UN. Can you imagine Kenneth Kaunda as a Minister in Whitehall? So this curious relationship was a two-way street.

JJ: Very sophisticated.

JW: Yes, but not independence. To call them independent was ... until the bricks started flying and the fires started burning.

JJ: Do you remember the event towards the end of 1983 when I arrived – I had arrived there – about the problem of paying back the IMF?

JW: Yes. I went to the reception which the Minister of Finance gave to ambassadors, the press and anybody who wanted to come along and we were given this speech and told that sadly this year they were not going to pay their latest “tranche” back to the IMF, but the minister was sure they would get over it and do better next year. Then they opened the doors and there was this enormous buffet with oysters and shellfish and vintage champagne.

JJ: Always, always vintage champagne.

JW: It's the only post I've ever had like that. Nothing but the best. And all the Ministers dressed in three-piece suits and little pointy-toed patent leather shoes, with air conditioners set so high the ice was dripping out of the machines, it was so cold.

JJ: What did you think of Houphouet Boigny as a leader?

JW: I think he led his country very well, given the way that the French regarded independence. He did the best he could, and did get as much independence of thought and action as possible, and he was backed up by some pretty competent Ministers too. The Foreign Minister, Aké; Balla Keita; one or two others who were competent operators in their own right and were by no means puppets of the French until it came to broad policy when they did as they were told.

JJ: Houphouet personally believed in having an open door dialogue with South Africa at a time when the rest of the world regarded them as pariahs not to be spoken to.

JW: Yes, I remember that I went from Abidjan to Johannesburg by South African Airways. The airport was dark. There were no lights on the 'plane and few lights at the terminal, but I made the trip because my son was working down there, and I was able to wangle myself there and back. Then my son paid a return visit by the same means.

JJ: But Houphouet wanted the dialogue. That was a very sophisticated thing for him to do, wasn't it?

JW: He cultivated this idea of being "father of the nation" and so on – Papa Houphouet.

JJ: And opened the borders? He allowed the borders to be open to other local refugees coming from other countries – Ghana and so on – which I thought was very good.

JW: I'm afraid that his successor, Konan Bedié, is not a tenth of the man.

JJ: Oh the successor President.

JW: He'd been – what was he then?

JJ: Had he not been the Minister of Agriculture and at the United Nations?

JW: You could be right. I don't remember. But it was fascinating again travelling around. Going up for instance to the one third of the country in the north that was all Muslim. I went up there with Balla Keita who was the Minister of Education; it was his home ground, and he came up with me. It was great fun. And then of course visiting the other two countries – Burkina Faso and Niger were, if you like “actes de présence”, but they liked to feel they had an Ambassador who was accredited to them, and we did have an Honorary Consul in both countries. The one in Niger – I don't know whether you ever met him, but he was a French lawyer who made Oswald Mosley look like a dangerous lefty. This man was so far right – quite incredible. He used to meet all these mad English who would cross the Sahara in a bath tub or something and had no money and no clothes or anything else, and sort them out. And who was in Burkina? I think it was a British Council professor at the university.

JJ: Yes, it was.

JW: But you know it was good to go up there; you presented your credentials and you talked to them a bit and they asked for this, that and the other. I sent them English courses, that sort of thing, to the Heads of State in both cases, and in Niger I accompanied the Duke of Edinburgh when he paid a visit. That's why I've got his photograph on the table there. He flew himself in from Algeria, but he came to see this scheme which was half Algeria, half Niger, of trying to get people and wild animals to subsist in the same area. We were the guests of the President of Niger and had the most enormous meal and the Duke got some elaborate gold artefact of some sort – a camel? I can't remember what it was. And then the Princess Royal, as she now is, came to Burkina Faso with her Save the Children hat on.

JJ: This wasn't a Royal Visit but a visit as head of Save the Children Fund. She went to the Sahel.

JW: That's right. I accompanied her up there looking at various projects. I have great admiration for that lady. She did an extremely good job with that particular hat on and went everywhere and anywhere too: mosquito-ridden missions, where she stayed the night – that sort of thing.

JJ: She must have crossed dangerous rivers, I seem to remember, to visit a children's hospital right out in the Sahel. She made a big impact with that visit.

JW: Certainly; we had British television and press out there.

JJ: But apart from supporting Royal Visits and so on, do you think there was a great deal of purpose in having a British Embassy in a small French-dominated West African country?

JW: It wasn't small by comparison. If you look at it in terms of political importance, the two main ones are Senegal and Cote d'Ivoire. The rest you don't give a whistle for, but on the other hand if it salves their pride to say that you're also Ambassador to them and you come and see them twice a year, it doesn't cost much. It keeps them sweet.

JJ: But to what effect for us? And what influence did we have on anything they cared to do?

JW: Well, the French do the opposite in East and Southern Africa. It's just a question of an "acte de présence" to make them feel that you regard them as somebody worth cultivating. And you see in Niger again there were the uranium mines where a number of Frenchmen did their national service.

JJ: But apart from the coffee and cocoa trade where British manufacturers are large buyers, there wasn't much trade, was there?

JW: Palm oil, rubber.

JJ: Not done with any intervention on our part – that just happened because British companies needed those products and traded in them.

JW: Before I went out there I went to a cocoa and coffee importer, because I had no idea how cocoa grew. I went through the whole process. I even went to Mars Confectionery, Cadbury and Rowntree to have a look at the manufacturing processes.

At that time when the price was fairly high, or at least stable, they were of some importance. But then as you remember, the prices of all these natural commodities went through the floor, and there was a lot of competition, particularly with regard to palm oil and rubber, from places like Malaysia, which knocked the bottom of the Ivorian economy.

JJ: I thought that the clever thing the Ivorians did was to build special refrigerated warehouses, to keep coffee and cocoa off the market until demand went up again. They had to do that, didn't they?

JW: Of course; the next stage would have been to manufacture chocolate bars on the spot and therefore get the added value from it. Whether that ever came off I don't know. They had plans for it when I was there, but I don't know what happened.

JJ: It was an easy place to live. Most of the time there were no security anxieties for the foreigners, or white people. There was no racism.

JW: The only thing I didn't like was the climate.

JJ: The climate was hot and sticky.

JW: Particularly if you remember for the Queen's Birthday Party outside on that back veranda at the residence. After half-an-hour you could have taken your jacket off and wrung it out. Terrible.

JJ: After the Ivory Coast you came back to London.

Return to the FCO and attachment to Royal College of Defence Studies, 1987

JW: I did two things actually. One – the only thing I've written when in the Foreign Office is "Guidance notes for your first posting if going abroad". It was known as "Tips for Dips" and was revised later to take account of the increasing presence of women in the FCO. And then I was attached to the Royal College for Defence

Studies, whose students spend one term touring areas abroad. They choose when they come which one they want. And the Commandant said to me, “Well you'd better lead the Africa tour, since you know something about the place and nobody else does”. So I took out ten/twelve servicemen and civilians of various nationalities and we did a week in Zambia (I didn't attend as I knew I was then going there as High Commissioner). So I bowed out of that one. And then Zaire, Kenya and Nigeria – a week in each, which was fascinating.

JJ: What is the main purpose of these RCDS visits?

JW: Well the RCDS is a year's course and it's mainly for people of colonel/brigadier rank in all three services. In my day there were 80 students, 40 of whom were British and 40 were foreign and they did three terms, like university terms. And when they came they were asked which tour they would like to go on. There was a Middle East tour, there was an Eastern Europe tour, an African and an Asian tour. The third term to a large extent was taken up with this overseas visit. As you know, the host countries are asked whether they would like to receive RCDS students. Usually it's handed over to the receiver country's Forces to organise everything. I found it fascinating, mainly because none of the people that I went out with had ever been to Africa before. They didn't realise that groundnuts grew underground - thought they were on trees or something. None of them spoke French, which was difficult in Zaire. But it was an interesting tour to look through their eyes and they in turn got something from me because I knew a fair amount about Africa.

JJ: How did they spend their time?

JW: Well it's all organised by the receiving country and you go and look at probably a ministry. You go and look at farming. You go and look at the military set-up. You go and look at any industry or economic undertaking that happens to be important in the country you're visiting. We were certainly fully occupied. I remember, for instance, flying from Nairobi to Mombasa and when we got out, one of my Air Force members (who was an ex-head of the Queen's Flight) said: “One out of ten”. Every emergency exit was blocked by luggage. He said if we had had any problems we didn't stand a chance. And then conversely, when we got to Nigeria they lent us a

transport aircraft with Nigerian pilots. I was quietly saying my prayers by that time. And the Queen's Flight expert who had been in the cockpit for take off said: "Nine out of ten", which was a great relief. They were interesting – I learned a lot on these visits, particularly about the armed forces, because usually one doesn't know much about them as a diplomat, and they did open defence matters up to you.

JJ: And it certainly expands their horizons after taking a purely military view of everything.

JW: Oh yes. I had the head of the British Women's Royal Army Corps. I had a Thai naval captain. I had a Norwegian colonel and a Luftwaffe brigadier. I had a couple of civilians from the Ministry of Defence. I had a colonel from the Sherwood Foresters. Anyway – a good mixed bag, because the lady WRAC – her idea was to get up before breakfast and play nine holes of golf before we started and the Siamese naval captain had to be dragged out of casinos. If there was a casino anywhere near he would spend all night in there. But they were a good bunch and it was an interesting interlude. I then went out to Lusaka.

JJ: As High Commissioner in Lusaka where you had started out.

Appointment as British High Commissioner in Lusaka, 1989

JW: Full circle.

JJ Yes, that's right. It must have been strange going back to where you'd done your first public service as a Colonial District Officer?

JW: Yes. It was quite different. In a way it was – but you see by the time I got out there, there were very many fewer non-local residents. Most of the white faces were on two or three-year contracts, lived in Lusaka, never went to the bush unless they had a project in the bush, and didn't speak the language. The exception was the British who had a very big aid set-up which made their headquarters in an old Italian road camp where the Italians had been building tarmac roads up in the Northern

Province. And then there was a British set-up – development set-up – and they were based there. I used to go up and stay with them quite often.

JJ: When you say development, this was by the UK Government?

JW: No, it was private enterprise, making roads and installing drainage and sewerage – that sort of thing. But hardly anybody spoke the language. I suppose people would argue there wasn't a need for it. But when I went out to the villages I made it my business to visit all the places I'd not visited when I'd been there before, and if you greeted them in their local language they fell over, because they hadn't heard a white man speak it for years. I went to places like the source of the Zambesi, Lake Bangwelu and then into the Kafue Flats and Barotseland. I had a very good number two, David Carter, and I was able to get away as much as I wanted to. And I enjoyed travelling. There was no question of seeking permission. They were only too pleased to see somebody going out there.

JJ: Did they speak English nevertheless?

JW: In the towns yes, but once you got off the beaten track, no. Zambia is shaped almost like a butterfly, north of Zimbabwe and South Africa. The line of rail runs north straight through the middle of Zambia and then continues to the Congo. The railway serves the copper mines. Broken Hill was on the map here. They spoke English along the line of rail, but once you were beyond that line very few did, unless they had a development project of some sort going on. As is so often the case in Africa, they get through aid funds, the capital to build a road, but they entirely neglect to provide for regular maintenance, so in three years the whole thing's crumbled and you've got pot holes and everything.

JJ: When you returned Kenneth Kaunda was still there as President?

JW: Yes, I felt before I went that he might say: "Willson – that bloody man. No thank you. I don't want him".

JJ: Why would he say that?

JW: Well he might have felt that I was in some way an obstruction.

JJ: Remembered too much of the old days?

JW: Got involved with the founding of his party and so on. But he didn't. He was very nice. And a number of my old buddies now being senior black civil servants, I had a better entrée than my confrères in the other embassies. And if I went out into the bush I would also quite often find people I'd known, or the sons of people I'd known. I went to look for my old first house in Lundazi and it was now a girls' secondary school. It had been built right across my old house. But I found my old house in Fort Jameson and in Broken Hill, lived in by locals, but still there.

JJ: So comparing what you saw in 1988 with when you first went out there, what comparisons did you draw?

JW: They had moved on, but in cold, hard figures, their currency was worth half when I got there what it had been at independence.

JJ: Why was that? What had happened to the economy?

JW: Just neglected completely. To be fair, the price of copper had gone down as well, but without getting into a semi-racial rant to explain what happened ...

JJ: There were no white men to keep things maintained -

JW: And keep the books; make sure where the money had gone to. All that sort of thing. The country was a very fertile country. Nobody starved in Zambia. It isn't like Ethiopia or the government-imposed starvation in Zimbabwe, but they hadn't progressed very much at all off that central line. But they are very nice, welcoming people, pleasant and get on very well.

JJ: What was the government's attitude to the United Kingdom, the former colonial power?

JW: We had sorted out the Rhodesia/Zimbabwe problem. Things had more or less settled on to an even keel. Before that, Kaunda whatever he felt would stand up and rant away to the crowd. No, when I was there it was very pleasant really. Its main reason for importance when I was there was that it was the headquarters of the ANC in exile.

JJ: That is the African National Congress?

JW: Yes, of South Africa. The ones that weren't in prison on Robben Island; the ones who got away were based in Lusaka, and their head man there was Thabo Mbeki, now the President of South Africa, and I saw him I suppose once a week. He'd come in and have a natter, and we had a sort of triangular correspondence between Pretoria, Lusaka and Whitehall to try to get a general idea of what their thinking was, and how they were foreseeing the future. This I think was helpful from Britain's point of view. It enabled the ANC to put across their views to London and it enabled us to put across to them any particular points we wanted to.

JJ: So that was a valuable channel of communications?

JWE: Invaluable.

JJ: Invaluable indeed.

JW: There was no other substitute.

JJ: You were in a privileged position, in a sense.

JW: Yes. They'd chosen Lusaka because KK was always very pro ANC and they'd set up there. Of course any representation they'd had in Zimbabwe had been driven out by Smith. There was quite a strong movement in Lusaka and we had good relations with them.

JJ: Did the British Government have a specific aid programme for Zambia?

JW: One of its more prominent ones was in the medical field. Both the professor of surgery and the professor of medicine at Lusaka Teaching Hospital were British-financed posts. They were both actually women and one of them became a world acknowledged expert on AIDS, because Zambia was one of the countries hardest hit. We were not allowed to move out of the High Commission without our little first aid box with everything we might need if we had a crash, including blood plasma. We weren't allowed to have transfusions. We had several on roads and infrastructure. Not much as I recall on agriculture at that stage, because of course another thing was, Zambia welcomed and encouraged white farmers and in fact, to jump forward, when Mugabe chucked them all out of Zimbabwe, a lot of them moved to Zambia and established themselves there. Zambia had always been quite happy to receive them. We had good white farmer friends with whom we still keep up who are second or third generation. Their grandfathers went out to build the railway, Cecil Rhodes's railway – Cape to Cairo and they stayed on and went farming.

JJ: So there were no disputes over land then because there was plenty for everybody.

JW: Nobody felt he'd been deprived.

JJ: When you went out there, normally, a new High Commissioner or Ambassador is told what the core objectives are of your mission in that particular country. Did you get that?

JW: Obviously to keep in touch with the African Nationalists and the ANC was a major objective. Another objective one was to keep Zambia onside with regard to Britain's African policies.

JJ: Keep in touch in Lusaka with the South African, African National Congress?

JW: Yes, this was the main objective because by that time you could see how the dominoes were starting to fall in South Africa. And it was necessary to know as much as we could about what their views and objectives were after the end of apartheid and, as I say, Lusaka was the headquarters of the ANC in exile.

JJ: And so you were talking in fact to the man who eventually succeeded Nelson Mandela as President of South Africa, so that was a key contact.

JW: He was a graduate of Sussex University.

JJ: Not too much seems to have rubbed off on him?

JW: No, he has a strange view about AIDS and HIV. He sees them as separate, one doesn't necessarily lead to the other and so on. He appears to be coming round gradually, but certainly he has some strange views.

JJ: Personal face saving ...

JW: I don't know what it is really. It isn't something I would have expected of him because when I knew him he was a perfectly straightforward chap and I didn't know he had these odd kinks in his outlook.

JJ: He seems to be out on his own on that particular theory.

JW: Another thing I think you asked in one of your questions is whether there were many diplomatic missions in Lusaka. Well there were a lot and there was a curious thing about circles. You had particular meetings between ambassadors of particular countries. There was the Anglo-American – that was the closest one. Myself and my American colleague getting together. Then you had Anglo-America-Australia – Anglophone whites. Then you had Commonwealth. Then you had EU, and Britain was the only EU member who was a member of all these circles and that again was very helpful and very interesting. We had a Commonwealth High Commissioners' lunch once a month and a good bit of nattering before and after. An EU meeting once a month.

JJ: Were they useful?

JW: Yes they were. Particularly in those early days when not many of us knew much about each other. It was useful to talk to the French and the Belgians and Dutch about these things. And my American colleague was a good chap, Geoffrey Davidow.

JJ: And he was the American Ambassador?

JW: Yes, and it was very helpful to have all these different points of view about the same country, about the same events. It kept one busy. Sources of information.

JJ: Which you could feed back to London. And there was again I suppose a British Council?

JW: Yes, there was – very active. Again English was the main thing the Zambians wanted and preferably scholarships. They were used to it and they always had English teachers; it wasn't such an innovation for them as it was for instance in Bucharest or somewhere like that.

JJ: Were there particular British government policies which Kenneth Kaunda or the government in general were opposed to at that time?

JW: Not once we'd settled Zimbabwe and provided we broadly saw eye to eye on South Africa, which we did most of the time. They didn't want the British to hold up the end of apartheid any longer than was necessary, but obviously our views there were fairly common anyway, so there was no problem from that point of view.

JJ: So things were quite harmonious really?

JW: Yes they were. As I said, I did a lot of travelling which I enjoyed because I knew the country anyway and it enabled me if you like, to fill in gaps from my previous days there.

JJ: It's not at every post Ambassadors or indeed other staff can now travel so much because there's so much paperwork; forms to fill in for risk assessments etc.

JW: I used to tell the Ministry of Foreign Affairs when I was going and that was it. That was fine. Nobody spying on me or checking on me. Difficult sometimes to find places to stay, but there were missions, there were farmers, and various other people that could be relied on for a bed. So that was helpful from that point of view. I had a Land Rover for bush-bashing and a Jaguar for more sedate travel.

JJ: You mentioned South Africa and Mbeki, but what about Nelson Mandela? Was he in touch with the ANC up in Lusaka? Did he come up there?

JW: Once he was released, Lusaka I think was, I think, the second place he visited outside South Africa because Kaunda had always been a strong supporter of his. He came up and had a sort of reception for Heads of Mission, and we all spoke to him. And of course that rather changed things because it was then obvious which way things were going down there and Mbeki and company went home so that particular listening post was no longer in use.

Role of Colonial and Diplomatic Service wives

JJ: I believe that Dawn, your wife, wanted to play a role alongside you when you went abroad. Your first posting was Northern Rhodesia. How did she in fact occupy her time there?

JW: Really at that time going round the local villages offering instruction on hygiene, first aid, cookery, handicrafts, that sort of thing.

JJ: She had had some training herself in ..?

JW: She had at Oxford. And the fact that she had a baby on her back and he was a boy was an asset as far as these women were concerned. She started with sanitation – trying to construct decent loos and rubbish bins, compost – that sort of thing. You also had to for instance, combat witchcraft which was still strongly believed in there.

JJ: A delicate subject, I suppose?

JW: It was but woman-to-woman they could say more than I could as an official. And then later than that she dealt with people being released from prison. She was asked to set up a department of probation, but she said she always seemed to be pregnant. And then when I was in another rural post called Serenje, there was a place called a Development Area Training Centre; a DATC, and at that time she was on the government payroll again teaching the same sort of thing but on a residential ...

JJ: Local government?

JW: Northern Rhodesia Government. This was them coming to you at a school, rather than you going to them. She was also, at various times, an Examiner for the Northern Rhodesia Council of Social Services and a teacher of adolescent girls. She then took an extra-mural course at the University on political theory and theology. Lots of entertaining to do – multi-racial; much involvement in travel. From 1975-80 when I was at home – nothing much. Horses, living out in the country, taking in foreign students. And she was a Committee Member of the DSWA at that time.

JJ: That was a very useful task.

JW: Then we moved up to London in 1979 and she found plenty of work coaching, particularly in English to Iranian children who had been displaced by the overthrow of the Shah. 1980-83 Bucharest – daily foraging for food in the markets. Lots of travel until we were stopped. From 1983–87, Cote d'Ivoire. She took up teaching at a girls secondary school run by nuns. Taught English and she worked also doing the same thing at a training college and did some lectures on English poetry at the University in Burkina Faso. "First time" she said "I ever read Shakespeare in French".

JJ: I seem to remember that also Dawn was very useful in intervening with the Foreign Office with the help of the Medical Adviser who visited us to stress the importance of the younger staff being able to afford to run their air conditioning. Because it was an expensive item and inspectors who came said "we're not giving you any money for air conditioning because it says that you're not using it". And the patient answer of the staff was "we're not using it because we can't afford it". And Dawn as I say if you remember, helped by writing to the Chief Medical Officer in the

Foreign Office explaining this and it made the Office think twice and give the younger staff appropriate allowances so they could have air conditioning and stay fit, and be fit to go to work in the mornings.

JW: Do you remember the Residence where the first floor passage giving off to all the bathrooms and bedrooms was just concrete shutters – not even windows. I got windows and air conditioning put in. Anyway, the American Embassy did a study course on Muslim culture which Dawn found interesting. There you are. 1987-90, Lusaka. Loved going back; knowing enough language to wow the locals as I've told you. Staggering, particularly that you could speak the sub-languages. And when I rolled off my greeting.

JJ: It does underline the importance of being able to learn a local language if it's at all possible and being given time by the Office to do that, even though they might have thought that some of those languages were quite unnecessary?

JW: The Colonial Office didn't, you see. Their attitude was different. With them unless you passed a lower level of language proficiency in so many years, you got no incremental pay increase, as opposed to the Foreign Office who give you more, or did – I don't know what they do now. Dawn's main interest in Lusaka centred on the University Teaching Hospital setting up women's shelters for mothers with AIDS, and dying children. Because you know in Africa all the mothers go in with their children and there was nowhere for them to sleep. And Dawn with a couple of helpers on the ground set up this centre. This is about afterwards. You see, this is one of the general points I wanted to make. I've been present at the birth of three African countries. Zambia in 1964, Zimbabwe in 1990 and then after I retired South Africa because I was a member of the Peace Observer Corps at the elections. We wore bright orange tabards, and made sure there was no hokey-pokey going on in the polling booths and so on. I got involved with that and worked the black township as well. So I actually witnessed the birth of three African countries. And of course I have been in three different British Civil Services; the Colonial Service, the Home Civil Service and the Diplomatic Service.

JJ: Probably unique?

JW: Could well be. Because when we retired, we went to South Africa. We bought a property down there between Pretoria and Johannesburg. We had ten acres. We had dogs, horses – it was great fun until the security situation got bad. Then we moved into the centre of Southern Johannesburg and that was all right for a bit and then the pulls of grandchildren and so on got too strong so we moved first of all to France and then when we found that we were still missing prize days, sports days, we moved back to England. I think you're right to put in a bit about Dawn because this is long before the days when Ambassadors' wives got paid but there was still lots of opportunity for those so minded to support their husbands and to do good. Even after we retired to South Africa, Dawn was one of four delegates of the SA National Council of Women to the International Council meeting in Paris.

Reflections on chosen career

JJ: Looking back now are you glad you chose the career path that you did?

JW: Yes I am, particularly when you become Head of Mission, because it's endlessly interesting. You never know when you cross the threshold in the morning what's going to happen that day. There's a large variety of work to do. You have on the whole first class support from your staff and sometimes I thought it's a job I'd have done without being paid because I really did enjoy it. I suppose I'm what they now call a "people person" because I enjoy going round chatting to people in their various offices. And the same in Lusaka and particularly so there because of having been there before of course. It made it even more interesting. Whether one chooses a career path – I don't think you sit down and map it out, but it did sort of happen that way, but I've no regrets so far. And you asked in one place whether I felt out of the main stream because you ... but obviously I was never going to be Ambassador in Paris or Washington or anything like that, but on the other hand I did twenty years with the Foreign Office and got to AUS equivalent, so it's not bad. I enjoyed the work. I didn't find anybody condescending. Some of them perhaps a little thoughtless, but not deliberately condescending, not in my experience anyway, but I agree that my experience in a way was quite narrow because it was Africa, United States by proxy and Eastern Europe.

JJ: Certainly, particularly with your African service with your particular background you were actually bringing something to the table, that nobody in the Foreign Office, or hardly anybody, had knowledge or experience of.

JW: If you saw some Ministers, who shall be nameless, trying to deal with Africa and Africans; again Lynda Chalker was the exception. She was very good. She was first class.

Some comments on aid to Africa

JJ: Looking now at Africa, what is your view of Africa and its so-called independence?

JW: I think our present aid programme is misplaced. I think we are gradually getting round to realising that the condition of good governance has got to be the first condition. We've been ladling out money now since the 1950s, and it has got us nowhere. It's been badly organised and badly distributed and at last I think we're realising that first of all you've got to get good, and as far as possible uncorrupt, government set up in these countries before you just start ladling out money – which is what we've been doing. If you go there, there's so little to show for it. I found that even in the gap – what was 24 years between my two posts in Zambia and Northern Rhodesia – the waste of money is terrible.

JJ: But you did say that in Zambia it wasn't so much corruption as incompetence.

JW: Yes, of course, not everywhere is corrupt; there is also a fair amount of incompetence. But look at Kenya, what we have been saying. Do you know Edward Clay, the High Commissioner there (2005)?

JJ: A little bit.

JW: He speaks directly.

JJ: But with Foreign Office approval.

JW: Yes. Good for him. But Kenya is an outstanding example of corruption. But Zambia, I don't think was. It was more incompetence or lack of ability to think through a project, or think into the future. We've certainly got to toughen everything up if we expect our money to produce more than just temporary results. How many Ethiopian famines have we tried to solve in the last twenty years? And it just comes back again.

JJ: I mean that's nature I think?

JW: Yes, but also incompetence and corruption.

JJ: We could have done something about the land – fertile

JW: Shoot all the goats! There are things that could have been done.

JJ: We had an Englishman in the Ivory Coast who wanted to shoot all the goats for the same reason, that they were destroying the land.

JW: Yes, because they don't just graze. They uproot. They leave a place devastated. Culling sounds bad, but I think it's quite a sensible policy.

JJ: But I saw in the press a week or two ago an argument put forward by politicians that perhaps Western aid donors should stop providing aid with conditions and put the full onus on the recipient governments to block it – to stop it. I personally find that ...

JW: Would get us nowhere. In fact that's what in effect we've doing for the last forty years. You see, in a way I started this. When I first went out to Northern Rhodesia in 1955, there was a thing called the Peasant Farmers Scheme and volunteers were asked for and then you went to look at how they cultivated their land. If they were good you gave them an ox and an ox-cart and some fertiliser and some seed. So they prospered. But then the tall poppy syndrome cuts in, and if he gets too much better than his neighbours, they say it's witchcraft or he's a friend of the muzungu – the white man.

Africa is not easy. Places like Indonesia and Thailand are so much easier to give aid to, or Sri Lanka or wherever, but Africa is difficult and I've no immediate or long-term solution. I'm clearly of the opinion that what we're doing now is not the right way to go about it.

JJ: That was a very interesting and illuminating interview, particularly drawing on your African experiences. Thank you very much indeed.

Word count: 16,420

Transcribed: Evie Jamieson

20 July 2005