

YMCA 175

Oral Histories and Stories

Story teller Geoff Hillman

Subject Personal Reflection

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Interviewer (Int): If you would just firstly like to introduce yourself then maybe speak about how you first got involved with YMCA?

Geoff: Well my name's Geoff Hillman. I was born and bred in Stoke-On-Trent, I lived in Hanley and my first introduction to the YMCA was about 1960-62 when I joined the 1st Hanley YMCA Scout group and that was based in Hanley at the back of Marsh Street, which is sort of the main feed around Hanley. The North Staffordshire Scout Association had its headquarters there. At the back of the headquarters offices was Twyford Hall which was the base for The Hanley YMCA Scout group and I think that was it as far as the YMCA, they didn't present the YMCA in a different way they retained the title of the YMCA.

Int: What sort of activities did you do in the Scout group in the 1960s?

Geoff: I didn't join the scout group until I was about 15 and I was into rock climbing in those days. A couple of my mates were in the scouts and they used to go off into Wales rock climbing and they had all these great facilities that were free so I thought to join the Scouts wasn't a bad idea really.

Int: So you mostly joined the scouts to be with your friends?

Geoff: We were the senior scouts those days, there were about 8 or 9 of us. And then we used to help out with younger groups

Int: So a bit of sort of peer mentoring...

Geoff: Yes, we took young groups on holidays camping a lot as you do

Int: So YMCA ran sort of clubs...

Geoff: Well that was it the YMCA wasn't really promoting it in anyway at all I think it was just a spin off from years gone when the YMCA used to have a base in Hanley which was in Marsh Street in Hanley I think. And that was sold I think during the second world war and the money from that sale was actually entrusted to the rotary club of Stoke on Trent and the rotary club of Stoke on Trent became trustees of that money. And looked after it for, how long, 1940s to 1970s until they started building the new Centre. So for 30 years the rotary club of Stoke on Trent looked after that money and invested it and were trustees of it. That's how the rotary club became involved with the YMCA.

Int: Where the YMCA is now, the site was donated from Howard Corns.

Geoff: Yes, it was indeed, it was donated by Howard Corns.

Int: And I think he sort of wrote into the council about sort of a spot to be given for young people

Geoff: Yes, he did yes and it was a huge deal. Over the years it had been used to extract clay and over the years had been filled and filled and levied off so it just looked like a very nice piece of levelled land and it about 15 meters of fill beneath it all which made building the new YMCA a bit challenging.

Int: And then when the site was given from the Corns family was then you sort of next introduction to the YMCA?

Geoff: Yes, it was yes. Our practice was appointed to be the architects and I got lumbered with the job of designing the building which was very exciting cos it was the biggest project id even handled at the time and It was good to get involved really.

Int: And sort of looking back at how you were to design this new YMCA building, was there anything you sort of thought of or could reflect on from your days at the Scout group from what you knew the movement into the designs?

Geoff: We went visiting several YMCAs to see what was going on at the time. I think Central London YMCA had just been built and it was a massive flash complex don't know if you've ever been there?

Int: Yes...

Geoff: It's a huge indoor swimming pool and what have you and I remember going touring there and so we sort of got ideas from that. The YMCA had a regional association, I assume it still has, I don't know? Because you know originally they were part of the west midlands region and there was a Regional secretary that's sort of like an advisor so they were quite involved as well at the time.

Int: So learning from the YMCAs that helped you to sort of design the new youth campus and obviously its 7 floors tall and got extended to 8?

Geoff: Yes, its 7 floors above ground and two below now isn't it?

Int: Yes, that's correct. And in terms of project were there any challenges that you had to overcome to think this is going to be lovely campus for young people and in terms of the ground itself?

Geoff: Yes, because the ground dictated the format of the building because the ground was so poor it was either you had to spread out and have a very flat single story building because of the pressures on the ground or you got to try and contain it and squeeze into a tight box and then just deal with the foundations under a small complex. The ultimate decision was that we'd do that and try and go tall and small minimise the foundation implications.

Int: And then you went off and did some designs and the building starts taking place, how long did it take roughly?

Geoff: I think it took from memory about 18 months to build.

Int: And then in terms of naming the tower, obviously I know it as Edinburgh House, has that been the title of the tower since day one?

Geoff: Yes it was because the Duke of Edinburgh came and formally opened the building. I can't exactly remember the date, it wasn't before the building opened, the building had been opened a few months before. They had the official opening and the Duke of Edinburgh came and did the official opening and the gave permission for the building tone named after him.

Int: Were you present on the day the Duke of Edinburgh came?

Geoff: Yes, I was, I was presented to him.

Int: Would you describe the day to us a little bit?

Geoff: It was a big event actually, there were marquees there and various youth groups from all over the city came and quite a party atmosphere really. The Queen was over as well and I think she opened one or two other buildings in the city because he knew it was going to be named after him he came on his own officially visited and opened Edinburgh House as it was then known. So yes it was a big day there were a lot of people there, as I say there was all sorts of activities going on there. He toured the grounds outside and went into all the marquees and met all the groups and it was quite a full on day.

Int: And then terms obviously you've had this massive grand opening and as you said before the Duke of Edinburgh opened the tower months after it sort of opened. When people started using it for accommodation and for its purpose, did you get sort of a sense of pride?

Geoff: Well of course you do yes, cos you can see that it did work well. It didn't get off to a very good start in terms of financial income, I think they struggled to fill it initially. One of the reasons I think for that was that they got quite a lot grant money to build it and one of the grants came via the British Council I can always remember that. Then they came and took a percentage of the rooms for the students to stay in. And I don't think they actually could meet the targets I don't think. They are basically students coming from common wealth countries which is what the British Council was all about. And I don't think that they really met their commitment to find that so financially in its early days it struggled the YM did really to keep it above water financially.

Int: Would you sort of describe maybe a bit of the activities or sense of the YMCA locally you might have picked up on. I think the bulldog opened in the late 70s, would you describe a bit about the YMCA in the late 70s at Edinburgh House?

Geoff: Well the big attraction was the squash courts, that was a major attraction because there weren't many squash courts in Stoke on Trent at the time and the squash courts there were very fast, they were very fast to play squash on. And they had massive squash leagues and quite a big group of people coming in on a regular basis coming in at lunchtimes, through the night, playing squash. So squash was a big attraction, that got a lot of people into the building. The other thing was that it was unique as it had a licensed bar and it was the first YMCA in the country that had a licensed bar that was managed quite strictly but you know for people to have a game of squash and have drink after was quite an attraction as well. But then I don't know why they struggled they struggled to get a lot of community involvement. A lot of time and effort went in to it. I got lumbered to become a member of what was then called the youth and community committee and that's how I got involved with the YMCA post construction really. And it was trying to get groups to visit the building and see what the facilities were available to them.

Int: And what were the challenges then to get them to come into the YMCA?

Geoff: I think the biggest problem that they had they weren't really supported I didn't think at the time. I mean if you compare the way the YM operates now compared to the way it was operating initially, I don't think it offered groups the support that it should have done really in hindsight. A lot of groups used to come in and they'd come in for three or four visits and then go off and not come back and they didn't seem, they had a full time youth and community worker employed but I don't know whether he wasn't doing a particularly good job or I don't know; there was a bit of movement in the

management level in the early years and I think the people that they had leading the YM from a professional point of view weren't really the right people from early days. I think that was naivety on everybody's part the YM hadn't operated in Stoke on Trent for thirty odd years and they'd forgotten what the spirit of the YMCA was all about.

Int: Do you think that was a crucial part?

Geoff: I think it was yes. I think people didn't really know what the YM was about really. I think over the years that ethos started to come back.

Int: It's a massive generation gap...

Geoff: Yes, well two generations I suppose lost between closing and reopening. It isn't easy. To see it now open and vibrant and phenomenally active is great to see and as it should be but that's mostly taken what, thirty years is it now?

Int: In terms of today, just to sort jump forward a couple of years, maybe decades - would you ever have envisioned yourself in terms of when you first sort of designed Edinburgh House that it would be what it is today?

Geoff: No not at all. No, no, I'm amazed.

Int: And from the early 70s to 2014/5 when you obviously, the company you are involved with remodeled the inside of Edinburgh Tower and also if I'm correct in 2019 when you did some sort of workings on further proposed for some more accommodation at YMCA Staffordshire?

Geoff: We are working on that this very moment in time.

Int: Would you have ever envisioned yourself in the 70s that you'd be still involved with the YMCA?

Geoff: No, no. not at all. Which is good isn't it?

Int: It's absolutely fantastic. What an incredible story from designing and the rebirthing and I know working with these people living in the tower that you helped design, how important it is for these young people. So within your sort of role within the youth involvement committee?

Geoff: Yes, it was and then I became chairman of that. In becoming chair of that group that gave me seat of the board of the YMCA.

Int: How long were you on the board for?

Geoff: Probably about 5 years I think.

Int: Do you remember when you first started?

Geoff: When did the YMCA towers open?

Int: It was '76 when the tower was completed and '77 when it was opened by the Duke of ED so most probably the year after that, '78-'83 possibly I'd have thought.

Int: Could you describe possibly some of the times you remember?

Geoff: It was challenging, the professional heading up the YMCA at those times was called the General Secretary and I think we had two or three that came and went and that was quite challenging because financially it was a struggle and really the YMCA nationally recommended a guy to us to come in as an acting General Secretary just as a temporary measure, a guy called John Berry, I don't know if you ever heard of John Berry? John is still alive, he's in his 80s and he's chairman of Porthcawl YMCA now.

Int: Oh really, oh wow....

Geoff: John is a real true Christian YMCA man and he just brought a completely different view to what the YMCA is about and it was he really that sowed the seed really for what the YMCAs moved on really.

Int: So that was sort of helped shift the tide...

Geoff: I can't remember when John would have been there, would of been '75ish I would of thought. He just came on a 12-month employment really to help them over a bit of a difficult time. But he got very involved, he's a young people's person and he got really involved with the young people and brought Christian ethic into it. He was impressive to watch, John.

Int: In your thought as your experience as a board member, what does the YMCA mean to you?

Geoff: I think it just create opportunities for young people to develop their skills and most probably enjoy the freedom the YMCA gives to people to express themselves and just encourages them really to get the best out of people and offer encouragement and help and push where necessary and advise where, I think it's important to advise. But I think it's all about young person's development really to help people to learn how to express themselves and get the best out of themselves really.

Int: And is there like a moment when you sort of look back with pride in terms of your involvement with the YMCA?

Geoff: I don't think so; I have contributed a little but it was only little part really of what was going on. I quite enjoyed being involved in the tough times but it was good to see them overcome the problems the initial start had and see the new ideas developing and growing really.

Int: What were the sort of initial teething problems at the start?

Geoff: I think a lot of it was to do with the fact that there were too many people involved who didn't thoroughly understand what was required really. I mean I'm a member of Stoke Rotary club and Stoke Rotary club are actually brilliant in terms of looking after the money for 30 odd years but no disrespect to them they are local businessmen and who were interested in running a business, if they couldn't see an income stream coming from it they struggled. So there was bit of a battle, we used to have some entertaining board meetings at the time. Yes, it was quite good fun really at the time. I was very friendly at the time with the Rector of Hanley Was a guy called Ray Fenell Was on the board, and he and I were about the only ones who had string community feelings for the YM and he and I used Mohave some right battles. We won one or two!

Int: In terms of the YMCA projects showiest you were board member, are there any you can recall? Projects the YMCA was running in the Centre or perhaps out in the community.

Geoff: They weren't doing a lot of outreach at that time to be honest. The biggest thing was trying to fill the hostel with young people because they did struggle with occupancy levels in the first three or four years so it was trying to reach out to universities, colleges, local colleges. Trying to encourage young people to use the facilities and live in the nulling really. Whether it was too expensive at the time I don't know, it may have been an issue, cost. Cos the facilities at the time were as good as you could get to be honest. They dated as the years went by, they changed but compared to what they've got now it was pretty basic really!

Int: Also you mentioned a few names already but is there anyone who also stands out in terms of YMCA, any individuals...

Geoff: Well, the driving force behind it all was guy called Neil Harrison who was the original chairman of the board, he was a member of Stoke Rotary Club and he was like the trustee who looked after the money all over that period of time and it was he who got the building under way and got grants and it was he who talked to Eric Gormes about getting the land and so he was the original driving force behind it. They guy who was deputy chairman ran a big transport business in Stoke on Trent called Langton Transport Holdings and he became chairman after Neil decided to stand down and then the other guy was guy called Harry Deakin who was a board member and was also a member of Stoke Rotary Club and Harry took over from Alf Dale who in due course who became chairman and he was chairman for a few years I think, Harry.

When the YMCA became a resident housing association because I was a consultant architect who technically worked for the YMCA as well, and there was another guy the board who was a solicitor who used to offer free legal advice and we had to both stand down as board members, that's how we came to leave the board because the housing corporation who were the funding body in those days said there was a conflict of interest which I could understand so we two both had to resign positions really.

Int: You mentioned Neil, was he like a man on a mission?

Geoff: Absolutely yes, he made an aim in his life that rather than having this money sitting. I don't think there was vast amounts of money because think in the 40s they sold they only had a relatively small building I think in Hanley. I can't even remember exactly what it was or where it was.

Int: I actually have a picture I'll send it to you...

Geoff: Yes, I'm intrigued,

Int: We have a couple of pictures of one from where you look down from Hanley town hall towards the big telecommunications I think that's where...

Geoff: Yes, that exactly where it was. Right opposite there is Portofino's restaurant and Portofino's restaurant used to be the Scout shop. The Scout shop was what it said it was, it sold scout uniforms and camping, anyone could go in buy camping gear. They sold scout uniforms to the whole of north Staffordshire I think. Well behind that was, sorry upstairs over the shop was the regional headquarters of the north staff scout's association

and then behind that was this Twyford hall where the scouts used to meet. It's still there now, it's still there and there's a pub on the corner

Int: That's correct...

Geoff: In those days that was called the Mechanics and in those days the entrance in to Twyford Hall was between Portofino's and the Mechanics Pub there was an entrance.

Is there still people at the YMCA today that thinks the YMCA still owns that building, how true that is I'm not too sure!

Int: The rotary, has a long connection ...

Geoff: Yes, they did, the original board members were 70% were Rotary members the original board.

Int: And without the Rotary?

Geoff: It's unlikely to have ever happened.

Int: Unlikely to be the YMCA today..

Geoff: I would have thought so.

Int: So within the Rotary the sort of talks you can possibly remember how did it ever come about that then this money the vision to reality?

Geoff: I think it was finding the site, first of all and somebody having the drive and determination. I don't know who was the catalyst to start it off, but obviously Howard Corns was a pretty successful local building contractor and must of felt he had a social obligation I suppose is the best word. And in conversation it must have cropped up that there was this amount of money in a pot waiting to build a YMCA and I assume that some conversation might of took place and he said well if you can get the money together Ill offer the land free of charge to build it on, cos he gave it free of charge

Int: When I hear that, from my involvement with the YMCA 'cos I was part of a summer club but, all this sort of history and your insolvent and the rotary involvement and Howard Corns involvement. I look back in awe like oil how today I know the YMCAs actual thriving youth campus and it's kind of a fascinating story behind it which I didn't know even exists until few months ago. In terms of moving forward and you got another chance to engage with the YMCA, how did that feel? Was it to kick new life back in to the YMCA from the 70's?

Geoff: The great thing about the YMCA now is that it's moved on with the times and changed, not changed for change's sake but to meet the needs and requirements of what young people's expectancies are really and I think that it's just great to see how its developed really and the facilities that are there and now available, its remarkable. I even wonder now as successful as it is how well known it is now in the city cos I'm sure of you went to the neck end of Longton or the back up to Tunstall and asked somebody do they were the YMCA is I wonder even now would they know that the YMCA exists so even now there's even more of an opportunity for it to spread its wings and to help.

Int: Maybe it was a bit of foresight, in terms of if I'm driving around the city, I know I can always possibly see the tower...

Geoff: I think that was always one of the other things, it was in a good location to be seen. It was good to make it tall it was the right thing to do cos it's got a great location, view of the park.

Int: Being on the board the time and having this amazing space to fit the times and obviously you struggling to fill it, it must have felt like what's going on...

Geoff: It was a concern at one time it really was and whether it was going to have long-term viable future really. Fortunately, the right people arrived at the right time and it developed and Mavis obviously was Danny Flynn's predecessor and I think had a lot to do with that. Mavis started off as the secretary to the General Secretary, that's how Mavis appeared on the scene. After the first General Secretary was appointed, she was appointed to become their secretary.

Int: Do you know how long Mavis was in post for?

Geoff: Until Danny took over, I think was there for about 15 years

Int: That's correct yes... and Mavis, do you know when she came?

Geoff: When did the YMCA open did we say '72? Yes, so Mavis would of been there then, she was on site while it was being built because they had a temporary portacabin on site for about 6 months trying to get work underway really so they didn't just open with nobody there so yes so she was on site as the secretary to the general secretary. So she developed.

Int: And obviously became the leader of the YMCA..

Geoff: She did and suddenly took off and you know, and great opportunities to young people.

Int: To sort of finish off and thank you for your time. Could you maybe describe a memory you haven't spoken about today, is there anything at the back of your mind?

Geoff: I remember the fun and games we used to have a bonfire there every bonfire night, a community bonfire and if I think back to the health and safety I dread, I think the YMCA would be closed down if we had of operated. We had this great big bonfire where the sports centre is now...

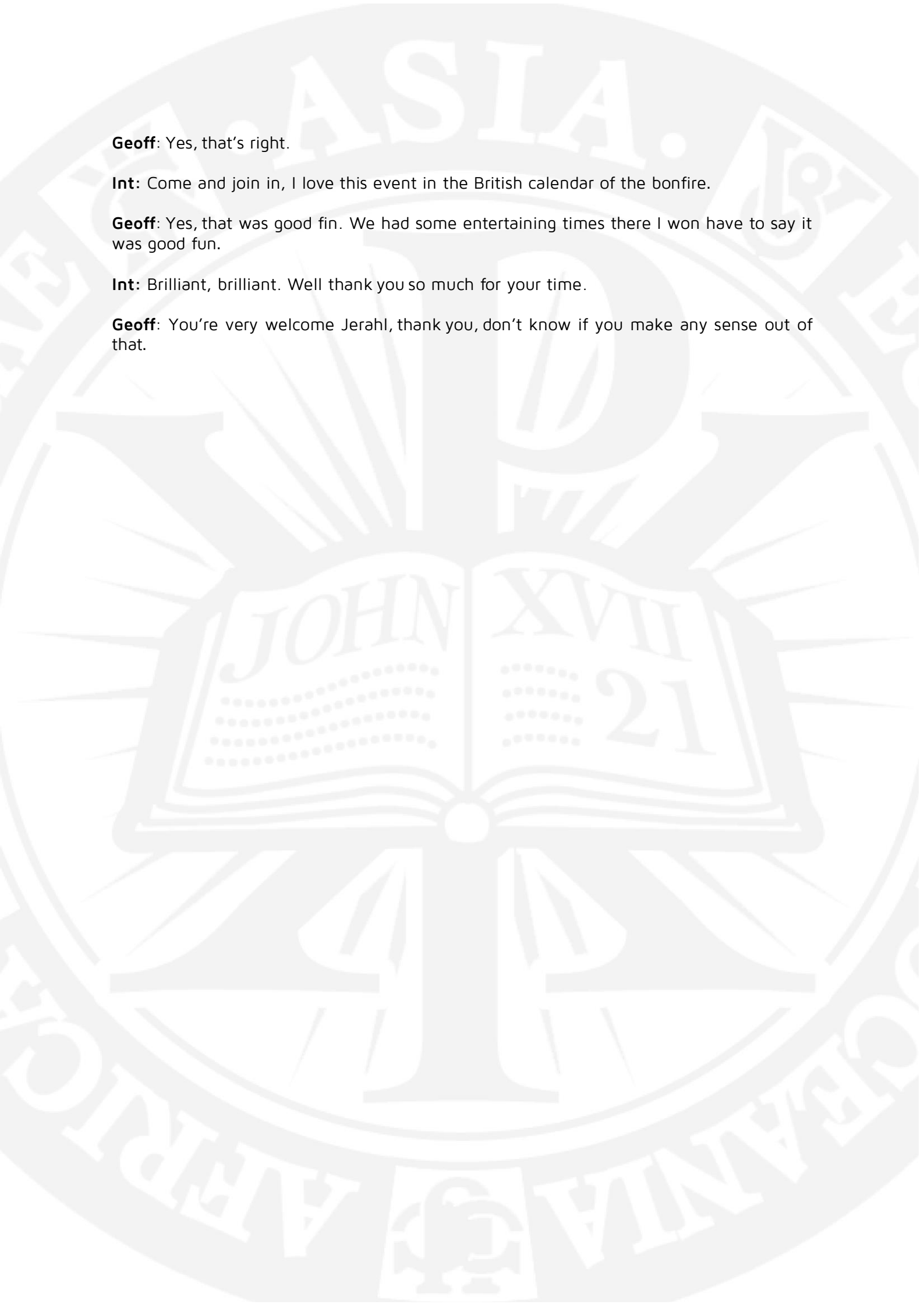
Int: Yes, used to be great big fields...

Geoff: And all the local residents, quite a few, used to be two or three hundred people would be there, it was all free and I used to set the fire works off so it was dead basic you know. We had a few people with torches telling people to stand back. They were really good events you know.

Int: This lovely community event inviting people in...

Geoff: Yes.

Int: Regardless of how they are, where they're from...



Geoff: Yes, that's right.

Int: Come and join in, I love this event in the British calendar of the bonfire.

Geoff: Yes, that was good fun. We had some entertaining times there I won't have to say it was good fun.

Int: Brilliant, brilliant. Well thank you so much for your time.

Geoff: You're very welcome Jerahl, thank you, don't know if you make any sense out of that.