

Happy Campers Project – Interview on 12/06/23 at the BFI – Notes by Ingrid Holtz

Name: Patrick Watson

Year of Birth: 1950

Place of Birth: Belfast

Parents: Father a labourer, who had to look after his seven children alone after his wife died.

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Arrival

Patrick worked at Butlin's Skegness in 1971 and 1972.

Patrick applied to Butlin's at the suggestion of a friend and he thought it would be fun.

Patrick had never been on a holiday so it was all strange to him. He sometimes had trouble understanding the accents from other parts of the UK.

Accommodation

Staff accommodation was a chalet with bunk beds, a sink and a wardrobe. They had communal toilets and bathrooms.

Campers' accommodation was much nicer. They had TVs, kitchen, proper beds.

Meals

Staff had the same three meals a day as the campers, but they had to eat before the campers which meant eating dinner at 5pm. This meant they were hungry in the evenings. They ate in the communal dining room and the food was good. The staff were mostly working class so the food was great for them.

Each waiter had to look after 7-8 tables (about 30 guests). They had roast beef/lamb and the food was very good and served hot. There was no vegetarian food or special food for allergies. Butlin's had high standards. Staff had neat uniforms and they were respectful to the campers. There were very few complaints about the quality or quantity of the food.

Work

Like everyone he was initially recruited as a kitchen porter. He was quickly promoted to waiter and was made a supervisor within 3-4 weeks. Male waiters got paid £9 per week and female waiters got £7.

Typical Day

The staff were young and he had to make sure everyone was there for the beginning of the day. They would knock on chalet doors to chase them up and they sometimes had to find

them in someone else's chalet. He had to make sure that they were presentable before they started the shift.

There were two sittings per meal and they had to clean and sort out the dining hall between the two sittings.

Working Culture

The culture was cordial, convivial and people became friends very quickly. They partied together and it was fun.

Pay/Working Conditions

He was OK with the pay. His wife got £2 per week less than the men for waiting tables.

People were sacked quickly if they misbehaved. He had to be tough with people and even sacked a friend.

What he enjoyed about the job

He enjoyed meeting people, getting the job done well, and helping people enjoy their holiday.

They went to Inglemal's (sp?) Hotel in Skegness. Lots of fun.

Later in the season they would have students come to work. They could be condescending to the working class campers. Patrick told them not to spoil their holidays and to always look decent. Patrick was from a similar (or worse) background to the campers.

Difficulties

He had to deal with strong willed staff, who didn't like being told off.

He had to allocate days off. The most popular day to be requested was pay day. The second most popular was the day the VD clinic was open.

Stories

He met his wife at Butlin's. She was a student and was nicely spoken so was a bit of a "fish out of water".

He got a job for his brother, which was a big mistake. His brother was the "life and soul of the party". Patrick had his nose broken with a "red hander" by someone who mixed him up with his brother.

Activities in Camp

Campers enjoyed that it was safe with lots of security at the gates. There was a funfair, swimming pool and competitions. The redcoats were also performers in the evenings.

Time off

He would often have a rest, because he was so busy with work and going out. People didn't leave the camp much. He had a temporary job helping a London bookie, who had a concession at the camp.

Entertainment

Looking back the entertainment was old fashioned, but the singers were good and staff used to go to the bars to listen to music.

Competitions

People had to be prepared to have a laugh and embarrassment was part of the fun.

Entertainment Patrick participated in

Patrick can't swim so didn't use the pool. He also didn't like the funfair rides. He enjoyed the music even though they played the same songs every night.

Sights/Smells

There was a jolly atmosphere and the redcoats had to be jolly all the time and encourage people to enjoy themselves. People wanted to start having fun as soon as they arrived.

Social Life

All the managers had high standards, but the young staff often came for the fun rather than the money. The staff were usually young, working class and all nice. It was usually seen as a short term job. There was no nastiness. There were a few marriages.

Butlin's had a policy that no staff or manager should be treated any better than campers.

Butln's was his first introduction to gay people. There were some predatory older men preying on the 18/19 year old waiters and he had to watch out for that.

Some married female guests used to tell him that their husbands didn't understand them.

Different Campers

There was a wide geographical diversity amongst the campers. He was always well treated by the guests. They were friendly and he had no bad experiences.

Staff's Attitude to the Campers

This was generally good. New staff would sometimes start well and then let their standards slip later – not washing/shaving, smelling of drink. Patrick told them that they had to be respectful to the campers, who had saved hard for their holiday.

Tips were a big part of the job so the staff were friendly to the campers.

Other Camps

He and his wife took their children to Butlin's in Bognor in c. 2000. The children enjoyed the freedom and he and his wife were impressed with the shows.

Finding Love

There was plenty of love making and some relationships carried on after they left. He knew a few couples. He felt that some relationships wouldn't survive after leaving the Butlin's bubble when couples didn't really have much in common. .

He met his wife who worked there while she was a music student. They both lived in London after Butlin's so it was easy for them to stay together.

Attitudes of Others

He wasn't aware of his family's feelings towards holiday camps. He left home at 19 and only went to visit once a year.

Reliving a moment at the camp

He really enjoyed meeting his wife. She was the opposite of him. He was lower working class and she was better educated. She gave him a lot of self belief and encouraged him to go to university. She was always kind and kindness was at a premium in his working class background.

What does Butlin's mean to you now?

No regrets. It opened his eyes to other people and experiences and let him be a manager very quickly. He wouldn't change anything.