

L04: JOHN MITCHELL INTERVIEW SUMMARY

Interviewee: John Mitchell
Interviewer: Dr Fearghus Roulston
Interview summarisers: Dr Jack Crangle and Prof Liam Harte
The interview was recorded across two audio files that were spliced together to create a single audio file.

L04: John Mitchell	Start time: 00:00:00	Finish time: 01:42:36	Duration: 01:42:36	Brief description of content:
00:00–09:59	Born in Belfast in 1948 to an English father and a Dublin-born mother with NI roots, both of whom were Protestant. Parents met in England and moved to Belfast and then Downpatrick soon after John’s birth, when his father got a job as a planning officer. Attended Down High School and recalls ‘a very happy childhood’, which included outdoor pursuits such as sailing and mountain climbing. His father was a Mason, but not an Orangeman and did not express any strong sectarian views. The family attended local Church of Ireland services, although John feels he was not ‘really a Christian until I came to England’.			
10:00–19:59	Discusses his enjoyment of mathematics at school and how he went on to secure a scholarship to study maths at Queen’s in Belfast in 1966. Recalls his student life there and his developing relationship with his girlfriend Catriona, whom he later married. Explains that the university area was largely untouched by the Troubles, even during the height of the conflict. He himself knew nobody who ‘was killed or injured or anything’ and never felt that he was ‘living in a war zone’.			
20:00–29:59	States that his ‘confused background’ meant he felt at one remove politically from the polarised communities in NI, though he was nominally unionist. Recalls once going to hear Ian Paisley speak ‘out of curiosity’. Discusses his PhD studies in atomic physics at QUB, after which he married Catriona in 1973 and later that year moved to England to take up a post at the Met Office in Bracknell, Berkshire.			
30:00–36:30	Explains that his family links to Cheshire had familiarised him with England, which eased the transition from Belfast to Wokingham, where he and his wife first lived. Found the Met Office a friendly and convivial place to work and ‘never faced any prejudice’ there on account of his Irishness. Recalls the logistics of his move to Berkshire and how he, his wife and children visited their families in NI at least once a year during the Troubles, without encountering any difficulties. The two interview audio files were spliced together here.			
36:31–46:30	States that he continued to follow the news from NI and again notes the absence of hostility or abuse in his social and working life in England. Reveals that all three of his children were born in England, the first in 1976, and visited NI regularly when young, although John is somewhat reluctant to pronounce on their attitudes towards their parental heritage. Discusses his life outside of work, including playing for Bracknell rugby club, rock climbing and mountaineering.			
46:31–56:30	After moving from Wokingham to Bracknell, he joined a United Reform Church, which transformed his understanding of his Christian faith. Discusses how he reconciled his faith with his scientific training. Reveals that he has engaged in door-to-door evangelical work in Berkshire and in Wales, and that the leadership skills he gained through his church activism has helped him in his professional career. Contrasts the multiethnic congregation of his current church with his monocultural upbringing in NI.			

56:31–01:06:30	Reflects on the legacies of his having grown up in NI, such as his fear of car bombs when he first moved to Berkshire. States that if asked by English people, he would have explained that the NI conflict ‘wasn’t primarily a religious war, it was a political war’ and was ‘not a simple Catholic-Protestant thing’. Reveals that he didn’t discuss the Troubles with his children or ask them how they felt about visiting NI during the conflict. Recalls being delighted when the peace process bore fruit in 1998 and cites the Queen’s state visit to the ROI in 2011 as another key milestone, one that made him ‘feel quite emotional really’.
01:06:31–01:16:30	Discusses in considerable detail how his research on mathematical models in the new field of climate science developed at the Met Office in the 1970s and 1980s. During this time he was an active member of international committees and led various research teams, including at the Hadley Centre, a specialist climate change unit established in 1990.
01:16:31–01:26:30	Continues to share his views on climate change and the need for greater public and political understanding of its complexities. Discusses his appointment as Chief Scientist at the Met Office in 2003, by which time he and his wife had moved to Exeter. Speaks of beginning ‘slowly to retire’ in 2008-09 and being given lighter administrative duties. Recalls a time when he considered working for the Irish Met Office, but states that this would have been a ‘disaster’ as he would not have had the research resources he had in the UK. Discusses the ‘Climategate’ scandal that erupted in 2009.
01:26:31–01:36:30	Continues discussing his views on climate change and mentions speaking on the topic at events in Belfast and Maynooth. He is wary of entering the ‘rabbit hole’ of Brexit, but expresses concern about the potential ‘inflammatory’ effects of the restoration of border controls between the ROI and NI. Questions the viability of a unified Ireland that would contain ‘a million dissident Protestants’ from NI. Expresses his continuing affection for NI and makes clear that he did not leave because of the Troubles: ‘a lot of people I think who came to England couldn’t get out of Northern Ireland quick enough, I didn’t feel that way about it’.
01:36:31–01:42:36	Recognises that people in NI can now identify as British or Irish, but thinks that some struggle with this concept. Reflects on the themes raised in a recent TV programme in which Irish rugby legend Brian O’Driscoll interviewed Protestant NI players who represent Ireland at international level. Ends by stating that while he still misses ‘the friendliness of Ulster people and the countryside’, his personal migration journey ‘has been smooth. I’ve come over, I’ve found a job, it’s been an interesting job, we settled, we found community, and so on’.