

In our Words: Sixty years of the National Autistic Society and the story of autism in the UK

Oral History Interview with Michael Baron. April 2024.

00:00:01 Oscar Hilder

I am Oscar Hilder interviewing Michael Baron for the National Autistic Society's *In our Words* project. The date is Wednesday the 10th of April 2024. So Michael, can you please confirm your name, how it is spelt?

00:00:16 Michael Baron

Michael. Geoffrey with a G. Baron. B A R O N.

00:00:25 Oscar Hilder

Lovely. Thank you so much. So, take us back to the start of the National Autistic Society in the 1960s. What inspired or motivated you to get involved?

00:00:38 Michael Baron

... Right... Well, let's see, in 1961, 1960 - '61... I and my wife knew that we had a child who didn't speak and who didn't walk and so on. Or who walked slowly. And so we began searching out and bega-, and went naturally to the Society for Mentally Handicapped Children, as they then were, and I think still are. What do they call themselves? Mencap. So, there was someone called Judy Fry. And there, when I approached them, I was put onto some fundraising committee and met some other parents... notable amongst whom was Helen Allison, who was an American. And we had various meetings and as a result of which, I became more involved and more interested in what was going on. And we've, and then we got together in March... 1962... that was a preliminary meeting, and then a more

formal meeting, at which we'd doled out the jobs of a would-be charity that we'd decided to set up. And I became chairman... and... God, Monty Frankel was treasurer, and someone called... Isaac 'Izzy' Dalton was vice chairman, and the treasurer was an accountant called Henry Sainer, and the secretary was Helen Allison. That's right. So we were the four, as it were, leaders. And we used to meet at Helen's house in Wise Lane, Mill Hill. So, that, and there we decided to form a charity. Then we had our first meeting in... in, that was March 1961, had our first meeting, I think in May 1960-, May, May of that year, by which time I, who was a solicitor, had obtained a, the... approvals and all that, that are necessary to set up the charity under the name of the Society for Psychotic Children.

Now, OK, flashback to June 1961, that's the year before, where, I think, where, I think, I went to a conference on the psychotic child, which was organised by Mencap. And that had all the luminaries of the day speaking at it. Doc-, the, Dr Kenneth Soddy, Dr Gerald O'Gorman of Smith's Hospital in Henley-on-Thames. There was, I think Lorna Wing probably spoke... Let me see, who else, someone called... Chojko, C H O J K O. I think Dr Stroh, S T R O H, S T R O H, who ran a special unit at High, at High Wick, I think, near St Albans, for children of... children like Timothy, let's say.

So then, and so that was the first occasion of which there, first occasion of which there was any mention that this was a specific group of children. It was called the psychotic child. And it was well attended. But the emphasis was on medical treatment, so it was all medical. Doc-, Dr O'Gorman. Dr Soddy. Mildred Creak was there, that's right, Mildred Creak. Dr Stroh. So there was, basically, it was medical... Right, because most of the children they had then diagnosed were in what was called then junior training centres. We, on the other hand, with this little group of parents, thought that it was education, and they should be in school. And that one of our objectives, early objectives, was the change from junior training centres to education, from health to education, that's how it went.

And so, flash forward to... April or May 1961, 1962, when the charity was formed. And there we got a few members, but you have to remember that the idea of autism was an American idea and no one knew anything about it. And so it went on for about six months. And Lorna Wing, who was a psychiatrist at the Maudsley Hospital in Denmark Hill, had read up widely about it, had, had a child... one child only, and decided that psychotic was the wrong name, and that autistic was the right name. And so in... October, I think, October or November 19... 19... 61 (1962), the name was changed from the Society for Psychotic Children, because we thought they'd all grow out of it, somehow or other. I don't know why we did, but we did. It was changed to the Society for Autistic Children. Against some problems, difficulties, in that I was the chairman of the organisation and I was proposing the change of name and the first time it was rejected, so I had had to be fairly undemocratic and not accept it, not accept that vote, and to put it to the meeting again.

And it was passed, so it became the Society for Autistic Children, because we thought they would grow out of it. And then various name changes, so the current one is the National Autistic Society.

Lorna Wing had read the work in America of Kanner, K A double N E R, and you all know all about Kanner and what he found. He, and he had adopted, as a phrase, 'autism', that had been coined in Germany in the 1920s by someone called Bleuler, B L E U L E R.

00:09:27 Oscar Hilder

So, to elaborate further, can you tell me a little bit more, if possible, about the other key figures who were there at the beginning?

00:09:33 Michael Baron

Right, yes. I can tell you about all the figures...

00:09:37 Oscar Hilder

Mhmm. Please do.

00:09:38 Michael Baron

In order. So, Isaac Dalton was a general practitioner, practising in North London. That was Isaac Dalton, who had a child who exhibited all those symptoms. There was Henry Sainer, who had a son, a child. S A I-, S A I N E R. And he was the brother of someone called Leonard Sainer, who was quite influential, he was, as an accountant. And then there was... then the house from which we had the meeting, was the house of Dr O'Driscoll and Mrs O'Driscoll.

But we're talking about, Timothy today is aged 67. So we're talking about people who are, if they're still alive, are in their late 60s or, indeed, in their 70s. So that's the, they're the four. And Driscoll, O'Driscoll. Henry Sainer... Helen Allison. And then, as it were, not there, but in the distance, because she lived in Forest Hill, Lorna Wing. So they were the five founders of the society.

00:11:12 Oscar Hilder

Can you also, if possible, tell us a little bit more about the personal impact of your son, Timothy, on your involvement, as in what was he like back then and now?

00:11:20 Michael Baron

So, so Timothy, so Timothy was a strange child, and my wife said that he, the way he behaved towards her was different. She was, claimed to be familiar with children, and the way he sat and talked and behaved was different. That was all. And he didn't speak. And he didn't walk 'til late... What else, what else, and then today, well he's in a care home. Today, he still doesn't speak very much... and then developed epilepsy at the age of 18, as they often do. So he, first of all, went to a little school we established in the house at Gwendolyn Avenue. And then where did he go after that? Then he went to... High Wick for a year or two, I can't remember how long, under the, under the tutorship of... Dr Stroh. S T R O H, S T R O H. O H. And then from... from... Handsome Wick, or High Wick, High Wick, he went to, strangely enough, to the Rudolf Steiner School, which was a boarding school in Northern Ireland, since that was the only place that was, that, who had, a slot for him, and he remained there for... he went there when he was ten, so he left there when he was eight-, 18. He remained there for eight years. I have two other children, one of whom you've met, downstairs.

00:13:36 Oscar Hilder

Yeah.

00:13:37 Michael Baron

So what I put down to the Rudolf Steiner School at Glenraig, which was in Northern Ireland... There were two or three children from England who went there. So he was there from ten to 18, I think. At 18, I was always involved with the National Autistic Society, and we, so a group of parents decided that, who were, whose kids were at... Sybil Elgar's school at 10 Florence Road, Ealing... and that were now age 17, 18, decided they were, wanted to continue their education. And so we set up a community at Somerset Court. Which was found by Jack, found by Jack Elgar. Now Sybil Elgar, go, backtrack, Sybil Elgar was the first... mistress or headmistress, or whatever she was, I don't know, of the school at 10 Florence Road, Ealing. So she was there from... she was there for ten years as well. And

so she went and her... I think her husband Jack had found this place, we went all over England looking at different places. Anyway, we found this one in Somerset, so we bought it for £40,000, that it was, I think. That's a lot of money then. Which we raised from... the parents, I think. And a grant. So that opened in October... 19... 74, I think. And Timothy went there. So he went from Northern Ireland to the first intake in Somerset Court. And he stayed there for 20 years or so.

00:16:00 Oscar Hilder

Yeah. We, I would actually appreciate you telling us more about Somerset Court actually, as in, what led to it. Yeah.

00:16:07 Michael Baron

OK, Somerset Court. Somerset Court was a large house with grounds close to the motorway at, near, south of Bristol, at Brent Knoll. And, so it began as a community for autistic children. And then became adolescents and then adults, and lasted until... well it's closed. Somerset Court was an extension of... what was going on at... Ealing.

00:16:53 Oscar Hilder

The Sybil Elgar School.

00:16:54 Michael Baron

So Sybil Elgar continued there. So she was the first mistress there, as it were, or head, or ran it, and then she was succeeded by... someone called (Bob) Reynolds.

Anyway. So basically it was a continuation of what went on at Ealing, but with more emphasis on gardening and... printing and so on, and, you know... So... And more domestic pursuits, as it were.

00:17:37 Oscar Hilder

Lovely, thank you. So, going on, so going back a little bit to the founding of the charity, you mentioned, of course, the society Mencap earlier. Can you tell us a little bit more about the society's relationship with Mencap and why it was that you broke away from it?

00:17:55 Michael Baron

Yes, right. So the Society for Psychotic Children began as an affiliate of Mencap... until they decided in 1962, 1961, to break away and establish it on its own. That was the advice we got and the advice we took. And so, formally, the affiliation was broken up. I think it lasted maybe for six months or for a year, I can't remember now. But it was decided that the society would only grow on its own, not as an affiliate, it was held back in some way.

00:18:52 Oscar Hilder

Yeah. And how did that influence, sort of, the direction of the society? Did it, sort of, did it broaden parents getting involved in it at all, in the early years after you broke away from Mencap?

00:19:04 Michael Baron

Yes, it did. Yeah.

00:19:06 Oscar Hilder

Yeah, good. So what can you say about public knowledge of autism at the time? Sort of, how many people were aware of it? How many people had even heard of it?

00:19:17 Michael Baron

It was hard work. Because autism... and so on, was endangered of being confused. So, it was, well, I don't know. At some point in the... scheme of things... it became common knowledge... the word autistic, but when it was, I don't know.

00:19:47 Oscar Hilder

Do you remember any, were there any early information campaigns at all for the general public that the society organised, that you can remember?

00:19:56 Michael Baron

Well, I mean, they're all the time... There was... We were trying all the time to establish the use of the word autism.

00:20:13 Oscar Hilder

Over the word psychotic?

00:20:14 Michael Baron

Yeah.

00:20:15 Oscar Hilder

Yeah. So, sort of following on from that, can you tell me about how diagnosis, what diagnosis was like at the time? What were the prevailing views about autism from psychologists and psychiatrists such as Lorna Wing?

00:20:30 Michael Baron

Quite narrow. Relatively narrow compared to what they are now.

00:20:37 Oscar Hilder

Yeah, very much influenced by Leo Kanner's, his writings and everything.

00:20:41 Michael Baron

Yes, yeah.

00:20:43 Oscar Hilder

Very well. So, lastly, can you just, on this topic, can you, do you remember what inspired the original National Autistic Society's logo, which was the puzzle piece with the crying child in the middle of it?

00:20:58 Michael Baron

Oh, the crying child. The crying child was the brain-, if I may use the word, the brainchild, of a parent called Gerald Gasson, G A double-S O N, who devised the logo and... and there was the idea of the puzzle with a missing piece... That was the idea of it.

00:21:36 Oscar Hilder

The idea that the children were missing a piece somehow?

00:21:38 Michael Baron

Yeah, yeah.

00:21:38 Oscar Hilder

So focusing on your son, Timothy, before the society was founded, do you remember what sort of services there were available at the time for him and other children like him?... Before the establishment of the Sybil Elgar School and Somerset Court and...

00:21:58 Michael Baron

Well, let's say, in 1961, there was more or less nothing. More or less nothing. So, to get a place at a Rudolf Steiner School, which was residential and boarding, was quite an achievement. There was the Rudolf Steiner schools and there were the, there were Rudolf Steiner-type schools. So there was very little, apart from a hospital.

00:22:34 Oscar Hilder

And institutionalisation.

00:22:35 Michael Baron

Yeah.

00:22:36 Oscar Hilder

So... And you mentioned earlier that you and the other founding parents, you didn't want, as in, it was originally medi-, the conference that you talked about, it was medical-based, and you wanted education.

00:22:47 Michael Baron

Yes. Yes, yes, that's correct.

00:22:48 Oscar Hilder

Yeah. What, aside from education, were there any other particular services that you and the other parents wanted to see for your children?

00:22:56 Michael Baron

Education.

00:22:57 Oscar Hilder

Alright. And although Timothy, of course, didn't go there, can you tell us anything about the Sybil Elgar School?

00:23:05 Michael Baron

... Well, what can I? Except, no, no, not really, except they had a wide range of activities, that's all... But that most of them were geared to doing work that was suited to their needs.

00:23:28 Oscar Hilder

... Lovely. So, let's see, we've covered actually a lot about Somerset Court already. So, speaking more generally, can you describe some of the challenges faced in the society's early years, perhaps relating to fundraising or awareness, anything, any sort of problems?

00:23:44 Michael Baron

It was always, always difficult to raise money. And every time it became necessary to raise money for, usually to buy a building... for a school, it was always a headache... and a problem. But it, you know, it worked in the end. It was hard work.

00:24:10 Oscar Hilder

Yeah. What sort of ways did you use to raise money? What sort of fundraising methods did you have?

00:24:16 Michael Baron

Oh God, I can't remember. Everything. Everything that was available to any charity... I can't remember.

00:24:25 Oscar Hilder

Yeah. Do you remember the Christmas card designed by Hugh Bredin?

00:24:30 Michael Baron

Yeah. Yes.

00:24:31 Oscar Hilder

Can you tell us about that?

00:24:32 Michael Baron

The Christmas card. The first Christmas card was designed by, as you said, Hugh Bredin. I can't remember much about it, except it was a card and we sold it. And then, and then it developed from that, from one card, into several cards, and then it became more a commercial operation, but nonetheless run for the... National Autistic Society by Betty Dobson... And we had a separate company called Autistic Cards, I think.

00:25:16 Oscar Hilder

Oh, I see. Yeah. And then that's, you produced those, sort of, Christmas cards every year. And are you able to tell us the car raffle fundraising story? How, do you remember much about that?

00:25:26 Michael Baron

[Laughter] Oh dear. A disaster.

00:25:30 Oscar Hilder

[Laughter] Please do tell.

00:25:32 Michael Baron

A disaster, in which I was closely involved. That in 19-, in the 1960s, early 1960s, I was approached by a group of parents who'd raise money for Thalidomide children, who they represented, through car competitions. And so we... they approached us and thought we were a suitable target. We didn't, not realising that they're also raising money. So they, so they... so they began a campaign of publicity, in the Evening News and so on, and other papers. Oh dear, and... it all gathered force. And event-, and the, a whole lot of advertising, and it all... all collapsed when it was discovered that they didn't really have any cars...

00:26:51 Oscar Hilder

Oh dear.

00:26:52 Michael Baron

To award the winner of the gamble. And we had to pay out. And... I didn't, I think I was chairman at the time, and... I approached my wife's uncle in Denmark and he provided the money for the... for the winners, I think. So it was all, it was settled in the end, but not after considerable expense.

00:27:33 Oscar Hilder

I see. So, just going back over a few of the things that you've said so far, just to elaborate on a few of them, when it came to Timothy's education, you mentioned the school that he attended in Northern Ireland, do you remember how much about, sort of, how he progressed within the school at all, as in from...

00:27:56 Michael Baron

Well, I think he progressed quite well. He was calmer and more peaceful and would have stayed in Northern Ireland, I think he'd still be there today, had it not been for all the Troubles and things like that. And I got... I got worried about all, worried about the fragility of the state there.

00:28:25 Oscar Hilder

And that's what, so you withdrew him to take him to Somerset Court instead? Yeah. So, with Somerset Court in particular, whilst he was there, can you remember specifically what sort of support was provided for him and other children like him? You mentioned earlier gardening and I think printing as well, was, what, what generally, what sort of things were the residents there doing?

00:28:48 Michael Baron

They were painting and they were gardening, and they were generally occupied one thing or another during the day.

00:28:59 Oscar Hilder

So it was just generally giving them things to do, really.

00:29:01 Michael Baron

Yes.

00:29:02 Oscar Hilder

Was there any sort of notion that they were building towards something in, as in, for people who were progressing socially, was there any sort of idea that they might, you know, put those skills to use in employment or anything else like that?

00:29:15 Michael Baron

No, I don't think there was.

00:29:18 Oscar Hilder

It was just things for them to do. Yeah, I see. And, with the establishment of Somerset Court, can you remember any of the challenges with its establishment and the way it was run? Perhaps specific to you and Timothy, but also to, kind of like, more generally, what sort of challenges were there and how you overcame them?

00:29:40 Michael Baron

It was run by Sybil Elgar with the aid of a management committee... which then became the Social Services Committee, which I think was then finally abolished by the National Autistic Society as being unnecessary. But I think it, we, during the time it was independent, it ran

itself with... and gave advice to Sybil Elgar. When it ceased to be independent, it also ceased at that point to... Oh, I know. I remember now. It was, I think I was the chairman, and I think I negotiated its sale back to the National Autistic Society... So it became, so, before then, it was independent, called the Ealing Autistic Trust, owned it, and I think they sold it to the National Autistic Society in return for assuming all its debts and everything else like that.

00:31:08 Oscar Hilder

Elaborating on the debt, why was it that it had such, sort of, financial troubles?

00:31:14 Michael Baron

I can't remember. It did.

00:31:16 Oscar Hilder

That's not, that's not a problem. It just did. Very well. So generally, is there anything more about the original early years of the society that you want to talk about? Anything that stands out to you based on what we've talked about so far?

00:31:34 Michael Baron

Well, it's a lovely place...

00:31:37 Oscar Hilder

Somerset Court you mean?

00:31:39 Michael Baron

As long as, as long as it was run by Sybil Elgar.

00:31:42 Oscar Hilder

Do you remember what it was about the way she ran it that made it so lovely? And, as in, why it was that after she left, you know, what was it about her leadership that?

00:31:53 Michael Baron

Her all time involvement in it, as opposed to temporary involvement in it.

00:32:00 Oscar Hilder

She was just always engaged in it, yeah.

00:32:02 Michael Baron

Yeah.

00:32:03 Oscar Hilder

So looking back over the last 60 years, what moments stand out to you personally as, sort of, defining milestones in the development of the society?

00:32:14 Michael Baron

Oh dear.[Laughter] I don't... What milestones stand out? ... I think it's very gradual. I think the, that it's, that the... slippage towards a... a generalisation of autism has been gradual and one hasn't noticed it. For example, there is a book in the ca-, in the shelf over there which I have, which I think was written... 20 years ago, called *The Myth of Autism*. And we, had then total inaccuracies, and now, but, generally speaking, I think he was right. Some psychiatrist in middle England somewhere, I can't remember, Timi-, someone, Timimi was his name. Called *The Myth of Autism*. And I think it is a myth. As it has got wider and wider and wider... So Timothy, my son, who we thought... was learning disabled autistic, has been redefined as having Bohring B O H, B O H R I N G hyphen Oppitz, O double P I T Z syndrome. Of which there are 200 or something in England, the mutation. So that's the DNA of Chalfonts, the epilepsy centre. And, also, this connection that is either they develop epilepsy age 18 or they don't at all, and whether that's a division, I don't know.

00:34:20 Oscar Hilder

I see. So within, sort of, the early years, in your regard, with, especially you with your position as chairman, what, out of all of the decisions you made, such as the changing of the name, helping to establish Somerset Court, which would you argue is probably the most, would you consider to be your most, sort of, I suppose, favourite.

00:34:42 Michael Baron

Helping to establish Somerset Court, I think, in the end. Yeah.

00:34:45 Oscar Hilder

Yeah. You think that had the greatest impact for the most, the greatest impact for people?

00:34:47 Michael Baron

Yeah. Yes.

00:34:49 Oscar Hilder

Great. So...

00:34:51 Michael Baron

And promoting Sybil Elgar, I think.

00:34:55 Oscar Hilder

And promoting-, yeah. Excellent. Why do you, why do you consider that to be the best one, as in promoting Sybil Elgar's work in those two places?

00:35:01 Michael Baron

Because that was an example of how it should be then. There weren't special schools, you know, the movement was, didn't exist. But it has existed, if you read, oh God, got it the other day, if you read the, if you read the magazine, Autism, and Ruskin Mill and so forth and all these, all this advertising that it carries.

00:35:33 Oscar Hilder

Yeah, it was a real, it's really started the movement of special education, the idea that these, you know, these children, we can...

00:35:40 Michael Baron

Do it. Yeah.

00:35:41 Oscar Hilder

... teach them, we just need to do it in different ways. Yeah.

So, as we conclude the recounting of this incredible journey through the history and the evolution of the National Autistic Society, you know, over the last 60 years, we do look ahead to the next 60 years and beyond that. So obviously, you have stated your views on the charity previously, but, generally, what would you like the charity to go, to do, to go on and achieve?

00:36:09 Michael Baron

Well, I think... I think that the, there, it has had its role in the... development of charities. I think that it's time it was merged with the, with one, there was one organisation... be my view today.

00:36:38 Oscar Hilder

Into which other charities?

00:36:40 Michael Baron

Add different asp-, add different aspects to it.

00:36:43 Oscar Hilder

I see. So you're, so, which charity would do you think it should...

00:36:46 Michael Baron

Mencap.

00:36:47 Oscar Hilder

Mencap. You think it should remerge with Mencap?

00:36:49 Michael Baron

I think there's an overlap between Mencap and the National Autistic Society.

00:36:54 Oscar Hilder

Yeah. Why do you, why do you think that is? As in why...

00:36:56 Michael Baron

Historic.

00:36:57 Oscar Hilder

Historically. So is it, so based on just the fact that it used to be part of Mencap...

00:37:00 Michael Baron

Yes.

00:37:01 Oscar Hilder

... not based on the different, as in, the differences in the people that the charity concerns?

00:37:04 Michael Baron

No

00:37:05 Oscar Hilder

I see. OK. Is there anything kind of like specific, beyond the charity's, sort of, position as part of Mencap or not, is there anything, sort of, any, sort of projects that you think the charity would benefit from pursuing?

00:37:18 Michael Baron

No.

00:37:19 Oscar Hilder

No, alright. And generally, how do you envision society involving to better and embrace and support autistic individuals moving forward and that can be from, you know, your perspective of what autism is as well, with regards to people like your son, Timothy?

00:37:34 Michael Baron

I just, I think that it's... difficult, difficult to say... that it's... become irrelevant that there should be some more national organisation.

00:37:56 Oscar Hilder

But for autistic people like Timothy, for instance, what sort of further changes would you like to see for those sort of autistic people, as in, compared to what is going on at the moment?

00:38:08 Michael Baron

Well it's very difficult to say, he's sixty-, 67 or so.

00:38:13 Oscar Hilder

Children nowadays who are like, who are, who are like him, who are the way that he was in the 1960s, if that makes sense. I'm not wording it very, very well, unfortunately. What sort of, what sort of things, do you think generally things are, there are enough resources for them?

00:38:27 Michael Baron

No, there're not, no.

00:38:29 Oscar Hilder

What sort of resources would you like to see then?

00:38:30 Michael Baron

I would like to see more resources with a capital R.

00:38:34 Oscar Hilder

Just more schools.

00:38:36 Michael Baron

More schools.

00:38:38 Oscar Hilder

More special providers, everything like that?

00:38:40 Michael Baron

Yeah.

00:38:41 Oscar Hilder

Excellent, lovely. Well, I, that pretty much concludes the interview for the *In our Words* project. Thank you very much for your time, Michael, and for your answers in this recording.