

# **Interview with Professor John Veit-Wilson**

## **Part 1: on his involvement in the research**

**So if you could just tell me, before I ask you specific questions, how you got involved in the poverty in the UK project, and how the process was, and just the whole story from start to finish, and then I'll ask you some questions after, specific questions.**

I can tell you how I got engaged, so it's my personal account, rather than being an account of the research programme. The research team of Peter Townsend and Brian Abel-Smith were looking for a research officer, one of four, or rather one of three appointments of research officers, to work on the four pilot projects, which they had planned, to act as intensive qualitative studies of groups at risk of poverty, but not necessarily in it, to begin to be able to crystallise those issues in people's lives which might be used as indicators of deprivation. The four groups were the long-term unemployed, large families, single mothers in effect and long-term sick and disabled men.

I applied for one of the positions and was interviewed by Brian Abel-Smith in 1964, the summer of 1964, and was appointed from I believe 1<sup>st</sup> September 1964. And initially I worked with Hilary Land in Skepper House, which was an offshoot of the London School of Economics, on the large family study, which was carried out in London. The study was of a sample of family allowances and was records of families with five or more dependent children receiving family allowance, and it covered in principle the whole income range. And I worked on that with Hilary Land until my partner and I had bought a house in Colchester, into which we moved in the summer of 1965.

So I was living in London at the time and working in Skepper House, which is part of Brian Smith's LSE bit, and then I worked at the University of Essex and had my responsibility for the study of long-term sick and disabled men of working age. And that is what I did for the next two years. I had a three-year research contract, and when it expired, the funds didn't allow the continuation of three research officers and so I was, as they say, let go, and I took a teaching post elsewhere. But that was my involvement with it.

So in the two years that I was at Essex and Colchester I carried out a survey by first of all contacting all the GP practices in and around the town to see if they would pass on, with consent obviously, the names and addresses of any married men of working age, so up to 65, who had suffered from a sickness or other disability which had lasted for more than three months, that was treated as, and I think there was, I can't remember the precise details, but I think it was an official definition used in survey work and in reporting work by DHSS, DSS, whatever it was at that time. Ministry of Pensions still, I can't remember at any rate. I think they were all either national insurance claimants or national assistance claimants.

So they weren't defined by their benefit receipt but by having been off work for three months or more, which had to be certified by the GP, and that was why, there were one or two errors in GP records. And I found in the end 65 men who met the criteria, and interviewed them all. With a lengthy questionnaire, the actual documentation, all my completed questionnaires are deposited in the data archive at Essex, together with the notes I made at the time, everything I packed up at the end and followed me around in my various garages after that, until it seemed an appropriate time to send them off.

Yes, what should I say about the actual research? The interviews were in the area around, up to 10 or 15 miles from Colchester, because the men in question were all patients of Colchester practices, and so they would not have been likely to be further afield. The one thing I remember about the interviews particularly is that the median length of interview was 3¾ hours, some of them I went back again and even again, because it was very much a matter of letting the men and their wives speak about their condition, their lives, their current living experiences of living with a long-term illness or disability, the consequences for their lives, and of course the related economic and social aspects.

And the idea was to generate from those responses, as from the other three studies, as I said, a set of indicators of styles of life, of experiences, of patterns of behaviour, and of obviously expenditures which would generate usable deprivation indicators for the national study, for which this was a pilot preparation. My contract, as I said, terminated in '67, three years after I started, and the team was then preparing for the national survey, which was conducted I think '68, '69, but unfortunately not published until 1979. So I didn't take part in anything but the early stages of the National Survey of Poverty.