

## Mike Sullivan Transcript

Speaker 1:

Why did you decide to-

Speaker 2:

Let him start at the top.

Speaker 1:

What is your full name?

Michael Sullivan:

Michael John Sullivan, but everybody calls me Mike.

Speaker 1:

What year were you born?

Michael Sullivan:

I was born in 1945.

Speaker 1:

Where were you born?

Michael Sullivan:

I was born in Woking, in Surrey, but I've always lived very close to Waterloo Station.

Speaker 1:

What did your parents do for a living?

Michael Sullivan:

My dad was an engineer, but my mom stayed at home and looked after the family.

Speaker 1:

Please tell us why you decided to work for the Royal Mail.

Michael Sullivan:

Well, fortunately my mom saw an advertisement in the newspaper saying that they, Post Office, were looking for engineers apprentices. So I started an apprenticeship in 1961 with the Post Office, Mount Pleasant, which is just down the road.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about any family members who worked for the Royal Mail.

Michael Sullivan:

None of my immediate family worked for the Royal Mail, but I had an uncle who was a postman. He worked for the Royal Mail, but he lived out in Basingstoke.

Speaker 1:

What did your family members think about your decision to work for the Royal Mail?

Michael Sullivan:

They all thought it was a very good idea. The Royal Mail was like a government organization and they said it was a very secure job, "You'll always be able to work there." And they were right.

Speaker 1:

Tell us how you started working for the Royal Mail.

Michael Sullivan:

Well, I started doing an apprenticeship in Mount Pleasant on the Post Office railway. The Post Office railway stretched from Paddington at one end to Whitechapel at the other end. We looked after the railway except for the big offices, which is Mount Pleasant and King Abbey Building and all the other stations. We also looked after all of the machinery and everything in the sorting offices, which were above the railway.

Speaker 1:

Describe the training you did.

Michael Sullivan:

Excuse me. Well, initially it was a two-year training course. Now, if you're doing apprenticeship, you might want to be an electrician, or a plumber, or a plasterer, but not with the Post Office. They taught you everything so instead of becoming an expert at any one thing, you learned lots about everything. We covered electrical work, mechanical work, engineering work for two years. We would go to any one of the offices and work with one of the senior technical officers there and they taught us what we needed to know about that place. But in that time, they also sent us away on lots of training courses.

They would teach us all about electrics, mechanics, and things like that in that two years. After that, you came out as a technician and then after being a technician for a year, you went in for two more years' training. At the end of that, you qualified as a technical officer, which meant you were in charge of the office and looking after everybody there.

Speaker 1:

What was the first job you did for the Royal Mail?

Michael Sullivan:

Crikey. That would have been as an apprentice on the railway in Mount Pleasant. Now, in Mount Pleasant they only looked after ... we only looked after the railway and there were another group of engineers who looked after the sorting office above. I worked on the railway and if it broke down, we had to run out and fix it very quickly. We were there all of the time, just waiting for it to break down.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about how you felt on your first days of work.

Michael Sullivan:

Oh, I think I was very lucky because everybody I met was friendly and nice. There were other apprentices that started at the same time, so I made friends with all of those. The work itself, they taught you what you needed to know and looked after us really. It was very, very good.

Speaker 1:

What was the atmosphere like at your work in the early days?

Michael Sullivan:

As I've just said, very, very good, excellent. I made lots of friends, everybody was nice. They would occasionally make you laugh and we would laugh and joke together. Generally, it was a really, really good atmosphere, friendly.

Speaker 1:

What kinds of people were you working with?

Michael Sullivan:

Wow. I spent most of the time working with other engineers, but we also of course worked with the postman and the postwoman who were sorting the mail and loading the trains and things like that. It was a large group of people really, and they were all nice.

Speaker 1:

How diverse was your workplace when you started?

Michael Sullivan:

Extremely diverse. As I said, we didn't just do electrical work, we did everything. If something broke down, we would have to fix it. In the early years, of course, I wouldn't know how so I would help the technical officer who was fixing it and he would show me what he was doing and he would teach me how to fix it, which was good. I enjoyed that.

Speaker 1:

What sorts of equipment did you use in your work?

Michael Sullivan:

The majority of the time, it would have been just hands tools, so screw drivers, hammers, chisels. Machinery, we used to turn onlays and grinding machines, but generally we would get by with just the hand tools that we had.

Speaker 1:

Describe your uniform.

Michael Sullivan:

My uniform at the time ... Because we were engineering, there was no real uniform. You would just go in your normal clothes, but you would wear an overall, normally a dark blue overall, and that would distinguish you as an engineer as opposed to a postman.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about the skills you needed for your job.

Michael Sullivan:

Oh, crikey. Well, I started off knowing nothing, but I had to learn lots of hand skills, using your hands. Before I even started to work, I used to enjoy taking things to pieces. Putting them back together again was a lot harder of course. We had to learn how to do that and throughout my career, there were different parts of the machinery that I would learn how to pull apart, fix, and put back together again.

Speaker 1:

Describe a typical day at work.

Michael Sullivan:

A typical day at work. Well, it was shift work normally, so we would either work from 6:00 in the morning till 2:00 in the afternoon, or 2:00 in the afternoon till 10:00 at night, or 10:00 at night until 6:00 the next morning and every day was different. We would spend a lot of time just checking over to make sure everything was working okay, but we would also spend a lot of time just waiting until somebody phoned up and said, "Something's broken down." And then we'd have to rush out and fix it.

Speaker 1:

What were your favorite things at work?

Michael Sullivan:

Sorry, can ...

Speaker 1:

What were your favorite things about your work?

Michael Sullivan:

Favorite things is it was practical, using my hands all of the time. But I think the most favorite thing of course, was working with nice people and having a laugh and a joke with them and telling them what you were doing yesterday and all that sort of thing. Meeting different people was perhaps the most favorite thing.

Speaker 1:

What were the difficult things about your work?

Michael Sullivan:

Crikey. Well, doing shift work, having to work at different hours, having to be at work when everybody else was going out and enjoying themselves. I went to work all night when everybody else was fast asleep, that was not easy. Some of the jobs were difficult, but there was always somebody else you could ask to help you.

Speaker 1:

Can you tell us about any discrimination you experienced or witnessed?

Michael Sullivan:

Well, the world was different. There was, I suppose, discrimination, discrimination against women, discrimination against people of color, but not a great deal. When the Post Office ... There was not very much of it and I didn't really see it at all.

Speaker 1:

Tell us a story that stands out from your working life.

Michael Sullivan:

A story that stands out from my working life. Crikey, that's a difficult one. Well, I was working down at Paddington Sorting Office where we used to have to go and they only had small machines for stamping the letters, canceling the stamps on the letters. We had to regularly go around and fix those and it wasn't always easy. We didn't always have the right spare parts, so sometimes you would have to fix the part yourself instead of getting a new one and putting that in the machine. That could have been quite difficult.

Speaker 1:

What were some of the naughty things people did at work?

Michael Sullivan:

Lots. We were always playing with each other, always pretending that somebody had to go up to the office and pick up something, and there was nobody up in the office so when they came back they were really angry with us. Things like that.

Speaker 1:

Talk us briefly through different jobs you did while working for the Royal Mail.

Michael Sullivan:

Well, we would work on the railway. If there was a problem on the railway, it was normally an electrical problem so we would have to get our meters and our tools out to find what the fault was. Then when you found it, you had to repair it. We also looked after the sorting offices, which were above the railway. Eventually, not when I first started there, but eventually they brought in sorting machines, which would sort ... which would stamp and cancel all of the stamps once they worked out where the stamps were on the letter. Then they would go into a machine, which would put them all the right way up because everybody puts their stamp in the top right hand corner of their envelope.

There's no reason why they should do that. You could put your stamp anywhere on the letter and the Post Office will still deliver it, but everybody puts it in the top right hand corner and the Post Office says, "Thank you very much." Because if we pull the letters that way up, then all of the addresses are the right way up for us to read them and sort them. Yeah, that was one of them.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your favorite job.

Michael Sullivan:

Favorite job. Difficult that one, really. Part of the job was working up in the ... what they called the car depot at Mount Pleasant, where they brought the trains up for repair. It was good to work on the trains that had been brought up and then send them back down when they're fixed, all my time.

Speaker 1:

How did you progress in Royal Mail?

Michael Sullivan:

Well, after these two years I finished my apprenticeship, became a technician and then went to the various offices repairing the equipment. After doing that for a year, they gave me another two years' training and I became a technical officer. Then after about six years on the railway, I went to work at Dollis Hill, which is the research establishment for the Post Office. That was initially north London, but then it moved to near Ipswich.

Then after doing that for about two years, I then went to Southampton and worked in the Southampton sorting office, looking after the equipment down there. That was looking after all of the machines that faced the letters and sorted the letters and put the codes on the letters so that the machines could read them. That was really, really interesting. I enjoyed that.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your relationships with your colleagues.

Michael Sullivan:

Well, they were always good. We used to often ... All of the apprentice used to often get together and go out and enjoy ourselves. Only last week, I went out to meet a friend of mine who was an apprentice at the same time as I was. We've known each other for more than 60 years, and it was good. All of the relationships were good.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about your experiences of joining clubs at work.

Michael Sullivan:

To be honest, I didn't join many clubs at work. There was a number of social activities that went on. I did join the union and became a union representative for a short while when I was down in Southampton. Generally, the social life was good, but not really a club as such.

Speaker 1:

Tell us about any other opportunities to socialize.

Michael Sullivan:

To socialize.

Speaker 1:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Michael Sullivan:

Well, I would say we would arrange to go out and meet in the evenings. A couple of the other apprentices had motorbikes so they would take me for a ride on their motorbikes. That sort of thing we would do, because everybody came from all over. I had to travel quite a way to get into work normally. Socializing, there wasn't a great deal of socializing at our works, but we did on occasions manage to get together and go out for the evening. That sort of thing.

Speaker 1:

What made you join the union?

Michael Sullivan:

Well, the Post Office had a very good relationship with the union and instead of always battling against each other, it was possible for the union to talk to the management, tell them what the problems were and agree together what a good solution might be. It was a way of getting the management to listen to what all of the staff were thinking about and act on it.

Speaker 1:

Why was the union important for postal workers?

Michael Sullivan:

There were two unions. There was the Postal Workers Union and there was the Post Office Engineers Union, and I was in the Post Office Engineers Union. It was a good way of making sure ... We would meet maybe once a month and all talk about what the problems were and then the people ... the secretary would go and talk about these problems to the management, come back next month and tell us what was happening. It was a really good way of communicating.

Speaker 1:

What was your most memorable moment at the Post Office?

Michael Sullivan:

That's a difficult one, because there were lots of nice ones. I suppose working. When I was working at Paddington, we were very, very close to the station and it was always good to go out and drive around the station on the trucks that used to pull the mail bags. That was fun. That sort of thing, we could do at the Liverpool Straight, or Paddington, or occasionally at one of the other offices.

Speaker 1:

What was your most challenging moment at the Post Office?

Michael Sullivan:

Challenging. Well, sometimes you find a problem and you don't know how to fix it so you had to call upon somebody else to come and give you a hand and then work closely with those. Every time you did that, not only did you overcome the challenge, but you learned something new as well, which was good.

Speaker 1:

Over your working life, what were the three main changes at work?

Michael Sullivan:

Well, I traveled around quite a lot. I only worked for the Post Office for about 16 years and then I went to work in pet foods, where they make pet food, was looking after their machinery. Then I went to work in Africa for nearly two years, where I was building power stations and power distribution systems and giving electricity to people who had never had electricity before. That was really, really rewarding, really interesting.

Speaker 1:

In what ways do you think the job could have improved?

Michael Sullivan:

Oh, that's a difficult one. There are so many different parts to the job, with so many different people doing different things. Communication through the unions, or when you talked to the management yourself could always improve. The speed with which the post office actually did things was quite slow compared to other things. You might ask them to do something this month and they'd come back next month and say, "We're thinking about that." Or they'd come back the month after and say, "We're ordering the bits," and they'd come back months down the road and say, "Yep, we've done that." The slow pace of change took a lot of getting used to. [inaudible 00:22:15]

Speaker 1:

In what ways has it got worse?

Michael Sullivan:

I don't think it has. I think if anything it's got better. I think people communicate better. The postal workers I know now, they still enjoy working there. The pace of life might be a little bit faster, there's more machinery to look after and do the work, but generally I'm not sure that it has got worse. I think if anything it's got better.

Speaker 1:

What will you think if your child wanted to work for the Royal Mail?

Michael Sullivan:



I'd tell them to do it. Personally, I think it was a much better engineering apprenticeship than I could ever get by working for a private company. I think it was well planned and well organized, and they looked after us. I would recommend it to anyone who wanted to work for the Post Office, either on the engineering side or on the postal side. I'd say, "Go and do it. Go and enjoy yourself."

Speaker 1:

If you were the boss of Royal Mail, what changes would you make?

Michael Sullivan:

Oh, crikey. Difficult one, because it's such a big organization. Everybody knows somebody who works for the Royal Mail. Once again, I would say communication. Let the world know what you're doing, let them know what you're hoping to do in the future, and keeping everybody informed about how things should be done.

Speaker 1:

Looking back over your working life, what has the working for Royal Mail meant to you?

Michael Sullivan:

I think it gave me a really good foundation. I've always wanted to be an engineer, it taught me how to do that and it gave me a very good apprenticeship. It gave me a very good working life as an engineer and it gave me the opportunity to travel and work all over the world, in Europe, in Africa, in the UK, because of the skills that the Royal Mail gave me.