Nicola  Right hello there and welcome to the Open University Students Association virtual campus tour podcast. I'm Nicola Powell the volunteering officer with the Open University Students Association and we're speaking to you from the very heart of the campus. We'll take you on a tour taking in some of our oldest and most interesting buildings that make up the OU campus here in Milton Keynes.

With us today are Daniel Weinbren, curriculum manager OU historian and author of the 2014 book the Open University History, and Ruth Cammies, the Open University’s archivist. Welcome to you both.

Daniel and Ruth before we start our virtual tour could you put the campus into context, where are we and how did the OU come about? Ruth?

Ruth  So we're here on the Walton Hall OU campus in Milton Keynes as you said. And at the centre of the campus is Walton Hall. So in 1201 Walton appears in records as an estate consisting of lands that had been taken from the Bow Brickhill parish and the earliest owners were believed to have been a family called the Rixbauds. The earliest surviving part of Walton Hall was built in about 1622. Thomas Pinfold who lived from 1638 – 1701 pulled down most of that Hall and the front white square part of the Hall that we see today was built by Thomas’ descendant, Captain Charles Pinfold, in 1830. So the Hall was sold to a Dr Vaughan Harley in 1907. Dr Harley was a distinguished heart specialist and the family gave its name to Harley Street in London. And Dr Harley’s daughter and his son in law, Brigadier Eric Earle, were the last family to live in the Hall.

During the latter part of the Second World War the Hall was used to house forty WRNS, the Women’s Royal Navy Service, who worked at Bletchley Park. After the war the Hall was briefly occupied by Milton Keynes Development Corporation Planning and Architects’ Offices before becoming home to the OU.

Nicola  Lovely. So why did the OU come to Walton Hall?

Ruth  So the very first home of the OU was actually in Belgrave Square in London where the planning committee had been based, but very quickly after the University gained its charter in 1969 a larger, more permanent home was required and Walton Hall in the new city of Milton Keynes was selected. So the very first vice chancellor, Walter Perry, wrote a book about the history of the
OU and in his book he wrote about the choice of the site for the new campus and just to quote what he said, “By January 1969 our choice had become a matter of extreme urgency, we were therefore extremely glad when, through the good offices of Lord Campbell of Eskan the chairman Milton Keynes development corporation, we were invited to examine two sites within the boundaries of the proposed city as possible homes for the university. The development corporation on its part was keen that the new city should have a university.” And no other new town could boast a university and it was felt this would be a source of attraction to new industry. So yeah the Open University officially moved in on 1st September 1969.

Nicola Dan can you tell us a little bit more about the early days of the OU? Who were the main people involved?

Daniel In some ways it goes back a lot further than you might imagine in that there had been a correspondence course for a couple of hundred years, there’d been a summer school since the beginning of the 19th century. There had been the idea of adult education from university staff since about the 1870s. So these ideas were knocking around but it was only after the Second World War when people started to bring them together and with the new technology of television and of course radio to produce the notion of a university.

And the other thing which was also going was this was a period when there was a number of universities, something like seven were built in the 1960s in England and there was legislation in 1966 for polytechnics as well. So this was a period when there was expansion of higher education and it was felt that people who had missed out, who had not gone to higher education because of the war and for all sorts of other reasons needed an opportunity. There were these first class minds out there and they needed an opportunity to learn, to study and to gain qualifications.

So those ideas were in the ether. And then particularly Harold Wilson called for a University of the Air as he called it. It was in a Labour Party study group and then subsequently he said that in 1963 he went to church, “And between church and lunch I wrote the whole outline for a proposal of the University of the Air.” Now exactly how true that is it’s not clear, but he did stick to the story and he certainly a bit later that year gave a talk in a Labour Party rally in Glasgow and he announced then his plans for a University of the Air. He hadn’t bothered to tell any of his colleagues he just said, “We’re going to do this.” So we’ll perhaps come back to that when we come and look at his building but he was one of the prime movers and he’d got a lot of support and ideas from people in America and elsewhere.
Nicola: Well Ruth has told us how the OU actually acquired this site so I imagine it was all cleared, levelled anything around, apart from the church and Walton Hall itself, so what buildings went up first?

Daniel: Well initially, this is a new town as Ruth said it was founded in 1967, the university comes here a couple of years later, there's very little by way of local accommodation for staff and very few amenities in the area so the Open University purchases a couple of RAF huts from nearby and they then purchase a local stud farm which was on the land and that becomes the print shop and design and photographic studios and something called the Institute of Educational Technology, which is an unusual thing for a university, because right from the beginning they're going to use technology and they're going to study how people learn and then the idea was once they've worked out how people are learning they can improve things so that it gets better and better. And that notion of collecting data, something we're very familiar with nowadays was at the Open University right from the beginning from its earliest buildings. But they acquire things initially quite piecemeal. In 1971, quite late on, they actually get a warehouse.

They also have to acquire a post office and there's this enormous post office in what's otherwise a rural area and they then decide to employ a company to design and lay out the campus properly. So then one of the most influential parts of this company was Jane Drury who was the first woman president of the Architectural Association, she's done work all over the world and she comes and thinks about how people are going to communicate, she wants low level buildings, she wants walkways and so on. So although it's a morass of mud and chaos at first it's also they are thinking about what we want, how we can most enable people to work together on a campus which is like no other one in that no other university is certainly going to have so many students, who aren't there but will require a huge number of parcels within the first week.

Nicola: That's amazing. Well many thanks for that Daniel. So we know a little bit about why and how the OU came about, we can start our virtual tour of the campus. We're using as our guide the PDF of the campus map that's available through the OU website and we're starting, as most visitors do, at Berrill reception. What I'm thinking, if I'm orientating this correctly, it's the south west corner, roughly south, south west corner of the university campus. So Daniel we're walking northwards along St Michaels Drive, what's that lovely large light and bright building on our left?

Daniel: That building is the university library which was never going to exist at first. At first people thought they would buy in experts to write the teaching materials and they'd buy in experts to help them make the television programmes and the radio programmes and they didn't really need a very big library.
Quite soon they also discovered that actually it would be pretty useful to have a place for research, for scholarly activity and the library was built, not initially on that site, but in the library there's always been and always was planned to be a collection of the teaching materials, which means that this university is unique because other universities, if you go to lectures, if you turn up at all you make a few notes, it goes over your head, those notes get put in the bin a few years later. Here every broadcast, every book, every item sent out to students, home kits, whatever it was, they're all stored there so you can see the history of teaching, history of learning, history of pedagogy, over a 50 year period. And that is a unique national resource about how we understand what the university has been doing for students and what students have been doing for the university.

Nicola: Fantastic. And Ruth it's now named after Baroness Betty Boothroyd. Can you tell us a little bit about her?

Ruth: That's right. Yes so the current library building was opened in 2003 by Baroness Boothroyd and is named in her honour. Baroness Boothroyd was Chancellor of the Open University from 1994 to 2006 and is obviously famously known as being Speaker of the House of Commons from 92 to 2000. She's actually given us her archive of papers, which is deposited in the university archive in the library, as Dan said.

Nicola: That's a wonderful resource, lovely. So we're going a little bit further, heading north, still along St Michaels Drive and Ruth we're coming to a church.

Ruth: Yes, yes the church. So apparently a church has existed on the Walton Hall site since at least 1189, that's going right, right back but the present structure dates from about 1350. During restoration of the church excavation was carried out by the Milton Keynes Development Corporation archaeology team and evidence of the original 1189 church was found at the bottom in a wall of the nave. So yeah it's great to have discovered that building.

Nicola: It's our oldest building on campus and a lovely place.

Ruth: Yeah and it's still used today for OU clubs and for events and that kind of thing.

Nicola: Lovely thank you. Daniel is it still used as a burial ground? Who's buried there?

Daniel: A number of staff have been buried on the site and you might imagine that being buried in your workplace is an odd decision but actually it means that it tells you how much they felt this was part of their home, their family, and particularly in this one grave as you walk in for a member of staff who was a son of a Whitechapel cabinet maker, he failed his 11 plus, he got into a local
comprehensive in East London where the headmaster was somebody called Rhodes Boyson, who went on to become a cabinet minister, I think he was given six of the best by Rhodes, then went on to Warwick University and became a member of staff here in 1979 and being a historian he wrote widely on a number of topics, mostly about working people but also about his own background with East End Jews. He married a local lecturer who worked here and she lives nearby and every day she can walk in and she just goes past his grave. And I think that reflects on the status of the university in her life and in his life and of course the both of them had their children at the Open University nursery which is just around the corner.

Nicola Well we’ll carry on our walk and we’re walking towards the Hub which has a theatre, the Hub theatre and a restaurant and there’s a large building standing with the landscape gardens around. Which one is this Daniel? This is Jennie Lee.

Daniel Well now Jennie Lee was the daughter of a Scottish miner. She became an MP in her constituency before she was old enough to vote because at that point women didn’t have the vote until they were 30. She was a very young MP. She lost her seat shortly afterwards but got back again and by the post-War period she’d been an MP for many years but never a minister. In 1964 when Labour was elected Harold Wilson gave her the job of the minister who was going to set up his private pet scheme the University of the Air. And she immediately set about doing this. She wasn’t building a career, she wasn’t going anywhere in terms of being a minister she was going to set up a great independent university based on something like the Scottish system which she understood.

And she’d created, and more significantly I guess, chaired a committee to advise her about this and she decided very quickly on what she wanted, she wanted to offer degrees to all, even the unqualified, she wanted it to operate independently, separately and with the highest academic standards because as she said, “Adult education should be more than this dowdy old-fashioned night schools of hard benches.” She knew that’s what it was like. And she also knew that adult education was, as the first vice chancellor, Walter Perry, put it, “The patch on the backside of educational trousers.” So she told the Commons, “I'm not interested in having a poor man’s University of the Air, which is the sort of thing which one gets if nothing else, is within reach, we should set our sights higher than that.”

And there was of course plenty of sceptical voices. The Conservatives largely hated this. They thought it was a gimmick. The BBC which had long produced educational materials was a bit concerned that this was a rival, unimpressed by this upstart. Whitehall was a bit snooty about it and the Press largely
agreed. And even within the higher education sector many wanted the money spent elsewhere.

But she pushed it through, she got a white paper through in 1966 and Harold Wilson recalls a weekend at Checkers which is where the Prime Minister and his cabinet used to hang out at weekends, it was just prior to the 1960 election, it was the end of the afternoon, everybody was free to speak on anything. Jennie got up and made a passionate speech about the University of the Air. She said, “The greatest creation of the previous Labour Government was Nye’s National Health Service (that was her late husband) but then now we’re engaged on an operation which would make just as much difference to the country.” Wilson concluded, “We were all impressed. She was a tigress!”

Nicola Inspirational, absolutely inspirational. And Ruth is it true that we have her archive here at the university?

Ruth We do it’s a fantastic collection that we’ve got, an immensely comprehensive collection of papers from Jennie Lee’s life, from her school reports, her socialist Sunday school hymnbooks, through to her early career as a teacher, through to her political career and later life. There are letters from Indira Ghandi, letters from Winston Churchill, there’s information about her input into building the National Theatre. She was an amazing, inspirational person. So it’s great to have that collection and that’s available in the archive.

Nicola That’s incredible. And we’ve actually got her ministerial despatch box.

Ruth We have, we have her Red Box.

Nicola That’s absolutely astonishing. Well we’re coming to the end of our tour; there are certainly lots more buildings to see but we’re going to end up just now at the Open University Students Association itself. We have a couple of offices in the Wilson Building. We’ve spoken about Harold Wilson so maybe we’ll hear a bit more about him. Daniel a bit more about Harold Wilson.

Daniel Well Wilson had this idea, as I mentioned, in Scotland and politicians if you have a good idea you repeat it and so he went to the Labour Party conference a couple of days later in Scarborough, this is in 1963 and he gave a speech and it’s called Labour’s Plan’s for Science and he spoke about Britain, a Britain that is going to be forged into the ‘white heat’ of this revolution. Shortly after, in the same speech he says he’s going to have this Open University or the University of the Air and he doesn’t go into details because that's what he's going to get Jennie Lee to sort out for him but he's enthusiastic and engaged and he continues to be. And the Open University has been given many identities, in fact it was called his pet scheme and said to have his personal
imprint. And indeed his son came to teach here for many years, was a distinguished professor here for many years, and Wilson’s press secretary called it Wilson’s Monument. And I quite like that. I think it’s quite apt because if the reference is to the words written for Christopher Wren ‘Reader if you seek his monument look around you,’ then we could do that, we can look around and you’ll see some of the Open University’s two million plus graduates and you’ll also see all the things they’ve done, their contributions to society.

Nicola That's terrific. Ruth a few more of the other buildings around then.

Ruth Yes there are lots of buildings on campus named after various different people. So we have the Perry Building that was named after Walter Perry, later Lord Perry of Walton. He was the first vice chancellor who I mentioned earlier and his building the Perry Building was opened by the Prince of Wales in 1982. There's also a building named after the first university secretary Anastasios Christodoulou, known as Chris. Yes there's lots of buildings on campus and lots of different names. There are also buildings named after families that lived at the Hall, so the Harley Building and others like that. So yeah there’s lots of buildings to look at.

Nicola Yeah so lots of buildings that are associated with people who were directly involved in either the site or the OU itself, but also some have been renamed like the Mathematics Block renamed?

Ruth Yeah so there’s some buildings that have been renamed like the Robert Hook Building, Robert Hook was a scientist. There's also the Alan Turing Building, as you say the Mathematics Block. Alan Turing obviously described as the father of computer science was a mathematician and computer scientist who was the main participant in the code-breaking work at Bletchley Park.

Nicola Lovely Ruth thank you. So if we perhaps pop back to the library for a little while and this is where the OU archive is housed as well, an enormous amount of records and of course there’s a digital archive as well, can you talk us a little bit through that?

Ruth There is so OUDA as we call it, the OU Digital Archive, contains a lot of digitised materials, images, audio files, video files that anybody can go in and visit. And we’re currently working on a historical tour of the campus exhibition where people will be able have a look at related videos about the different buildings, who they were named after; watch a clip of Harold Wilson talking about the OU, that kind of thing. So yeah we’re working on that at the moment.
Nicola That sounds absolutely wonderful. And Daniel you’re very active on Twitter, you’ve got your 50 objects project at the moment.

Daniel Yes well in 2019 it will be 50 years since 1969 and to mark that half century I’d like to collect 50 objects online which made the university and I’d like to invite everybody else to chip in. So it might be the first parcel you received with OU materials or the gown you wore at your graduation. Perhaps it was coffee which your partner brought you at midnight as you struggled to complete your TMA. It might be all sorts of items. And the first few objects have already gone up, we’ve put up the Royal Charter, the tiny McArthur microscope which was sent out to thousands of students, and we’ve also put up the non-existent mortar board which people do not wear at the ceremony at the Open University.

Nicola That’s very virtual!

Daniel But if anybody would like to contribute, I’m looking forward to reading all sorts of ideas, then you can log on to the History of the OU blog.

Nicola Lovely thank you very much Daniel, thank you. Well thanks to both of you, thanks to Daniel and Ruth and we hope this has given you a flavour of our campus and maybe inspired you and made you keen to get involved with the Open University Students Association as many of our volunteering opportunities will give you a chance here to visit campus and engage with OU staff and students here. And do check out our Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts where we post amazing photos from around campus from time to time. Thank you both, thank you very much.

Ruth Thank you.