

SWISS AT 60

Interviewee: Gordon Keys

Date of Birth: 1953

Parents' occupations: father: carpenter; mother: housewife

Interview location: Swiss Cottage Library (meeting room); 12th September 2025

Interviewer: Sheela Kenan; Summariser: Claire Barwell

Gordon Keys was a librarian who started work as a trainee in Camden in 1971 before going on to do a course in librarianship at Loughborough University. He met his wife on the Enquiry Desk at Swiss Cottage where they bonded over a mutual love of Crime fiction. Several couples formed at Swiss Cottage – 'there must be something in the water'.

As a child he loved spending time in the reference section of the library and at school the careers adviser recommended going to work in the library.

In 1976 he came to Swiss Cottage as a professional librarian in the lending section with a team of six. There were always two of them on the Enquiries desk. He particularly enjoyed recommending stock and being a book detective, tracking down requested books in the British Library catalogue. At that time they bought almost everything that was published. He went on to work in Interlibrary loans in King's Cross and St Pancras and ended up as the head of the stock department in Holborn library until he retired in 2012.

He liked helping people, although some were not so nice to deal with. The particular challenges he faced were as a manager, which he says is a special skill, and dealing with new technology. Library management systems have changed a lot from catalogues to electronic catalogues and databases which can now be accessed from home. Camden was one of the first to have an electronic catalogue.

Camden has a strong union and he became a shop steward, though wasn't sad when he gave it up as there were tensions in being a manager at the same time. He didn't go on strike as his wife was also in the union and they couldn't afford to lose both salaries.

He learnt a lot from two colleagues at Holborn reference library. Malcolm Holmes trained them by setting questions and Dave Quayle had an impressive knowledge of publishers and the book trade.

Libraries have developed into community hubs, renting out rooms for training sessions.

The merging of lending and reference stock and the new displays which changed from the Dewey system into colour coded sections in 5 overarching themes. Would like to see a bigger budget for stock as in the past they had £1m to spend and would like to see greater cooperation between libraries to share stock and work on specialisms. There is a last remaining box of GLASS (Greater London Audio Specialisation Scheme) material still in Swiss Cottage library.

The building is big and it takes time to get from one end to the other. It is fairly easy to use but it was cold in winter and hot in summer.

Gordon has a particular affection for the Reserve Stock where everything is in place.
'Libraries are my whole life'