

An Oral History for Northwick Manor Community Project – NM3

Name: Max Sinclair

Date of Birth:

Place of Birth: The Firs, Northwick

Date of Interview: 21st May 2008

Interviewed by: Julia Letts

CD 1 : Track 2 : 16:20:30

Max, if we can start by me getting you to say your name and your date of birth and where you were born, just so I can check your recording level.

I'm Robert Maxwell Sinclair and I was born in Ombersley Road, at No. 89, which was known as The Firs, in those days, because it had the large Drover's fir trees in the front garden.

Tell me a little bit more about that, the Drover's Fir Trees.

Drover's trees were way marks. They exist all over the British Isles. They were planted by the cattle drovers and herders to mark the routes when there were no roads. They came across country and they planted clumps of Scots pines and you still see them now. The nearest ones here are outside Elgar's house on the Crown East Road, but there's quite a clear trail. Years ago, cycling, I followed all the way from Aberwystwith to London. You can follow the line of trees there, marking the route.

In Ombersley Road was the clump called The Firs, and then in Droitwich Road was another clump, called The Pines. They did the same thing, they pointed the way.

OK, so the trees were outside your house, not connected to the date it was built?

No, they were there prior to that, they're very old trees. In fact during the war they came down in a terrible storm and blocked the Ombersley Road one night, just as an American army convoy arrived and this was the first time I'd ever seen a chain saw, because this great black guy got out of this truck, he said 'here, got a problem', and he got this huge chain saw, even by modern standards, and he sawed this tree up. It was all very spectacular.

I bet it was, and so was at the end of the trees, or were there some left?

That was the end. Well, the others were unsafe and my father had them taken down by Mr Dark, who was the local timber merchant. They were fine trees and an owl used to live in it and the owl used to attack. I can tell you a story about the RAF. We had families billeted with us. But the house we now lived at was Brearley House, where the naughty girls lived. Sadly, there were no naughty girls when I was there.

Anyway, we had this large RAF family billeted with us and Flying Officer Davis, one night, came home and he found a baby owl on the front lawn. So he thought, ooh, that's not safe and he picked it up to put it in the bushes and the next thing, this almighty bang on his head and the owl had taken his hat off his, his flat cap, peak cap, and flew away with it up the Ombersley Road and dropped it outside the Northwick Cinema. So, that was a and then for the rest of the evening, we could hear people coming down the road, shouting and screaming, the owl was wrecking vengeance on anybody walking down Ombersley Road from the pictures.

Do we know what happened to the baby?

Well it presumably went back in with owl and we think it survived. We certainly didn't find any carcasses.

So, I don't think, I think I interrupted you before you said your date of birth. Let's just get that.

I was born on **, 1930 at The Firs. Doctor Spalding was the local, wonderful GP who officiated on that occasion and on many other occasions.

Take me right back, then, to 1930 and describe to me pre-war Northwick, what you can remember?

Well, that area was much as it is now, but of course, far less houses on, particular on the Northwick Road side. The Ombersley Road was fairly well established and there were tram lines down the road, because the trams used to come up to the Northwick. The tram service ceased, I think, in about 1928, but the tram lines were there and I can remember them being lifted, particularly because my brother, my elder brother, he got, fell out with my father over something. Father had a toolbox which he was rather proud of and they got this big hole in the road and my brother put dad's tool box in the hole in the road and it was buried and never found. One of the stories from the past.

Gosh, how amazing. So that would have been in the '30's that the tram lines were taken up?

Track 3 : 16:20:57

It was about 1934, '35, I think they lifted all the iron out of the road and remade the surface with proper tarmac.

So, you said they came as far as the Northwick, I take it by that you mean the cinema?

By the cinema, yes.

So the cinema was there as long as you can remember?

Yes

And functioning as a cinema?

Oh, yes, very much so. It was a very nice, very popular cinema and, of course, through the war time years was a major source of entertainment.

Somebody's told me it closed during the war years.

No, no, it, not to my memory. No, because my wife used to go every Monday with her father, and that was post-war.

Right, no, it re-opened after the war, but it was actually closed during the war. You don't

I'm not, I can't say. But my impression was, it was open.

So, you would have gone as a small boy? Pre-war. Can you describe it to me?

All I can remember is these figures, these art deco figures down the side of the building, sort of to my impression, women in long drapes. But it, it was just a nice atmosphere when you went in there, you felt you were going somewhere special.

You mentioned that your house was right on the road, how busy was the road, back then?

Well, it was the main road from wherever, Liverpool to the south and certainly through the war, all the army convoys came down and tanks and big guns, and we used to wave and they'd throw gum at us. It, certainly my memories of Ombersley Road was basically a main road, but nothing like as busy as it is now. There were not the motor vehicles, there were a lot of tradesmen on bicycles and tricycles.

We used to have a man come, pretty regularly, on a dilapidated old tricycle, selling blocks of salt and he had these big blocks of salt, about ½ metre long, square blocks, and my mother, he used to ring the bell on his bike. And my mother used to say, oh, here's the salt man, go and get me, whatever it was, a pound of salt or so on. And she used to say, wait until he's served the other people, 'cause his saw is rusty and when he's sawn the others, it'll be a bit cleaner. Which it was.

So that was, then of course, the milkman came, again on a tricycle, with all his churns and bottles of milk piled up on it.

And do you remember who he was, the milkman?

Yes, his name was Caldicott. His son is still alive and I think he was with Wychavon Council. But, a guy called Caldicott. But he was a nice, very nice man.

And it was definitely was a tricycle, not a horse and cart?

Oh, no, he was a tricycle. Further up the road was Samson, Harry Samson, and he had a milk float, quite a ornate, boat-shaped, that's why it was called a float, I believe, a boat-shaped body on it, and he went around with the milk churns and he used to dip in a can and pour a pint of milk into the jugs for housewives.

And that was pulled by a horse?

That was pulled by a horse, yes.

And that's the origin of the word, float?

I understand so, yes.

And, in the, how far up the Ombersley Road were you, where was The Firs?

We were about, I suppose ¾ mile up Ombersley Road, opposite Pembury Street, just south of the Northwick Cinema.

So what were the main facilities around where you lived? Where would you frequent in terms of shops and so forth?

There was a Post Office, nearly opposite the Northwick Cinema, called Cockerton's, Miss Cockerton ran that. And the letter box outside, which again has a bit of a tale. It was a tall letter box, and when the war broke out, they painted the top of the letter box with a special paint, a greeny colour paint, which, if we were attacked by gas, was supposed to go yellow. Now, I never worked out how, if you saw it go yellow, I'm sure that by then you were gassed, so, it always struck me as being a bit of an oddity, but that was the case. But we used it as a

vaulting horse and we used to go and leap over this box. I've looked at it in recent times and I've thought how on earth did I ever manage to jump over that. But we did in those days.

Track 4 : 16:21:17

And is it still there now?

I believe so, I haven't been up Ombersley Road for some time, but I would expect it to still be there.

With it's green top, probably not?

Well, if you scraped through the red paint, you'll probably find the green.

How amazing, so, she was called Caldicott?

Cockerton, Miss Cockerton.

I'm confusing her with the other one. Miss Cockerton, that was the Post Office? What else was around that area?

Well, further down Ombersley Road on the corner of Perdiswell Street was Johnson's paper shop. And the next one down was Gummery, the undertaker, who is still there, and they were very kind and helpful when my wife died and so it was nice to deal with a local Gummery, very nice, very nice chap. And then next to that was Yaps, the boot maker and his son, George, who was a friend of mine. A member of our gang, George Yapp. So, those were the shops in Ombersley Road.

Then further, right down, was a shop, it became an antique shop, but I can't remember ... I've got it in mind that perhaps it was a vegetable shop.

So where else did you get daily provisions, was there a bakery?

Next to the Northwick Cinema, in, I think, before the war, there was a row of shops there and they provided the green grocery and, I think, there was a bakery there. And then the milkman, Caldicott had the dairy.

Right, OK. Let's just go back quickly to The Firs, your house. Can you just give me a description of the house?

Yes, it was quite a large Georgian house, three stories, with a large garden, which was my father's pride and joy, because it had been laid out by a Frenchman and it had vines growing, not only in the, there was a large conservatory against the house with black Hamburg grapes in it. But in the

garden were things which we called the pits, which was a deep brick pit, about 60' long, and you went into a , like a little cabin, down steps into it, and in there were all the vines and things like courgettes and marrows and so on, could grow in the warm. It was, and it had a boiler.

How absolutely amazing.

A coke boiler with pipes.

What, to heat this pit?

To keep the temperature up in the winter, yes. And dad used to grow all sorts of things.

So, what was the origin of that? Was the Frenchman brought over to design the garden?

No, he lived there, apparently. When the house was built he had all this constructed and it was quite a wonder for the locals.

I bet it was. And do you know if it's still there. What happened to it?

I think it's all been bulldozed in when they extended Brearley House, this hostel. I don't know, I've never been back. But I would imagine the back's gone. But the garden, it had something like 50 or 60 trees in cordons. There was a pergola, all pear trees, again about 50, 60' long, pergola, wonderful pears hanging down. And then there were cordons of apples, Worcester Pomagnes and so on. Because Worcester had quite a reputation for its nurseries. I mean, the nearest one was just behind us, in Newey's Hill. Mr Newey, he had a big nursery there, growing fruit and exporting it all over the world, I understand. As did Smith's in St Johns, who employed something like 400 people. They were big industries, the nursery industry, around Worcester.

It sounds huge. So Newey's was just behind your house, was just an area of nursery land?

There was Newey's Hill, which was the lane which went down the side of Faithful Overalls and went down. You see, there were a lot of lanes, all going down to the Severn because before 1840, the Severn was fordable.

Track 5 : 16:21:38

The Severn was a shallow river and there were many places you could walk across. Most of these were known as 'ketches' and the Northwick Slip was a ford, but when they built the locks at Diglis in 1940, the river now is 6' deep, but in

those days it used to be 1' to 2', unless it was raining. And that's only time boats could move was when the water was high.

So, everything was transformed by the building of the locks?

Oh, definitely yes, because prior to that you were ketches. It meant that the rocks on the bottom of the river caught the keel of your boat and you couldn't go any further. And you then had to wait for a flush of water from the rain or you had to unload the boat, carry everything over the ketch and drag the boat over the rocks, and then put it back in again. And I've got a record of a boat coming down from Bridgnorth that was unloaded 19 times to get down to Gloucester.

So, you were saying that all roads kind of led to the Slip.

Yes, there were a series of roads running down from the Northwick Road down to the Severn.

And that would have been post 1840, because by then the Severn was a useful way of transporting?

No, these roads are pre 1840, because they were down to the fords.

Right, OK, to get across the Severn?

Get across the Severn, yes. You see, if you think of old Northwick Lane, that's what we call a Hollow Way, because so much traffic went up and down, animals, that it wore the surface away and the road was 6' to 8' lower than the surrounding fields. So it was down in a dip, a hollow way. And you get hollow ways all over, all over Britain. But that was one and it used to be all lined with great big stinging nettles and that's my, again, childhood memory in the war, father sending me off with a sack up to either Newey's Hill or Northwick Lane, wherever he thought the nettles were best, and I had to fill this sack with stinging nettles and he would make nettle beer from it, which was a very potent liquid. Father came from a family of brewers in Burton-on-Trent and he knew all about brewing all sorts of things. And he brewed nettle beer, which was like a ginger beer, but very potent at times.

On one classic occasion, very explosive. We were all in bed one night, during the war. We'd had an air raid alarm, then we had an all clear and suddenly the most almighty explosions. And it was bottles of dad's beer on the cellar stairs, exploding. And it made a terrible mess down there. I know it took him days clearing it all up.

Amazing. I'm trying to get a picture of your house and it's very impressive garden. Was it walled, how was it ...

Yes, it was a walled garden and it went right to, well there was an alley way through a back gate, which led into the Northwick Road. So it went right through.

From the Ombersley Road, right through. So you had a big plot?

Oh, yes. It had a motor house, a proper motor house, which was an early garage and it had, what we called a pit with timber over it. But you could drive your car over and then take away the timbers and go down the steps and work underneath on your car. And outside was a wash pit, which was a central drain with sloping sides to it, so you put your car there and you could wash the car and the water went down the drain, which was my downfall because dad had been washing the car, somewhere about 1935, '36, I think it was, when I was 6 years old, and he'd left a great big puddle. And I was on a scooter, and I've got a picture of it there, and I decided to scoot through this pond, forgetting the drain and the front wheel went down the drain and the handle bars went through my chin and made a big hole, which permanently scarred me for life.

It's a huge scar, actually, isn't it?

Yes, and Doctor Spalding was fetched and he came and, on this table, I was laid out and he sewed me up again.

Track 6 : 16:22:02

He came every day and took my temperature and some little fit, or something, I decided to bite the thermometer, and I swallowed the mercury, and they filled me up with salty water and held me upside down and this shiny mercury appeared, whizzing around the bowl.

My goodness, you did have an adventurous childhood.

Well, it was normal for, you know, that period. Things were normal. My brother, Clive, had his tonsils out on this table. We all used to stand round and watch.

Amazing thought. So, the house, was obviously a substantial property?

It was. It got many bedrooms and kitchens and dining rooms. And then at the rear were the brew houses. There was a copper boiler, where dad boiled his metals and a workshop, where he had his lathe and all his tools and we used to sneak in occasionally and an outside toilet there. As I say, down the garden, the pits and the, oh, and there was a stables. A horse stable and with a stable was a mounting block where you climbed up the steps onto the block and got on your horse.

And what would have been in your memory, the other kind of big houses in the vicinity?

They were all of a similar type. The man immediately below us, Mr Lipyard, he was a Jehovah's Witness. He used to come round and pester us as they seem to still do today. And then the next house down was Dr McMillan, who was the GP, the sort of, upper class GP, Mr McMillan, very, very posh. He had a lovely daughter, Christine. And then the Jacksons, who came from Porters Mill. Well there was just that sort of, I suppose, upper middle class houses. Good houses.

So, were the sons and daughters in the road, did they tend to be your friends?

Oh, yes, we had an almighty gang. I mean Northwick area was our playground and we got up to all sorts of scrapes. We went to school, well, yes, pretty much all of us, to St Stephens Primary School, which is now Northwick Manor School. Dordie Westwood was the Head Master and I can remember my first teacher, Fanny Button. She was probably only about 25, but to me she was ever so old, because she had a most peculiar creased neck, like a tortoise and she used to put her neck out at us. But we all had slates, a wooden frame with a slate in it, and a thing, like a nail, to write, and you had to put your sums down and then, when you'd finished, you got a wet cloth and wiped it, wiped off the marks.

I'm amazed. And this is mid 1930?

Oh, yes, that went on until I left in, I left in 1938 to go to the grammar school. That was St Stephens School.

So, you mentioned this gang of you, what would you get up to then before and after school, in the holiday times?

Well, I mean if we started school we used to go out to the outdoor lavatories there and, if you were very adept, you could wee over the wall onto Dordie Westward's cabbages. And that was a favourite game of the gang. So that was school time. But after school, there was football, of course, in Pembury Street, and what was the next, Coombes Road, the next one, and of course, we had an air raid shelter during the war. A brick, two brick air raid shelters in Pembury Street. They were rather clever. They were a very strongly constructed building, but they were not fixed to the ground and the claim was that if a bomb dropped near, instead of smashing the building, the building would slide along the road, keeping the people inside, safe.

Track 7 : 16:22:25

I could never quite see that, I felt the shock and blow of moving along the road might kill everybody inside. But that was what it was all about.

So, were they brought in, or were they constructed?

Oh, they were built there. Oh, yes, the builders came and laid the bricks and put a concrete roof on it. Yes, there were two of those in Pembury Street.

And did you ever go to them?

No, 'cause we had a cellar. Again, our war time experiences. My father, he served in the First World War, and so, when the war broke out, he joined the Home Guard, and the Air Raid Wardens, and everything. He was with the Post Office. It must have been in the first months of the war, we had an air raid warning and we all went down into the cellar, and it was not very cheerful down there, and the siren just wailed on and on. It was supposed to stop after a minute, but it didn't. It went on for about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour. Eventually my father went out and met somebody outside and they said, oh, it's all right, the air raids over, but the sirens stuck. We all went back to bed. But that was our first experience there.

I had, in fact, already experienced the war, because I was on holiday in Cornwall in September 1939, down at Fowey. We were on a family holiday and we had two French boys with us on an exchange visit. And we were on the beach at Parr, I think it was a Sunday, September 3rd, and father walked up into the village, to the village shop where they had a radio on, and he heard them declare war. And he came back down and he said, they've declared war, we've gotta get these French boys back to France. And I said, oh, there was only one other family on this great beach, you could see them. And I said, shall I go and tell them. And dad said, no, let them enjoy the day, they'll know soon enough.

And I always thought that was a rather nice philosophical answer to that one. But then they had a nightmare journey, they had a Ford 8 and they took these two boys to Portsmouth to catch the French ferry. And there was blackout and, I'm sure, hysteria. They were being stopped all the time, what are you doing on the road, and your lights are too bright and all sorts of things. They had, and in fact, father was fined for having too bright a light and mother had to take her stockings off and stuff them in the, behind the glass, to dim them down. They eventually got these French boys on the ferry.

In the meantime, three of us, my three brothers and myself, we had a nanny and she was only about 15, ever so nice girl, but she was told to take us to Worcester, on the train. So we set off from Fowey and up through Bristol and it was pitch black and they had all the blinds down. And of course we kept peeping, we could see the searchlights crisscrossing the sky as we approached Bristol. We didn't know whether there was a raid, or not, but it was all very frightening and we were glad to get back to Worcester. But this poor little girl had to look after us and she was marvellous.

So what other particular effects did the war, early on in the war, have on Northwick?

I suppose basic rationing was the main effect, food supplies were restricted. Little tiny bits of cheese, bits of meat and everybody had to make do. My mother started keeping chickens. We had a lot of poultry which we used to chase round, as lads. And a cockerel, and then of course, the rats came and we used to shoot the rats. And then there was the dramatic occasion, she, mother was boiling the chicken food, she had a pressure cooker, an early pressure cooker, and somehow the safety valve got jammed and it was cooking away on the gas stove when there was a terrific explosion. I was in bed, upstairs, with the measles.

Track 8 : 16:22:46

And the lid of this pressure cooker came up through the floor boards and hit the bottom of my bed and it took the whole of the window out of the kitchen. It was a Crittal metal framed window, a big one, and it carried the whole window out up the garden and it didn't break a pane of glass. It just caught against the trees and dropped in the garden, this big window. And mother was standing there, covered in chicken food and Flying Officer Davis happened to be in the house at the time, in the front room, and he said, my god, it's a bomb, and he rushed round and found my mother standing there, dripping chicken food. But she was all right.

She wasn't burnt?

She wasn't burnt, no.

What about the, you've mentioned the air raid shelters going up. Were there any other physical changes that came about in the area because of the war?

Blackouts. Total, no lights. Everything, all the lamp posts had white bands painted round them, so you supposedly didn't walk into them. And, of course, everybody crept around in the dark, no lights. Blackout curtains were made for the windows and crisscross sticky tape put on the glass to stop it shattering. It was, I suppose, not dramatic in its way, but it did completely change the appearance of things. As I say, at night, everybody crept around and you were reluctant to use a torch in case Jerry was watching. We had no idea what was happening or what could happen until the proper blitz started and then we realised it was destined for some people, and it was terrible. But in the Worcester area we were comparatively fortunate with just the one sad bombing was up at the Mecco in St Johns.

But there was quite a lot of war work going on in the Northwick area?

Well, yes, all the factories turned over, Windshields of Worcester, were making canopies for Halifax aircraft and then Lancasters and Spitfire components. Everybody was on war work. And of course, then the whole Perdiswell, which was the municipal aerodrome, was taken over and turned into a training field and

there we had flights of, well, in the early days, it was test field for fairy battles coming from Longbridge. They built these planes in Longbridge and flew them down to Worcester to test them. But we used to say if they got to Worcester, they'd passed the test, but of course, some of them didn't and crashed on the way on the Lickeys.

But then it was changed to a training, Empire training unit, with all these young chaps, oh, from all over the Empire. They came, were billeted at Perdiswell Hall and billeted with families around. We had Sign Officer Davis and his wife and children. He was the Chief Flying Instructor. Again, a smashing chap and he was my hero and he used to come and tell us tales of things that had happened. A Tiger Moth got stuck under Upton bridge, a pilot trying to fly under the bridge when he shouldn't have done.

One that went out on Christmas eve and landed in a rather posh house, somewhere in Shropshire and got caught up in a party with a lot of pretty girls. Forgot to telephone Perdiswell, and they were all worried about him, so eventually Flying Officer Medlan went off in a Tiger Moth to see if he could find him. And he apparently did find him and landed and immediately got swallowed up in the party and he forgot to telephone. In the end, Flying Officer Davis went out and found them all. Phoned back and said, we're out in this place, we shall not be going back tonight, they're not fit to fly. They came back next day to a bit of a stormy reception, I believe. But I remember the stormy reception, Mrs Davis gave Flying Officer Davis when he walked in. It was a strong memory of childhood.

So presumably all your friends down the road also had people lodging with them?

Yes.

And did that change the make-up of the community?

Track 9 : 16:23:07

Not in a noticeable way. It was accepted. Everybody thought they were doing their bit. I mean, Joslins lived in Northwick Road, they had two evacuees from the Air Ministry, I think they were, with them. I found the certificate the other day the Queen sent to Mrs Civil, thanking her for looking after these evacuees during the war. Presumably my parents had similar ones, but I've never seen it.

And what about the land, any available land, was it turned over to food growing?

There was, basically it was an agriculture area before the war, so yes, there, potatoes. Us children, we had to go picking potatoes in the fields. Miserable job chasing after the tractor to keep up with it, filling the buckets.

And this was war work?

Yes.

OK, and whereabouts was that?

Well that was down, I worked down Old Northwick Lane. I worked on a farm that Mr Probert, who was 103, and he was a magnificent man with a huge white bushy moustache and beard, very much like a Father Christmas. But in the middle of this was a brown hole where he poked a cigarette and he chain smoked the whole of his life. He'd been out in Canada on the gold rush, in Alaska, and while we were hoeing turnips, he would tell us all about it and he was a super mentor and, obviously, passed on knowledge of growing things. Mr Probert was to me, again, was a magnificent and interesting man.

And that was Northwick Farm?

He was down at Northwick Farm, yes, down Old Northwick Lane.

Somebody's told me that the Lodge, where you used to play, was turned over to potatoes during the war.

Yes, it was, it was, that was the King George playing field and we knew it as The Lodge because it's part of the lodge at Northwick Manor. But, it was ...

When you say King George Playing field, what's the history to that?

Well, it was a National scheme. There was one at Brickfields and, I think, there's still one up London Road somewhere. But it was a national scheme to create playing fields for school children and The Lodge was a very good open field and when the crops were not growing, we used it for flying model aeroplanes, football, cricket and ...

Do you have a memory of it, pre-potato field?

No. Not really, no. I can remember it in well, my first memory of it is 1941, 1942 when it snowed and I can remember the Lodge having about 2' of snow on it. It was very impressive then, and then again in '47. But it was just a big open playing field and then down Northwick Close, were the tennis courts, the Worcester Tennis Club. I think it's still there.

And there was the rugby club up there, as well, wasn't there?

Well, the rugby club came on the Lodge after the war. That's from memory, but I don't think it was a war time. I think it was a post-war, the Worcester Rugby Club

played their games there, with chaps I'd been at school with, the Evertons, Pritchards, Moseleys, they all played there.

OK, just one thing I wanted to go back on, when you were talking of your childhood memories and your gang of friends, and Northwick being your playground, presumably that extended down to the Slip and the Severn?

Oh, yes, yes, we used to swim. Well, I very nearly drowned in the Severn at the Slip. It was when I was about 5. We used to go as a family, for family picnics in the field there and take the blankets and thermos flasks and things, and baskets, and so on. And father was keen on swimming and we all went down in the water to play and he told us, you know, stay on the shallow water. Well, of course, I had to experiment and walk out a bit further.

Track 10 : 16:20:05

And you see, the River Severn in those days, with the barges travelling up and down, had a deep channel worn by the passage of traffic. So, although this, nominally only a few feet deep, it went down, a shoulder slipping down to 6' deep. And I wasn't aware of this as a little toddler and I was walking in the water and I got on the edge of this slope and started to slide down it. And, just as I was going under, there was a man standing near and I tapped him on the shoulder and I remember he turned and said, hello, sonny, and then he turned away again. And I went under and the next thing, somebody grabbed my hair and pulled me out. If he hadn't seen me, I would of gone. That would have been the end of Robert Maxwell.

And, presumably, that wasn't unknown, children did drown?

Oh, there were drownings, yes. If you look through the Berrows Journal or the Evening News, regular drownings in the Severn, yes.

Yet you all learned to swim there?

Well, we learned to swim at a thing called the Barges. These were down at Pitchcroft. They were two of old Severn Trows that had been opened up and demasted, and placed side by side and joined together to make a floating trough with holes at each end so the river flowed in and flowed out. But you were safe inside the barge. And we used to go from St Stephens School, in a crocodile, down with the teacher and put our costumes on in the little changing rooms, and then this man had a long bamboo pole with a canvas strop on the end, which he put under your shoulders and you went in the water and he whizzed you up and down in the pond and said, you're swimming, you're swimming, you know, and wave your arms about. It meant nothing to us and it, I didn't learn to swim for a long time.

I hated it and then, of course, we came out all shivering and tried to dry ourselves, which we never succeeded in doing and we then straggled back to St Stephens, all wet and miserable. It was a pretty sordid thing, but it didn't get any better when we went to the grammar school because we then went to Parks' Puddle in the Sansome Walk. Mr John Parks' baths. Again we were made to go in and swim and float around on the end of poles. But eventually I did swim, but not, I was never a strong swimmer. Although I later had to do some long distance swimming to again save my life, but that was in France. But it was, that was the way it was done.

So, when you were picnicking with the other families down at the Slip, was there any safety measures, was there a lifeguard or a rope?

No, no, nothing at all. Oh, no, absolutely no rings or anything. No, it was just primitive and everybody had to fend for themselves and we were there and we also used to go up to Bevere by the weir and picnic in the fields there.

And there is a classic occasion in 19.., it would be 1938 when the French boys first came to stay with us. We all went up there for a picnic, quite a big gathering. I think some of my aunts and uncles were there as well, and Morris Peswy, the mischievous French boy took my brother Clive's shoe and threw it in the Severn. We all stood there, watching, as it floated down the river, and we followed it down until it got to the weir and it went over the weir and it vanished. And, mother wasn't very pleased with Morris.

But there we are, as a family we stayed friends and in 1945 I went to France. I was the first English schoolboy to go to France, after the war. In fact the war hadn't properly ended, but my parents wrote to Miss Ellen Wilkinson, who was the Minister of Education and applied for a visa for me to go to France to reunite. Father did quite a strong letter saying it was important that we bring together families that had been separated by the war and the Peswy's, French family had been with us and he wanted me to go. And I was 15.

CD 2 : Track 11 : 16:17:00

They put me on the train at the station to London, and an uncle met me in London and took me across to go down to Dover. And then on the ferry to Dover, Dover Boulogne, and as we were coming into Boulogne the pub was lined with crowds of people. There was a gentleman leaning on the rail by me and I said, oh, look, they're pleased to see us. And he said, no, they're not, the last ship that came in, blew up, and he said, they're waiting to see if we blow up.

But you didn't, you were safe.

We didn't. Then we got on a train and we set off for Paris, but the line wasn't complete, it had all been bombed and every so often the train would stop and

we'd have to climb out, walk down a valley, cross a rickety bridge over a river and climb up the other side and get on the next train, and so made our way to Paris. And then I went to stay at Chante for about a month with this French family. Again, delightful people. The object was to make me to speak French and Madam Peswy wouldn't let me speak English. She was very persistent and every morning I had to write what we did the day before. So that was an introduction to France.

And a huge adventure.

Track 12 : 16:17:14

OK, I'm going to bring you back to Northwick and the Severn, again. And you mentioned barges going past when you ... what was going up and down the river in the thirties.

It was a continuous traffic of, mainly, fuel and timber. The barges came up from Sharkness and Avonmouth, up through Gloucester and they'd carry 400 tonnes of petrol to Diglis, that was the maximum they could bring onto Diglis and then the smaller barges went up the Severn into Stourport with petrol and paraffin and they had 300 tonnes, because the river was only 6' deep. That was a regular trade and when you were swimming, you had to watch out because they had quite a suction. They would draw the water away from the banks when they came up and you had to be a bit wary.

Then at the same time we had the steamers, a fleet of lovely steamers. The Holt Castle, the Duchess Doreen, The Bell and all working out of mainly, North Key and South Key.

They were pleasure boats?

They were pleasure boats, very graceful steamers. The only one that survived is The Bell, the steam launch Bell, SL Bell. That has gone down to London and was restored. It worked as the Maidenhead Steam Company for some time, but at the moment it's up for sale if you've got £250 000. But it is a beautiful boat.

Nice to bring it back to Worcester, wouldn't it?

Well, yes and no. The River Severn isn't a suitable river, really, with its high banks, it's, the Thames is so lovely to boat along. I've done all of it and I'm afraid the Thames wins, hands down, from a pleasure boating point of view. But, there are these boats doing the trips but the people in them see very little, really, because of the high banks.

Was the Droitwich canal still in operation?

No. No, the Droitwich canal ceased in 1916. The last boat went down during the war and carried two hayricks that were confiscated from the farmers by the army. They came round and just confiscated things. And there were two big hayricks on it which were loaded at Mildenhall Mill, Mr Watts, and that then went down to Cardiff.

By strange quirk of that time, my mother had been conscripted, she worked for Kays in Worcester, she was what they called a stenographer, and she could produce letters at high speed. And she and two or three friends were conscripted from Kays and taken down and put in a shed in Cardiff and their job was controlling the incoming of all the supplies loading on the ships to France. Because we had 2 million horses in France and they had to be fed and this was the job of the army, getting supplies.

And that's where the hayricks went?

That's where the hayricks went, down to Cardiff. So, it's just possible my mother handled the last boat off the Droitwich.

In your memory, where there any physical evidence, or names that had stuck, for anything physical in, along the shore of the Severn, or around that area that had obviously come from historic times?

Well, I suppose the Ketches is, you've got the Ketch Inn, which is over there on that picture. That marked the site of one of the big ketches, where the boats used to be held up. And of course it was a logical place to build a pub. You've got 20 or 30 boats, thirsty boatmen on board, you built a pub and met their needs.

Where was the Ketch Inn?

Ketch's down near the southern ring road, where it crosses what they call the Carrington Bridge, the Ketch's Pub immediately upstream from there. Still there.

OK, anything up on the Northwick stretch?

Northwick stretch, well we had The Slip, and we had Beverly, Bevere, the island at Beverly where supposedly, the population sheltered during the plague,

Track 13 : 16:17:41

Although I'm personally a little dubious of that because there was a very large island just above Worcester Waterworks, above Barbourne. The road now is called Chasewater, but that was a river around an island, and it was a big island and I feel it's more logical that the people went to that island. But, anyway, somewhere there, people sheltered on an island during the plague.

At Beverly was this lovely iron bridge, which I believe, was constructed by Mr Moon. He was an extremely wealthy man who lived at Beverly Manor. He was the Chief Engineer of London North Eastern Railway Company and quite a severe official, I believe. What he used to do, was go out secretly on the trains, over to the north east, turn up unexpectedly, catching people doing things they shouldn't be doing. But the signalmen got wise to him. When he was spotted on a train, they would telegraph ahead a message, Moonlight tonight. And that's where moonlighting comes from. People who were painting their shed, or doing gardening when they should have been manning their signal boxes, got the warning that there was moonlight coming and they stopped moonlighting.

How amazing.

Doing other jobs.

So, did your adventures as a boy take you up as far as Beverly?

Oh, Beverly was our haunt. Yes, conkers, wonderful conkers off the trees, there. Again, I had a dramatic incident. I think I was about 8 or 9, probably 8 or 9. I cycled up on my new bicycle up to Beverly with a little suitcase and I filled it with conkers. Coming back down Northwick Road to where the little factory was, the bottom of the hill, I was going at quite high speed and got a wobble and came off with a crash and decided to put the handlebars through my kneecap. So I had a hole through my knee, which I still have. But, of course, to anybody nowadays, it's a bullet wound. That was a memory of Beverly.

But Beverly was a secret place, dark, and spooky. We used to go, George Yapp, and Bobby Landrum and myself, walk up there and we used to frighten each other, jumping out and so on. It was very spooky.

Dark and spooky, because it was quite wooded?

Yes, lovely trees.

A lot more, than say, today?

I don't know, I haven't been over that way for, probably, 20 years. I believe there's been development. But the lane that went down to the river was a dark lane. Just as Northwick Lane was a dark lane until they opened it up and built houses. They were spooky places. We spent a lot of time up there.

Then of course, winter the whole thing came a delight, because with the frosts and the floods. We had Greens farm, down Northwick, with the ancient fish pools, which filled with flood water and froze and made the most wonderful skating arena. Night after night after night from school, particularly, me when I was 17, '47, we skated there, we played ice hockey.

We had teams, all sorts of activity. We even went from there and we skated up the canal to Droitwich and we played an ice hockey match at Hanbury Wharf against some Droitwich lads, which was another great expedition with one of the Pardoe's falling in. We got to Dunhampstead Tunnel and we all said, oh, it won't be frozen, we've got to walk over the top. Tony Pardoe said, the ice is, it was thick, it was over 2' thick.

Track 14 : 16:18:04

He skated into Dunhamsted Tunnel and he'd only gone about 2 yards inside and there was a splash and we all had to get sticks and get him out again.

He was lucky.

Then we made a fire to dry him out. I remember this woman came along with a big Labrador, who was sniffing round Tony, he kept saying, go away, go away.

Did the river ever freeze?

Oh, yes, there were blocks of ice came down the river. But by the thirties, the power stations were pumping warm water into the river. We had Worcester Power Station and upstream at Ironbridge, was a big one, and Stourbridge, uh Stourport. And they pumped warm water, so the river didn't properly freeze as it did in the 1800's. I've got pictures of skating parties in the 1890's with all the Victorian dressed women skating on the Severn. And they roasted an ox on the river, the ice was that thick, but once the power station, and pollution was the other thing.

You see, all the sewage works started pumping their waste sewage, which was warm, into the river and that warmed the water as well. So it never froze completely. But there were times, '63, I think was the last time I remember when quite big blocks of ice came down the river.

So, the pools where you were skating, the fish ponds, was that land that you could get onto and play on regularly?

Well, I think the farmer didn't mind. It was open house and everybody went and there were adults in the evenings. It was a huge skating party. Bonfires were lit, things toasted.

You obviously knew that they the were fish ponds? Were you conscious, as a lad, that this was connected to Bishop's palace?

All we called them, was the Monks Ponds. That's how we knew them.

So that name had passed down through the generations, but you weren't conscious of the palace?

It was fish, it was fish for the church, we knew that, but the whole implications of it, no, we didn't. But to us it was just a grand skating area. And in '47, of course, it stayed icy for a long time. And, in fact, the flood waters started to recede, so the fish pond had a great dip in the middle. The ice bowed and you could stand on your skates on one side and go right the way down, across the pond, and up the other side. We were so upset when it thawed, because that was a wonderful time.

The complete opposite of that. Can you remember drought years?

No recollection of drought, no.

No particular drying up of the land, and things appearing, as they do?

No.

What about flooding. Other flooding years?

There were, '47 was the massive flood when Worcester was cut in half. I was taking school exams, I remember, and the boys from St Johns had to come on the train, over the bridge, and we all cycled down and we used to ride through the floods in Hilton Road. The policemen shoo us away. But it was a dramatic flood.

Any others that you remember and what, how far did the waters come up in Northwick?

In Northwick they came, Park Avenue, they came a long way up Park Avenue. I think people living there don't realise how far it did come, and could come again. Johnny Parks lived down there on Victoria, corner, I think, of Victoria Avenue, in a bungalow. It reached the gates of his house which was a long way up Park Avenue. I see they've built houses down there now and I would hate to be living in one. I think they're at risk.

Our big expedition. We decided to make a raft to go on the floods. Johnny Hall lived up Ombersley Road and his father was Halls the ironmongers in the Shambles, the black and white building that they wickedly demolished. Anyway, we took his garage door off. We had a couple of oil drums and we went off down to Beverly and we floated on this door.

Track 15 : 16:18:23

But, unfortunately, something happened, and we got tipped in and the door floated away and old Mr Hall never knew where his door went. I think it went to Gloucester.

Bet it did, gone down the river.

Track 16: 16:18:24

We've just had a short pause.

I wanted to just pick up on the house, The Firs. Did you live there for all of your childhood?

Yes, I lived there from 1930 until I got married. And, in fact, when I got married, Joce and I lived there, for about, nearly a year while we built a house in Broadheath.

OK, and what then happened to the house after your family ... you were talking about it being turned into a place for young girls?

Well, it was taken over by, I think it was the County Council, as a Bale Hostel. Originally they were all females, but I gather now, it's male.

So, it's still a hostel now?

It's still a hostel, called Braerley House.

Braerley House. Why did they change it's name, do you know?

No.

That was after ...

I think it was after Councillor Braerley. You know, you have to name people.

OK, and this was all after your family had moved on. So you sold it to the Council.

My parents moved across the road into Pembury Street and bought a nice house, smaller house, there. They call it downsizing, now. They live there and my father was 84 and mother was 80.

So, they were in Northwick all their lives?

Yes. Well, father was born in Burton-on-Trent, but he came to Worcester to the Norton Barracks in the Royal Engineers and the officer he was working with, who

was Raymond Priestly of the Shackleton and Scott expeditions, he was billeted with my grandfather at The Commandery. That's how father met mother, because her brother was killed in the war, but she couldn't find the grave. Well father happened to be in France in the area and found out and when he came home on leave he went to tell mother. The messages were, he was missing, but he had clear evidence that he'd been shot, shot by machine gun bullets straight through the head. It was quick which was the only good thing about it. And poor old Henry was buried out there, father found out, came home and told mother and romance started.

And you, obviously, married a local girl?

Me, yes I married the girl next door, almost in Northwick Road. Yes, Jocelyn, she was a Civil, her father owned Hardy and Padmores in Worcester, the foundry. Lovely family, again, both he and his wife and Jocelyn's brother, Michael, sadly gone. They lived at, well they lived in Northwick, no, Beckett Road, first of all, they built a house in Beckett Road. I've got things there. They bought it for seven hundred...

These are sales particulars.

£781 from Mr Ward. Mr Ward built the house for £781.

And when would that have been?

That was 1930. And then they built another house in Northwick Road, 150 Northwick Road, Bigbury, I think, yes, because they used to go on holiday to Bigbury. That's in Northwick Road, opposite the Lodge. Mr Pepper built that and I've been trying to find the bill for you for that, but I've got it somewhere, it'll turn up. And he had that built and then all the furniture, mapping and web.

Do you remember these builders?

I knew Mr Pepper, he was a builder through the war, so knew him on various things, yes. I didn't know Mr Ward.

And was, were you conscious, post-war, of a lot of building going on in the Northwick area, new houses?

Well, oh yes, it started to literally mushroom. The bits of lands, and schools, like Northwick Manor School, and so on. All these things began to spring up and then down the riverside, down Park Avenue, houses built down the bottom and along Lavender Road. All on what was the Northwick Estate.

Going back to the school, do you remember that being built, and what was there before?

Track 17 : 16:18:46

It was Mr Brewer's field. He was a farmer and his wife used to be, help clean Joce's mother's house. So we knew the Brewers quite well, but he sold that field for a lot of money. It was a little gold mine.

And do you remember the school being built?

Well, only, not really watching it but being aware that there was construction taking place, yes.

And given that these days that there are so many planning considerations, usually controversy over any building, was none of that there, then?

Not aware of it, no. Things just sprang up and bits of land were taken over. And if you go up Northwick Road, up towards Green Lane, 'cause that was all fields, up there and then houses appeared, roads and they didn't build on our tobogganing field, because that was too steep.

Which one was that?

If you go up Northwick Road, past Northwick Manor, Beverly Manor, there's a very steep field there which was wonderful for tobogganing. The only problem was there was a brook at the bottom and you had to roll off the toboggan before you went in the brook.

So you have happy memories or snowy winters up there?

Oh, we dragged our sledges up Northwick Road and one day they gritted the road, which had never been done before. They did the Ombersley Road, but they'd never done Northwick Road. And they gritted Northwick Road and if they only knew the language that came from about 50 small boys, dragging their sledges up there.

Now, one area that we haven't talked about at all is church. Were you church goers?

Yes, I was, very much so. My father was a church warden at St Stephens and at a very early age, I think probably about 8, I became, what they call, a Server. I was a boat boy. I carried the incense boat with Mr Passard who swung the Thurible, I think they called it, and I used to have to open it up and he'd shovel the incense in and make clouds of smoke and we'd go in procession round the church. Well, of course it dawned on us that if he wanted smoke, we could create smoke, because we mixed ... You know when a candle burns, little bits run down the side, well we use to pick those off and break them up and put them in with

the incense. He'd get halfway down the church, you couldn't see him, in a grey cloud of smoke. And it never really dawned on him what we were doing, but we had some marvellous conflagrations going round in the incense.

And was St Stephens the parish church for Northwick, or did some go to Claines, could you choose?

There was parish for Claines and Northwick. I was married at Claines because Jocelyn and her parents went there, so we were married at Claines.

Was there any reason that some went to one church and others went to the other?

No, just a natural division, whichever you could walk to, the nearest, I think. Or if you liked the vicar, that had an effect.

Was there a community around the church, whichever one you went to?

Yes, we had a great community. We had a youth club in Pembury Street. Every Friday night we'd go there and gig about to pop records, whatever they were in those days and have talks and things and the vicar tell us all about sex, lots of giggling. It was a big community and we've stayed friends ever since.

Were there ever any particular annual events in the community that, a big fete, or ...?

No, not that I'm aware of. No, nowadays they have these fetes, but I'm not aware of St Stephens, it probably did have some functions, but I'm not aware of them.

Or any that celebrated a particular thing, like did you ever have a VE-Day party in Northwick?

Oh, of course we had D-Day party in Pembury Street. Yes, that was a great knees up there and long tables and flags and bunting and so on. 'Cause the first memory was when the war ended, they allowed the blackout, VE-Day, and the lights came on, half of them, because the bulbs had gone in the other half.

Track 18 : 16:19:08

But I can remember asking my mother and father permission to walk in to Worcester and I can remember them debating whether it was safe for me to go. In the end, father said, oh it's an important event, he ought not to miss it, and so I walked down into Worcester, where there was just a huge crowd of soldiers and sailors and RAF men, all half drunk.

And I can remember, and I think of this man, now, one sailor climbed up a lamp post on the cross and out on the arm, which was the old tram arm which held the tram wires, and was obviously corroded, because when he got to the end, it broke and came down. And he fell in the road and broke his leg. And I often think of that man, that was the end of the war and he'd gone through the war, and the poor chap broke his leg in the celebrations. I often think, what did happen to him?

I bet he never forgot that celebration party?

No, he wouldn't, no, if he survived it. 'Cause in those days, you know, broken leg could be severe. But he'd be taken up to Ronksford or Worcester Infirmary. Ronksford was, of course, a military hospital. That's where I went when I was in the army. A service hospital.

So, VE-Day memories. What about any other kind of get togethers, post-war or ...?

No, I can remember. I can remember war time events like, my aunty Joyce was in the WAF and she was killed by a bomb and we had the funeral at my house and all the family, quite a large family, came from all over for Joyce's funeral. And I remember, mother had got some ham from somewhere and we had a big picnic ham, and the gathering in the front rooms, and I can remember my Uncle Bob, who was captain of Worcester Rowing Club, I can remember him, saying, you know I was only a little boy. This is 19..., I suppose I was 13, '43, and I can remember Uncle Bob saying, oh, what a lovely party. Joyce would have enjoyed this. And to me, I was a bit shocked that poor dear, she was in the coffin there, and there was poor dead Joyce and uncle Bob was saying, she would have enjoyed it. But I thought afterwards, she would have done. The family were like that.

And it's a nice comment.

Just so.

As the years went on, do you have recollections of landmarks in Northwick. Houses or buildings coming down, being demolished and replaced by estates or another?

I'm not aware of any demolition, no. I don't think, not to my knowledge, anything came down. No, it was all open spaces that gradually got nibbled away.

Anything else that you can remember about the community that you think it would be important to put on the record?

Well, another sad one. There was this shop opposite Checketts Lane, I think it was a butchers, and I got the name, Bannister in mind. I remember one terrible

wet morning, torrential rain, I was cycling to school and I could see Bannister in front of me, riding along. We went down Ombersley Road to the junction with the Droitwich Road, and as he went to go across the Droitwich Road, a lorry coming up the Barbourne, turned across and crashed into him. He must have been about 16 years old and it struck him violently and knocked him into the road. We stopped and this poor lad was there bleeding from his head, it was obviously very serious and he died. I remember a policeman there and I said, I saw what happened and he said, shut up, son, you're only a lad. And he didn't want to know. But in my view, the lorry driver was at fault, but he never got blamed.

That's obviously stayed with you a long time?

That stayed and I can see it, now, so clearly and I thought it was an injustice at the time.

Talking of the police, there were, of course, the police houses in Northwick, weren't there?

Well, they were new, they came, I think they were post-war.

OK, do you remember a police presence in the community as you were growing up?

I remember a policeman. I remember I'd been at John Bennett's, the farm at Manor Farm. We were at school together and I'd play there a lot.

Track 19 : 16:19:28

I can remember cycling home one evening and it had got dusk and I'd left it a bit late, and I was coming up Ombersley Road on my little bike, pedalling away and suddenly a voice says, Stop, sonny. And I stopped and there was the biggest policeman you've ever seen, in a big black cape. What are you doing riding a bicycle without lights. And I said, I, I, I'm sorry, I was late and I tried to get home. Does your father know you're, and I said, no, he doesn't. And what would your father do if I told him. I said, he'd get a stick out of the garden and he'd give me a thrashing, which is what he used to do. And he said, oh, well we won't get you a thrashing this time, but don't you ever let me see you riding without lights. And the message went home, and a pity it doesn't go home these days.

And would he have been the kind of village bobby, so to speak?

No, he was a city policeman.

You didn't have a character that you kind of regularly saw?

No, they had their routes and they'd meet at the police station and they'd do a drill and they all had to produce their torches and their notebooks and pencils, and things, on parade and the Sergeant would march them out. And they'd march all round the city, dropping off one at different places. Traffic duty at Castle Street or, if there was race days, work the traffic lights there. Which, incidentally were the first automatic traffic lights in the world and the case was made by Hardy and Padmore and Reevo Electric made the electrics in Smethwick. That was very early traffic light.

Which ones are they? The ones by the race course?

Top of the hill, Castle Street, on the Tything

Goodness me, I never knew that.

And there used to be a box against the wall, it had a little brass knob, and if you turned the knob, you can change the lights.

But not a lot of people knew that, presumably?

Well, no, but of course, it wasn't long before little boys knew it and cars would suddenly have to screech to a halt.

You obviously have very happy memories of growing up in Northwick?

Yes, yes, we got into delightful mischief. Can I tell you of my very worst one.

Go on then.

One day, when I was about 8 years old, my mother said to me, will you take Clive, my little brother, in this rickety old pushchair, and will you walk him around the block. Which meant up Ombersley Road, up Vine Street, down Northwick Road and back up Ombersley Road. Well, I set off up Vine Street and I met Bobby Lander. Bobby Lander lived behind us in Northwick Road, he, I think he's retired now, I'm sure he is. But he owned the printing works in Worcester, Lander's printing.

But, anyway, Bobby Lander I met. Lovely day, what're doing Bob. I'm going to Miss Cockerton to get a Mars bar. Oh, I said, I've got some money, we'll go. So we went to Cockerton's, no Mars bars. Shortage, or something. I said, I know where they've got Mars bars. I said there's a shop in Ombersley, Evertons, we were there last week and I saw them. We'll go to Ombersley and get a Mars bar. So we set off and we walked and we walked and we walked and we walked to Ombersley. And we got our Mars bars.

Poor little Clive in this pushchair, probably wet himself by then. Anyway, 6 o'clock in the evening, coming back down near Hawford, and my father's car pulled up and a police car pulled up. What the heck have you been up to. I said, well, we've been to Ombersley for a Mars bar. They'd been down the river. They'd been to The Slip, looking for pushchair marks in the mud. They'd hunted all, the Landers had been out. My mother had been out on her bicycle and we'd completely vanished. Well, dad pushed Clive in the back of the car and Bobby Lander and said, you can walk home. But mother said, no, no, he's had enough. So eventually I was allowed in the car and when I got to Ombersley Road, I was taken up the garden and father cut one of his apple twigs and I can still remember it. It was an incredible episode.

Well, a long, long way for a small lad.

Yes.

Right, thank you very much for your memories. They will be treasured.

I can go on forever, but ...

Transcribed by : Sharon Kettleby – December 2009