Fabian Eagle interviewed by Imogen Radford 070322

Transcript with added timings and summary sections

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**Summary of subjects covered**

Born 1971. Father and uncles as children paddling in North Pickenham ford 1934, his own children playing in the river and learning about water, also at Hilborough Ford and Ickburgh. Hilborough Mill, visited from school, landowner challenged dredging the river just after the war. Hilborough school, one of last pupils when closed in 1979, conditions including freezing outdoor toilets. Decoys and duck flighting. Lifelong interest in wildlife. Wells, water table, water levels and pollution, and changing attitudes.

Additional material: two photos of North Pickenham ford, photocopy of country life article about the Hilborough Mill river dredging.

**I = Interviewer, Imogen Radford**

R = Respondent, Fabian Eagle

**I: My name’s Imogen Radford, I'm from the Tales From The River project. And it's the 7th of March 2022 and I'm here in his home to interview, so if you'd like to tell me your name, please.**

R: I'm Fabian Eagle.

**I: Could you tell me just the year of your birth?**

R: 1971.

**I: Just before we go onto the subject we came to talk about, which is about swimming and playing in the rivers and that sort of things, just a few little facts and figures, like what did your father do?**

R: My father was a poultry, a small livestock farmer.

**I: And you, yourself are a…?**

R: I'm actually an Auctioneer.

**I: Specialising in…?**

R: Poultry.

**I: So it's in the family. Mother’s occupation?**

R: She worked within the business.

**I: We’re in North Pickenham now, has you and your family lived in North Pickenham a long time?**

R: We've lived here since, well different parts of families but since the 1850s, prior to that Hilborough.

**I: Okay. So, we mostly want to talk about, as I say, the rivers and recreation side, I brought along just copies of those photos which sort of brought us together, if you like. You told me that your father and his brother were in these photos of the river, North Pickenham Ford. And that was in…?**

[00:01:45]

R: I would hazard a guess about 1934, I guess my father would have been about six, his brother was about four years old or so.

**I: Do you know which one he is?**

R: Yeah, my father is the far figure on the right with the stick, his brother is next, one of his older brother’s is next door to him on the left. I couldn’t tell you who they are but I do remember the surname of one of the other boys was an ‘Applegate’ and I think one of the young girls’ surname was List, up on the bridge.

**I: It’s a lovely photo because apart from anything else the ford is no longer there, is it?**

R: No, no. The bridge was built well before I was built and I do remember there was a story from someone else. They came through the river and they were moving house from Houghton Lane, which is actually, it was quite a development and some of their items fell off the cart while it's going through the river to come to the other property.

**I: So perhaps the villagers were quite pleased when a bridge took over?**

R: Obviously if there was anything large there was the footbridge, which was there so it did enable most people to be connected and most people didn’t have vehicles or anything but obviously any division between the village and flooding would have caused problems and as there is that high depth stick measure there anyway.

**I: That’s right, ‘cause it's obviously very shallow because there's children paddling but it's the River Wissey, isn’t it, and it can really flood, can't it?**

R: It can, it floods there to the picture what would be to the left hand side of the picture was a field that’s called the Camping Land before the river was fully dredged. I have heard from other people that that was where it flooded and that was where they went skating, playing around beforehand. But the river obviously because it rises sort of in the Bradenham Scarning area so it doesn’t flood but it is still to a substantial depth fairly quickly, which is surprising really.

**I: Yes, and to think that people skated on it, that’s quite interesting, I hadn't heard that before.**

R: Not on the river, but on the flood lands. The point was made, you don’t go skating in a dyke or on the river. I have seen it, I think it was the big sort of freeze of 2010 or so, it got to the stage the river nearly freezing over.

**I: Gosh, but the meadow of course once the meadow floods then you know it's shallow because you're familiar with the meadow so people skated if that froze. Do you remember seeing that for yourself?**

R: No, no, this was people had been, again my father’s age, group of people saying it. How often that happened or not, I don’t know. But obviously the rivers were, according to that, the rivers were sort of dredged immediately after World Ward 2 some bits were stopped. Particularly further up the larger estates, so South Pickenham Estate and particularly Hilborough Estate stopped it because they were concerned it was gonna ruin the trout fishing and other parts of wildlife.

**I: Stop the dredging?**

R: Stopped the dredging, yeah.

**I: Yes, I understand, so the dredging made it more likely that it would flood?**

R: Well, no the dredging was to prevent the flooding and increase the drainage, but obviously the cleaning out of the river and to make it more of a canal system, obviously didn’t aid anything if you had a more of an interest in biodiversity or wildlife. But obviously from those that wanted more productivity from their land, which was more of a feature after World War 2, it was considered more urgent.

[00:05:35]

**I: Interesting how things have changed, isn't it. So, there's obviously, your father had memories of playing about in the river like that. Did he talk to you about that?**

R: I think there was an activity, and I think all children get drawn to water sometimes. I think it's more of a worry for the parents but they all gathered and played in those parts and that was where you had to cross so it was wading across and I think we all still do and have done.

**I: And so your father’s generation did it, did your generation as well, do you remember doing it yourself?**

R: Yeah, not so much because it sort of lost it but, rivers or any of the ditches or anything there you were more fascinated with it and playing around but it depends on the group of your friends or anything else but it was sort of activities and moving around.

**I: So, yes the ford wasn’t there?**

R: [Over speaking] The ford wasn’t there, the river wasn’t so accessible because the sides became steep so it wasn’t into it. I had friends, they're more South Pickenham areas in there school where it wasn’t dredged and they were game keepers sons who had access to the river, sort of parts of that there, which were more sort of interesting and accessible.

**I: So what did you do yourself, what sort of thing did you and your friends do?**

R: Well, we’d have been more interested in sort of, because those areas were quiet we'd have been more interested in wildlife and try to see what we could find, particularly certain times of the year nests or ducklings or different parts. So, it wasn’t more, it was an interest rather than, shall we say, a full scale amusement or a playground.

**I: So you just generally went around looking for birds nests…?**

R: [Over speaking] Bird’s nests, or trying to find out whether it was a snake, or we’ll see the kingfishers, or we try and find see what was going on, was the interest of what was the activity in the river on a more of a nature basis than, as I said, than playing in it.

**I: We’re interested in all aspects really, anything that interested people about the river, so getting in or not.**

R: So, I mean, it was different times of year you saw different types of birds but it was mainly the sort of spring and wandering around and chasing, seeing what was about.

**I: Any particular memories stick in your mind?**

R: No, I think we still do, we still get excited, you see a kingfisher and still do. And I know where some have sort of bred within the areas within the Wissey, yeah, so I just sort of remember wandering around I don’t remember a clear objective of that point.

**I: Did you sort of play as in, I mean for example, I remember making little dams and that sort of thing, did you do that or did you stand back and watch more?**

[00:08:40]

R: No, I mean we weren't there for any length of time so it would have been a walk along the river. My children have done and I suppose there's been more accessibility and a change in things. So on the river, the parts that we farm, or we have our water meadows there and they play and jump across. And there's a sort of, the cattle have created an access point across the river at a point so it's a bit more shallow and they play in there and look at it. So yeah, those sort of things they do, I don’t, like I said they’d have probably played with the sticks and messed about and splashed, my father’s generation. But, yeah they do and then try and see if they can take the bike through or something else, which part is shallow, but I think it does teach an interest in, we all did geography and studying rivers and how the cutting out and erosion of one bank or another one side.

**I: Did you notice your children sort of playing, well it's playing isn't it, what they're doing, but are you saying you feel they're learning as they do it sort of thing?**

R: Yeah, I think they learned and they wanted, this is slowing down, create a depth and I think they learn, if we move this stone, I mean they were doing it more in the summer so it was a lot shallower but they could get to see how the current can change and the speed by restricting where the water was going and it was level so narrowing it's channel. So, yeah, they did it there and it just added, so my son, his friends, there was a field so they're out of the way unless they can get on with doing their own things without being in anyone else’s way but the river’s an added attraction and an added feature to play with rather than being in a plain field and added to that to mess about with and the level.

**I: And that’s really local to here, isn't it, here…?**

R: [Over speaking] Yeah, this would have all been in North Pickenham again.

**I: So, that’s in your own land so obviously your children and you obviously you’ve got access to it. Are there any sort of publicly accessible places that you go as well?**

R: There's two bits, there's what they call the Hilborough Ford, which is just on the bends and some other people have gone yes, we've gone and played there with the river and because it’s still got the old road ford so they like to think you can take your vehicle through and drive through just for the point of that. But, yes, they can go and play in there and then there's another one which is really the remnants of the mill pond at Ickburgh, several people but if you go, it's finding the right time to go there and some of those are quite shaded so they are cold and obviously you’re sharing it with other people.

**I: Yes, I know both of those places. And you were telling me that you went to school in Hilborough?**

[00:11:45]

R: I did.

**I: So tell me a little bit about that, did you play in the area when you went to school?**

R: Hilborough was still, if you’d say virtually a feudal style village at the time, so the school was run, the school building was owned by the estate, their governors, yes it was run by the local authority. Certain things were encouraged and then there was the mill before it was renovated as a dwelling. So there was the historical aspect, the church was near it so you were taken there and it added up a bit about wild life and other things. And it was only a small school so it was easy to sort of monitor childrens’ numbers and safety at certain times. But yeah, it was there to see how the mill worked and what was left of it although there wasn’t much but you can remember seeing the wheel and obviously again narrowed channel and the water coming out.

**I: So you were taken on school trips down to the mill?**

R: It just might be, if that was a nice day or something different, it could be flexible and far more times you go there it didn’t have to be a fixed day, come what may on the weather, but nicer days we'd go down there to see those and they fitted in just to, I suppose expand your own mind and development.

**I: So the mill was just empty then, was it?**

R: Yeah, totally redundant, you remember all the change but obviously, you know, at the time that was a redundant building, not much use for it or anything else and practises and they weren't, you know. Obviously there was a dwelling there, the times when people lived there where they worked but they weren't considered to be well, there was no consideration to being a dwelling or someone's house to live in, which a lot of these places have become features and an attractive and desirable places to live.

**I: I think it has now, actually, I think it has now been renovated.**

R: It’s now on the second owners after renovation.

**I: And did you go down to the ford when you were at school as well?**

R: No, because that would have been down on the A1065, wasn’t really safe. You gotta cross there, you went down onto the river in the park and then well, obviously it was just permission off the estate just to go down to there and see things and just walk along but I can't remember much memories about that, really.

[00:14:20]

**I: Yes, as you said, it was very much owned by the estate and you couldn’t wander freely down there you had to be part of something.**

R: No, I mean the estate, just the historical bits there they had the river. And then the other side they had a large pond, which was, or a lake really and that was cleared out, excavated, and that was used for either duck flighting in the winter and ice skating when it had frozen over. It had all the sluices and everything built into as well and then it was used, there was a boat house and everything, and they used it for their own swimming and their own leisure activities as well.

**I: So you were able to go down there occasionally…?**

R: [Over speaking] Well, you couldn’t cross, there was what you’d call an ‘ornamental bridge’ but you could see part of it because it wasn’t overgrown then and it was open.

**I: Did you hear a bit about it then or…?**

R: It’s just, you’ve heard about it from other people and different items as you got older and listened to and people said, you know, that was there. And obviously it was well known more then for duck flighting, ‘cause the last owner of the estate as it was at that time would have been in their late 70s so obviously their activities then and that was probably pre-World War 2 and other bits how they used it.

**I: What is ‘duck flighting’?**

R: That is shooting at, so wild ducks, so obviously if you have a large expanse of water, so it's another form of sporting, shooting, so the ducks are there and there's fed and there's the area. So the ducks come in to flight and they had a large platform erected in the middle of the lake, sort of a wooden platform for people to sit on or they're sat in their boat and shot those ducks. But that wouldn't have been done all day that was done early in the morning, just as dawn and the light was coming up or dusk as the ducks were coming in to roost.

**I: Have you ever heard of there being a decoy there by any chance? I've no idea.**

R: No, the only decoy I known that exists, and you can just see the outline on the map, is at Didlington. And there is a book about decoys, I can't recall the name of it now, and actually I sold it at the auction but there was a duck decoys and they actually gave into the history. But they were done differently, they were done as, in the old days, with the, so they looked similar to an octopus or a spider, with the tentacles coming off the ponds and his leading lights and they were done purely as commercial entity. And they were made to source of revenue particularly in the early part of the 19th century, ducks were caught live and enticed into the nets. I mean they still do them now for ringing and conservation purposes but a lot of those decoys have sadly sort of neglected because there isn't a necessity for them that there was.

**I: I think I might have seen the same book, which is fascinating, which is why I thought I'd ask you…**

R: [Over speaking] That listed virtually I think every decoy in the area and even told you how much duck meat, and they were probably as a village area, most were owned by an estate but some could be rented off or done, or if you had the chance to own them they probably the major source of income although for a limited time. So I think the Lakenheath one was probably the most profitable. And I think they could take, at certain times of the season, take nearly a ton of duck, catch a total of a ton of duck or goose within a week.

**I: That’s a lot of ducks or geese.**

R: It is.

[00:18:35]

**I: Fascinating. So Hilborough ford is something you’ve been to much later then with your children, is that?**

R: Yeah, you took the children because it had become, it was a deeper channel and other people have done it, there was some overhanging trees with a swing, it was wider and it hadn't fully been dredged. So I think people had realised where it was and people had left bits of rope swinging from trees to mess around with. So that was on the occasion bit but you didn’t go and do it when everyone else was there so it wasn’t a Sunday afternoon thing or something.

**I: And the same with Ickburgh as well perhaps?**

R: Ickburgh, yeah. But Ickburgh is more of an open, it's a lot wider, shallow expanse but it is quite nice too, I know other people have gone there with their younger children to visit, because it's easier to wade into and get out, it’s a lot easier to get into and probably not so stony to walk into for younger children. I mean, like I said, our river you have to sort of, you could slide into it at times really with the banks.

**I: So, also it's something you were telling me on the phone a little while ago, what's your feeling about all this, I think about children playing in rivers or, you know, learning about them and the wildlife? What do you think, do you have any thoughts on it?**

R: If you're a parent it's obviously a concern and a worry to you because it's a mistake in a way but I think it does allow children a sense of adventure where it's reasonably safe to go. They learn some of their own risk and averse points and it just gives them another activity away and learning, I think it creates more of a memory and another interest. And it's just like that photo you’ve shown us was a fairly common one, there's one with the same but it's taken from the other side of the river going the other way. Yeah, that’s the one again, so that would be…so I think that is the girl Neat [spelling?], this time my father’s on the right, his brother is on the left and like I said somewhere along there there’d be an Applegate and I could probably get a school photo identifying. And I should probably say it's probably the cameraman’s vehicle.

**I: I hadn't spotted that, yes. He's come along and taken some photos, they probably were postcards, I think, perhaps?**

R: Oh, yeah. But, well there wasn’t the amusement and the cost, most people in the village they're agricultural labourers, cottages or anything. And the children had to make their own amusement there wasn’t the leisure facilities or anything else and if there was a radio they were only allowed to listen to it a certain time if there was a children’s point, it wasn’t…

**I: And presumably that’s really just a summer activity, I should imagine…?**

R: [Over speaking] I don’t think they'd be wading in there in the summer [means winter] time. But obviously if there was parts that were frozen or the part of the river which would have been this bit here, this field here, would have been part of there so obviously they would’ve played in that and done things. But again, like I said, most houses they were a simple two up, down, so they were probably sharing bedrooms and everything so there wasn’t the space in the house so whenever you could have the opportunity you ran outside.

[00:22:30]

**I: And do you think for yourself you were talking about how you were exploring wildlife do you think that sort of created a life long interest in you as well?**

R: I think the interest was already there so that just there was the opportunity to do it further, which perhaps other people didn’t have or wouldn’t have had doing the river. So you’d notice more things and you just notice, I've been fortunate enough to have grown up on the same, have that same stretch of the river so you notice things have changed and what has done. So in some ways I've done it but in some ways perhaps the river’s been more overgrown and less dredged now obviously that changes wildlife habitats. We had mink, so you know you lose voles and everything else I think they’ve now gone. Otters have come back in although a native species although more aquatic but they can still have an affect on the other parts of the wildlife because they are the top predator in that part of the river.

**I: Are you at all interested in fish?**

R: No, if I see a shoal of fish in the river it's of interest.

**I: [Over speaking] I mean, as in terms of fishing…**

R: [Over speaking]I'venever gone fishing but yeah, you do see oh, there's a shoal of fish, so yeah it's an interest to see where it is in the river but, you know, all these rivers are prone to pollution at any time so I think the fish are the first to suffer once it hits into an area it slows.

**I: Are you aware of any population in this part of the river?**

R: Not recently, although there was some pollution several years back and there's always people saying oh, they found something in rivers further down but whether we get it. On the picture, so on this one, to the left of here there's now a pumping station so it was of a concern last year over when it was the water table was so high the pumping station can cope. So Anglia Water had a license from the Environment Agency to pump directly what they called the ‘surface water’ out of their sewerage system but it did cause alarm to people but they were supposed to have monitored it but obviously anything like that, sewerage I would have thought is a concern to anyone.

**I: Was it a concern in previous times, to your memory, or that you’ve heard of?**

R: I think most people thought the river took all our rubbish away so it just went down. So probably the people that lived in Great Cressingham, in Hillborough and there, moaned about the people that lived at North Pickenham. And the North Pickenham people moaned about the people in Necton. And I think we still do when there's a bit of rubbish that comes floating down, you moan about someone further upstream and that is whether, I don’t suppose then but it was a possibility but things were washed in the river and everything else.

[00:25:40]

**I: On this subject, what about the cattle and the way people have regarded or have farmed their cattle near rivers, has that changed at times?**

R: Well, if you’d have had obviously anything there it was the access to the water because anything was manual, it wasn’t easy, so water had to be carried into sheds or anything even the horses. So any field that had an access to a natural stream or a pond, which had cleansed water whether it was a spring fed one, or they had access into the river to drink is so useful. And cattle will frequently, probably not entirely good but it does have its benefits, which way depends on the stocking density but they would frequently stand in a river or something of water because obviously the water’s then going around their equivalent of their ankles and it lowers their blood temperatures. So if they're feeling hot, they wouldn’t got and sit in it, but they will certainly stand in it for a length of time to allow the blood to go further down. And the streams for sheep they would have a diversion, often a sluice bit, there so they can enable them to dip the sheep, which I think worry a lot of people with more the modern points but the sheep had to be dipped and they needed that quantity of water to clean it out so will have created those areas just besides them. And I think any river anyone had sheep that would have been a normal occurrence because they would have needed the water in the summer so the river would have been a guaranteed source of water.

**I: Any other places that you or your family have sort of played in or by, around here, do you know? Those are the main three you’ve mentioned?**

R: My grandparents lived at Bradenham, you’d have gone down because there was still the shallow concrete ford but their house was away but you'd have just, again the river was there. And the other points which just come through is, then further down you’d have heard stories from other people just, so Didlington had the famous bit and then right from Mundford everything, it was a very important trout fishing part of the river and I think still is owned by a consortium of people that have the fishing rights there and that’s a very, I think it still holds its value and it was of a lot of interest, even after the war when agricultural land was down still fishing rights. And it was the same as in Buckenham Tofts where the hall was and the water features and obviously people recognised the bits such as Buckenham Tofts in Dads Army, what was the old ornamental park was used. So they're all of interest to people, I think people are still fascinated by a river and it's nice point of sale, ‘I've got a bit of river frontage’, or something.

[00:28:50]

**I: And actually the Stanta area of course that was taken over in the war, wasn’t it. Have you heard from your parents or anyone, sort of any memories of going into the water within there at all?**

R: No, I mean I've only heard of people, the Buckenham Tofts and you just heard those bits of the fishing, so Didlington, there was the fishing, The Heronry, although it’s more the lake with the hall at the time but it was the fishing that carried there. And I think it was a shock, you know, people were paying more to own the rights to the fishing they actually were for the land or anything else. Yeah, the other bit was Buckenham Tofts, it was a major sort of, again there was Buckenham Tofts and Didlington who had the trial areas although there was some, the Mills family had the Hilborough Estate and there is some large articles and bits that were in the Country Life because they did actually very loudly complain about having the rivers dredged, whether it's by the agriculture board and got it stopped. And then certain bits had to be paid in compensation for the level of dredging because they considered it more a sporting estate and they were water meadows and they wanted to make the meadows to be used, so instead of saying ‘it was not been able to graze or stocked’, you know, for a fair part of the year they wanted to increase in further down for the land and obviously they didn’t want that so…

**I: When was that, just after…?**

R: That would be about ’48, something like that. But that would have been, there was a large article, and I've seen it somewhere and there's a picture of Mrs Mills and she's virtually in what is essentially a large canal, so they said it's dropped the water table of the place, there's no fish and she's standing there and sort of with a Pekinese dog on the side saying how bad it is and the trees just have all been ripped out and ruined one part of the area…

[00:31:00]

[not transcribed]

[00:31:22] Hilborough school, preschool run by Dye family, Hilborough village school last 1979, fire and freezing outdoor toilets.

[00:33:30] The Pits by the Greyhound, sometimes used as a name for where auctions held.

[00:34:32]

 Houghton Springs is private, I'm not sure because it went up for sale whether it's been changed, that was owned by, well it go with Houghton Farm and I'm not sure if it's now been bought back by the estate because it did go to the estate. So that was a famous or well known for duck flighting and used for it there, very expansive piece of water and never known to have dried up.

**I: So mainly for duck, what did you call it, sorry, duck flighting?**

R: Duck flighting. It would have been there as a sporting point to have had on that and you can still hear, seems a very good area for wildlife, because like I said, the river hasn’t been dredged or interfered with that area and the water expanses and it is a major source, but I presume it draw the water, has found a gap from coming from Houghton and the highpoint of Ashill to filter through out into the river at that point, there's a pond there.

**I: So that has always been, as far as you know, private rather than…?**

R: [Over speaking] That’s private, I then can remember it’s my father, like many other people, when he was young he went poached to get some food and their dog got, he was more worried about losing the dog because the dog managed to get tangled up in the reeds that were around the edge of it and getting her out before anything else.

**I: And Caudle Springs as well, I think that’s?**

R: I think Caudle Springs is the other side, between South Pickenham and Great Cressingham I'd have walked there when I was younger but I don’t remember again, there was duck flighting in those areas were used at that time. And they were just being lightly grazed or grazed during the winter but they would have been kept for their sporting activities.

[00:36:25]

[not transcribed] Wells, marked on a map, water fed into the houses. Changes in the way water and the rivers are regarded.

[00:39:05] Water table and changes, floods and springs drying up, more awareness of pollution.

[00:43:352] End of recording.