**Rachel Spinney**

**Short summary of subjects covered**

Born 1971, Thetford, parents moved from London, father was a seafarer, built a canoe, had Wayfarer dinghy in the garden for the sound. Canoeing and playing in the water at Santon Downham. Different attitudes from father – have fun, mother – fears about dangers of water, which influenced Rachel. Moved to Mundford, as teenager played at Lynford gravel pit, Ickburgh canoeing with adventure centre boats MoD area, weir, and stories about a bottomless pit, boys skated on ice on Lynford Hall Lake. Discussion about knowledge about danger and forbidden activities. Influence on enjoyment of water as a swimmer nowadays and on water-based activities with children.

Interview 26 April 2022, interviewer Imogen Radford

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Key:

**I – Interviewer**

R - Respondent

**I: My name is Imogen Radford. I’m one of the volunteers for the Tales from the River project and we’re here at Rachel’s house to do an interview about her memories. Would you like to tell me your name?**

R: Rachel Spinney is my name.

**I: And you can either tell me your date of birth of your year of birth whatever you’re happy with?**

R: Yeah sure I was born in 1971.

**I: Okay and what’s your occupation now?**

R: So I’m actually now a full time carer.

**I: And it’s, sort of, one of these background things, your father’s occupation, your mother’s occupation?**

R: My parents you mean?

**I: Hmm.**

R: So father was a TV engineer and mother, kind of, worked in a school.

**I: And you were just telling me before we started about how you were one of the first generation or you were the first in your generation of your family to move from London to Thetford?**

R: Yeah so I was actually born in Thetford. So I was the first member of my family born in Norfolk on that side. And it was in a housing estate, it was in St John’s Way housing estate in Thetford. So my mum worked at the local school there and I attended the local primary school in Thetford.

**I: So a Thetford girl?**

R: So I’m a Thetford lass yes.

**I: So tell me as a child what sort of things, I mean I’m particularly interested in what you got up to in terms of recreation activities and maybe how it was related to the river?**

R: Yeah absolutely. I mean in terms of rivers, so my father was actually in the Merchant Navy so he had an interest in seafaring anyway. And in later years we moved to another estate in Thetford whereby we had a wayfaring dingy. So it was actually always parked at the front of the house with the mast up and we’d fall asleep with the ding, ding, ding you know, of the mast swaying in the wind, which used to make him laugh but this, sort of, rattled through the cul de sac of this housing estate. So water and sailing and being on the water was really important to my father.

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So he actually built a wooden canoe, it was quite a clumpy thing that he built but it was beautiful. It was, kind of, slim line but it had quite a deep hull on it. So he built this amazing canoe. And so our family weekends would really be at Santon Downham in this canoe and I was really little at that time. I’ve got a brother who is eight years older than me. So we both really had good fun with this canoe in Santon Downham. So that is my early childhood memories really.

**I: That must have been wonderful. So just down the road, canoe in the car or whatever.**

R: Yeah absolutely strap it to the car and take it down there. It was before parking fees so it was free activity there. We could paddle and catch tiddler fish and swim, splash yeah really enjoyable times. And then later in life my aunt also moved from, oh I can’t remember where she lived now but anyway she moved down to Thetford with my younger cousin. So again they joined in this activity on the river and I’ve got lots of fond memories of Santon Downham.

**I: That’s wonderful. And it is quite shallow there isn’t it so for little children I imagine…**

R: Yeah I never realised how shallow it was because to me obviously it was quite deep. And it wasn’t until actually a few years ago that I, kind of, went to that spot and I was “Like oh my gosh it’s so shallow here.” But it just felt very deep at that time.

**I: Yes the levels might have gone down a bit and they vary from year to year but I think it’s possibly more your memory…**

R: Yes absolutely that’s it.

**I: What about your father’s attitude to it in terms of, you know, teaching about safety or was he thinking this is a nice shallow place or was it just let’s go and have fun?**

R: I think my father was just like just go and have fun. And there was always an absolute disaster because there is a massive difference between, you know, wayfaring dinghies on the Broads and canoes in Santon Downham and oil tankers, you know, in the Americas. And my mum was really fearful, so my mum would be like “Oh my goodness this is really scary you’re going to drown.” And my dad just doesn’t care, you know, and so comical. One of the incidents on one of the Broads was he said “Oh let’s just stop here in the middle of the Broad for our picnic” and he threw the anchor in and it wasn’t attached to anything. And that just, kind of, sums it up, you know, the amount of times we’d have to be rescued. So we’d be stuck in trees or the boom would snap, you know, we would have literally people in the sailing clubs shouting at us and my dad shouting back saying “You would have lost the race anyway.” So it was always very gung ho of my dad. And my mum would be an absolute bag of nerves, you, know, throughout all of it.

**I: So she didn’t get in the water herself?**

R: No she didn’t. She really didn’t like to do that. She did do, like, a weekend course, again somewhere on the Broads with my dad to build her confidence up and did the capsize drill, you know, she found it really terrifying but she did it, which is also amazing to be that scared and still actually do it.

[00:06:15]

**I: That’s impressive actually isn’t it?**

R: Yeah that’s it and not to stop us as children who she feels really protective over, you know, to not stop us from doing it.

**I: Was that talked about or was it you just got on and did it and you knew that mum was scared and…?**

R: Yeah nobody really talked about it. It was just literally what happened. I mean the only time I saw my dad, sort of, scared or angry with my brother was he said, he told my brother because my brother would then be older than me, kind of go off with the canoe with his friends. And he would say “Never go over the Thetford weir in that canoe” because it was quite a sharp, sort of, pointy hull on it and he said “Don’t do that.” And once he was driving past the weir at Thetford and he saw my brother on it with his mates and he stopped the car and gave them all a really good telling off. That was the only time I’ve seen my dad be that reactive around water.

**I: It is almost like don’t do it and that was a major….?**

R: Yes absolutely that’s it.

**I: So would you say that whole, sort of, experience then that in later life you have then gone on and carried on enjoying water?**

R: It is really funny because actually I did inherit more of my mum’s fear of water. So it was never being out of depth, you know, it was also worried about what I was treading on. And actually in Santon Downham I had something slice the top of my toe off when I was a child as well. I was convinced it was a pike at that age, you know, but it was probably a bit of debris in the river. And my mum was really fearful of the reeds, so I’ve been really scared of reeds. So I’ve, kind of, grown up, although there was been water around us actually I do have a fear of it in terms of being out of my depth or not being able to see the bottom of water. And it has prevented me from enjoying water in the way that I could have done and would have been expected to have done with water being so much part of my childhood.

So I started, because I’m not a very good swimmer at all, you know, because I always had a life jacket and I didn’t really need to learn to swim and I was always in my depth paddling. So it is only in recent years really that I’ve actually started to push myself in terms of water and it was two years ago when I did my first river swim with the Norfolk and Suffolk Wild Swimming Group. And again I was really nervous of that. I didn’t swim so much I was more, sort of, just checking out the depth and seeing where I shouldn’t go beyond.

**I: And you carried on since then?**

R: Yeah so now, actually somebody had a tow float and that was a game changer for me because I know if I’m in difficulty I can swim on my back. But to have a tow float it’s great. I know I can grab onto something. So now I’m swimming in currents and I’m swimming out of my depth where there are reeds, you know, or I can’t see the bottom. And swimming in rivers in Norwich, you know, again where there is debris and such like. So I feel that’s been a game changer for me actually.

[00:09:53]

**I: So going back again to your earlier years you were telling me some stories earlier around some of things that people got up to, you or others, would you like to tell me some of those?**

R: Yeah. So in my teenage years, as a teenager I moved to Mundford. And there you had, I think you reminded me of the names….

**I: Buckenham Tofts or Ickburgh.**

R: Yes that’s it. So they had waterways there. And then you also had the pits that have been dug out at Lynford that they were still extracting gravel from in Lynford. So as a teenager I’m, kind of, getting up to all sorts of mischief. I’ve got a lot of the teenage lads on their little 50cc motorbikes and stuff. And so me and my step-sister actually like to hang on, you know, on our pushbikes we’d hang onto the back of their motorbikes and get a tow up the road at 20 mile an hour, 30 mile an hour without helmets, as you do. And then once we were in the Thetford forest we used to ride our friends’ motorbikes, so we’d go up and down pits and things. So we used to hang out round by the river. There was a rope swing there. But again I was quite cautious of the water and then it was, kind of, my first understanding and acknowledgement of, like, grass snakes in the which, kind of, freaked me out a little bit. And also there were rumours of there being a bottomless pit there at Ickburgh. And there used to be an activity centre there and so sometimes there used to be canoes lying around and we used to hoik off in a canoe and go for a paddle. But I remember always being, kind of, worried about this bottomless pit and it was rumoured that there was a whirl pool that could suck you in. So we’d enjoy it but again I was still quite nervous of that part of the river.

And then I would always avoid the gravel pit but then I had some friends saying “No, no we go swimming there.” So once I went swimming there and it was still, it was just basically great big holes in the ground. There was no, the whole of that area was, kind of, cleared so there was no shrubbery or anything in that area. It was just like sandy deep sides. And the water over the years had, kind of, collected so it was quite deep. But there was a sandy shelf so we, kind of, slide down to the sandy shelf and then my friends were quite competent swimmers and they were swimming off this sandy shelf. There was no way I was going to do that. I just felt my job was to be, kind of, watchman if anybody got into any difficulty I could jump on my pushbike and high tail it back to Mundford and raise the alarm because again we didn’t have mobile phones or anything. But I never enjoyed being there. I was always quite anxious when I was with that group of friends.

**I: And do you think that was like when you were saying earlier about that nervousness you got from your mum?**

R: Yeah I would say it was definitely, kind of, inherited, you know, really from my mum. And actually I’m pleased it was there actually. I still don’t feel that I missed out on anything for not swimming. I think even my friends that were swimming were also nervous about it as well. I think they were more centred on showing off to the boys.

**I: Was it girls that were swimming?**

R: It was the girls that were swimming yes and the boys were on their motorbikes.

**I: And they never admitted they were scared?**

R: No but I think that they were, you know, they would hang close to the edge and I think that they liked the fact that somebody was there, kind of, ready to raise the alarm. I think it was all of these unspoken words around it.

[00:14:05]

**I: Interesting yeah. Did the boys get in as well?**

R: Sometimes they did but mainly, you know, I can’t really remember that. My memories are more of the girls. So whether that’s just that I, kind of, yeah it wasn’t so significant for whatever reason or possibly because I’d gone down there with the girls so that was my little group I’d gone with.

**I: By the way you are the first person I’ve found who has actually told me about swimming in that way a few years ago so it’s really interesting to me. Can you remember or can you, sort of, locate from what it’s like now, where that might have been?**

R: I don’t quite know. I suspect, because you’ve got the two pits there and I can’t even remember there being two pits I just remember it being one pit. So whether there was two pits and I just didn’t pay the other one attention I can’t really remember. The only bit I can think it might be is with the, so you’ve got the pit where you had the bird hides used to be there and then to the right is the bit where it actually, there is that sandy shelf. Whether it was that pit, maybe they’ve extended that sandy shelf, it was definitely much lower down. It was quite a scramble to get down to it from what I remember. So whether that was just, sort of, built up I don’t know. That’s the only thing I can imagine from it.

**I: Yeah as you say it must have looked very different without all the trees and it must be very difficult to locate it. I do know that the one on the right as you come from the car park, the far part of it is very new. The next bit I think is…so you would have been there what year would that be?**

R: So that would have been in the late 1980s because I would have been 16 because I was born in ’71. Well I wasn’t quite 16 so it is, kind of like, from the age of 14 to 16.

**I: It doesn’t matter really exactly but it’s really interesting to, sort of, yeah to hear about those experiences.**

R: Absolutely. And there wasn’t, you know, at the time we went there there was nobody else there swimming. I never felt that anybody else was swimming there. I just very much felt that this was something that we were doing, you know, ourselves and it was a naughty thing to do as well. So there was that air of don’t tell anybody we’re doing this and nobody else is doing this because it is an unsafe thing to do because you’ve got the sandy sides of the gravel pits itself, which are hazardous anyway. And this sandy shelf I don’t know how secure that shelf really was. And then you’ve got the deep water and nobody around, nobody around.

**I: Yeah that’s really interesting so you were very well aware it was not allowed and also it was not safe really or you felt it was not safe?**

R: That’s it. And also there was security around there. So if anybody, you know, from the pit or whatever saw us we would be essentially chased off as well.

**I: Did that happen?**

R: It did once it happened somebody was shouting at us and we scarpered. So it was like “Oh we’ve got to be careful of the security in that area.” But it wasn’t, you know, it was a dangerous area anyway because you’re on the edge of the MOD land there as well. And so occasionally we would, kind of, wander off into that as well to take short cuts and then you had these gravel pits. And then you also had Lynford Lake itself and so in the winter that would freeze over and the lads in the village would take their pushbikes down there and skate around on these pushbikes on top of the lake, again which I found a bit worrying.

**I: That’s the lake down by the hall is it?**

R: Yeah that’s it by the hall.

**I: That’s fairly shallow.**

R: It is fairly shallow.

**I: It froze quite solid I imagine.**

R: Yeah it would freeze.

[00:18:21]

**I: That’s interesting so around the same, sort of, time?**

R: Yeah that was all the same sort of time. So it, kind of, went from me being a young girl in Santon Downham really to paddling around in my depth to then not really having any contact with water for quite a few years and then being a teenager and then me, sort of, risk taking in water activities or being quite scared of what we were doing.

**I: So it’s kind of a mixture of being scared but also knowing it was naughty and also the excitement presumably to an extent?**

R: Absolutely yes.

**I: So I’ve not heard of people skating on that other lake either that’s really interesting. Again did anyone see you or were you…?**

R: No again it was something we knew we shouldn’t be doing. There was a lad in the village who was particularly into his motorbike stunts and things like that and he was a bit of a reckless rider as a teenager. And again he was quite good on his BMXs and stuff so he used to do stunts and slides on his bike across it. And for him it would have been wonderful because it would be an opportunity to skid and slide that he just wouldn’t be able to do any other time of year or anywhere else.

**I: So you were on the side watching this?**

R: Yeah watching them mucking about definitely.

**I: Presumably he was also showing off to the friends and the girls?**

R: Yeah and I should think there was a showing off element and just his own sheer enjoyment he just loved that stunt stuff that he was doing.

**I: And did people in the village talk about either lake really?**

R: There was never really any talk in the village that I noticed around the pits at all. The main, sort of, talk was the Lynford Lake but it was more about how beautiful the Lynford Lake was and there was a walk around the lake and through the arboretum. So it was much more, you know a very different experience of the lake than my experience of the lake. And again you’d never see anybody swimming in there, whether that’s because of the lilies and things in there and the amount of vegetation, I don’t really know why you don’t see people swimming in the lake. But it was never something that would be spoken about at all it was more just about how beautiful it was and what a beautiful circular walk it was. The gravel pits, yeah didn’t really, wasn’t really part of a conversation apart from the dangers of it. And the other area really was more talk around the activity centre that was next door to it. So people would talk about how wonderful it was because apparently that was mainly rented out for youth groups from London. And so there was this amazing opportunity for London children to come out and see the countryside of Norfolk and play in the river and be in the forest. So it was spoken about in that way, being an amazing opportunity for outsiders to come and enjoy.

**I: So I was going to ask you a bit more about that because again I’ve not really spoken to anyone who knows it in detail. So you saw the young people coming from that centre or…?**

R: Yeah I can never remember seeing anybody there, which is strange that I can’t really remember seeing anybody there. And it may have been that, again it was just when people were there we would just move off to a different area. So it was just insignificant because we were mischief making you’re not going to be doing it around a group of youth workers. So it hasn’t really registered. But I know that sometimes we would definitely go there and nobody would be there and those canoes would be laid out and it would be like “Whoa.”

**I: Irresistible.**

R: Yes.

[00:22:43]

**I: You talked about this bottomless pit, did people locate this or were they just saying it was somewhere?**

R: No that was the worst part of it. If I knew where it was I’d have felt so much happier but as soon as I was in that stolen canoe, commandeered canoe on that water I’m immediately thinking “Am I over the bottomless pit and am I going to be taken by a whirl pool.” If I’d known where it was it would have been easier.

**I: And where did you go? Did you go downstream or upstream?**

R: So I remember it being, kind of, more, so if on the other side of the river really to where the, so I always think a bit of where the rope swing is and there is a bridge I think to the left. So we would go right in the opposite direction to the bridge and up there. And again it would be quite reedy and I can’t really remember it seeming deep. It always seemed shallow to me.

**I: You didn’t go up the other way into the firing area?**

R: No we didn’t in the canoes, no never on the canoes.

**I: Did you go up there not in the canoes?**

R: Yes we would go up not in canoes but never in the canoes yeah.

**I: I wonder if it is that weir because I’ve actually twice been in that weir and felt it pull me. So I wonder if somebody has had that experience and then the story has expanded into a bottomless pit?**

R: It’s so fascinating isn’t it how these, kind of, stories occur and a friend of mine did a course on how fairies have shaped the landscapes, and again fairies, I didn’t realise, vanished people down holes. So a lot of these stories involved holes, you know, don’t go there, don’t plough that field because you’ll be banished down the fairy hole. But it is actually just where the ground subsides, you know, so it’s interesting how these things come about.

**I: Did you get the impression that story was, like, just because it’s an interesting story or was it some kind of deliberate thing trying to prevent people going in or putting people off?**

R: Well in hindsight now as a mother I would assume that the stories were there to put people like us off going there. And some degree it would have worked, it did work because we were definitely cautious about what we did in the area as a result I think of that. Or I certainly was even if the others weren’t, I certainly was.

**I: It’s interesting to compare the knowledge and the attitudes and do you think that you and your friends, sort of, understood the dangers?**

R: No I think as children you really, kind of, don’t, to be fair, understand the actual dangers and the significance of it. So I think although the adults I supposed do but we really didn’t although I was nervous of the consequences I wouldn’t have really understood what that actually was.

**I: That’s interesting. And did anyone jump into the water?**

R: Yeah on the pits there because there was the rope swing, so people would, you know, could be swinging on that rope swing and jump in, again it was something I never did but it was something that they would do.

**I: And the weir as well perhaps? Did anyone jump or use the rope swing there?**

R: Yeah. That’s it use the rope swing there yeah absolutely.

**I: Did you?**

R: No I didn’t because, and even to this day I’m quite fearful of being splashed as well. I’m not very good with being splashed. So it is really bizarre that I, kind of, grew up as a young person in water yet actually I’m really fearful of it. So I don’t like being splashed. In fact I even recently had an experience of swimming in Norwich where, it’s an area where there is a lot of dog walkers and I think this dog walker was trying to encourage their dog into the water, saw me swimming there and thought it was an ideal opportunity and she literally threw her dog in and it splashed in the river next to me. It was quite funny.

**I: Exactly what you wouldn’t want really?**

R: It was a big splash yeah.

[00:27:25]

**I: And can I ask, you talked about being a mother, does your child or children do they go in the water or do you take them or anything like that?**

R: No and again it’s also quite funny really because we also lived in Happisburgh next to the sea. So I was going quite regularly in the sea but again I’m quite scared of the sea and the currents of that area. So we would go in quite regularly but again I was far less of a competent swimmer than I am now and so it would be like, right this is where we stop. And again with my son I, kind of, feel like we could have done so much more. We could have been much more Swallows and Amazony than we actually were. I mean we did canoe in north Norfolk, you know, and I still canoe now. I have a canoe. But also part of that is our family circumstances became really complex so we just weren’t able to, kind of, access the waterways in the way that I would have liked to have done for my young children to improve their confidence and sail and do the things that I did as a kid.

**I: Yeah circumstances and location all have a factor don’t they?**

R: Absolutely.

**I: It’s very interesting the way you described your mother’s attitude, your father’s attitude and then how it has influenced you and then how it might influence another generation.**

R: Yeah absolutely, that’s it. With my daughter I have taken her a couple of times to the Hellesdon Mill pit [pool] there, that’s quite good and again she uses my tow float and stuff. So that’s always nice to do that and she’s enjoyed doing that in the summer. My son now isn’t, you know, so interested in it but he’s more into canoeing so then we get out in the canoe together which is really nice instead.

**I: And do you go back and revisit Lynford and Ickburgh and places like that?**

R: I walk, you know, I walk around Lynford Lake and we walk up to the gravel pits and have a look around there. And I keep saying “Right I’m going to go for a swim or a paddle or something at Lynford pits” but there is still the element of, like, I feel like I’m doing something naughty or something wrong. So that’s why I need to do it.

**I: It sounds like that’s something you going to stay with?**

R: Yeah the resistance that’s it, you know, and there is an element where I, kind of go “Those two lovely lakes there is so much they could do there in terms of water sports and again within the community.” It is really under-utilised I feel, you know, but yet I still have resistance.

**I: And that’s obviously persisted throughout even though you’ve gone out and challenged yourself and done all sorts of things.**

R: Yeah absolutely. Also did you know about the mammoth at the pits?

**I: I’ve heard a little bit about that.**

R: Yeah okay because apparently that’s in the Thetford museum.

**I: Is it, oh yes.**

R: So that was found within the pits apparently.

**I: Is that something you knew about in earlier years?**

R: No, no I knew nothing about that until recently, until discussing the pits with my step-father and he said about it. And I was like “Really I can’t remember any of that at all.”

**I: So it is obviously not something that teenagers thought about?**

R: No not their thing.

**I: That’s an additional fear…**

R: No nobody told us about a mammoth coming to get us. Swim in there a mammoth would get you.

**I: Water snakes were enough.**

R: Yes.

**I: Did you think the grass snakes were going to hurt you?**

R: So as such no, you know, because they’re not known for doing that whereas you’ve got the adders obviously. But I just found them quite unsettling to be around. And even recently getting into the river here in Norwich at Anderson’s Meadow as I was, kind of getting in with a friend there was a, like, a track that looked like a snake because it was zig zagging and I was like “Oh it’s a snake.” It wouldn’t have put me off getting in the water at this point. But when it, kind of, got to the other side where there were some reeds, it wasn’t it was a little water vole. But the track of it looked like a snake so that was quite funny. Oh it’s only a water vole anyway.

**I: And do you like seeing nature?**

R: Yeah I do. I do like that side of it, seeing the river from that eye level. And there is a difference there, you know, canoeing on it. So recently I was canoeing with a friend who I do river swimming with and we were like “Oh there’s sort of brown blotches on top of the water” that when we’re swimming in it we don’t notice that, which I think is pollen bloom or something. So it’s, kind of, interesting how you get these different perspectives of the water from walking alongside it to swimming in it and then canoeing on it. Yeah it is quite interesting. And I also always remember walking along Santon Downham with my mum and a friend of my mum’s when we were teenagers and there was rain coming towards us and you could see it in the water. It was like this wall of rain coming down the river towards us, you know, and it was like you could draw a line and that was fascinating because you wouldn’t see that on the ground but in the water you could see that. It gave a totally different perspective again.

**I: That’s really interesting. Have you any other memories or thoughts about any of it really?**

R: No I think that’s pretty much it in terms of things that I can, kind of, remember with the water. I really did enjoy my younger years at Santon Downham, those were my fond memories because I felt safe in that environment, whereas the teenage memories that has an element of risk being naughty and involved in it. And I love having the opportunity to, when I can you know, access the water locally and have a different relationship with water again. I really appreciate that and being in the cold water and that was something I would never get into the water unless it was the height of summer or on a sunny day. I hated cold water but now having a different love and respect for cold water.

[00:34:47] End