Chris Thacker

**Short summary of subjects covered**

Born 1947, Thetford, moved to Brandon aged 17. Swimming in the river baths, collecting for the new indoor baths, several swim places in the river. Belly tank boats, parts of the river including ‘Death Alley’, using a pram as a trolley. Fishing, some fish sold to a lady for her cat, fishing and the cannery’s coloured discharge, coffee mill, eel babbing, fish bailiffs and licence. Witnessed weed cutting with scythes, and a narrow gauge mining type railway beside the river.

Interview 3 May 2022, interviewer Imogen Radford

**Audio filename: 2022\_05\_03\_CT001\_01\_02\_03\_A**

**IR = Interviewer – Imogen Radford**

CT = Interviewee – Christopher Thacker

[00:00:00]

**IR: I’ll just start by saying that we’re in the Guildhall here in Thetford, I’m going to talk to Mr Thacker. So, my name is Imogen Radford, and this is the Tales from the River project. Would you mind telling me your name again?**

CT: My name is Christopher Thacker.

**IR: Okay, thank you, and could you tell me the year of your birth?**

CT: 1947, I was born in Thetford in Ford Street at the Osborn Nursing Home.

**IR: And so, did you live in Thetford all your life?**

CT: No, till I was 17 when I moved to Brandon.

**IR: Oh, right.**

CT: Not too far away.

**IR: Is that where you are now?**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: Oh, okay.**

CT: Not super travelled.

**IR: Just before we do anymore, I’ll just ask you, what was your occupation most of the time?**

CT: I was a sign maker by trade, an engraver, but I was also always interested in motor vehicles, I’ve been a car man most of my life.

**IR: Right, so the project, and you know because you’ve been chatting to us across the road, is concentrating on the river and the sort of things people did in Thetford, cause we’re here today, but other places as well. So, I’d be really interested to hear really from your earliest of age of what do you remember doing in the rivers or by the rivers?**

CT: I expect till the age of about six or seven, you went down to the local swimming pools at the Three Nuns’ Bridges on the side of the river and I learnt the man’s name today, Stooshy was his nickname. He also used to work at the sewage works. He was the man who used to collect, I believe it was sixpence to go in, to actually swim in the river. And then, there was a row of wooden huts where you had the girls’ huts, a multiple change hut, where girls and boys could change, and then the men’s huts at the other end where the diving board and everything was. And then, the other side of the river there was a big sandy bank that you could go over for sunbathing. But yeah, that was just on the side of the river, semi learnt to swim there.

**IR: Did you? Semi?**

CT: Semi, yeah.

**IR: And was that sort of informally or were there lessons?**

CT: I can’t remember any lessons.

**IR: No, no lessons.**

CT: Usually you were pushed in *[laughs],* you learned the hard way, yeah.

**IR: Sink or swim.**

CT: Yes.

**IR: And was it cold?**

CT: I can’t remember, I can’t remember. We were youngsters so it was probably, you shrugged it off really, that was just good fun to go and be able to go down the river, and a lot of your mates, you’d all meet down there, and yeah. But that was part of the growing up in Thetford because that was a very small town at the time, and everybody knew everybody else.

**IR: And you went there from quite an early age...**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: ... and like, all the way through the time you were in Thetford?**

CT: Till I was about 12 I think, and Mr Smith, I can’t tell you his name, I know him as Mr Smith, he used to drive round the town and was collecting money to build the new swimming pool. He would collect a lot of cardboard and stuff and resell that to, I expect, Mr Knott, to the scrapyard, and used that money to put towards having a proper swimming pool built, which I believe ended up at Croxton Road, that’s the current swimming pool.

**IR: And yeah, so were you involved in that at all, or you just knew that it happened?**

CT: Just knew, yeah, he would come round at weekends collecting and you’d see him.

**IR: So, why did you, or in what circumstances did you stop going there, age or did it close, or...?**

CT: Well, I left Thetford when I was 17 so I had the little bit in between. I don’t know, you just found other things, yeah. Cause by 16 I had a motorbike and then you’d all meet at the Hole in the Wall Café, they used to call it, that’s near the Mason’s Hall. I know the proper name of that, the Mill Head, yeah, there was a café there, so that was a meeting place for everybody.

**IR: So, you moved away from swimming and went in motorbikes and other interests.**

CT: Yeah, yeah, got into motorbikes and cars and then doing a bit of stock car racing, yeah, as you did in those days.

**IR: So, did you go anywhere else apart from these swimming baths by the Nuns Bridges? Did you go to different places?**

CT: Erm, in Thetford itself?

**IR: Oh, anywhere really.**

[00:04:51]

CT: Yeah, one of the things when we were youngsters, we used to get what they called belly tanks. They were the drop tanks off aircraft, and you could chop a hole in the top, smacking your fingers a few times as I can remember, and you used a piece of 4x2 wood across the top and got two five gallon drums each side and made it into a boat, and you could then go out on the river. But some of the other local boys had a pair of drop tanks, fixed them together like a catamaran, made a square wooden raft on the top and six of them could paddle it, yeah. But that was one of the things, cause a lot of people got redundant military stuff and made use of it in another vein.

**IR: Did you just have the one tank on yours?**

CT: Yeah, yeah.

**IR: Did that stay stable or did that...?**

CT: Well, you just had a piece of 4x2 across the side of it and two five-gallon drums on each side.

**IR: I see, the drums in addition to the belly thing, yeah.**

CT: Yes, they were the stability things on the outside.

**IR: And then you used paddles to...**

CT: Yeah, just to paddle.

**IR: Where did you go?**

CT: You used an old chassis of a pram, and you could take your boat and launch it near the, err, Mill Head. You could get down to the river there, and you could go there and then back up to the pulp works, because where the pulp works were, you couldn’t get any further cause the factory was built over the river. And the other way you went up and that was another dead end, or you went down what us young lads used to call Death Alley, that went down past what is now the cinema and that.

There were two maltings on the right-hand side of the river going towards the Town Bridge and on the left-hand side was Woods Garage, and the only thing in between where the 3-Legged bridge was, and the Town Bridge was metal rings in the wall. That was the only thing, if something went wrong and you started to sink, you could be... and we used to call it Death Alley because that was a risky place to go down, and then you’d go down as far as, nearly to the Stanch, which was right out of town in those days.

**IR: The first one, number one?**

CT: Yeah, and then you’d haul it out of the river, put it on your chassis and then wheel it up to where the Diss Road roundabout is now, and launch it in there, and then you could go round and round by the Nunnery and round by the swimming pool. But yeah, that was... because the rivers were cut in half, yeah.

**IR: So, this pram chassis, you put it on the boat and then go up in the boat and then go home?**

CT: No, you just used the pram chassis as a...

**IR: ...like a trolley?**

CT: ... you’d pick it out and use it like a trolley, which was an ideal thing.

**IR: Perfect, yeah. And did you go up from the baths, past the Nunnery and up to Barnham?**

CT: Only just Barnham, no, not as far as Barnham, just past the bridge. By the time you got there you’d done a lot of paddling *[laughs].*

**IR: Upstream, yeah.**

CT: Upstream, yeah.

**IR: Yeah, and then you just came back down.**

CT: Yeah, and then the other river went up past what was the old railway station, and where the original old bridge is there now, where the Diss Road roundabout is. And then you could go up there and then they built a weir and that was a bit deep, you didn’t go up there too far. But that was another place to go swimming, up there.

**IR: Oh, did you go up there, did you?**

CT: Yeah, that was another place to swim in the river, but you were on your own up there. Usually three or four of you went because that was very deep there. Had a big rope hanging out of the tree and you could swing out into the river and drop yourself in, yeah.

**IR: Is that just upstream of the old bridge, where you mean, or was it downstream of the old bridge?**

CT: Upstream, yeah, of what... is it Hurth Way? The new road that comes from the Norwich Road roundabout to the Diss roundabout, and the bridge now crosses the river. That was the old railway line.

**IR: I know where you mean.**

CT: And then, that was going upstream from there. Not that far, but yeah, that was another good place to go swimming. That was deep there, cause a lot of the river was quite shallow, yeah.

**IR: And did a lot of people go up there, or just not very...?**

CT: Yeah, oh yeah, well, if you didn’t have sixpence to go to the swimming pool and you wanna go swimming, and a lot of people won’t understand what sixpence is. But there’d be... how many? 40, there’d be 60 sixpences in a pound *[laughs].*

**IR: And so, that was quite a lot of money basically?**

CT: Oh, yeah, yeah.

**IR: And did people... where it’s deep, did they jump in as well?**

CT: Yeah, jump in, go swimming, and just a fun thing to do when you were a youngster, yeah.

**IR: What sort of age were you when you went up there, or was it similar sort of time?**

CT: Ten or eleven, I reckon, used to go up there.

**IR: And was it sort of like, you’d expect to be a bit older or be able to swim quite well, cause it was deep up there?**

CT: Yeah, you had to be able to swim really, because there was no attendant, no nothing, you was... but then, if you was with your mates, if something went wrong, they’d help you out. But yeah, a lot of local people used to go up there, but that was out of town.

**IR: What did you call it there?**

CT: I don’t think it had a name.

**IR: But yeah, so that was quite a trek to go up there?**

CT: Oh, yeah, yeah. You went from the bottom Tavern Bridge, walked up the side of the river, walked over the railway bridge...

**IR: Right.**

CT: ... walked... actually went over the bridge to the other side of the river and then walked up the right-hand side of the river as you were going against the flow. I don’t know, that weren’t all that far up there but that was a reasonable... but that was out of the way. And the other side of the river was Allen Newport sandpit, it’s now all housing in there now and it goes down towards Tesco’s. Some places alter.

**IR: They do, yeah. When it was a sandpit, was it literally used, and people collected sand from there?**

CT: Yeah, Allen Newport, I think are still... do sand and gravel, they were a big firm. They had a big pit at Euston as well, yeah, sand and gravel.

**IR: And that didn’t... you sort of kept away from that when you were doing your swimming on the other bank?**

CT: Yeah, yeah, that was sort of across the fields a bit, the sandpit.

**IR: And so, you went up there, then you went down to the Death Alley, as you called it...**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: ... did you get any further down, down to the Stanch?**

CT: Nearly to the Stanch, but if you were in a boat you didn’t go too close to the Stanch because you couldn’t get away from it. The draw of the river would pull you over. But there was a roller slide at the side of the Stanch where you could run your boat down, but didn’t ever go any further because, time you’d got to the Stanch you were a long way out of town... and you were a youngster.

**IR: So, you had to go back upstream?**

CT: Yeah, you had to paddle back upstream and then back up Death Alley and back to... there was a place where we used to get the belly tanks out... erm, where Argos used to be, where the car park is now, it was the cannery originally. And at the bottom of the cannery, there was a cut-in off the river that had a bridge across it where they used to load and unload the barges in the olden days, and that was quite a good place, if you were going to leave your boat on the river, to leave it there.

**IR: Was the cannery working then?**

CT: No, no, that was all disused.

**IR: Just sitting there, disused, yeah.**

CT: It’s old buildings, yeah.

[00:12:28]

**IR: And presumably, there weren’t many boats coming and going like the...**

CT: No.

**IR: ... cargo boats then, that was earlier, wasn’t it?**

CT: Where the 3-Legged Bridge is at Butten Island, on the corner of Butten Island there was a big old barge laying on its side, sunken in the corner of the river, yeah, it’s on the corner of Butten Island virtually. That was one of the mooring places you could moor up there.

**IR: Was the island used in those days?**

CT: No.

**IR: Was it private?**

CT: Private, yeah.

**IR: Somebody else told me, and I forgot to ask him, but you might know. Somebody said that Butten Island was a different name before, named after somebody, not something that you mentioned.**

CT: I don’t know.

**IR: Not to worry.**

CT: Mr and Mrs Cole, who lived in Bury Road, I believe they were something to do with Lamberts, the motor engineers, their garden ran down to the river, and they had a bridge across the river that took you over on to Butten Island. There was a wooden bridge there.

**IR: That was private as well, presumably?**

CT: Yes.

**IR: Is that the one that’s still there or is that a different one? It’s somebody’s now but...**

CT: I’m not sure.

**IR: No, not to worry, but that’s something you just knew about? Cause presumably in your little boats, in your belly boats, you’d be going up that way under that bridge, would you?**

CT: Yeah, yeah. You’d go up to the two iron bridges and you either... if you went to the right-hand one that was very shallow up there, and you could only go a little way. And the swans always used to nest on the side of the river there, which was another hazard *[laughs].* But if you went up the left-hand one, there’s a waterfall from the other river, that was at the back of Mr Culey’s house. And then, you could only go so far, and you came to the other waterfall, or the water level gates along Haling Path. No, it’s not Haling Path, Spring Walks.

**IR: I know, yeah.**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: Yeah, okay, so you’d just go so far and then... you could only go so far and...**

CT: You’d come to a dead end, yeah, you just couldn’t go any further.

**IR: And you were already going upstream by then?**

CT: Oh, yeah, yeah.

**IR: Probably didn’t mind. So, is there anywhere else you went, either swimming or boating, or anything?**

[00:14 :35]

CT: No. When I was a little bit older, I used to go fishing with my cousin, fished in the Mill Head. That was quite good, there used to be one or two pike roaming about in there. You could catch a half tidy fish in there, and under the Town Bridge was good for fishing for perch. There used to be a lot of chub, yeah, near the iron bridges, just down behind St Mary’s which is a big house that went down to the river. And that used to be good for catching chub there , and if you caught a half decent sized fish, an older lady who lived in St Giles Lane, would always give you sixpence for a half decent sized fish to feed her cat on *[laughs].*

**IR: Oh right, yeah, incidentally the same amount as it was to go swimming.**

CT: Precisely, yeah.

**IR: And that by the iron bridges, somebody else told me, is very clear there, so you could see the fish quite well.**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: Was it clear by the Town Bridges, in your memory anyway?**

CT: Yeah, the whole river... always a lot of weeds, and then every now and again, the GORB, Great Ouse River Board or something like that, they used to come along with like a...I don’t know what you’d call it. It was like a scythe, but they were all about three-foot long curved blades, but they were all connected by bolts, so they had a long string of these blades. And two men used to go each side of the river pulling it backwards and forwards to cut the weeds. And then, they used to haul them out at the Stanch, they used to have a big dragline digger and pull them out at the Stanch. They had a rope across the river and catch them all and pile them up.

**IR: And when you say they had this scythe thing, were they on a boat?**

CT: No, they were each side of the bank of the river.

**IR: On each side, I see what you mean, they were standing on each side.**

CT: And then they just pulled this row of curved blades backwards and forwards.

**IR: Oh, right, sort of just moving up the bank a little bit all the time, yeah.**

CT: Yeah, walked along the bank, just like an ordinary field scythe, but a lot of them all joined together. I can’t ever remember any more mechanical things. In my very younger days, there was a little railway track round down Haling Path, right the way down to the back of Cannon’s, and they dumped no end of rubble down there. It’s now a housing estate, because that was all marshland in behind what was Smith’s Garage on the Brandon Road. But in the bit opposite the Warrener, where the new houses are, was very, very marshy land and they were filling that, but I’ve never seen them ever build anything there. But they ran these... they were like mining cars that run on a railway line, like a V-shape, and they took no end of rubble and stuff down there.

**IR: And so, is that... I know where the Abbey Farm Estate, do you mean there or is that somewhere else you’re talking about?**

CT: No, when you go from the Town Bridge...

**IR: Yeah.**

CT: ... if you go down Haling Path...

**IR: Oh, yes, yes.**

CT: ... then you go underneath the new... old A11 bridge, which was the new one in the day, and then just a bit further on from that, you were nearly to the Brandon Road. And then, there were like two abutments come out of the side of the... there’s a walkover bridge there now, but apparently there was a bridge there in the wartime, and that was a feed from what was the canneries. I believe they made army uniforms in the wartime at what was the canning factory. That was a uniform production place, yeah, cause they ran it down and they wanted the Brandon Road, I expect, to take them away.

**IR: Oh, so this was a railway that was put in especially for this work to put the rubble there...**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: ... and that went along the Haling Path, you said?**

CT: Yeah, went the bottom of Haling Path.

**IR: Roughly when was that? Do you know?**

CT: That would have been very early fifties, ’51, ’52, what I can remember of *[laughs].* But yeah, that was quite a novelty thing to see, a very narrow-gauge railway track. But I have seen these similar sorts of things at other mines where they have small mines and had like push-along carts. I can’t remember it having any train or anything to draw it, I think that was just a manual push-along little four-wheel carriage thing, yeah.

**IR: That would have been fascinating cause you would have been quite young then...**

CT: When you were a youngster, yeah, that was...

**IR: ... you’d have been watching this thing.**

CT: Yeah, state-of-the-art travel *[laughs].*

**IR: Did you try and hitch a ride on it?**

CT: Oh yeah, because the men were always with them when they were moving backwards and forwards.

**IR: And so then presumably, then that got taken away once they finished the work on it, yeah.**

[00:19:24]

CT: Yeah, and what is now Wilkinson’s was not that far down from in between the Town Bridge and the first A11 bridge used to be the Norfolk Canneries, and quite often if you were fishing, you’d go and look to see what discharges they were giving. If that was peas or whether that was bits of strawberries, or whatever the discharge was coming out in the river, you’d go back to the greengrocers and buy whatever it was and use that for bait.

**IR: Yeah, so somebody else mentioned the canning, so yeah, you’d have this discharge of different colours for different...**

CT: The riverbed maybe six or seven foot from the pipe would come out and that would be green with peas, yeah, or that would be a nice colour red with strawberries, and the river looked like somebody had been killed, it looked like blood running down the river where they were processing all this stuff. Yeah, it was Duncan’s, yeah.

**IR: And for the fishing, did that attract the fish, did you find?**

CT: Yeah, the fish used to... they used to like the peas, for the main things to catch the fish with, yeah, dace, chub. The perch were usually you’d have to fish with the small fish, like the pike, you know. But yeah, when you were a youngster, that was quite good fun.

**IR: And did the water coming out of the cannery, was that warm, do you remember?**

CT: I don’t know, that was just their effluent waste.

**IR: Looking colourful.**

CT: In today’s age, there would be uproar at discharging something like that into a river, but that was how it was, yeah.

**IR: Did you fish anywhere else?**

CT: No, mainly...

**IR: Those were the main places.**

CT: Yeah, sometimes go fishing for eels but they were difficult to catch, and they were horrible things. You’d try and get your hook out and they’d wrap around your arm and, yeah, they were quite lively things to catch. Where normal dace and roach and perch and that, you could just get them out, get your hook, remove it, pull your hook out, put them in your safety net and, yeah.

**IR: So, you’ve talked about one fish that the lady would buy for a sixpence, but would you...?**

CT: Usually a chub or a dace if they were a reasonable size fish.

**IR: So, would you normally take the fish out and... you know, take them to either buy, or eat, or sell or eat, or whatever?**

CT: Usually she was the only customer.

**IR: Or did you take them home sometimes?**

CT: Miss Cracknell, that was her name.

**IR: Well done.**

CT: The memory... yeah, she used to buy. And also, Miss Cracknell, every four weeks she used to get me to go to Mr Barnes & Sons, what was the electrical shop, to take her accumulators that were the batteries for her radio, to take them up to his shop where he charged them, and bring her other two batteries back for her to put back in the radio, yeah.

**IR: Did you take any of the fish home to eat, for your mum to cook or anything?**

CT: No.

**IR: Just put them back in the river?**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: What about the pike? Same thing with the pike?**

CT: Yeah, pike used to go back in again, yeah.

**IR: Where did you catch the pike? Or did you catch the pike?**

CT: Mainly in the Mill Head, that was a good place for catching pike.

**IR: Can you tell me where you mean by the Mill Head?**

CT: Erm, it’s now the Mason’s Lodge, erm, that’s at the back of the library, near the car park, where the water comes out of like two tunnels.

**IR: Where it comes out of the mill, the coffee mill?**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: Ah yes, I’m with you now.**

CT: Yeah, that was always known as the coffee mill because they used to grind coffee for Ibex, which was the international shop/store, that used to be their coffee production grinding works. Then they had a packaging plant on the other side, where the car park is now.

**IR: Did it smell of coffee?**

CT: Yeah, oh yeah, it was a real strong smell.

**IR: I wonder if that had any effluent that went in the river as well *[laughs],* a coffee-coloured river.**

CT: Who knows? Environmental things weren’t... apparently, from years and years ago I read about history, is that the effluent place from the canneries used to smell all over the town. They had no end of complaints about the canneries and how much smell there was from the canneries.

**IR: And so, you moved to Brandon, but before you moved to Brandon, did you do anything else in the rivers in Thetford?**

CT: No, not really.

**IR: You told me about all of that. So, what about when you went to Brandon, did you have anything to do with the river there at all?**

CT: No.

**IR: No? You were concentrating on all your motor interests and so on?**

CT: Got to the time in life when fast cars and fast women were more interesting *[laughs].* I don’t know if I should say that.

**IR: *[Laughs]* I don’t know, but you know, you move on, don’t you? Yeah.**

CT: Yeah, as you grow up and then plus you have to go to work because you have to earn the money. Things have never changed in life, everything revolves around the dreaded money, yeah.

[00:24:24]

**IR: Okay, so anything else you can tell us that relates to the river or activities, or any stories or anything?**

CT: All I know is that two of the older men in the town used to go in the night-time with a punt and they used to put the punt poles down in the river and wedge the boat so it was still, and then they used to thread worms on wool on a ball and they’d roll that into the river, and then they’d wait till an eel came along and they’d pick it up. And the eel would be stuck on, and they’d just shake it in the boat, and they’d have all these eels wriggling about in the bottom of the boat. But quite what they did with the eels or what happened to them, I don’t know, but that was another thing.

**IR: Not something you did though?**

CT: No, that was down near the Bridge Tavern, that was the main place where they used to do that, yeah.

**IR: Oh, right.**

CT: The old Bury railway station originally.

**IR: Yes, right, that’s further down on the common, isn’t it? Or beyond the common?**

CT: No, where the Diss Road roundabout is now.

**IR: Oh, sorry, yeah, sorry, getting mixed up.**

CT: I believe the bridge is still there, the railway two-arch bridge is still there, yeah. Arlington Way now, you go round and go into... there’s a big housing estate built in there. It goes up to the back of the Nunnery.

**IR: Okay, and that’s called... tell me again, sorry? Tell me the name of the place you just said?**

CT: Arlington Way.

**IR: Yeah, before that, Bridge... Bridge Tavern.**

CT: Bridge Tavern.

**IR: Bridge Tavern, yeah.**

CT: That was the bottom bridge railway station.

**IR: Why was it called Bridge Tavern? Do you know, did anyone mention it?**

CT: I believe cause the railway went there originally and usually at a railway stop they built a pub, and that was always... And that changed hands, especially in recent years, quite a few different people did different things there, I believe it’s still closed at the moment. But the station yard is actually where the Diss Road roundabout is now.

**IR: Ah right, I see, I see.**

CT: The roadway that goes up to the old A11, the Norwich Road roundabout, and then back up the Mundford Road, was the old Bury St Edmunds railway line, and then it run through and went past RAF Barnham. There was a station at Barnham, there was a station further on at Ingham, and then that curled round and went into Bury St Edmunds.

**IR: Right, I’m beginning to understand the geography better now, yeah, which you gather I don’t know so well. Well, that’s really interesting, thank you so much.**

CT: That’s okay. They had a torch, lower it in the river, and then they’d pick it up and get an eel hanging on it, and they’d go *[noise],* then all these eels were *[noise],* cause they’d shift, they were rare things. At the Diss Road roundabout, cause the old bridge is there and the new bridge is beside it.

**IR: ...telling us about the babbing?**

CT: Oh, yeah.

**IR: That was what you were telling us earlier, but you’ve now remembered the name of it is, with the eel...?**

CT: Is babbing.

**IR: Eel babbing?**

CT: Yeah.

**IR: When they would have these wool...**

CT: A wool ball on a string, yeah, and usually at night-times, and then hold it at the end of the punt and lift it out, and then just shake it and the eels would just be squiggling about in the boat.

**IR: And you didn’t fancy that?**

CT: No.

**IR: And just say the bit about the bailiff again for me. You were saying about the bailiff, you remember the name of the fishing bailiff?**

CT: Mr Parish.

**IR: Mr Parish, and did he check that people were fishing where they should be or shouldn’t be?**

CT: Yeah, or if you’d got a fishing licence.

**IR: If you’d got a licence, yeah.**

CT: What you had to buy from Clark’s, the toy shop in King Street. That’s now the YMCA fundraising centre, business centre.

[00:27:59] **[End of transcript]**