**Robert Kybird 23 February 2024 transcript of oral history interview,**

**interviewed by Imogen Radford, (length: 01:17:10)**

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**Short summary**

Robert Kybird, born 1952, lived in Thetford all but seven years of his life, key role of family in business and council aspects of the town, including the expansion. Memories of swimming, boating and other recreation.

**Summary of subjects covered**

Kybird and Mayes family, Watermill for game food (now Coffee Mill), Burrell’s, wheelwrights. Always interested in museums, role now. Learnt to swim with Thetford Grammar School at the river swimming baths, Arthur Singer. Two Mile Bottom river walks, swimming at the common and Third Stanch, spring. Older cousin and father camping there. Others swam at Santon Downham and Barnham Cross common. St Helens well and oratory, spring, water levels. Mask and snorkel swimming. Canvas canoe, Water Lane. Importance of rivers to Thetford, commitment to promoting Thetford. Expansion – father key role – planned with jobs, workers, housing, regeneration and recreation, including river by Abbey Farm, new bridges, underpass. Inner relief road. Canning factory. Lowndes at the Nunnery. Punjab/Duleep Singh connections. Photos discussed: the mill, steam traction engines to plough, steam launch, concert party by the staunch, family and friends including WG Clarke.

Key:

**I = Interviewer, Imogen Radford**

R = Respondent, Robert Kybird

[00:00:00]

**I: So, my name is Imogen Radford. I'm from the Tales from the River Project, which is part of the BFER project, and I'm here to interview Robert Kybird. So if you'd like just to tell me your name, please?**

R: So I'm Robert Kybird. I was born in Thetford and I've lived here for all but seven years of my life.

**I: Would you mind telling me the year of your birth or even the date?**

R: It was the 17th of October, 1952.

**I: Okay, thanks. Just a few little bits and pieces about family. What's your occupation?**

R: I'm multi-hatted really. So, I used to run the family building business, which my youngest son is now running. I'm a District Councillor. I am also involved in some technology companies with a friend I did physics with at the university. So, as I said, multi-hatted.

**I: And just a couple more family things. Your father's occupation?**

R: My father, he started the family building business. So he was a building company manager from 1947 till he retired in the late seventies.

**I: And your mother?**

R: My mother, before the war trained as a florist and then she lost her fiancé in the Second World War and then married my father in early 1952. She did work in the office at the Thetford Canning factory, which is obviously next to the river.

**I: So, thank you for telling me about your family, and perhaps that might be a good place to start. Tell me a bit more about your family connection with Thetford?**

[00:01:55]

R: Well, the Kybirds moved to Thetford in about 1850. They were wheelwrights and then great-grandfather was a pattern maker at Burrell's and his son Charles was a turner at Burrell's. So the wheels concept sort of runs through for the last 200 years, really. On my mother's side, my grandmother was a Mayes and her grandfather was the head game keeper at Elveden. So, there's a lot of other family history that comes from that side of the family.

**I: Yes. I don't know where to start really. So the project is focusing on water-related things, but actually you can't really separate them from other things. I mean, you were mentioning to me before we started about the photograph and the Mayes family being involved in that.**

R: Yes, So, after Duleep Singh died in 1893, James Mayes declined to carry on with the Earl of Iveagh. I think he'd accumulated sufficient funds to, in 1899, buy the water mill in Thetford which he used to produce pheasant and game food.

**I: Was that for the estate?**

R: No. No. It was a commercial enterprise selling it. He was widely respected around the country as the man to talk to if you wanted to know how to rear pheasants.

**I: Which is a big industry.**

R: Yes.

**I: Presumably, has been for quite a while in the area. So that was the mill connection.**

R: Yes.

**I: And when did he sell it on? When did it move on to different families?**

R: Well, his son-in-law, whose surname was Keymeractually ran the mill and I think they ran up until the 1930s that eventually ended up as the Ibex Coffee Mill, which you may or may not know.

**I: Yes. Yeah. So did it go straight from your family member to the coffee, do you think?**

R: As far as I'm aware from Norfolk Mills website, whether it was idle in between, I would imagine it was, but I don't think there was an intermittent use.

**I: Okay. That's interesting. So have you heard any stories from that period, or is that bit too far back in the generations?**

R: Well, recent stories said when the bungalow that was built next to the mill, several barrel loads of Roman coins were removed by night.

**I: *[Laughter]*. Well, one doesn't know who.**

R: No. One doesn't know.

**I: Oh gosh. So, obviously a long history at that site.**

R: Well, obviously, yeah, a river crossing for at least 2,000 years.

[00:04:55]

**I: Okay, interesting. So how about wheels? Again, you were mentioning wheels just now.**

R: Well, wheelwrights. I mean, wheelwrights, blacksmiths and millers were sort of itinerant workers. They could take their skills around the county. So they could sell themselves to the highest bidder or actually run their own businesses. So, they were much freer, and my great-great-great-great grandfather married a miller's daughter in Old Buckenham, and the Locke family operated a number of windmills both sides of the Norfolk/Suffolk border.

**I: And where does that tie in with this photograph you were showing me of the steam tractors? You mentioned something about the connection with the wheels.**

R: My grandfather, Charles Kybird was a turner at Burrell's works and in particular he worked on the rear drive wheels for the traction engines. So the particular engines in this photograph appear to be a pair of ploughing engines because they've got a large additional chain drive wheel and they would put one either end of a field and pull the plough across. You can see this demonstrated at Weeting Country [steam] Fair on occasions.

**I: The photograph shows two ploughs, or two machines, not ploughs, sorry. The traction engines. So perhaps they were, well, we don't know.**

R: Yes. They were made as a right and left hand pair so that they could move up either end of the field and pull the plough across one end to the other.

**I: So we see two there, but perhaps they were going to move into position before or after that photo, or is that too much speculation?**

R: I would imagine they have been ploughing nearby and had come down the river to restock up with water.

**I: Of course. Yes. Yes, and we don't know where that is, do we? Or do we?**

R: No, we don't. Actually there are some hills on the horizon, so maybe it isn't as local as we thought it might be.

**I: Yes. There are not a vast number of hills. There is one or two small ones, isn't there? And the river is intriguing 'cause the field seems to go straight into the river rather than having some kind of bank.**

R: Yes. Certainly, it sort of looks has the potential to have been a fording point of the river.

**I: Yes, possibly. Yes. Yes. Very intriguing, and we don't really know the date, but we've got a rough idea maybe?**

R: I would suggest 1890s to 1910. Somewhere within that time window.

[00:08:10]

**I: So before the war. That's an interesting connection, and is that a period you've heard any stories about at all or memories has been passed down?**

R: So, during the First World War the engineering skills at Burrell's, my grandfather went to work at Woolwich Arsenal, and I know a number of the Mayes families went to work at other engineering works to machine things like wire cutters for use in the trenches, et cetera. So engineering skills were highly valued and were rediverted to the war effort.

**I: Okay. I meant to ask you, when you were saying about the rear wheels, I gather that things were very specialised. You would specialise in rear wheels in particular. Do you know more about that at all?**

R: Well, I imagine you have different size lathes for different size pieces of machinery. So if you were used to working a particular lathe, that's what you would do.

**I: So the war effort, so directed to the war effort, how much longer after the war did steam engines and Burrell's go on? And perhaps your family connection with it?**

R: Well, I think the internal combustion engine was sort of the advanced warning that steam has passed its heyday as road transport. Although it took another 40 years as regards rail transport, but I think Burrell's ceased manufacturing in 1924 and most people were redundant by 1926.

**I: And steam was applied for the tractors and so on, but also for boats, wasn't it? You've showed me another photo.**

R: Yes. We have a rather poor copy of a steam leisure boat that used to go up and down the Little Ouse in the centre of Thetford, I believe, and this particular photo shows a concert party going for a ride. So some nice striped jackets and a canopy to keep the sun off.

**I: *[Laughter]*. I think you said there might be a copy of that in the Ancient House Museum.**

R: I think there may well be. I think I've said my cousin has got the original. I shall keep trying to get hold of the original, but it's hard work.

**I: You have your cousin, which cousin is that may I ask?**

R: His name is Anthony Mayes.

[00:11:05]

**I: Okay. 'Cause you have another cousin who I actually came across you through, if you see what I mean, which was Basil Kybird. I think he was your cousin.**

R: Yes. He was my...

**I: On the other side of the family.**

R: ...my father's eldest brother's son. So he is my first, well, he's no longer with us, but my first cousin. Well, his father was the first detective chief superintendent in Norfolk and Basil followed his footsteps into police force, and I think his final bit of his career, he was the crime prevention officer for Norwich City.

**I: Yes. He had shared a number of memories on the Norfolk Mills site and another person's website about all sorts of memories actually about his life in Thetford and his early life, he went to Methwold and Northwold Mill, but I think that was a little bit distant from you. You were not so much involved in thatarea?**

R: Well, he was I guess nearly 20 years older than me because I'm a late born son of the youngest brother. So I'm half a generation out at least with most of my cousins.

**I: It sounds to me like there's quite a lot of different members of your family that have been connected with different aspects of Thetford over many years, really.**

R: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. I mean, our father became a councillor in 1947 and mayor in 1956 and I became a councillor in 2003 and was mayor in 2007 and 2015.

**I: So very strong connection with Thetford, and also very much with the museums and other institutions; can you talk about that.**

R: So, Breckland has an Area Museums Committee, which has oversight of both Ancient House and Gressenhall and I'm chairman of that, and by being chair of that, I'm on the Norfolk Joint Museums Committee, and by being on that, I've been elected as the vice chairman to represent the districts. So that allows me to be member of all the Area Committees, which is interesting.

**I: Very interesting. Yes. Yes. So you've got an insight into how all of that works, and from that angle you can see information, photos, and stories, but also through your family.**

[00:13:55]

R: Yeah. As a young child, father would, about 1956 when we finally got a car, we'd go down to Two Mile Bottom for walks along the riverbank because around that time, it must be the Little Ouse drainage board, I guess dredged the whole river. So you could walk by this sort of heap of sandy deposit that had been dragged out of the river, but nearly every 20 yards you'd find an old clay pipe or something. It was quite interesting, and then following on from that, it was a good place to swim. So our father used to take us down there and then once I was a bit older, or it must be Grammar School, we used to go down in the summer holidays, either cycled through the forest or on the main Mundford Road, and there were two favourite spots for swimming there, which one was directly opposite the Level Crossing, and you could also move back up the river to the site of the old Third Staunch and swim. There was quite a good current there and where the staunch walls had collapsed a lot of bricks on the river bed which were host to a large number of eels, which you tended to tread on.

**I: That must have been an interesting experience?**

R: It wasn't the preferred place for swimming.

**I: *[Laughter]*. Because of the eels?**

R: Yes.

**I: And the current?**

R: The current was alright.

**I: Well, that's very intriguing 'cause that staunch is less well known being a bit remote, and was there much left of it at the time when you went there?**

R: Really only the side walls and you had to go across quite a bit of marshy land to get there. So there was effectively a track there 'cause I think it was popular as a fishing spot as well as a swimming spot.

**I: So just in terms of how you got there, talking about the Third Staunch first, which route did you take from, sorry, where were you living in Thetford at the time?**

R: About a hundred yards from here.

**I: Right. Right. So slightly north of the centre of the town. So you would go across, through the forest from here?**

R: So you'd either cycle up Mundford Road past the Waterworks, and then free wheel down to Two Mile Bottom across the Level Crossing and then the area that's now used by motorcycles much to its detriment. So on Google Earth here you can see that's the big common area...

**I: Next to what's now the power station.**

R: And there's a slight indent there and that used to be a spring that was a couple of feet above the river level. So you could get nice fresh water there as well.

**I: Right. So the staunch is slightly further that away?**

R: The Third Staunch is...

**I: So that was the favourite place or a favourite place?**

R: That was the favourite place, and in fact on a Sunday afternoon, you'd find 20 or 30 cars parked down here and whole families enjoying the river, but that's not quite similar. Well, the Forestry Commission put a gate across it. I'm not sure they had any right to, but that's a different matter. So if you come back here, there's sort of a little drainage channel that drains that then, but the Third Staunch is back here. So, there was a track across this marshland that in dry weather you could get there without getting your feet wet.

**I: Alright. I see. So you approached from that side in the river.**

R: Yes.

**I: And so you'd go to the first place that's nearest the power station where a lot of people went, but then you or others would make your way up to this other place?**

R: Yes. Yes.

**I: For various reasons because it's...**

R: It's just for interest really.

**I: ...for interest. Yeah. I didn't realise that the popular place was there on the common. I thought it was further down where the scout hut and so on is now, but that's perhaps not. Do you remember going down that road?**

R: No. I don't remember because there was a further staunch by the power station. I don't remember going beyond that to go swimming. Although you could go swimming right down at Santon Downham. I mean, the other popular swimming place was on the Little Ouse Barnham Common and Glynis, my partner, used to go in a hot summer's day, go there almost every day after work.

[00:19:15]

**I: Just sticking with Two Mile Bottom, and you called it that, but that's what it was called also then, Two Mile Bottom?**

R: Yes. Known as Two Mile Bottom Common that one. Although this bit up here is Broadwater Common, I think.

**I: Okay, and do you remember people camping there?**

R: I remember camping there on occasions. We had sort of a summer party in my later teens down there. I remember one evening the mist was rising so everybody could only be seen from waist high upwards, sort of drifting around in this mist.

**I: And did you go as a family as well when you were younger camping?**

R: No. We didn't. I don't recall any regular camping activity there at all. It was probably against the bylaws anyway.

**I: There's a picture on that website where Basil had spoken to, a picture of him and his Uncle George. I don't know what relationship...**

R: That's my father.

**I: That's your father. Ah, I see. Yes. Of them with a...**

R: Okay. Well, it's like they're making a fire to cook something on, isn't it?

**I: So he talked about your father, then, I hadn't realised it, his uncle George, your father.**

R: Yes. I think Basil used to perhaps come and stay sort of as a holiday.

**I: I see. Yeah.**

R: Well, he used to come and visit his grandfather quite regularly.

**I: And of course with that age difference, that's before you even existed, isn't it?**

R: Yes.

**I: Because he's quite a young boy there, in that photo with your dad.**

R: Yes.

**I: Yeah. So it was obviously something that people did further back as well, but not as a regular thing. More as a holiday or occasional thing, the camping part of it. But going down to swim, when you were young you went from time to time to Two Mile Bottom. But then later on...**

[00:21:30]

R: Well, I learnt to swim in the town swimming pool on the river which PE lessons in the summer term were taken there and whatever the water temperature, I think it was 48 on one occasion, which was bracing to say the least, and a gentleman called Arthur Singerwould put sort of a harness around your waist and have a very long pole that he would walk you up and down the swimming pool till you got confident enough to realise you were swimming.

**I: And what age were you when you learned to swim?**

R: 10/11, I'd say.

**I: Did you enjoy that?**

R: Yes. I think once I'd learned to swim, then that's when sort of cycling down to Two Mile Bottom became a summer activity, or it did. On one occasion we went on the 1st of April and we managed to persuade somebody to jump in as an April fool *[laughter]*.

**I: To much laughter all round, except by the person *[laughter]* concerned. Was it quite deep there then?**

R: It varied depending on what they'd done. Depending on where the staunch gates were set, the river level could vary by three or four feet.

**I: Right. Okay. Could you remind me roughly what year that would be when, well, any of that? When you were say 10 or when you were 15.**

R: Well, we would be talking '63 to through '66, something like that.

**I: Okay. So there wouldn't have been boats at that time, presumably, or not many boats?**

R: No. No. But I think at that time the River Authority did cut the weeds which they stopped doing in the late 1990s within Thetford, and then I know that we wanted to do a river festival [under the aegis of] Moving Thetford Forward and I think we had to pay them £5,000 to cut the weeds, which luckily we had a budget for at that time. But what was routine then is no longer routine.

[00:23:55]

**I: So then you went to Barnhamcross Common?**

R: Yes [to name].

**I: With Glynis?**

R: No. She used to go there. That was not my preferred place to swim. But a good friend of mine, his mother, Mary Hayes, used to go swimming there every morning well into her eighties.

**I: But you did go there sometimes, or is that just Glynis that went there? Sorry, about that.**

R: That was just Glynis went there. You do go there as a sort of part of a walk around the common, but not specifically to go swimming.

**I: There's not a great deal of water there. Is there? I don't know if there was more then.**

R: Well, they've diverted some of it now to, they're rewilding the river. So they're encouraging it to meander and set, well, the gravel areas that are created are good for fish stock.

**I: So that's not an area you've got specific memories of as you were more for the Two Mile Bottom?**

R: Yes, indeed.

**I: And the road you mentioned going down, presumably that's very different now, is it? Or it's got quite a lot *[laughter]* busier now, of course?**

R: Yeah. I'm not sure I would want to send a 10-year-old cycling down there now, but there are means by which you can use forest tracks to get there as well, which is more pleasant really and avoids cycling one mile long hill *[laughter]*.

**I: It's alright going down. Coming back must have been pretty interesting, and did you go anywhere else to swim?**

R: No. No. No. That was the key destination.

**I: So you learnt at school in the river pool?**

R: Yes, and by the Nuns' Bridges.

**I: Nuns' Bridges, and then you sort of were able to branch out on your own, and you didn't choose to go and swim in Thetford then?**

R: No.

**I: Because it was not particularly nice?**

R: No. It was just convenient to go down there. It was nice sandy bit there and as I said, there was a spring there, so you didn't have to take a bottle of water with you.

**I: Ah, the spring. Yes. People have told me about the spring. So that was an actual spring that you could drink from?**

R: Yes. Absolutely.

**I: Ah, and that was by the common that you showed me?**

R: Yes.

**I: Alright. Alright.**

R: I mean, I think the water table was generally higher there because if you went a bit further down to St Helen's Well, that used to have several springs in it and a healthy crop of watercress growing there, which was father's reason for heading that way.

[00:26:55]

**I: Ah. Yes. So, did you go there sometime or your father did?**

R: We used to go there I'd say on Sunday walks I think in the summer, some of those were evening walks as well. That bit of the river, you go to St Helen's Well, you can get under the railway there. There's a very poorly maintained sort of footway under the railway bridge there.

**I: But that was a favourite place of your father and then your family when you were younger?**

R: Yes, and you could stand up on the site of the oratory and shout and about three seconds later you will get your voice coming back from the valley as an echo.

**I: Ah. Do you mean up on the top of that hill where...**

R: Yes. St Helen's Oratory it's known as.

**I: Oratory it's called, is it?**

R: Yes. Yes.

**I: Okay. Well, apparently there was a church there?**

R: Yes.

**I: Yeah. Where did the echo come from then? Across the valley?**

R: Well, it was from the Valley back towards Thetford.

**I: Oh. Right. Right, and so the well, what did it look like then? Was it as tree covered as it is now?**

R: No. No. No. There was a few short bits of scrub. No significant trees at all and father always called it Tanner's Well pit, and why that was, I think that just might be a Norfolk dialect version of getting St Helen's to Tanner's. I don't know. I think it was used for extracting chalk as building stone for Thetford and brought back up the river, and of course, if you go due north from there you come to Blood Hill tumulus, which is one of many supposed burial sites of Boudica, but I think it predates Boudica by about 500 years.

**I: It's interesting how all the stories grow up, don't they?**

R: Yes.

**I: I think there are a number of stories about St Helen's Well as well. Have you heard any of those or were those talked about?**

R: No. You might enlighten me on that *[laughter]*.

**I: Yes. I can't remember actually. I think people have associated myths with it. Anyway, that's not something that was talked about. It was just a nice place.** **It had this spring, and did you drink from that spring as well? Those springs there?**

R: On occasions, yes. But there was sort of like a whole arc of them at the head of that. But as I said, I think the groundwater levels must be significantly lower now as it all gets pumped to Cambridge.

**I: And so was there generally a pool there, or you could see the spring there?**

R: It was generally 18 inches to two feet deep there and now it's very rarely any water in there at all.

**I: And that is quite a change, isn't it?**

R: Yeah.

[00:30:20]

**I: Very interesting to hear how it looked that number of years ago. Yes. Thank you, and did you do any other water related-activities such as fishing or boating?**

R: Fishing was not my forte. A friend of mine had a large canvas covered canoe, which took four people to carry down to the river. So we occasionally took that on the river. I mean, I did some mask and snorkel swimming along there, which was kind of, I felt more relaxed swimming like that as well.

**I: Well, that's interesting. What could you see?**

R: Well, you could see the smaller fish that were sort of on the sandy bottom of the river.

**I: And we're talking still about the same place...**

R: Yes. Yes. Yes.

**I: ...in Two Mile Bottom? Ah, and why did you feel more relaxed, do you think?**

R: I think because with the mask and snorkel you don't have to think about when you breathe *[laughter]*.

**I: And you can see, the vision...**

R: Yes.

**I: ...and so on. Yes. Yes. Alright. That's nice. Did other people do that as well? Was that a popular activity?**

R: There was a group of three or four of us who kind of did that on a regular basis.

**I: And the** **canvas boat, how far did you go with that? Did you go upstream, downstream?**

R: Well, that would generally get launched at the bottom of Water Lane, which was then next to the canning factory. So that would be confined to the area between the mill and the First Staunch normally. Otherwise, you could take it beyond the First Staunch and launch it further down and then you could get down to the Second Staunch, which is now just a weir, I think. But at least there's a footbridge across the river at that point.

**I: Did you do that often? Well, you said it was quite heavy. So it was a bit of an operation to do it, was it?**

R: Yeah, I think my friend, Andy, it was two of us tended to go on bicycles more than the others and two of them tended to go out in the canoe more than cycling. So it was horses for courses really.

**I: I see. I've not heard of a canvas sided canoe. That sounds intriguing. Was that something common at the time?**

R: It was sort of a ribbed frame and then stretched canvas and then multiple coats of something waterproof on it.

**I: Was that something you made or somebody made?**

R: Somebody made it. I don't think Andy had the skills to make it. So they may have just acquired it.

**I: So that wasn't so much your thing. Just an occasional thing.**

R: Yes.

**I: You were more of a cycling and snorkelling. *[Laughter]*.**

R: Yes. Yep. Indeed.

[00:33:20]

**I: And walking as well, again, with the family. You said walking by the river as well and the family was an interest.**

R: Oh, absolutely. Yeah, and sort of fossil, well, isn't one. Not fossils per se, but castoffs from the time of barges, I guess.

**I: Did you collect the things and keep them?**

R: I did have a collection at some point of a number of broken clay pipes. I don't think we ever found any coins down there.

**I: Did you find coal?**

R: Yes. Occasional lumps of coal, animal bones. That was about the three main things you'd come across.

**I: And do you think that inspired your later interest in museums, collecting things?**

R: Well, at Grammar School, at the end of the third year, you either did history or biology, and as I was studying sciences, I stopped learning history at age 13, but my father was always keen on our local museum and things historical. So I had an arm's length interest in all things interesting really and a certain pride in Thetford history.

**I: Yes. Yes. Yes, definitely. Just on the sort of biology angle, I suppose, did that also, or your studies lead to an interest? Or did you have an interest in wildlife and the environment and that and so on?**

R: No, because I was doing physics ultimately *[laughter]*.

**I: A bit more esoteric.**

R: Well, things go full circle because physicists are now effectively the guardians of the planet in understanding global warming. So it's a much bigger picture and it's something we're actually actively trying to do something about at the moment. But I can't tell you more because of...

**I: Okay. That's fine.**

R: ...till we file some more patents.

**I: But it's obviously an area that has come back round to, as you say, to being a key interest.**

R: Yes. I mean, I think James Lovelock and the Gaia hypothesis was kind of when it all started coming back together and understanding the world as an entire self-sustaining system.

**I: And when that came out, did that sort of affect you personally? Did you think, oh, yes, or anything like that?**

R: Well, when I was in university I shared a house with, I think there was eight of us in total, but one of those persons was I think a founder member of the Green Party. So we were always being lessoned in what was wrong with the planet from early to mid-seventies.

**I: Right. So it wasn't a new thing to you?**

R: In fact, his day job was designing satellites was *[laughter]*...

**I: Ironic.**

R: ...ironic. Indeed.

[00:36:25]

**I: And you just mentioned a lifelong love of Thetford and life in Thetford. Tell me more about that.**

R: Well, it's a question where you start. I mean, we did as part of the Moving Thetford Forward thing create a comprehensive study called The Thetford 13, which effectively put Thetford's history into 13 consecutive periods. Starting with the Stone Age and the links with Grimes Graves, the Roman age with Boudica on Gallows Hill, etc. So that's a quite a comprehensive document running to 80 pages and is highly, fully referenced as to all the important bits of Thetford that are in the Norfolk Heritage Explorer.

**I: Well, that's interesting. I haven't seen that, but I've seen on the website there is like a timeline with different ages, which presumably has been drawn out of that perhaps to illustrate it.**

R: Yes. I mean, at the time we had Growth Point status. This was written as a business plan, or business case to gather further funding to Thetford to expand it as a destination of choice, but then the Growth Point funding stopped.

**I: So your life in Thetford and your sort of knowledge of it led you at that point to do that particular thing, but was that something that was sort of...?**

R: Well, I became a councillor in 2003 and that point the East of England regional plan had identified Thetford as a potential target for 5,000 to 10,000 houses that took another 17 years for that to materialise as the first house started. It seems crazy time, 17 years in the planning, but those who say they're gonna simplify the planning systems seem to do so by introducing more regulations. *[Laughter]*.

**I: And to what extent this sort of focus on Thetford, or rather, what place did the rivers take in this sort of idea, would you say?**

R: I mean, the confluence of Thet and the Little Ouse has sort of been historically a reason for Thetford. If you could cross a river at Thetford, you only had to cross one. So it was the main crossing point for the prehistoric Icknield way as well. Lots of settlements grow up on river crossings. I think that's the root of why there's a town here in the first place.

**I: And how it developed perhaps as well.**

R: Yes. Well, I mean, the population in 1950 was about the same as it was prior to the reformation, I guess, because, was it 13 or 14 ecclesiastical establishments? And it was a good stopover on the pilgrim route to Walsingham as well.

**I: So the industrial period. I mean, the exhibition that's on at the moment at the Ancient House Museum, I'd sort of got the impression there were quite a lot of people working in various trades.**

R: So in the 1950s, there were only really two employers, which were Norfolk Canneries and Thetford Moulded Products or otherwise known as the Pulp Mill, but after Burrell's closed, that was a big loss to the town, and really you had to sort of get on the train every morning and try and get a job with Norwich Union if you've got the skills.

**I: So population's obviously gone up and down a bit, but in quite a small scale up until 1950-ish.**

[00:40:45]

R: Yes. I mean, my father was not wholly responsible, but was one of the drivers behind having town expansion because he felt it was the only way to bring some kind of prosperity back to the town. So, that's how the London overspill started and he got awarded an MBE for his services for that.

**I: So he played a key role in the overspill?**

R: Yes. He was chairman of town development and planning from late 1950s right through to signing all the agreements with, initially the London County Council, which became the Greater London Council. No. That started small and then got to a sort of a planned size of 20,000. The next logical step was to double that and we [Thetford Borough Council] decided not to do that, and in fact in the seventies, there was the Ladies Estate in Thetford, was effectively 200 surplus houses, which were put on the open market and got a lot of people on housing ladder at very reasonable prices.

**I: So 20,000 was the additional population?**

R: No. We are 25,000 now, but at the end of the period of building larger estates of social housing, I guess we were headed to around 16,000, 17,000 total, and then the building went on to private owned estate, sort of the Admirals Estate and then Cloverfields. So, there's quite an imbalance as to what type of houses are where in Thetford.

**I: So the scheme involved building houses, originally social housing, bringing people from London mainly?**

R: Yes. I mean, the key driver was actually you brought the factories and the workers and the skilled workers were allocated key worker housing, which tended to be slightly bigger and better with a garage, but there was that social hierarchy in terms of even who was identified as key employees. It started with companies like Jeyes. Jeyes moved here. Baxter Healthcare started their UK operation here, I think. Camvac was the first Cambridge spin-out and has recently gone into liquidation, but I think is subject to management buyout. So that's mid-sixties 'cause it used to be called, Camvac was Cambridge Vacuum Research, and it was a university-led process by which you could apply metallic layers to plastic film which we use in everyday packaging, but it was an early tech spin-out.

**I: Yeah. So, the project was bringing all this together. You had the jobs, the factories, the workers, and the housing basically?**

R: Yes, and then of course the town centre regeneration, which *[laughter]* was a two-edged sword, I think.

**I: Slightly controversial?**

R: Yes. I put a photograph up yesterday that I came across on Facebook of the town centre in 1950 which I shall try and show you just to...So the market square is much the same. You had the Primitive Methodist Chapel what is now the Red Cross building and then you had this big Manor House down here. That was actually...

**I: It's not there, is it? Not now.**

R: No. That's where the library is now, but it virtually fell down from being completely full of dry rot.

**I: And this is another big house there.**

R: The White House is still there. It's Grammar School now and [they] use it as a residential annex for their foreign boarders.

**I: And there was a whole street of flint houses, I believe, went down....**

R: Yes. Down here, Well Street.

**I: ...Well Street which are over there.**

R: Which are here. In fact, Glynis used to live in this one, which was called St Cuthbert's Cottage. So the church is just over there.

**I: So the town centre was renovated?**

R: Was brought into the modern age *[laughter]*.

**I: And was it controversial at the time?**

R: Well, it was. I mean, what is now Riverside Walk was four, five-storey high maltings up to the river's edge. So there was no Riverside path through there prior to this. So there were some advantages to opening up the centre, and of course, maltings tended to be only six foot high between floors. So they weren't suitable for residential conversion.

**I: I see. I see. So did they consider that and then just rule it out? Or was it just obviously not much of a starter?**

R: Well, there's maltings in Raymond Street, where effectively they took every other floor out to enable them to actually be used. But that was originally converted for boys club and now it is going to be some kind of special needs school, I believe.

[00:47:55]

**I: You mentioned the canning factory, I think. Did you say Glynis had a connection with that?**

R: No. My mother worked there. She worked in the office prior to getting married, and the manager there, who's a guy called Jack Corston, used to live across the road from us in Vicarage Road. So it did feature the world's tallest baked bean cooker. You may not be aware of.

**I: I didn't know that. No.**

R: 80 foot tall tower for cooking baked beans *[laughter]*. So we used to go down there. It was a good student summer jobs and there would be, 40 or 50 mostly girls come over from Northern Ireland to do the strawberry season. So it was an attractive place for older teenagers to work *[laughter]*.

**I: And the girls, were they older or were they quite young as well?**

R: Well, they were sort of effectively, sixth formers, I guess. That sort of age, but they'd come over here to earn some money. It was interesting times because effectively you'll get truckloads of strawberries and you first of all have to pull out all the rats and mice *[laughter]* so they don't get canned *[laughter]*.

**I: How was that done? Was there a...?**

R: By hand *[laughter]*. So anyway, that was...

**I: Was that the type of work you were doing?**

R: I did work down there one summer because as builders, we didn't have a full-time plumber. So once I'd passed my driving test, we used to drive the plumbers around at the weekend instead.

**I: Slightly less messy work *[laughter]*.**

R: Yes.

**I: Not so many girls, maybe.**

R: Absolutely not *[laughter]*.

**I: So the biggest baked beans, and that presumably worked when they weren't doing strawberries in the summer?**

R: Yes. That was an all year round kind of thing. I mean, it was HP Baked Beans, not Heinz, and Norfolk Canneries. Other main label was Duncan for their peas and then they became Smedley.

**I: Yeah. I've heard that name, and they did beetroot, I believe?**

R: Beetroot, the peas, beans. I mean, I do remember when dad would come home from council meetings and one of the things in the council reports would be the report of the local public health officer who was local to the borough at that time, and there was a regular condemnation of sacks of tomato puree at the canneries *[laughter]*.

**I: But for the state of it while it was in the factory?**

R: Yes. You probably won't hear that from anyone else.

**I: No. No. I hadn't heard that. So, even before it got canned, it was condemned?**

R: It was an issue. I mean, some of those were the old original Burrell's buildings so they weren't necessarily designed to be vermin-proof or anything. It wasn't the sort of controlled environment you would expect of a modern day food factory.

**I: And the discharges from it is something I have heard about.**

R: Bright green.

**I: Yeah. Or red.**

R: Yes. Red for beetroot. Green for peas, and in fact, in the late sixties there was a major extension done to the Sewage Treatment Works so that they could discharge it as trade effluent, and that expansion immediately preceded the closure of the canning factory. So that then enabled the Sewage Treatment Works to be over capacity for the growth of Thetford for a number of years, which is probably why we don't get spillages that other towns suffer from because there's over capacity there.

**I: So it was expanded deliberately for the canning factory effort?**

R: Yes.

**I: I see. Right. But sadly it closed?**

R: Yes.

**I: So, there wasn't a period when that came into use in Thetford?**

R: Well, I trained as an accountant with the Wessex Water Authority down in Bristol and it was 1974 was when the water authorities effectively took over all the water and sewage undertakings. It was at that point that I think trade waste charges came into being. So factories had to pay to have their waste processed and that partly funded the expansion of the works, but it wasn't sort of a capital contribution. It was, well, we are going to do this so they can pay us more money, and then of course they've closed. They had another factory in North Walsham, I think that one carried on a bit longer than the Thetford one.

**I: Do we know why it closed?**

R: I think it was part of the general trend in moving from tinned food to frozen food, I would guess. I mean, Thetford had a foot in both camps really, because we had two cold stores up on the London Road Industrial estate. Plus we had Danepak bacon factory that had its own cold stores, but it was a transition from tinned to frozen that meant, if you go around the supermarket now there's about a hundred feet of frozen food and five feet of tinned, and it used to be the other way around.

**I: People didn't have freezers, of course, in those days. They didn't. Alright. That's interesting. So your mother worked in the office for a while?**

[00:53:45]

R: Yeah. During the war she was a clerk to the garrison officer who was stationed at the Nunnery that was a subset of the Royal Engineers. So her father was in the Royal Engineers. I don't know whether that helped or not, But anyway, she was meticulous and used to run in fear every month of having to do the VAT return.

**I: The Nunnery, that's where the BTO is now?**

R: Correct.

**I: It was previously owned, I don't know what the timing of things were, by a man called Mr Lowndes, I believe.**

R: Jeremy Lowndes. Yes.

**I: Jeremy.**

R: Yeah. I used to stay there on a number of occasions. So his wife was the previous first wife of the Earl of Kimberley. So his stepson who lived with him was Lord Wodehouse and he and I were the same age. So I used to go up there on quite a regular basis and that was my first introduction to Coca-Cola *[laughter]*.

**I: Doesn't quite sound the drink of Lords *[laughter]*.**

R: No. Well, he was only sort of seven or eight at the time. *[Laughter]*.

**I: So that was quite exciting then, presumably as a new thing?**

R: Yes, and we used to sort of harvest time used to ride the grain wagons back from the harvesting and pick out all the ladybirds so they didn't go into the grain drive *[laughter]*.

**I: For the sake of the ladybirds or the grain *[laughter]*?**

R: Well, I think tomatoes are allowed, 2% flies in tomatoes. So *[laughter]* there's no such thing as a vegetarian tin of tomatoes *[laughter]*.

**I: Best not to inquire… *[Laughter]*. So, Mr Lowndes was, was it Mr?**

R: Yes. Jeremy.

**I: Jeremy. Sorry.**

R: Jeremy.

**I: Jeremy Lowndes was a farmer?**

R: Yes. I mean, the Lowndes family was, Lowndes Square in London, that was that family connection. So they had a swimming pool which was a converted septic tank *[laughter]*.

**I: Whereabouts was that then?**

R: So, where you normally go into the BTO, almost opposite that entrance. I guess it was something like 20 foot by 12, something like that.

**I: Did you go in that?**

R: Yes.

**I: It had been cleaned out *[laughter]* since its earlier use.**

R: Yeah. Yeah. Because at the time dad managed Boughton Builders, which became R G Carter, and when it became R G Carter, he started up on his own. But that large single storey bit of the Nunnery, they built in 1950s, which was sort of a large function room really.

[00:57:05]

**I: And did he own a piece of land on the other side of the river too?**

R: Arlington Way. Yes.

**I: Alright. Okay. Yeah. I was thinking of by the swimming pool, swimming baths, but I may have got mixed up with somebody else. So it went through Arlington Way and then back to the river?**

R: So it went up to the edge of Barnham Common. It used to go out to the Euston Road, the farm, down to the, so he had all the gravel pits that were, everything that is currently the Nunnery Stud was his land, and a few fields the other side of the road, which was the Old World War I airfield. You may not know about that.

**I: Is that Snareshill?**

R: Yes. Yes. Yeah. But there's no brick buildings down there. The only residual buildings from that were the squash courts built for the officers *[laughter]*.

**I: And he acquired it after the war, or he'd already had it all the way through?**

R: No. I think he acquired it in the early to mid-fifties.

**I: Did it stretch as far in as Nun's Bridges and the old swimming pools?**

R: Right. So there's a wall that you go through to get into the BTO. So the wall was the boundary, and then I think beyond where the swimming baths were, he certainly owned up to the middle of the river at that point.

**I: The reason I ask is I'd heard that, or I'd read that the far side of the swimming baths, the landowner there paid to put in the bridge, the rickety rackety bridge. I think that might have been before your time.**

R: The one...

**I: The one that preceded the current footbridge.**

R: I don't...

**I: I could have got that wrong though, but what I read didn't say the name of the land owner.**

R: I think you might be confusing that rickety rackety bridge with the one that is at the back of the plains in Bury Road.[in fact there were two, one at the swimming pool] There's a bit of Butten Island that's fenced off and has a bridge over. Now, that bit was fenced off. It belongs to the owner of the other side of the river. That one would've been funded by the owner of, well, it would've been Major Cole. It would be Major Cole.

**I: That was always private, though. I think that area.**

R: Yes. I don't actually know who paid for the bridge across the river there.

**I: I just wondered if it might have been that.**

R: I mean, as far as I was concerned, it was just part of the facility for the swimming pool 'cause you could go over and just go in a normal edge rather than a concrete edge. So I hadn't heard that someone else paid for it, but it's always possible.

[01:00:25]

**I: That's the trouble with this sort of thing, is you pick up bits of information and they don't always tally with other things, or I might have forgotten as well. So always nice to pick up bits of information and piece together a bit like a jigsaw, really. That's all very interesting, and just going back to the expansion, was there any relevance of the river to all of this? Or was that just something that was there? And did people feel, both in the time your father was busy doing that and you've obviously heard quite a bit about that or you know about it. What place did the river play, if any, in this whole business of construction?**

R: Well, it was then called Abbey Farm. I mean, as part of that estate thing that there was this whole terraced link into the river put in. So that became a popular bathing space, particularly for the people living there, and there was a timber palisade fort there as well as the children's play area and that's all disappeared.

**I: So they definitely made some recreation for the newcomers or the new estate?**

R: Absolutely. Yeah. Especially on that final phase because that included a new bridge over the river there as well, and then the Blaydon Bridge, I think came about 1973, or maybe earlier. So if you come down from what was Canons Walk, there's an underpass under the Blaydon Road that leads to that footbridge. So that would've been put in as part of that particular phase of, to give people a direct route into town that didn't involve crossing roads. Very forward thinking in a way.

**I: Yes. Yes. That bypass was part of that whole expansion period?**

R: The Inner Relief Road was because on some Saturdays you'd find two removal vans wedged on the Bell corner and that would then cause a tailback all the way virtually to Newmarket if it clogged up.

**I: Yes, of course. It's easy to forget that the main road went straight through Thetford, didn't it?**

R: Yes, indeed.

**I: As it expanded. Yes. It makes complete sense to have. So, when they put the new road in, did anything get removed by doing that?**

R: There were a few cottages sort of in Water Lane and I think there was...So if you look at the front of the Thomas Paine Hotel, there was a further house and a sweet shop sort of heading north from there, so that went in order because the road used to come and then to go sharp left down White Hart Street. So carrying that straight through we lost a few houses there but not too much. The rest of it was part of what was the school [plain] and then part of what was the Grammar School playing field. So that was all effectively greenfield land rather than having to remove historic buildings.

**I: Yeah. Thank you. That's all really interesting. What else have we not talked about? Is there anything else you can think of particularly related to the river?**

[01:04:25]

R: Only we have this photograph of what appears to be, well, I don't know. These look like perhaps they've been ferreting or something. These look like Jack Russells, don't they? But it's a Sunday, has got fishing rods, you've got music. I just think it's a Sunday afternoon party and I think you told me that all the staunches had these big hand operated wheels. So which one this is at? I don't know. But it is from the era of the smaller flat cap, because if you go back to 1870, the flat cap is much wider.

**I: Really?**

R: Yes.

**I: Alright. So it's after 1870?**

R: I'd say this was sort of 1900-ish. It looks more Edwardian than Victorian, I think.

**I: It was all men, isn't it? I think. Is it all men?**

R: Yes.

**I: Well, boys as well. I think that's*..*.**

R: I think these two probably are Mayes's.

**I: Alright. It's intriguing, isn't it? And just remind me, well, as you said, there's at least two members of the family in there.**

R: I think so, yeah. Because, no. One to the right. So John Taylor Mayes, who was my great-grandfather, I think. He was a keen photographer, and I've got his camera upstairs. A wooden half plate camera.

**I: Plate camera.**

R: And he had seven sons, but I'm told on a Sunday evening, the whole family would have a concert party and each member of the family played a different instrument. There was a harp, there was all sorts. So my grandfather who lived next door before he married my grandmother could play the piano by ear, but he couldn't read music, but he could play any tune played to him, and they just used to line the pints up on the top of the piano and *[laughter]* get him playing. Whereas his wife was a properly trained pianist, used to play the piano at the cinema.

[01:07:15]

**I: In Thetford?**

R: Yeah.

**I: How marvellous.**

R: My youngest son, Paul, plays the piano, but I never managed myself.

**I: Do you think he took the photo and posed them in front of the staunch wheel?**

R: Yes. I would imagine so.

**I: And so that probably has several family members with musical instruments and...**

R: Friends and family. These two are a bit familiar.

**I: And this guy's got a different sort of hat.**

R: Yeah.

**I: And this one.**

R: That's W.G. Clarke.

**I: Well, that would be exciting. What would he be doing there? I mean, was he just a friend?**

R: He was a journalist on the Thetford and Watton Times and interestingly I went to the exhibition launch for the one hundredth anniversary of the Norfolk Archaeological Trust a couple of weeks back, and both he and Prince Frederick were founder signatories of that organisation.

**I: Right. Right. Well, I know of him from the book, of course, which has been influential.**

R: There are two editions.

**I: Yes. Yes. I've got the original. I mean, the first edition.**

R: And his son, Roy Rainbird Clarke was the county archaeologist.

**I: Of course. Yes. Yes. So very...**

R: And he was my cousin's cousin *[laughter]* on his right. So my cousin was Ian Holden and his mother was Melita Carter and his father was a Holden and his father's mother was a Clarke daughter of. So interesting. The Holdens, they were obviously stone masons as well because the three of them, the Maharaja Gravestones at Elveden have got Holden on the back of them as stone mason. I don't think Duleep Singh actually owned, did he own any of the land goes right down to the river? I don't know.

**I: Well, that's an interesting question. Yes. I don't know. Elveden maybe doesn't come up as far as that.**

R: I think that's correct. I think that the town boundary was also the estate boundary.

[01:09:50]

**I: I mean, he might have had some interest in the river though, in other ways perhaps.**

R: Yeah. There's no record of him running a duck shoot, pheasants and partridge. I mean, it still holds the record back for a partridge shoot and this was Duleep's effective Swiss Army knife.

**I: Oh my goodness.**

R: It's a thing for [removing] stones from Horses hooves.

**I: Oh yeah. So you must always have a thing for horses. Oh, that's an enormous piece.**

R: It has toothpick and tweezers. So that's what you take when you go shooting.

**I: Yes, yes.**

R: And those were children's slippers from Elveden.

**I: Oh my goodness.**

R: But there's no particular, I mean, the link with the Punjab, the Punjab have the five rivers, don't they? That's one of them. When we have done the festival on the Punjab, we have had themes on the rivers before.

**I: I didn't know that. Yes. Yes. That's interesting.**

R: So that's the closest link I can give you to Sikhs and rivers.

**I: Fair enough, and there is the statue on the island, of course, but that's not necessarily... Well, actually there is an inscription on it, isn't there? About something to do with the meeting of...Well, no. I don't think it's the inscriptions. When it was opened, I read a report and it said, I think it was probably on the Thetford website or somewhere, and it says that somebody made a speech, somebody from the Punjab community about how the rivers meet here and so do the communities of Thetford and the Sikh community.**

R: Right. That would've been Harbinder Singh.

**I: That's right. Yes. That's absolutely it. Who said something along those lines? So perhaps that alluded to the river connection.**

R: Yeah. I think so.

**I: Yeah, and this photo, this is one of the ones that's in your cousin's loft?**

R: Yes.

**I: Yes. Yes. One day we might be able to investigate this loft.**

R: Maybe he doesn't want me to write a book about Mayes's *[laughter]*.

**I: Ah. Well, that would be good, wouldn't it? If you did.**

R: I mean, they looked like they knew how to party, didn't they?

**I: Yes. That's an absolutely marvellous picture. It'd be wonderful to get a good copy of that, and who knows if there's any other interesting ones, but I think you said you looked already.**

R: No. His mother used to bring things around in small batches, but at the time we had a dodgy photocopier. So this may well be a similar set of people, 'cause you've got the...

**I: This is the one with …**

R: That and that hat seem to… So obviously I...

**I: So this other one, you think there might be a copy at the Ancient House as well of this one?**

R: I think I've seen that elsewhere other than in the family archive, but not necessarily that one.

**I: Not that one. That very much is a family photo, isn't it? By the sound of it.**

R: Yeah. Yeah.

**I: No. That would be very intriguing to get. I think we alluded to this one of the mill, didn't we?**

R: Yeah. I mean, there are so many photos of the mill. It's not unusual one other than...

**I: No. So, the photo with the steam engines and the staunches particularly.**

R: I mean, this morning, the water is way over apparently.

**I: I went down to have a look actually 'cause I was early and it is. Well, I met a man taking a photo and he said it's been, it was even higher a few weeks ago.**

R: The photo I got shown by my son was worse than it was the one before Christmas.

**I: I wasn't entirely convinced about that, but it's good to know.**

R: I got some videos of the Environment Agency, were using it for white water rafting training.

**I: Oh. *[Laughter]*. Well, all the canoeists are flocking there at the moment because it is unusual to have a nice bit of white water in Norfolk. So it's become quite popular.**

R: I've got a couple of video clips of that if you would like them.

**I: The problem with all this flooding is it keeps disrupting the guided walks we wanted to do by the river to show the river off, then we have got to cancel it 'cause there's too much water.**

R: You'll have to get Bush adventures to do...

**I: Boating trips.**

R: ...boating trips. Yes.

[01:14:30]

**I: Okay. Well, I think we've sort of come to a tidy end really, haven't we? Is there anything else you can think of that we haven't?**

R: We've talked about Two Mile Bottom, we talked about Barnham Common, talked about the dredging down by the river. We talked about St Helen's Well. So I think that's the, if you like the, because the other interesting thing about St Helen's Well is that's still within the town boundary.

**I: Oh, right. I didn't know that. Not owned by the town. Owned by Forestry, is it? Or is it owned by the town?**

R: It's on Forestry Commission land, but it's within the historic boundary of the borough of Thetford. Why that is? I don't know.

**I: Interesting. No, I didn't know that. I mean, we've focused very much on the river, but also on the sort of broader issues of the town expansion, which your father in particular had a very key role in, which has had such a major influence on things, hasn't it?**

R: Well, apparently the Cockney accent is now stronger in Thetford because it has been protected as an enclave more than it is in London generally *[laughter]*.

**I: That's interesting. We’ll have to get a linguist onto that one *[laughter]*.**

R: Well, I've heard them called many things *[laughter]*. I mean, languages have their own sort of Darwinian, what's the word? Evolution, I suppose, don't they? New words come in, other words change meaning. So the only thing I haven't mentioned is my hobby, which is neuroscience and how the brain works and what consciousness is.

**I: And that's a hobby?**

R: Yeah. It's 30 years of reading *[laughter]*. Am I wiser? Possibly. I've had some interesting trips abroad and met some interesting people and philosophy professors and all that kind of stuff. I haven't done it lately though.

**I: Yes. Unless there's anything else to say…**

R: I think I've found some photos of interest, isn't it? Even if there wasn’t one of people sitting in rubber rings by the river.

**I: No. I think they're absolutely fascinating photos.**

**Ends**

**[01:17:10]**