Adrian Jolly 19 March 2024

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**Summary**

Born 1957 in Cambridgeshire, secondary school teacher for 34 years in Mildenhall. Lived in Isleham for 30 years, until 1998, married into an old Isleham family, small scale farming, flowers, celery, sugar beet, and lock keeper at West Row who made eel hives, trapped eels. Catching game, rabbit. Peat digging. Fen Bank. Marina area before developed, a floodplain, flood concerns. Farming was hard, no time for leisure, no work on a Sunday. Types of soil. Children would swim by the wear, duck race from the school.

As a Mildenhall teacher, colleague arranged catching crayfish, river not very accessible there. Took children and canoes to Temple Bridge from the school.

In more recent years plans to get to know Brandon, walks Culford, Lackford, Cavenham, Santon Downham. Mention of Farthing Bridge. Inspiration from BFER organised walks and talks, dragonflies, otters.

Fishing when young in Cambridgeshire with father as a child, and in more recent years in Scotland, lucky went fishing. Observing fishing at Lackford.

Interview took place at Bury Library.

**I = Imogen Radford, Interviewer**

A = Adrian Jolly, Respondent

[00:00:00]

**I: I'm gonna start off by saying my name’s Imogen Radford. I'm from the Tales from the River project, talking to Adrian Jolly. Just tell me your name again.**

A: I’m Adrian Jolly.

**I: Thank you very much. I'm just gonna do a few like little basic questions, like what’s either the year or the date of your birth?**

A: April 1957.

**I: And what was your occupation, or is your occupation?**

A: I was originally a teacher of science in a secondary school in Mildenhall.

**I: How about your parents, your father’s occupation?**

A: He was a British Telecom engineer and my mother was a sales buyer for a department store in Cambridge.

**I: And so you were born in Mildenhall?**

A: No, I was born in Cambridge and raised in Histon and in my first married life lived in Isleham and worked in Mildenhall for something like nearly 30 years.

**I: Now you’re in Bury?**

A: Yes.

**I: So you’ve got memories, so the first time you were in the area, or the Brecks area, if you like, was in Isleham, I think from you’re saying?**

A: Yeah.

**I: You were in Cambridge and then you came to Isleham?**

A: Yes, I was at school in Soham and then when I qualified to degree level my first job was at Mildenhall and I worked there for 34 years from start to end. Also then married into the community and lived in Isleham and the person I married was in a long term Isleham family. So there's connections there through the churches and also through the farming community. Because my late father in law was a smallholder and small farmer, along with the rest of his family, his other brothers were also farming. So there was a connection there along with the river and knowing some of the other members, the older members of the family, they were also farmers as well.

[00:02:32]

**I: Were those farmers along by the river there?**

A: Some parts of it were, yeah. I remember my father in law, or mother in law talking about growing celery along the fens, they had some fen land. Telling me how the rows of celery, when they grew on there, were over a mile long, from one end to the other and having to literally mould up each row of celery. Similarly with sugar beet having to thin it all out and it would be the sugar beet harvest time and then the celery will be dug up by hand and then transported to what was then Isleham station, to be transported to the refinery at Ely.

**I: And it went by rail, did they?**

[00:03:30]

A: Yes. That was in the first days. When I was part of the community it obviously went by road, because Ely sugar beet factory closed and so it used to go to Bury by road.

**I: When it went by river was probably longer ago than that family?**

A: Yes, I think they would have gone by river originally, but the rail had come in obviously in the early twentieth century. But the station had closed by the time I moved into the village in 1981.

**I: First of all, the family you moved into, so to speak, you became part of. Did they have quite a strong connection with the river, would you say? With the land, obviously.**

[00:04:29]

A: Certainly with the land and I know that the Isleham community there were concerns that the fen lands would flood originally, until it was obviously controlled by the locks and the weirs and such like. But I know my mother in law’s father, he would have been working in probably the ‘20s, and he would talk of farming with horses and such like. But they would, on stormy weather conditions, so when there was a lot of rain as there is at this time of year, they would be up all night and would marshal the bank, the old fen banks, make sure it didn’t breach. If you look at the river Lark, down by Isleham Fen, you’ll see there’s a huge, wide fen flood plain. There’s still floods now but not to the extent they’d been, because they were concerned about the bank giving way, ‘cause the river was much higher in those days.

[00:05:54]

 Similarly, another aunt of my wife’s was also the lockkeeper at West Row, her husband was a lockkeeper, and they lived in the lockkeepers’ cottage. And to supplement their income they would trap eels and they would also make eel baskets as well. He would make models and things as well, which as I mentioned previously are in, or had been, in the Mildenhall Museum for many years. I don’t know if they're still there now, but they were then.

**I: They’ve certainly got eel hives in there. I don’t know, they may have models, I've only been once. So there may be, they got the willow, did they grow the willow?**

A: I presume so, I’m not sure of the source of the willow but it would almost certainly have been sourced locally I would have said.

 **I: Was it just for themselves to do the fishing orfor others as well?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* No, and for others as well.

**I: So as a sideline?**

A: So it was a bit of a sideline, yeah. I know the aunt would tell how they’d sit on the floor and literally weave these hives, these eel traps, over a period of time. It was quite a frugal way of living, I think, in supplementing your income as a lot of people did then.

**I: About when would this have been that they were doing that?**

A: You’d would be talking, I would have thought, in the ‘20s, ‘30s, ‘40s, right up to the ‘50s when he’d probably had finished at the lock gate ‘cause they're all automated now. There's still a lockkeepers house there but it wasn’t the cottage that they used to live in.

**I: So which lock is that then, is that the one down actually at Isleham?**

A: Yes, Isleham Lock, you get to it from the West Row side, although you can walk round through, down Fen Bank and where there's some lodges down there now, but those are relatively recent. You can walk through there and get to the old lock and there is the weir before you get to the holiday lodges, which the local children would swim in. Although there is of course the sewage outlet from the Isleham sewage works, so the unwary may not be aware of that. But the water looks nice and clear and enticing on nice warm weather and people go in and swim and they fish there as well, which makes quite a nice walk and seeing people enjoying the water in that way.

[00:08:40]

**I: Did you do that yourself?**

A: No, not personally.

**I: ‘Cause by the time you moved there you were an adult?**

A: I was an adult, that’s right.

**I: But you saw other people doing it?**

A: Yeah.

**I: Sorry, I've forgotten the exact relative, the lock keeper family you mentioned?**

A: They were aunts and uncle.

**I: So they lived there, do you know if they would do the eel trapping?**

A: Yeah, he would.

[00:09:07]

**I: Would they sell the eels or eat them, or both?**

A: They would sell them on and eat them as well, yeah, certainly he would. My last recollections of eels is that the local pastor to the Free Church that was there, would occasionally go fishing, or members of the congregation, and I had my wife’s uncle who was farming as well, small farmer, he had a bar and when he was retired and I remember coming home one day and popping in to see him. He said, “I've got an eel in here”, and the pastor had left and he had put it in a bucket, and he showed me the eel, it was a really large eel. So I was saying the eel was in the bucket but he had put an old wooden tomato tray on the top with a brick ‘cause otherwise they get out and squirm. Then I remember him actually finishing it off and skinning it for his supper or for his tea, ‘cause that was what they were used to having that kind of diet.

**I: What did you make of it yourself?**

A: Well, I don’t like fishes per se, but I mean I was used to eating game and rabbits and things like that, so it didn’t seem odd to me it's just that I wouldn’t fancy eating an eel. Not from the river, I have eaten eel from the sea that I’ve caught myself but fresh water fish doesn’t float my boat, really.

**I: Presumably, as you’ve explained, they needed the money and they needed the food and it was just part of life, really?**

A: Yeah, it was just part of life.

**I: Along with game as well.**

A: Game and rabbits and things like that. I know the uncle who I was just mentioning there, I know until relatively recently he would buy rabbits off one of the local farmers who would go round trapping the rabbits and things. In fact one of the family’s made quite a good living out of catching rabbits beforemyxomatosis and hawking them around the village as a form of meat for sale to local families, so there was quite a good living to be made from the rabbit industry.

**I: There was quite a few rabbits around in those days?**

A: Yeah. There was quite a lot of that used to go on in the forest, wasn’t there, the verderers would also make a living out of that, as well as the deer.

**I: It wasn’t poaching as such, it was their own land?**

A: No, it was on land they had permission to. The farmers were glad to get rid of the rabbits and they’d go along the banks, which is where they would be burrowing, and trap them, and use ferrets and such like to get them out. There was quite a few people I knew, when I was living there, would go out to get the odd rabbit or two for themselves rather than actually hawking them around when they fancied a bit of rabbit and a bit of nostalgia, as it was then. Obviously there's still the game shooting and such like that goes on in a lot of areas of East Anglia, which I'm not party to, but it still goes on and it’s quite a big industry really as a supplement to farming.

**I: Yes, I suppose it's the same thing, just a different variety of it, in a way.**

A: Yeah, that’s right.

[00:12:53]

**I: Do you remember, you’ve got the lock, and then you’ve got that bit where the bit of water goes round in a big loop and then there's the straight bit and it goes around a big loop. There used to be a bridge across there where the loop went off, is that something in your time that you might remember?**

A: You mean there’s an old wooden footbridge that used to go over so you could actually get to the lock itself, are you thinking?

**I: There was another one further along, I think there still is, I don’t know if it's the same bridge or not, that you could get to the lock, so by the lock, big curved one. That’s there now still. But I believe, you can see on old maps, there was another one further towards Mildenhall way. And you know where you’ve got the long straight bit that goes down to the lock and then you’ve got this curved bit that goes round by the marina and the lodges and things and there used to be a bridge there, but I don’t know when it went, you see.**

A: *[Overspeaking]* No, I don’t recall that. I never investigated that area because by the time I was living in Isleham, it wasn’t long after before they put the road across the weir to put the development in for the lodges that are there now, so they would have been built in the 80s. I know my in laws would say, “It’s no good building there because they’ll just flood.” Obviously they’ve survived and then they’re controlling the water levels, I don’t know what has happened this year. They are very popular and it's quite a nice, I think people make holiday residences of them. Because I think initially when they were built, I don’t know if it was true now, you could only live in them for 11 months a year, so they weren't allowed to be permanent residences. But that may all have changed, I don’t know.

**I: So what was there before then?**

[00:14:45]

A: It was just flood plain really, the same as it is on the other side of the river.

**I: I see, okay. Then there wasn’t a bridge?**

A: No. Not sure. Yeah, there was the footbridge over the weir.

**I: Just a footbridge?**

A: Yeah, over the weir, you could get across. But whether there was any, I can’t think of, I can’t remember seeing the road bridge they put across. But presumably it was still available when it wasn’t flooded for cattle and such like to be kept on there, so there must have been some access. Of course there was a few house boats along that bit of the river that were there where people had permanent homes, one or two there. But I don’t recall, I didn’t know the people who lived there as such.

**I: But you remember it when it was a marsh?**

A: Yeah, but only just.

**I: Just right at the beginning of your time there, by the sound of it?**

[00:16:00]

A: Yeah. And it’s still obviously very marshy now, ‘cause I would cycle occasionally, further down beyond Fen Bank where it ended, you could take a cycle route and you could get to where the old fen road, you could cycle. Obviously track ways down you could get down to and I would cycle along, and at various points you could see over the bank and see where the flood plains were and such like. But I think I cycled probably three or four miles down there on occasion and walks down there, just out of interest. But it was interesting that there was a whole community originally down there, because there were old ale houses and there’s an old chapel down there, old school down there and such like. I recall talking to some of the villagers who remember the school and the chapel and the ale houses down there, so there was clearly a community down there.

**I: I didn’t know that.**

A: Yeah. I think if you still cycle down there or walk down there you can see what were the old ale houses, what was the old school and certainly the old chapel is clearly seen ‘cause it was originally an old chapel. So there was a fen community that doesn’t exist anymore.

**I: So they would have been quite closely connected with the river I suppose?**

A: Oh yes, definitely.

[00:17:27]

**I: So the lock keepers were not necessarily part of that, it's a bit later as well, I suppose?**

A: Yeah. I would think they would be connected to the fen side of the village and Isleham would have been, sort of if you like, the main centre where the shops were but there was still communities down there.

**I: Yeah, ‘cause you think of the lock as very isolated now, apart from the marina, obviously. And there's one at the moment, there's only one or two houses, so there's the farm, isn’t there. There’s not much but to imagine that being a whole community is quite hard to think of, isn’t it.**

A: Yeah, but that would have been on the Isleham river side where the schools and the school and such like was. Because of course they didn’t go to school to the age we went to, they’d be out working from about 12, 13, 14, when they left school they had just had a basic education and then of course they’d be farming out in those days.

**I: Every hand needed.**

A: Yeah, every hand needed.

**I: So the lock keepers, they’ve only really gone either the West Row side or the footbridge over to get into Isleham?**

A: Yeah, presumably.

**I: So they were quite isolated, weren't they, in their own sort of area?**

A: Yeah, ’cause there’s a long way to West Row, you think it’s more Isleham but it's definitely more West Row side.

**I: Yes, isn’t it, still miles.**

A: Oh, definitely.

**I: So I wonder where would they have gone for shops, would they have gone to Isleham?**

A: I would think Isleham, yeah.

**I: They were obviously self sufficient as much as they could, I imagine?**

A: Yeah, that’s right.

**I: So the lock keeper, so they would be dealing with navigation boats, wouldn’t they, rather than pleasure boats? Or maybe a mixture, do you think?**

A: I think navigation would only have gone as far as the Isleham, West Row ferry at that point in time. It wasn’t navigable all the way up toBury St Edmunds at that time. So it was very much a case of controlling water levels from those locks, I would have thought. Then it was the occasional pleasure craft that would go through and I mean with the growth of the marina and the lodges there's clearly more river traffic now. But it's more a setting off point, an end point for a journey rather than, and a starting point obviously, for those who moored their boats there but you can't get much further than West Row ferry.

**I: Yes, it used to go up to Mildenhall I think, later than it did to Bury, I think, to Bury it stopped quite a bit earlier. But I'm not quite sure the date when it carried on going up to Mildenhall, but I think it just dwindled quite a bit, didn’t it?**

A: I was gonna say there certainly wasn’t any navigation up to Mildenhall when I was working, that was from 1981, no, from ’79.

**I: Yes, I don’t think there would have been.**

A: No.

**I: I don’t know whether the lock keepers would, in their memory, going back to the early 20th century, I mean certainly it's only what you’ve been told, really.**

A: That’s right, yeah.

[00:20:53]

**I: We can speculate but we don’t know. But yes, as you said the floods were a real consideration so keeping control of everything was a very important part of what they did, that was their job.**

A: Yeah, very much so. Controlling the water levels and you only have to look at the fen levels in other parts like Southery and places like that, they're well below the levels of the river, and the drains that flow through. I also only know through my own father that, and it only came to light, that actually my own family relatives, one of them ran the Red Lion pub in Isleham but there was no connection with my married family. I've been told by one of my own aunts how, ‘cause it was one of her uncles that ran the pub out the ale house, Red Lion in Isleham but as his sideline he was a peat digger and would go dig the peat, dry it into peat bricks and then he would take it to Cambridge, selling in Cambridge for fuel. And that again was the early twentieth century when that was going on. I have seen photographs of the peat diggers in Isleham. There was quite a lot of I don’t know, I'm not connected with the, there must be a history society in Isleham and I know quite a few of the people, ‘cause the church is very strong, particularly the Baptist and the Free Church. There's quite a few members and elders, there's particularly the older ones who will have quite a lot of history that they will be able to, may be able to, pass on if you were able to contact the, I think it's called The Ark now, isn't it, the new one.

**I: The Ark, yeah, that’s right. Yeah, there's the Isleham Society.**

A: That’s it.

**I: They keep an eye on the history. I haven't been for a while because it’s quite a way but they do do history talks and things and they do the annual walk to the old ferry where there's the Spurgeon memorial, they do that once a year.**

A: That’s to maintain, it’s the fact that it's open, isn't it, they do quite a lot of the footpaths.

**I: Yes, they walk around the footpaths as well, yes they do those things. So that’s interesting, do you know where that peat might have been dug, I wonder?**

A: No, I’m not sure where he would have, at all, I've got no idea where it would have been dug.

**I: It’s interesting you had that connection and then you end up there and…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Yes, but didn’t know.

**I: You didn’t know you really were an Isleham person.**

A: Yeah, or connections with the family, by connection, yeah.

[00:23:55]

**I: Yes, that must’ve been quite a thing really to be going and digging up peat and then, well they would have presumably burnt it themselves as well as drying it?**

A: Oh yes, definitely.

**I: That would have been an income, really.**

A: Yes. I know when I sort of looked more closely, Isleham, because it's one of those places that you either go to or you come from, it's not one that you pass through. I mean it's changed now, but when you look at the original housing and such like, it was obviously quite a relatively poor area. It was very much, as I would say a sort of ‘cash based’ society whereby, you know, you just had a small dwelling that you maintained but you lived off the land, either from the animals that live there or growing the plants. I know my father in law, there was a lot round sort of Fordham and Isleham he actually was a small holder in a sense he grew flowers. There were a lot of flower growers in the area and they’d grow and sell flowers to the bigger markets in London and further afield, Birmingham and places like that, mainly to London. That was quite a tenuous living because they were quite demanding and if the flowers weren't up to standard, it wasn’t worth sending them. And similarly celery would go to London and places like that. In my first years of marriage we would always buy the fen celery as it was, rather than what we've now buy at supermarkets. It would still be covered in fen peat and such like, and you’d buy a box of it, keep it in a cool place over the winter and wash it. Nothing better of course.

**I: You can still get it occasionally.**

A: Very occasionally, yeah, if you know where to go.

**I: It's a real prize.**

A: Yeah, it is a real prize treat these days, there isn’t much grown traditional celery, it tends to be self blanching now that they grow, so it’s rather than that, which is ridged up.

**I: Yes, I imagine they do it by machines now rather than by hand?**

A: Yeah.

**I: I mean I think the fen celery is slightly blanched but it's not that sort of very delicate stuff…**

A: No.

**I: …that people would have got used to, haven’t they?**

A: Yeah, that’s right.

**I: There’s no flavour.**

A: No, but it's better than nothing.

**I: Absolutely. So it must’ve been quite a hard time, a hard life because as you say, if it wasn’t right up to scratch it would be rejected.**

A: Yeah, exactly. I know my mother in law was saying she would be on her hands and knees going up the rows and when they are getting on for a mile long, it's a long day, when you're trying to thin it out. I remember when I used to travel to school on the school bus, 'cause I lived outside Cambridge, caught a school bus from Cambridge to Soham and you'd see in the spring time they did these single out the beets and you'd see gangs of men, as it were those days, singling out the beet with the beet hoe. But now it's all pelleted and single germination now, seeds bred obviously so you get mono germ beet. But yeah, so it's not that long ago when you'd see them out in the fields singling out the beet.

**I: Very hard work.**

A: Very much so, by comparison.

[00:27:40]

**I: I mean did you hear about or come across people doing much for, what did people do for leisure, particularly if it was connected with the river? Did you hear anything around that?**

A: Not really, as I say the only thing I recall is seeing young children fishing and swimming in the river, so presumably that would have happened down the generations. They certainly didn’t seem to have pleasure craft or anything like that of their own because it was out of their price range and comfort zone, I would say. I mean as I recall my father and mother in law saying it was very much, Isleham certainly was a very religious community and so a lot was tied to the rest day, Sunday would be spent going to church, not necessarily to the parish church but to the Free Churches. The Baptist church, well there were two Baptists church, one became a Free Church I think it was originally a Methodist church down Pound Lane. So I know my father and mother in law wouldn’t do any work on a Sunday, that was absolutely sacrosanct. Although they weren't church goers at the time they were in their younger day, but there would be no work done on a Sunday out of habit, I suppose. But then they would have been working six days a week.

**I: No time for leisure then.**

A: No, not really, because you were trying to scrape a living and it was a hard life and certainly my father and late father in law was far east prisoner of war so when he came back, he spent four years in Changi building a railroad and survived. But when he was demobbed he was given a suit, a coat and I think either £5 or £10 and that was all he had to his name. So I think he was then offered and allocated a parcel of land, which was rented I think in the end by the university, Cambridge University, and so I think he ended up with a small parcel of land. All he was able to do really was to work for himself because he wasn’t in a fit state to be employed for a full day’s work doing what others wanted him to do. So he went back to what his brothers were used to doing, ‘cause they didn’t go, he was the only, being the younger one, was the only one who went. The others were home working the land and he joined them working the land still and then obviously found his wife, who’s from a farming family and they connected and then married and had their own family, which included my then wife. So it was not an easy life at all and I think if it wasn’t for the help and support of his brothers and his wife and his wife’s family he wouldn’t have fared very well.

[00:31:20]

 Because it was very much a case of learning and making sure that you produced good quality crops, flowers mainly, from which he survived. Of course you depended on the price day to day, week to week, of what those flowers would make in the markets. There used to be flower lorries that would come and pick up and again you’d see, it's a dead trade now, people put out boxes of flowers at the end of their driveways or at the front of their house. And there’d be a flower lorry that would come round or flower lorries that would come round and pick up the flowers to take them to market. To the various markets in London for the next morning where they’d be auctioned off or sold off. So they’d grow, you'd see larkspur and all sorts of other varieties of flowers that we now import, but they were grown locally in those days.

**I: In the rich soil of the fens.**

A: Oh, yes. Well not so much in the fen soils, but around Isleham itself, the soils would be a mix, but it would be quite sandy and fen.

**I: Was it white fen?**

A: No, they referred to it as ‘hot land’ because it would stay warm even in the cold spells in the spring and so the flowers would grow nice and quickly and you’d get to the market first. So you had to be quite selective which parcels of land you used. I know from my own experience yeah, the chalk base would be quite low down. I remember my first property we had, we had quite a nice bit of garden and we would grow our own flowers and vegetables on for ourselves, and it would grow the crops very early because it was warm soil. Whereas when we moved and we took on a parcel of land that was connected to one of my late father in law’s field, it was quite cold so it will be quite difficult to get things to grow and it will grow very slowly and it wouldn’t grow that well. I think also the fact that it had been farmland for some years nutrient depleted as well, so it wasn’t brilliant. But it was surprising how different the soils varied, the fen soils were not good for growing flowers really, it was mainly the beet and the celery. And you’d get winter wheat, it wouldn't grow barley very well because the soil wasn’t warm enough for growing spring barley. So yeah, it was quite a lot of difference in the soil qualities around and I'm sure it's the same everywhere, you had to know where to grow things.

**I: A lot of skill and knowledge, and as you said risk that it might not quite work?**

A: No.

**I: So supplementing it with the eels and other things was really important?**

A: Oh, yes.

**I: Presumably they were a bit more reliable?**

A: Yes.

[00:34:31]

**I: Presumably they got paid to be a lock keeper as well, sorry the lock keeper family?**

A: Yes, they were paid, but they supplemented that. ‘Cause obviously there wasn’t that much trade in traffic then in those days. But certainly you know, the eel trapping was certainly a lucrative business in those days because there were far more eels than there are now and I don’t know how well eel trapping would go down these days ‘cause obviously they try to conserve eels as well.

**I: Yes, I think that’s changed, hasn’t it?**

A: Yeah, I think that’s changed completely.

**I: Did you come across any baptisms or hear about baptisms?**

A: Not at the river, no, I didn’t. I only went there I think a couple of times on a walk to find the stone that you showed in that slide, Spurgeon’s place where the baptisms were carried out. But as you said in the talk, the chapels had their own baptism pools anyway, so they don’t tend to go to the river to baptise people these days, as far as I'm aware. I do remember when our own children were at the primary school, there was a period of time when one head teacher used to have, obviously fund raising afternoons, and such like. PTA, they actually did take into actually going down to the river and holding duck races, where you buy a duck and set it free and have a race, so it was all dependent on the, so that was quite nice. Our children were at school so we'd go and support that down there. On a couple of occasions went down there, that went on for a short period of time, that would have been in the late 80s early 90s.

**I: Where did they do that?**

A: By the weir, before the lodges were built so they would sort of set them off from that roadway, and literally just follow them down with the current from the weir taking them down further down the river, probably about till 100 yards and then fished them out at that point. So yeah, that was something that went on, but whether health and safety would bear that now is another matter, but that used to happen. I obviously have not lived in the village since 1998, so I don’t know what goes on down there now, I've lost connection with it.

**I: You had quite a long period there then, quite a long…**

A: About 30 years.

[00:37:33]

**I: …yes, that’s long. And you worked in Mildenhall as well for a while?**

A: Yeah, I worked there for 34 years in the same school. I worked at the upper school as a science teacher and gradually working up into the leadership team as well till I finished there. Then went to work for an education charity thereafter, then as a lab technician in one of the schools, secondary schools in Bury to finish my career off. Didn’t want the stresses of teaching at that point in working life.

**I: You'd done a few years of it then.**

A: And 34 years is enough, at the coal face.

**I: When you were in Mildenhall did you have much connection with the town there, I mean obviously at school?**

A: Well, obviously with the local, ‘cause you'd be connected with the local families obviously through their children coming in, but I didn’t have much to do with the river or anything at that point. I suppose the only connection I would have was through the Riverside Hotel there, we’d occasionally go and eat there, either as a staff do or something, but nothing much to do with the river at all. I know the river ran down at the back of the school and it was quite overgrown at that point, I don’t know if it still is. There was one member of the PTA, I recall he was connected to the river in that he would be involved with trapping the American crayfish. ‘Cause they were a problem in that pond and they were breaking up the banks so he would arrange for a trapping session and they would set crayfish traps and spend a day there encouraging people to come and trap and then take the American crayfish out ‘cause they were destroying the banks. Also they carried a disease which affects the local crayfish, which are much smaller. But I don’t think it was particularly successful because I think American signal crayfish are quite prevalent and quite vicious compared to our own. I haven't eaten a crayfish from there but I know they trapped them, and encouraged people to take them away and eat them and cook them.

 And on the one occasion, I don’t know somebody was concerned at the river levels getting too high and they blocked off some of the drains, when they built the school, which has now gone, been demolished, even though it was only built in 1976. They put it on a raised bed but the school field was lower but it was drained with drainage. Somebody decided that they would block them off in their wisdom. I remember one winter time, it wasn’t necessarily like this one, as wet as this, but the field became flooded because they blocked the drains off, so our school field was out of bounds for some time. So again, it's obviously part of the flood plain that they built the school on, they raised obviously where the school was built, but the school field was still within the flood plain. But that was all fenced off to stop the children going to the river, out of sight, out of mind, and the woods surrounded, the willows and things. So you could look over to it, but you couldn’t get to it.

**I: I heard that children, or young people, did go down to the river to the White Stone, near Walcis, from the school Walcis [error – ie Wamil] Walk. But I'm not sure how long that went on till, I think it went on to the 80s I believe, or 70s, anyway. That was a place that they used to go to swim from the school. But I think that probably would have been more in the school holidays. So basically you, as school people or teachers, your responsibility would have gone and they’d then go down there for the summer.**

A: Yeah, that’s right.

[00:42:07]

**I: It sounds like it didn’t really impinge on…**

A: I think that was nearer the town centre, near the Riverside Hotel, there was a mill pond there.

**I: Oh yeah, there was the Gas Pool.**

A: Gas Pool, yeah.

**I: Well, apparently they did go down to this other place as well, and I believe they went from the school but I may be wrong.**

A: And there was a recreation ground behind Sainsbury’s and such like, all around there, which obviously that river is quite nice there. But by the time it gets to the back of the school it obviously was out of bounds hence it was fenced off but it was also heavily overgrown and quite boggy there. So you get the willows and such like all growing there quite high but they're quite brittle and breaking down as they do where the river’s not maintained quite as well and so it was all full of algae and such like, so it wasn’t free flowing.

**I: Not at all attractive.**

A: No. A lovely wild life place, the back of, what’s the village there now? Where the Bull is. I'm trying to think of the name of the village at the back, would have been at the back of the school. You get to it from…

**I: Holywell?**

A: No.

**I: Wrong way.**

A: Yeah. Barton Mills.

**I: Oh yes. The school, sorry I was in the wrong place. The school was up almost near Barton Mills?**

A: Yes.

**I: Oh, sorry, I'm mixing it up.**

A: The one with the old dome.

**I: Yes, that’s all gone, isn’t it?**

A: Yeah, it’s all gone now.

**I: Right, I’m with you now, I was thinking of the wrong place.**

A: You were thinking of the…

**I: Sort of where The Hub is now, I was thinking.**

A: The Riverside, that would have been Riverside Middle School. Of course, and the river, yes it's better there, the river, ‘cause it's not, where the Upper School used to be was quite boggy. But the back there, you wouldn’t want kids going in there.

**I: It’s different, yes. I was actually talking to somebody yesterday who lived the other side of the river, and it was all marshland and then later on the poplars were planted.**

A: That’s it, yeah, we had the poplars and the willows, they were quite brittle and would break off occasionally and send branches our way.

**I: Sorry, I was completely at the wrong place.**

A: Yeah, I was at the upper school, ‘cause I started there in 1979 and that was built in ’76, so it was building up the school population. So I was there, started when the first year 11, as it were, intake came. Riverside Middle School and College Heath Middle School, which was built at the same time to expand the middle school population in town. So there were two middle schools, College Heath was on the land and overspill development, and the intake from those two and from Lakenheath, but they would tend to come to College Heath and Riverside. Then we had Breckland Middle School, which again is near to the river at Brandon. One of my old colleagues who was in the leadership group, he was a Brandon boy, he’s still alive today and we get on, we meet occasionally. He would tell how he was born and raised there and spent quite a lot of time down by the river, but he was a keen sportsman so he used to play a lot of football in Brandon. But I know very little about Brandon itself and the river. That’s one thing my wife and I have in our to do list, to go down there and, particularly after your talk, going and having a look down there. But we haven't been down there yet, but we can have words with my ex colleague and see where the best place to go, he’ll obviously be able to give us a lot of information whereabouts to go.

[00:46:13]

**I: It is a very different place, all these places. Bury and Mildenhall seem to be linked to an extent. Mildenhall and parts of Brandon, but then other bits are separate, if you know one you don’t necessarily have much to do with the other. So it's something new to find.**

A: Yeah, you just don’t think that the Lark, as it runs through Tesco’s, you don’t believe that it sort of goes on to Mildenhall. We have walked quite a lot of, we’ve walked to Culford, obviously you can walk, there's the lake at Culford and we have walked from Culford Church but you have to go through the village and then get in again to the Lark. We've walked along the Lark valley there, right through to where there's a lake they fish, on the Icklingham side. But they're separate from the gravel works, round by where the brewer had his house, you can walk through there along the river.

**I: Is that called Lackford?**

A: There’s Lackford Lakes.

**I: That’s further down.**

A: There's Fuller’s Mill.

**I: Oh yes.**

A: You can walk from Culford all the way past Fullers Mill to where the Saxon village is and all round there, you can walk along that side of the river. I know the other side you can walk then through to Icklingham. There was the weir at Icklingham at one point, the weir’s still there but the bridge that used to go over it has been demolished, hasn’t it.

[00:48:05]

**I: Temple Bridge, yeah.**

A: That’s it. In my early days of teaching, one of my colleagues and myself we used to have a person who would take the children, he would be involved, a youth worker as you would call them now. We had a trailer load of canoes and we’d take them down there to that weir and we’d offload them. Some of the pupils we’d take on the river canoeing, along there, and they’d canoe over the weir ‘cause it was only a short drop, you'd go over the weir. So used to do that and I know there are some pools, we found that the pool last year, a couple of years ago, my wife and I, during Covid, we did quite a lot of walking from, which is the other village, it's not Icklingham, there’s another village. Cavenham. We’d walk down to the river in Cavenham and there was a pool down there, which you could swim in.

**I: By the river?**

A: Yes, the river. And another one, yeah that was at Cavenham. There was another one on the road side, is it the…

**I: Is that by the little bridges?**

 The blue tits, that’s right, by the bridges, they swim there.

**I: By Farthing Bridge, sometimes they call it ‘Three Bridges’, 'cause there are three bridges.**

A: Yeah, that’s right and I know, our daughter has been swimming there, there’s free swimming, we've not, we find it too cold so we go in the pool. Or we tend to go to the sea and swim, rather than down the river, but we have seen people swimming in there.

**I: So when you went with the canoes with the school, did they just play around there?**

A: Yeah, we just play around there.

**I: Load them up again and…**

A: That’s it, take them away.

**I: By the weir by the sounds of it?**

A: Yeah, by the weir is what they used to enjoy, yeah, was canoeing off that and then going up river. It’s only occasionally we'd do that.

**I: Would they go up the river a way as well?**

A: Yeah, they’ll go up a little way. But it's quite navigable by boat but they tend to go along, behind Icklingham rather than towards Mildenhall, they wouldn’t canoe to Mildenhall, because it got a bit overgrown that way. But the river at Icklingham was quite nice and shallow, and safe, which was important.

**I: They could stand up if they fall in.**

A: Yeah.

**I: When was that, roughly?**

A: That would have been early 80s before the bridge was demolished. You'd get over the bridge, at that point you get over the bridge, park the trailer and the minibus up and then just offload and straight into the river. It was safe, toppled the canoes, which they often did on purpose as well as otherwise, it was very safe.

[00:51:10]

**I: So that was preferable to going, even though the school was right by or near the river, it wasn’t really easily accessible?**

A: Oh no, definitely wasn’t accessible. No, it was definitely fenced off, but they used to be able to, not by the river, they’d be able to get out where the estate is now built, between what was the school and the town centre, they’d be able to walk through. There were cattle and fields there, some of them would hop over obviously if they wanted to get downtown on the QT, we knew it happened, they would be able to do that. But yeah, it was a different era those days, it's now got a much bigger fence round it, or did have, they built a six foot, as children do they will always find a way, you know.

**I: They probably got up to all sorts of things you didn’t even know about?**

A: Oh, absolutely, yeah. We actually had a gate put in so it’s easier for them to get back in rather than get out. So you’ll always wanted them to be back, all sort of things would go on and obviously there were in the middle of the school field of course, we had one of the war time, what do they call them, the concrete bunkers…

**I: Pill box?**

A: Yeah, there were several along there, so that was out of bounds of course. I always wondered why they were there ‘cause not knowing the area until I moved there, but there's quite a few of them around and also gun emplacements as well, concrete stops, as it were.

**I: Yes, so there’s stop lines, aren’t there?**

A: Yes.

**I: At strategic places they thought might be invaded by the Germans along the river.**

A: Yeah, exactly. So you have to think, they put them there as a legitimate place to put them, but they just seem quite incongruous, you’d expect them to be on the coast, or I would have done, but obviously they were there for good reason.

**I: Yes, I am slightly hampered by not knowing these places as well as I would like, but I am learning a lot.**

A: It’s certainly worth a visit, but there’s a lot of places to visit and like you we've still got to explore some of the places. Your talk the other day obviously sort of inspired us, thought ‘we must go out to Brandon’. We promised ourselves, because you can hire boats can’t you, from Brandon.

**I: Yes in the summer maybe, from the Bridge Hotel.**

A: In the summer, we’ve seen them, that’s when we've driven by thinking we must hire a boat one day, and then we say ‘we must walk’. Actually we have an ex colleague who lives close to the old school. And I know you can get from hers to the river ‘cause she talks about going to the river ‘cause she was a Brandon girl as well. So there's quite a lot of things, I hear an ex colleague, male colleague talk about Brandon and how it sort of evolved and how they used to play and swim down by the river. Because that was their entertainment, he couldn’t get out very easily ‘cause they didn’t have a car, so it would either be bus into Bury or they’d entertain themselves in Brandon. So yeah, there was quite a lot going on in the town itself. I think we’ve got more flexibility, haven't we, with transport these days to go further afield but you had to make your own entertainment in our younger day. So that was what we did, I remember, being from Cambridge we'd cycle to go fishing, but we'd cycle to what was then, or still is, called Smithy Fen. And Twenty Pence, which is near Wilburton, but that’s more in Cambridgeshire fen, Wilburton Fen.

[00:55:35]

**I: And you use to fish yourself?**

A: Yeah, when I was younger, my brother and I would go fishing. We'd get on our bikes, it's about six miles, we’d get on our bikes and take our rods with us. My dad, I was only about six or seven and I remember he bought my brother and myself, my brother’s a bit older, he bought us a fishing kit from Woolworths, 12 and 6, which had everything. During school holidays, if it was a nice warm summer’s day we’d occasionally go fishing, perhaps three or four times a year. If we were fed up and wanted something to do we just get some couple of slices of bread for bait, wet that in the river and make it into a mush so just sit on a hook and just put that in and catch quite decent fish. Those days when you're young you see how many you could catch rather than the quality of what you could catch. I always remember my dad taking me for the first time, it was my birthday and that was when I had the rod and he took us to Twenty Pence, which is in between Cottenham and Wilburton and this Twenty Pence Bridge as they called it, there used to be Twenty Pence Inn there it's no longer there. And dad was also fishing, we weren’t mad keen fisherman like you see today but we’d go fishing, he’d go fishing. He’d set me up and I remember, he always reminisces now, he's now in his 90s.

 “I remember taking fishing on your birthday with a new rod and you were saying, ‘I’ve got another one dad, I've got another one dad, I've got another one’.” I remember I caught 18 fish in about an hour, whereas my brother was sitting patiently waiting for a fish and so was he. I was catching obviously in a nice shoal of fish where I was and hauling them out but they were only little minnows and gudgeon and things like that and putting them straight back.

**I: You were probably catching the same ones again. *[Laughter]***

A: Yeah, but it was the fun and joy of catching them. But actually until the last four, five years I would go trout fishing in a fishery, or I've been with my dad, we'd been up to Scotland salmon fishing, things like that. I’ve always been quite fortunate, I don’t know what it is they say that some people have got a sense that they, either the pheromones that you carry around that’s actually attractive to fish. And women tend to make very good fisherman because of the pheromones that they have and then they put it on the bait, they seem to catch more fish, so that may be a connection there. But yes, when he first took me salmon fishing, when he was in his 70s, I remember on the first day he took me, he didn’t catch any fish. We were just about to come home and I was fishing and lo and behold I caught a lovely six pound salmon, which was really nice. And I caught another one in the week but sadly he didn’t even have a bite. So I've been quite fortunate, I don’t know why, as I say it may be down to pheromones and your own natural scents that’s more attracted to fish than some other people’s, that is the theory. I do know that the heaviest salmon caught was caught by a woman, apparently.

 And they're very successful fishers, as the chap we used to go on the stretch where we used to go would said, all the time that women used to be better fishers than the men, generally, for some reason. May just be more patience.

**I: Maybe.**

A: Which I do have in abundance, obviously being in the teaching profession, also putting up with an elderly father sometimes.

[01:00:43]

**I: It's interesting, because you’ve got that lovely first fishing experience with him and then the Scottish fishing. And it sounds like even if you weren't mad keen doing it all the time it was still quite special to you?**

A: Yeah, it's still there in your subconscious all the time and I quite like watching people fishing and enjoying themselves fishing as well. So if I see people fishing and I'm walking along the river I'll often have a chat with them about what they're catching and what have you. Yeah, it’s just nice to see. So for example, at Icklingham, the old gravel workings, not on the gravel working site, but there is an isolated lake which you can walk round, it's part of the where the Saxon village is, you can walk down and walk along the river, you come to this lake which you can walk round, it's lovely to walk round. There's a local fishing club that obviously hire it or rent it out and it's all fenced off and made otter proof ‘cause there's otters around there now, so they’ve got otter fencing all the way round. You'll see, they’ll fish there all night and they’ll literally have so much gear they carry it on a trailer all the way round. You chat to them and you can see the carp fishing, massive carp in there that they fish for, you can see them. I've only ever seen a couple of fishes, actually been there when they’ve caught one. But they're very keen fishers now, obviously ‘cause they're equipped to the gills with the gear, they’ll stay there overnight and they spend a weekend there some of them, they’ve got so much gear they have to get it there in a van.

 I don’t know what their marriages are like, but probably not, *[laughter]* they're probably single or divorced, or whatever or have very contented wives who are happy to see them go off.

**I: You haven’t ever see any women there, then?**

A: No, I haven't actually.

**I: They probably won’t let them in ‘cause they’re too good. *[Laughter]***

[01:02:20]

A: True. It’s quite nice to see the old, we went on a walk organised by the BFER, we went along the river, along that part. There's that curved lock, which you pointed out, which we’d never experienced before. Also we went on a dragonfly walk as well with guy’s really interested in dragonflies in that area. That was interesting, such that we actually went back after the talk and sat on one of the fishing jetties that they’d created, in a nice warm sunny spot and literally watched dozens and dozens of the dragonflies of various types. But it was nice to be able to identify them and see the different sorts and their habits and such like. So, yeah, there's some very interesting things that sort off spawned off from the talks. We went also to the Lackford Lakes Reserve. We went to an interesting talk on otters and the fact where they’ve caught a lot of otters along the river there now and how to identify where they like to have been by the trail, species and such like. Also, another one, which was all to do with the birdsong now, which are the songbirds that, what’s the song? Not song thrushes, but they're like thrushes. We went on a walk in the evening with the ranger there to hear the song, specifically the songbirds. Oh, what’s that song?

**I: Nightingales.**

A: That’s it, nightingale, yeah. ‘Cause they’re quite timid birds and they live in the dense undergrowth around the lakes and we went round with him and initially you could hear the dusk songs of the thrushes and the other bird life. It took my wife some time to pick out the nightingales but the ranger was able to point them out and I got into it quite quickly. But as the evening went on and it was just getting dark, all the other songbirds went silent and then you could hear the nightingales. You think it's a lovely song that you’re going to hear but nightingales aren't that tuneful but it's the range of songs that they have rather than the actual tunes that actually attract, they can be quite harsh some of the songs. But they also mimic some of the song thrushes as well, so, it was quite an interesting one.

**I: It sounds magical.**

A: It was quite magical, actually. But you only caught it at the very, my wife catch it at the very last, particularly you could hear them. But it’s the males only that sing, obviously as a courtship to attract the females, but the females apparently don’t sing but it’s the males. I think they identified about a dozen male nightingales around the site so obviously picking out ones that went to locations where they knew that there were male nightingales. So we’ve been quite spurred on by the BFER.

**I: Excellent, they’ll be very pleased to hear that.**

[01:06:20]

A: Yeah, it's nice. Some of the talks at Thetford as well. We missed the first one, because there was three we went to. One was about wasps, that was the last one, that was interesting. Also about the connection with Tutankhamun, the connection with the Swaffhamguy archaeologist, Carter, that’s it. But there was somebody who swam, was it in lockdown.

**I: Oh, Nicola Crockford. You can find a video on that.**

A: Oh, we were expecting to find it on the BFER website but we haven't.

**I: I’ll find that for you.**

A: That would be lovely if you could send us a connection to that, 'cause we were doing something else and we weren't able to get there. One of my ex colleagues went and said it was absolutely brilliant.

**I: It’s a different one, actually, it's an online one, it's on a video but more or less the same. I didn’t go to the real one. No, I did actually because it was the first time I met her. Anyway it's lovely to hear that you’ve got all those extra experiences and it links nicely back to some of your earlier…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Yeah, I just love countryside, whether it involves rivers or whatever. We have also walked from Santon Downham all the way towards Thetford, towards the power station there and the Scouts or Brownies, Scouts and Guides camp. You can cross over a bridge there and then walk back the other side, can’t you, that was a lovely walk there, we've enjoyed that one two or three times. Our daughter goes [paddle] boarding there at Santon Downham, but it's very difficult to get through from Santon Downham to Brandon because it's a bit overgrown, on her paddleboard.

**I: Oh right, I think it varies. I think it's probably a bit clearer now but it has been. No, that’s a nice way to come towards a finish, really ‘cause it brings it up to date, really and it makes that connection from earlier times to now. That’s what the projects are about really, building up that connection so that’s lovely to hear. So if it’s alright I think we'll maybe draw to a close…**

A: Yes.

[01:08:57] End