Jackie Palmer, 08 May 2024, Isleham

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**Summary**

Born 1965. Memories of Isleham, downstream from Fen Bank. Family came to the area 70 years ago, then in Bedfordshire, returned in the 1970s. Father ran boat mooring and hire business, now Jackie runs a mooring from 30 years ago. Memories growing up on the river, cycling, horse riding, swimming and other fun, the chain link ferry, holidays on the boats. Fen bank houses and pubs. Observations on the river, the wildlife, changes in river management. Children and grandchildren and the river. Brother fishing and canoeing, fishing matches. The house – grain drying barn conversion. Floods. Old photos. Weaving with rushes and willow. Importance of the river and wildlife in Jackie’s and her family’s life.

Key:

**IR = Imogen Radford**

JP = Jackie Palmer

[00:00:00]

**IR: My name is Imogen Radford. I am from the Tales from the River Project, part of the Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Scheme Project. I am here with Jackie. So, would you like to tell me your name?**

JP: My name is Jackie Palmer.

**IR: And would you mind telling me the year of your birth, or your date of birth, whichever you prefer?**

JP: 17th of June, 65.

**IR: And what is your occupation?**

JP: Mooring owner.

**IR: So, we are at your place, which is a mooring – sorry, a boat business – on the River Lark, isn’t it?**

JP: Yeah, yeah it is.

**IR: And just a few bits and pieces, like your family. You were telling me earlier about your family. So your family came here – when did they come here?**

JP: My mum and dad came – well, if my sister is 75 and she was 5 – so 70 years ago they first came down here and they lived up near The Cock Pub, which was a pub then, and then my mum was from Bedfordshire and so we ended up in St Neots and that sort of area. And then, it was always my dad’s wish to come back and so we came back in the 70’s, and, yeah, that is where I am now, today.

**IR: So they came to this place to run a business?**

JP: We first went further downriver. There’s a school house which – well, there was a cottage there. We first moved in there and Dad couldn’t acquire enough riverbank for his moorings, so he then bought this off – what was their name? – it was like a big farm here, and stuff, so he bought that. And then, you know, he’d done it up and we moved in here sort of thing. Yes, so I have lived here since, basically. I mean, I moved out for a couple or three years, as you do when you are growing up, but I came back.

**IR: And then you had taken the business over from your family?**

JP: Yeah, well, after that my dad passed away first, thirty years ago, and then I bought it off my mum because I stayed here and built a bungalow in the garden and looked after my mum. So, I had to have a job so I could be here so I took it over, yeah. But I do laugh because I think if my dad chose any of us as children I don’t think it would have been me. So that is quite funny.

**IR: Yeah, you said that you were one of quite a large family.**

JP: Yeah, I am one of seven and, yeah, I can’t imagine that, you know, there were 4 boys and 3 girls.

**IR: And were you the youngest or the oldest?**

JP: Youngest.

**IR: Youngest?**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: Right. And the others went off and did different things, and you were the one that ran the boats?**

JP: Yes. But, I never dreamt that that would be what I would do. That wasn’t one of my ambitions in life.

**IR: Circumstances. So, when you were young, what did you… did you have much to do with the river yourself? Did you help in the business?**

JP: No, I really wasn’t into it at all. I was very much into cars and motorbikes and lorries. And my ambition was to become a lorry driver, which I did, until I had my first daughter and then that changes your outlook on life and you need to be there for them, don’t you? So that it when I stopped.

**IR: And were you living here then as well?**

JP: No, I was in West Row, which is literally just over the river, and, yeah, but within I think 4 or 5 years, I came back and I have been here ever since.

[00:03:47]

**IR: Right. So, you love it, I take it?**

JP: I love it. Sometimes it is a lot of work. It is a lot of work, down here, especially winter time when it’s, you know, when it is muddy, and especially this year with all the flooding as well, it has been really difficult. But, you know, when it is a day like today, you couldn’t wish to be in a better place. So, yeah.

**IR: And, presumably, the people – do they come and moor there, and they…[Overtalking]**

JP: Yeah. Most of my people are, um… they keep their boats here like all year, and you know, they are from all sorts of areas. I have got some from London, Birmingham, and then some people as local as Isleham and Soham. You know, there is quite a different collection of people really.

**IR: So, they come here, and they come to their boat and they sort of enjoy it or go up and down the river, and so on? Travel?**

JP: Yeah, sometimes they go off for a week or two, or whatever, and yeah, then they just come back again and moor up. And then you might not see them for a while. It is just how it is.

**IR: Do you like the fact that they’re obviously enjoying the river?**

JP: Yes, I do. Yeah I do. As long as, you know obviously, whenever you know, it changes that people move on or, you know, whatever the situation… it is always making sure that everybody knows just how important it is to respect the river which is a big part, for me, obviously. Because I have been brought up with it, but yeah, not always does that happen.

**IR: So not everyone is familiar enough with the river to realise how to respect it, do you think?**

JP: Well, I find that it has changed, you know. There was a lot more respect. The Environment Agency used to dredge the river and so the flow was really good. You know, they maintained it quite well but to be quite honest it doesn’t happen like that and now, as society and the whole world is changing and people are living on boats a lot more, they keep allowing this to happen. And this worries me because, obviously, if people aren’t moving their boats and not getting rid of their waste, it is going in the river. And, you know, there is only a certain amount that the river can take before it does do damage, isn’t it. So, hopefully, they will, you know… I do often get on to the Environment Agency asking them to, you know, pay a bit more attention but it is very difficult.

**IR: So when they are out on the mooring, they have obviously got the facilities, but when they are just sitting somewhere?**

JP: Well they have not always got the facilities. I mean, especially when people are living, I mean, there has just been some land just further along up here that has been sold off individually to private people. Well, that is really worrying for me. One, because they have taken down – they took down all of the trees. They have, you know, the river voles, the kingfishers that were nesting there – that has all gone. And then the Council rings me and asks me if I would agree to be part of the tree preservation and I went, “What? You know, it is too late!”. You know, which is bad. And so, they have been sold off individually and no one is keeping an eye on it, are they? Do you see what I mean? I think that is more worrying when it is owned by an individual because no one is being able to be, you know – if anything went wrong on mine I would be the one in trouble but when it is an individual situation it is a lot more difficult to keep control of it. But, yeah.

**IR: I hadn’t thought of that, yes. That is quite a complicated situation, then. Yes.**

JP: Yeah.

[00:07:55]

**IR: Is this a fairly quiet river, relatively, do you know?**

JP: Generally, it is. I mean, obviously we have Isleham Marina further up so you know we do get quite a lot of traffic because obviously you go through the lock and it is really pretty down the other side of the lock normally, to Judes Ferry, but you can’t navigate any further so people go there and come back but you can’t actually go that far. So it is not hugely busy. No, it is not hugely busy. So it is not too bad.

**IR: Quite a nice balance then?**

JP: Hmm.

**IR: Enough business for a business? Or a few businesses?**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: But not so busy, hopefully, as to drive off the kingfishers and so on.**

JP: Yeah, yeah.

[00:08:43]

**IR: But you have told me about the chain link ferry and do you yourself remember that? Do you use that?**

JP: Yes.

**IR: Tell me more about that.**

JP: Well, that was up near the Cock Inn Pub, which wasn’t a pub when I was alive but the Popes owned it. And then, Roger Murfitt and his uncle and his dad used to live next door and they always used the ferry boat because they worked the farm over the other side of the river. That was when I was alive but I know, obviously, when my parents first moved down here that they used it a lot as well. But yeah, we would, if we wanted to go to Mildenhall swimming, or stuff like that, we would put our bikes on it and we would go over to the other side because then we didn’t have to bike all the way to Isleham and all the way round the river. That made it a lot shorter. Or going to Mildenhall Stadium as well, you know, because that was close to do that as well.

**IR: And quieter roads to cycle on.**

JP: Oh definitely, yeah. But this road, obviously when I was young, was very quiet anyway. Very quiet. So, not like it is now.

**IR: So it was only big enough for, what, a couple of bikes? Or …[overtalking]**

JP: Yeah, it wasn’t huge. It was more like a punt, you know. Like that sort of size. It wasn’t like, it wasn’t big at all really. You know, you could get 3 or 4 of you on it, or, like you said, a couple of bikes and stuff like that. But it wasn’t. It wasn’t very big really. It was more like punt size, like you see in Cambridge? That sort of size or maybe a little bit bigger.

**IR: And then you would pull on the chain to make it go across?**

JP: Yes, yes. So, the chain I guess, would be running at the bottom of the river and then, yeah, you just pulled it and then the chain would go the other side sort of thing. So yes, you just pulled yourself backwards and forwards across it. I wish it was there now. It would be quite cool.

**IR: Yes – it sounds like it would be great for people, who could cycle along the riverbank and up those sides, or walk it, couldn’t it, and then cross over?**

JP: Yes.

**IR: Yeah and it sounds so beautifully simple really, because you leave it where you got off, obviously, and then people could pull it across from the other side, back for them.**

JP: Yeah you could. It was very very simple but practical, you know. Very practical. Yes it was. But, like I say, I really don’t know what happened. You know what I mean? Because, obviously, we moved up here so we were further away from The Cock and, then again, everything changes. You know, people move, and different stuff, and then you don’t go down to that area any more. You have no reason to, so I don’t, you know. I don’t know what happened.

**IR: So you would have stopped using it when you moved up here, then, really, wouldn’t you?**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: You wouldn’t have used it afterwards?**

JP: Oh we would probably have when we were still young, especially if we went down because Roger – he was only a couple of years older than my brother Wayne – so, you know, we were all sort of friends and everything like that and the people that lived at The Cock – the Popes – you see I only ever knew the lady as Granny Pope. She wasn’t really my granny, but that is how people were in those days, wasn’t it? So, anyway, Granny Pope, they were the people who originally used to have the pub and stuff, and then Brian and Janice which was her son, they lived there as well but then after Granny died, they moved away. So, you know, then you don’t have the reason to go there any longer, do you?

**IR: And when would be the last time that you remember using it? Can you say how old you were, do you think? Roughly?**

JP: Probably about, ooh, 10 or 11? Something like that, maybe. For me. I mean, my brother Wayne, he might have used it more but yeah, I don’t know. Because he was more friendly with Roger and his cousin Andy Sennett – Roger’s cousin – used to live the other side so that is why, you know, backwards and forwards sort of thing. But, yeah. I only used it a few times because I was the youngest and none of them wanted me to be with them, did they? You know what it was like.

**IR: You didn’t have any friends of your own age here?**

JP: I had a friend, Edwina. She used to live across there when that was just a bungalow, so yeah. I guess that yeah, I didn’t need to be pestering them because I had got her over there so that was quite nice for me.

**IR: And so, just… it was right next to where the actual Cock pub was? Or right there?**

JP: Just so, the Cock Inn, the pub and that is here, and it was just, sort of like, just a little bit. Just, you know…

**IR: [Just a little bit this way? [overtalking]**

JP: Yeah, just a tiny bit.

**IR: And who, who was responsible for it really?**

JP: I’ve got no idea.

**IR: Nobody really?**

JP: I just think that everybody who used it was responsible for it. It was how things kind of worked those days, didn’t they? So yeah. Yeah, I don’t know. I actually have no idea.

**IR: But you have told me more about it than anybody else.**

JP: Oh, right.

**IR: And more about one of those types of ferries as well, because they are in other places as well. Or they were, rather. But often, people don’t know when they went, or why. So perhaps the reasons were less… [overtalking]**

JP: Maybe it’s because, I would imagine, it was wooden. I’m 100% sure it was wooden. Well, you know, wood rots, doesn’t it? So maybe, when the boat gave in, they just didn’t bother replacing it. I don’t. I honestly don’t know. But it was cool. It was good it.

**IR: It sounds it. And yeah, the idea of it running again would be lovely, wouldn’t it?**

JP: Mm.

[00:14:51]

**IR: Yes, really interesting to investigate. So, there were… there was the Cock Pub, which was not a pub when you were there, but there were a number of other houses along there, I think, weren’t there? Maybe some more than there are now?**

JP: Oh lots more. Yeah. Um… um. Loads. Because, the school house – so where we first moved when we, when my parents brought us back here – so obviously there were enough people down here to require a school. And that’s quite unusual. So, actually a really lovely building because it is all made of flint which is quite unusual for in the fen. It is. Yeah. And when we moved to the cottage, Mr and Mrs Human still lived at the school house and she was the school mistress from when it was a school, so… Which was to my advantage because we had come from St Neots and I started Isleham School and I felt that I was not doing very well. So I used to go round and she would help me catch up because, you know, I had come from a big school and Isleham School was very small then. So…

**IR: And it’s the same house now, still there, is it?**

JP: The house is still there. It is – um – the man who now owns it converted some of it I think into flats or something like that. It is quite run down now, to be honest, which is quite sad. But, the actual structure of the building is amazing really. But, like I say, you hardly ever see a flint house in the fens. So, why that got built like that I have got no idea.

**IR: I suppose they would have had to have transported the stone along the river, presumably?**

JP: Yeah, probably, because I mean you think … and it would probably be from Bury way, so they probably dropped the coal off and brought the flint back or something. You don’t know, do you? But yeah. I don’t – I don’t know the age of it or anything like that but when, like I say, when we moved in to the cottage, and the address there was “The Cottage Next to the Old School”. That was it! That’s all it needed to be.

**IR: And the school itself? Was that still there?**

JP: It was still as a school when I was a kid. Yeah.

**IR: Oh…**

JP: So, there is the flint house, and then, and then the school was like a longer part over here, and that still had all the like little desks and chairs and everything. It was really quite smart, really.

**IR: It wasn’t still used as a school?**

JP: No.

**IR: No? So you had to go up to Isleham?**

JP: Yeah.

[00:17:38]

**IR: Yes, I see. And, um, and there was the – I think it was on the opposite side was the windmill, which I think is still there, is it? The Pepperpot?**

JP: The Pepperpot. Yeah, he is just…

**IR: Is that more or less just opposite there?**

JP: No, no no. It is literally, um, probably 10 or 15 minute walk probably along the river bank from here. So, it is not that far. And, yeah, but that is where there are all these new moorings and the gentleman who owned it, which he was looking after, and it looked lovely. He was really, well he opposed all the, you know, the moorings and things, but lost. So he sold up. And again, things – if you don’t keep on top of the stuff here it just falls to pieces really quickly so the fen ground isn’t very stable. You know, you have to work hard to keep things standing in the right position. So, um, yeah. But I mean it is there still but I don’t know what it is like inside or anything.

**IR: Yes, it is quite a, it is a landmark, isn’t it?**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: And, um, on the other presumably? Yeah.**

JP: Yes.

**IR: And then on this side, there was an old chapel, I think? I don’t know if that’s still there? In the past there was a chapel, I think.**

JP: Yeah, I think…

**IR: Is that not something you remember?**

JP: No. I think now that that was near Riverview, because me and Edwina as kids, we used to go and, um… just go exploring as you do as a child. And we used to collect bottles. You know, I have got hundreds of them. Hundreds of them now. But yeah, and so, we used to – I imagine that was probably like where that was, because it was like a building but there is no evidence of it at all now. But then just further up here, if you turn right where the river bank is, and there is another – that was the Anchor Pub – that was just up here as well. So I think they worried more about having pubs than they did about having chapels. It kept them all together, didn’t it?

**IR: That wasn’t open in your day?**

JP: No. No. But it has been done up as a house now, so… which is nice.

**IR: The building is there.**

JP: Yeah, so that is good.

[00:20:07]

**IR: Did you – your father was from here originally, did you say?**

JP: No, my dad was from Brandon.

**IR: Oh, from Brandon.**

JP: And my mum was from Wealdon, which is a little village near Bedford, and my dad was, I think, in the war he got sent that way and that is how my parents met. So, yeah. I have got like uncles and cousins and stuff all Lakenheath and Brandon way, and then also in Bedford sort of thing. So yeah.

**IR: So he was in Bedford, and then he came back to here? Or just down river, rather? And then he went away and then came back again – is that what you are saying? Yes, so, did he talk about many of his memories of the river? Does that go further back, before your time?**

JP: Yeah, not to me personally. But, you see, I wasn’t really into the boating side of it, like I say, at that time. I was, you know, I was a young girl.

**IR: You had other interests.**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: So you yourself did not have a great deal to do with the river until you later on sort of took on the business and started doing that.**

JP: Yeah, I mean, we always used to have holidays and you know, and that sort of thing, because obviously Dad, with the amount of children that they had got, couldn’t afford anything much more but yes, so he, well we… I mean I do have quite a lot of memories of people you know, because river people can be quite a community. Do you know what I mean? So, you know, they sort of like all get together. And I can remember my parents once having – they all went down river to – it was the Black Horse then but it is called The Swan at Littleport. So there were like I don’t know how many boats and they all went off down there. They had a band playing on one of the boats and they all went off down there and then set camp up at the pub. They were there for the whole afternoon and then they’d all come back so I bet they were well-oiled. But yeah, I mean, I met them there but I didn’t even go down on the boat, do you know what I mean? I was like doing a bit of my own thing as well. But yeah they use to. It used to be really good, yeah.

**IR: And where did you go on your holidays?**

JP: Um… we would be often just going wherever my dad said. Depending, really, because like we – Dad had boats originally at Tempsford Marina, Kelpie Marine. And so, often, we would head that way down river because obviously Dad knew a lot of people all the way through.

**IR: So you would all get on the boat and then go down river to the places he knew and the people he knew along the way?**

JP: Yeah. But that’s what you do when you are kids. When we were kids we did what we had to do. You didn’t – I mean well, the first time I went, like, on a plane with my parents I was 15 but until then, you know, we didn’t do any of that sort of thing. So, yeah.

**IR: So it was on the boats. And did you enjoy that?**

JP: Yeah, yeah it was all right. It was quite quiet that is, I mean, and also then we were kind of like – you explored, do you know what I mean? And we always had. I did have, friends and stuff so you would always meet up with another boat and then you know, they would have children and so we would all play and stuff like that. So that did, you know, that used to be quite a lot sort of thing, but again you just lose touch when the parents all pass away then that’s the, you know, that’s when it all sort of goes off. Because all us younger kids were probably, you know, we have all took different roads, haven’t we? So yeah. Yeah.

**IR: Nice memory though.**

JP: Yeah. It’s lovely.

**IR: All your sort of holidays, really.**

JP: Yeah, yes. Gorgeous. Just going camping and, you know, having a fire and you could just do what you wanted, sort of thing, which was nice. Yeah.

**IR: So could you all sleep on the boat?**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: Or did you have to do tents as well? Oh, you all slept on the boat.**

JP: Yeah. Yeah, Dad had – I am just trying to think – because Dad used to hire some out. I haven’t ever done that because, again, my memories of that is that people would be going, you know, I would….

**IR: You’re talking about your dad hiring out boats?**

JP: Yeah. He used to hire them out and so we would… our job often, as the kids, would be that we would have to go and clean them or do whatever, but I always remember that if they break down… you know, Dad would have to go out and tow them in. I mean, it would be a lot easier these days because obviously we’ve all got mobile phones but they didn’t then. Do you know what I mean? And we would have to find them, and all that sort of thing. You can imagine it was. And I never thought, you know, that that was what I really wanted to do, because I didn’t want to be running around in the middle of the night looking for people. So yeah. I didn’t do that.

**IR: But, because he hired them, he then had boats you could go off on, on holidays.**

JP: Yes. So, so they were always made so they could take… because, like my eldest sister who is 17 years older than myself, so you know, obviously they weren’t coming. We were sort of like, so the 3 oldest, well they were at work and stuff and so it was, you know, there was plenty of room. Yeah.

[00:25:59]

**IR: So you played, and you camped, and you had fires and things. And did you, did you ever swim in the river yourself?**

JP: I still do.

**IR: You still do?**

JP: Yeah. Yeah, I still do. If I am working over there and it gets really really hot, I still get in the river. I just – because… because it’s got quite popular again now. They call it wild swimming, don’t they? And I, and some of my friends were going to the No Hurry Five Miles From Anywhere and they were all getting in and saying, “Oh come and do this wild swimming!”, and I went, “Well, I learned to swim in the river. It’s not a novelty to me,” and they go, “Yeah, but…” and I am like – I mean, I have swum down there but I was like, “Oh…” I only swim when it is really nice and warm. I mean, when I am really hot. I am… I like the heat. I am not going to go there if it is raining or cold.

**IR: So you would always swim then, from when you were living by the river?**

JP: Yeah, yeah.

**IR: And you learned to swim there as well?**

JP: Yeah, yeah. I was – I mean some of my earliest memories are that I would just, from when Dad had the boats at Tempsford – I would be allowed to go down sometimes. Because, obviously, I was under the age of 7 then. But my only outfit was to wear my life jacket at all times and you know, I was not allowed to take that off.

**IR: Swimming or otherwise?**

JP: Yeah. Because you know, whatever. It was just – that was it. I can remember it to this day. It was yellow and it had little mermaids on it. And I just wore it so much. It was like – yeah. Of course my older brothers and sisters didn’t want me around so often they would throw me in the river too. You know what they’re like. So, yeah.

**IR: So that’s why you had to wear the life jacket?**

JP: I might have been a bit of a pain in the butt, really.

**IR: So down there, I think there are some quite shallow bits of river, are there, or is it deep there as well, at Tempsford?**

JP: No, it is quite deep as well. Or what I remember of it. Obviously I was quite young, but I used to, so, there were like couples that had boats there and a lot of those people, when my dad came here, they moved their boats here too so that was quite nice. You know, to keep in touch with them and stuff. Yeah, I have real fond memories of going up and down the river on peoples’ boats with them, and stuff. Yeah.

**IR: And, when it is hot, going in for a swim.**

JP: Oh yeah. Definitely, Definitely.

**IR: When did you no longer need the life jacket?**

JP: I don’t remember having it much here so I guess I had learned to swim by then. But yeah, what I said about my friend Edwina over there – we used to do some really silly antics as you do. I mean, I can remember, we decided one night that it would be really good to have a midnight swim. So we went swimming at midnight, up and down the river, like you do. And then another time, my dad had a polystyrene rowing boat and it had got crushed between two of the boats so it was not noted as a rowing boat any more. So we set that up on the edge of the bank and made it into a slide, so we could slide on it. Because – not being horrible – but the bottom of the river is really horrible and it’s not nice on your feet, so we made it into a slide so we could slide into the river.

**IR: That sounds great. We should have that again.**

JP: Yeah. Well, I’ve now got a grandson. He is only just over a year and I said, because both my daughters grew up here, and I said to her, “It’s time for him,” and being a little boy, I can get him into a lot more mischief, can’t I?

**IR: As long as he’s got his life jacket.**

JP: As long as he’s got his life jacket, yeah. He’s already got one.

**IR: So your children, presumably, swam in the river as well?**

JP: Yeah, yeah. They did, definitely. It is funny, because when you are brought up around something you don’t have as much interest in it, I don’t think. You know, this is how I was when I was growing up but as you get older you kind of realise just how nice it was. I mean, my eldest daughter went to uni and she went to Texas for a year. I thought, “Oh she isn’t going to – she’ll stay in America. She won’t want to come back,” and anyway, she came back, and she is now married. I was going to say she got a boyfriend and they ended up, because the end of the house is like separate, so they came and she and her boyfriend lived her for 5 years and they got married from here, even. Yes. And now my youngest daughter is doing the same. She is now in Australia at university so we will see how this one pans out.

[00:31:25]

**IR: Is the house big enough for more?**

JP: Yeah. Yeah. I am here on my own at the moment, so yes. There is plenty of room.

**IR: It is an interesting house, isn’t it? It used to be a drying barn.**

JP: Yes, a drying barn for corn. And that was before World War II. Long before World War II because there was a gentleman… he is still alive but he is in a home at Soham now – Peter Flack. And Peter, he left here. His dad was one of the horsemen for the farm, and he left here to go to war. And so, I mean, until recently, as he has got too old to drive and now, you know, he is in the home at Soham. But he, like nearly every weekend, would come round and he always stopped for a chat. And I went to school with his daughters at Isleham School in Soham and he used to be there. He would just go, “I am just so pleased that you have not just knocked it down or changed it,” and I said “It would probably have been cheaper for me to have knocked it down and rebuilt because I spent so much time and money keeping it standing.” But yeah. He always said that when he left, you know, when the war was over and he came home, his parents didn’t tell him that they had actually moved to the village – only to Isleham – but he said he used to say, “If I knew they’d have moved, I wouldn’t have come back from the army.” He was so upset. And like I say, every weekend I would get a visit from him, just checking it all out, and everything. So I don’t know, obviously, but I wonder whether this was one of the first ever barn conversions, if you think about it, because before World War II, this was made into 3 horsemen’s cottages. So, yeah, I don’t know but it would be interesting to find out really.

**IR: So, did they have a farmhouse near here as well for the farm, or was that somewhere else?**

JP: That was behind – as far as I know – that was behind here, like… but there is no sign of, like, the house or anything so I don’t know when that went. I think I found an ordinance survey map and I think it was the middle 1800’s, and this was here, this part, but I don’t know about the farmhouse. I really don’t know.

**IR: So it is interesting that, perhaps, that conversion – that early conversion – is what saved it. Since the farmhouse went at some point.**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: Otherwise it might have just crumbled or turned out like… [overtalking]**

JP: Depends even what – yeah – depends on what the house was made of, why that’s not still here. I don’t know. But yeah. So, like I say, they made it into 3 horsemen’s cottages. My dad bought it in the early 70’s. It had a demolition order on it, um, to, obviously, be knocked down. There was a gentleman called Cliff who lived in here. He moved to Soham into a bungalow, and Dad had 6 months to get it liveable or they were going to pull it down. So he worked like crazy, and it is still here today.

**IR: Oh, well done.**

JP: Yeah. But, like I say, it is passion for me more than anything. I have said that, when anything happens to me, my girls will do whatever they need to do and that is up to them, then, isn’t it? If I haven’t sold up and left by then. It depends. Because it is a lot of work living out in the middle of nowhere, you know. You have got to be fit to keep doing it. You never know what is round the corner, do you?

[00:35:37]

**IR: No. So, tell me about there were these photos you told me about earlier. Could you tell me about them again?**

JP: Yeah, so the two photos of the house when it was first converted into the 3 horsemen’s cottages, and the one where they are building the river bank on there. I used to be a hairdresser – many years ago – and a couple, Carol and Eric Mason, I stayed friendly with them. And I mean, really friendly. Like Eric had a boat here, and we would just… well, I saw them every week. And, um, they went down to their cousins in Bournemouth, and she asked Carol if she could look at some of these photos, and she went, like, “Well, that’s Jacqui’s house!”. And Eric went, “Don’t talk so silly. That can’t be Jackie’s house.” And when they looked, it was actually. And I said it was a bit kind of like, “Why did I stay so connected with you two, out of all the people I did their hair?” And I said it was kind of a bit spooky really, to know that her dad and her grandad, like, built the river bank like, by my house. And he worked on the actual converting of the barn as well, which is really, really strange.

**IR: And that was before the second World War?**

JP: Yes.

**IR: And the people in the photo, with the machinery on the river bank, can you tell me who they are?**

JP: They were Carol Mason’s brother, and he now, he is still alive. Den. He lives in Australia. And this one, he is just called… he is an Isleham person… but he knows this river very well, because he fished it all the time. Because there used to be two fishing clubs. From the Anchor always to Isleham was Isleham Fishing Club and then, from Trelander, which is the next property along, that way, was always Soham. So there was always, like at weekends, fishing matches. Like, cars and cars. You know, because it was a really popular thing. And him and his dad used to do that all the time. So yeah. Yeah, he is very passionate about the river as well.

**IR: And he lives in Isleham, does he?**

JP: No, he lives the other side of Ely now.

**IR: Oh right. He has moved on.**

JP: Yeah. But he is a very keen fisherman, yeah.

**IR: It is interesting to hear how popular it was. The fishing. Because it doesn’t seem to be now.**

JP: Oh my gosh. No. Well, because it has all – again – everything has changed. People don’t, there are not so many fishing matches, and everything, and all the village people used to do it and everything. I mean, there would be like, there would be a hundred pegs. Like, either side. And they would always be full. You know, again, it was just a community sort of thing, wasn’t it, in those days? And, I guess, relaxation as well, for them. But I did want to say, I have left these here as well, because these are reeds out of the river.

**IR: Oh right. Yes.**

[00:39:07]

JP: My friend Lynne, and myself. We do this.

**IR: Oh right. So it is woven. There is a, there is a basket. A sort of low basket, woven. It is different colours as well, isn’t it? Is that just, sort of like, just the way…**

JP: It is just its natural – yeah.

**IR: So you just pick the reeds, and then…**

JP: You dry them out and then you rehydrate them before…

**IR: Oh how interesting.**

JP: Before you actually start weaving them. And yes. So, I don’t. I haven’t. I mean, I help her, but Lynne and her husband and that, they go along. And there are only certain… it is more of a dark, round, because a lot of people confuse them because it is actually a round reed.

**IR: Is that rushes? Do they call them, or is it reeds?**

JP: Yeah, it is a rush, um, but there are only little patches along the river so we have – we have gone all the way along the river so we know where they are and everything and the Environment know, obviously, and then, and they cut it, and then we do workshops. And teach people how to do it.

**IR: How lovely. That is lovely. Is that an old sort of craft, do you think?**

JP: Yeah, it is a very old craft. There was only, well not that many people in the country that do it, sort of thing. So, um, yeah. We get into all sorts of things like that. But it is very interesting. It is really, you know. And it is quite interesting to have a go at it as well.

**IR: Hmm. It looks quite intricate and tricky. Yes.**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: So, you dry them and then you flatten them? Because they are flat, aren’t they?**

JP: Yeah. No, you don’t flatten them until you are actually working with them.

**IR: Ah, right.**

JP: So…

**IR: So when they’re wet again, you can squash them?**

JP: Yeah. So you can make them into how, you know, what you want it to be, sort of thing.

**IR: So there is the low basket, and then there is also a candle – it’s a jar, isn’t it? It is a jam jar with a sort of intricate woven….**

JP: So you do it very similar to the basket as such, as you start off. But then, where you bring these up here, you just bring these other, the same stems sort of thing and…

**IR: Bring them round from the bottom up.**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: They go all the way round, don’t they?**

JP: Yes.

**IR: They are in a loop and then they’re…**

JP: Yes, just woven in.

**IR: It looks intricate. I mean, it is probably simple if you know how. Not so simple… [overtalking]**

JP: It’s – it’s quite, it is quite difficult. Not difficult difficult. It is easy to do like the hearts and all those sort of things, but – and she has got me into willow weaving as well but that is really hard on your hands and you know, after a day of a workshop, helping her doing, my poor fingers are so sore – but this is much more gentle on the hands.

**IR: Yes, it is lovely. Maybe I can take a photo of those, afterwards, couldn’t I?**

JP: Yes, well that is why I thought I would bring them out because I mean, you know, it is really… well, we are going to start because Lynne was a social worker for East Cambs and that but she is retired now, so, but hopefully she will get a few workshops and stuff going, you know, and get people interested as well, you know.

**IR: So, it is, it’s an old craft that would have been done long ago.**

JP: Oh yes.

**IR: Well, for practical reasons. To make things that were needed.**

JP: Yeah, definitely. Definitely.

**IR: And they would have used the reeds. Well, they would have used the willow for some things I suppose, but reeds for other things.**

JP: Yeah. Yes.

**IR: Lovely. That is fascinating. I love the fact that you are taking it forward and teaching new people. I would quite like to have a go myself actually. Have a go at your workshop.**

JP: Yeah. Yeah well we are going to try, well hopefully do the Prickwillow at Leach Hall as well, because it is nice to use your local stuff. We did one at Aldreth a few weeks ago – that was the first one we had done – and we were making these baskets, and we had too many people. There was only me and Lynne and 12 people. And when you are teaching them from scratch… you know. We didn’t know which way to turn and it all got a little bit too much. It was like, “Ooh no. Let’s… you know, I think 8 should be the maximum number of people to do it,” But it is good. It is really nice to do.

**IR: And presumably the materials – and there is not a vast amount of it, as you said…**

JP: No.

**IR: Just some clumps, as you said. So there can’t be lots of it.**

JP: Yeah, yeah.

**IR: And you wouldn’t work the same with ordinary reeds, because they wouldn’t have that same flexibility, would you?**

JP: No. Well, they haven’t got, well, a lot of them, just are just like strands, aren’t they, you see. So you haven’t got the…. Yeah.

**IR: The solidity.**

JP: Yeah. I mean, these are kind of spongy, really, aren’t they, if you feel them?

**IR: Oh, yes. Yes, I see. Yes.**

JP: But this is supposed to be like a bread basket. And yeah, so I said I need to make some place mats now, because, yeah.

**IR: You like a challenge.**

JP: Yeah. Yeah.

**IR: Because they would have to be quite flat, wouldn’t they?**

JP: Yes. Yeah.

**IR: Well that’s lovely. It’s fascinating to see about the old crafts.**

JP: Yeah. Trying to keep them going, and keeping people interested.

[00:44:37]

**IR: Can I just…**

JP: Sorry.

**IR: Go back to… [overtalking]**

JP: Sorry.

**IR: No, no. There’s just one other one you mentioned there, with the – there’s a picture of your house across the flood, isn’t there?**

JP: Yes, yes. So that was in the floods of ‘47 and Peter Flack gave me that picture. So he was, obviously, or his parents or I don’t know in detail, but he gave me that photo. And he said that the men would like walk the river bank of a night, or all day as well, just to make sure that it was holding up and, you know, was not going to collapse, sort of thing. So, yeah, the house has seen a lot of interesting things going on. But I mean, that’s a massive, you know, width. I can’t imagine. I mean, we had floods this year and I mean, it was up to my waist, but that…

**IR: On the bank?**

JP: Well, like, so when you go over the river bank, you’ve got that grass which is the flood plain.

**IR: And that was up to your waist?**

JP: And that was up to my waist this year. But I mean, that’s not…

**IR: But in the picture it is much higher than that?**

JP: Oh, yeah.

**IR: It is up to the top of the banks.**

JP: Right up to the top of the river banks. So, yeah, gosh. If that had have burst that would have been horrific. Because a lot of people, when they have seen my house, they say, “Oh, is that built on arches? In case the river flooded?” And I am like no, you know, but everybody thinks that’s the reason it’s on arches but it is not.

**IR: Why is it on arches? Do you know?**

JP: Yeah. Because it was for the drying of the corn.

**IR: So it helped with the circulation of air?**

JP: So, the wind would blow under the house and then - or under the barn, as it was then – and then, um, yeah, it would dry all the corn. And, yeah, because when my dad actually bought this place, there were still two of the horses here that worked the farm. You know, in retirement, obviously, they were, but I remember sitting on the fence and watching them tack them up and everything to take them away which was really cool because I have always liked horses, so, yeah. Another thing that you did. Because when my dad brought us out here from St Neots, there was me, Andy and Wayne, and we – we’d been in a town, you know, and then to be brought out in the middle of nowhere. I think we were driving my parents mad. So Dad said, “I’ll buy you one thing each, and then I don’t want to hear nothing more.” So me and Andy, we had a pony each, and Wayne had a canoe. He said he didn’t want something he had to look after every day. So, yeah.

[00:47:33]

**IR: So you rode it and you had to look after your horses… [overtalking]**

JP: Yes. Yeah.

**IR: Rode them around?**

JP: All the time, yeah.

**IR: Where did you ride them?**

JP: Everywhere you just could. You know, especially, I remember we used to make, when they cut the corn, because when they cut the corn years ago it was small bales, so we used to make them into forts and stuff like that, you know. We wouldn’t destroy the bales and we could use them, and the farmers didn’t mind because we weren’t doing no harm, and you know we would ride our horses and stuff all around there and ride to the village. I mean, when I was 8 maybe, 8, I had my first car. Because, again, you know we were so remote I learnt to drive. And so, I used to drive along the river bank to you know where you’ve come from – Wells – there’s like, where the concrete road stops and it goes to track – I used to drive it up there and then I could walk into the village and see my friends, or also, even both my girls, when they left primary school and started secondary school, the school bus picks you up at the main road. So, both my girls learned to drive at 11 and they used to drive the car up the top of the road to catch the school bus. So, yeah. Yeah, it does bring some interesting things, living in the middle of nowhere, doesn’t it?

**IR: Did you ride the horse along the river bank as well?**

JP: Oh yeah. Yeah. All the time, yes.

**IR: Did they ever go in the river? The horses?**

JP: No, no. Because there is quite, there’s, until you get up to where the sluice is, up at the thing, like you literally haven’t got slipways or anything in this river. It just goes, like, straight down. Yeah.

**IR: And they’d have difficulty getting out?**

JP: Yeah. I wouldn’t want to be on their back, no.

[00:49:35]

**IR: And how about Wayne doing his canoeing? Did he go up and down the river?**

JP: Oh, yeah. Yeah. He was the fisherman, and because that was funny – I was only talking to someone the other day and I said that I remember him catching… well, there used to be a lot of eels in the river as well, obviously, Ely and you know, because they have just had their thing for eels at Ely this week, last weekend.

**IR: Have they?**

JP: Um, but, yeah. No, I remember him catching eels out of the river and even when you, like you cook them, and they wiggle even when they are dead. Oh the stupid things you remember – it was like oh my God! I could not ever have eaten them. It’s their nerves or something.

**IR: Oh gosh. So, did you eat them?**

JP: No. No, no.

**IR: Did anyone eat them in the family?**

JP: Oh yeah. My dad and Wayne, yeah. Because my dad was quite a fisherman as well. He had a sea fishing boat, somewhere on the coast there, and he used to take people out fishing and all that sort of thing. So, yeah. So we kind of lived, I suppose in a way, that was cheap food, wasn’t it? If Dad was taking people out to earn money, teaching them the sea fish, but he’d catch fish and bring it home and it fed us all as well, didn’t it?

**IR: And was there much fishing in the river that you could eat? Fish from the river that you could eat?**

JP: Well, I mean, people do eat it, but I mean a lot of the fish from the river always taste muddy, sort of thing, a lot more. They say if you soak them a lot but I don’t know. I have never eaten the fish from the river. No, it’s not something that has interested me. Yeah. I am a bit like, I mean, obviously I understand catching fish to eat for, you know, for your dinner. Things like that – that’s fine – but as a, as a sport, I think of the fish and they’ll go, “Oh, that was a real battle to get fish in,” and I’d say, “Yeah, because it is worried it’s gonna die!” Yes.

**IR: Not your thing. And that eel maybe putting you off.**

JP: Yeah, I think, probably yeah. I think, those things, you don’t think about it do you, but it probably was. Yeah. Yeah, but, um, I am trying to think if there is anything else I – I mean, obviously, I have got the… that’s a very old river map on the wall there, as well, of the fen land waterways.

**IR: Oh, that’s nice. That is the first time I have seen a picture of one of those machines. People have told me about them before, and obviously to have that connection of the people on it as well, so that is lovely.**

JP: Yeah. It is sad, because obviously, like I say, Eric has now passed away, and Carol is now in a home, and all his stuff has gone, so it is like, well, because obviously they were, you know, little pictures like that you know, as they did years ago, and of course he blew them up for me, but it would have been wonderful to have the original ones, wouldn’t it, but it is still nice to have that.

**IR: Yes, it is. Yes. You can regret things forever really.**

JP: Yeah. I don’t. It is just it is – I am so glad he did that. And I didn’t know if you might want to tell people that one as well.

**IR: Oh yes. I was thinking that that is really useful. That was done by – this is a map of the River Lark, showing all the locks and things. Who was that done by, again?**

JP: That was Eric. He did that as well, yes. But if you talk, like, if Peter gets back to you – Peter and Eric were, really – oh they did so much history. Because that is how I met Peter. Because Eric asked me, before Eric had his own boat, and he said, “Could I take a group of historians from Soham down the River Lark,” so I went, “Well, yeah. I guess so,” and my youngest daughter wasn’t very old and so she was the little tea girl on the boat. So, like I say, we went off and trundled up the river and everything, and Peter has lived in Soham all his life as a farmer, and never knew that, like, that this was here. And by the time we got back he just fell in love with it and he went, he said, “I don’t suppose this boat is up for sale, is it?” and I went, “Well it can be, if you want!” because it was one I was doing up at the time. So yes, he has had a boat here ever since as well. That is just how it works, isn’t it? It is so nice though because all, I mean, I don’t make a fortune with my mooring business, I don’t charge like other people do, but as I said, every one of the people over there are my friends as well which is really important, I think. I think it’s important. I am not out to become a millionaire. I would rather have nice people around me.

**IR: And they also, it sounds to me, they also fall in love with the river as well?**

JP: Yes.

**IR: Which is nice, isn’t it?**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: Like you.**

JP: Yeah. It is.

**IR: And then, Peter became interested in the history as well?**

JP: Oh no. Yes, he was a historian, yes.

**IR: So he became – he fell in love with the river as well.**

JP: Yes. Yes.

**IR: How far did you take him, up to Judes Ferry?**

JP: I don’t – did I?

**IR: That would be the furthest.**

JP: Yeah, that would be the furthest I could go. I think I went up to the Ouse as well, you know. We did the whole of, kind of the whole of the river. I believe, I am sure Peter would tell you exactly where we went.

**IR: It is probably stuck in his mind.**

JP: Yeah.

**IR: Isn’t it? Such an important trip for him.**

JP: Yeah.

[00:55:43]

**IR: Wonderful.**

JP: Yes. I mean, one thing that sticks in my mind from being a child is the smell when they used to dredge the river. Because they used to dredge it, and pull it up on to the river bank, and that would smell just rotten. Just so rotten. And until, you know, it dried, and then it would settle down and it was all fine. But it was such a rotten smell. But it was so important and I wish they did it today because the rivers would be a lot better for it but they don’t. So, but, yeah, always done. It was always done. It is a funny thing, you know, how you remember some things that are like oh my God. It was like, it used to smell horrible.

**IR: How often was that?**

JP: Once a year. They used to do it, sort of like before – so it would be sort of like a kind of a winter project as such. You know, depending on weather obviously, because then it would dry and it would be gone, the smell would be gone, by the time the summer started and everything. But yeah.

**IR: Did they cut the reeds as well? Cut the weeds and things?**

JP: Yeah, they do still come and cut the reeds some of the time. They, you know, they just don’t seem to be as keen as they were. You know, I have to nag a lot to get jobs done, or something, which is sad, but they do come and yeah. And get them done. I bet I must be a nightmare to them really. But it is just – it is only when you care, though, isn’t it? It is like, you know, I just think that if you don’t say something, you know, if people listen or don’t listen. I can’t change that part, but at least I have tried, so, which is important. Because I would hate to lose it all really. It would be really sad, because, I mean, we have the otters over there, and the kingfishers, and the water voles and all those things. It would be very sad. I mean, at the moment I have got – because the river has been high and I haven’t been over there cutting grass as much, and people haven’t been down to their boats as much, I have even got a swan that has made a nest and she is sitting there on her eggs which should be any time now, I believe, though, they will be hatching. Then a moorhen has made a nest on my daughter’s boat over there as well. So, yeah, nature was taking over because no one had been over there. Which is quite sweet.

[00:58:35]

**IR: Yes it has obviously been a really important part of your life, the river here, hasn’t it?**

JP: Yes, it has.

**IR: A big, big chunk of it. Even though it wasn’t so much in the early period.**

JP: It always was part of it, but you don’t really realise do you, because obviously when talking with you and like I say, me and Edwina, I mean the antics that we would get up to as kids. So it was always important that the river was there and we did do some really funny things. But my children have done it too, which I think it is a wonderful thing. You know, like, they got the paddle boards out and put them behind the boat, and you know, they were kind of skiing behind the boats on the paddle boards. This was my children, and stuff like that, do you know what I mean? So they have had fun on the river too which is really important. So yeah, when I moved a mooring once from one end up to the other, because it is on barrels, so I just tied it on to a boat and pulled it along the river. You know, that little trip would be quite funny as well. Just silly things, you know, but it is not harmful or anything. Just a bit of fun, which is important. And I do save lots of birds, when it is – like an Egyptian goose, that was my pet, for a very very long time. I never keep them so they can’t go back to nature, and they all go back in the end, but they do spend as long as they want with me. And ducks, and stuff, and Carl and Jay who live over the road there – they curse me sometimes because they often all come back when they feel like it and they don’t half make a racket sometimes. My Egyptian goose used to come over to the river with me. I would be working on a boat and it would be sitting on the boat and waiting for me, or I have got photos of it. Even of its first flight, you know, all this sort of thing. It is hilarious. But, yeah. I do like saving animals.

**IR: And the love of the river, you are hoping to pass on to the next generation as well. Your grandson.**

JP: Yeah. Yeah, I would like, yeah. I would like to think so. You just never know. Because, like I said, I never, if you had asked me when I was 20, I just knew I wanted to be a lorry driver and that is what I did. So, you know, my eldest daughter is 30 and my youngest is 21, so they have still got time for that to happen because it didn’t happen for me when I was 30, do you know what I mean? I still hadn’t thought that I was going to be running the business then. But it is good. It is good. It is a nice way. Yeah, I enjoy the people that I have got. They are really lovely as well, so, you know, and I always felt because with being here with my 2 daughters, I always wanted to feel safe. Do you know what I mean? I didn’t want to make the business massive or have just anybody. They all laugh and say, because I never let anybody just bring a boat here. I am like, well. “You come down,” and I like to meet them, and stuff. It was just, because I wanted to – because it was my home as well. It was very important to work well at the time. Yeah. But it has been good. It has been good.

**IR: Okay. Well, thank you very much. It has been really, really interesting.**

JP: Thank you. And if I think of anything else, I will let you know. But I, you know, I think, because my brother Wayne, was much more – as, as the children, he had a lot more involvement with the river than I did, but he lives, he actually works at Felixstowe Docks now, so yeah, still by the sea.

**IR: Still by water.**

JP: Yeah, yeah – it is funny, isn’t it?

**IR: Not as much in a canoe, but…**

JP: No. No, no.

[01:02:53] End.