Lord Walsingham full interview SUMMARY times topics

Interviewed 15 January 2025, at Merton, interviewer Imogen Radford

as part of the Tales from the River project, in turn part of The Brecks Fen Edge and Rivers Landscape Partnership Scheme, supported by National Lottery Heritage fund.

**Full interview, lightly edited, 02:43:43**

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Additional material provided: autobiography: Lord Walsingham, One More Onion Peeled

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See below for summary of times and topic – last page.

**Summary**

Born 21 February 1925 (John de Grey), lived at Westmere, Tottington until age 17 in 1942, when the family moved to Merton Hall, removed from the Stanford battle area along with all its inhabitants who were never able to return. Went into military service, also at Foreign Office, returned to Merton 1968 and ran agricultural related businesses, retired in 1998, still lives in Merton, now writes books on linguistics.

Interview covers a range of subjects including the subject of linguistics; experience in various military areas including Malaya, India at the time of partition, Korea, and service in the SAS; the family history from 970s onwards and their arrival at Merton in about 1338; farming including introducing marling in 1613, farm harvest methods, and management and the finances of the Merton estate and the family. Also breeding and providing Shetland ponies for trap racing, waterlily and other plant production, vegetable processing and production. The school for girls at Merton Hall, other information about the villages and about people.

Some discussion of the removal from (what is now called) Stanta and the impact on the villagers displaced and on the Walsingham family.

Creation of Thompson Water, Stanford Water, and descriptions of them and West Mere, activities on or by the water (by Lord Walsingham and others) including duck shooting, rafting, skating, ice hockey, observing and fishing for pike and eels, and cattle and horse watering.

**More detailed summary of water-related topics and farming**

[00:38:30] the lakes were created in the late 19th century, river Wissey dammed, Thompson water 20 acres, Stanford water 30 acres, for duck shooting. At age 10 to 15 knew all the ducks, their eggs, it was burgeoning then with a blaze of colour and birds, a joy for a young teenager. Nothing left now.

[00:40:45] West Mere is 5 acres, most westerly mere in the Brecks, not on sand but on soil. In 1613 Sir William de Grey introduced marling, digging down through 2 foot of soil then through sand to find clay 15 feet down, making a hole in each field, children went down and transported the clay. Improved the soil and increased the value of the land.

[00:49:45] the waters were created to attract ducks to shoot them. Great uncle Tom [Lord W6] built a marble billiard room at the end of Merton Hall for after going shooting.

[00:51:45] school run by mother. [00:52:26] skating, also moat in garden of Hassocks which was a manor house. The Danes who were in the area in 850 worshipped a water goddess and created moats to coax her to protect them. They washed more than the Saxons so more attractive. Hassocks is matting made from Norfolk reeds, which grow in the moat. A large widened area where people played ice hockey, and skated on West Mere.

[00:56:10] made a boat out of a box, but sunk, three cousins cut trees down and made a raft on which they sailed around the islands, could explore and look at the ducks nests and different plants

on the islands. Skating was only a few days every year. Westmere farm pond had the effluent from the stables so was unpleasant.

[00:59:10] school had 60 girls, when home in the holidays would swim in the pool with them.

[01:00:45] land taken during the war in 1942, not given back afterwards, three villages destroyed, villagers having to live in the roof spaces of houses in the village, priority was given to rebuilding London. House built in 1770 and magnificent barn taken and blown up for fun, it was all a disaster. Living in a Bolton and Paul movable bungalow, originally brought in for extra school staff.

[01:58:08] Thompson Common – had plans to create ponds at the low points to grow waterlilies and similar, but not allowed as they said it would damage the pingos – disagreed, had a study done. So did it at Broadflash farm, and abandoned Thompson Common.

[02:03:47] Shetland ponies on Thompson Common – an enterprise to amuse the children. Grew them from 3 feet tall to 49 inches tall for racing carriages – two stallions with a small seat a bit like a bicycle seat, 8 km races (possibly), sold 30 of these equipes for £3500 each, including to president Giscard d'Estaing in France. [02:07:08] Took two generations to grow, run by one employee. When sold the land to Norfolk Naturalists they had to look after the 40 Shetlands. Breeding mares kept at Merton in front of the hall by the cricket club, originally eight, now three left, live 20-30 years.

[02:09:25] great uncle Tom wrote that he had seen three pike of 70 pounds, about a yard long. There were about six, and one of them is now stuffed and in Merton Hall.

[02:11:15] once caught an eel and gave it to an uncle. When repairing the eel trap at the end of Thompson water, the trap broke and the water went downstream along with the six pike into the army fishery which was well stocked with trout. Never said anything but they would have known what happened.

[02:13:00] there were hundreds of eels, around the edge in the wood there were little ponds with 20 in each, as well as in the trap which was a wooden box that caught the eels as the stream flowed through it. Villagers were free to come and catch them to eat.

[02:15:32] Watton Fishing club asked to fish on Thompson water, said yes and probably made no charge.

[02:16:00] the river runs through Tottington and Stanford water, but not past that as there is a structure that stops fish, eels, duck. Stanford water was the best, but not now, nothing there and no one goes.

[02:17:45] Plan to have windfarms covering the whole of Stanta, not used except for running about which they could do between the windmills.

[02:30:50] often think about Stanford water. West Mere was formative. Would like to be able to see it again but won’t. Still in good condition. It is quarter of a mile from the farm. The cows were driven down to water and the horses galloped down after ploughing all day, with Lesley Macro on the back of one of the eight cart horses bareback. The way was known as The Drift, a sandy 30 yards wide ride with hedges along both sides. Around West Mere was just a narrow strip of 30 yards of good grass which the cattle and horses would graze when watering. The pond at Westmere farm was not fit for them to drink.

[02:35:00] in the holidays, 1940-1941, worked on the farm, start at 6 AM so up at five, back at 6 PM, 12 hour day. Leading the horses with the wagon, would shout “Hold Ye” each time they moved off, so that the three or four people on the wagon loading the stooks from the field would know. Got to know the horses, some of their names included Captain and Major, would stand eating corn in bags over their noses. At other times, fitting in between other work, would cut bracken for bedding, not sure for which animal.

[02:39:25] away at school in Berkshire, Crowthorne, prep school [from 1938 at Wellington].

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| **time in recording (hour, min, sec)** | **Brief summary of the topic** |
| 00:00:00 | explanation of project, Date of birth |
| 00:02:30 | Study of linguistics |
| 00:07:37 | 1954-56 SAS Malaya, Semai aborigines |
| 00:13:22 | family story from 970s approximately |
| 00:24:00 | Battle of Hastings |
| 00:29:30 | Merton 1338 |
| 00:38:30 | ducks on lakes for shooting, creating, appreciating the lakes |
| 00:40:45 | Westmere farm, Marling 1613 |
| 00:43:15 | agricultural revolution, movement of people to towns |
| 00:48:30 | Baynards family |
| 00:49:45 | water and billiard room, shooting |
| 00:51:45 | School |
| 00:52:26 | Skating, moat, Danes water goddess, ice hockey |
| 00:56:10 | boat and raft on the lake, ducks |
| 00:59:10 | School, swim with girls in the pool |
| 01:00:45 | the war – land and house taken, villages destroyed, farm and barn, villagers displaced, rehousing delayed |
| 01:05:35 | living at Merton in a temporary building |
| 01:08:45 | India and partition |
| 01:22:24 | return to Merton in 1968 (left 1942 to join the army as a private) |
| 01:25:15 | formed companies, father, uncle |
| 01:27:45 | Hassocks, was a workhouse, wife and family |
| 01:30:10 | companies, growing and processing vegetables, new process for onions |
| 01:37:00 | commanding a regiment to train young people |
| 01:40:45 | MC in Korea |
| 01:44:10 | killing, including 1000 in one go, conditions, frozen dead |
| 01:52:15 | Airborne SAS commando |
| 01:53:10 | retired in 1998 age 73 |
| 01:54:32 | farming company, growing and processing vegetables |
| 01:58:08 | Thompson Common, water plants |
| 02:01:15 | Finance and estate |
| 02:03:47 | ponies on Thompson Common, bred for racing |
| 02:07:08 | sold to Norfolk naturalists, with ponies, some still at Merton |
| 02:09:25 | Fish at Thompson Water, pike, stuffed |
| 02:11:15 | let pike through eel trap into army area and trout fishery |
| 02:13:00 | eels at the sluice and in ponds, villagers could come and catch |
| 02:15:32 | Watton Fishing Club |
| 02:16:00 | Stanford water |
| 02:17:45 | wind turbines for standard |
| 02:21:40 | an earlier Lord Walsingham closing the pubs |
| 02:22:38 | Leslie Macro, prisoner of war, feet destroyed, escape, long life |
| 02:26:31 | great uncle Tom railway Watton to Sandringham, Argentina |
| 02:27:28 | estate during the war and later |
| 02:30:50 | Westmere formative, cows walked and horses galloped down to West Mere, Leslie Macro riding one of them |
| 02:35:00 | farm work 1940-1941, methods |
| 02:39:25 | away at prep school, airfield |
| 02:43:43 | End of recording |