Adrian Bibby

**Short summary of subjects covered**

Born 1944, Thetford. Swimming from early age at Thetford swimming baths – including a description – with school, or on Sundays, later with bicycle went further afield. First Staunch, Barnham, Second Staunch, Two Mile Bottom, Red Arches. Making boats from ‘belly tanks’, discarded aircraft fuel tanks and paddling them on the river. Brother catching pike and eating it, weed cutting and dredging, cattle grazing on the common, dairy, Mr Lowndes.

Interview 3 May 2022, interviewer Imogen Radford

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Key:

**I = Imogen Radford**

A = Adrian Bibby

[00:00:00]

**I: My name’s Imogen Radford. We’re here at the Guildhall Hall talking to Mr Bibby. If you wouldn’t mind telling me your name again.**

A: Adrian Bibby.

**I: Would you mind telling me the date…not the date but the year of your birth?**

A: 21.10.44.

**I: What was your occupation when you were working?**

A: *[Laughing]* Very many of them. I started off as an apprenticed French polisher in the yard just at the back here. They went down the pan. Then I went from there to being a car sprayer across the road. From there I went to work on roadworks outside. I suppose that was about my last 20 years of work and I wasa painter [?]. That’s about it.

**I: Confusing. Have you lived in Thetford all your life?**

A: Born and bred.

**I: In a few different places in Thetford?**

A: Yeah.

**I: This project’s mainly about activities in the river; swimming and other things. What did you do and from what age?**

A: Well, we used to go down the river when we was very young and that, but when we was at school, to get out of lessons, half the kids went down swimming. We used to go in the morning, the girls went in the afternoon. So we used to go down there and that’s when I learnt to swim. Started with 10m, 15, then 25. The water temperature was about 52º, that was cold.

**I: But you had a choice did you? Whether you went for the…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Well, when I got me bicycle and that and other friends up, we used to then go down places like Two Mile Bottom and second staunch, different places. Any part of the river where we could get to really within two or three miles of Thetford. Barnham River; there used to be two places down there. There used to be the old Barnham River and then a bit further up there used to be a railway bridge that used to be from Thetford to Bury and we had a swimming hole there where we used to go to. A lot of the older people used to go there as well.

**I: So that’s a bit further down the road towards Bury.**

A: If you look, there’s a car salesman’s on the left. Just past there was a gate we used to go through down to the bridge. I don’t think the bridge is there now, but that used to be the old Thetford/Bury railway track.

**I: The railway’s gone now, hasn’t it?**

A: Yeah.

**I: I didn’t know about that one. That was really interesting. That was quite popular was it…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Yeah, as I say, the older ones…we was sort of young, but they put an old railway sleeper, made a diving board out of that. Then the other side used to be a tree when they hung a rope and then used to swing across. It was lovely. From the bridge outwards for a while was very stony and shallow and then it went down to a hole where it was all sand where you could swim. People used to…not me, but they used to dive off that bridge and that was very scary.

**I: Off the railway bridge?**

A: Yeah...

**I: *[Overspeaking]* That’s…**

A: …but you had to go out a fair old way to get into the deeper part. Yeah, you had people who were mad *[laughing]* enough to do it *[laughing]*.

**I: You didn’t do that.**

A: No *[laughing]*.

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

A: Yeah. Same as down bathing sheds. Chap used to dive off the top of the sheds into the pool.

**I: Oh really?**

A: Yeah. Then of course, you had the concrete bit around

**I: So from the sheds, which are further back from the edge aren’t they…?**

A: Yeah.

**I: You had to go from that roof…**

A: You’re talking about, what, 6/7ft and that’s off the roof. Wouldn’t do it myself.

**I: Did the superintendent have something to say about that?**

A: No. Well, the chap on the gate used to be the one that done it. Rocky Stead his name was.

**I: What’s his name, sorry?**

A: Rocky Stead. He used to be the one that took the money at the gate. He used to work for the council and that. He was one of the people that done it but there was one or two others that are mad enough *[laughing]*.

[00:04:00]

**I: Brilliant. So just chronologically, you always went to the river at all different times and all different ages. Tell me a little bit more about each one. When you went with the school, was that like a formal thing to teach you to swim? Very specific.**

A: That was, yeah.

**I: Was that during the summer or any time of year?**

A: That was during the summer but that was still cold when we used to go in. We used to go down there at 11 o’clock till 12 so that weren’t very warm.

**I: Did you enjoy it at all?**

A: Well, yes, that was alright. Once you got in the water that was alright, but you used to let somebody go in first and let you know what it was like *[laughing]*.

**I: Was it clear or muddy?**

A: It was clear most of the part of, but there was a lot of mud in there the longer it went on. One little story; there was some strangers come there and I was talking to the chap. He said, “Well, it looks quite deep there”…’cause I was standing half way along the pool and I was up to there against the concrete. I said, “Yeah, but you don’t realise I’m standing up to me knees…or past me knees in mud.” Yeah, there was plenty of mud there at the time.

**I: You went with the school but did you also go outside of school…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Oh yes, we always used to go down there…on a Sunday afternoon especially or when the weather was nice. We used to go and listen to Top of the Pops on the other side of the river.

**I: Was that on the bank? On the other side…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* That was on the other bank, yeah. There used to be all sand and grass there so you could lay out there and sunbathe and listen to Top of the Pops. A lot of people used to do that.

**I: I remember, Sunday afternoon at 5 o’clock or something.**

A: 5 o’clock, yeah.

**I: So when you did that, you went to the bank, you didn’t have to pay the entrance for the…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Yeah, because that was all fenced off. Once they put the bridge across they fenced it off, so you had to come through the gate…which was thruppence I think, so it weren’t too bad.

**I: So you went there and you went to the Barnham…you told me about the railway bridge and then there’s the other place you call Barnham River.**

A: Barnham River.

**I: Where was that? Where was…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Well, that’s before you get to that one. If you go up the Bury Road, you've got the common on your left hand side and you can follow the path and come to the river. That used to be 2 or 3ft. That’s only about 8/9in deep now. I don’t think it’s very deep now at all.

**I: Was it deeper in your day then, when you went there?**

A: Yeah, it was deeper then. Oh it’s I suppose about 2/3ft deep at the most. But you could walk all the way along that river. That was all sand. Nearly all the way back to Thetford up there. You couldn’t go through The Nunnery because the person who owned The Nunnery…you weren’t allowed to touch the bottom of the water. Lowndes his name was. If you went along…and you could go along in a boat but you mustn’t punt yourself along there.

**I: Could you swim along it if you were so inclined?**

A: Well, you wouldn’t try it because if you had to touch the bottom that was a fair old way and if he was about…he was a funny man.

**I: He used to have something to say to you.**

A: Oh, he would, especially when he’s got his shotgun in his hand.

**I: Really?**

A: Actually, Lowndes his name was. He was had up for murdering his wife. He sold out to the Arabs on the BTO, the Lowndes estate. Sold it to the Arabs and he moved to Spain. Then I read in the paper that he had actually murdered his wife and the last I heard about him must’ve been about 10/12 year ago, he’d put in for parole and they turned him down so I presume now he’s dead and gone. But he did not like anybody going along through his land. That was from the bathing sheds, up between the bathing sheds and Barnham River, his land.

**I: So you basically avoid that and go up…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Always went around. Up the Bury Road and cut across or go across the common.

**I: Did lots of people go there? Did they picnic and…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* No, Barnham common used to be a village. Yeah, a lot of people used to picnic there and that. Kids…trouble is now you got the cattle on there now and the sheep and there’s so much mess and now you couldn’t let your kids run because of it all. There used to be cows go down there years ago. In them days, when we used to go swimming the cows used to go there but once they’d gone you could go in ‘cause you knew all that hadgone down the river further. But yeah. Dairy used to be on the Bury Road and Simons their name was. My father’s brother used to drive the cattle from there to Barnham River, then he used to bring them back and they used to go on a field which is opposite BTO…I can never remember the name. There’s Nunnery Drive and…I think that’s Nunnery Drive. One place there they used to go on a field there and graze, then he used to come pick them up and take them down Mill Lane back to the dairy.

**I: The field you mentioned that you say you can’t remember the name of, is it now…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* It’s all built.

**I: It’s all built on now is it?**

A: Nunnery Drive I think is the right hand side…oh, I can’t remember the name of it now.

**I: Not to worry. But it’s now covered…**

A: Four houses.

**I: …in houses.**

A: Apart from one bit that’s green where they weren’t allowed to take which is in front of where we used to play football and that. Next to the river.

**I: But that used to be where the cows went during the day.**

A: Yeah. Then he’d go and pick them up and take them down Mill Lane.

**I: So they went over to the river. What? To drink or…?**

A: Yeah, drink and feed and graze. I suppose he’d come and be over there a couple/three hours and then he’d bring them back to the field, leave them there and then pick them up later, ready for milking in the evening.

**I: People picnicking and swimming and so on, they knew when the cattle were gonna be there…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* More or less, yeah.

**I: …and they could kind of…**

A: They’d go in the morning.

**I: …more or less go a different time.**

A: Early morning. If you went up there 11 o’clock time they’d be gone.

[00:09:55]

**I: So that’s Barnham. Then you mentioned second staunch.**

A: Yeah, second staunch is down the other way heading towards Brandon.

**I: Is that Abbey Heath Weir it’s called now?**

A: Yeah.

**I: Is that the same place?**

A: Yeah. And there was another one further down which had a pond right next to it, but weren’t really safe to swim in the pond. A lot of people used to go fishing there because they had a lot of pike in there. We went down there in what we used to call old belly tanks.

**I: Oh, what were they?**

A: They were underneath the aircraft, the fuel tanks. People used to take them, cut a hole in the top, put a bit of board across and put another two…join two together and go down the river on them.

**I: Did you go down the river from Thetford down to the places you mentioned?**

A: Yeah. Carry them out over the first one and then carry on till down second staunch. Didn’t used to go no further than that. Yeah, that was like a Sunday afternoon jaunt.

**I: And then back again *[laughing]*.**

A: Well, that was harder coming back ‘cause you’re going against the current but we did manage it.

**I: Did you have sort of like paddles or…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Yeah.

**I: …oars or something?**

A: A coupla paddles. You used to get soaked ‘cause the paddles coming back. But yeah, what was fun.

**I: Second staunch is now what they call Abbey Heath Weir, what was that like then? It wasn’t like this concrete stuff they’ve got now was it?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* No, it hasn’t changed that much really.

**I: Okay.**

A: Well, the bank is where they have the swimming now. That weren’t like that. It was just an ordinary bank but now they’ve put concrete in there over the last few years where people go down there and picnic and swim there. We never used to go there.

**I: Is that the one by…I think they call it Red Castle? Is it that one?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Yeah, the Red Castle Estate.

**I: That one. That’s one you used to go down to.**

A: We used to go down there but we used to go the other side of the weir because that weren’t so dangerous as if you’d gone this side. But now they shut the weir off. It’s where people go swimming there now. A lot of people picnic there now as well.

[00:11:57]

**I: How much further down did you go?**

A: Second staunch, I suppose from there to the next one must’ve been a good mile or more. Yeah, down that way.

**I: Where’s the pond you mentioned?**

A: That’s right next to the river. The river used to go through and then there’s a big pond. Sort of go round and go back into the river.

**I: Down at the second?**

A: Yeah.

**I: That’s not there now…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* There where I call the first staunch and that was the second staunch.

**I: I understand, yeah. That one’s not there anymore I don’t think. That pond.**

A: I don’t know. I would’ve thought that’s dried up.

**I: But did people go in there?**

A: Used to go in there fishing.

**I: Fishing…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* My brother used to bring…he brought a pike home like that.

**I: Oh my goodness.**

A: A bit of a fair sized one and he said they used to eat them. Oh, that’s muddy. Wouldn’t touch them. But you could see them in the water there. Quite big pike in there. As I say, I think that’s all dried up now so…

**I: And that was in the pond rather than the river?**

A: Yeah.

**I: But then the pond went into the river.**

A: Sort of…

**I: *[Overspeaking]* Presumably the pike and things travelled between them.**

A: Well, there was a bit of a wall the other side and if it used to get up to a certain level that used to drop back into the river. But I haven’t been down there for donkey’s years now so I wouldn’t know what it’s like down there.

**I: Did you say you went to Two Mile Bottom as well?**

A: Two Mile Bottom, yeah.

**I: When did you go there? What sort of…?**

A: I used to go there quite a lot. Used to have to cross a railway crossing and go down to the bottom where the river was. There used to be a spring there as well right next to the bank. There used to be a lot of people picnicking down there ‘cause that was like a big common area. People used to sit there and picnic and go swimming. There was a big factory on the right of it. I can’t think the…

**I: *[Overspeaking]* Is that the vitriol factory?**

A: No, it’s the animal feed factory. They were well-known. I can’t think…

**I: *[Overspeaking]* Fisons?**

A: …of the name of it. Might’ve been.

**I: Not to worry.**

A: Fisons or something like that. Could’ve been. Anyway, that’s where we used to go. I used to go down over me sister’s and that.

**I: Did you ever camp down there?**

A: Not really, no.

**I: Some people did.**

A: Yeah, a lot of people did. They used to have a fire and that ‘cause they’ve got plenty of wood there. Light a fire. But I never…

**I: *[Overspeaking]* Was that a forest on the edge there as well was there?**

A: Yeah, ‘cause now you’ve got the factory there as well which weren’t there years ago. And there weren’t so many trains going through there then.

**I: You just basically crossed the line…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Yeah and then the other side. That was quite a nice place. As I say, we used to bike down there. When you’ve got your bikes that was fairly close. That was all downhill that way, uphill coming back *[laughing]*.

**I: Like with the boats, yeah *[laughing]*.**

[00:14:47]

A: Yeah. Then the other place would be Red Arches which I told your friend about. Snettisham [Knettishall] Heath.

**I: Did you go there on your bikes again?**

A: Yeah. Used to go down on the bike. They had a pond there where the river goes round there. We used to go there. People still do. They still go down there with the dogs, walk the dogs and let the dogs goes in with the kids and that. That’s quite an ideal place.

**I: That was quite popular then as well?**

A: Yeah, that was very popular. Red Arches. Never used to go in and out the water but once we got the bikes…

**I: Did you not?**

A: Once we got the bikes we was away *[laughing]*. A lot easier. I still notice some of these places being used. That is one of the most popular places, especially on a Sunday afternoon. You get the ice cream wagon down there and quite a few people…it’s all looked after now by the proper authorities. The rivers nowadays, I’m afraid they’re not as clean as they used to be kept. They all used to be kept clean by hand ‘cause there was no…I don’t know if Alan come out…Alan Sizeman his name is. He used to work on the river…well, he’s my age. He used to go to school with me. His foreman used to be a chap named Teddy Bear Reeve…passed away now. They used to have a big old punt, hold about five or six people, and they used to go round with the old sieve cutting all the weeds. Right up from nearly just short of Swaffham right down into Thetford. All along the river. They used to keep it all clean. There’d be many a time you’d be in Thetford and you’d see weeds come by and they’d been cutting it up further. Never done nowadays I’m afraid.

And the last time I can remember the water being dredged was from the Nun’s Bridges…you know where they are, down towards what used to be the old factory. They dredged that and they put all the mud or whatever you call it onto one side and brought the bank up so it was a bit higher. Now it’s all grassed and everything. You wouldn’t know it’d been done. I don’t think that’s ever been done since.

[00:17:00]

**I: What’s the last time you remember…or how long did you carry on with swimming and going in the river or carrying on beyond…?**

A: *[Overspeaking]* Oh till I was about…I’d’ve been round about mid-20s, early 20s. We used to go sneaking down there at night time after a pub and go swimming. I’d climb over the top. Must’ve been early 20s and that.

**I: Over the fence?**

A: Yeah. Then they built the new one. Once they built that then that one stopped.

**I: It just all finished really did it?**

A: More or less, yeah. No, you’ve still got the concrete bank there and the old sheds are all gone.

**I: Some people talk about reviving it.**

A: Well, I don’t think so.

**I: There’s a lot of mud *[laughing]*.**

A: Yeah, I don’t think they’ll ever revive it. I think there’s too many rats and that in the river. They’re not clean like they used to…even then we used to…we didn’t take a lot of notice of them. Cows being up in the river and coming through *[laughing]*…all flowing through there but…no way, no way will they revive it. I don’t think so anyway. There’s a lot of other places they could do I think might be better but there you are.

**I: Thank you. Anything else…**

A: *[Overspeaking]* I can’t think. Well, you *[laughing]*…

**I: *[Laughing]* No that’s fine.**

A: No, I can’t say what we used to do when we was young lads at the swimming pool…

**I: Oh yeah *[laughing]*.**

A: …but that’s a bit naughty.

**I: Well, that’s up to you.**

A: Well, the old swimming pool had two long sheds. One for ladies, one for gents. You had the single sheds either side. The toilet was down the far end of men’s. What we used to do when we was…I think we was about 12, 13. We used to leave a couple of the men’s sheds with no clothes in so any strangers come…but the girls’ side would be full. So any strangers come with their wives, the wives used to have to go in the big shed and the men seeing a couple of empty ones used to go in there. Then we used to sneak into the…now you know what happens there. Yeah, many moons ago. A lot of strangers don’t know that *[laughing]*. Oh, it weren’t that bad. We was just kids.

**I: Didn’t do any harm.**

A: No, I think a lot of worse things go on nowadays. But as I say, over the common, we used to go there seven days a week. All during the summer holidays. Get a jacket potato heated up at the gas works, take it down with us. Just play on the common and go down the river swimming. Then come home; when mum said tea’s ready at 5 o’clock and we used to be there. If you weren’t, you missed out. You couldn’t do it nowadays. Not on the common like you could. Just dog walkers and that over there now.

**I: So happy memories then.**

A: They were, yeah. Thetford had a population just over 2,000/2,500 but that was then. I wouldn’t go back to them days at all.

**I: Things move on, don’t they?**

A: Yeah.

**I: Thank you very much.**

A: That’s okay.

[00:19:56]

**[End of transcript]**