Roger Warner interviewed by Helaine Wyatt 160222

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**Summary**

Roger Warner, interviewed by Helaine Wyatt 16 February 2022 (combined, originally 2 parts).

01. Born 1944 lived in Whittington since 1966, since 1978 at current address, owns River Wissey frontage. Memories of boating, fishing, swimming, appreciating nature. Places people swam in the area. Drainage of land by local farmer, steel barges and their eventual disposal, use for sugar factory transport. Maltings horse and cart access to barges by Water Lane.

02. Ran duck race 2004-2014, five day sponsored row in stages from Whittington to Ely Cathedral, taking a jar of eels to represent when they were currency, other recreational river use and its importance.

**Transcript**

[00:00] This is Helaine Wyett. I’m a volunteer for the BFER project and it’s the 16th February 2022 and I’m about to start interviewing Roger Warner of Whittington. Roger, can you just tell me … Roger, introduce yourself please.

*Yes, I’m Roger Warner from Grange Farm, Whittington. I’ve been here since 1978 and I’ve been adjacent to here since about 1944, so that puts me nearly 80.*

OK. And were you born in ’44?

*Yes, that’s right. I was born in ’44 and I lived in Boughton from ’44 till ’66, and I’ve lived here from ’66 till now.*

And why did you move here?

*I moved here because in 1966 my sister died and we lived at Boughton and my family also owned this premises so we moved here because that seemed quite a sensible thing to do. So I’ve been here since 1978 till now.*

Ok. And you own quite a length of the River Wissey frontage, don’t you?

*Yes, I do. I own from the bottom of my yard in Whittington up to the junction with Stoke Ferry parish which is at the end of Bridge Road in Stoke Ferry. But actually I am in the process of selling some ground up there but I’m still quite familiar with the river and all the bits and pieces that appertain to it.*

[02:05] So tell me your memories of using the river, perhaps fishing, boating – I know you’re particularly interested in boating, swimming, all those sort of things: the leisure activities of the River Wissey.

*When my parents got married in June 1940, my father and his brothers were very keen fishermen and they spent a lot of time on the river, in a punt or a rowing boat. And as I say, I was born in 1944 and one of the first things I remember I did as a child was actually fall in the river and my father grabbed me by my ankles and that was my first introduction to the River Wissey. My parents, at that time, lived in a wooden bungalow just down Church Lane in Whittington, and yeh, we’ve been interested in the river; we’ve fished and boated and swum for a long time.*

Yes, we were recalling the area particular near Salmon’s Hole, as a particularly nice place to go swimming. Did you use that area particularly or was it mostly the river near Grange Farm?

*No, I’m very familiar with Salmon’s Hole. It is a lovely area. It’s an area where there’s a sandy beach and where the Wissey turns a sharp right and joins up with Stringside which is a tributary that goes off to Oxborough and, yeh, it was a very popular spot. I mean there are lots of people still alive who would have used it. Yeh, a very good recreational area. And I’ve got a picture of my father, and his cousin and his sister, in a punt in the very spot. It’s been a focus of recreation for a long while.*

[04:25] And can you recall any of the names of any of the people that used it?

*Rodney Turner would be a good guess. Bill Taylor and your cousins, John and Jill Claydon.*

It would be lovely.

*Talk to Rod Turner.*

Does he live in Feltwell?

*Yes. That’s the last I knew was where Rod lived.*

And, of course, his father …

*Don Turner*

Was he the manager …

*Yes, the foreman, of Crouch’s Grass mill.*

Is there anything else in particular that you can recall?

*No. Just a lovely place to fish and a lovely place to enjoy boating activity. In rough weather, in windy weather, the bend at the bottom of my garden, it used to get quite rough and it would be fun to go out in that particular time because, you know, the water would spray up and it would be something to enjoy.*

[05:50] And your interest in boating on the river continues?

*Yes, it does. We’ve got a rowing boat. People say you need an outboard motor on that rowing boat but I say that’s just what I don’t want, because if you row, you become part of the natural environment in which you find yourself. The kingfishers, the otters and all the wonderful life that’s there, is there before you. But if you’ve got a noisy motor boat, you miss a lot of that.*

[06:25] *But, of course, I remember years ago there used to be a great deal of activity done by Derek Crouch who was a local engineer, and they, his father (and you need to talk to Fay about this) did an enormous amount of drainage on their land. I think they owned about 1500 acres all in here and H O Crouch and his son did a hell of a lot of work. But that’s already recorded. I think Jim McNeill has done that in The Village Pump.*

[07:00] *But I can remember the steel barges. The steel barges would have been somewhere here, Helaine. On the Wissey. This is all Crouch’s land and the steel barges were pulled up on the bank. I think Mr Crouch invited all kinds of scrap dealers to go and take them away but the barges were too much for their oxyacetylene cutters and they were there for years. But eventually someone did take them away and that’s about the only point at which you could say, there’s any industrial use for the river because the barges were used, presumably, to move the peat.*

[07:40] *But if you go to the sugar factory, of course, well then you are getting into an industrial stage and I’ve got a photograph here of Wissey Sugar factory; this would be about 1930, between 1930 and 1940. When the factory was built in 1925 there were no roads to it so you only got to the factory by river or by rail. And you can see here the barges, all waiting to take – this is obviously out of season – during the sugar beet season the barges would have been used to bring the sugar beet to the factory, and it was a very precarious operation because the farmers used to bring their sugar beet to the river bank and they would have these wooden chutes and the wooden chutes were used to tip the sugar beet from the horses and carts into the waiting barges and on a cold frosty January morning, it was a very … I’ve had Bill Miller talk about this – he was a farmer at Ten Mile Bank. You remember Bill?*

Absolutely

*He’s dead now. And then they used to bring the sugar beet to the wooden landing stages and it was a very precarious job getting the sugar beet on to the barges But it was all, you know, labour-intensive and they were big strong men and they did it. And there were 3 tugs, one called the Wissington, one called the Littleport and the other one, I don’t know, and I’ve got pictures of them somewhere that I can’t find at the moment. I’m sure they’re available online or somewhere. The tugs that used to bring the sugar beet to the factory. And the other way to get sugar beet to the factory was by rail because, as I say, there were no roads. And the railways were all over the fens.*

[09:55] [Here, Roger’s wife, Suzanne, reminds him of Water Lane.]

*In Whittington, yes, Suzanne’s quite right, there’s Water Lane. It’s still there. And that was used*

Whereabouts is Water Lane?

*I’ll take you down before you go. Down Church Lane, turn left. It’s a public right of way fortunately. And sure enough, the horses and carts used to take the malted barley down to the barges and also bring barley to be malted from the barges up to the Maltings. And the rule was that there had to be enough space for a horse and cart to turn round. There’s not enough space for a horse and cart to turn round at the moment but that was the original order. But yeh. That’s all in here, Helaine. You must take this away and read it and it will all then make sense.*

[11:00] And can I just clarify? The place where the metal barges … is somewhere around here? (pointing at OS map) The pumping house which is the other side of…

*Near the Methwold Lode. Here’s the Methwold Lodge. Have you been down here yourself on the river?*

Yes I have. The other side of the aqueduct then

*Ask Fay. You have to talk to Mrs Crouch, Miss Crouch.*

I know where that pumping house is.

*I think it’s derelict now.*

It was for a long time because I used to walk all around there before Sophie had it all fenced off.

*The Crouchs are very territorial now. You can’t trespass.*

That’s wonderful. I think that’s a good start, Roger. Thank you very much.

[11:55] [End Part 1]

Helaine: I believe that you’ve also used the river fairly recently for intensive leisure activities. Tell me about it.

*From 2004 to 2014 we had an annual duck race and it just grew and got bigger and bigger and what I used to do is take people up the river in my rowing boat and give them a running commentary on the little bits and pieces that I knew about the Wissey. And people from Stoke Ferry who’d lived there for years had to confess to me that they didn’t know that the river existed. And I used to say ‘that’s awful. You must come. Come and use my boat. Come when you like.’ But people never do. They never did. Some did. But the river is the one constant over all centuries. It just hasn’t changed since Roman times. The direction, and the flow and everything, is exactly the same as it would have been thousands of years ago and it’s a real sort of focal point to the whole area.*

*A few years ago we rowed, in stages, from Whittington to Ely Cathedral. It took us 5 stages to do it and we took a token jar of eels to the authorities at Ely Cathedral because that was the currency that was used to pay the dues to Ely Cathedral. We raised money by doing that; it was a sponsored row. It was a sponsored row from Whittington to Ely Cathedral.*

And it was Bill Taylor …?

*Bill Taylor, Elaine Taylor, the MacLeods, Inspector Moore, the retired policeman in Wretton*

Oh, Anthony?

*Anthony Moore in Wretton. I can’t remember. But those people contributed. It took us 5 weeks, 5 weekends. Ten Mile Bank and then Ten Mile Bank to Littleport, and then Littleport to Ely.*

And when did you say you used to do the duck races?

*From 2004 to 2014. I started them when I was 60 and finished them when I was 70. And the reason I finished them was because I was getting too old and they were just getting bigger and bigger and I was worried that someone was going to fall into the river and the time came for them to stop. It was very popular while it lasted. Yeh, we had a pedalo and all kinds of river activities. Yes, so there’s a huge spectrum of use, over the years, Helaine.*

Thank you.

[15:21] End