

Interview with Maggie Dryden (nee Margaret Myers), brought up in Tilberthwaite, near Coniston and later lived in Oxen Park.

Interviewed by Sarah Emslie, 2018.

S: Hello, I'm Sarah Emslie and I'm here in Sussex with Maggie Dryden who is a long-time resident of the Lake District and has recently come down to Sussex to settle. But I was wondering about growing up in the Lake District and you mentioned Tilberthwaite. I'd like to hear about what that was like.

M: Yes, we could talk about Tilberthwaite but shall I start at the beginning and tell you where I lived to start with...

S: Yes

M: ... to start with?

S: That would be good

M: My father lived in the valley of Tilberthwaite all his life and he didn't move anywhere else and had never lived anywhere else. But my mother lived at High Wray on the shores of Windermere lake. And when Mum and Dad met it was during the war and so they got married at St Margaret's church in High Wray and then because he was only home on leave for a very short time he went back to the war and she lived with her mother in High Wray and then I was born and we all... we both lived with her mother in... at High Wray on the shores of Lake Windermere. So I was actually born in Westmorland, and I have that on my birth certificate which I'm very proud of. In fact it's still on my kitchen notice board as I walk through the door in East Sussex.

S: And was that a farm or a ... cottage or...

M: No, my grandmother was a farmer's wife eventually, quite a complicated story. The farm was sold when her husband died, she had very little money, and three children, four children actually, and had to bring them up on her own with no help from the government or anybody. So she rented a house at High Wray and opened a village shop to make money, some money, and took in washing, did what she could. And she was known as Widow Dixon when she lived in High Wray.

S: And how long were you there?

M: Until the end of the war.

S: How many years... had the war started?

M: I was born in 1943, so I would be... er. I think I must have been about... when did the war...?

S: 45

M: Yes, I think it was about 2 years, yeah. Then from there they looked for a house and Dad, my father wanted to live in the valley where he came from, Tilberthwaite. And this... Beatrix Potter had left all the property, the houses at Tilberthwaite to the National Trust, so they were able to rent a house at Tilberthwaite and that's where we all moved to.

S: And did he farm up there?

M: No he was a quarryman.

S: Which quarry?

M: Well he worked at Broughton Moor quarries with his father. My grandfather... my great grandfather... no, my grandfather sorry, was a shot-blaster. And he used to be lowered down the rock face on a rope, pack the black powder into the hole and, you know, set it alight and blast out the rock from the quarry face, so that was his job.

S: And then be hauled back out of the way before it was...

M: Yeah, yeah And my father was a river..

S: What's a river?

M: Well a river is the person who splits the rock into slates, very carefully, into very thin slates. And that was his... that was... he served his time, and worked with his father at Broughton Moor quarry. And after the war he knew, my father knew, that there was a very good quarry that had been closed down at Tilberthwaite called Moss Rigg which is on the way between... on the road between Tilberthwaite and Little Langdale. And he knew that there was this enormous piece of stone in the bottom on the quarry that would be able... they would be able to work it without having to blast any more stone out of the rock face, without having to spend any money doing all that process or time. Because there was already a very very good piece of rock in the bottom of the quarry. So he decided that he would like to start his own business by trying to get permission to re-open Moss Rigg quarry because it had been closed down. So eventually he managed to get the permission to re-open the quarry and he got three more men from Coniston to go into partnership with him and they opened Moss Rigg quarry again after the war. And because he knew that there was this piece of... you know, without having to do any more work, that there was a good start.

S: So how long was he running Moss Rigg quarry?

M: Well he retired in the 60s, late 60s because they were taken over by Burlington. But in the meantime it obviously took off, the building industry, after the war, and he... they actually did lots of very large projects including er... one of the hospitals, St Thomas's I think in London, and Coventry Cathedral, and they had Basil Spence up at the quarry.

S: How exciting.

M: Looking at the... well they had to make a wall to show him the effect of the dressed stone on the wall, and he decided he would go with Moss Rigg because he liked the colour and they... so he went with Moss Rigg for Coventry Cathedral, and they all went to the commissioning of the cathedral. They had a coach load including my parents.

S: How big was the workforce at the quarry?

M: I can't remember but I know a lot of people from the village of Coniston worked at Moss Rigg. A lorry used to bring them all up each day and Dad used to get on when it passed the house at Tilberthwaite and go along with the rest of the men to the quarry.

S: I wish I'd known that when I'd been at Coventry cathedral, I'd no idea.

M: Yes, the green slate that is there, the green stone, is from Moss Rigg quarry and they all went down to the commissioning ceremony, all dressed up, and had a wonderful time.

S: (Chuckles) I'm sure they did. So he retired.

M: He retired early yeah, he decided to retire. He felt there wasn't really, it wasn't really going to take off. I think he thought that was the end of the green slate and building and stuff. I don't know. But he retired.

(Break in recording 7.31)

S: You went to school from Tilberthwaite ...

M: To Coniston school...

S: ... to Coniston school.

M: Yes

S: How did you get there?

M: In my father's day they all went to Little Langdale school, and they walked to school and in fact when my brother and I used to... well, you know, when we were children growing up, you could still see the clog marks on the rock where they all used to slide down because it was a slide on the way to school. And it's now gone but I remember seeing that slide on the way to school, you know, for the children. Then my cousin, who still lives in the valley, her brother was at the age for starting school and his Mum managed to get a taxi organised to take the children to Coniston school so then we all went to Coniston school. So there'd be about thirteen or fourteen children...

S: So quite a lot

M: ... going to Coniston school. Yeah because the quarries were working and there was Tilberthwaite and there was also Holme Ground and the row of houses...

S: Where was Holme Ground?

M: Hodge Close, near Hodge Close quarry, across the other side of the valley. So there was children from both sides of the valley went to school at Coniston.

S: I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about growing up in Tilberthwaite. You mentioned that there was no electricity, so how difficult was it?

M: Well we had Tilly¹ lamps and a calor gas fridge and all that sort of thing, but actually my father decided that he would dam the beck at the back of the house and we would make our own electricity. So he bought some second-hand pipes and dammed the beck up, which is up a very steep slope, up behind the house and had a Pelton wheel, and er, you know, made... we made our own electricity. But the funny thing is, it was quite good and we managed to even have a television, but we all used, all the valley used to come and watch telly on a Friday night and we used to watch Cisco Kid... growing up, but the trouble was if we got a bit of a dry spell or there was leaves over the top of the pipe, it was our job to go running up the fellside to clear the pipes. So you'd be watching something on the telly and the screen would get smaller and smaller and smaller, somebody would put a light on and it would go completely, and then... "Oh come on! Get those leaves off the... run up the fell." So we'd just, you know, we just ran up to the end of the pipe, took the leaves off and we had a better flow of water. It did work.

S: How did other neighbours cope, did they do similar things?

M: No, no.

S: And was... did it take a long time to bring electricity into the valley?

M: Well I think we were the last, one of the last places to get electricity, and I know people were really fed up with the whole thing. But the National Trust I suppose it would be in those day, I'm not sure, wanted to put the... all the lines underground, all the cables underground. So that would be why, because it would be probably quite expensive. But they were so annoyed that they all decided they would protest, and marched in Kendal carrying candles (chuckles) whether that made any difference I don't know.

S: I don't know, it may be the start of the lantern procession.

M: (laughs) It could have been, I don't know. I'm sure there's footage in the papers of the Langdale people.

S: So it was quite a tight-knit community.

M: Yes, and we had a little church and that was on Hodge Close quarry bank, and we used to go to church over there. We had a service once a month and it was run by Mr Shepherd the vicar who was obviously, you know, looking after his flock. (chuckles) But yes we had a little organ, one of those that you pedal. And

¹ Tilly lamps were paraffin lamps which were pressurised to express the fuel onto a gauzy 'mantle' giving a very bright light

we all sang and had a church service in there and we were all confirmed at Ambleside because we were part of Carlisle diocese and the bishop of Carlisle came down and we were all confirmed in Ambleside at Ambleside church. And we had lantern slides sometimes and all that sort of thing in this little tiny hut that was there on the quarry bank.

(Break in interview 12.02)

M: There was a house for sale in Oxen Park. My father arranged to meet up with Myras Casson who owned the house and that had been the old farmhouse. Myras Casson owned Oxen Park Farm and Boretree. We bought Boretree farmhouse but he kept the barn to go with Oxen Park Farm, in 1972.

S: You said Matthew was three then.

M: Yes

S: And the others came later?

M: Then I had Johnny in 1974.

S: And they were growing up in Oxen Park.

M: Yes

S: A very different childhood to yours.

M: Not particularly, no. They enjoyed living in a small village just... I suppose Oxen Park was more of a village than where I lived, ours was a lot more sort of isolated I suppose. They spent a lot of time over on the fell, playing in the beck, all that sort of thing.

S: Yes

M: And they were very friendly with the Slater boys, because they were growing up at the same time, there was a lot of younger children. They were country children and they enjoyed country activities and that sort of thing.

S: Going to school in the same way you did, by taxi? Or was there a bus?

M: No, there was a bus from Oxen Park to Leven Valley School and it went down the back road to Bouth, Mr Sproat from Bouth used to bring bus around, the school bus, drive the school bus. And they all went to school at Leven Valley.

S: How has Oxen Park changed from those times, early 70s to present day?

M: Well it hasn't changed a lot really. We had a post office which was very good, and the pub, the pub was there of course. And the village hall which was very important to the community, we had the WI, I joined the WI because I felt it was something interesting to do. And we had our own WI which then folded and became part of Rusland I think eventually.

S: And that met in the Oxen Park reading rooms.

M: Yes

S: What other things were held there, or meetings there.

M: Oh I remember going to a dance there, it was very difficult doing the barn dance because there wasn't a lot of room, when you went backwards and forwards but we used to have the odd dance there yes.

S: Was there a local group that played for the barn dance?

M: I can't remember. I mean Syd Banks used to play at the dance... at the ... at the dances. When I was growing up there were dances in every village on a Friday night in the village halls. Little hunt balls they were called. And er we had two bands: there was Miss Bateman who was very well known...

S: Was she the caller?

M: No she played... she had a band, and she came from Broughton. And then there was Syd Banks' Band and he used to play. And we used to do... well, all the old traditional dances. The Langdale ones were good fun, so were the Coniston, because we got all the climbers dancing in their socks because they weren't allowed to wear their boots. (chuckles) But it was good fun. There was lots going on, lots of local activity everywhere, including Oxen Park.

S: What do you remember about your childhood? Just the activities that you as a family got involved with?

M: Well I feel very privileged because it was a wonderful childhood. We all learned to swim in Tilberthwaite Gill which was freezing cold. Every spring we use to clear out this pool which was known as The Big Dub, and er... because the rocks had been washed down, but it was a really quite a nice deep pool with a waterfall and you could do about six lengths... six strokes across, that was about your lot. But everybody used to go up there to learn to swim and my Mum was a great one for swimming. With living near the lake as a child they swam across the lake and that sort of thing, very keen on water and swimming. And that was part of our life was to swim when we could. We also used to light fires and... you know, cook sausages, that sort of thing on fires, little wooden, you know, wood fires in the beck... usually in the gill where it was safe to do so. And we were, you know, allowed to do that sort of thing. Outdoor activities I suppose of all sorts. We used to do a lot of fishing with my parents. I think fishing's always been in our family. My great grandfather was a ghillie on Windermere and used to take people out fishing. And he used to write, he was a correspondent for the Westmorland Gazette, writing about fishing under the pseudonym of Rainbow.

S: How unusual

M: I presume after the trout, I don't know. But they used to have a charr boat, he... I have a lovely photograph of him sitting in a charr boat sitting with his three-piece suit and his trilby hat on because he used to go charr fishing as well on the lake.

S: And it wasn't a sport it was for food?

M: Charr, yes, I think it was a sport as well.

S: Was it?

M: Yes, yeah. But I presume he made his... some money well from taking people out fly-fishing on the lake. And we used to walk up to a lot of the mountain tarns with my father, he was a very keen fisherman. And we used to fish all over really.

S: And were there different fish in those mountain tarns?

M: Oh no, we used to fish for trout when we were doing that, that was just little brown trout, but we used to fish Small Water up Haweswater and Kentmere and all over the place and walk up to the tarns. It was the only time Dad used to walk far was to go up to one of these little mountain tarns to fish, usually with his wellingtons on. But he had... he was a member of the Duddon Anglers and he used to fish on the river Duddon. So he used to fly fish for sea trout and salmon on the river Duddon. But we never did that as children

S: You mentioned that all the children in the community went down to Coniston by taxi.

M: Yes

S: But how, how else did you travel about? Obviously when you weren't in school, school holidays, you had to get about. How would you go?

M: Mm.

S: Go meet... see each other or...

M: We all had bikes or we walked. And one of our favourite things was to go on our bikes, for bike rides. Take our sandwiches with us. Of course at the time as well we were picking rosehips² for the school... to take to school because we got paid so much a bag for rosehips. So that was always an interesting little exercise to find rosehips and that sort of thing... go on a little adventure. We used to go on our bikes through to Little Langdale to the post office. Because there was a post office at Little Langdale with a little shop, and so we used to go there to buy sweets and that sort of thing, on our bikes.

S: How far is it from... Tilberthwaite?

M: Two miles, perhaps a mile or two, something like that. Then when I was working used to have to... I used to catch the bus to Ambleside. So I had to go down to the road end at... on the road to Coniston which was a mile, on my bike, to catch

² Rosehips were a good source of vitamin C so they were collected from hedgerows during and after the war and sent to be made into Rosehip Syrup. (<http://www.theoldfoodie.com/2014/05/the-rose-hip-collection-campaign-ww-ii.html>)

the bus to go to work, which took five minutes in the morning, and I was always late, quite often having to pedal in front of the bus, leave my bus behind... leave my bike behind the... down in the farmyard at Yewdale Farm, behind the wall, propped up against the wall, and then jump on the bus to work. And then in the evening it was a slog back up to Tilberthwaite usually quite a lot longer...took a lot longer to get back up, when you're tired at night. And also they had a late bus on a Saturday night so we used to go to the pictures in Ambleside that was our highlight... the highlight of our week. But it was all... you know, going back home on your own in the dark was a bit tricky especially when the sheep started coughing, when you had to stop to open the gate. It did sound a bit scary certainly, but you got used to it.

S: So you were working in Ambleside.

M: Yes

S: I wonder if we could skip a bit and perhaps think about how you came to be living in Oxen Park.

M: Well my Dad bought a house at Force Forge and he was doing the house up in Oxen... at Force Forge and he heard that there was a house for sale in Oxen Park, and I was living in Ulverston then. I was married, I got married from Tilberthwaite, I was married at Coniston church and then we moved and I was living... we were living in Ulverston, Croftlands.

S: I wonder if we could go back to the childhood activities in Oxen Park, you mentioned your boys and a number of other ones, a number of other families with children

M: Yes

S: What sort of activities did they get up to? What was there for them.

M: Right. Well they were very keen on, you know, playing over by the beck. They were allowed to just go and play on the fell or the beck, you know, it was very safe, they knew... you knew they were going to be safe and fine all day. They spent a lot of time outside. They used to catch very small little bullheads and all that sort of thing in the beck.

S: You'll have to tell me what a bullhead is

M: Just a very small tiddler type fish, really I'm telling this story because that was the size of fish they were used to catching in their nets and whatever, or fishing rods, and then my brother came along one November and said to my son "Would you like a little walk over to the beck we'll see what's happening, see if there are any fish in there, I'll take the torch. And they went over to the beck which is over Robinhoe. (?) ... it was full of salmon coming up to spawn. And I think my son was really thrilled... it was just such an unusual sight after catching these tiny little fish...

S: Very exciting

M: ... to see the salmon coming up to spawn in the beck. That was one of the things they did. The other thing of course was cubs, they were part of the 1st Grizedale Cub Scouts, there was Young Farmers as well, they were part of the young farmers.

S: Did these all meet in Oxen Park in the ...?

M: No, Rusland

S: Rusland, Rusland Reading Room yes. My friend Christine used to run... she was Akela to start with of the Cub Scouts, then she had too many commitments so I took it over for a while, and because another member of the group owned the field down by the river we were able to camp so that was great fun, and we were able to camp with Cub Scouts so that was fun to do that sort of thing. So there was lots going on for the children really, in the valley.

S: Thank you

(ENDS AT 23.40)