

## **Ron Mein**

**C:** I'm Carol Mc Neill and Roger Layfield is my technician and we're sitting in the cottage belonging to Ron Mein and Ron's going to tell us about his local history and the way things he's seen changed over the years. Ron can you tell us a little about how you came to be here?

**R:** Well I was born right at the start of World War Two in 1939. And I first came to Bouth in about 1944 and I used to come over with my grandfather who kept pigs and he brought them over to Black Beck Farm to the boar. And then I made friends with a young lady, and it was my wife. We didn't know then what would happen but we first met in about 1944. I started work in the blue mill in about 1955 and eventually we moved to Bouth in 1968 on Christmas Eve and we moved into Wayside Cottage and Father Christmas never even helped us to carry anything into the house, we had to do it all ourselves. But since that time the village has changed tremendously. But the one thing I try to do is not look at the present, I look to the future but I also look to the past in the village. Because this village is very ancient and can be traced back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century as far as I know. And the changes that have occurred since then is quite tremendous.

Many people wouldn't believe that at one time Bouth had six pubs. The last two were The Commercial Inn and the White Hart. The White Hart's still there but the Commercial Inn has long gone. It was demolished when the houses that are on the site of the village green were condemned. There were several cottages that were on there, they were tumble down shanties and they called it The Shambles, and The Commercial Inn was pulled down. And if anyone today wants to go and see The Commercial Inn it's still... the mound of stone that forms the banana slide on the village green is The Commercial Inn, and that was done by local villagers at their own expense. The biggest change that occurred in Bouth is at Old Hall Farm, it was farmed for many years as a proper farm with livestock, cattle, milk cattle, but now it's a Victorian farm attracting visitors from all over Cumbria and beyond, in fact many foreign visitors come.

But the most important man as far as I'm concerned as a local historian was Archbishop Sandys, the Archbishop of York. He owned the farm for quite a long time and after his death it passed through the family for a few centuries. Sandys also established the Hawkshead Grammar School which is one of the oldest grammar schools in the north of England.

Today if you come from Old Hall into the village, now that the village green's there we get visitors from all over the world in fact. Biggest attraction in the village is the White Hart pub and the village green acts as an overflow for the pub. Many a morning, especially in summer time you can go out onto the village green and you'll see Nigel going round picking glasses up that have been left there overnight.

If you came along the road passing the White Hart car park to Wayside Cottage which is just about to be demolished... well gutted I should say. It's just been bought by some people, the last people that lived there were Neville and Renee Stark, that's been sold and that one was established when the road was built in Bouth. And people will often wonder why they call them the Wayside cottage, there are many in

Cumbria , Wayside cottages, but the 'way' is the road. So today we use that expression, we say 'I'm on my way to Ulverston' or 'I'm on my way to Kendal', and what I'm literally saying is 'I'm on the road'. So when you see houses in Cumbria called 'Wayside' it's because it's on the road. But my own house, Bouth House Cottage was originally a farm building, the house itself was established as a single storey farm building, it was a milking parlour and next door which is now Yew Tree Barn was a slaughter house. Because villages in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century were almost self-sufficient. Bouth had a butcher, it had the slaughter house, it had a shoe maker, a nail maker, coal merchant, wood merchants, everything they needed was in the village.

As far as my next-door neighbours go Bouth House itself, the home of Gordon and Jean Pickles, that was originally built for the gunpowder works manager. And next to the house is a garage and the garage was established to keep the gunpowder horses in when the works first opened. Later they built stables on the gunpowder works site. So that house is a Georgian house. My own house, how I found out it was single storey with my research... in our spare bedroom one day we were decorating and I noticed the wall sounded hollow; so me being a bit of an adventurous sort of a person, I said to Dot "I think there's a cupboard behind this wall". So I took a drill and drilled a one eighth of an inch hole in the wall and pushed a piece of wire through. And the wire went through without any resistance to about 2 feet, and I thought we can make this room twice as big. So I sealed the window with tape, sealed the door with tape, put a mask on, and with a hammer and chisel knocked the wall down, it was only laths and plaster. And much to my dismay all there was behind the partition was a wall and the hollow area was where Bouth House had built, been built, when my house was a single storey house, and Bouth House wall had been built on the roof. And when they increased my house to two storeys they left the slates sticking out into the bedroom and somebody had partitioned them off. So I spent two days cleaning it all off to find out there was nothing there and then spent three days putting it back again, re-plastering. So that's how you find out about local history, especially your own property. (*chuckles*)

Next door, Yew Tree Barn, I remember that from when we first came to Bouth as a besom factory, Tommy Nicholson used to make besoms, besom brooms, which are still favoured today by people like cricket managers or cricket pitches because it takes leaves off without damaging the grass. And he used to be able to drive round the back of Yew Tree Barn with a horse and cart, and now it's impossible nearly to walk round because each person who's bought one of the properties has put a fence up, they've built their own stockade whereas Tommy used to ride... come round with a horse and cart and load everything in there.

Where the slaughterhouse was was slightly higher than the rest of the ground floor and the reason for that was they needed to hang the beasts up to bleed them after they killed them. So it gave upstairs in the barn the appearance of a stage and the stage would be about half a metre high the full width of the barn. And during WW2 they used to hold dances in there, a typical barn dance, you know, straw bales, people sitting round, somebody playing music, probably a local musician playing and they'd have dances in there. And when you go in there today it's an ultra modern house, one of these designer houses that looks very much like a dentist's waiting room but very desirable to the modern youth, modern young people. Next door was

yew Tree Cottage now and Ash Cottage, that was Bouth Farm, Yew Tree Farm, it was farmed up to the 1950s and then later on it became just a private dwelling. Two houses further on, up the ramp next to Yew Tree Barn, there are two cottages and those were built especially for gunpowder workers. If you go further on to Kiln Cottages that's about a hundred metres further on towards Burnt Knott, the Kiln Cottages got their name because there was a malt kiln there and the malt kiln was for brewing beer because all the villages in Cumbria had their own breweries. And there was no control over the strength of the alcohol, you tasted it and if you fell over it was too strong and if you wanted another drink it needed some more hops (*chuckles*). So that has been misunderstood and mis-represented by many historians. One historian wrote in the local papers that Kiln Cottage was a pottery and it never was, it was a brewery for malt. And to prove that, Roderick Smith, a neighbour of mine, digging in his garden one day found some tiles, perforated so they could use them as a base for the malt kiln.

A malt kiln like the one at Bouth operated like this: they had a small smouldering fire on the ground floor, above the smouldering fire the ceiling was perforated flags so they let the heat through and the barley was then roasted into malt. And they also had... set a water wheel driving bellows to produce air, hot air, and that water can still be heard running under the houses at Kiln Cottage.

If you go beyond Kiln Cottage without turning right we come to Burnt Knott and at Burnt Knott there's a monkey puzzle tree there which astounds many people, they look at this monkey puzzle and it should really be in Spain. People ask where these monkey puzzles come from because there are several, maybe half a dozen or so at Black Beck Farm, there are other ones at Underfield and I notice the Flemings have just planted some seedlings. But the seeds were brought over with the troops coming back from the Peninsular War with Wellington, so when they came back from the war they brought the seeds with them and planted these monkey puzzle trees. And I have a large part of a German General's diary, who was a prisoner at Grizedale, Grizedale Forest was a German prisoner of war camp, and in his writings he says he's always astonished on exercise marches, when he walks through Bouth, and sees these monkey puzzle trees. He couldn't understand how they got there, and his name was... his name escapes me but I have his... a German SS officer. If we go beyond there we get to the boundary of Bouth. So let's move back, come back towards the Malt Kiln and turn left up the hill. The first house on the right is called Crag House and the reason is, if you look at it when you go up there and have a look, it's built on the end of a crag, a rocky outcrop. And that was one of the oldest houses in Bouth, second only to Old Hall. One time it was owned by a very wealthy family, but later on it was used for horses pulling extra loads up the hill because the road past what we call the council houses at Crag Houses (sic) to Crook Farm at one time was the main road to Kendal. So horses would go up that hill, if they were very heavy loads the horses that were bringing them across the causeway and suchlike wouldn't be able to pull them up the hill, so the man made a living hiring out horses to give extra strength to pull the carts up the hill. But he was very clever as well because when the horses with a load started to go down past Black Beck Farm he used his horses as a brake. He put them on the back of the cart to stop the cart running away down the hill. So he was making money both sides of the hill. Next to that is Bouth School House, and luckily it's still called School House. It was established in about 1740, 1743, and it closed in 1936. And I have photographs of

the children at that time sitting outside School House, all smiling in front of the camera and they look a ragtag bunch of kids and some of them actually lived in the village later on and I knew them. And George Prickett was on the photograph, Eric Walker was on the photograph, these were all residents of Bouth. And opposite the school house was... is a hand pump and there were two hand pumps in Bouth, one at School House and one down at the Black Lion pub. There were two water pumps in Bouth and that was the whole supply of water for the village.

But the School House is unique, it's got the present shape and size as it was built in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, 1740s. And if you look at it closely you'll see it's got the porch and two rooms, only two rooms originally, one slightly smaller than the other. The one on the right was a girls' classroom, the one on the left was the boys' classroom. And people have asked me why there is such a small window in the wall, the window in the wall is no more than 150 millimetres by 250 millimetres and it's known as a smoke window, and many people have never heard of these things. The smoke window was designed to make sure there was plenty of draught in the chimney, because if the weather was humid and damp and they lit the fire, often using bracken to start the fire, the smoke didn't go up the chimney because there's no air flow, and they had this little tiny window and they opened it up just to get the fire going then closed it. And that was the only heating for children in the classroom was an open fire.

On leaving the School House going up the hill, on the left is a wood merchant's yard belonging to the Minton family. And they were the last family in the village to make their living out of the woodland industries, and the only retired in 1999 from full-time employment and he used to sell all the wooden products, like coppicing products. Next to that is Cringlemire. Cringle, I'm not sure of the name of that but the 'mire' is quite obvious. If you walk past that road end on a wet day you'll see at both sides of the road leading to Cringlemire Farm there's two ponds appear and they just drain overnight because it was a very marshy area.

And then we come to New Hall on the right. New Hall, there are several buildings, all come under the name of New Hall. And it was named that way as a joke really because Old Hall Farm being the manor house of the place was the most prestigious farm building in the area, and so when they built the house up there they decided to call it New Hall because it looked down on Old Hall. And that's the only reason it got its name.

And the next house to that is Beech Bank, and Beech Bank is unique. People talk about Black Beck gunpowder works and think it no longer exists but Beech Bank was built with stone taken from the Black Beck gunpowder works chimney, because the gunpowder works had a chimney stack which I'll explain shortly, 180 feet high, and when they demolished it the people who decided to build a house, in the 1940s, used the bricks from the chimney. Although it's a modern-looking house the bricks pre-date it by the best part of 80 years.

And then if you go further on and down the hill to the left you come to Black Beck Farm. Black Beck Farm is as old as Old Hall Farm and inside Black Beck Farm is a staircase with a preservation order on it and it's identical to the one in Old Hall, they were built at the same time and by the same contractors, and the same joiners built

the staircases. And I have a set of deeds dated 1611 when Black Beck Farm was first sold and it was sold by a man called Arthur Benson. Later on the farm together with other farms in the area, in fact six I believe, were bought by the Dixon [*Dickson?*] family of Abbots Reading. There hangs a tale: Abbots Reading, people often wonder what it means, Abbots Reading, well it means exactly what it says. The abbot of Furness Abbey used to retire during the summer months to Abbots Reading to meditate. Today you'd call it skiving but that's what he did, he used to come from the priory at Furness Abbey and stay there for several weeks meditating. So it's a very ancient building it has it's own chapel. Opposite the house itself if you look closely as you go past it you'll see there's a perfect Norman archway church window in the end of it, and so that's a very ancient building. And then the next one before we go over the hill to Finsthwaite which we won't go today is Ealinghearth which got its name, something to do with the Abbots of Furness Abbey, because people used to believe that if they went in the house and sat near the fire, and go the ash from the fire and rubbed it on any part of the body that was suffering some sort of illness it healed them and made them better and that's how it got called Healinghearth (sic). I've tried it myself, it doesn't work, I'll tell you that, I tried it myself it made no difference whatsoever. (*chuckles*)

So if we retrace our steps back across the causeway end, back to Black Beck gunpowder works that's perhaps the most important industry that ever appeared in the valley, and that was the gunpowder works. That was established by F C Dixon in 1860. And it was established to get , take advantage I should say, of the dying slave trade. Although Wilberforce had done away with the slavery in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was still some going on in the world. But Dixon realised there was no future in that, but he knew if he could produce gunpowder there were so many engineering works going on with the industrial revolution he could make money out of it. But he was faced with a major problem. Low Wood gunpowder works which is only a mile away, Sedgwick gunpowder works which is about 9 miles away, and all the other gunpowder works in Cumbria were powered by water power from a nearby river. Well Black Beck never had that luxury because Rusland Pool, although it is a river, it's tidal way on beyond the works, so he couldn't use it for motive power. But Dixon quickly realised that the most modern invention at that time was the triple expansion steam engine, and that was the most adventurous thing that ever was undertaken in any engineering system in Britain. Up to that time ships that used to sail with steam engines on board also had sails. People see drawings and pictures of ships with funnels on and sails. The reason was to get to far destinations like the United States or Africa they couldn't carry cargo, there was no room for cargo. But when the triple expansion steam engine was invented that changed the world because it works as it says: steam from the boiler went into a high pressure cylinder, when it turned the crank to turn the piston it exhausted into the medium pressure cylinder which in turn exhausted into a low pressure cylinder. And the condensate from those cylinders all went back to the boiler so the boiler was always fed with warm water. So with the triple expansion steam engine they were getting three times the energy for the same amount of coal.

And so Dixon realised this was a great chance to make money with little outlay. So his advisors decided that instead of using water power, because they hadn't that luxury, they would put in Black Beck a triple expansion steam engine to drive all the machinery.

That proved a disaster because the last thing you want in a gunpowder works is a live steam engine being fed by coal, and there were numerous explosions. Because making gunpowder is the simplest thing in the world in theory because you only need sulphur, saltpetre and charcoal in the right quantities, ground down under pressure and mixed into a black powder which is explosive. But it isn't that simple, if you get a spark it can spoil your day completely. And at Black Beck there was eleven explosions and I believe, without looking back at my notes, twenty one people killed. But there were a number of people in Bouth injured, some lost arms, some lost legs, one man was led around the village for many years, blind, after being hit with a sheet of zinc. And this house we are sitting in now, my house, one of the last two men killed at Black Beck lived here, and his name was Andrew McDougal. And his daughter Annie was only eight years old when an explosion occurred at Black Beck killing her dad Andrew and a Mr Dodd from Stagg End Haverthwaite. And the story goes, and Annie told me this herself, this is first-hand information: they heard an explosion, and in Bouth when they heard an explosion the women of the village would go upstairs, take all the clean linen off the beds and rush over to the gunpowder works. And when Annie and her Mum left here and went over to the gunpowder works there was still a big pall of smoke over the gunpowder mills, and when they approached the incorporating mills there was a crowd of people stood around and they parted, and Annie walked with her mother into this crowd and found her dad laying on the narrow gauge railway with his ribcage open, and very badly burned, and she could see all his internal organs with his ribcage wide open. And he was still conscious and he just managed to say to a man called Neil Lancaster "Can you take my teeth out?" God knows what he thought about that. He probably was... Andrew probably was not in pain, he'd gone beyond that, he'd be in shock I would think, and he died soon after. But Annie carried that to the grave, for the rest of her life she always remembered that, that incident, and I think any child would, to see such a horrible sight. But Black Beck was closed after that, that explosion devastated Black Beck and it shut down after that.

But a man in the village who was involved in the explosion, which I haven't time to go into, called George Sackley was appointed as a watchman after the gunpowder works closed. And one Saturday morning, coming from Ulverston on his pushbike, because nobody had cars in those days unless you were a doctor or very wealthy, he saw a cloud of smoke over Black Beck and when he got there, although the works had closed and been deemed safe, the corning house where they made the pellets for gunpowder had been struck by lightning, exploded and completely destroyed it. So that's how Black Beck gunpowder works ended its days. But that wasn't the end of its story because in 1942, well into the Second World War the ministry decided it would be an ideal place to store ammunition and ordnance. Then when the Americans joined us in the war in 1943 they also had it as a depot for storing military equipment and ammunition. So it still had a life after that. But then in the 19... after the war, in the 1950s it became a caravan park. So Black Beck was the most important industry in the village.

**C:** Moving to the outskirts of the village, and the farmland and the woodland...

**R:** Mm

**C:** ... have you seen yourself changes...?

**R:** Yes. Well yes, I've seen lots and lots of changes. The biggest change at the moment is Horizons. It's so much pleasure to see woodland industries again. When I was a child it was coppicing all... all over these hills.

Well once the gunpowder works closed down unemployment was a problem because people didn't have transport in those days, they couldn't just get in the car and drive to distant places. But woodland industries were playing a major part in other things. When I was a child, these hills, there were almost no big trees on them at all, they'd all been taken by the gunpowder works at Black Beck, Low Wood, and the ironworks at Backbarrow, so there was no real mature trees.

Coppicing was a great industry, I'm glad to see Rusland Horizons is re-establishing coppicing because everything has its day. Like I remember charcoal burners up in the woods and they used to go and stay with the pitsteads and put a soddy up. I'd better explain to listeners what a soddy is. Try and imagine an Indian wigwam, you know, several sticks in a pointed tent shape. All they used to do was build a small wall, perhaps less than half a metre high, around the base of it. And then they would cut sods or turf and lay it up these poles like slates, so they had a good shelter, a waterproof shelter. And the families would join them on a weekend with the tending the pitsteads. And they'd make the meals there, I have photographs of them sitting there with a kettle and pans, having a meal. Because when they were burning charcoal it must not burst into flame it had to smoulder. And these hills were covered with them, and even today I can take you to places where there are flat areas on these slopes, and that's where pitsteads were. But that sadly went away. The only difference today is that coppicing is not done in the true sense of the word, because you couldn't coppice with a chainsaw, but we do nowadays because we've had to move into modern times.

Coppicing was done on about a seven year cycle and they'd only go to that wood every seven years, or thereabouts, I'm no expert in that. And then they would cut larch poles and make wattle fences. They do... Rusland Horizons even have spoon carving as part of coppicing. I don't know whether it really fits into it or not but that's what it is. So coppicing played a great part in it and it died out in the 50s, as did besom-making. Besoms, when coppices were done they collected hazel twigs and made them into besom brooms. But they also made oak spell baskets which are locally called swills; and those... every village had two or three swill makers. In this village, if you go out to Burnt Knott, right on the roadside is a long low building with one window and a doorway which have been walled up, that was a swiller's shop. And what they did they used to cut oak poles and split them using an draw knife and then weave them into the basket shape. Swills are difficult to explain unless you can see one, but they were very extensively used in agriculture. And at one time they were used by the Royal Navy, and it was used for coaling ships because swills are almost indestructible. It's built something like a coracle to look at, and if a swill has been well made you can turn it upside down and a full-grown man can stand on it and it will not collapse. And they used to use them for coaling because they were indestructible.

And then nowadays there are one, perhaps two, swillers in Cumbria, now they're just a desirable thing for laundry baskets and suchlike. But not used extensively like they

were, because I can remember them sending wagon-loads of swills from Haverthwaite station and they used to stack them like saucers one on top of the other and tie them in bundles of twelve, load them onto wagons and send them all over England.

But Rusland Horizons is establishing coppicing again and that's nice to see.

**C:** In the woods over here, when you lived here, were they still doing any coppicing or charcoal burning?

**R:** No. no charcoal burning then in the 60s, it was only besoms, you know, hazel twigs. Pea sticks, you see that's all they use them as. It had died out by then. It was sad because it put a lot of people unemployed. You see when the gunpowder works closed there wasn't many alternatives for people to find employment. But after World War 2, when it got to the 19... late 1940s, 50s, public transport was much better and people could travel further so they went to the shipyards in Barrow or the steelworks in Barrow, Glaxo in Ulverston the drug company. So coppicing was no longer thought of as of any value. Plastics came along and everybody wanted things made out of plastic and so that killed coppicing. So I've never really seen coppicing apart from a few things. As a child I saw it but I never took a load of notice of it because it was just happening.

**C:** Another thing, just going back to the houses and the old road. I see the old road went past Black Beck farm

**R:** Mm

**C:** ...and then did it go onto the causeway ...

**R:** No...

**C:** ...or did it go up to Crook and over the river?

**R:** ...the road that goes past Cragg House over to Black Beck farm was the main road to Kendal, but prior to that the main road to Kendal came into Bouth village, up past what we now call Greenfield House, and over the grassy lane. It's a narrow lane. As you go up the village you turn left to go to the village green but on the right you'll see a very narrow lane with high walls each side and that was a packhorse trail. And a packhorse trail's very easy to recognize as if you come across them in the Lake District, and there are a few in these woods if you know where to look. If a full-grown man, which is bigger than me by the way, stands with his arms spread out, if it's a true packhorse trail he should be able to touch both walls. And the grassy lane up to... up by the reading room was the packhorse train [*trail?*]. And then later on when the roads were improved it came up past Cragg House, down past Black Farm... Black Beck farm and on to Crook Farm, and at Crook Farm there was a bridge, and the bridge has long gone but the buttresses for the bridge, the walls for the bridge are still there. Once across the Rusland Pool it then wound out over Hilltop and made their way to Newby Bridge. And then they were faced with another major obstacle. At Newby Bridge up till the 16<sup>th</sup> century there wasn't a bridge there was just a crossing and so in bad weather, or a high spate of water it was difficult to cross. But that was the main road to Kendal. And today in Bouth, if you know the

house really well, Greenfield House in Bouth, outside the front door is a milestone, erosion and has taken place and the numbers have all gone off the milestone but that was the Kendal 15, K 15 milestone. And it's exactly 15 miles from Kendal to there following the old road, and it's still like that.

But later on when the Truck Act came in and they had to pay people in coin of the realm among other things the highways had to be improved. Originally it was every parish council was responsible for a patch of highway and this put a big drain on them but eventually when it became a county and then a national thing roads could be improved.

So the next road improvement: if you leave the White Hart go up the hill and turn right and walk past Foldstile Farm then down the hill to Pool Bridge there's a house on the left which was originally built as a waiting house, and at the other side of the causeway near the Cobblestones, as you climb the hill out of the low ground, you'll see another barn, and yet it's a barn with no doors into the field. And people have often questioned me about that, but that was also a waiting house. And this is how it worked: if a coach being pulled by horses, perhaps a mail coach or something like that was coming through Bouth and the tide was in they would stop at the house at Pool Bridge and wait there for the tide to turn, then they would cross the causeway. And traffic coming from the other side of the causeway would also wait in the barn likewise.

If you go in that barn at Cobblestone today you'll see... when you think it's a barn... when you go inside you'll see two of the walls are plastered and there's a fireplace. Well you don't have a fireplace in a barn so that's where they used to wait for the tide to turn. The causeway was built... topically because of woodland industry, was built on hazel twigs. Bundles of hazel twigs, tightly bundled, were laid on the ground then covered with stones, and that was the only foundation. The causeway still stands today and still carries all the traffic, even huge wagons which it was never intended to carry. You can still cross it with no difficulty.

But packhorse trails around here still exist and perhaps the ones that people don't realize are the ones that are the most popular. For instance if you come down from Longmire down towards Bouth and you go into High Moss or Springwood there's a little track follows round the wall along the side of the fields coming to Old Hall, that was a packhorse trail. Another one was over the grassy lane. And the reason the packhorse trails kept round the outskirts of the village in the field in front of Bouth House and Botu House Cottage that was a glacial lake. That's where fresh water fish were caught for the village. And if you go down to the post box at Bouth, Weir Beck bridge, that's called Weir Beck because there used to be a weir there to maintain the level of water in the lake so they could guarantee fresh water and guarantee fish. So all these things are interlinked. But packhorse trails are readily available today and they're still there if you know where to look for them. And in fact if you came here today from Longmire you came down a packhorse trail. You drove down it but nevertheless you came down it.

When you go down the ramp into the car park at the White Hart on the right is what's called the Coaching House, well that used to be the coach house for the pub when they used to have horse drawn coaches. And that was used as a temporary morgue

on one... at least one occasion, with sailors washed up from the estuary into Rusland Pool. And I can remember Mrs Barrow that lived in here, the woman whose father was killed at Black Beck, saying they had to walk past with cloths over their noses because of the rotting corpses in there.

I first started school in Ulverston, let me give you a little bit of a précis. I was born in Levens Garth Haverthwaite in 1939. My father was called up, he was in the Border Regiment. He served as a paratrooper, fought at Arnhem among other places. And I went to school in Ulverston. We had a one up one down cottage, no internal water, no electricity just a gas mantle. The toilets were up at the top of the yard and when you used to go up to the toilet with a candle I'd guarantee when you got to the toilet door the candle would blow out (*chuckles*). And so we spent the first two or three years there, but once the war was the real war rather than the phoney war my mother and I moved the Levens Garth permanently, because my grandparents, their sons had gone off to war and they were on their own, so we lived there, so then I went to Haverthwaite school for a couple of years. And they were the best school days I can remember because it was a tiny little school, again two rooms, a girls' half and a boys' half. Each half of the school had a pot-bellied stove in for warmth in winter and in the evenings the Home Guard used to have socials raising money for the Red Cross. And I have a poster I treasure of a dance held in Haverthwaite school in 1943 and that was for the Soldiers Sailors and Airmen's Fund. So that's where I went to school. And then after that, when we went back into Ulverston and went to Lightburn School and then the Victoria Secondary Modern school. And secondary modern was a posh name for a school for drop-outs (*chuckles*), and my education really started when I started work at Glaxo.

My happiest childhood years were at Haverthwaite because that's when you're in the formative years, everything was adventurous. I used to watch Spitfires coming over from Cark, and American soldiers driving from Low Wood to Haverthwaite station picking up supplies, because Low Wood was a depot for the area. And my grandfather used to trade chickens and eggs to the officers because they couldn't get fresh chickens or fresh eggs. But what they did have was rice and oranges and things we... peaches, tins of peaches, nobody could get peaches. (*chuckling*) And my grandmother used to say to me if on a Sunday afternoon when we had a rice pudding, which you had to have in secret, "Don't you scrape that rice pudding tin out on that step and let anybody see you!" Because we were the only family in the village that could get rice and it was trading black market with the Americans. And then as soon as Normandy came along and the invasion of Normandy the Americans disappeared overnight and no-one said "Ta-ra" no-one could tell you where they'd gone. All of a sudden there was a large amount of American troops and wagons with big white crosses on their... white stars on their sides. Overnight they'd gone and we didn't know why until the newspapers announced the Normandy invasion.

And I had a lot of fun there as well as a child with the Italian prisoners, it was a prisoner of war camp as well at Low Wood, and they used to walk round with a big yellow circle sewn on their back, yellow cloth, and I'm not sure if it was the right or left knee there was another yellow patch. And those Italian prisoners were high risk prisoners because they used to let themselves out in a morning, from the prison camp, and they would go and work at the local farms or they'd go and do gardening

for women in the village or men in the village. They'd go to church, Haverthwaite church on a Sunday and they were in the choir because Italians are good singers and they'd get invited to soirees and suchlike. And then on a night they'd go back to the prison camp and lock themselves in (*chuckles*) because they didn't want to know anything else about the war.

**C:** What about your grandparents? You lived with them. Do you remember any stories that they told you about changes? Because we're going back like over a hundred years with them aren't we?

**R:** My grandfather was Joseph Robinson. He lived at number 1 Levens Garth where I was born, and he'd been married before and his wife had died and he met my grandmother whose name was MacDonald, and he married her because when he got married to Elizabeth MacDonald she took on Joseph Robinson's name, Mrs Robinson. The problem is, in my family history, her maiden name was also Robinson, so she once again became Robinson. And Joseph was very famous was Jossy, his nickname was Jossy, because he was a world champion clog dancer and there are... there is a book written about him, of which I've not got a copy. And he won his gold medal at Ulverston, the world must have been a much smaller place then. And he used to travel around the district with a horse and trap and I have a photograph of him with his horse and trap. And he used to carry in the trap a little... he used to call it a piano but it was an organ, so you could operate the bellows with his left hand and play the tune with his right hand, so he used to teach clog dancing, and he was noted for it. And he also used to have a haulage business taking tourists around the Lake District and then he won the contract with the Backbarrow Blue Mill for hauling all the raw materials and finished product to and from Haverthwaite station or anywhere else, and that kept him going as a business. So he and his two sons, three sons, lived off that contract for the rest of their days. But Joseph was quite a character with his dancing, he was well known in the area. I don't take after him I've got two left feet.

And they, during the war, were very generous people. One cameo I remember and one anecdote was as a child at Levens Garth, I'd be three, four years old, a very early memory, and we used to play in the garth itself which is a street, and this day we heard all these engines roaring, well you didn't hear traffic in those days, there was not much public traffic, and a convoy of vehicles come down, the wagons, army wagons, jeeps, transport of all kinds, Bren gun carriers, and they stopped in front of Levens Garth. And we as children ran along the line of wagons to see how far they stretched and they went up to Haverthwaite Station down to the post office at Haverthwaite, the bottom of St George's playing field. And all the soldiers were getting out, having a break, and they were going into the houses asking women or whoever was in the house could they have boiling water to make tea. And I can remember this almost as a cameo picture in my mind of the soldier coming up the path with me to number 1 Levens Garth, knocking on the door and saying "Are you there Missus?" and Grandmother said "Yes what can we do for you?" "Can we have some water to brew tea Missus?" and he walked in and on the table was a sponge cake she'd made, put jam in the middle of it, and he was looking longingly at this sponge cake. And she said "Would you like a piece?" "Ooh aye, please Missus." And she cut it up and dropped it all into his tin hat and he took it out for his mates on roadside. And I thought what a generous thing to do. We couldn't

get a sponge cake. And I thought afterwards she'd be thinking I hope somebody's doing it for her sons. And we as children were in our element because we were climbing in and out of these vehicles playing with all the gadgets and letting us play with the rifles and suchlike, nowadays they wouldn't let you do that. So that just let me know how generous people can be in difficult circumstances, and that's always stuck with me that little cameo.

Another thing I remember, we were living in Ulverston at the time and my sister had been born and it was 1944 and my mother took me down to the bus station at Ulverston and said to the conductor "Would you let Ron off at Haverthwaite?" because they just called Levens Garth Haverthwaite, and she paid for the ticket and I got on the bus, on my own, nobody thought... there was no risk in them days. And when they [sic] got off the bus at Haverthwaite everybody got off. I got off, all the passengers got off, the conductor got off, the driver got off and they were all looking up in the sky and going over Haverthwaite was a barrage balloon. And the barrage balloon had trailing behind it about... I don't know how many hundred feet of rope or cable behind it, and it was following the River Leven up towards Lakeside. Later on we found it had broke free from the shipyards at Barrow. And I as a child was gobsmacked, I didn't know what this thing was in the sky, I knew what a balloon was but this was enormous and it had fins on the back like an aircraft. But these cameos stick in your mind forever and often you have to check yourself where it happened, you can't remember when it happened. I know it was then because of my sister being born.

**Roger:** Did your father survive the war?

**R:** Yes, my father he... he was called up and joined the Border Regiment and the Border Regiment it was decided that they would make the First Battalion of the Border Regiment airborne infantry, so they were glider-borne troops. Well father was a very talented artist and they put him in the intelligence section, and he stayed in the intelligence section throughout the war. So he saw service in North Africa, Sicily, Italy, and then at Arnhem and ended the war in 1946, so he was in long after the war finished. His happiest days in the army, if you can call them happiest days was in Norway disarming the German troops. He had quite a colourful career they wrote a book about him did the Border Regiment, it's called "When Dragons Flew". He made the models and plans for the invasion of Sicily, and he used to draw the maps for them, being artistic. He also made a sideline of drawing cartoons for soldiers because you couldn't get Christmas cards or anything like that with rationing so he used to draw Christmas cards for a couple of cigarettes. And in the book "When Dragons Flew" there's a couple of these pictures drawn in there are in there. So he had a colourful war. But in Arnhem the only injury he got... so if you think about it there were twelve thousand men dropped there, less than two thousand got out, and yet all he had as an injury was, as he got into the boat to cross the Rhine, a rowing boat, somebody stood on his thumb (*chuckles*) .

But there's another cameo there that's almost unbelievable. When the survivors crossed the Rhine many of them swam, they had some with no clothes, they had little equipment, very few kept their rifles or anything they were wanting to survive. And when they crossed the Rhine there was dozens and dozens of ambulances waiting to pick them up and take them to an aid station and as they were walking past these ambulances this voice says "Come on Len", that was Father's name, "get

in here.” And it was his brother-in-law from Levens Garth, ambulance driver, how canny can that be to go from North Africa to Arnhem

**RL:** Survive Arnhem

**R:** And his brother-in-law who’d been with the Desert Rats, the 8<sup>th</sup> Army, fighting Rommel and he’d

gone up through the peninsula through France and met him on the Rhine. Unbelievable.

**C:** amazing

**R:** You’d have a job to make a Hollywood film wouldn’t you? with that.”

**C:** Thank you Ron, your memory is just amazing and so impressive. It’s really great to have all this information particularly about Bouth and your own history, we’ve really appreciated gathering...

**R:** Well I’ve started writing a book. I’ve got about thirty six or seven pages written at the moment. What I do with it I don’t know. So what I’ll do when I get a bit further on I’ll give you a copy. What you do with it you can do what you like with it. If you can’t sleep it’ll be worth reading. A lot of these things come up in it...

**C:** Good

**R:** And what I find, as you get older you find this happens, as you go into this researching your own past, almost doors open into things you’d long forgotten. Things that happened long ago. And that’s what’s happened writing this book, it started off as a little short story and now it’s becoming war and peace...

*48.41 minutes*