

Transcript of Interview with Mike Thwaites, Master Craftsman, by Tim Fleming

T: It's the 21st of September and I'm in a beautiful barn with Mike Thwaites and he's going to tell us a bit about himself. So Mike let's go right back to the beginning, tell me a bit about where you were born and what it was like there.

M: Actually I was born in Coniston in the late 1940s. My mother was originally from Merseyside and came up to work in the Land Army which she did for about four and a half years, and my father was a second generation boat builder at Coniston, in fact some of his rowing boats are still on the lake at the moment. One possibly my grandfather's. Although our childhood was quite mixed emotionally, I say "our" because I was one of four, it was quite mixed emotionally, I nevertheless had a very interesting, absorbing childhood.

That came about because of the freedom I had of the countryside and the way the countryside was in those days. Coniston area, the lakes, the fells, were very very rich in wildlife when I was a little boy, and I capitalised on that and it promoted an interest in wildlife and the countryside that stays with me to this day.

So school was school. The first school I went to was the little village church school where we were infants and taught by Mrs Currie, the local headmaster's wife, very very nice lady, very interesting lady. From there we went to the other school at Coniston, I think it's called St Andrews or the church school next to the church for a few years. And I was fortunate or unfortunate enough, I suggest fortunate enough, to start at the new school, John Ruskin School, on the day it opened, and did the last five years of my schooling at John Ruskin.

I think probably the most interesting time would have been the intermediate school where we had the headmaster as I mentioned, Mr Currie, he had a massive interest in the outdoors and wildlife and encouraged us all to... to absorb it, take it on board, and even, he even had quite an unusual lesson for which we were examined annually which was called Bird and Tree and we had to study 'a' bird and 'a' tree and write on it, on the subject at the end of every year with an exam. And Mr Currie used to be very very generous, if you did well in it, not quite so generous if you didn't do well. Fortunately it was one of the subjects I did do well at. To the point where I can remember every tree and every bird that I studied over those few years under his guidance.

T: Tell us what, what kind of adventures you had as a young lad in the hills around Coniston.

M: Basically (chuckles) what I think is missing today for many varied reasons... we had the freedom of the countryside. There weren't "Private" notices stuck on every gate and every fence like there are today. Every woodland's got a "Private" notice nailed into a good oak tree. We had the freedom.

The farmers were extremely accommodating. Mind you, they were getting something out of it, they had to maintain our favour else we wouldn't help them at haytime.

I was probably a wee bit of a loner and spent a lot of time on my own, obviously. But not all the time. But my advent... adventures rather, were up to places like the Scrow Beck, tickling trout. Catching fish was always a great adventure to me because it was the thrill of catching them, the thrill of being up on the fell, the things I saw whilst I was there and at the end of the day a couple of trout to take home for the frying pan. So that was adventure throughout.

I spent a lot of time exploring the old slaters' or should I say the quarrymen's huts on the fellside, and had these visions of being thousands of miles away from home and only this slater's hut to live in and how I would appoint everything

inside it, it was great. My father being a boatbuilder when I was 11 years old it wasn't uncommon to row a boat down to the bottom of the lake and back, crossing the lake. I had friends at Lawson Park which is up above Brantwood and rather than walk all the way round the head of the lake and up through Tent Lodge I used to row across the lake, park the boat on the shore, walk up through Brantwood woods, up to Lawson Park, many many times. Dozens and dozens of times I've done that. I would quite often have a little fish for something legal or illegal on the way back, if I wasn't lucky I would try maybe in the beck on the way home. Sometimes fortunate, sometimes unfortunate. But everything was an adventure.

Working around the local farms, 'working', we were probably a damn nuisance at a certain age but we were accepted and welcomed and many many times getting a ride on the back of a tractor was an adventure because I do remember horses working in the hay fields, and ploughing. And tractors came along, well, this was massive.

The train from Coniston was still running in those day and a "free" inverted commas ride from Coniston to Broughton and the same train coming back an hour later, that was a great adventure. It would be 1960 or 61, 61 I think, that the railway closed. So you know, I was twelve years old, thirteen years old. Coniston station was a bustling place, bustling. A lot of staff, all uniformed staff, beautiful buildings, absolutely beautiful buildings, men took a tremendous pride in running that station, tremendous pride in running that railway. I remember them all, picture them all, very very generous. A lot of the ladies from Coniston used to go to Barrow shopping, and that meant jumping on the train at Coniston, down to Broughton, I beg your pardon, Foxfield, the end of the line, changing at Foxfield and going into Barrow and get back on the last train back. And I remember distinctly, I was on it twice in my life at that... on a Saturday afternoon... and I remember distinctly the engine driver and stoker stopping at different level crossings, getting off and lifting prams down, shopping down, and sending some grateful young lady down a path with her pram and her shopping piled on top. It's all gone now, railway gone, no thought of the railways. In my view they should never have closed them, and incidentally I don't think it was Beeching's fault they closed.

T: Let's skip on a little bit and change our focus to when you came to the Rusland Valley, so we've skipped a few years there if that's alright.

M: Well yes, I ... I left Coniston... after leaving school, a few months in Coniston, then I went away into the forces, into the army, and spent the next ten years being a soldier which I actually thoroughly enjoyed, I would recommend it, I had a wonderful life in the forces. And for various reasons I left the forces, came back, and settled in the valley.

T: Whereabouts did you settle?

M: At Bouth, only quarter of a mile from where we're standing now, sitting now. And I got quite involved with a farming family in the valley, in particular the two brothers, both of whom have gone now, both different people but tremendous people, excellent custodians of the land, excellent people to converse with and to work with.

T: So what work did you do in the valley when you came back?

M: What work?

T: Yes

M: I was a bit disillusioned at that period of my life with what I could see of British industry and the power that certain institutions had over British industry, and the restrictions being imposed by big companies on people exploring their talents basically. I thought this isn't me. Bear in mind I'd been in the forces, this isn't for me.

I had acquired some very very basic skills as a boy, not only through my family being... my forbears being craftsmen, but also with working around farms and being cheap labour for some local wallers etc, and we had constant contact with timber in one form or another. And we were encouraged all the time to make things, do things, and not play. So I thought well I survived my childhood through a couple of rough interludes, I thought if I could survive that I could survive working on my own.

I mentioned this to a few local people and they said "well we would embrace you" and they did. I had a lot of work from my friends and that led to more friends, that leading to too much work, then looking for lads who were like-minded.

T: What sort of work was that, was that building work?

M: Walling, walling basically. And that leads to gate stoops and work around farm buildings, that leads to people being let down by big contractors and can't get anybody to do the job, would I tackle

it? Which I did and do to this day. And I found I loved it and I er ... my customers were certainly content with what I did because I've never looked for a day's work in my life. I have had a full book for the last 38 years, and more than a full book, more than I could cope with at times. But we went on to do a lot of work in restoring traditional lakeland buildings, a lot of work.

I had a very good relationship at the time with the local slate quarries, I used to do an awful lot of subcontract work for them which led us to quite interesting jobs like showrooms, fitting out... building showrooms in London and places; reflooring Manchester cathedral to name two.

But I was never ultimately happy doing that. I was happy and the work was good and we got adequate pay for it and I never had to worry about being paid for it, but my happiest is in the valley trying to enhance the valley, trying to keep it right, traditionally right, trying to make it a better place for the future, for people that didn't know it in its traditional form. Because it is changing dramatically.

T: So you've noticed a lot of changes since you first came.

M: Massive

T: What was it like when you first came? Can you... what sort of things have gone now... that you remember?

M: The most significant which affects everybody I would say are the roads, verges and hedges along the roads. I hesitate to say twenty or thirty years ago, I couldn't be specific, but I do know that the hedgerows and the verges were so beautifully maintained by the local council, mostly by hand, nearly all by hand. And they were a picture simply because the hedges grew, they didn't hang in the road, they didn't get mutilated by these hedge-cutting machines, if they needed attention they were dressed by a professional man with a hook who left them looking pristine. Which allowed so much to grow underneath them, so many wild flowers, so many places for birds to nest. I think a blackbird or a song thrush nowadays would avoid going into a hedge because they know, probably know, they're going to get mown down by a white van.

T: So there was a specialist crew looking after the roads and the hedges?

M: Yeah, the lengthsmen. And they all had their patch and they'd change round occasionally, terribly proud men, terribly proud men. What a wonderful system they had for working. And all of them characters you know. I think the job developed the character. I don't remember any one of them being boring or...

T: Do you remember any one in particular?

M: Sadly, yes I can. I can remember many in particular that's the difficult one. Probably the most topical I can remember has recently died in the last couple of months, we buried him, was Alan Dalton. Fantastic character, a truly honest man who asked for nothing in life but gave massively. One of your old-fashioned sort who... let me give you an example: on his particular length, that was the official term

T: Where was his length then?

M: Well Alan... as I say they varied but Alan worked anywhere between Coniston and Ulverston but spent a lot of time in this valley. He wouldn't pass a job, he was there to clean the road, trim the verges, clear any gully tops that needed cleaning on his way. But they never passed a job. If there was a wall with eight or ten stones falling out into the road they would put them back, wouldn't kick them aside like they do today or walk round them or ignore them. If somebody, which was very very very rare put a bit of litter down, threw litter down, they would pick that up and sweep it up, the mess. They wouldn't see anybody stuck, they would know this is not a council wall but it's a wall that needs a touch, we'll do it on our way past. And they were... I don't think it would be too emphatic to say they were loved these men, they were looked out for, and their kindness was... going back to when I was a boy... their kindness was reciprocated because they knew... I'm speaking of the Coniston area, they could stop at any house and ask the lady for a pot of tea. And the lady wouldn't just give them a pot of tea, she would give them a bit of bread and butter and jam that had just been baked, or a bit of cake she'd just made. And they did know the good watering holes, but they were part of the community, so much a big part of the community.

T: And did that make the landscape look different?

M: Absolutely. To be totally frank, I don't like to say this, but I referred to this before. People say to me many times "What a beautiful area you live in" and I cannot help... maybe it's the sarcasm in me, maybe it's the lack of education, I cannot help coming back to the statement "it used to be a beautiful place we lived in."

It is going the way of many many places, it is going a little bit derelict and it's not loved the same as it was by any manner of means. And I've got to say that includes local people as well as people that are touring the area. Why is it that today's tourists have got to throw so much litter down? When in the 1950s you never saw litter, in the 60s you never saw litter, you never saw fly-tipping, you never saw people pulling cam stones off a wall and throwing them into a beck, or you never saw Mum... as has happened to me, when I'd just hung three new gates... you never saw a Mum encouraging

kids to climb on the gate and swing round backwards and forwards on it, because people cared. And that's one of the major things I think's going wrong in the countryside. And you know they talk about the wildlife in the area, there's nothing compared to what there was. Open those doors and I remember that field with half a dozen curlews in it, twenty lapwings, peewits in it, barn owls galore, the lot up there full of woodcock. Go up there now twenty times you might, you might, you might once see a woodcock.

T: Why do you think that is then?

M: Pardon?

T: Why do you think that is?

M: Well basically it's noise, I think. Farmers always get the blame for the demise of the birds and wildlife in general (19.11 *sounds like* 'who are') very very strong predator population because there's so many protected species and I believe it's the big ones they protect so people don't have to get out of their cars to see them. The small ones have no chance because the small ones are prey to the big ones.

But another very very concerning factor is this to me, it does concern me. And if you were to ask me is there one thing, one thing I could change, there are about three things I would like to change and I know it'll never happen, but ranking among those three is the noise people are making in the area. And they say "we've walked three miles over that fell and we haven't seen a bird we haven't seen a possum" or whatever they expect to see on the fell, because if they did want to see something they would tread a bit more carefully, they wouldn't have two dogs running round barking and yapping and the kids screaming and shouting, and they wouldn't be riding over the fells and through the deer forest and the deer park with halogen lights at night in a procession of about sixteen people on bicycles as they're doing. It's frightening everything away.

This is the land of the animals, you know, it isn't the land of halogen lights. And another thing is people can't live without halogen light, what chance have they got to see anything, even a cat crawls round the periphery of light. I would change that, I'd ban the blooming things. I would ban these cyclists, not the cyclists per se, because there's some very nice people among them, I would ban the use of these halogen lights on footpaths at night. I definitely think they are doing massive damage, they're certainly disturbing the deer I do know for a fact and many other people connected with deer know for a fact.

But the noise people make, they're never going to see wildlife. There is a little bit left, the general public isn't seeing it.

T: You were saying really interesting stuff about different deliveries that used to come and the different characters that used to come down the valley which most of them don't come any more.

M: Well. Well. They too were great characters. I think they were all characters. One in particular was a grocer from Hawkshead. There were two brothers actually, both grocers. And the one brother... there was Joe and John and John Wright used to come to this valley about twice a week. He had everything on his old van, everything any household could possibly need. I don't know where he stored the kitchen sink but I bet he had one somewhere because if you asked for a small box of matches you would get them, if you asked for a big box, a bottle of Vim scouring agent, a piece of chocolate cake, some teacakes, a bar of Lifebuoy soap, a tin of paraffin, John would have it on that van. And if he didn't have it on that week for any reason, he'd sold out, he'd come back again the next day and deliver it for you. But not only did he deliver that, he would go to the doctor's and pick up all the prescriptions for all the people that were unable to get there, didn't have vehicles, and deliver them. He would meet the postman and take off the mail... take the mail off the postman for the people that he knew he was going to visit that day, to spare the postman going there. And he had a tale, a different tale, I can't remember the name, I think it's orator, he was a great, great story teller. And one of the most interesting things I will remember about John Wright, a smashing smashing man, I can't remember him wearing anything else but his brown leather boots, his shirt and tie and a brown tradesman's overall.

In my absence, whilst I was away in the army, I hadn't seen John obviously for ten maybe fifteen, sixteen, possible eighteen years and I bumped into him one day, I was having a cup of tea in a farmer's house with the farmer and his wife, John walked in with a basket of groceries because he knew what they wanted every week and the lady said to John "I'd better introduce you" she says "You won't know this man." I will never forget his reply. He said "Kna 'im, kna 'im? I'll tell you his mother's maiden name and date of his father's birthday!"

T: (Laughs)

M: And believe you me he was right. And he was one of many. Harold, I think Harold hasn't been so well, Harold Hutchinson and his father Fred before him. Fred was from this valley actually, they weren't Coniston people they were from the valley originally. The butcher, Harold wouldn't care what time of night he got back, he'd be there on time with his delivering but who knows what time of night he finished because he'd have a tale to tell, he would have been awash with tea and he had the most brilliant memory I've ever seen on any man, ever ever experienced anybody's (sic) Harold. I say had, has. But they were needed, Harold too there was always something on his van. I don't think he was a believer in smoking but he always had a few packets of fags under the seat or something like that for somebody that had a sly fag and didn't want their husband or wife to find out,

and he'd tuck it in among the sugar and the tea and the smoked bacon, but what a wonderful fella. But we had fishmongers used to come from Flookburgh, more than one. We had more than Harold, a butcher used to come from Ulverston, Zella's father was a travelling grocer.

T: Whose father was?

M: Zella

T: Oh right

M: you know, Oxen Park, Zella Teasdale, Zella Slater now. There was a time, it's quite a few years ago when the travelling grocers used to drive from Ickenthaite to Oxen Park along Peg Lane, you can barely walk along it now, but that's due to the off-roaders wrecking it, no maintenance. But they had... they all had their rounds they all knew the way, I would think some of the vans might even have had a licence on them, I don't think others would. But I don't think anybody apprehended them, it was never a heavily policed area. Coalmen used to come in. Reverting back to Coniston I remember the... I don't know why it was but they called them Spanish Onion Men. But I do know their cry was "Spanish Onion" because I heard it, but I believe they were actually French men. And a family used to come to the area with a truck and it was absolutely loaded down with onions. Bicycles and camping gear on the top of the truck. And they used to spend time in the villages selling what they said were Spanish onions on strings and they used to ride their bikes around the village, all the far corners, nooks and crannies shouting "Spanish Onions, Spanish Onions". And then of course there was the scissor grinder who used to come round on his push bike. There was the pot mender who used to come round on a push bike and he would...

T: A pot mender?

M: A pot mender

T: What did a pot mender do?

M: Well he had a basket of tools on the front of his bike and on the pannier he had like a board thing that... like... best description's a mini bench. And the ladies if they're pan had worn out they didn't go to the supermarket or press those buttons and get one delivered they'd get it repaired and they used to stick it to one side till the pot mender came round. And then he would... he would rivet the hole up in the pan. And then there was the scissor grinder he came round and there was a piano tuner used to come round on a bike and the piano tuner used to ride all the way from

Ulverston up to Coniston. I never saw him in this valley but I do believe he came to this valley. There were all sorts of... all sorts of tradesmen. There were a lot of itinerant people around, but no evil in them, they weren't bad people. They may have lived a little bit rough but they all had a story to tell. The local tramp was called Jam Pasty and I was told, quite recently actually, I was talking about him, he got his nickname from my mother's jam pasty. Whether that's true or not I don't know. But I know several old barns, semi-derelict, that he used to live in. there was a lot of people came.

T: What age are we talking about? 70s is that or...?

M: Er, prior, 60s definitely the 60s. whether he survived to the 70s I don't know because as a young boy anybody that's forty is an old person. He could have been forty, fifty or seventy, I really wouldn't have known as a boy. But the old barn that he used to sleep in has gone now and the joiners' shop next door to it that's gone now, that's all houses (are? 28.36) being developed as we speak.

T: So talking of the things that have gone, what do you think we've lost?

M: The art of communication between neighbours in the valley, I think is massive. Once again this is not judging anybody for their lifestyle, but as I indeed wouldn't want to be judged for mine, but there seems to be a lot of cliques that are orientated round particular interests, interests or hobbies, or pursuits. There doesn't seem to be the general feeling of togetherness, help your neighbour, help each other, we can sort it all out together. I think that's missing dramatically. Though I also would like to pay respect to a lot of local people who are actually trying to revive that. Indeed I think Rusland Horizons is probably one of the most positive things that comes out of it for me, that is one of the most positive. It is bringing people together in a ... is the word communal or community? ... effort, and that I applaud, because it has been missing for so many years. I think it's testament to that fact that you get so many people turning out to actually find out about what's going on and how can we get involved etc etc.

30.04