

Voices of Hickling

Interview Transcript: Bernie Ellis

Interviewed by Ann Louise Kinmonth on 21st February 2016

ALK: What's your name?

BE: It's Bernard Ellis. Born in 1946, and we didn't come to Hickling until 1960. My father sold a very small farm in Haddiscoe, on the Norfolk/Suffolk border and came here to try and have a slightly easier life. He was always milking cows all his life.

ALK: So, what was the difference then for him then, coming here?

BE: Arable farming as opposed to marshes and cows really. That's all, it was a tiny farm by modern standards, 60 acres in total, I think. No, 80 acres, much of which were marshes.

ALK: How many cows?

BE: About 30. Then we got hit by the 1953 flood – came across from Haddiscoe Cut, across, flooded all the marshes, so all the cows had to briefly go. For a couple of years until they got the salt out of the marsh, and washed it out. The government lent rain guns so they could pump the fresh water out of the dykes and flood it through and through till the salt was gone.

ALK: That must be one of your earliest farming memories.

BE: Oh yes. I. Was it '53... I was 7 years old. So then dad started his cows going again. But he always said, much to my amazement at that age, This place isn't big enough really. He was, I always remember him saying that to people.

Then eventually he started trying to find somewhere else, so this one came up. This was sold by the chap, Major Mills, who owns at least half of Hickling, if not more. But they wanted to get rid of it because of the liability of the house, strangely. The roof needed attention but it didn't get that until we'd been there about 30 years, and it was a hell of an undertaking for my poor old mum to come into that, from a tiny farmhouse.

ALK: Were there just the three of you, was there more?

BE: No, I had two sisters. I have two sisters still, so it's a family. But it was, it was so cold, no heating whatsoever, no electricity, and just a tiny little, almost like a little range in the wall to heat the kitchen, and you put the ket...., unbelievable.

ALK: So, how old were you when you came here?

BE: 14.

ALK: What are your first memories of the place?

BE: The coldness of it. It struck us all. Um, and the vastness of the house.

ALK: Do you remember the cellars?

BE: Not very much. They were only in one corner, under one big room at the front. Um, my father actually established the farm workshop down there, can you believe.

In fact, when we came here the tractor fuel and a 200 gallon tan, tank of paraffin and for years afterwards my father said Wish I'd have taken the chance while I had it and dropped a match down there. But he never did it. BERNIE LAUGHS I don't know what he's thinking now.

ALK: Is he in the graveyard here?

BE: Yes.

ALK: Sorry, you were going to say.

BE: I wasn't. Um, anyway, things like that are my first memories, mud everywhere in the winter. This concrete through here, I did that, I dunno, 20 years ago but mud...

ALK: Yeah

BE: ... out there.

ALK: Did you know you wanted to farm?

BE: Um, probably didn't think about doing anything else. I did later on, I went to Thorpe Grammar from here, eventually, and er...

ALK: Which school did you go to?

BE: Thorpe Grammar near Norwich. They hadn't got room for me. I think I'd been a misbehaving lad at Sir John Lemon School in Beccles, the grammar school there.

So I done a term at North Walsham and I had to go to Thorpe Grammar.

ALK: But you had to have brains to go to Grammar didn't you?

BE: Oh yeah, I had a few brains. LAUGHS. But that did me the world of good, going to a strange school, long bus ride, long bus ride every morning and night. All the homework studiously done on the bus...

ALK: Were your sisters with you?

BE: One went to Art School, she was, she'd left school by then.

ALK: They're older than you, your sisters?

BE: There was a young one and an older one.

ALK: You were in the middle.

BE: Um, and so I really had to pay attention at school, I didn't know anyone for a while, and a very wise headmaster saved my life there because as I got used to it I started playing around again, always entertaining my classmates, Ellis you fool, I'll put you in the A stream and they won't laugh at you, and you'll have to work.

And it worked, I still played around but it did me the world of good and I really, he did, I owed him so much really.

ALK: In between, in the holidays....

BE: Yeah, never thought of doing anything else really.

ALK: And did the sisters as well, or just the?

BE: Not really, no, it wasn't sort of fashionable for, um, for girls to work on the land. If you had a few pounds you didn't need to make your daughters get their hands dirty. I suppose.

ALK: Your daughters doing it though?

BE: They have done, but they're not keen anymore. No. They worked on, it's always potato grading now, and it's always another pair of hands wanted.

ALK: So when you came can you describe the farm, in terms of how it was managed and run, and who you had working on the place alongside you and your father?

BE: Yes, it struck me as so big, not just the house but the farm. Very few buildings. Farms didn't have many buildings then.

I came up once to look at the farm with father before the sale and he only went up the Loke there a little way and said "Look at those bloody sugar beet". I don't need to see any more, there was 20 ton an acre laying there.

Yeah, and it was raining so he got in his car and we decided to buy it. So, LAUGHS just like that, he was a very wise man like that. Yes, and he had a choice of several men. Jack Borrett farmed it and he lived at Eastfield then, Jack did. He farmed, he had a foreman up here, Mervyn Gibbs, you've probably heard of him, and father took on, one, two three – 3 men plus himself working all the time, 20 acres.

We do about 14 hundred now, just my son and myself.

ALK: So, you've brought in, is it more of Major Mills' land or is it

BE: Some. Some. We own more than we rent now but, yeah, we're very lucky, we bought some about a decade, just over a decade ago.

Tripled in value since then. Yes, so, um, my memories of it, I just worked along, alongside the men, weekends and...

ALK: What can you tell me about Mervyn Gibbs? Because he's turned up for several people?

BE: Really?

ALK: Yeah.

BE: Yes, I can understand that.

Wise old boy, man of the world. I couldn't go into details, you'll have to ask Joan.

ALK: To ask Joan Greenacre?

BE: Yes. She knew him. Well, everyone knew him really. But he was a good foreman here, he knew more about the farm than his employer.

ALK: He ran a shoe shop before he came to the land. He didn't like sitting about.

BE: He'd done an apprenticeship as a cobbler. Yes.

ALK: Yes.

BE: Yes, He did, didn't he. I'd forgotten about that, that was before we came.

Dad, my father took him on and he must have been 60 then, when he took him on. But he took him on for his knowledge, for those few years he could learn what he wanted from Mervyn.

But, yeah, he was a great friend of mine. He sort of educated me in lots of ways LAUGHS as I grew up alongside him.

ALK: Are there, are there any stories that you are able to tell?

BE: No.

ALK: Not any (BE LAUGHS) There was no straight education then. It was all men's stuff?

BE: Yeah, that was all Mervyn used to talk. LAUGHS. No, it wasn't. He was an interesting old fellow, and he was like a farmer really. He was interested in what he was doing all the time, and the land, and the weather, and which is very different to a lot nowadays.

ALK: Can you describe how the harvest changed from when you first came to now?

BE: Yes it, my father took me up, he moved here in 1960, as I said, and combine harvesters were then, they were in, but not everywhere. So, he straightaway bought a 780 Special, a self-propelled combine, and it was the first one in Hickling. The rest was small German ones, towed behind a tractor.

And he bought a sugar beet harvester the second year. But the first year he was taking on extra labour to harvest the sugar beet by hand. It's amazing to think that he did that.

The number of men you carried on a farm were the number of men needed to cope with hoeing sugar beet in the spring and hand lifting them in the autumn really. And that way you needed four or five men on a small farm, there was only about 30 acres of sugar beet. But that takes a long time, one acre a week a man by hand. And they worked hard, they did it on piece work, the hoeing and the lifting.

So my first impressions were rapid mechanisation really, because we hadn't seen any where we came from. We still had a binder, um, went behind a tractor with the sails on and everything. Things were changing 50s, 60s, amazingly before everyone got mechanised. And we are still dropping 18 stone, 2 hundred weight bags of wheat onto the ground from the combine.

And then dad bought a bulk one that had a tank on that was then emptied into a trailer, then you tipped it in a pit that he built in the old barn. That is quite a thing in our lives – the old barn. That is huge, so, lovely barn.

ALK: I used to do theatre productions there, for the village.

BE: Yes, indeed, yes. When the kids were small, the play group, we always wanted to do do's every year. I'd clear all the rubbish out, put it all back every year. In the end I pallet, palletised all the rubbish. You can't throw rubbish away can you! And put it round the back then put it back in again with a teleporter. Lovely barn for that sort of thing.

ALK: So, that was, that was then, you'd need about 5 people. And what about now?

BE: Well, it's sad that we're on our own most of the time now.

ALK: You can run the whole thing. Just you and one other?

BE: Yes.

Well, we do a lot of potatoes, we do 250 acres of potatoes. We grow them on other people's land as well as our own, something I developed years ago. The first extra piece of land, my father acquired was some marshes at Waxham – the concrete road goes down, um, in 250 acres. It was like the Fen really but much younger, it hadn't been drained for

so long it's more brownly organic matter rather than soot like round Ely.

But I eventually under drained it all, um there was only just enough freeboard – about a metre above the water table. But that improved it and, then it made grade 1 land out of it really, once we drained it properly. But that took a long time.

ALK: Did it drop?

BE: It started to drop by the nineties, I probably did that, nineties it was time to pack up because it was so wet.

It just, it, um, oxidises basically, doesn't it? Rots away, and that had started, sad. Anyway, all went down to grass and I was very fortunate, started an enterprise with the local horse sanctuary which has grown and grown and grown and they take every blade of grass I can find as haylage now, from the marshes down there and Eastfield marshes, and the marshes that went with Church Farm, this farm ...

ALK: Where's that going to?

BE: Hillside, it's called. Near Norwich.

ALK: Yes, yes.

BE: The woman who started it, Wendy Valentine, actually started Redwings.

ALK: I thought you were going to say that.

BE: But she fell out with...

ALK: But she said I don't put the horses out on the grass I take the grass to the horses.

BE: Well they have so many horses, she can't restrain herself, and they just destroy the pastures all the time.

Too many. And they try to leave them out too long, I don't mind. She's also saving cattle now, it's unbelievable.

ALK: Saving cattle.

BE: I send silage there and it's just one of those piece, pieces of luck that you need in your life at times.

ALK: Well, I was going to ask you what had happened to those marshes, and how you manage the marshes now. And that's...

BE: Very easy now.

ALK: And that's a one off solution really, isn't it?

BE: Yes, up until last year we were getting £100 an acre plus but ESA money, environmentally sensitive area, as well as the haylage, it was actually yielding more money than this grade 1 land up here.

ALK: Yeah.

BE: Such a piece of luck.

ALK: Farmers are going to want to stay in the Common Market then?

BE: I think, as a body, they probably do, yes.

ALK: As a body.

BE: My personal feeling is not to be in it, I think there's too many, too many cushy jobs. We pay more in than we get out. We're probably unused to managing ourselves now.

I think it would take a bit of, bit of doing.

ALK: So, if you describe your farming week. What do you spend your time doing now?

BE: It's all through the whole year. When I was, I had a son even, Um, I'd sort of fill the year up. We used to do strawberries, onions, Brussel sprouts, potatoes, tried everything really.

I was friendly, very friendly with someone who was at, at Croxford (?) college with me in the fens, or in the silt fen, at Spalding and I sort of took a leaf out of their book really.

ALK: Yeah.

BE: People didn't really work overtime on a farm here. In my earlier days, um, and I sort of introduced a lot of overtime – don't think it worked very well did it? But things have changed a lot really.

ALK: A lot of the people who have spoken to us worked on the fruit. There's a lot of fruit around Hickling.

BE: Yes, I had strawberries as well.

ALK: Yeah. Up this end, there were glasshouses.

BE: There were a lot of blackcurrants behind Jack Borrett's Blaxall Farm. Because it suits them, the wet land around the Broads area and Guttermere area was blackcurrants. No, when I left school I wasn't even then dead sure I wanted to farm.

ALK: So what happened then?

BE: You'll laugh but on the way home, finished school, I'd been given a few booklets by the careers people, reading them on the bus, where I did all my reading before I got home to do some work.

I thought I must go to agricultural college – that was all my own, father couldn't see why I needed to – Just do what I did boy. But I insisted so I had to go somewhere else for a year and I worked on a farm at Martham for a year and another year here, then Chelmsford.

ALK: I don't know that, Writtle.

BE: **Writtle, that's the name of the village that it's in.**

ALK: And so they call it Writtle College.

BE: **Writtle Agricultural College, yeah. Two years there, National Diploma in Agriculture, then the VSO people got their hands on me, before I left there and I went off to Central Africa for a year and a half, or a bit more than that.**

Much to my father's displeasure who then took another man on because "That bloody boy's not coming home". And that was a great experience.

ALK: Yeah. What did you do out there?

BE: **Believe it or not, agriculture. I was called District Trials Officer and had to be chauffeured, they'd only had black government for 4 years so white men weren't allowed to drive the government land rovers in those early days. (16.44) So I had to have a driver, and I just did trials with ground nuts, tobacco, maize and cotton. All round the central region of Malawi, which they tell me now is drought, and all the refugees on there.**

ALK: Were you doing, you know, Fischer plots and randomising?

BE: **Yes, yeah. Three randomisations I think it was.**

ALK: Yeah, yeah.

BE: **You know all about that?**

ALK: I do.

BE: **I'd never come across it before. And then I had to sit after the harvest and do all that.**

Yeah. Which was, you know, really a joy to, it was quite an experience for a lad.

ALK: So, I'm coming on to the bit that I want to talk to you about the seasons, because that's quite a kind of feature.

BE: **Oh yeah, you asked me about my year, my year did you?**

ALK: Yeah.

BE: **Now. It's very full, that's what I was leading up to.**

ALK: Yes.

BE: Decided to drop, I decided to drop, it was getting ridiculous, we never had, had lots of men but couldn't, we were always behind. So I had to drop strawberries and onions and sprouts. Or Birds Eye dropped the sprouts in Norfolk and took them up to Humberside. Um, and concentrate on potatoes.

We took potatoes on when we took the Waxham marshes, never had anything to do with potatoes before that, so we bought some old equipment, employed Joan Greenacre – amongst others.

But now the farming year is still very full, we've just finished ploughing now, because it's been a wet time previously and we were behind with it. My son has a plough and I have a plough and we get over it as quickly as we can.

ALK: Were these earlies or?

BE: Sorry, I'm now talking about the farm generally.

ALK: Yes, sorry, I'm right on these potatoes, so

BE: I can concentrate on potatoes if you like.

ALK: For a moment. I'm trying to understand the potatoes. So are they early potatoes or B, later potatoes? Who's buying your potatoes?

BE: Well, I had a big dabble with earlies, second earlies on the marshes. Because the black soil warms up quickly and that was very successful. Made my first contract with potatoes with Golden Wonder for £14 a ton. LAUGHS. We now get £150, and it's nowhere near enough.

ALK: So, when was that, the first contract?

BE: Oh, gosh. In the late 70s I suppose, yeah. Um, so now we have, at the moment we are all crispy potatoes. We don't do the fresh market at all now, and so they're all on contract, everything we plant is already sold.

Um, and we have just lost, we were doing some with, um, Mc Coy's crisps, KP snacks, up in Billingham on Tees, and the rest were with Kettle at Norwich.

The Billingham on Tees one are going through a really bad time, all crisp sales have slumped quite recently – the last two years. Something to do with healthy eating I guess. Um, so now we're, this coming season we're 100% with Kettle. They've taken us on, and we hope that's the right decision. It, it swings about, sometimes chips are better. With Mc Cain's – big processors before. McDonalds, you know.

ALK: And do you? I'm getting this feeling of you knowing businesses all round the place. Do you, do you pay attention to this healthy eating change? Are you thinking what could you grow for a changing market or?

BE: Well, the whole potato market is for unhealthy eating, isn't it? Really, if you're going to do, see we're doing 250 acres – that's 5000 tons of potatoes a year.

We store all those – we've got stores all round – this yard, Perry's, Waxham. Um, a lot of investment. You can't just grow them on chance, it's too much, investment is...

ALK: You've got to have a contract.

BE: ...pushing £2000 an acre. Invest in them before you take them out of the store to sell 'em. Um, to me it's too big a risk. That's not the way to do it. And so we stick with processors – and most processors make their, they're more healthy than they used to be, but they're probably not very good for us.

I can't see where crisps are bad for one, they, I've been round the factory. They don't peel, they wash, they don't even peel them, they slice them and they drop them in healthy vegetable oil, sunflower oil or even rape oil now. And they come out of that oil and it drips off them and they're dropped in the packet so there's not And there's a little salt put on, just a little.

So, avoid the flavours that's the thing. They're purely chemical anyway, although Kettle would say theirs are not. Anyway, I digress.

ALK: Well, my fault for, for asking you. Yeah. So, we're thinking about farming through. I'm interested in just what it's like farming through the seasons. But then if there are particular years that you remember, you know – terrible floods or, um, terribly hot and dry, or whatever. Things that stick in your memory as a real challenge to farming.

BE: The real challenge is, that sticks in my memory is that I was into potatoes, into strawberries and we had the '75-'76 droughts and it really was hot and dry. And my job then was weighing strawberries on the headland, women picking on their hands and knees.

It was so hot I used to go down to Sea Palling and have a swim at 6 in the morning, before I started work. Um, and the strawberries literally just went, just flopped over and we had to pick because the leaves protect them from the sun normally and the leaves were gone. They just went all red and flopped down, and the fruit were shrivelled up and it was awful. But they were worth a bit more money that year so, because of that, that usually happens.

And potatoes were worth a fortune that year – '76. '76 followed '75 which was probably drier and hotter but then it was a dry winter but then we moved into '76 which just carried on.

ALK: But the water table here would save farming here. Compared ...

BE: Not really, no, um, plants do have, have deep roots - pemmican barley goes down nearly a metre. Um, wheat goes down as tall as it is above the ground but nevertheless they can't get vast quantities of water and by then it would be 4, 5 feet above the marshes, you know, the water table level if you like.

I did apply for irrigation in those years and did not get permission because they were realising this was quite serious and they would want to monitor the marsh levels if I start to pump. So it all went to be, spend a lot of money and we won't give you a licence, you know, so I didn't. I'm glad I didn't.

Irrigation is irritation, it's hard work. That's, funnily enough it doesn't, as you would think it does, you're putting really cold water on an inch, in a few hours each little piece of ground gets an inch in a very short time, don't it. And I've had experience of using other peoples' irrigation on potatoes on the farm – not that outstandingly as you would think, a benefit, mmm.

ALK: So, that was a very hot year.

BE: Yeah I remember that.

ALK: Good, because it was worse for everybody else.

BE: Yes. Often the more enterprising you are in bad times you'll do better if...

ALK: ...You hold you're nerve. Yeah. And what about very wet years or very cold winters or snow up to your elbows?

BE: We, we seemed to have lots of those. The marshes, I got so used to getting things unstuck. We had a crawler tractor down there to get things out of a muddle. I had, got the combine up the shed, in the middle of winter, when it was frozen up, to pull the crawler out – enjoyable LAUGHS.

I remember one particular very wet spring when we just planted everything and then it rained three and a half inches in a weekend – must have been about April or May even. That was fairly disastrous, that just rotted all the potatoes, seed tubers just rotted.

ALK: Do you remember when that was?

BE: No, I don't. No, I haven't got that imprinted on my brain. Probably about the year – the way our weather goes. But now we, real turn around. We've had one decent frost. Not even that this year, have we?

ALK: No, exactly. So, thinking about decent frosts, when the Broad freezes are you out there, skating?

BE: Used to be, Yes, oh yes.

ALK: Can you remember any particularly good times?

BE: Yeah, '63 was a big one wasn't it? We hadn't been here long and I obviously was, what, about 17.

Yeah, John Tallowin, he was, he was a good skater with his great long legs – he could go faster backwards than I could forwards. Yeah, everyone got a, it was a very communal thing for the village.

When we bought Eastfield Farm, er, from Paul Borrett about 12 years ago he showed me some old advertisements when his grandfather bought it and one of the advantages of that farm was that there was skating in the winter.

LAUGHS. **You wouldn't think to mention that now would you? It, it was almost annual wasn't it?**

ALK: Yeah, yeah.

BE: I took a pump out there one year because of the rough ice, if it freezes and there's a bit of breeze in the night you get rough ice, so you're skating like...

And, I banged a hole in the ice and pumping water on the top ready for the frost coming that night. And it vibrated and sunk into the Broads, dad was very pleased.

ALK: What, it disappeared, not very BOTH LAUGH

BE: But, you know, cars and bicycles everywhere, it was, it was amusing and you met people, you spoke to people who you hadn't seen for, since last year, sort of thing.

ALK: So, who would be the people who you knew best, in the, in the village? Who you, you know.

BE: Well I didn't know many for a long time because we came here, I was 14, went to Norwich every day to school, didn't get back till 6 at night, 6 at night.

I didn't know people for several years, John Tallowin was sort of a drinking body, buddy until he got married in his early 20s, but, um, it was when I started to grow Brussel sprouts.

ALK: Really?

BE: And we employed 25 women from the village to trim sprouts for Bird's Eye and I got to know who was who and what was what really.

We did that, I dunno, 6 years or something, 7 years – shared that with John Tallwin, he grew a few and we grew a few, and then we grew a few more. Joan Greenacre was one of that team.

Knocking on doors for one weekend and we recruited 25 ladies who had not worked before, on the land or anything like that – as easy as that. To go and stand in a cold shed, trimming sprouts until the end of January.

ALK: Was that the 60's or?

BE: No, no, later than that. It would have been in the 80's.

ALK: The 80's.

BE: Late 70's early 80's.

ALK: What would be the rates then?

BE: Piece work, they earned more money doing that in that shed, though the door was always open, they earned more money than the poor men, including myself, out in the field picking up frozen sprouts, you know.

Every winter was frost then wasn't it? It just was, and we had to de-leaf them all as they stood, before you cut them, like that.

The whole lot, the whole plant was taken into the shed. You had to de-leaf them and then you got tenosynovitis in your wrist in no time.

So when that got bad then you'd go on to cutting and loading and the other half of the gang would go on de-leafing the sprouts.

ALK: What a story!

BE: And the women are in the shed...

ALK: In the warm.

BE: ...rushing out to meet the trailers, with their aprons flapping because they'd run out of sprouts – swear, swear, they were earning a fortune, you know, in comparative, in those days – they really were.

And they put carpets in their houses, they told us, 'cos we'd have an annual sprout do at the end. Got a bit raucous, um

ALK: Where did you hold that?

BE: In the sprout shed LAUGHS. One or two fell off their bikes in the mud – I'm not naming names 'cos some of them are still around.

But after we got more civilised and went to various venues and had a meal and a posh do and they brought their husbands, yeah. LAUGHS. Tamed it. I mean some of them had babies in prams.

ALK: Yeah.

BE: Eileen, across here, her husband died a couple of years ago worked for, she's worked for me all her life as has her husband ----- (?) under everyone's feet, another one in the pram, tiny, tiny, you know.

ALK: What's her surname? Eileen ...?

BE: **Mayhew.**

ALK: Yeah. Mayhew.

BE: If you look at a stalk of sprouts they grow in a spiral on the stem. Now they were supposed to cut them just so for Bird's Eye, 'cos Bird's Eye, no kidding, are very, very fussy with everything they do.

And the Fieldsman would come round every day and look at all their baskets and say No, you're doing, you're doing.... You know, and the pace- it has to be done in one, there's no time. But they got the knack of holding the stem, the knife didn't stop and they twisted the stem, Pwhhht, they didn't care where they cut. And we were "DON'T DO THAT". You know. LAUGHS.

But they did, 'cos Bird's Eye accepted it, but then they moved on to machine, to do the job in the field, on tracks. Pretty rough job with machines but they had to be satisfied with it and it was cheaper, if you like.

But it was just amazing that we could go round in one weekend – John Tallowin and I and find those, that number of women just like that, oh yeah I'll come.

They were at home either with or without children just gone to school. Had to go home at half past three, it couldn't be a long day in the shed. When we do potatoes now it's start, press the buttons at eight o' clock, so there's various things to do beforehand for me and Stuart, um, but then we go through till 7, half hour break for a cup of tea. Sorry, half hour break for lunch, cup of tea in the morning, cup of tea in the afternoon, just to break the boredom bit.

But it's a very long day and, er, I have to have people who will accept that and seven days a week. Because when we are lifting 250 acres they've got to be in. Yeah.

We have done as many as 400 acres years ago, I don't know how we did that, 'cos we've got a self propelled harvester and we still struggle to get done as far as we want.

ALK: Extraordinary. So, we're thinking about what you do to keep yourself going, and who you know and so on. And you've told me about John Tallowin, and a bit of skating – do you do other things, football, cricket, anything?

BE: No, I was never into ball games.

No, I am a workaholic still.

ALK: Right.

BE: And I'm still doing 70 hours a week or something.

ALK: Now I hear it.

BE: Don't think too badly of me, it's just how I am. BERNIE LAUGHS

ALK: Completely free of judgement, this interview.

BE: I absolutely love every job on the farm and, because of mechanisation, I can still do it. My father had to stop 'cos it was manual and you can't can you?

ALK: So, now I'd like to come on to what you remember about the owners of the hall, you know. 'Cos when you buy a place like that obviously you're interested in it and, and so on. So, um, the stories that you've heard about the hall going back and who owned it and how it worked and anything like that.

BE: Yes. I got a lot of that from Mervyn Gibbs.

I've learn a lot about the Hall since it was burnt.

ALK: Give us a few stories then.

BE: Um, kitchen door, just over there, was about that thick, the door, there's a bit scrape mark gouged out of it and Mervyn said I did that. People, 'cos they pump the water up. Just this side of the Hall there's underground tanks that took the roof water and that was used. They pumped it up, Mervyn used to go in and pump it up into the tanks in the attic every morning so then it would come out of the taps, well the tap.

That sort of thing, and then, to the left was the dairy in there. This was the dairy before that was the dairy I think. But there are still the cool arches, the brick arches in there that they put all the things on, keep things cool. For years that room had no glass, just had slats. Um, to let the air in and it was just a junk room.

Dad put machinery parts in there and never thought anything about it. In there and there's boxes of nails and there's all sorts But eventually that was thrown into one, when Teri and I were there that was a lovely large kitchen. Um, I never really, no one ever said that the back, the Victorian back was for servants.

It would seem logical, and the front was the Queen Anne Grand Piece. But there have been so many things happen there. I always thought the back piece, which was a lean-to really, was built in the mid 1800's, it was Victorian bricks definitely but we found out it was about 1898.

They burnt it down before that.

ALK: When was that then?

BE: About 1890, somewhere ...

ALK: Was that the kitchens or?

BE: Yeah.

And when this latest fire burnt the Queen Anne front bit, we thought, we burnt the whole lot, we did a thorough job this time. There were no walls in there except just lath and plaster walls, all the interior were lath and plaster. So they burnt faster than the floors.

But there was one remaining wall with an arch in it – and they were definitely Victorian bricks. So we went into that, and that was put up when the front was burnt out in 1845. LAUGHS.

Because all houses had candles for light didn't they? Open fires.

ALK: So, this was the third burn?

BE: Yeah, at least.

When they started doing the building with contractors they said You will want underfloor heating, heating won't you? Don't be ridic, I think they think I'm an idiot... ALK LAUGHS.

I said Don't be silly, you can't have underfloor heating in there, you'd have to rip all the floors up, so they're quite happy to save some money – they said Fine. 'Cos I don't like hot, modern houses.

But then they turned round and ripped all the floors up, because of modern building regs, they have to insulate them and concrete them and, and this back half now is as thick as I laid in the yard where the lorries come up.

So anyway, when they went what was our lobby entrance, just there at the back, rubber boots and things, um, they discovered a great big flint wall running the other way, across it.

There's always been lots of different buildings here – that's what I'm coming to.

ALK: Was there some link between this site and the Priory?

BE: There's a lot of stone around here that's nicked from the Priory.

ALK: Yeah.

BE: After Henry VIII.

All those edgings, they were all from the Priory. All the stone in the hall is, er, from Caen in France., Caen stone. Do you know? And they're now importing some more.

ALK: Did I know what?

BE: William the Conqueror built all the castles in the southern half at least the UK from his own stone, he brought it across. It wasn't good enough here.

They went back to that quarry for the front of the Hall, the steps which were broken and round the doors and the lintels above the big window, and the quarry was just about finished. But they found some anyway, we got some French Caen stone – but that saying must have been a huge quarry. Since 1066 – yeah, but there's lots of stone here that would have

ALK: It's quite exciting, it sounds like they're really doing it properly.

BE: Oh, they are. The architect is very enthusiastic, very....

ALK: So that must have been a bit of a blessing.

BE: Well, I sat here with the architect six months ago.

And I said "do you realise there were four big windows on the east end which is where the fire started, that chimney?"

But they were all bricked up in George III's reign when he was, after window tax, to fight the Americans, wasn't it? I said Wouldn't that be lovely to open those up?

Oh, yes, he said I think we can work that in. And they've done it, they're doing it – so that sitting room, which was always, and the bedroom above is going to have 4 ceiling to floor almost, or ceiling to window seat level, 13 foot ceilings.

And look out towards the Waxham lands.

We'll have to chop a few trees down. Yeah, that'll be lovely, absolutely lovely. 'Cos that was always a very ugly side of the Hall, because they'd been bricked up.

They got the stone lintel still in place. So, that's a plus. There were two rooms that were panelled but not oak or anything. I call them cheap pine panels but they were panelled, which was a pain. You couldn't heat them, they split and the panels would drop off the wall because the nails had rusted, they were simply panels nailed up.

So I've for, forgone the panelled walls to do things like open up and not costing any more.

Luckily it was exceedingly well insured.

ALK: Fantastic, yeah. And, and when, when's it going to be...?

BE: They say this Christmas coming, this year.

ALK: Oh, fantastic.

BE: But if you look at it now you'd never believe that.

ALK: Are they going to let you have open fires still?

BE: I've got 4 beautiful fireplaces in that barn there, waiting to be fitted – and I'm not sure whether they're genuine or whether they're... they're very expensive, one is a George III or IV and the other 3 are Victorian horseshoe, which were in that.

ALK: Now I know that you are not too keen to talk about the ...

BE: Getting there aren't I?

ALK: You're moving slowly towards it. BOTH LAUGH Where were you when, when this happened? I know exactly where I was when, when your Hall burnt down but, er, where were you?

BE: We had had, um, Christmas Day there with little granddaughter and Stuart my son and his wife Hannah, and Bethany and, who else was there? Probably it.

And it was adequately heated from the old boiler there so you didn't need open fires really, but cheers a room up doesn't it?

It had happened before – jackdaw nests are always in the chimney and they used to burn when we lit the fire, and they come down onto the hearth and away you go, you know, it was. But this one lingered until the next day and they came up again on, it was lunch on Boxing Day.

Yes, because even dear old Eileen came across, her husband ----- (?) unexpectedly, and she was with us for lunch – so half the farm were in there and we lit the fire again and it must have been smouldering.

The wind went from a gentle westerly to a hoolie of an easterly, if you remember, on that night and it was raining and sleeting and it must have been smouldering up there above bedroom floor level. It was attic level, 'cos the attics burnt first, it just went through like a train.

All the years I've had a boiler there, heating that place. It was tinder dry, wasn't it, lath and plaster walls everywhere. And that particular room was called the nursery and it had always been a junk room really, even had bars on the window 'cos it used to be the nursery – huge room.

And parts of the lath and plaster wall had holes in them so either side of the big chimney where it just sort of, we'd never decorated it since we moved here in 1960, you can't believe it, can you? Um, and that's where it started, and when the first section of roof fell in – well that wind, we all stood out freezing to death in our, the wind just went in the hole like a hungry animal and it just went through the floor, through the walls, right down to the bottom in minutes. You wouldn't, flames doing that, all that, all that wind – and the fire brigade didn't have a hope in hell really. They just can't cope with something like, they just kept they'd get control of a piece, run out of water and it would just flare up again.

Once you get that temperature going – pah. Anyway I was there, they'd gone home and my eldest daughter, Katy, was with me and, er, we'd just had a light meal – I don't know, 8 o' clock, I've forgot now, and she said "What was that?" And I said I dunno, deaf....

And then the lights went out, to the other end of the hall, to the fuse boxes in the Gun Room, messing around and one of the big fuses had blown so I'm looking for a piece of wire, nail, anything to get it to work again like you do.

And she said I'm going up to have a look upstairs. I keep hearing things. And she opened the door of that big room and she couldn't see – it was just solid smoke. She slammed it shut, ran downstairs. I didn't know what to do as I guessed the fire had obviously blown the fuses, there was a fire somewhere.

My daughter grabbed her stuff, she was working in Chester and just home for Christmas, took her car from the yard here and took it away from the house. I said What are you doing, it's only a chimney fire. I'll phone the fire brigade.

So I phoned the Fire Brigade and they came quite quickly. I took them up the front stairs with a big garden hose type for a start to show them.

Took them in and opened the door, there was just solid smoke. They got all their gear on, they told me to get the hell out and they shut the door on them almost and they went inside, and they radio'ed him and said "We're sensing fire above us..." - which is where it was, in the attic -- "... But we can also see something below our feet."

He just said get the hell out, that was it, at that point they had given up really. They started squirting at a roof that high in a gale – you can imagine can't you?

So then it just..., a really funny thing was that, er, I said to one of the firemen in the back yard here that, just around there in the office, shall we get them out? We'll help you – so we got them out, put them in the boiler shed, and then they wouldn't let me go back anymore. I was on a

run then, I'd have cleared the office, got all my stuff out, I'd have cleared... I had time 'cos the big Queen Anne wall in the middle was like a firewall really, it was acting like a firewall.

There were just two doors that you went up from one level to another – from the Victorian to the, and reached the back really, in minutes. But they just wouldn't, put up the tape really – Safety. Keep back. And that, they concentrated on that. I was, I was assigned a fireman in the end. They didn't trust me and he wouldn't leave my side. BERNIE LAUGHS.

Oh dear, we had to march right round in the pouring rain and he followed me all round. I thought I'll lose him. I'll go round the back.

Dear, oh dear, worst night of my life I'm sure. I hope.

So, that's how it started. They will not be allowed in any more I can assure you. But they were great big chimneys that you wouldn't sweep them, you'd put children up to clean them, you know.

ALK: Mmm.

BE: They were that sort of a chimney.

*This transcription has been made to back up, not replace,
the audio tapes that form the main record output of the VOH Changing Village project 2015 to 2020.
The transcribers used their best efforts and checked back for proper names and places.
We ask for forgiveness for any errors...*