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BILL BELSHAM AND GWENDOLINE HORN

WT13,WI15

Interview - 6 November 1995 (60 mins)

Bill Belsham

Can you tell us where you were born and when, please?

I was born on 4th July, 1928. If you see these cottages out through my office window there, the second one down there, Blackhorse Road, Sidcup. So I haven't really moved very far from there. My father bought this piece of land when he was working for another builder just at the bottom of the road and built this place himself while he was still working for the other chap. And then, a few years after that, he struck out on his own. The first thing he built was on a piece of land that was attached to this garden was an old toque ? hut and they didn't go exactly out of business, but they ceased to use it and they were strapped for cash, of course, and money was very tight, we'd got a mortgage on this place and Captain Downs came along who ran the local Crusader. I suppose it was a bible class really and he asked if he could buy the piece of land and my father said 'yes, I'll sell it to you but I'd like the job of building the hall', which he got and that's his first job on his own and he carried on from there.

How was he trained, how did you learn the trade?

Well his father, they lived in a little place called Castle Camps which is right in the corner where Cambridgeshire, Suffolk and Essex meet and near ...? His father and his father before him, I think, were thatches and he worked with his father and his brother for a short time after leaving school and his father died when my father was fourteen and, of course, he couldn't be supported then with his old mother. So, he left Castle Camps and came to Chislehurst where his brother, Harry, was a coachman to one of the local families and Harry found him a job, I think they found him a job with a firm called Bentleys? which were local coach builders in the main road, Sidcup, next to Christchurch and, I don't know, he was there for a short time and then, who he went to work with I'm not really sure, I think it was when he went directly to work for a local firm called,

F & J Webbs or, I think that's what he did cos he worked with them then most of the time until he started up on his own, but for a certain period during the First World War, he worked in Woolwich Arsenal. He wasn't able to go into the First World War, probably fortunate, well it was fortunate for him, because he failed his medical. I don't know on what grounds. But he worked in Woolwich Arsenal for a period during the First World War and then he started up a window cleaning round in Chislehurst so that when his brother, Harry, came out of the army he had something to come back to. When Harry came back from the war they worked together for a while window cleaning in Chislehurst until my father fell out of the window of the Bickley Arms Hotel, he wasn't drunk or anything like that, it's just he was cleaning windows and fell out backwards. But he was off work for a few months, but he got back to work - he did quite well after that. So then he went, I know from then on he worked for this local firm and worked until he started on his own in 1936.

That was before you were born?

No, after I was born, I was born in 1928.

So, you remember some of that, before he set out by himself?

Vaguely, vaguely.

When he started work by himself, if you can remember that well, you were about eight?

That's right.

When he started out, do you remember any sort of financial insecurity?

No, well let's put it like this. There wasn't any spare money about but my mother was the leading, I'm not saying this in the wrong way, but she was the one that had the push. She had the drive. So she, shortly before then, the art school, which has now been demolished in Grassington Road? was built and she applied for the job as caretaker and she got the

job as caretaker. So she was caretaking there and I had an invalid sister who she used to look after, and of course there was no national health service then, so money was tight from that part. My father smoked, so he got himself a paper round which he did for years, up until shortly before his death. And he used to get out early in the morning and do the paper round.

I thought he went off to do his building work?

Oh, that's only half of it, he did. Before he went off to do his building work, he did his paper round and then he as a co-partner in the caretaker shift, he used to look after all the fires at the art school, which was the main furnace which ran the central heating and that was anthracite fire. So he did that three times a day, there were one, two, three, four other central, not central heating, but combustion stoves throughout the school, he did that. He did all the window cleaning there. He, in the winter time, before he set off for work, he would clear all the snow from all the paths with snow, that was that. He also, during the war time, he did the fires and kept St. John's Church going, the fire and furnace under there. He did the fire for another little private school, just round the green, called Park House. And what else did he do?

When did he have any time to do any building?

Well, he used to get up early and, of course, lunchtime he'd be back and, of course, in the evening he would do this. And then of course, he'd be district then? Early on he worked just on his own. Just a hand cart, but he used to work quite a lot of the local estate agents, he'd work on their properties. He'd turn his hand to most things, a bit of plumbing, a bit of bricklaying, whatever came along he'd do. And he used to travel around on this old bike, an old maroon coloured bike which he bought second hand and his tools would be just be hanging on the handle bar. I can still see him now trying to ...? And of course he had the hand cart which had the ladders on it or anything like that to do. In actual fact we still had the hand cart when I first joined him in 1953.

You were working with him in '53?

That's when I came with him. My start, I went to the local secondary modern school and failed the 11 plus. And at 13 you got another chance in those days and, I was then sent on to Dartford Technical college, where I went for, I was there for two years. I didn't really make any effort to study at all, as I say, I then decided I'd be a pattern maker and I got a job, Sir William Lark was the father of my old cub mistress, and he was very influential in the engineering business during and between the wars, and prior to the first world war, I think. That's where he got his knighthood, and he got a job with a firm called Sandfords of Gravesend who were shipwrights and they had a pattern foundry, a pattern shop foundry and I was to be apprenticed with them. But, I was then fifteen and they wouldn't give me a job with the pattern shop until I was sixteen and that was when the apprenticeship was starting. So, I spent, I was there for about two months, I think and I was working down on their wharf called Old Sun Wharf and this was during the, yes the latter part of the war, I suppose and we were converting old Thames lighters into invasion barges. So, quite an interesting job and we used to be there and watch the convoys come up and the state of them, all rents in their sides and all the rest, and the Atlantic convoys. But I, of course, really wanted to get on with the pattern making side of it, I was more interested in that and somebody, through the art school, one of the masters there said that he knew of somebody who had got an engineering works in London and they had a vacancy for a pattern maker's apprentice there. What was the name, R W Wales & Son, and that was a very interesting firm to work for because, Rex Wales, who was the son, he was running the firm then, was the country's authority on windmills and the old chap I was to be apprenticed with, a chap called, Bob Durdy, he was a very clever man and he used to make models of these windmills for Rex Wales. He'd go round and take photographs and measurements and he'd got a whole selection of models, I think they're in various museums now. And also, he used to, they used to have these wheels brought in from various windmills round the country cos they were people who could do it and they? wheels with the wooden cogs. So that was interesting. But I was there for nine months and I was due to sign my articles when for some reason I decided I didn't want to be a pattern maker and I left the job without looking for another job. I came home on Friday night and said to my mother, I said 'I've given my job up'. Of course, all hell

broke loose as although jobs weren't difficult to find then, they thought they'd got me settled.

Why did you give it up?

I don't know. I think I was a bit depressed at the time and I was travelling up and down to London. I don't know, I just didn't see much future in it, I didn't see much future in anything. I was just at a funny sort of stage and I decided that I didn't want to do that but I hadn't thought about what else I wanted to do. As I said, my mother was quite a forceful lady and she said, 'Well what are you going to do?', so I thought I better think of something a bit quick here. So I said, 'I might as well go into the building trade like my father'. So she said, 'right', and she picked up the local paper and she went through the jobs that were advertised. She said, 'there's a firm in Orpington looking for apprentices', so she picked up and said 'oh, no', that was on a Friday night so I phoned on the Saturday morning first thing and got through to them and they said, 'yes, can you come over?' so I was over there with my father on a Saturday morning and I was taken on as a carpenter's apprentice. And they were a firm that had, they were both Liverpool Irish, the two brothers, and they'd done a lot of development at Whiteley, Camberley?, over in Surrey and they came to Orpington between the wars and bought up quite attractive land from the Darerum's family and they developed quite an area close to Petswood, the Marlings Park Estate, they were big, quite nice houses, a good class of development. And, er, in the land that they bought, they owned both sides of Sevenoaks Way which was the main road that ran through from the Railway Station but the Railway line at St Mary Cray, through almost to Orpington Pond there, pretty well all the land on both sides, so after the war of course, there was all the development factories and all that that went on there and they'd also got quite a lot of land which the GLC or the LCC as it was then bought off them to develop the St Paul's Cray Estate and we got the job of putting the roads and sewers through there and built quite a few houses on that estate. So they were quite a good, big firm to work for.

How did they go about training you?

Oh, well it was, comical really, cos I didn't really get a very good training. Not, comical I suppose, because I joined them when the war was still on and when they took me on, they took on I think about six, I can't remember whether it was six or nine apprentices . We had two carpenter's apprentices, a bricklayer's apprentice, a plumber's apprentice. How many have we got to now four, five? Did I say painter's, no, two painters, that's seven. I think that was it.

And it was all very specific then, was it? You weren't just taken on as a builder's apprentice?

Oh, well I haven't got to it yet. We had all these posts but we hadn't got any tradesmen. They were all away in the war, there were no tradesmen. All we had was a chap, a old painter called, Jack Driscoll, with a withered arm and he was the only tradesman. There was a chap, I suppose we now would call him a sub-contractor, carpenter, that we worked with a bit. But as the two carpenter's apprentices, we hadn't really got any tools, we hadn't got any knowledge, but we used to be put on all sorts of work. Bearing in mind that at this time there was a lot of bomb damage going on, and we used to work in all the local factories, we used to work over at Dussex at Crayford? Massive jobs we used to do, just the boys. We would go over to Dussex and half a roof would be blown off off this great big sheets of corrugated asbestos and we'd be up there replacing all this lot, no knowledge of the job, we picked it up as we went along.

Just sort of guess work?

Well, not quite guess work. There were some of the older, labourer chaps that were with us that had probably been on it before. So this is how we went on. I mean we, it didn't matter what, there was no demarcation of what jobs we did. We used to do the glazing, hacking out and glazing. I can remember, I think it was one winter time, it was Coats Paints Factory, the old Sevenoaks way there, the whole of their office block on the side, there were enormous great metal windows there and I think, a land mine had dropped close up to it and there wasn't a pane of glass left in this place. Not only that, all the windows were distorted, bars were all bent

and I can remember now, we'd no scaffolding, there were just the lads we had there and this old painter with a deformed arm. We actually took these windows out of the brickwork, these metal ones and they must have, I can't think what weight they were, they were pretty heavy anyway, two or three hundred weight probably and took them out into the road, laid them on the concrete road outside, there was not a lot of traffic about then, fortunately, and straightened these things out with sledgehammers. And I've been past the factory many times since and they're still there, they've not been replaced, they're still there. ... Well, I just don't know?

Were you able to re-glaze them?

Oh yes, yes, We just put more glass in and probably, in most of them in a couple of weeks they'd all be blown out again. We've just finished this job over at Crayford, this Dussex Oils and went back on the ... we finished just about Friday, went over on the Monday to clear our stuff away and another one had landed and it was back to where it was before. So it was, plenty of work about. I mean, a lot of firms made an awful lot of money on bomb damage. My father did quite a lot of bomb damage and he was working on his own then and, but I don't think he made a lot of money out of it, not like some of the local firms did.

Did you ever make or did you and your other apprentices ever make any dreadful mistakes as you didn't know enough?

Oh yes, we must have made plenty really but we never used to think about it at the time then because there was nobody out there to tell us whether we'd made a mistake or not. But bearing in mind, materials were very difficult to come by. Most of the work was being done on licence, I mean if you had to apply for, I can't remember how it works, I know if you were building a house which was after the war, after that, if you were allowed a licence of I say about a percentage of a standard of timber for a house and you had to build the house and use just that amount of timber, 1.6? comes to mind but it can't be that amount, that standard was an awful lot of timber. But this time, when we'd got after

the war and the tradesmen started coming back, we started building. We go contracts in for council housing for Orpington Council and I can remember the other carpenter's apprentice, Reg, Reg Wood, he was very meticulous, he used to worry very much about a 32nd of an inch, he never gave a damn about a foot. We used to be allocated a particular pile of timber to cut a roof for a pair of houses, the exact amount, there were enough 16 foot lengths for all the rafters. Every bit of timber was itemised that came on that job and that was all the timber you were going to get, you weren't going to get any more. Cos there wasn't any more, that was all that came in on the ration. And, I know these hips? had to be cut and three went in nicely and the fourth just fell straight through he'd cut two feet too much off. It was absolutely spot on to the edge but, so there was a big row about that, that was one of the mistakes. Not all that funny now, but it was almost a tragedy at the time.

Was your work affect a lot by the winter? Did it make it a lot harder?

Oh yes. Well you didn't really have the clothing then that chaps are issued with now on site.

What would you wear then?

Well you just wore as many pullovers as you could get hold of, vests and all the rest of it. Any old coat you got. Shortly after that you used to get donkey jackets, we used to get if you were fortunate you'd get a donkey jacket. But no we never, I think it was that winter just after the war I'm not sure we could afford these things.

A really harsh one?

A very hard one when all the railways froze up and the trouble we spent, we were then building, I think 50 council houses for the Orpington Council and, I remember all the timber came in and, this snow came down. This snow was there for about six weeks and the two of us boys, we were out in the middle of this field and we'd got this great stack of timber and we trimmed all the joists for all these houses, got it all cut and trimmed during the six weeks and it was standing out in the middle of

this field. It wasn't actually snowing then, but it was cold. But bearing in mind we were working quite, there was no power tools, so it was all hand tools and chopping things up, I never remember during that time being cold. It was, we were young and it was quite good fun really.

Would they do that now, would they work outdoors in those conditions now?

Well, I've been thinking about that, I think probably they would, because people were in a lot of ways, conditions not conditions that's not the word for it. People were more worried for their jobs now than they were then as although you could be sacked with an hour's notice and quite often were, you could walk down the road and get another job. Cos there was plenty of work about then and nowadays, of course, particularly in the building trade, I suppose this redundancy business stopped a lot of people getting sacked just like that, but now I think that's changed. A lot of people are on short term contracts, so I think if you want work, you get out there and do it. And it's mostly chaps on this 17? guard or whatever it is. It's where they pay their own tax. So of course, if your working for yourself you've got to be out there.

What were the sort of things that the cold would affect? Were there certain things that you couldn't do like, I don't know, mixing putty or would the concrete not set or maybe brickies couldn't work?

You couldn't concrete. You couldn't lay bricks.

What was it exactly that stopped you laying the bricks?

Well the frost. If it was below freezing, then if the frost got into, say it thawed during the day and you could knock up your stuff and lay bricks. It if froze again that night then the frost would get into the mortar and the whole work would be ruined.

Was that before it set?

Before it set.

And what would then happen to it if it didn't do that?

Oh, the architect would come round and knock it over.

Would it not, would it go crumbly or?

Oh yes, it would go crumbly. And the same with concrete, of course. You just couldn't do anything in those conditions. Shortly some time after that they brought in anti-freeze and all the rest of it. But that was after my time as an apprentice.

What about the ice, would that make work dangerous? Imagine being stuck two or three floors up and it not being too pleasant in the winter?

Well, there wasn't so much thought given to health and safety in those days. In fact there was very little and fortunately, I never suffered much in the way of accidents but, er, well you were cautious in what you were doing. You didn't take any unnecessary risks and there again, I wasn't on any very high stuff. No, I don't think there was much more danger.

How would people get by, builders, if they couldn't work and, in those times if you couldn't work, you weren't paid, or were you?

You weren't paid.

How did people get by?

Well you'd sign on the dole, I mean virtually you hadn't got a job really. I mean the firm's didn't pay you anything and bearing in mind, when I first came into it, there was no holiday money either. So if you wanted a holiday, you were only allowed the one week or the two weeks, but you still didn't get paid for it. And then after that they brought in holiday stamps which so much a week was deducted from your money and it was put into the holiday stamp for you, so there was something like that. But prior to that, before the war and during the war, no. I don't

think my father had time off and never got paid for Christmas day, or Christmas or anything like that.

So any days you didn't work other than anything else, you just weren't paid for them?

You weren't paid for it, no. Good Friday, you didn't get that off, that was the day even when I first worked, Good Friday was the day when there was the chance that if you had any work to do in one of the local shops, that was the day to get in there.

Because they were closed, so you could just do the work?

Oh, yes, that's right. Because then, of course, some time after the war, things started getting easier because I think the building trade was the reason now why everybody has not only Christmas off but the week after running into the New Year. But we never used to get New Year off, all we had off was Christmas day and Boxing Day and we were back at work. But when they brought in this extra, I think they started off, I think we got the fortnight paid holiday, but that was all done through the holiday stamps. And the men contributed a certain amount and the employer contributed a certain amount. But when they then brought in a third week, it was agreed that the third week could be taken off, had to be taken at the employer's discretion, when he wanted them to take it off and of course, they all plumped then for a week during the winter which then developed into the week after Christmas. By that time they'd already taken off New Year's Day quite often, so it suited employer's to make that the week. So the building trade were the first to take that week off and then, of course, everybody else followed suit. Now, nothing gets done in that week after Christmas.

But when people were having to sign on because they weren't simply able to work at that time, was it enough, could you get by on that, cos I suppose that must have gone on for weeks or months even?

Well there was no alternative was there? They did get by and there was a lot more self-help, a lot of people producing their own ...? in gardens. Most gardens really had a vegetable patch, quite a lot of people had

allotments and that was self help. Their expectations weren't so great and they weren't spending money in the way of much outside entertainment, although they would go to the pictures now and again, or have a pint now and again. The television I suppose had come in, earlier on, and there wasn't much in the way of central heating then. So it was a harder life but people weren't used to anything else so that was it.

And you carried on being employed as it were even though you weren't able to work for them at that time? Was that how it worked, were you still on their books as it were?

In the main, I suppose, if work had been slack or the winter had come on, a lot of firms would get rid of, I suppose now you would almost call them casual workers, but they would be on the books but you could go along to a man, which was an awful thing to do. You could go along to a man on a Friday afternoon and say, 'sorry, I shan't want you after five this evening'. An hour's notice was all you had to give a man and that was it and there he was with nothing. So a lot of the casual men took off all the winter I suppose and then during the winter, if you were a regular with the firm, you'd get sent home and wouldn't get paid, well that was with firms I was with. But, erm, that was it.

Did people find other employment. Was there other jobs that people in the summer could do in the winter?

Well there wasn't much doing. There wasn't much to take on I suppose. I mean, let's bear in mind that through the average winter there's not many periods when you can't work. We used to work through most. Rain was a stickler but I think throughout the time in 1953 when I joined my father, things had changed quite a bit then because I never remember actually putting men off during the winter. We seemed to find something for them to do. And if not, if it was a really wet day, I used to send the men home, we used to have to pay them and that was it. So, ...

So the expectations gradually changed?

Oh, yes, the boot was on the other foot then and then, of course, for some period, say from about 1950, about 1950, in the 1950's up until not so

very many years ago, the boot certainly was on the other foot because you couldn't get men. I mean the building trade was very busy most of the time and skilled men were very difficult to get. You put up with what you got and not only that, you couldn't get rid of them anyway if they were not up to scratch because you would have to pay them redundancy to get rid of them, so certainly for a long time, you were paying for whatever the conditions, whatever the weather was like, you were duly bound to pay, which was fair, which was fair enough.

Was it seen as a good job? In terms of the 40's or thereabouts, how would it seem?

Oh, it was the lowest of the low.

Really?

Oh yes, if you were in the building trade, well that's my impression of it. Well, the people that took up apprenticeships were in the main from school, the majority were lads that weren't academic in any way. The ones that didn't get the 11 plus, went onto the Secondary Modern and they left the Secondary Modern at fourteen, and I suppose, really then not all went into that but then they would go into various trades and, they would then serve, by then it was a five year apprenticeship and at the end of it we turned out good skilled men. They weren't academic but they were bright enough to do anything that was necessary and you had some really good tradesmen which is now, the Government got interested in, I can't remember, the Construction Industry Training Board and all these other boards came in and they dictated as to how apprentices should be trained and apprentices had to have a continuation class course in one of the rules of apprenticeship. I think if you had to take a continuation class it started off with one day a week which certainly benefited me but it meant that all of the youngsters then had to do that. A lot of them weren't, a lot of our apprentices weren't up to doing it no doubt, they hated it

They weren't that way inclined?

They weren't that way inclined and weren't, I not saying „...? bright cos they wasn't, they just couldn't take in what was being offered to them. It was not only that they couldn't take it in, but it was unnecessary in a lot of ways, because the thing was that the ones that did carry on the continuation class were the ones that would have made the best craftsmen anyway but after they'd served their time, they had to continue the academic side of it then. They never became tradesmen, they immediately moved on to higher things so either way, in the way of getting trades men it was no, this is just my opinion.

Its something that being said at the moment, you hear politicians and others, that you must always, everyone should get education and ...

Go up ..

Ignoring the fact that nevertheless there are a whole load of jobs that still have to be done that you don't need an academic education for.

But the issue is, they've made it so expensive to take an apprentice on. You've lost a day a week immediately on that. It was always said by firms that to train an apprentice, you never made any money on apprentices until their last or 18 months, perhaps two years if he was a good chap, because then he would be probably be out working on his own with some sort of supervision. And the ones I knew at that time were good craftsmen and they would do as much as the man. But it was generally accepted that when a man finishes his apprenticeship, that he moved on and went to some other firm because, But then again, your firm were doing the same thing, they were taking chaps from other people who move about.

So you weren't tied to the firm in any way?

Yes, you were tied until you finished your time, yes.

Was that until you finished your apprenticeship, or was there a period after that you ...?

No, I mean some before my time or just during my time when you had finished your time, you would then be classed as an improver and they didn't get full pay. That was really why chaps left, as soon as they finished their time, of course, they moved on. They weren't an improved for anybody then, they then moved on and said they were a craftsman and that was it.

You were taken on initially as a carpenter, a carpenter's apprentice. How did you pick up the rest, presumably you had to pick up the rest.

Well, you see, bearing in mind we hadn't got any tradesmen there, I suppose it was the best part of a year. We picked up a bit then and also then, one of the things that I asked for when I was apprenticed, this was before they had these continuation classes in on the ...it wasn't your right then to be sent to the ...? But this was, I asked, he was quite a progressive chap, Eugene O'Sullivan, the governor, I said I would like to do some continuation classes. 'Oh, yes, I'm all for that', he said, 'I think I'll insist on all the apprentices doing this'. Of course, that didn't go down well with the rest of them, Reg, the other carpenter's apprentice, he started with me and we went the first three years ...ah, there's my sister coming in now...?

Gwendoline Horn

Did you tell this gentleman where you worked?

Bill

Oh yeh, I've told him all the jobs I did.

Gwendoline

Webbs, before he started on his own, he worked for Webbs.

Right

And there still a, well she's not, she's Mrs now, but she was a Miss Webb, still living locally. Well, if it was raining and the men couldn't work, she sent them home and there was no pay.

How often did that happen?

Gwendoline

Well ...

Bill

It depends how often it rained.

But?

Gwendoline

If they were working out doors

Bill

Well he used to work us, his health suffered, he had awful rheumatism at the end. His knees were bad, the same as my knees were bad. But he, er...

Was that from building?

Well one thing that he said to me when I came in, 'Just one bit of advice that I've got for you,' he said, 'don't kneel about on wet floors and wet ground'. Which then I took no notice of and now I'm suffering as I've got arthritis of the knees. But he did a lot of pointing, brickwork and that, just around Sidcup and that

Gwendoline

That's right.

Bill

There are a lot of houses built with just lime and water and they were pointed with sand and cement and after a period of so many years it needed replacing. So that was one of the jobs he sort of specialised in, I suppose, it didn't matter whether it was rain or not, he carried on. He used to have a sheet of corrugated iron he used to fix up over the area he was working and just work out in that in the weather and the Governor used to come round and make sure he was still there and that's how he carried on.

And would that go for the winter as well in the snow and the frost?

Gwendoline

Well I suppose there were just many jobs he just couldn't do, he couldn't do that sort of work in the snow and ice, could he?

Bill

He used to keep a supply of old sacks and he used to have that round the soles.

And you said you weren't paid unless, or he wasn't paid unless ...

Gwendoline

Well they weren't paid unless they were working.

So how aware were you about the hardship of that?

Gwendoline

Well, let's say, we didn't have a lot of expensive things to eat. I mean we had lot of, erm, I don't think we were ever hungry, we probably made up on suet puddings and apple pies and that sort of thing that my mother could make cheaply, and stews and soups and things, but there wouldn't be any meat or anything.

Bill

But I mean, the whole of this garden was a vegetable patch

Gwendoline

And we kept chickens.

Bill

We kept chickens, that right; And we used to, during the war, we used to swap the eggs for other rations in various shops in the high street. We used to, from the shops, get various? You used to get buckets of food from the scrapings of the tables and that and feed the chickens, so it was quite a .. Well I don't remember any actual hardship. We always had shoes.

Gwendoline

Oh yes, we always had ... Dad mended our shoes himself.

Bill

That's right. And cut our hair.

Gwendoline

We used to laugh about that because we always used to have the same sort of? pudding basin and we cut round it.

So was everything that could be done, was done in the house?

Gwendoline

We're not saying our mother didn't work, she worked hard too.

Bill

She was the one that pushed, she was the guardian.

I mean, there was no central heating or anything like that cos very few people had that. But I can still remember the old coven? before we went to bed, he put some old bricks in there and would wrap a brick up in a piece of blanket and you would just take that to bed with you if you had to, there were no hot water bottle.

Did you have other brothers and sisters?

Gwendoline

Oh, yes, there were five of us.

And did you have to bunk up, I mean did you have two or three to a bed?

Bill

I don't remember, but we must have done.

Gwendoline

Well, I don't remember too much about it but we must have shared.

Bill

There was only two bedrooms.

Gwendoline

Only two bedrooms.

Was the house warm enough?

Gwendoline

I don't remember being cold.

Bill

Well, I suppose, from the amount of bodies in it would get warm. I don't know. There was the cooking stove that was going all the time.

Gwendoline

That's right and the sitting room? was opened up on to the staircase and a certain amount of warmth would have gone up that way.

What was the food?

Bill

.....?

Gwendoline

Oh, yes.

Bill

I mean, erm. I suppose you would have described my mother as a go-getter. She had quite an ambition.

Gwendoline

And don't forget mother was a cook. She'd been a cook to a family, that's how she came to be down here for a family from the north. Do you remember that?

Bill

That's right. And so she was in domestic service as a cook and she was a very good cook.

Did you always have the stew going?

Gwendoline

No

Bill

Oh no, it was all fresh. We had stew plenty of times, Lancashire Hotpot I remember.

Gwendoline

Oh yes, there was dumplings in it and that sort of thing.

Bill

Bearing in mind, as kids we always used to come home for lunch from school. There was, I can't remember what we had, but I expect it, yeh it was a cooked lunch. I can remember baked potatoes.

What about clothes. What the interview is mainly about is winter but I'm particularly interested in the building trade in relation to winter. What would you wear as children in the winter, do you remember?

Well, whatever the older ones had grown out of. And this family that my mother had been in service with, a family called McClarens. He was a banker but this time he'd retired and they'd moved up to Kendal in the Lake District and quite often a parcel of clothes would come down from them which were cast offs from their children and their grandchildren. And whatever came down, we had to wear. I remember being sent to school in a green beret, most upsetting for me it was, all the other boys had got caps and I'd got the blasted old green beret that I had to wear. But one thing I always wanted was a pair of black boots like the rest of the boys. I always got sent to school in shoes, I never realised of course, it was one cut above the rest, I just fell out of it without boots.

Now I wouldn't have realised it was one cut above because you hadn't said it.

Gwendoline

Cos I'm a lot older than Bill, so I don't remember it all that ...

You are a lot older than Bill?

Yes I am, ...? I'm 75 and he's only 67.

So you would probably remember a lot more?

I was probably left school. Well, when you said the period that he's talking about.

Yes. As a matter of interest, what did you go into?

Pardon?

When you left school what did you go into?

Well, I was already earning a little bit by doing a paper round.

And your father did a paper round as well, didn't he?

Oh, yes. We both did paper rounds. The sister above me, I don't know if Bill told you, she's an invalid and that was about the time that she was going to be ill, wasn't it?

Bill

Yeh

Gwendoline

And that made it harder than ever for us really.

Bill

There was another job the old man did, he was a bell ringer. The bells used to get rung quite often for weddings and funerals then, so he'd always get a few bob for that. He used to ... and also, when they built this house, what is now the dining room is a garage and we used to let the garage. Oh yes. And we had an old, two rooms were let. This in two rooms, the front room and one of the rooms upstairs was let to an old lady called Mrs Tibbets who mother had as a paying guest. She was an old ... instead of putting her into a home, the family put her into ...and mother used to look after her. And my invalid sister she'd got on hand ?

It sounds like an absolutely enormous amount that your parent used to do.

Oh, it was absolutely fantastic what they used to do.

Do you remember when your father started in the building, building trade?

Gwendoline

Well, from me being a child he'd always been in the building trade. But not on his own, he worked for this firm called Webb. Didn't he Bill?

Bill

Oh yeh.

And did it make a big difference when he went on his own to you, were you aware of this?

Gwendoline

Not really, no.

Bill

No, not really, cos we, as I say, we never .. Oh we had a car then, didn't we? It was shortly after the war.

Gwendoline

.....? It was just before the war.

Bill

Yes, well that was when he was on his own ...?

Did you ever go out and visit him on site?

No, but you'd see him ...

Gwendoline

See him around

Bill

See him around, he was well know in the district. I mean he used to get up to all sorts of capers, I mean the church, you see the high church opposite, he was not worried about heights he'd clean these cast iron gutters on the stone gorble. And he'd get up one end and he'd walk along with a bucket and shovel along the top and clean these out, so he was well known.

When he took this barrow round, what would he have in it?

Oh, everything he needed. He used to have ladders at the side of course, and he'd ... and I don't know if you know where Down is, Cudham Down, the other side of Orpington there. He'd think nothing of pushing his hand cart there up there and put a couple of slates on the roof up there and then back home, in the afternoon go to Mottingham.

So would your father do ten miles each way?

Oh yeh, if he had to. He was only a little fella too.

So when he was in and out of work, you wouldn't notice the difference day to day it would just be in general?

I don't think actually think he would have been out of work much.

Gwendoline

Not when he was on his own.

Bill

Before that with Webbs, I don't think there was a lot, sometimes you'd be put off but he used to make sure that he did keep working, whatever the conditions he would work out.

But he'd got the other things to go to as well, I mean the caretaking and ...?

Not while he was with the, erm, only for the last two or three years that he was working with Webbs.

What about, just to change the subject a little, could you tell me, it might just be the same as today, but did you play the games that they play now in winter or were there?

Gwendoline

Your only really interested in winter?

Particularly, yes.

Bill

Well, all the games were seasonal.

Gwendoline

Yes.

Bill

Erm, conkers in the winter.

Gwendoline

Whips and tops, hoops, things like that?

Bill

I don't know quite ...

And you'd play all of those right through the year?

Well I suppose they were crazes really. But we seemed to do the same things every year, marbles, ..

Gwendoline

Yeh

Bill

Hoops were a great thing, I mean we used to run for miles with a hoop? in life?

Just a hoop with a stick?

A hoop and a stick.

Gwendoline

That's right.

Bill

I mean, it wasn't a....., then after that they brought in wooden hoops. Ours were old steel hoops, wrought iron they were really and then occasionally if they broke, the old man would take them down to the local forge and weld them together again. No problem.

And was there anywhere you could go skating or tobogganing?

Yeh we used to ...

Gwendoline

We used to go over to Chislehurst.

Bill

There were no great slopes round here, yeh we always had a toboggan, its still hanging up in the shed outside, that my children used. A home-made thing of course. Nothing much in the way of skating because we couldn't afford skates ..

Gwendoline

Oh no, but you used to over to Chislehurst and slide ...

Bill

And slide.

Right, up on the ponds?

Gwendoline

Yeh

Bill

Yeh. And of course great things were made of things like bonfire night and all that sort of thing.

Would you have those here?

Oh yes. This road was an enormous road then and we used to have an enormous bonfire in the middle of this unmade road every year, loads of fireworks and all the locals. No, not so many of the locals, it was just our bonfire wasn't it and few other people used to put their hands over the fence.

And what about New Year's Eve? Did you do anything New Year's Eve?

Not a lot really.

Gwendoline

Not really, no.

.....?... or anything?

Bill

No, no, we'd got no Scots in our family.

.....Scots.?

Yes, it's been taken over a bit down here, but I don't think really we celebrated New Year's Eve, did we?

Gwendoline

I don't think so.

Bill

It was a working day then, wasn't it? No holidays down here?

Gwendoline

Oh no.

Bill

You used to hear of course, the sirens and the ships on the river.

From here?

Oh yes.

Gwendoline

Yes.

Bill

Oh yes, New Year's Eve you'd hear that. An absolute cacophony of sound, that's the word for it.

Oh, they'd do that particularly on New Year's Eve?

Oh yeh.

Gwendoline

Cos there were a lot of big ships come up the river then, weren't there into the docks ?

Bill

Oh yeh, very busy, the Thames ...?

Gwendoline

They've all closed now them docks ain't they?

But this is some distance from them going to hear it?

Bill

Well. Yeh.

Well I think that's just about it, thank you very much indeed, unless there's anything ...?

Bill

Well, I didn't get round to telling you that my father, his father was a thatcher. And my mother's side, her father was a builder, up in the Wirral in Cheshire and her brother and uncles, they were all in the building trade for some time up there. They got their own firm up there, so really, if it is possible to say it, it was in the blood I suppose. But my boys haven't gone into it. I didn't encourage them.

Didn't you?

If they'd been interested I would have encourage them but they weren't. I didn't see any sign of it, so I didn't.

...? Were those in fact your son or grandson?

Yeh, they're my three there.

It's extraordinary isn't it? It's exactly the same in my family, the ... one generation where there's somebody in service, the next generation there's somebody doing your sort of work, the next generation they're at university. It's extraordinary.

Bill

Well, I think this is general right through the county, isn't it. The education has improved but in the end it makes you wonder whose going to do? It would be alright if there was still people being trained for the menial, not the menial, for the manual work. And I think there the ones now that are going to be able to command the money. Well they are now. Plumbers are demanding more than surgeons aren't they and getting it too.

But it varies a lot, I mean in things like catering where the pay's still terrible.

I know, and so many people are going into that. And I suppose really there are no firms offering apprenticeships, because they can't do it. Because no firms now have got tradesmen, their own tradesmen. Its all sub-contract, all chaps on the self-employed ticket and there not going to train anybody else because they're only interested

But that's what's been encouraged, this so-called flexible market, so that nobody has a career anymore, we just have bits.

Well that's right. And I worried for a long time, not worried, but I discussed it with various people what's going to happen when there aren't any tradesmen about and its getting to that pitch now where there aren't many. I should think that perhaps the last of the tradesmen that trained in the way that I was in my sort of period probably only went on for another 10 or 15 years afterwards. So, there are plenty of them about that describe themselves as tradesmen and, as the work is now, all being done with power tools, roofs are all pre-bought trusses and all that, I suppose they do get away with it. And the thing is, I worry what's going to happen when there aren't anybody about with the old skills, but its evident what's going to happen because people now, the majority of people, don't realise what a good job was. And they say, 'we've got old so and so, he a great chippy, marvellous'. I come along and look at it, and it's diabolical, but people have got used to

Third rate?

Well, they don't realise it. Probably now it isn't third rate, it is the norm. If they only knew what had been expected and what was turned out in the past. Well just as well I suppose that people haven't got that expectation, because it's not going to be fulfilled. But having said that, there still are the men about, whether there are being trained. When you think of some of the jobs that have been done in recent years, I mean, you take the National Trust. When House burnt down four or five years ago, now that's all been completely restored and put back exactly as it was before it was burnt down and they found all the plasterers, the old ... plasterers, they got the right masons from somewhere, they got the right joiners and everything I believe is absolutely perfect. So it still is around and it could be brought back. It's just not possible to afford to bring it back, I can understand that.