

Christine Corkett interviewed by Diana Brand on 9 December 2014 at Halsway Manor

DB: So we're going to start by asking you, Christine, how you got involved in folk music to begin with.

CC: Well, that's an interesting one, um, I suppose I first came across folk dance through my mother going to a class when I was very young, sort of seven, eight, and occasionally she needed to take me along, so that was, um, (pause) oh well, sixty years ago (laughs) and from that I, I enjoyed going with her but, you know, it didn't feature regularly in my life at that stage and then when I was probably sixteen-ish I used to go off to these weekends with the Ranger Guides and the Rover Scouts and always on a Saturday night we had a barn-dance and I enjoyed that and when I went off to London I looked for some folk activity to go to and I found within walking distance to where I was living that there was a folk club at Imperial College in London and I used to go along to that and so I suppose that got me sort of enjoying it but very much just something I did once a week.

And I think probably the biggest thing that had an influence on me was that... I was looking for a holiday-job round about 1964 and on the college notice board there was, they were advertising for somebody to come to a camp to do the catering. And this was in Devon, and I thought well that sounds good. They weren't paying very much at all but I thought, well you know, if they paid my train journey down, you know, that would be fine. So I was reading it and another friend of mine was also reading it and she said I wonder if they'd have two of us and we'd split the money. so for the princely sum of £1.50 a week (laughs), we went off to Devon to do four months of catering, four weeks of catering.

And it was, um, being organised by a fairly new organisation which Bill Rutter had also started – the person who was very much involved in the starting of Halsway Manor Society – and we sort of supervised the catering for a month, but what we, the sort of side-effect of all of this was that we met some really interesting people who were not only dancers but musicians and singers and I learnt an awful lot about the English Folk Dance and Song Society and what they did, and all sorts of things about the folk traditions of this country which I didn't know before I mean I'd never met anyone who clog-danced until then and I hadn't come across certain instruments until that summer. So that really sort of galvanised me into having a life-long interest in folk after that.

DB: And how old were you then?

CC: I was 19.

DB: And you were studying at Imperial College?

CC: No, I was dancing at Imperial College, I was studying at Battersea College of Education at the time.

DB: And what was the name of the organisation in Devon – can you remember?

CC: It was Folk Camp Society and they still exist and they have been organising camping holidays, well, ever since – at home and abroad.

DB: So how did you actually then get involved with Halsway?

CC: Halsway came a little bit later. I was dancing regularly at about three clubs in Surrey by then I was teaching. And one of the people that I met regularly at two of the clubs said to me, 'You really ought to go to Halsway Manor it's a great place', and she said this for more than one year cause I was thinking that's a long way to drive from Surrey down to Somerset on a Friday night after you'd been at work do I want to do this you know. Anyway, eventually I came down to a weekend that the Yetties were doing and I also came down with one of the dance clubs I went to so that really started me off.

DB: And what was your impression of Halsway as you came up the drive?

CC: Um, it was dark at that point as it was winter, it was January, I believe, and we had snow that weekend, so I think, the impression was probably one of warmth rather than what we could actually see because we didn't go out walking, or anything we just, you know, we were indoors most of the weekend. There are things that stick in my mind from that weekend not particularly to do with what I had come for (laughs). The food I remember, that was all very sort of wholesome and pleasant, We helped in those days with washing up and wiping up.

I remember being in a room, it was room three, which actually in those days had seven beds, um, it has four, three or four these days. But then it was much more like a sort of youth hostel regime and you didn't have a great deal of space between beds and I do remember that. And I remember the weather because having snowed all day Saturday and quite a lot of snow, on the Sunday it thawed incredibly quickly and there were floods. So getting back to Surrey became quite a problem I mean it was before the days of motorways of course and we set out, and we knew we couldn't go back into Taunton, because there were floods on that road so one of the people that was with me said, 'Oh we'll go down into the valley and see if we can loop round beyond the flood.' Anyway, we found another flood. Having studied geography I should have known that going down was not a good idea. (laughter) But you know it was dark and we set off thinking well we've got a long journey.

After a couple of false starts, this friend said to me, 'Well we'll have to go over the top' And I had no idea what this meant but it actually meant going up Crowcombe Hill and over the Quantocks down into Bridgewater. Well, Crowcombe Hill was a bit like a river and we got over to Bridgewater and that was about as far as we got in the first hour of the journey, and we debated then whether we should go on up towards Bristol or whether we should go out to Langport and...anyway I think we headed for Frome and Warminster and, um, eventually we got back to Surrey some time after midnight. So those were much stronger memories of that occasion than what actually happened, that we had come for I'm afraid..

DB: But you saw the Yetties?

CC: We saw the Yetties We had great fun actually and I do remember there was dancing on the Saturday night I remember they'd got a chap called Oscar Burridge who'd come to fill in some of the time when they weren't playing and dancing and he did a really interesting talk on early recording equipment and he had sort of horns and trumpety-type things which were used not only to play the music but also for recording it as well on these early sort of wax cylinder type things And I do remember that, that made quite an impression on me.

DB: So that was the first of many visits down was it?

CC: That was the first of oh too many to recall really. I think I came three times in the early seventies and then had children and we came once with the children as babies and then after that there was quite a gap and we came back when they were teenagers. In between, we had gone to these folk camps that I was telling you about just now and then we came back in the late eighties, early nineties for several holidays with the children and then we moved down to Somersset in '98 and since then I've had some different roles at Halsway, I wear several hats at the moment

DB: Well, let's stop there about the hats, can I just ask you did you meet any of the very early... did you meet the woman who owned this place, the artist?

CC: No I didn't meet the artist I met Marjorie and Donald who were the first wardens here and I knew some of the people who had put up money to buy it with the debenture scheme that they did back then, um, yes that all just seems quite a long time ago um Marjorie and Donald were interesting people. They gathered around them quite a lot of students who came here and spent time in the summer, because when the manor was first owned by Halsway Manor Society, they didn't run as many courses as they do now. They ran weekend courses but in between there was very little folkly-things... Clarke's shoes used to use it a lot for training purposes, and then... I can't remember when it was possibly in the 80s, they stopped doing a lot of their training courses, the sort of week-long ones, so at that point, Halsway started doing a few more courses and that's grown and grown and grown but back in the early days it was really weekend events and the month of August.

DB: Ok, so you moved back with your family, you moved to Somerset?

CC: We moved back without the family they had flown the nest by then, so there was just my husband and I and we came back and we knew Halsway Manor was here so we knew that we'd come and dance here we didn't quite know what else we might do at that stage. My husband...

DB: What date was this?

CC: This was '98. So, what are we? Sixteen, seventeen years ago um

DB: So tell us about your involvement in Halsway since '98.

CC: Well, I suppose the first thing that I got involved with was serving in the shop which was on a sort of monthly rota so whichever week of the month it was we did that each month. We, being, my husband and I, and then, round about 2002 the person who organised the shop at that stage was going through a stage of having, you know, hip replacements and so-on and she decided that she would still serve in the shop but she wasn't going to do the organising so I've been organising the shop from then on which basically means dealing with the money, ordering things that we order and doing a rota for people to come and serve. Since then, I have taken on other roles, My husband became a trustee round about that time, 2000, so he was busy doing that and he did the magazine that Halsway had at the time and we

still came here and danced and we came here for some events during the year, and then, round about, I'm trying to think, round about 2008-ish, I was aware that people were commenting, 'cause we had quite a lot of weddings here at the time, and people would come in and they would comment, you know, 'Where's so-and-so gone? What's happened to this or that?' and it's usually been moved because there was a wedding. And then you'd get the wedding people come in and they'd say, 'Well, who owns this place? Is it National Trust?', you know, those sort of questions and not having a clue what the use of the manor was. So, I thought we need something, so that was when I started pondering about the wall-hanging that's in the entrance-hall and I think it was about a year that I was pondering and thinking, 'Well what can we put up there and it's going to have to be quite big to cover that wall'. Anyway. by the end of a year I thought, 'Right I'm ready to do something about this.' So I asked the Council at the time for permission to make a hanging and I also asked the Friends of Halsway Manor if they would finance it. So, those two being settled, I then went to various people who, you know, come here on courses, because by then I'd got to know quite a lot of people who come here and I asked a them if they would do a panel. And I really needed twenty people because there were twenty panels so I think I got to nineteen, and then we had one or two problems, like somebody had a stroke and couldn't sew anymore and somebody else was ill you know as you do with these group things but we got together at the beginning – well it was October, it must have been '09 – and had a 24-hour session here where we agreed certain things about the hanging so that it would look not a mish-mash of bits but something that was hanging together nicely so I did most of the initial drawings which were only an outline but the right size so that people had something to go on and we set a target of finish it in four months from when we started on that weekend.

DB: Could you describe it, for the tape?

CC: Right, the hanging is in fact three hangings um hanging in the east wall of the entrance hall. The middle hanging, because of the shape of the barrel ceiling is taller than the two side hangings. The central hanging is between ten and a half and eleven feet high and the other two are about seven and a half feet high. So the whole of that wall really is covered with some wall showing is covered with hangings which have all of the English dance traditions and some traditions, ritual traditions. So we've got Morris dancing and Rapper, clog dancing, one or two special dances like the Bacup and Abbots Bromley which are unique within England and so on and then we've got one or two sort of rituals like the Padstow and the Minehead hobby-horse, wassailing and so on.

DB: Is it embroidered or is it patchwork?

CC: It's really machine-appliqué because when I was designing it I felt that it had to be a method that everybody could do and it would have a certain similarity without the whole panel so it's machine appliqué – everyone taking part was allowed to choose their colours, the background was the same throughout and some things needed a particular colour like the Abbots Bromley where the Morris Men were in their traditional dress but some things like the Garland dances for instance just had a typical costume of a garland dance but it wasn't of a particular team.

DB: So you had a group of people, how many were in the group doing it?

CC: I think in the end there were nineteen people involved

DB: And did they work at home?

CC: They worked at home. We set up a Facebook site, a secret one that only we could look at, and anything that they wanted to ask the group, for instance, 'How are you doing the bells on the legs of the Morris dancer?' or whatever, or 'How are you doing the flowers on the hat?' You could ask and you'd get comments from several people about how they might be doing it or what they think about it and that worked very well, and I encouraged people to take photos of how far they had got and put those up every so often so it either encouraged people that had not got that far to go a little bit further so we, we had quite a lot of conversations on Facebook during that time and the majority of people who took part did actually join the Facebook site, some people didn't want to but mainly those were people that lived local to here and I saw them quite often anyway.

Yes, so we had four months to do the panel and then all the panels arrived back and five of us over the next four months put it together. It took probably longer to put together than it did to do each individual panel and as you added panel to panel it got bigger and bigger as well so you know it got to a point where really you needed a second person at the sewing machine just to move the fabric on, to take the weight really. So it was an interesting thing to do.

DB: Fantastic. And did it work? Did it give information to the wedding parties?

CC: (Laughs) Well, we've stopped doing quite so many weddings so I don't know about that. But for the people who come here I think it's..you know..it's been appreciated.

DB: It's a focal point isn't it?

CC: Yes, it's a focal point and some people say, well I'm not sure what that is, um, y'know, what's that tradition or where's that from? One of the ones that people keep asking about is the well-dressing because outside of the Derbyshire area, well-dressings aren't seen very widely and it's a rather static panel and people look at it and they're not quite sure what they are looking at so that's had quite a lot of comment.

DB: So apart, this is a massive project that you did, what are you doing now?

CC: Well, I'm doing the housekeeping I think is probably the way to describe it, for the Telling Tales project, the oral history project, and I shall be collecting in all the permissions and the copyrights and those sort of things.

DB: And do you still dance or not?

CC: I do when I can, yes, I do still dance, yes, but I've had a few problems health-wise and I haven't danced as much as I would like but I shall get back to it. (laughs)

DB: Now I'm going to ask you some funny questions about um...ghosts. Are there any ghosts, have you seen any ghosts here?

CC: I haven't seen any...so people tell me I think is the answer to that one (laughs)
Um..there's a group of people who, I think they're called the Paranormal Society, who have come here several times and y'know, they've stayed up all night and measured things with their bits of equipment and they certainly say that there's activity in certain rooms, but I've slept in a lot of rooms here and I've not been aware of anything. I think they're sort of friendly...(laughs)

DB: There are no rooms you wouldn't sleep in then?

CC: Um...No I don't think there is, I think I might be more wary of one or two rooms but on the whole I have slept in the one that I might now be wary of..(laughs)

DB: OK...And what about characters, like people, not ghostly ones, but real people. Who can you remember who really....?

CC: I think.....characters...oh...um...well, Bill Rutter who started this was a great character, sort of larger than life and very determined. Some people would almost say a bit of a bully, but he had good ideas and would make sure they got carried out. And he had a good knack of surrounding himself by people who would do things, and consequently, the Manor is here, and you know it's survived fifty years, let's hope it survives another fifty.

DB: And what about occasions? Perhaps a disaster. Can you remember any disastrous occasions?

CC: I can remember being snowed in here. Only two years ago, which was....the event was called Winter Warmer, and it was at the end of January, and we arrived, I think we'd had snow on the Friday before the Sunday that we arrived, and that had been cleared by one of the local farmers cause the lane doesn't get cleared by anyone except whoever we decide will do it and we all arrived here safely but on the Tuesday night it started snowing and it was round about 6 o'clock at night when the lady who manned the bar arrived and she said, 'Well it's not snowing at Williton but it's snowing quite fast up here.' So she was here for the night but she phoned her husband round about 9 o'clock and he said, ' No, we haven't got any snow down in Williton' -it's only what four miles away- but here we were still having snow and we'd had a lot of snow, such that the staff who were on duty for the evening meal couldn't go home and it carried on snowing and snowing and then, the next day well, we'd had about 10, 12 inches overnight so all that had been cleared the previous Sunday was needing to be cleared again.

Well, the next day I think it was the farmer came back and cleared the lane again and cleared the car-park out the front, but, of course, with the tractor he couldn't get between cars. So on the Thursday morning, when we were all leaving, the Chef, the Chief Officer, the Housekeeper, whilst we were having a lovely breakfast indoors they were out there shovelling snow so that we could open our car doors (laughter) to actually get in our cars cause the snow was above the car door sill and.. so that was interesting. Fortunately, I think we had one power cut, it must have been on the Wednesday morning and we couldn't have coffee, we had to have apple juice.

DB: That's not exactly a disaster (laughter)

CC: No... And I think lunch was a bit odd, I can't remember what it was now, But it was a bit odd cause the electricity came on just before lunch so you know they hadn't been able to do whatever it was they were intending to do and we had to have what they could do. So that was a bit of a disaster but, of course, we carried on dancing and singing and doing all those sort of things that we were here to do and really, the outside world, you know, left us by. And it was interesting that when I got home I had an e-mail from my daughter who lives in Sussex saying, 'Did you see the news last night', and I said.' No'. and she said.'Oh the news people were at Nether Stowey because both the A358 and the 39 were closed because of this snow', and they'd had to rescue I think it was about 50 people from the A39 and put them in the village hall at Nether Stowey for the night.

DB: So if you had been at home you would have been in a worse situation.

CC: Well, I mean we'd had a lot of snow and a lot of tree damage, it was tree damage on the A39 because the snow was so heavy it's what they now call a snow bomb a lot of snow in a very short time and it brought down a lot of trees and split a lot of branches off trees because the weight of the snow was just too much.

DB: Well it looks like we may be having another one..

CC: Well, yes, when I heard the news this morning I thought Oh no...

DB: OK...So Christine you've had, what, 50 years contact with this place?

CC: Not quite....

DB: Not quite..how long?

CC: Well, I first came here, I knew of its existence probably from inception, but I first came here in 1970

DB: So we're talking about 44 years yes?
(laughter)

CC: But not continuously, you see, there was quite a big gap.

DB: Well this is quite useful, because with this big gap, can you compare what Halsway is like now with your first contact with Halsway?

CC: Well certainly, physically there was a big difference, The bedrooms had as many beds as they would hold because it was before the Mews was owned by the society so in order to get enough people here to make it viable you know, as many beds were in every room. Now there are en-suite rooms and we own the Mews so there's a big physical difference there. The first few years that I came here there was no bar in the lounge, so the lounge actually was a bigger room which was quite nice but you know there's nowhere else to put the bar really at the moment and it was thought that. I think a lot of people would walk down to Crowcombe

to the pub and it was thought that it would be better to have the bar here so a little bit of that room was lost you know for our use and if you've got 40 people here or 50 people here the bar really as a lounge isn't big enough. What else is different?

DB: What about age? Um, do you find people are older now...(under)or do you get a lot of youngsters.....?

CC: Certainly there were a lot of young people on the events that I came to in those early days. I think some events, the people coming have just got older and older and older. Since, the last four years, since we've been having more events organised by the Manor and the breadth of those events has grown that there are more younger people coming. When I say younger, there are specific events that are organised for teenagers, that sort of age, and there are events where perhaps you don't get anyone under 60. So it's quite varied, the number of people coming and, you know, what they come for.

I think probably the music events have got the broadest age-range, because if you want to play ukelele or a hurdy gurdy it's not age-related whereas some of the styles of dance might be more age-related. Singing varies quite a lot in the age that come. Yes, so that...I think it probably, back in, you know 50 years ago, to some extent was a younger lot of people but it was relatively inexpensive to come here then, and, of course, as you improve the facilities so prices go up...and in those days there were people who would come here just for the pleasure of coming here and not charge a fee, we now use more people whose livelihood it is so you've got, you know,increased expenses.

DB: And, I'm going to ask you the last question now, I think, unless, if you want to add anything afterwards, that would be fine. Do you remember going to any of the Open Days that were held here?

CC: Not in the early days when they were quite big events so I understand. In fact, really, I think, only since we've lived in Somerset have I been to Open Days and quite often it's because we're had the shop up and running and I've been here to look after that. Yes, so...they've become a little bit smaller, I think, in some ways, but also we now seem to hire out space to somebody who makes craft things or whatever, rather than doing many stalls ourselves. I think, even going back, to the first one I remember doing, we had skittles and things, which the Friends of Halsway Manor organised. That as a body doesn't exist anymore so I think there were many more stallholders that were volunteers from people living locally who came and did something. But now, we have the chap who runs a nursery down the road, he comes up with plants, so we don't have a plant stall where people are giving things; somebody who makes jam on a sort of small but commercial basis comes with jams, and marmalades and chutneys and we sell them the space.

DB: It just reflects what's happening in society really doesn't it?

CC: Yes, I think volunteering, or committing yourself to things, is not so common these days, in a way.

DB: Right, is there anything, any stories that I haven't allowed you to tell?

CC: I can't think of anything that um.....

DB: Don't worry if there isn't ...I've allowed you to speak. So I think we'll finish there.
Thank you so much for talking to us and for all the work that you obviously do for Halsway.