

Jenny Knight interviewing Shan Bigwood at her home on 16th January 2015.

JK I am just going to ask you just a few personal questions. Where were you born?

SB: I was born in Bristol

JK: and your date of birth?

SB – I am afraid it is 28th March 1934.

JK: Ok that's lovely. So where did you live as a child?

SB: I lived in Ham Green in a little village just outside of Bristol. I lived there until, well my parents carried on living there but I lived there until I got married when I was 18.

JK: Yes

SB: I lived there for about 17 years

JK: and what did your parents do?

SB: My mother was a hairdresser and my father worked in an office in a big wholesale warehouse. He was chief cashier. My mum ran her hairdressing business from out front room and she had two helpers initially and had quite a thriving business. But then gradually the two helpers got married and left and Mum was left on her own. And all this time I was growing up and by the time I was 16 she had given up completely in the house and was working for a friend of hers who had a salon in White Ladies Road in Bristol. That's the story of my early life.

SB: My parents were ballroom dancers, very good ballroom dancers and no way could I aspire to be as good as them. My feet just didn't go where they wanted.

JK: Did you have lessons then?

SB: No, I had ballet lessons but not ballroom dancing. Consequently when years later when I was a farmers' wife and our milk recorder and his wife ran a folk dance group. And I said to him I need to get moving and he said why don't you do folk dancing and that's when it started.

JK: Um, so obviously you had moved away from Bristol?

SB: Yes, I got married at 18 and my husband was a farm worker he stayed for six months so we moved around quite a lot, um and eventually after our first child was born he got the sack. He was working for a lady and er he got the sack (laughter)

because he had been saying things about the lady of the house to the guy who milked with him.

JK: Oh right.

SB: He was farm bailiff at the time when this young guy was working with him and he was sort of using his normal language about women. (laughter)

JK: oh dear.

SB: and the story got back to his boss and he was told she no longer wanted his services. At that point we had nowhere to live, no income. But my parents, my mother having given up her front room as a hairdressing salon had it as a sitting room, very seldom used. So we were told we could live there so we used it as a spare bedroom. Luckily the day we moved in Tony's uncle rang and he said he had a cottage behind his house, he had a big garden that needed some work done and would Tony like for 8 hours a day, sorry 8 hours per week rent to live in his cottage. So after 6 months we moved in to it.

Which gave us an acre of land where we had pigs and chickens and a building and pigsty and battery chickens in those days not as anti as they are today. And we started a little business of our own and then still no dancing. I was expecting my second child and the second child came along and living in two bedrooms it really wasn't going to be suitable for that long. So Tony's father said he would lend us a thousand pounds to buy a farm. In 1956 we bought a farm we put down £750 towards the mortgage and we had £250 to stock the farm. It was a 52 acre farm with a five bedroomed house. No road in, no water, no electricity, no inside drains at all let alone a toilet.

JK: You had lots of work to do.

SB: Therefore I still didn't have time to enjoy life. I carried on having children. I had seven children and then in 1962 when we had 6 children we decided we wanted to expand and we applied for some tenancies as well as going for owner occupiers. We got the tenancy of the farm at Staple Fitzpaine and moved there in September 1962. This is when I met Mr. I can't remember his name now. Our milk recorder who introduced me a few years later. Because in 1964 we had our 7th child and still wasn't dancing. So it started in 1965 I went to Taunton Folk Dance Group and there I met somebody who introduced me to Halsway Manor. And this is where the romance with Halsway Manor began.

JK: So that was when you first went there.

SB: I went there with a group of us on a pre-Christmas dance, walked into this wonderful house which you felt you were going into somebody's home. Marjorie came down the stairs and welcomed us as if we were part of the family. Marjorie & Donald were the wardens they called them at that time. They had started the story at

the beginning of Halsway Manor as documented elsewhere. So then we began. My husband was very rude about going country dancing and the following Boxing Day there was a dance and I had arranged to take several people in the car and at the last minute he said that he would like to go and I said too bad mate the car is full. Which made him want to go? He came and was completely overwhelmed as I was and he became an avid folk dancer as well as me. We joined the club meeting twice a month and it is still going actually on a Wednesday evening and er began meeting other people outside the folk world. Outside the farming world. A group of friends materialized, there were about twenty of us and over the years we used to go off to dances in other places but always coming back to Halsway most Saturday nights and alternate Wednesdays, twice a month. Full stop at the moment.

JK: So how did you get involved with working? Did you work there and help out?

SB: No there was just the dancing. My children were growing up. Wednesday evenings twice a month and Saturdays occasionally and this group of twenty of us used to go out to dances and used to come back. We held dances in our barn at the farm, everybody used to come in for coffee afterwards. It was just a lovely period of life . It was so much fun. It all revolved around dancing.

JK: and did you learn all the different sorts of dances, did they teach you?

SB: Yes luckily I go to Halsway because Bill Rutter and Marjorie and Donald were the instigators. Bill was employed by Cecil Sharpe House the English Folk Dance Society. So he knew a lot of the top names in the folk world and introduced them to Halsway and Halsway to them. So we had names like Nibs Matthews, Pat Shaw, oh golly I can't even remember the names of so many well-known dancers, callers and bands played there and we were lucky enough to be there at the beginning.

JK- Yes, did you meet..which famous musicians have you met – can you remember?

SB: Brian Wilcox he was quite regular at the Ranch. The Yetties of course, they were there before they became professionals. We sort of grew up with them growing and Pat Shaw used to come regularly and take weekends and he was wonderful. I mean he has written loads of dances and books He was such a lovely man and taught you the correct steps but if you went wrong it didn't matter and that I think was the fun with folk dancing. With English folk dancing as long as your body goes where it is supposed to be. If you are in a demonstration team which we started at Halsway at one period then you need to be correct. But if you are social dancing then you just enjoy it.

JK: Yes of course yes. So are you involved with Halsway now? Do you still

SB: Yes in 1988 my husband and I separated and I needed to do something that a woman could do on her own and I had been going to Halsway Club regularly and I continued to go on my own and then became chairman of the club so got a little bit more involved with the workings of the Manor itself. I got to know various people

who were on their board of management – it was called the council in those days and somebody came up to me one day and said would I like to be Minute Secretary. And I said no! but I did it and that was enjoyable. And then they – I was Minute Secretary for a number of years and then there was an election every three years and they used to have the Board (think there are twelve now). So three of the board retired every year so there is an election and I went on the Board which again was another interesting aspect. You learn about the running of the Manor and the problems. As a dancer you only enjoyed the atmosphere and the ambiance and everything, but when you get involved in the nitty gritty.

JK: What sort of problems did you come across whilst you were there?

SB: Oh money!

JK: Money

SB: Money has always been a problem with Halsway. Until recently where we now have applied for grants. In all the years they have never asked for any grants it has been run on voluntary contributions which is quite something really for all these years. But it was because, as I said this to Paul, Paul Jones who is unfortunately leaving us but when he first came I said it has been a hidden secret and there were lots of people who didn't want it to be known more widely. In fact a point just recently Maddy Prior who is a well-known folk singer gave a concert at Milverton and Paul had approached her so she was interviewed by Yvette and told Yvette that she thought Halsway had died a death because she didn't know it was still going. I mean all these years people that were there could have been a help to us just weren't involved.

JK: They didn't get included in the running of it.

SB: They didn't know it was still a going concern. It was such a pity.

JK: Did you meet Maddy Prior?

SB: I did, I did she was with Tim Hart at the time. I don't know quite what it was, I mean over the years I had been involved with various things like organizing dances and various things and this was an open day and there was a dance in the evening. My husband who is a very robust farmer who catches hold of a small lady and swings her. Swung Maddy Prior (laughter) and I danced with her partner Tim Hart who I also swung! (More laughter). Oh golly I can't think of all the people there were just so many.

JK: Lots of comings and goings. So I've heard that there is a ghost at the Manor.

SB: I've never encountered it, no I've never encountered it. During the years, the initial years, in order to make money or they used to hold conferences. The Manor was open and business's and youth groups used to hold weekend seminars or mid-week seminars there. Incidentally Taunton twinning started because of a visit from a group of German people. And one of the Clarks (shoe people) they had one there and we went into the library and had a ouija board going and that is my only experience of anything super natural and I can't remember what the results were but we did laugh a lot.

JK: and nothing happened? Strange happened?

SB: Strange happened yes. Who was underneath the table moving this thing we don't know (laughter)

JK: So was there anything any happy moments for yourself when you..

SB: Oh yes, so many just to dance to that wonderful music and to know how to put your feet in the proper places, lean your body back against your partner and swing that is just so wonderful as long as he doesn't release you suddenly. (Laughter)

JK: You've got to feel confident with your partner or partners you meet along the way.

SB: You can tell as soon as you hold them. Yes, one fun thing well lots of fun things actually – one day back in the 70's Bill Rutter said to me Shan you've got a large family. Yes. You cater for them. Yes. How would you like to cater for about 100 hundred people on Open Day ? No I wouldn't Bill. But with Bill Rutter even though you said no, he always got his own way. In fact, every time I saw him it increased by 100. We had over 900 people there.

JK: Gosh that's a lot isn't it.

SB: and we produced teas for them. Luckily, we did it outside, we had nice weather, and we had marquees. I did it for several years, but they were in the kitchen, in the Manor making scones and we had plenty of jam and cream which I had bought and knowing if it wasn't used it could be for Open Day. It could be kept back and frozen and used again at the Manor. There was always plenty there and thank goodness we had enough.

JK: Did you have lots of helpers?

SB: I did I had a whole group of ladies who weren't folk dancers they were just friends of mine and we were there on one particular day I remember trestle tables outside the Manor and we were making sandwiches at and I can't remember which of the Open Days that was for but just lots of fun. That I really remember something that I would never ever had considered I had been capable of doing. But with help, Brian Heaton helped with various things. Dick Musson who was a baker he helped

with numbers and the amount of loaves of bread I would need for so many people. Did it!

JK: It feels good when you have done something like that.

SB: Yes, if it has been successful.

JK: So the German Twinning time were you involved in that?

SB: Yes, what happened because I used to organize these dances for the Association of Boys Clubs the guy that used to contact me said could I organize for lots of women to come to a dance on the Thursday evening because there was 36 approximately, men, German and English on a Seminar. Well I think I found about 12 women and we had a wonderful time that night. During that time I met up with several lovely German men and one of them was the leader of a mandolin & guitar orchestra which I had never heard and I said gosh that sounds nice. So the next time I went to Germany which was later that year I met up with him heard the music, met the kids, it was a youth band. There were mandolins, guitars and I think one accordion but it was just so lovely and I said would you like to come to England. A stupid thing to say isn't it (laughter) course they said yes. I arranged with Bill for them to go to Sidmouth and it was only back in January before August Sidmouth Concert, When Jan Wilcox who was the Director at the time and rang me and said Shan they are a string instrument band most of their concerts are out doors, inclement weather is just impossible with strings so I am afraid we are going to have to say no. I had to contact these people who had been – they were very worried, very upset, not worried, but I then said OK you come over anyway. In 1977 they came over, 36 of them, in a coach, gave a concert in the Brew House. The first foreign group, in fact it was only the second time that the Brew House was open on a Sunday and when they gave this concert, which was wonderful. The English, the Taunton people loved the group so then the group said would you like to come back. Because they stayed – they had no money – it was a youth group. They stayed in homes and I had, I was a youth worker at the time, and I had arranged to put 36 beds, camp beds aside so that they could go in our barn if necessary (laughter) but we found homes for all these people. So it was the host families that were invited back the next year in 1978 and that was the beginning of Taunton Twinning.

JK: Oh that was interesting.

SH: It was Kate initially in Taunton who organized the exchange and then in 1992 we became more official. In 1982 indeed a friendship with Taunton was organized which didn't mean anything but I thought if it was more official we might get some help, because we didn't, again as with Halsway no finance. It was all done – my ex-husband financed quite a bit of it. Postage and such like, phone calls but it is still going to this day coming over.

JK: So do they go to Halsway now?

SH: No

JK: Have they ever been there?

SH: Yes the first few years they regularly gave a concert there or they played or we visited. I think I am the only original member now. Apart from the German guy. Him and I started it. He is involved over there. I am involved over here. None of the others are. So Halsway to them means nothing. But still very proud that Halsway started the twinning.

JK: Yes, that sounds very interesting.

JK: So do you keep in touch with the German men that you met?

SH: Yes, in fact Herms Wolff the leader is very sick at the moment. They came over last year for the Mayor making and he was very ill then. We are in email contact but I haven't heard from him since before Christmas when he said he wasn't feeling very well and he was having to go for tests. So, yes I am still involved with the exchanges and I am accommodating a couple this year that I have stayed with in their home for several years and their daughter used to stay with me before I met the parents.

JK: So when she was little. Interesting isn't it. So whereabouts is the town in Germany.

SH: It's in Northern Germany between Hamburg and Berlin there is an autobahn that runs along there and it is a little town called Konigslutter Very small, much smaller than Taunton and a lot of their residents are employees of the Volkswagen factory which is there. Which is the other side of the autobahn. It is a lovely town, lovely people. Great fun.

JK: Yes, very interesting. These days do you go to Halsway very often or..

SH: Not as often – I did go to the club before Christmas, I don't go very often but I am involved with the shop. Christine Corkett organizes a group of us who run the shop and I am one of a pair who go once every six weeks, something like that to run the shop. And every week we meet up at Christine's house at Nether Stowey and we make things. Some of them bring their own sewing machines and they are busy making waist coats , peg bags, tea cosies, bags for musical instruments, bags for shoes.

JK: What do you like doing?

SH: I am the ironer (laughter) I don't sew, but not these days. We make cards. A couple of us who are not sewers we. There is another one that makes jewelry. It is just a group of eight of us who meet up.

JK: They then have the shop open during the Week?

SH: Whenever there is a residential course the shop is open during that time because there is no shop. It is all in a cupboard so it has to be extracted from the cupboard and set up on trestle tables generally in the entrance hall. It is hard work and then it has to be put away afterwards. So it is just held on one of the days. Occasionally if Christine is resident she will keep it on a couple of days but generally our income is well we like to think it is approximately £100.

JK: Do the ladies get paid for their work?

SH: Oh no you never get paid for anything at Halsway if you are a volunteer.

JK: I was just thinking of the making of the items.

SH: No no it is all done. Christine has a cabin in her garden which is absolutely stuffed full of things craft wise and silk painting and caustic works, oh goodness me jewelry making. She has got everything there so we meet up in her, we take our sandwiches. She provides tea and coffee. We do a lot of chatting and we call it the sweat shop.

JK: It is nice isn't it to get together as well.

SH: It's great fun

JK: Yes, yes. So have you ever stayed at Halsway?

SH: Yes yes you need to stay. I think that when I was on the Council of Management I was determined to stay there because you need to stay in order to get the feeling of the place. And we've had good time, bad times and rough times, calm times, financial – several times it is been on the border of going bust and then somebody has come in and made a contribution. People have left legacies of their houses. This is the hold that Halsway has had on people. I think it is such a friendly place.

JK: and it's got a lovely position hasn't it, the house.

SH: Gosh, Yes, nice views and nice and quiet – walks around, Yes.

JK: So who owns it now?

SH: It is owned by the Halsway Management Committee it's a group of people forever changing. It isn't owned by any one person. It was bought initially by ten people putting £1,000 each and the Manor cost £10,000.

JK: Oh did it, yes.

SH: But then of course

JK: They had to spend a lot on it did they?

SH: Not very much Well over the years a lot has been spent on it but initially because Frances Gair Wilkinson who was the previous owner had and I don't know what it was like when she first bought it but she adapted it so that she could run art courses. She was an artist – several of her paintings are in the Manor now and so it had been adapted for residential use which made it. I mean there was one bedroom and I think it is one of the bedrooms where the ghost is supposed to haunt has five beds in it.

JK: So it was like a dormitory then?

SH: It was but

JK: a bit like a youth hostel sort of thing.

SH: It was yes initially everybody used to go down to the kitchen you all cleared away, washed up. You didn't cook there was a cook there but before health and safety and all the regulations came along. You are not allowed in the kitchen now but em but we all used to contribute. And the staff -they were paid staff – paid by the warden and his wife they lived on site and there was a cook who was paid and a housekeeper who was paid. Everything else was volunteers. My daughter used to work there during school holidays and weekends when she was at Bishops Foxes and em yes.

JK: So that don't have trouble in getting volunteers then – I guess its word of mouth is it?

SH: = I think it is getting, as with most things, no it is getting more and more difficult . Voluntary work – there is so many charities around that need volunteers and of course being where Halsway is it is not always easy to get there. You have to be very closely resident and be a driver and em there is a bus service but it doesn't always work with what is happening now.

JK: Great, so is there anything else that you remember about it that you want to speak about?

SH: There were glorious open days. They don't have them now. When parking was a problem , parking is still a problem.

JK: They haven't made a car park anywhere else?

SH: They borrow fields from local farmers. I think on the days that – I can't remember although I was involved quite a lot with open days when I was doing the teas I can't remember what happened about parking – I think they had a field across the road. The main road where they parked now they have the one which is by the Manor. The farmer lets them have that. I don't know what the arrangements are

whether it is a financial one. As usual, with Halsway it is just given. No I can't em. It is just a lovely place to have been involved with all these years. In fact at one time we used to call it our second home. My husband and I would regularly go there doing things. He was on the council management at one time. One of my sons said the other day " Oh I remember Mum when we had to drive loads of stone over when they were putting in some drains or something". Now that son is now in his mid-fifties and that would have been forty years ago.

JK: So your husband got like going there then though originally..

SH: Even though he was so yes. He came the first time – eventually he said he would like to come and I enough room in the car and he put a suit on, which is unusual for a farmer. He had to have two double whiskies before he left home and he sat all the evening – he didn't dance at all. But when we got home he said "You're right Shan I have never seen people enjoy themselves so much" and so he started going to the Wednesday Club as well.

JK: Did you ever do singing and join a choir?

SH: No dancing has been totally – in fact that was really what Halsway started on – dancing. Luckily now it is getting wider usage by story tellers/

JK: Other crafts and things

SH: and singing there is quite. We used to have New Year evening events there and Donald would don his chef's hat , the big turkey would be brought out on to a – well it wasn't a trestle table – it was a table that Donald had actually made in the front hall and part way through the evening we would break for this turkey sandwich supper and then back to dancing till midnight. At midnight the chimney sweep would always come into the door and we had singing in the entrance hall up the stairs and um. That was when you realised how many folk songs there were, not just the local ones which we were introduced to. Because even with the dances there was May Bradbury from Williton, Watchet, I am not sure which and she did a lot of folk singing. Yes

JK: Some exciting times then – lots of good memories

SH: Yes lots of good memories

SH: I remember one weekend when John Kilpatrick was there he was a young boy before he became known in the folk world and I think it was his sister who was working in the kitchen and we had a dance and everybody who worked in the kitchen they all came in and joined in the dancing and all of a sudden there was a HELP I've lost my contact lens. Music stopped, torches were found and we were all scrabbling around trying to find this contact lens on the floor. Cos with folk dancing you are forever active so it could have been anywhere. Everybody was down on their hands and knees for this contact lens eventually the MC said look you know I think we've

given it a good time let's get back to dancing and as she stood up it fell out of her cuff! (laughter). She had a turned up cuff and it had landed in there. Hey presto!.(laughter)