

Shan Bigwood interviewing Elaine Norman on 5th February 2015

SB: Right well we are at Halsway Manor this is Shan Bigwood and I am interviewing Elaine. Elaine is known professionally as Elaine Norman but is Elaine Turner wife of Chris. Elaine you are very much part of the Halsway scene can you tell us how you got involved initially here?

EN: Well I am very flattered it is very nice of you to say. I am a relatively recent convert to Halsway. I met Chris in 1989 Chris Turner who had been involved here since 1960 when he was a very young man. We got together and he started bringing here to folk singing. And er since I wasn't a natural camper. I didn't like being out in the cold and wet, Halsway viewed a much better prospect to me than folk camps which is what he had done a lot of before. So I came along to folk events and was just totally seduced by the house like everybody is. By the wonderful camaraderie and fun that people have here and how it brings people together through medium of folk music, folk singing, folk dancing, folk fun generally and I suppose I've been to events every year since then most years. Either Chris or I were running various events or we come as guests to other people's events that we enjoy and em more recently after I retired from my full time job as a civil servant I was approached to think about whether I would like to be a trustee here. So that was at the end of 2006 and I became a trustee in the autumn of 2006 to date.

SB: and how do you find it, Halsway impose itself upon you?

EN: (laughter) well I think it is a seductive thing isn't we've seen Halsway. We live in North London, we are a 100 odd miles away from Somerset but we think of Halsway as our second home. We are very comfortable here. It is not a 5 star hotel we don't pretend to be and actually I don't think people coming here, would want it to be. You want it to be a comfortable second home. The home we all would all love to afford if we only could. A beautiful historic building, fabulous ambiance and wonderful grounds, beautiful beautiful grounds and to feel very comfortable here. That you can come in and sit down to whoever else is there at a table or in a lounge, or in the Library, sit down and start chatting to them because it is a fellow guest in your second home. And I just think that is one of the wonderful things here that you can join in events know hardly anybody when you arrive but in a few hours of chatting, dancing, eating and drinking together, you know, you feel you've made new friends. It is a huge selling point for Halsway that

SB: It is amazing that is a house, a country house which as you say people would love to live in.

EN: I think those of us who are members of Halsway Manor Society feel that we do own it between us, don't we?

SB: My husband and I we thought Halsway was our second home. It just draws you in.

EN: Yes, it is very interesting we are running an event at the moment whilst you are interviewing me this weekand there are a good number of people who have not been here before. At least half a dozen if not more and again they are just knocked out by – part of it is about having fun together but a lot of it – we have been very fortunate with the weather in February. It has been very sunny and bright, cold but beautiful and they are loving the house, building, the garden and everything. And it is interesting actually saying that the house does for new people. Out of the 45/46 that we've got here at the moment. Forty odd are people that are returners, people that have been before, people that have been to lots of events. People that have not been awhile but wanted to come to this one. You know, that speaks volumes to me that it is word of mouth that brings people here.

SB: The house certainlybut it is also the people that run the courses. And you and Chris put so much life into it.

EN: We do our best. We are good organizers between us and we complement each other's skills. Chris is the front man who does the performances really, but I am behind him with a shovel as it were (laughter) working on the preparation because these things do require preparation. I mean our events, (to be clear for others listening) our events are what I would describe as fun folk events. Whilst you are on one of our sort of courses you would be dancing, you would be singing, you would be doing music making, storytelling, games, possibly craft sometimes. Lots of different things – you would be having a taster of lots of different things. If you want to come just for a dance holiday, or just for a singing holiday this isn't it. This is the chance to have a lot of fun but learn a bit about a lot rather than a lot about a narrow subject area and. I think that is an attractive offer for people. Not everybody would want it – of course but for people who want toone of the things that we are doing this week that people might be interested in is we are having a music for all activity. We have a musician's workshop every morning after breakfast and there are three groups. There is a group of people who own a musical instrument and can play it and there with our wonderful musician Linda Game who is a fantastic fiddler. There is a second group who can recognize a musical instrument, might have picked one up a few times and there with another brilliant musician Gareth Kiddier , a keyboard player and the rest of us, and that's about twenty five of us who are in the remedial class, as it were with Chris Turner and we are banging things and shaking things, strumming things and blowing plastic trumpets and things. But we are all working together on two things. One is a piece of music that each group is learning to play in its own way and this evening there is going to be a grand performance where we all play our part and then separately we are all going to do our party piece. Each group will have their own party piece to perform. So this means that something like 42 of us will be in the band and the audience will comprise any staff who are kind enough to stay on after dinner. If volunteers are still around from the shop that will be fantastic and the one or two people who decided that they didn't want to get involved. So the audience will be about 6 people and the band will be about 40 odd people but my experience from last year when we did a very similar thing was absolutely wonderful. Actually quite moving really. Those of us who aren't particularly musical, have never played an instrument, never thought we would feel

part of this – it might sound like a cacophony to most people but part of this musical experience and each play our own little part and feeling that we matter and are important in the piece. It's just wow it is just lovely for those who have never blown a plastic trumpet before, you now. (laughter).

SB: Working in the shop and talking to people they are full of enjoyment.

EN: Great – that is great to hear.

SB:which is what you and Chris bring isn't?

EN: That's what we try to bring that's what we do at fun folk events. You know we are an educational charity and learning is important and I am sure lots of people come to more serious courses and learn lots and lots of things but here in our courses we like to think we are slipping some learning under the radar so people might not think oh I am sitting here and learning something new but by the fun and having a go, working with other people it all being humorous and entertaining. But actually they have learnt something.

SB:and hear someone play something.....

EN: May be a horrible row but you know (laughter) actually it was this morning I hope we haven't peaked too soon.. As this morning at my last rehearsal it sounded great. We are doing Daisy Bell – you know. Daisy, daisy give me your answer do. And it just sounded great, you know (laughter)

SB: This is typical of what Halsway is. It brings people in, whatever their interests , whatever their needs.....

EN: and I think we have got one or two people who are going through difficult patches in life at the moment and you know getting away from home and getting away from some of their problems. It is like a bubble here actually, isn't it, sometimes I think. You are away from your home environment, your home stresses and strains and although I do listen to the radio for a little while in the mornings when I am getting ready.. Generally speaking you are away from the ghastly news that's going on in the world outside aren't you? So you are in a little bubble of fun and happiness and joy and you are away from all the horrid things going on outside. But just for a few days life can be wonderful and as I say for a couple of people that I am aware of who have got tricky times at the moment, hopefully, that will help them and bring them a bit of comfort. And that's nice.

SB: It is It is good for you to know Some of them are more serious

EN: Being a trustee, having my trustee hat on it is a serious job we are overseeing a business and it is quite a big turnover really . Lots of assets, lots of plans for the

future, as you know, and yes you have to be serious but you also have to understand that we are not here to run a business we are here to provide the folk activities. But unless we make enough money we can't do what we want to do. We can't achieve our purposes unless we raise some money which is important. That's why it is very important to have a varied programme. The sort of things we do and but the sort of perhaps more serious programmes that others do to attract a wide range of people to come and to attract more people to come on each of those courses and activities. Getting more people here. The more people at the courses. The more course we have. The more beds that are slept in every night the more money Halsway will generate. That is really important for our future.

SB: Yes it is.....more people in the wider circle can learn about Halsway.

EN: One of the things I make this is a point that I make to the trustees quite regularly. I do live in London I very much see Halsway as our National Residential Centre for folk art and I do understand why perhaps people who live a little closer than us see it perhaps as a Somerset or West Country asset, and of course, it is. But I personally would be disappointed if we become too much of a concert venue or a place for commercial activities. Because we are in business. We are a Charity that is in business to promote folk art for the entire country and the group that we have got with us this week they are from all over. There are lots from the Midlands, lots from the Home Counties, a couple from Cornwall which is actually just as far to get here as it is from London to get here and people from all over the place. We have been at events where there are people from as far as the North East and the North West. So it is remembering that perhaps and recognizing the strength from having lots of local supporters like yourself who do fantastic things and we rely on you and really value what you are doing but it is also balancing that again the fact that we are a National Centre and that we don't want people to think we can't go there because we don't live in the South West.

SB: No absolutely not..... It always has been a really

EN: Well I think our advertising and marketing has improved hugely in the last few years. But I think it is one of those things that you can never stop. You've never done it, you've never said I want need to do more advertising. I suppose there are two points really. One is that there is a truism in the marketing world which is that only 10% of the advertising that you ever do is successful. But given that nobody knows which 10% it is you have to keep doing the lot. And the other point which is really important is word of mouth principal. That hopefully the groups that I am talking about here will all go home on Friday morning and they will tell all their friends at the dance club and song club "Wow we had a good time why don't you join us next time". We give them leaflets in the hope that they will spread them around. But it is that constant getting things out to the world because everybody has to come here for the first time. Some people might be lucky like me coming with a partner or a friend. But others if we can get to them by other means. We have done a lot more, as you were indicating really, to advertise in various publications. You will now see a picture of Halsway in a list of some of the activities going on. But we've got to keep on and of

course the digital age having seen it on Facebook, twitter and all these things. Certainly using people's emails of that will save us on postage and printing costs which has got to be good news. But there will still be a special generation of perhaps old people. Not everybody is computer averse, not wanting to play with all these er devices. But there still are a number of people who aren't on line yet. So we have got to recognize that different approaches need to be used for different people really. But it is something we have keep getting better at and will never stop.

SB: Well thank you we have had a really good introductory talk Elaine.

EN: Thank you

SB: We didn't talk much about the work of a trustee so may be sometime in the future

EN: Well sort of just generally not just a trustee, but we are all volunteers. What we are concerned mainly about is the future development. What we make conscious decisions about and is not interfering with the day to day management by our highly competent and professional Chief Executive formerly Paul James who has now having left us but now Crispian Cook who has joins us in May and is highly competent person in running Theatres and Art complexes and has got lots of splendid ideas for the future. What we don't want to do is to interfere with his day to day management what we need to be thinking about is where are we going in the future and how do we get there particular In relation to all the development that we have planned recognizing, of course, that it is going to take us a while to achieve those objectives because we have to get to raise a lot of money and that will take time. But at least we now know where we are going, you know, and if you have got a plan and a line of direction it is very easy to go wavering off in the wrong direction and even now we know what we are aiming for we can direct all our money raising energies into that and we can talk to other people about the benefits it will bring and hope, of course, that they will want to support us along with all our existing supporters. So exciting, if challenging times. The Chinese says that – unusual times. (laughter)

SB: Well thank you Elaine – thank you very much indeed.

EN: Thank you I am very flattered to be asked. Thank you very much