

D This is Dorothy King, interviewing Shirley Driver at Halsway Manor on 6 February 2015.

D Er, Shirley, I have your name, could I have your address, please?

S [redacted]

D Thank you, and could I ask your date of birth, please?

S That's very rude by the time you get to my age. Laughter. 11.9.1935

D I was guessing at 1940, so there you are.

S Oh, really? Well, give you five years.

D Where were you born?

S When? Oh, where. I was born in Hackney, in London, within the sound of Bow Bells.

D That's absolutely lovely. Did you grow up in Hackney?

S No, well a little bit. We moved when my brother was a year old, so I was three.

D Oh, right.

S We moved to South-east London, then. That's where I was brought up most of the time but having been born in 1935, of course, the war came, didn't it, in 1939, so we certainly lived in south-east London erm until almost the end of the Blitz in the second world war when we went down to my grandmother, aunt and uncle who lived in Godalming in Surrey, so that's the connection there. But I certainly remember lots of being in and out of an Anderson air raid shelter, erm yes and being told of a nasty thunderstorm that occurred in the night and that's why the houses down the road were no longer there. Chuckles. So I grew up being quite frightened of lightning, but bombs are alright! Laughter.

D Do you remember much about the Anderson shelter, being in there?

S Yes, I've only got to smell something musty and that puts me in mind exactly. I mean there were my mother, father, my brother and I and there were two bunks one side and two bunks the other side and a pathway down the middle, which my dad built all sorts of duckboards for and we had sort of extra carpets over the door so it blotted out dust and stuff. We were luckier than most because our Anderson shelter was reasonably dry because near behind our garden we had a great big old oak tree, or a couple of gardens away and that drains the land quite well, we used to think.

D Yes

S But yes, it was beds and bunk beds, made out of sort of metal strips and wood and of course it was all wood, there were no synthetics in those days, there were woollen blankets and eiderdowns and a potty. Chuckles.

D How long did you have to stay down in the shelter?

S When the Blitz was really bad, we would stay down overnight. Anyway, my father worked in Fleet Street and he used to come backwards and forwards on the train and Mother used to leave his evening meal, his main meal for the day, his evening meal, on warmth and as he came through the house, he would hang up his bowler hat, or put his bowler hat on top of the piano, and pick up his dinner and come through the house, you know, and yes, then next morning, when it was much quieter, anyway, he'd go off on the train again to work. But there were times when the bowler hat got flattened by the ceilings coming down and things like that!

D In your house? Was your house hit?

S Oh no, it was not hit but there were some pretty big bombs there was lots of vibration and such like. I suppose the ceilings gradually got weakened over time. Hm, yes, it was a jolly time and we went to my Godalming in Surrey and then we came back once it was quieter. But then the next spell was when the flying bombs and rockets and things came across nearer to the end of the war and we went down there a bit earlier at that point; we didn't brave it out for so long and Mother insisted that Father came with us, because previously he still stayed in London, he worked in Fleet Street. But yes they were, it was all I knew at that time, so I thought it was all fairly normal.

The thing that really riled me was that I couldn't start school. Because – the girl next was older than I was and she went to school and she did lovely things like cookery and that and sometimes I was allowed to go with her to go and take her dishes back and things like that and I just loved the thought of school and wanted to go but couldn't until, well, eventually, while we were down in Godalming, I went.

D At what age did you start school then?

S It would have been five but how much delayed it was I'm not sure, it probably was about five or so cos I went one morning and came home lunch time, as primary schoolchildren did in those days and Auntie and Grandma looked at me in horror and said "Oh dear!" I'd got spots all over my face by then and I'd got chickenpox. It had come out during that morning! And I was just fed up, really fed up. I'd waited so long to start school and now I'd got to be off for three weeks or whatever it was. Chuckles. So that's how that was.

D Where did you go to school mainly, then, was it in Godalming or London?

S Erm, The infants department was mostly in Godalming and then I was back in London for my seventh birthday, because by then I'd contracted scarlet fever, which of course was before the days of antibiotics. Yes, we ran through the infectious disease quite nice and quickly, didn't we really?

D Yes, yes.

S I got scarlet fever so I had to go to the isolation hospital in Catford and couldn't see parents or anything like that. I hated it, there three weeks and a treat was to have to choose each morning whether you had a blue ribbon or a pink ribbon to tie your hair up with. Laughter. And when I cried at an injection, I remember them telling me that they would put me in the dustbin if I didn't stop. Laughter. (I remember thinking) even at that age "You can't do that!" Laughter

But after that, I wasn't particularly well and found school quite erm I think I must have been a bit depressed and er, you know, under well, but er, junior school, I remember that more in Godalming as well, that was probably during the rockets. Yes, it was after the Blitz and during the rockets and I loved the junior school because I was always good at numbers and arithmetic and things and we had a Mr Gibson, the headmaster, who used to come and teach us first thing on a Thursday morning. I remember it to this day, he would fire at you mental arithmetic things and you'd have to be absolutely answering on the, you know, no hesitation at all, the components of ten and if he pointed at you and said three you'd got to say seven. And I often used to win a new pencil, a brand new pencil with a sharp point. Chuckles. So I quite loved that. But it was a very nice environment round there, I enjoyed the country, the little country town. My uncle was there, he enjoyed lots of country walks and that, he worked as a gardener, so that was quite interesting, but he'd been gassed in the First World War so he only had one lung, so he made sure he did plenty of walking. That was interesting and good and when the rest of the family came home, I didn't want to come home because I enjoyed the routine there, and I liked the school and I'd got this best friend Gillian erm whose father happened to be Chinese, actually but we were great pals and we did all sorts of things. Eventually, it was decided that I was homesick but – because I started telling my teacher of things that my brother did, which usually didn't interest me because he was two and a quarter years younger than I was. So eventually I came home and found I was miles behind, no, miles in front of the London children because some of them hadn't been so fortunate but I had some really good schooling in Surrey, so that was great.

D Did you develop an interest in music at that stage, when you were a child?

S Not particularly. No, my overwhelming interest, well I loved music but dance was my folk thing.

D At that stage, when you were a child?

S No. At the London primary school, we used to do a little bit a little bit of dancing but I don't remember that with any particular joy. It was something I quite liked, I

liked physical things anyway, but erm it didn't develop from there, although I suppose I'd always got an appreciation of sort of better music but that was from parents I suppose, really

D They were musical?

S Not, well they enjoyed a wide variety of things but I don't really remember being particularly good at all of the popular things, like film stars and I think they were a bit sort of classical or whatever, not erm educated to university level or anything like that, I mean that was quite rare in our level of society at that time, so, erm yes, appreciated all sorts of things but art, I suppose, was particularly, my father was quite an amateur artist and he always taught me from a very young age to mix colours and things like that, so art was a particular thing but. We weren't short of being introduced to things at home, but no, folk, my introduction to folk was really that I belonged to, when I left school I joined a cycling club. My father had always been a keen cyclist and they were all very keen on the countryside. So I joined and it was a local Y Youth Hostel Association group and this was .., yes and I had a little bit of a gap, about 17 or 18 or whatever and that went from strength to strength. I mean, I went to an all girls' grammar school, so it was nice to have a mixed club.

D Laughs. A way to meet boys!

S That's right! Otherwise it was limited to the Scouts and the Church, I think! Chuckles. Well, apart from those up and down the road! Laughter. But you didn't count those!

But, what was I saying?

D The cycling club.

S Oh yes, the cycling club. We used to meet on a Wednesday in an old school hall and we needed a social activity on a Wednesday, either a talk from somebody or various things and there were a couple who used to come along who were a bit older than us but they were very keen and experienced in international folk dance and they'd bring recorded music, so once a month we used to, Ron and Phil used to come along and we used to have a dance and gradually learnt so we were sort of quite keen on that and by then, the other friends that I'd made within the group were quite keen as well, the girls more than the boys but on the other hand we got some of them in eventually and then the YHA at that time always used to have an international rally, in Europe or somewhere and typical of the English, all the Israeli people, the Dutch people, the German people, the Australian, all different sorts of people would have something to contribute, either songs or dance or whatever and we were a bit of a you know, the English wouldn't do anything like that. And the national secretary suddenly had this idea that our YHA group did dancing anyway once a month, so how about us being the nucleus to form a folk dance group, with a view to getting trained up and being something of a credit to England when the next international rally came up. So that was what happened. We managed to meet in central London at the youth hostel in Earls Court, didn't annoy the neighbours too much at first and so that was great, we met lots of other people. My particular girl

friends, Audrey, Ruth and Muriel and Valerie, we'd meet on a Friday after work, we'd go into what was then the little Lyons Corner House and have a tea and then we'd go onto Earls Court. All things of an era you see

D Laughter

S we're a bit ancient! Laughter. And then we'd go onto the dancing group, which was really nice cos we had a lovely old musician called Harry Decaux who played melodeon and he would always come and play for us wherever we went and it very soon developed up into going youth hostelling at weekends, as well as our local group – my parents didn't then see much of me really.

D You were 17!

S Yes, 17, 18, 19 or whatever, you know. We all packed off over to Germany before I was 19, so. But we would hire a village hall near the youth hostel, whatever and run a dance for ourselves and anybody else in the youth hostel or anybody locally who would want to come in and one of our favourite places was certainly down at Goudhurst in Kent, bear in mind that we were Home Counties and that was great fun but in addition to that, of course, we had to practice for these international rallies and we felt that since we were doing international dancing at that point, that we'd got to do something pure English for so we got in touch with the English Folk Song and Dance Society, they sent us along this guy called Bob Bowker, who came and trained us in mostly Playford Dance, with the lovely tunes and other dances as well. And so we became quite competent and therefore relaxed at it and some of the fellows joined us as well and an awful lot sprung from that group. We danced at the Brussels Exhibition in Belgium and I've forgotten which year that was but 1950s rather than 1960s, yeah and we danced in Prince's Street Gardens, it was in Edinburgh and Holland, Luxembourg and various places so that was quite fun, actually and we sort of developed our costume which we made ourselves for the most part in those days Chuckles.

D What was the costume like, do you remember?

S Well, it was difficult to think of anything because we haven't got a national costume

D No

S as such. I mean, you can locate periods when things were .. but we simply wanted something bright and so we had, each person had a different coloured skirt and they were plain circular skirts, round, with lots of petticoats and things like that and a white sort of muslin, no, it was a bit crisper than that, but anyway, blouses with three-quarter sleeves and a black waistcoat, a black velvet waistcoat. I remember making those and they were horrid, cos they were nice silk velvet and they didn't go nicely under a sewing machine. Yes, we had those and little black dancing shoes. And the boys, simply had, the men, the boys, whatever they were, simply had white shirts and

grey trousers. And synthetics had come in by then so they could have creases in them, they would pack reasonably well and then later on, we also developed a Morris team, for the men not for the girls and they had some rather jolly waistcoats, so that was our...

D So was this a London Morris group?

S No, we called it the YHA Folk Dance and Song Group and in actual fact for it to be folk dance and song, I remember someone from EFDS came along and taught us, I think they only got to about three different folk songs, like "What shall we do with the herrings heads, Make muffins and breads of the herrings' heads" and then there was Johnny Todd, Johnny Todd which was a sort of shanty thing and what was the other one? Fortunately, some of these were on a record by one of the folk groups at that time, so we did cheat a bit, but in actual fact, our dancing went down really rather well, it was rather nice, so we seldom got asked for a song, because we'd taken our slot with dancing, which was just as well. Laughter.

But it was a good introduction and an awful lot of the people who, well, ever so many of the people who were in that group, I'm still in contact with,

D That's lovely

S some have died off. We were already centred on central London and we'd already travelled to go in and then as we married and had families and moved a bit further out, we were all great friends, so we used to exchange weekends, the kids were like cousins to each other and we didn't always meet in Earls Court youth hostel, because the neighbours eventually didn't always want that music every Friday night and so we looked around and it's quite hard to find a hall big enough for dancing within our price range, but in Dalston, Islington, near to where I was working at that time, there was the Metropolitan Benefit Society Almshouses, and they'd got, they were along the Ballspond Road, (of the Goons!) and they'd got a nice square of grass, and round this square of grass were all these almshouses built, and right at the end was the warden's and the warden and his wife, their accommodation and above it a formal meeting hall, that their society used to meet in but they were willing to rent this to us and it was really rather nice, because Charlie, the warden, was a Geordie, he, it was a very friendly place, lots of the old people used to look forward to Friday nights, cos they used to come up and sit round the chairs to watch our dancing and lots of us paired off and married off, you know, they'd give us little presents. I've still got this little set of glasses, which they gave to us. It made it more villagey, but within London, you know? And they were quite sorry, apparently, we all seemed to produce children and that at about the same time and go on to forming a family so it had to come to an end eventually, because by then we were living in Godalming, we'd got our first house in Godalming in Surrey eventually and other people were in Cheshunt and Harpenden, it was too far to travel in, especially with family and responsibilities and that. But it didn't stop us dancing because we'd got this background now in dance and some of them in music as well, playing for the dance and so wherever we moved out to, we all found the same sort of thing and we had a readymade society and we joined Guilford Folk Dancers, which was a super

group and other people joined the groups that they were near. And at the similar time, actually, when we were all producing children, Bill Rutter, who, of course, was very instrumental in Halsway Manor and Sidmouth Festival and folk and he was a YHA warden at some point during his history so he was conversant with this sort of thing and he had the idea that okay, cos you couldn't take children under five to youth hostels at that time, so we couldn't do youth hostelling any more but we loved the countryside and all the rest, so, how about camping? And that would be within our price range now that we'd got families and wives didn't work that much in those days. So, yes, a folk camp was developed, whereby you took your own tent, the organisation hired a marquee or a village hall but marquees were more popular in those days, which was the main expenditure, cos marquees were very expensive to hire and we would arrange to have a farmer's field, rather than a permanent campsite because it made it nice and private, remote enough for us to play lots of music and stuff and we went to all sorts of interesting locations and the association still goes on, I mean, there's still a folk camp society alongside Halsway Manor Society.

So that's how quite a lot of us stayed in contact and we gradually introduced more and more of our old friends and newer friends and groups into folk camps, so we carried on our dancing and music and that for a long time that way and I think some of my neighbours think I'm a bit odd because I'm out a lot of the time, but I still have got friends, I mean, Christine from our sweat shop comes from the folk camp thingy and erm so that takes up one day a week, mostly anyway, but erm for various reasons we stayed in contact, well, friendship anyway but unfortunately, some of the closer ones, Audrey and there was one particular couple who were then introduced to here, to Halsway by the time we moved down here and Audrey used to have a Scottish dance weekend from her group in Tonbridge and so they were all introduced here and then it spread around to a wider catchment area. It was pretty fruitful actually, and it carries on introducing old friends to Halsway and folk camps, even now, in fact, my ex-husband's cousin was one of our group as well, he was one of our folk dance group, our YHA folk dance group and then he and his family didn't camp they had posher holidays and didn't particularly like camping, he still doesn't, but unfortunately he was widowed 18 months ago. He'd always played the violin, which was great and he'd always danced while his wife Beryl was alive because there's always a shortage of men in dancing, he would always dance, rather than play and be a partner for several people. But now he feels a bit freer and he can concentrate on his violin. His mum would be pleased! She was a very nice lady but she made him practice. He's still got the same violin at the moment that he's had from ages back. I suggested to him that there was the odd violin week here, so how about trying it. So he did and now he comes quite frequently here from Buckinghamshire. I was speaking to him last night and we're all going up to the Wye Valley the week after next, so he's coming there for the first time with us but he's done other folk camp things where he's stayed bed & breakfast, for a short weekend where it's been for music or something else. It's been almost like a religion really. In fact, it's stopped me having time to go to church! Chuckles. Yes, when I was younger, it was more fun.

D Did you have any folk camps around here?

S Yes, well, we used to have what we called the Winter Warmer in January, which was based on here, instead of being under canvas, but that's sort of divided off now. In August, they have a family weekend here more recently, so that's on that sort of model but having said that, we also in 1969 that's when my third child, my youngest child was born, we camped at Brean Sands, up Burnham way. It got so popular that during the month of August, which was the time we really operated, apart from odd weekends and bank holidays, there were various sites, one in the south and one in the north, one in France perhaps or even Germany or Holland, or whatever, so we had quite a selection. Actually, we spent, when the children were a bit older, we spent quite a few summers in France with folk camps. We looked for sites out there and we found some really nice places, again, away from public sites and near Pont Aven, that peninsular down there. I remember once going on holiday down there and purposely looking for campsites and Barbara Harrison

D Oh, yes, yes, yes.

S and I brought out our in fact it was her last year – best possible schoolgirl French and talked the mayor of Nevez into allowing us to have a folk camp, using as a base their village hall, it was a reasonably sized village, and the adjacent sports field for the camping and we used that for several years. I have happy memories of yes, yes...

D When was your first involvement with Halsway, then?

S Sorry, yeah, I've left that one out, haven't I? Laughter (PAUSE TAPE)
It was before – I moved to Somerset from Godalming in '74, but it was long before then, because with Guildford group, Guildford Folk Dance Group, we did a great deal and in the autumn/ winter of I think it was '66/67, Guildford Group and Southampton Group were getting together for a weekend away at a place called Halsway Manor in Somerset, long before I ever dreamt that I'd come and live here and so we came down then, that was husband, then and me and my first child, my daughter, who was two, two plus. So, that winter of '66/67, Pat Shaw was calling the dances and I think I was probably quite busy with the two-year-old as well, but I remember enjoying the dancing, but I do remember Pat Shaw commenting: why did I bring a child? Chuckles. Couldn't leave her behind and she wasn't disruptive! Laughter. So that was the first time I came and stayed here. Of course, we were at a distance and involved with babies and erm.

D Were you camping?

S Oh no, we weren't camping at Halsway, no, Halsway was a proper building.

D So you were actually staying in the hall here?

S No, in bedrooms here

D Yes, yes.

S It was before we had the Mews, we simply had this, it was when Donald and Marjorie Hunt were here, it was in the very early days of the erm, Society. It was another of Bill Rutter's things, it was Bill Rutter who'd negotiated for this place, who could see the potential for it, so we came and I don't know how many of us there were, probably about 50 of us or something. There were more erm there were less I mean there were not the ensuite bedrooms that there are now and there was more dormitory accommodation for families or friends, it was quite accommodating. And that was a really nice weekend and then in 1967 we came down again, so that previous one must have been before 1967, because my daughter was born in 64, so it was definitely '66, or perhaps even the end of '65. I must look up some old diaries, sorry. In 1967, Guildford Group was coming down again and we'd got enough people to fill it entirely. Donald and Marjorie were still here, I remember, but that was fairly early in the year in 67 and by then I'd got a little son as well as a daughter and he was born on February 1st, so we came here when he was pretty young and I remember actually bathing him in one of the big washbasins upstairs, 'cos he'd have got lost in one of the big baths here and we weren't camping, so I hadn't brought the baby bath, the kitchen sink and everything, so erm I must confess I can't even remember who was calling, or who the Band were or anything. Certainly, the person who used to arrange so many things for Guildford Group was Coral, Coral Charles, who unfortunately died just a couple of years ago, yeah, at the same time as another old friend, Alan Corkett, who subsequently came and moved to this area. He'd been one of the cycling group, yes, he'd been one of the cycling group, in the YHA days, all these things interlink.

(PAUSE TAPE)

S I might be repeating myself a little bit here, but certainly Coral arranged the weekend for the Guildford Group in 1967 as she did subsequent many many many many weekends, week's holidays and things like that. Yes, we were great friends, she was Coral Southern then, that's before she married Ron Charles and her mum was my first babysitter actually, when my first daughter was born, when the dancing started again, she was born in the May, and the dancing started again in the September, Mrs Southern said "Bring her in her carrycot and I can look after her, she can sleep away on the bed in the spare room", which was great for the first year while she was tiny and it didn't interrupt my dancing at all!

D A more helpful approach than Pat Shaw the Caller!

S Yes, definitely! Yes, I don't think he meant to be unfriendly or anything like that, I don't know whether he had a family, I rather imagine not, but anyway. Coral used to arrange all sorts of things along with other people.

D Did this early introduction of the children to dance encourage them?

S Yes, oh yes, the early introduction, erm, yes, I mean, not as early as being tiny enough to be bathed in the washbasin, laughter, so in fact that doesn't necessarily link to Halsway Manor, because although I came here in early sixties, mid-sixties and then again in '67, we were then into Folk Camp, Folk Camp was our holidays and in

those days when wives didn't work, we sort of missed my income and we couldn't have umpteen holidays a year and I think Halsway would probably have been quite expensive, hence it's run for so long on retired people, or people whose families have already, yes, erm. But the introduction to dance and all that was influential with the children but it was via Folk Camp, so perhaps I'd better not go down that's the wrong avenue, isn't it?

D Yes, yes

S Having said that, actually and this isn't chronologically in the right order, but my daughter who is now 50, but she's got a couple of sons and the older one is now thirteen and the younger one is just turned seven and they're both very keen on music, specially the older one, he's really really very keen and she's done quite a lot of French music and played hurdy gurdy when she was expecting, I mean that doesn't leave much room on the lap, does it and he was always jiggling along to the rhythm of music even as a tiny tiny tiny one and certainly we went to Folk Camp again as three generations, me as Grandma, her as mother and him as the baby, seamlessly, really and then met other Folk Camp people there who were also producing grandchildren or children. So that, Folk Camp seems to go on from one generation to another more seamlessly than perhaps Halsway does, because I think there's a little bit of resource shortage when you've got babies and things. Perhaps not so much now with most mothers having to work. I keep going off at a tangent, you'll have to edit that out. Chuckles

D I don't edit anything!

S Oh dear! Chuckles. It's certainly been beneficial in my family's experience for the next generation to be interested in folk. I'm skipping a generation here going onto the grandchildren. I think my daughter is vey strong on it and as a grandmother, I've certainly been sort of accommodating, I've wanted them to.. We've got an opportunity to learn music, the schools unfortunately now, with all the cutbacks and things, we had some very good people here but one of them in particular has come up to retirement anyway but is still very interested, but Somerset has done away with music almost, as far as,.. but schools are becoming academies as well and the whole education field seems to be changing, so it's very important to have the input of things like Halsway Manor. We've got a Somerset Rural Music School which meets in a secondary school on Saturday mornings and ever since my older grandson was five, or was just coming up to five, I've always taken him on a Saturday morning. He started at first with the tots and now he plays piano and clarinet but independently, because of experiences at Folk Camp and wider experiences with his mother and all sorts of things. He loves to play his guitar, quite nicely, He's.. of course the electronic keyboards are very useful as well. I used to find, still do actually, that when he came home from school, as a relaxation, he'd quite often say to me (his mother had to work, so I'd be bringing him home often), he'd say to me "I thought of a lovely tune today" and he'd get straight home and play it on his keyboard. You know, that's been really really really nice. All sorts of interesting things like that. They came here recently – their mother and the two little boys, the thirteen year old and he was six then. There was a Spanish group here and that was really

enjoyable and I brought them here for the concert, along with their mother, I'd been doing the shop, I think. We went and had fish and chips at Watchet – on Viv's recommendation and that was delightful even that was an experience because we went to the fish and chip shop, bought our fish and chips and they said "You can eat it in the pub next door" and the pub next door, yes, yes, next to the chippy there, they were very accommodating, even made a pot of tea and things like that. My daughter and the boys had tea and I think they charged them £2.00 for a whole pot of tea.

D I'll remember that next time I have fish and chips in Watchet.

S Yes, near the museum and the little chapel over as you face it the pub is to the left, they were ever so accommodating, it was really delightful, then we came back here without rumbling tummies and had the Spaniards' concert, which was really delightful and it was really relaxing. Yvette came, Yvette was just in front of me Coughs The boys were ever so keen. In the end, it came to the end of the formal concert eventually although we kept on with encores as long as possible, he was jiggling away, dancing, dancing away, the younger one, he surprised me actually. Oh yes, he looks like a Morris Man in the making! It was lovely for him to be here as well. It's a 26-mile round trip from my home to here, so it's not always possible to bring little ones but yes, that was certainly sort of a continuing thing because they're not having that at school but they do have it on a Saturday morning, because both boys go now so that's good and most years they go to Folk Camp. People are so accommodating, people like Chris Jewell and that, will lend them an instrument and show an interest, it's really constructive. I find it so hard to separate Halsway from Folk Camp because they all came from Bill's ideas as it were and so many people in them are common to each other.
(PAUSE TAPE).

S Certainly, because of work purposes, we needed to leave Godalming in 1974 and move to Somerset, so we settled in Taunton in 1974 and course, the most natural thing to do was to come to, well, not necessarily the nearest, but the folk dance group, so at Halsway Manor, there was a Wednesday, alternate Wednesday evenings folk dance group and we naturally joined that straight away. And there were quite a few people down here we knew already and so we were really already introduced here and we were able to bring other people and dance groups to Halsway as well as Guildford group. Yes, so that was really good and it was nearly always live music, oh except when we very first joined, there was a fiddle player who played for the dancing called Charlie and I remember people saying "He won't play waltzes, Charlie won't play waltzes", so if my husband then was doing some calling "He won't play waltzes" and also he used to shut his fiddle case at 10 o'clock because that was late enough, that was the time, you might come from elsewhere, but...
Yes, and the other thing that happened to me early down here was that I got a phone call – we'd been down here just a little while – from Bill Rutter, saying "Don't forget, you won't forget the meeting, will you, next week" and I said – at that time I was on Folk Camp's Council and I said, "No, we haven't got a meeting next week". "Oh", he said, "I forgot", because Bill was a law unto himself – "Oh," he said, "I forgot, perhaps I haven't told you, or let alone asked you perhaps I haven't told you. It'll be far more

convenient for you to be on Halsway Manor Council, rather than Folk Dance Council, because now that you're so relatively near," (He didn't use the word "relative") "But now that you're so near, that'd be a good idea. There's a meeting next week". So I negotiated to borrow the only car that we ran at that point and sort of came and that was in the days of Ruth being, Ruth and Mike being the incumbents here. But it didn't really work out, 'cos although I had the interest, I hadn't got the I had three children of, what five, seven and nine at that point, who needed collecting from school in the afternoon and all sorts of things and only one car, it just wasn't practical, so after a very little while, I'm afraid I had to say "No, no, perhaps later on I will be able to but not then".

So we came along and certainly enjoyed the Wednesday evening dance session/group because living so near, naturally you wouldn't come and stay here. You'd support it in all sorts of other ways. Certainly for years, we always supported the Summer Fete and that was quite fun, far more amateur, well it was like any Church fete, village fete or whatever and we did all sorts of things, perhaps a bit of dancing, certainly tombolas and things like that, anything else that would raise some funds as well. And I remember spending a long time actually running a stall called Lucky Seven and this was raffle tickets, cloakroom tickets, raffle tickets folded up very carefully and put inside straws, with numbers and to win a prize, you had to pull out one with a seven and I remember that was quite popular and I remember feeling quite proud actually; it was the mid seventies, I remember the stall took £36 which was not bad actually, just for a one-girl effort but it was popular with kids. We did all sorts of things like that, so there are many happy memories of those sorts of things going on.

Then after we'd been here a little while, we did begin to think, well, I don't know, just meeting with the Group on a Wednesday, there's not much time in folk dancing; you're either listening to the caller, calling through the dance, or the music is striking up and you're actually dancing it and you can't talk then either, or when the caller is calling and the gaps in between dances between enthusiastic dancers are not very great, you know and somebody would always be having to make teas and you'd queue up for tea and things like that and I remember driving home one night and sort of saying "It wouldn't really matter if we never ever went there again, we wouldn't be missed and we don't seem to be making..". I don't mean to take charge of it or anything like that at all but it didn't seem to spread to other things. So we thought, although all the other groups come to Halsway to have a residential week, we're obviously not going to come, we're obviously not going to come and pay to come to Halsway when we were within walking, motoring distance of it. So we looked, we suggested it to the Committee – my husband was on the Committee, or one of us was by then. We didn't even have a committee to start with; it had come from the village, I think, it had been just a nice local thing but more and more people were coming, so we looked around and we found a place down in the New Forest, it was called Avon Tyrell, it was a National Association of Boys place .It was a mixture of double bedrooms on a modern wing and dormitories elsewhere. It was in a lovely area and there was plenty of space for dancing, so we negotiated to have a weekend there with the Group and it was quite popular. Not too far to drive and we had at least two, perhaps we had more. We had nice callers down there and there were little traditions that started there with some callers. That was nice and it did give us more far time to socialise and get to know each other a bit better. And that's really gone

on, with stops and starts ever since, so the Group can go elsewhere as well as coming here. I think it sort of encouraged people to perhaps be more supportive of Halsway, because it's only recently that more people have joined Halsway Manor Society, I think and with all the plans for the development, we certainly need lots of really purposely committed people, erm

D What was the, I've forgotten what his name is, was it Mike who's just left as the manager of Halsway?

S Oh, no, that was Paul

D Paul. Was he quite influential?

S In the time he was here?

D Yes

S Oh yes. He'd got a background in Folk. One of his main long-lasting interests is Blowzabella. He'd sort of known that band long before he came here. Perhaps it's a bit disappointing really that he's not stayed on longer, because it is absolutely vital and essential that we have younger people, you know, it's not prejudice or anything like that, but it's just like a plant, it's just not healthy, is it, unless there's development coming up and he was certainly getting to grips with that. It's difficult, alongside financial stability, you know and you can't keep on subsidising, very much, younger people because they are younger, you've got to think of other ways. There have been some funds and that. Yes, it looked very promising and for years we've talked about needing extensions and things to make the place more viable and hopefully, hopefully, the first stage is going to get underway fairly soon and hopefully the other stages can follow on. I don't think it's going to happen very quickly, not unless we get some colossal great sum. Chuckles. So I probably won't see it! But yes, he's got very useful connections. It's such a shame that his family didn't relocate down here and integrate with the area because previously, mostly, managers have been residential, not absolutely exclusively but erm, it's nice to have a resident manager with a residential establishment, even if it's only sort of part-time residential but full-time... So, good luck to the new incumbent. Yes, erm, but it's very useful to have a folk background. Previously, I always used to feel, because I'm no singer, I used to feel that it was very much dance, folk to me was dance and the music and traditions and things but now that we've got sort of Yvette and all of you who've joined us, of course, it's added a song part to it as well and I mean there's craft bits that get added to it and the violin making, there's a whole.. – yes, as far as our charitable status is concerned, it's becoming far more satisfied, I would have thought, by the input that is coming in. But at the same time, it's got to be – we can't just magic up money, it's got to be financially viable. But that's why it's very important to keep trying to interest people in it all the time. If each one of us introduces one person, that puts a bit more, not that it's all about putting finance into the coffers but you've got to be practical, haven't you?

Erm Folk Camp and Halsway Manor overlapped, yes, I'm repeating myself here – with social contact and support and also with volunteers, because we've had some very good volunteers, particularly carpenters, they sort of stand out because we've had, I can think of various people who've done lots of woodwork; Bris and Ron Charles and people who were not at a distance. Bob Hughes, who lives down in Combe Florey, I mean. He's done no end of handiwork up here over the course of time and Sheila too, I mean it encompasses curtains and things like that. But sometimes, because things change here sort of quite a bit really, it's very easy to forget volunteers and it can be quite hurtful to them I think and that's something we really need to be mindful of. Okay, a couple of our carpenters unfortunately have died but other people who've been very good handymen and things like that it's almost as if they're perhaps forgotten but they're not. Laughs. I find it quite delicate to put that but erm it's been a wealth at Halsway Manor to have volunteers because if you start paying for everything, you don't have money for future development. And there's a limit to how much the visitors, the punters, the partakers

D The guests

S are willing to pay. Yes, contributing to fundraising is.. As volunteers, no, this isn't really about folk, but as volunteers, our little sweat shop, which meets up in Nether Stowey at Christine's, where we make things for the shop and then sell from the shop to support the place. But that in a way strengthens some of our input because some of us are not so able at dancing as we used to be. And I regret that I've never really learnt to play something. I'd really like to have an input to music now that my legs aren't so good

D Are you still dancing?

S Barely. I mean I'd like to but I need some treatment. My GP's being a bit economical I feel. Cos the other thing is the Manor's been used for all sorts of things in the past. Clarks the shoe people used it for training courses, CGB used it a bit and the Somerset County Council for whom I worked have used it; various departments; education, social services. I mean my own social work team have been up here for the odd training day and that they really appreciated, continually, really appreciate the situation that Halsway Manor is in, geographically. that we're so fortunate to be in and if you have it for a training day, after lunch, just have half an hour off and go and have a good old walk, just up the hill and back or whatever and that's been really appreciated and during that time you can sort of talk to people about what goes on here and come and join us at some point. There's all sort of people who have introduced; some stay, some don't. Circumstances change and. But my contemporaries tend to be getting a bit older and. But erm it is really important to introduce people and also people become widowed or whatever, it's good to be able to maintain that interest. People give up driving or can't drive, or don't drive once they're widowed or whatever and we need to sort of extend friendship to include those people as well because this place is fairly isolated; you might be able to get up here on the bus but I don't think you'd be able to get back down on a bus ands you wouldn't particularly be wanting to use the bus. There are also the family generations

for the contacts that are developed and certainly the last manager's efforts to encourage more young people is a really necessary thing, isn't it?

D With your work in the shop and your work in the sweat shop, what kind of things do you make for sale?

S Oh, we make all sort of things. If we get asked for it, we've got people who will sew or embroider or make cards or from paintings or photography. Oh what do we make? We have to buy in now. We used to have Linda who used to very keenly make us jam but because of increasing health & safety and things like that she had to retire but now we buy in jam and honey and that's always popular and we buy in sweatshirts with the logo on it and that's nice because it spreads Halsway Manor around and polo shirts and such like. But we make whole loads of domestic things from fabric that people give to us and so we make sort of, well, it may sound specialist things like music stand bags; music stands are dreadful things to carry around but if you can have just a long bag that it will slip into, with one handle over the top, it can be slipped over an arm while you're carrying all sorts of other things and we've sold an immense number of those – we're quite known for those and similarly microphone stands and various music stands and things. We make lots, oh, we've got some ladies in Minehead who knit for us from wool that's given, so they make all sorts of nice woolly hats, lots of children's jumpers and things like that, we've always got a selection of them. But we make all sorts of pot holders and tea cosies and erm, why can't I think of these things we make loads of them? Laughter. We make, oh I know why the mind's blotted out, it's because just recently we've been making metres and metres and metres of gold coloured bunting and all different sorts of things to hang around inside and we've got some more to go outside and that's sort of. We must come to the end of that now and make some more of the things we sell lots of. So, yes, erm come and have a look anyway, there's just loads of things there.

D Perhaps we can take a photograph of you with your craft items?

S Oh, yes, possibly, that's an idea. Yes. Laughter Mind you, it's all stored in the cupboard under the stairs, well, apart from the big boxes of stock which are right down the far end of the corridor. So one minute we're dashing down the corridor, the next minute we're bent double nearly can't get out of the cupboard under the stairs. But we were, ages ago, when Paul first came actually, he did say he'd have to look into what we could do to have a proper place for the shop but that's a low priority, I think! Laughter. One day we'll get stuck in the cupboard under the stairs. But yes. Actually, you asked me at an opportune time, because we just took a record amount of takings only yesterday from February Frolics which was a really generous group. We were within £11 of £400. But that was unusual, 'cos sometimes we're trying to reach three figures. It depends who's here.

D Perhaps February people are more generous!

S Perhaps yes, perhaps yes, I don't know, perhaps so Chuckles. One of the attractions of the place is certainly its setting – the wonderful countryside around and all sorts of things to do here, so if people are interested in coming for their music, or their singing or their dancing and that and they've got plenty right on the doorstep, they've got plenty of other things they can do, whatever they want. But we do seem to attract that, very enthusiastic people, as well, don't we and. I mean, from time to time, one group will get a bit weaker and another group will get a bit stronger, I mean. Singing has really taken off now, whereas it didn't necessarily before. If you have an inspirational leader, this is what happens, isn't it? But with the dancing visits and the groups, we've had so many different musicians because the folk musicians like to come and play for dancing here; it's quite an attractive place to be asked to come to.

D Do you have a favourite band who've been here?

S Erm, well my heyday of dancing has peaked long since. I mean, John and Mary Brock, the Western Country Dance Band, I just loved their playing and the two of them would often come just for the Wednesday evening dance group and they're such skilled people that's really lovely. I mean there are none that I don't like. Some have been more practised than others but usually by the time that they get here they're fairly well practised. Having said that, of course, a weekly or fortnightly group dance meeting is the place for people to be trying to learn to call if they fancy calling a dance, that's good practice and similarly, if a group of musicians is coming together, as long as they've got somebody to keep the tempo and to keep it going, it's the opportunity for other people to join in if the band is willing and I hope they're not too sort of precious about that. But it's another thing of growing, isn't it, growing new bands and growing new callers and growing new dancers, of course. The other thing is, I have heard from outside over the years "Oh, no, we wouldn't be good enough to come to Halsway, you've got to be special to come to Halsway" But I always said "No, for goodness sake, come with me, come with us", or whatever. We always say beginners as well but sometimes people have been more accommodating than others, but if you want a club to succeed or a group to succeed, an activity to succeed, you've just got to offer friendship and instruction to people, it's no good being elitist or whatever, I mean, that's destructive. But encouraging people to enjoy what one's always enjoyed, is great. So I'm glad that we still have the Family Week here as well, so that people come even with tinies.

D Small children..

S Not that there's anything to say that, no, I won't quote Pat Shaw, it's not for children not to come, that was years and years and years ago, that's long since disappeared! Chuckles. Sometimes I wonder, hopefully I can drive for a lot longer but once one no longer drives or has a lift, it's quite difficult.

D Yes.

S And after all, we haven't got people, we haven't got that many people right on our doorstep, we've literally got no-one on our doorstep, erm, you are reliant on.. and that's something that will need to be looked at, won't it, as the activity centre is developed, but I suppose quite a few groups will come perhaps in a minibus or something

Anyway, I'm not going on to folk traditions, am I, Telling Tales. Erm, I mean it's just been THE place to dance.

D Yes.

S Some of my experiences on Wednesday evenings when the group has been successful, and there's quite a nice lot, when the Manor is being successful and has got a nice lot of residents coming in, well, then, we can't always have the Wednesday dance group there and we go up to Bicknoller Village Hall, or Crowcombe Village Hall. We used to go as far as Combe Florey Village Hall as an alternative and the Manor of latter years has been very accommodating with that because they've paid our rent of being somewhere else quite often

D Right, Which is probably spreading the word as well

S Yes, yes, yes, yes, but there's nothing like personally bringing someone along. They know that you really mean it then, rather than just come, because there's.. We're lucky down here that we've got a nice lot of musicians but we can always spread it to more people as well and there are yes, yes.. I mean, Hestercombe House now, which is an old house, that is being developed as a music centre, which is quite a ..thing. They've taken on one of the I think London examining boards, they've got some fairly high level tutors there. But I'm not advertising that

D No Chuckles

S Because I would be advertising the Somerset Rural Music School Laughter which has been going for a long time! But that's not about this either; I've got my finger in too many pies!

D Yes, well, I think, summing up?

S Yes.

D Your involvement really has been a lifetime passion, hasn't it?

S Yes, yes, yes, most certainly, yeah. I'd like to just twist the clock back a bit. I hope with some treatment, I can get back to dancing, because that I really do enjoy and it has been something that has been very important, socially and physically and mentally and. Because that's the other thing with folk dance, it's a really good exercise overall. The elements of it, you know the physical bit, obviously and the

mental bit as well because you've got to be able to count out or know and be aware of space and numbers and things and therefore sort of moodwise and spirit, it's very lifting and to have been to a really good dance was always really nice. Yes Chuckles.

D Well, Shirley, I think we'd better bring that to a halt. That's a really nice end point. Physically uplifting.

S Yes, yes.

D Thank you so much.

S That's alright, it's a pleasure, it's a pleasure.