

Brian Heaton interviewed by Diana Brand on 22 December, 2014 at Halsway Manor

DB: So, Brian, I'm going to ask you first, how you first got involved with folk music.

BH: Well I was a student and had a girlfriend who tried to persuade me to do barn dancing and I thought it was a terrible idea and I wouldn't go and then eventually one Saturday night everybody, all the young people were doing it then, it was the thing, it was the pop dance of the time, I went along and walked into this wonderful atmosphere of music, it was the music, we had the St Helen's folk dance band which was made up of local teachers, and the atmosphere of music swept me off my feet, I think (laughs)

DB: How old were you then?

BH: Oh, I would be about eighteen.

DB: And where was that? Which part..?

BH: That was in St Helens in Lancashire.

DB: Ok, so from that point you got involved with the dance?

BH: That's right, yes. Well, of course, in those days, as I say, it was the pop thing, and we used to meet in the local school, I think it was the secondary school, it would be a secondary school there and there'd be about 200 kids, young people, there, you see, and they'd have sessions until 9 o'clock (um) for Morris dancing or American Square dancing, or Playford dancing or simple, beginners' dancing and then at 9 o'clock everybody joined together and we had a great barn dance until about half past ten. And, that was wonderful, because it was full of young people all doing the same thing and I loved the sociability. I lived in a very rural spot and it was wonderful to be involved in that way.

DB: So, you were involved in the dance, what happened next after...in your early twenties?

BH: Well, I then went to college and so on and then eventually I joined the RAF because it was National Service in those days, you see, and I went..I was posted to Yorkshire and danced with the York Folk and they said would I like to dance in the Royal Albert Hall which was then a highlight of the activities of the Society, a great pity now that the Society doesn't have a focal point of this kind to bring all the people throughout England together because we all looked forward to this and hoped we'd be one of the four people selected. And we went to the Albert Hall and, of course, it was just something quite magical and it sort of all grew from there, you know.

DB: And how did you get involved with Halsway then?

BH: Well, this was much later of course, you see, after I finished with the RAF and, so on, I took a job at a research station just outside London and (um) danced a lot at Cecil Sharp House and eventually Douglas Kennedy, who was, of course, the disciple of Cecil Sharp,

invited me to be the South East area organiser for the English Folk Dance and Song Society, the equivalent of Bill Rutter in the South West, so we were partners, you see, he was covering this area and I was covering London and the South East, and, of course, when this wonderful idea of having Halsway as a folk music centre, folk dance and song, then came up, it was Marjorie Hunt who thought of it, of course, and Bill immediately jumped at a good idea of that kind and eventually – Marjorie and Donald were at that time, the Wardens, as they were called, and people who – it didn't cost anything, you see, we worked for the society so when events were put on at Halsway we were useful people to come and run weekends and courses and so on – right at the beginning of Halsway in 1965.

DB: Can you remember the first time you saw Halsway?

BH: Oh yes, it was completely dark (laughs) oh, we had a wonderful time trying to find it because I remember it was in the winter-time and we drove from the South East in our little A35 or whatever it was at that time with our son who was about three or whatever, no, he was born in 1965 he must have been younger, and we came along and tried to find this place, Halsway Manor, and we drove from Taunton to Williton, no sign of Halsway Manor, so we drove back again to Bishops Lideard, and no sign of Halsway Manor, and we oscillated back to Bicknoller, back to Crowcombe, and eventually we found this little finger-post in the rain and the dark and the storm, and our little dim lights we had on our car and we found it that way. And, of course, when we arrived there was a wonderful welcome by Marjorie and Donald Hunt and so on and that was our first experience of Halsway.

DB: And what did you feel. what did you think of the place?

BH: Well it's a magical place isn't it, I mean the building and so on, but, of course, things were very different in those days. Halsway Manor was, as a folk centre, the brainchild of Marjorie and Donald Hunt who were here with Frances Gair Wilkinson who owned it before we bought it and they were Quakers. They ran it as a, really rather like a glorified youth hostel, very primitive, we all made our own beds and helped wash-up, did everything of that kind, because, of course, Bill, Bill Rutter who was the moving force behind all this, at one time in his life was a Youth Hostel warden and I think his concept of Halsway really was that well to start with anyway we'll have to run it on those sort of grounds and everyone who came took part in running it. It was run rather like a youth hostel everybody came along....

DB: Tell me about those characters then, the people that you have mentioned. What did you think of, of... Marjorie Hunt for instance?

BH: Oh, well, Marjorie Hunt was a wonderful person. She, of course, was what they used to call a Branch Teacher for the English Folk Dance and Song Society in Exeter with Margaret Grant and after the war, just after the war and was one of the people who used to go out like Cecil Sharp, on her bicycle with a little box of records and go round to the villages and run barn dances and so on and teach dancing – the sort of thing that went on for many years and, of course, resulted in people having a good quality of dance, a standard of dance which, of course, they don't do so much nowadays. And she, but she was a real enthusiast, and it was because of this enthusiasm and interest in folk music that when Frances Gair Wilkinson decided to marry Dusty Miller and sell Halsway, she immediately thought, what a wonderful place it would be for this kind of activity.

DB: Were you involved in the actual purchase of the place?

BH: No, no, we'd no money at all at that time. I mean we knew it was all happening and we were invited to buy debentures as you know. We needed to raise ten thousand pounds – what a lot of money – to buy Halsway Manor, it must be worth several million now, but, of course, we lived on a narrow boat you see, in fact, the South East area office, a lot of people don't realise, was on a narrow boat for a time. Most people were either titled or certainly rather better off than we were in the Society. We were the poor fish you see at the bottom, we lived on a narrow boat. We hadn't, our son was born in '65 so we were really quite poor and no money to buy debentures at that time.

DB: But you were involved in the actual setting up..

BH: Well we were involved through Bill and so on yes and we came, as I say, here to run events and so on at that time and thought it was a very exciting thing, in fact we thought why haven't all the areas bought a Halsway Manor, you know. But, of course, there were a lot of people who thought Halsway Manor was a bad idea. They thought Cecil Sharpe was the Mecca of folk music in this country and Halsway Manor was unnecessary. There were people who didn't think Halsway Manor was a good idea. I suppose there might have been an element of jealousy, I don't really know, but we certainly thought it was a brilliant idea.

DB: And how long did you stay involved before you moved down to the South West?

BH: Well, we moved down in 1969, (um) it was, Marjorie and Donald Hunt were of course (of) retirement age and Donald really he'd had enough of running Halsway Manor and it became more and more, as it developed as a folk music centre, there was more work to do, more office work. Marjorie was really the one who did all that sort of thing, Donald was the patriarch who sort of rather presided over Halsway and slept all afternoon in the, room 3 I think it was, upstairs and, but he was very much an influential person. But Marjorie did the work and obviously they were going to retire and Bill thought, well, those two poor people on that narrow boat in Surrey, maybe they would come and run it.

So we came down to Halsway really to take over from Marjorie and Donald in 1969 and we came down of course and were involved in Marjorie and Donald's family because all the staff here, most of the staff, were resident with a few extra people living locally. (um) In the back corridor where the office is now were bedrooms for the staff and there were students, people, we used students during the holidays and so on, all sorts of people. (um) I remember Marjorie used to advertise us in The Lady, you see, and that sort of rather put the stamp on the sort of people that we wanted to get here as staff. But it was a family you see and, I think, Glen will tell you, if you talk to her about it, the experience we had of being part of the family, rather than being members of staff.

DB: So when you came down you actually lived in the Manor did you?

BH: Well, no we didn't, Glen, we had our young son and our daughter, when we moved down in '69, our daughter was born in '69, so we had a four-year-old and a nought-year-old and Glen, quite rightly, said, 'We're not going to bring the children up in a hotel', and so we'd made that decision quite early on. It was a two-edged sword really because it was good to.., I mean if you're running a place of this kind with the sort of atmosphere and activity it

would be wonderful to live there and be amongst it, but, of course, with a young family our priority was naturally our family and so when we moved down, apart for the fact that most of our furniture was spread around the Manor, we lived at Roebuck Farm with Millie and Wilf Chidley, and then eventually found our house which is called Brambletye just down the road. And our idea was to live in Brambletye, and be, working here at the Manor and running the Manor that was our intention. But, in fact, it was quite clear, I think, to us that it wasn't going to work like that, so after a few years I left the Manor and didn't, obviously didn't run it then, and the managership moved on here. It wasn't really the sort of thing we wanted to do with our family.

DB: Were you involved at all in any of the repair work or the decorating or anything with the Manor at all?

BH: (laughs) Well wasn't everybody? I mean we'd no money you see, I did, oh yes, I rewired all the storage heaters in the back of the Manor, and all sorts of things,, I did a lot of the electrical work at that time and a..oh everything, you see, and we did a lot of work in the gardens. And this is why it wasn't possible to live in a separate house and work at the Manor, you really needed to be, at that time certainly, be here doing it. It was quite important to be involved in that way. And we were too young for that, I was about, I would be about thirty five or thirty six or something, and we were too young really to devote our life, with a young family, to the Manor in that way.

DB: What about the actual music? Were you....?(have you been involved with) the music ever since?

BH: Well, you see... Yes, you see, you know, having been an organiser for the society, a teacher for the society, I did Morris and Sword, and sang and played music and called and all those sort of things, you see, because, that was our stock in trade really. And so, coming to Halsway, was an ideal thing except I lived down the road and I would need..at that time we had quite a lot of people who came and used the Manor just for courses and things of this kind and we used to advertise quite widely, we'd have Americans who'd come and stay here and walk on the Quantocks or whatever they were doing, but they had..they were very demanding in some cases. They'd ring..they'd come down and say, 'My room is cold, I need to have a heater', you know at whatever time, they'd like to have breakfast in bed at 6 o'clock and all this kind of thing was going on.

So I'd be here quite early in the morning either with staff or just me making breakfast for some Americans upstairs you see, and (um) then, of course, we'd have the whole day with activities and meals, and all the cleaning and the various things that went on here. But then, you see, if it was a folk course that was on at the Manor, I'd want to be in the...we used to call it the Oak Room..which now has a bar in it, it didn't have a bar in those days.. but we used to sing and play in there until the early hours of the morning. So I'd be here until the early hours of the morning, go home to bed and be back here again early in the morning the next day. It wasn't a good idea really. (laughs)

DB: So all these activities, the dance and the calling and the music, which is your favourite and why?

BH: Well, there's a thing, um, no I like it all, I just love the... I think it's the people, the people are my favourite. And, so I don't really mind, I still play and call and so on, in this area and elsewhere, but I just enjoy people enjoying what I did. It emancipated me in a way, it brought me into a different world and I just like seeing people enjoying themselves. And, of course, I love the music.

DB: And what instrument do you play?

BH: Well I mainly play this rather strange instrument, it's called a British diatonic chromatic accordion and it's an unusual one insomuch that it isn't a piano accordion, it's a button accordion. One side is diatonic, like a melodeon, and the other side is like an ordinary piano accordion. So it's a sort of hybrid instrument that was made by Hohner for Jimmy Shand, it's a 'Shand Morino' accordion – that's an unusual one -but I also play concertinas and three-holed pipes, I did learn the piano originally but I'm not very good on it (laughs)

DB: Can you tell me, Brian, of any special occasion that you can remember or – either a disaster or something particularly funny that happened here?

BH: Disaster...

DB: Well it mighta ghost maybe?

BH: No, I don't believe in ghosts, no I think they were invented later on after we left (laughs) you see. They came, I think, when Bruce and Pepsi were here, that was when we all began to hear about ghosts at Halsway Manor, but I didn't know about them before then.

Well, yes, we used to have some wonderful things. One of the, we had a wonderful mid-summer revels on the tennis court one year, um, the Yetis were there, they were playing, oh there must have been two or three hundred people and we started about 8 o'clock, I remember with lights all over the tennis court and up the steps and so on and we danced, it was one of those wonderful balmy summer evenings, and we all danced and sang and played until dawn and it was just watching the sun come up, a wonderful experience. That was one of the highlights I think – forgotten now in the mists of time,

DB: What about the Open Days? Do you remember the Open Days?

BH: Yes, oh yes, well they've gone on for years and we've played for them and done different things there and yes, I think the big value of those sort of occasions was that when Marjorie and Donald were here, I'm just going back to the beginning because that's where we came in, they felt it was important to have local roots. Apart from being if you like a national centre, I think it's important to call it a centre for people from all over the country its strength is in its local roots, I think, and occasionally, you know, I go around giving little talks about folk music and things to the WIs and so on, and it's interesting because I usually say, 'Now, does anyone know what Halsway Manor is used for?' and in the early days, everybody in the area knew, they knew it was all to do with folk music or something associated, they didn't quite know, but it was all to do with music and dance and so on and they thought it was an interesting place.

Nowadays, nobody has any idea, they think it's an old people's home and things of that kind you see which I think is a pity, because...well, apart from the fact that the message is spread

by people being interested, but there's such a lot of folk activity in this area. I mean nearly every village now has its wassail tree and they all have barn..I could be out nearly every evening doing a barn dance in one village or another in the area, because it's a cult..., part of the culture, rather different from an urban area and I think it's a shame that people aren't more aware of Halsway.

Now you ask about the Open Day, the great value of that, the value of the Open Day was, of course, that people come and find out and next year, well this year, in 2015, I suppose it's next year, the fiftieth anniversary of Halsway, we're going to have all the primary school children from West Somerset and Taunton Deane...coming, we're going to have children from Taunton Deane and West Somerset to come and dance here which will bring all the parents in, you see, and they will find out about it and I think that's quite important really.

DB: Any relationship now with EFDSS?

BH: Well I'm a member still of course, yes and...

DB: And how is the relationship between Halsway and EFDSS?

BH: Well..I mean (clears throat) when I was on the (er) Council or whatever they call it here and I was the Chairman of EFDSS at one time, I was very keen to strengthen the links, and I think they're quite good now, I'm not on the Council so I don't really know what sort of arrangements they have between the two, but it's vital that they do maintain links in my opinion.

But I'm constantly disappointed when I go to Cecil Sharp House that the place is rather run down. It used to be a wonderful, happy, musical place, now it seems to be an administrative centre without anything to administer. That's how it strikes me – there's folk song there and dance, I mean, I go along and I get pleasure from it, primarily because I know a lot of people there but I do feel it's a rather faded image, I think, it seems to me, sitting on the outside now, that the EFDSS is in the decline and Halsway Manor is in the ascendancy and that's just the way it strikes me.

I think with having Paul here, he's given a new breath of life to Halsway, an injection of new ideas. When I was on the Council here I remember we came in and there was, there wasn't even a photocopied leaflet which said what was on. There wasn't a little A5 that you could give to anybody which says, 'there's a Barn Dance or a course on violin making' or anything. There was nothing like that to hand to people and so, I was very keen that we should improve that and that was one thing that has improved so much recently, our, our publicity.

I mean I think we went through a period at Halsway when it was, inverted commas, 'our little Halsway' and a lot of members regarded it as their little treasure, rather than wanting to involve people, because, of course, originally it was owned by members of the English Folk Dance and Song Society, it wasn't owned by the English Folk Dance and Song Society, but members..you had to be a member of the Society to be a member of Halsway Manor Society which was something which Bill Rutter was very keen on, He wanted to strengthen the relationship between the two and it was important to him that we should all be members of both...erm...but in fact I remember the meeting where it was decided that Halsway should go it alone, be independent. I think it was the right thing to do at the time, in retrospect.

DB: Can you remember when that was? Roughly

BH: No

DB: Which decade?

BH: (laughs) Oh it must have been in the seventies, late seventies, that sort of period I think. I could look it up but I can't remember now..but I do remember it being..I voted against it at the time but I think it was the right thing to do and particularly now that we've got somebody with an outward-looking view for the Manor. I think it's quite important that it should be stand alone but should have strong links.

DB: Well, that's absolutely fantastic. I'm going to ask you now if you wouldn't mind giving us a tune. (laughter)

Summary of main interview with Brian Heaton

Brian Heaton and his wife Glen were the first managers of Halsway Manor after Marjorie and Donald Hunt retired. Brian describes how he got involved in folk dancing in his teenage years in Lancashire before becoming South East area manager of the EFDSS and being asked by Bill Rutter to help out with the activities of the newly formed Halsway Manor. He describes the early days at the Manor including recalling Marjorie Hunt's former career as a Branch Teacher and Donald's role as the patriarch of the Halsway 'family'. He explains why his own family didn't live at the Manor and the difficulties of balancing the role of manager with his family commitments. He recalls a particularly memorable mid-summer revels but debunks the ghost myth. He has comments to make about the relationship between Halsway and Cecil Sharp House over the years and describes how, after a period of protectionism, he believes that Halsway Manor is in a period of ascendancy.