

Yvette Staelens interviewing Fiona Birchall on 10th March 2015

YS: This is Yvette Staelens recording Fiona Birchall at Halsway Manor on 10th March 2015. Fiona tell me where you were born and when.

FB: I was born in Aldershot in Hampshire in March 1947.

YS: and what did your parents do?

FB: My father well having just finished the war he was in the army, he was in the Queens own Scottish er dear me I've forgotten the title! He was in the Scottish Regiment but he left my mother at just before I was born and I only saw him once on my very first birthday and I can't say I remember him. My mother was from a fairly middle class background. She went to work in the local grocers when she left school at fourteen. She was something of an invalid because she had TB and several spells in hospital. erm so not professional people at all. Music and dancing was not a part of my upbringing.

YS: No, so when did it come into your life?

FB: I joined a church choir when I left school at sixteen and discovered yes I could sing. Not brilliantly, enough for a solo on a Sunday. I didn't start dancing until I was I think about forty. I was looking for a new hobby, something active and a friend said what about the local barn dance club which met nearby. I knew my husband wouldn't come with me – we were champion non dancers but I thought I would give it a go. I started in the October thought that he might possibly come to the Christmas party and he enjoyed it so much that he became a member immediately after and the following year he was Chairman of the Club.

YS: Which Club was that?

FB: It was Fleet Barn Dance Club and we changed the name to Fleet Folk Dance Club later on.

YS: So what sort of dances do you do then Fiona?

FB: Er English Country always, a few American, occasionally Scottish but generally I would do Scottish Dancing when we started going to Festivals which I loved but never did it regularly because I felt we had enough on our plates especially as we had a young family. So it was mostly English which I love.

YS: Did you dance to music or recorded?

FB: We had musicians who came to the club not always the same ones. It was a sort of adhoc band of whoever turned up and over the past many years I suppose we've

had a mixture of live music – may be one may be two musicians and CD's. Records were before my time and we did have some 78's belonging to the club. Cassettes certainly when I started dancing and gone on to CD's we tried mini discs as well. So it is mostly recordings.

YS: and when did Halsway come into your life?

FB: I think that was about 1991 we came down the first time in October with a local folk club – a folk dance club and just came from Friday night to Sunday afternoon. We enjoyed it enormously. The people organizing it were about to give up. Mary Hyacinth said she would take on the organising and we've been coming with Mary ever since. It is still Mary's House Party.

YS: So you were there at the beginning Fiona.

FB: I was at the beginning of Mary organising it but she had been coming down for many years before that.

YS: and do you remember that first visit. What do you remember?

FB: I remember it was cold outside we hadn't been down this way before. We'd known the West Country but not this area. I remember the heavy frost out there – the warm welcome – to come in the hall for the very first time and see a blazing log fire and welcoming staff. It has never ever been any different. As soon as we turn at the top of the lane and drive along in front of the wall and turn in front of the gates we say "Ah we've come home". I always say this is our home from home. We don't live in as quite a grand place as this but it is such a lovely homely atmosphere.

YS: and how has it changed since the first visit?

FB: I don't think it has. The staff have changed. It is always lovely to see familiar faces but inevitably over the years people have moved on or just retired and the atmosphere stays the same. There has never been anybody where we've said "Oh I am sorry they're on this weekend". They have all been absolutely lovely.

YS: Excellent Yes

FB: It's just a wonderful place.

YS: So you mentioned dancing but we've also had the conversation about your story telling. Tell me more.

FB: I first came across story telling in the traditional field up at Cecil Sharp House, English Folk Dance & Song Society. We went up for a Christmas dance and we danced in the afternoon and also in the evening but there was a Celidh spots,

entertainment spots which included story telling from Taffy Thomas and I was absolutely engrossed. I felt like a little child sitting there with my mouth open and my eyes wide saying "And what happened next" and I thought oh I would love to do this. But how on earth do you start where do you find stories. How do you learn them? I couldn't do that and this must have been about fifteen years before I had the chance to go with the Women's Institute to Denman College. There was a story telling weekend. I didn't know what it involved. I was very apprehensive thinking am I going to make a fool of myself. That's always the big problem. Will I know what to do? We had a wonderful tutor who went round first of all what we hoped to get from the course. We all had different aims, we had very different backgrounds. One young woman was a Sunday School Teacher, she wanted to tell stories better for the children. There was a couple of social workers. There was myself and ex librarian, a dancer knew nothing about story telling really. I read but it is very different and I came away from that weekend having written a couple of stories of my own. Learnt a story to tell and I thought this is me. This is me, this is what I want to do. After that I found there was a course advertised for Halsway Manor with Sharon Jacksties who was about to publish her book about Somerset Folk Tales and again I came down very nervous thinking everybody else would be so much better. But no, there were a lot of us. We had varying amounts of experience and what I loved was that Sharon took us round the area and told stories pertaining to the locations and that meant a lot and after that I came down the following Autumn I think. That was February with Sharon, Autumn with Taffy Thomas and I think that was when Peter Chand came who was an Indian, I think born and bred here er but he told Indian tales which was an expansion of what I was absorbing and since then I've been collecting stories avidly. I am an official WI speaker so I go out to groups to tell stories and I've warned them I've got enough repertoire now to tell stories every day for 8 hours a day for the next 3 months. I promise I won't. I was also lucky to find a local story telling group which was a teaching group and we had professional story tellers leading and they were excellent and we learnt the technics of how to learn a story, how you tell it. Don't learn it word for word and the chance to practice it in a, if I say a critical environment it was all positive criticism. It was a case of we will tell a story and everybody in the group would then say one fact of what they liked. What worked well – I liked your characterization, I liked your change of voice, I liked your gestures. And then not what they didn't like but perhaps it would be even better if. The positive emphasis we were free to accept or reject any comments made. The usual thing was ooh that's an idea I'll try it. You might go home thinking what a load of rubbish that's not my style but very often I have changed a story to fit something that somebody asked for. She said but that's all very well but what happened when the real owner of the treasure came back and found it missing. So when I tell a story I think no he was carried off to serve in the army and what happened to him as a story for another day. So that I learnt from a woman who was very new to storytelling.

YS: And tell me about story telling at Halsway. What does Halsway bring to the process about learning about stories?

FB: It has got so much atmosphere. There is the history. The library has a wonderful story telling collection. I think it is just the atmosphere. It is relaxing and although the

courses can be quite intensive we learn a lot in a fairly short time. You can then sit in the library think about what you've learnt. There is space to work in pairs, quite often you bounce ideas off each other. You tell a story to your colleague and then she will go or he will go and tell it to somebody else and you get another story coming in. So it's very relaxing and yet stimulating at the same time. It is quiet, there are no worries, no children, no pets, no meals, no washing up. A good supply of coffee and food and you couldn't ask for more.

YS: Fiona I am going to ask you to tell me a story now with a Halsway slant if you would.

FB: Certainly. This started from the very first course I went on at the WI College. I suddenly realized as I was going I was supposed to have prepared a ghost story to tell during the course. I hadn't done that I had forgotten. So I quickly invented something in my head and I am not imaginative. After the course was when I had had people saying Oh! Did that really happen? I had to say no that was invented on the A34 going north. I then adapted it and I gave it a Halsway connection. So it starts that I was invited to come to Halsway as a dance caller. It was for a group I hadn't met before, I knew nobody there. I called the dance on the Friday evening and among the people sitting around the room, The Long Room was a lady with a stick. She sat all by herself, she didn't seem to speak to anybody but she enjoyed the dancing and the music enormously. She tapped her foot in time, she clapped at the end of every dance. She had such a happy expression it was a joy to look at her. I wanted to speak to her at the end of the evening but somehow she had slipped away, probably gone to bed early and I didn't see her. The next day I was busy through the day again I called the evening dance and again there she was sitting in the corner by the fireplace all by herself enjoying every moment. Again I didn't see her go from the room and I looked for her on Sunday morning -couldn't find her. Eventually we packed up after lunch, we had the traditional Halsway cream tea and I said to one of the musicians whom I did know. "Tell me, I saw a lady at the dances I didn't see her dance. Who was she? She enjoyed herself so much it seemed a pity she couldn't join in, but I did see her walking stick". And the musician turned to her partner and then turned back to me and said "Tell me, what was she like?" And I said what she looked like and the only thing that worried me was I mentioned that one of the dances was one that I had written and that it was for the grandchildren born to the daughter of one of our club members. Her daughter had twins and the dancer was so proud of the twins and I had called the dance David & Jessica for these twin babies and as we were dancing it I noticed my lady with the walking stick had a tear on her cheek. And Susan said "mmm I know the lady you mean, her name was Jessie and she and her husband used to come to Halsway ever such a lot and they were leaving after one weekend, the weather was bad and there was a terrible accident and David her husband was killed and Jessie was badly injured. She came back to Halsway to watch but it was never the same and in fact we haven't seen her here for quite a long time. You were lucky because Jessie died ten years ago". End of story.

YS: Thank you so much. Fiona it has been a pleasure to talk to you. Can I just ask one final question? What does Halsway mean to you?

FB: I hesitate to say everything because I have family. I would hate the thought of not being able to come. I would be heartbroken if it closed as a folk Centre or if for some reason I couldn't come to Somerset at least once a year to stay here.

YS: Thank you