

Yvette Staelens interviewing Will Lang on 1st April 2015

Yvette: Thank you Will for taking part in Telling Tales.

Will: Pleasure.

Yvette: So I want to start with, tell me about where and when were you born?

Will: I was born in Weston-Super-Mare, 29th January 1985.

Yvette: And what did your parents do?

Will: For a living? My dad is, or was, in the aeronautics industry, worked for, then British Aerospace. And my mum worked for, then Rolls Royce, actually as the head of the private dining rooms there.

Yvette: And how did folk music come into your life?

Will: Folk music came into my life through my parents. My mum started folk dancing when she was, I think, about sixteen, seventeen. And when my mum met my dad, she said “it’s either go folk dancing with me or don’t go out with me at all.” So I was born into a very folky family.

Yvette: And what about music?

Will: Musically, I didn’t really, I had cello lessons and violin lessons when I was in primary school but I didn’t pay that much attention to them. I wasn’t too bothered. And then when I was twelve, my brother, who’s quite a lot older than me, a folk fiddler, said “What do you want for your birthday?” and I said “I want a fishing rod, please.” He said, “No you’re not getting one of those, you’re going to have one of these drums, which was a bodhran, an Irish flat drum. You’re going to make yourself some money.” I didn’t believe him but now eighteen years on, I am a professional musician and composer, well known for my bodhran playing. I could have been a professional fisherman but we will never know.

Yvette: So tell me more about that progress, you know, from those early times to where you are now.

Will: So, strangely, the progress came from my brother and two of his, his bandmates actually started a young musicians course here, in the mid nineties. He was asked to by the general manager, at the time, who was Malcolm Beaumont.

Yvette: Your brother’s name?

Will: Steve Lang. I came to the first year of it happening, when I was too young. My parents came too. My dad is a caller. So he came to call the barn dance for them on Saturday night and then from the next year onwards, I came up until I was seventeen, I think, I came to the

Young Musicians here until it disbanded. Then I got a place on the Folk and Traditional Music degree at Newcastle upon Tyne so I was lucky with the progress and the teaching that that offered me and the contacts. I studied up until 2007, became a course tutor, was touring Europe at that time with a couple of bands and now I am a choral, orchestral composer, working a lot with the folk idiom. The Musical Associate for the National Youth choir of Great Britain recently had a commission for Durham cathedral, all folk inspired pieces, 150 piece choir, 50 piece orchestra and I run the Hothouse programme here, which is the Young Musicians, dancers' programmes. So it's kinda come full circle.

Yvette: So tell me more about how Halsway came into your life. You know, you've mentioned coming as a young person.

Will: Yep.

Yvette: What was it like?

Will: When I first came here, it was really, really boring. The reason it was really boring was 'cos I was about two or three years old. The Manor was, for various reasons, in a bit of financial, managerial trouble. Jeff Rye, at the time, said "I would like Martin and Jenny Lang to come in as Company Secretary and to help with the hospitality". So I spent every weekend here while they were sorting that out. We would put our caravan at the back of the mews and stay in our caravan. So while they were doing all the bits that they were doing, I would go up and down the back alley on my trike. So, yeh, it was fairly interesting. My grandma asked me where I lived when I was three, apparently, and I said "Halsway Manor". So I must have spent quite some time here.

Yvette: So tell me a bit more about the Ryes.

Will: The Ryes came from Weston-Super-Mare or lived in Weston-Super-Mare from the time I remember. My parents used to folk dance with them. Don't really remember too much about them because they were in my younger years and I, you know, you don't really prioritise what you remember at that point. One thing I do remember is, Bessie used to be a very keen flower presser. She was always pressing flowers and selling them in the shop. I assume she must have ran the shop at that point and she was selling them to, you know, make funds for the Manor. Clearly, they were amazingly instrumental in what this place has become. So, you know, they are part of the fabric of Halsway Manor Society.

Yvette: What did they, how did they relate to you? Did they speak to you much?

Will: I was quite a cheeky child, well I'm quite a cheeky person now, but I can get away with it a little bit more. I was quite a cheeky child. So I have, the only real memory I have is Bessie being quite stern with me but I can imagine I completely deserved it, so that's fine.

Yvette: So, do you have any other stories in those early days? Did anything happen, any incidents?

Will: Lots, yeh, lots. I remember there was one waitress that would always talk to me, Auntie Lyn, I called her. And I think it must have been when I was around six, seven perhaps, we had a fire in the, had a fire in the staff room and one of the sofas caught alight. I was in room 11. I always used to stay in room 11 with my parents and my grandma. We used to put her in, used to put her in, she used to stay in, what we called, the priest hole, which was just over the porch. I remembered all of us having to get out on the grounds in front because of the fire brigade coming. What else do I remember? One year that my parents were running the Christmas party, um, because the Mews and the Manor have separate electricity feeds from the grid, we lost all electric in the Manor, so my dad had to take a feed from the Mews, all the way over to here, so people could, you know, eat and see, all those things, so there are a few things, yeh. I remember a lot of the ghost stories. When I said coming the year when I was too young for the Young Musicians. I'd grown up with the ghost stories, so I told all these slightly older youngsters about the ghost stories. I went to bed, fast asleep and apparently, they were up to five o' clock in the morning absolutely petrified of the idea they'd see a ghost.

Yvette: So, tell me one.

Will: The one that I love the most is the idea that there is a dog in the Great Hall. I honestly say I've never heard any of, or seen or experienced any of this. The other one is the blue and white lady, the white lady that goes up to see her husband, I assume that they were the Lord and Lady of the Manor, let's say and he was accused and hanged for murder and buried on the back hill here. So she would be seen in the back passageway of the Manor, every night as the white lady gone up to see him and come down as the blue lady. And the idea is that she's blue when she comes back because she is cold from being on top of the hill. Some of these change massively. One of my tutors, that we had staying here, a little while ago, was staying in room fifteen, which was the old manager's flat and she was asking about the ghost stories. I told this very watered down ghost story about hearing the servant's children up there playing. And then another member of staff told her a little bit more of a dark, horrific story of suffocation and things and then within seconds she had changed rooms and gone over to the Mews 'cos she wasn't staying in the Manor. So even if they are not true, it's a bit of fun and a bit of fairy tale to, you know, to hang on to.

Yvette: Is there any one, who stands out in your memories, you know, all the time you've been to the Manor, any person that has influenced you or you're inspired by or

Will: I don't know whether influenced or inspired but there was a general manager, back in the early nineties called Bernard Hucker. And um, he was just the most amazing gentleman. He's the kinda, I know it's fashionable now, for people to wear ties with matching hankies, but he was doing it then when it wasn't fashionable, it was just the gentleman's thing to do. And I remember asking my mum about it recently, saying "I want to do that thing", I said "How did he do it"? And apparently all he did was buy two ties and cut one up, which I thought was fantastic. But, um, yeh, he did amazing things with this place in terms of turning it around. Its reputation as a hospitality place, as well as a folk centre. Yes I always remember, remember him and I suppose it was around the time my memories were forming. So him definitely. And yeh, I mean, there're lots of characters, Jeff and Bessie, as I said, I don't remember them too well but they are part of the fabric of this place. Malcolm Beaumont was a very, he had a very clear vision, that without young people around the Manor, we wouldn't have a future. That's something that I've always been keen to carry on,

just to keep, you know, the tradition alive and to keep the Manor going for another fifty years. And I'm sure there are lots more people but I can't remember them at the moment.

Yvette: What about the other young people like yourself? Were you very much on your own here?

Will: When I was my age. When I was a teenager, we had the Young Musicians here and there were probably about twenty five people. Consistently, I am the only person that I know, of my age, that has been coming for this long. There are no other people of a similar generational time. But there's more and more being attracted now by the work that we are doing. The Hothouse Festival and courses.

Yvette: Tell me more about that?

Will: Basically, the Young Musicians courses that my brother ran stopped in about '99. And when I got to a certain stage in my professional career, I thought, okay, I've got the contacts now, I've got the experience, so I can probably do this myself. So we started in 2010. That year, we had one course of nine participants. They worked up an hour long concert. We presented it at Sidmouth Folk Festival and that was all very good. The Manor got some nice profile out of that. And that was just about the time where the Manor was becoming outward looking again. And talking in the public and it wasn't a kept secret. Fast forward five years now, we've got two courses. We've got one in the spring, so Easter holidays. We've got one in July. We've got one day and night Youth Folk Festival called the Hothouse Festival and we've just started the Junior Hothouse. So the main Hothouse is run for thirteen to twenty year olds and the Junior Hothouse is for eight to twelve year olds, so primary school age. We've had a lot of high profile, young, professional folk musicians tutoring on the course, which is great for the kids. They see someone with a career in folk music. They see a fresh take on folk music and they are motivational and inspirational characters. We've had young musicians come from as far as Ireland to come to the courses. The tutors have come from as far as Australia to teach on the courses. And now this is about the Junior Hothouse, we've got two primary music teachers, so the specialist music teachers in primary schools that are teaching. So we've got a real buzz and pool of excellence in terms of teaching which we have started to build up, which is amazing. You know, I'm very, very proud of what they do for this place. And they believe in it. As soon as we get one tutor here for the first time, they want to come back again. It's their second home, as it is for all of us, you know and that is really, really important

Yvette: So is that what Halsway means to you. If I asked you, you know, what does Halsway mean to you, Will?

Will: Halsway is, it is just my second home. It offers me, it offers me an escape from the outside world, where I am able to focus on just music. You can't get any phone reception. You'll be lucky if you have any wi-fi. People can't get hold of you and that's good. So that means I can escape from the real world. I can focus on folk music. It is, you know, it is somewhere I've grown up around, it feels very, very comfortable and very welcoming for me but moreover, it's somewhere that I am able to tell people to come here. If I can persuade you to come once, you will be hooked for life and that's, Halsway is this weird and wonderful place and there's not that many of them now that the customers of an organisation have a

relationship with it for life. You know, it's not a shelf life thing. As soon as you've come once, you will be coming for all of your life until whenever.

Yvette: Will, I would like you to share something of your talent for this, what're you going to do?

Will: I'm going to do a song that's quite close to my heart. I've taken it very many places with me. At this year's Hothouse 2015, we're doing a theme of traveling and travellers, so it was the first one that popped to mind. It was written by Peggy Seeger and Ewan MacColl for the radio ballad of the Traveling People in the sixties and it's called "The Moving on Song". I will just sing you a verse and a chorus. So it goes:-

*Born in the middle of the afternoon in a horse drawn carriage on the old
A5*

*The eighteen wheeler shook my bed. The police came and the little one
said*

You should have been born in someplace else.

Move along, get along. Move along, get along. Go.

Move, shift.

Born in the tattie lifting time in an old bow tent in a tattie field.

The farmer said "Your work's all done, it's time that you were moving on.

You better be born in someplace else.

Move along, get along. Move along, get along. Go.

Move, shift.