

Transcription of Interview with Neville Gardner. 28th September 2015 by Mary Reece

Mary: Neville, can you tell me about the first time you came to Halsway Manor; what you were doing here?

Neville: Cor...I can't remember the exact first time. I've looked in my diary and I've got a note in there on the 24th of November 1967 that, er, there was a musician's weekend with Nan, I've got Nan there, so I think that would be Nan Fleming Williams, who actually did a number of musicians weekends over through the years.

Mary: Gosh , so how old would you have been about then? Teens? Twenties?

Neville: Mmm. I don't know. Twenty-four, twenty-five? Something like that.
Mary OK. A young man. What was your interest in music then?

Neville: I was playing the violin because I used to go playing with Nan Fleming Williams in Cecil Sharp House on a Thursday night for the Beginners' Dance Club and we used to have a big band there as well, around fifteen people

Mary: Lovely. So you came to several weekends after that? Similar?

Neville: The next date I've got in my diary was 1977.

Mary: Ooh – ten year gap

Neville: Well I don't know as it's not necessarily ten year gap but there's 20th August to 26th August so I think that's a week's summer holiday or something; well it looked like it anyway. It was Saturday to Saturday. Um.

Mary: What was Halsway like in those days?

Neville: Probably the nearest thing is probably almost like a Youth Hostel is, where you had to participate in looking after yourself.

Mary: Oh, I see.

Neville: So, washing up for instance – everyone would muck in and dry the.., do some of the washing up and dry, but there was always someone there in command of us you see.

Mary: Sorting out the chores.

Neville: Yes, and people used to do it, you could do all sorts of things. For instance the tables in The Long Room had to be moved in order to move space up. People always did that and they also cleaned the tables and they put the crockery out and that's not allowed to do now with Health and Safety. But people survived. (Laughter). So that was one of the things we used to do. I can remember, er, up on the...there used to be a tennis court, up on the top there

with loads of wiring around it to stop the balls going down the hill, and they used to have dances up there.

Mary: Really? Outside?

Neville: Outside and there's a place called The Cop now, which is almost... which is a bar, and next to it there was a barbecue, you can just about see the remains of it. It was a stone built one, and we used to have barbecues up there. So it was like a barbecue/dance altogether. I can remember that.

Mary: Did these things go on during the night or...?

Neville: Ssssssh (laughter) I think it was sort of evening...

Mary: Oh Quite civilized

Neville: It would get darker later on sort of thing but we used to have a band and live musicians of course 'cos there was no electricity there. Er, what else? I certainly remember that going up there. Um...

Mary: So things have changed quite a lot.

Neville: I was here next in, I've got a couple more dates in my diary. It was 1980, 24th of December to 31st December and 1981 24th to 28th December – both of them were over the Christmas period – and in fact, there is a photograph in the archive. The photograph in the archive showing all the people that were there that Christmas and I can identify myself just about. (Laughter), I certainly look a bit younger. Well it's a ...it's a ...35 years ago, that was. Quite a lot of the people I can identify as no longer with us; they're dead. So, I used to come regularly to musician's weekends from time to time but not necessarily every year but, um, 'cos it's quite a long way, it's 170 odd miles from where I live so, it's not round the corner.

Mary: But now you come regularly. What's your role now?

Neville: Well, in 2005, I was appointed as the Company Secretary for Halsway Manor, and I did that for four and a half years, so during that period, I was coming down virtually every month, once a month, just for that, yes. So that was almost a full time job at the time. We had all sorts of little problems like, one of the first things was planning. There was...because they had to put in a toilet for disabled people they decided that there was a space in the Gentlemen's toilet at the back, in the back corridor. So they were going to, it was a very large rectangular building so said then ok, we'll put a corridor on the side and put a disabled toilet at the front which is easily accessible from the corridor, and then the Gents can go round the back and it's still big enough. And the planning authorities passed it, and then they put a proviso on, providing the door onto the corridor went back on. Now because the disabled door has to be a lot wider in order to get somebody in a wheelchair in it, it swung in an arc which went across where the outside door fitted. So if the door was put back, you could not use the disabled toilet. So, we appealed. Now that appeal had to go right up to the

deputy... for the Prime Minister's deputy office and he looked at it and they sent an inspector down and he looked at and he said 'Aw, definitely, no question, The door itself is of no consequence; it's a modern door, 1920s or 30 something, it doesn't do anything. Case dismissed. So, the door's no longer there now, but that was the sort of thing that used to happen with the planning authorities who would not let us do anything.

Mary: It all takes such a long time!

Neville: Another thing which I can tell you about was the,,the boiler which eventually decided to give up the ghost, which was down in the cellar. We tried to get permission to put another boiler in there, No, it wasn't possible because the chimney had to be lined and the chimney wasn't big enough so we then inspected every single chimney in the building and there was not one that would actually fit the bill. So we then asked them can we put an outside chimney up, like we have where the laundry is. Oh no, you're not allowed to do that., Sigh. So eventually we said oh can we put the new boiler up in the roof? Well...don't know about that ...not sure he said. Fire hazard...so we got the fire officer and checked as well...providing you've got fire insulation around the roof you can do that. Right, then we had a chimney. Well, we suggested that because in the roof way there was a double, I don't know what you would call it, it was a valley in between the roofs so we could put the chimney in the valley and it can't be seen from below. Oh well, they said it might be seen from someone on top of the hill, so you can't put it up staright; you can put it straight and then at right angles and paint it black in case it reflects the sun. That took about 3 years to do. Which gives you an idea of the sort of things

Mary: It's soul destroying!

Neville: Which was...it takes hours to do and is expensive as well cos every time you handed in a new plan...it gives you an idea of a couple of things which Halsway has to fight against in order to survive. And they have to put in things because of regulations, and then they're not allowed! And also , since I was teaching violin making in my Local Education Authority, you see university lecturer was my profession, and I went to evening class to learn about violin making, and then I took over the class, and after a time about ten years or so, it got handed to me and so I've been teaching violin making for about 17 years now I think. Now, of that, I started violin making at Halsway back in 2006 because I could see that the Local Education Authorities were cutting back any courses that did not have a computer attached to them. So you have to have a computer or it doesn't count. So all the craft courses gradually... and now there are about 3 left in the country, or 4, that's all violin making classes.

Mary: Really

Neville: So it was a start, I saw this 10 years ago; in those days there were probably about 8 or 9 – a lot more, and they've gradually been chopping them. Because I think... well that gave an opportunity for Halsway to provide something which was practice and supported their music, their folk music...

Mary: Absolutely. Yes.

Neville: to carry on.

Mary: And traditional craft making.

Neville: Exactly. Yes
Mary Ticks all the boxes.

Neville: And according to the memorandum of the Association, it was perfectly in order to make instruments which were then used in demonstrating folk music something so it fitted into the charitable objectives of the society.

Mary: So the people who come to learn from your violin making, do they come from all over the country or international?

Neville: Yes, well, I've got somebody coming from Edinburgh, and I had someone coming from bit further north than that – he stopped coming, but he did. I had somebody coming from Switzerland for a couple of terms, so it varies. We sometimes get people and we've got a few local people here as well.

Mary: As you were saying, there are fewer and fewer all the time to spread that knowledge, that craft.

Neville: That's probably happening over the country as a whole. There are fewer and fewer people who know the complications involved. It takes about 250 hours to make a violin; and I've also supervised a couple of cellos and they take, um, 750 hours to make, cello. So one of my students made a cello – took her 10 years to make that and she's decided she wants to make another one. (Laughter). She's making 2 violins at the moment; she's making another one now.

Mary: It's fascinating and people are coming from...

Neville: Well, this year, the current...this September which I'll be starting this afternoon, will be the 20th programme at Halsway Manor. Amazing

Mary: Oh Yes.

Neville: I don't know where the time's gone.

Mary: Well it must be fulfilling or you wouldn't still be doing it. And it's such a lovely venue too.

Neville: Well, this particular room is very good because it has lots of light and then it's...you need light a lot when you're doing violins because you're working to tenths of point one of a millimetre and we need light to see where the little grooves are...it's very, very useful this. I don't think there's another room in the place that's as good as this.is 'cos we've got light from the four windows you see, it all helps and very good lighting from above as well. So that's the lot.

Mary: So do you do your violin making just in London or do you it in other places?.

Neville: I've been on other courses. I went to courses in Loughborough and Cambridge, sort of weeks courses to learn things and other people give me an input. Mmm. Yes so I don't do it by myself, we have Corrie Schreijver who also teaches and she was trained in the Welsh School of violin making and she's got a violin shop for a number of years so she's got a lot of practical experience and I've got a lot of theoretical experience so between the two of us we can answer virtually all questions.

Mary: So are there differences then in the different...like the Welsh making?

Neville: Well that's no longer in existence now. That stopped because they were going to...they wanted to increase the number of students and it didn't work because you cannot teach a craft in front of 20 students – it's impossible. I mean at Halsway we have a maximum of 10 students to two tutors. So, that's a 5:1 ratio so you can do that and they get good attention, they're not hanging about waiting to get some. Evening class you can get 16 students, one tutor, and they never get to you in that evening so it can be very frustrating.

Mary: So are these popular courses would you say?

Neville: Oh I usually get between 8 – 10 people here and we've been going for 20 years.

Mary: And you do it annually? Bi-annually?

Neville: Last year I started an extra week. We were doing it twice a year, 2 weekends. Then last September we had a mid-week one. Some students said, 'Can we have more time please?' So I said 'Ok we'll try and see'. Last year we had Monday to Friday and we had 10 students there so we had ...and we're running again this year and we've got 9 students this year booked in. There should have been another one but she took into hospital; that sort of thing happens. So I think it's reasonably satisfactory.

Mary: So what are your feelings about Halsway? You've obviously been involved in the running of things as well as being a tutor.

Neville: Well, it is a charity and it doesn't actually cover its costs. As far as I once worked out for a number of years it needs something like £20, 000 a year but that's besides courses, in order to survive as an entity. Because the costs of running it are enormous

Mary: But as a resource for folk?

Neville: It's unique. It's absolutely unique. There's nothing else remotely like it. It's the only residential centre dedicated to folk music, folk songs, any of the traditions and anything like that. And it's a resource. So people anywhere in the country can access and use the facilities. And there isn't anywhere else. Absolutely. The only other place slightly like this is in Cecil Sharp House which is the headquarters of English folk now in Somerset. They've got a very good library there so that's another resource but the 2 are to some extent complementary, sometimes they overlap but there isn't anywhere else. And if there's a fire in one of those

places , it's gone. Well, I'm just saying it could happen and it's good to have 2 reasonable libraries which have got records of what has happened.

Mary: Some of your fond memories then. Have you got anything in particular which sticks out about Halsway?

Neville: Well. Memories...I can remember playing for one of the children's days. I was playing the violin and found we had about 500 children dancing on the lawn there, sort of thing. It was .perfect...and I joined in the band for that, for suppers; a couple of times I did that.

Mary: Oh lovely! That's one of the nice things...the involvement of children. It keeps those songs...

Neville: It's absolutely essential for without the children, we'll say childhood – anybody up to the age of 50 if you like (laughter) 'cos without those new people coming in, it will just die and wither away and just vanish and that would be very sad. It's been going for over 50 years now.

Mary: But I think it's enriching to anybody who gets to know about the traditional side of music .

Neville: But it has it's problems. I think with recruiting staff because it is in an isolated part of the world – which gives it a benefit because, actually, you come here, oh, we're still in England. You don't get lots of planes going over, you can't hear the main road although it's only 300 yards away, you're actually in a rural situation which is quite rare nowadays in England because we're getting so congested with people. and that's its benefit. You walk out the back door and you're on to an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty sort of thing on the Quantocks. It's got a lot of firm benefits to it.

Mary: Yes it is, it's marvellous.

Neville: It deserves supporting but, as I say, staff is a problem because it's an isolated place and they have a lot of competition from Minehead, with the Butlins, who are able to pay staff a bit more probably, and it's easier to get there with transport.

Mary: That's true. Well it's been really interesting. I've learned some things I hadn't heard from before.- about the barbecue and dancing outside.

Neville: This was an interesting book I picked up where I had in my house where I was seeing the managers with David and Iris Whewell, I don't know when that was, but it says they were happy to have a minimum booking of 15 people which I suspect would not cover the costs nowadays. You need about 35 I think to cover costs, so that's a long time ago and it says a maximum accommodation of 42.. I think the accommodation now is up to 62, something of that nature – 60, 62. So there have obviously been changes in the way the rooms have been organised. Certainly, when I came here first there were no en suite facilities at all. And now I think about 60 % of the rooms have all got en suite facilities, so there has

been a move towards modern requirements. But they're still limited to what they can do because of the fact it's a Grade II * listed building, therefore you cannot do anything inside without planning permission and I've already explained some of the problems with planning. They wanted to put a door up – 'No you can't change the door. You can face it with something but you can't get a new door in. I mean, that's the details it goes in to.

Mary: Stuck between the Devil and the deep blue sea in many cases. You have to improve, but it's a struggle to do so...

Neville: Well, you know, things are still surviving. Just about covering, costs with the people leaving legacies...

Mary: Neville, it would be lovely to hear one of your favourite tunes that you play on the violin. Would that be all right? Can we record some? Thank you very much.
(Separate recording of 'Auchden House')