

**This is Dorothy King, interviewing Bob Hughes for the Telling Tales project at Combe Florey on 25 August 2015.**

**D:** Bob, thank you for agreeing to do this interview. Tell me about your early life, how you got interested in music and your introduction to Halsway Manor.

**B:** I was a dancer, in a dance group at Halsway, like many of us and er, we, sorry, no, that's wrong. I started dancing down here when I came down to do my national service at Norton Manor Camp. There I met Sheila who was a little typist.

**D:** Oh, yes?

**B:** And we got to work together. We were dancing there and we were invited to go to a folk dance, which was at Porlock, with the Yetties. Coming up to the dance, the week before, was the big Flu, where pretty well everybody was down with the bug. But this young girl here, Sheila and myself and another woman, I can't remember who it was, ran the whole of the Fete, food and everything and we were absolutely shattered come the evening and this young girl said "Come along to the folk dance with us and you'll get rid of all that". We didn't believe her but we went anyway and believe me or not, it was true. The tiredness from working on the Fete vanished.

**D:** Right.

**B:** And the shatteredness from dancing came! Laughter. It was just pure relaxation, I think. From there, we got very keen on dancing and followed round and we joined the Belgium Society.

**D:** What's the Belgium Society?

**B:** It's the Belgians' equivalent to Folk Dance here. In fact they belonged to the Folk Dance and dancing was dancing and they also did English Morris. And we used to go over there with the Belgians and they'd come back here. We had a good time, catching the boat at the last minute.

**D:** Laughter

**B:** That, unfortunately, I think, has broken up now.

**D:** Right.

**B:** We then joined Halsway and danced from then on in Halsway. Well, I think that 'sabout all I can say about that really. Oh, we did start a Rapper Sword Group.

**D:** What's a Rapper sword group?

**B** It's a group dancing with the Rapper sword, set dancing and the Rapper sword is a steel strip with a fixed handle on one end and a rotating handle on the other end. It's very flexible and you used to literally tie yourself in knots and a good team could make the steel scream. We never achieved that! Laughter. The sword was for cleaning the pit ponies, you scrape the coal dust off the ponies.

**D** Right.

**B** And when there was no work, they danced for money on the street, the Rapper teams. They got that from the Long Swords, which has much more history a solid sword, a wooden sword. I don't know much about the history of that at all but that's where the Rapper came from in as much as they saw these teams dancing and thought "we can do that, it looks good, we could do it on the street, so when they tried, they found they could do even more, with the sword being flexible. And so came on the rapper sword dancing.

**D** Where did the rapper sword dancing originate, was it in Somerset?

**B** No, it'd be up in the North, in the coalfields.

**D** Yes.

**B** I don't know the history, one person who could tell you that and the history is Brian Heaton. He knows it all.

**D** But you introduced a rapper sword dancing club to Halsway?

**B** Oh, yes. We weren't based at Halsway, we were based at Bradford-on-Tone.

**D** Right.

**B** There's a nice little hall there. We managed to put one of our men through the front of the stage! Literally. We were doing a big circle which is a big spin and the spin broke and Andy King, which a lot of people will remember, he just flew backwards, through the stage, literally, smashing the panel down in the front and went through.

**D** Oh gosh, was he alright?

**B** Yes. The stage wasn't! Laughter He was fine, yeah.

**D** Bit of repair work need to the stage, then.

**B** Yes. I think somebody in the village put it together and forever more when we used to go there, there was a line across this particular panel where it had split. Er

**D** So you danced at Halsway?

**B** Well, folk dance at Halsway, one of the club. The rapper sword was done more out where requested and at base. As with the Morris and everything, you did your practice and training at base.

**D** Right.

**B** Sheila, she joined the er Women's Morris. No, she didn't, she joined the, er the American one, er

**D** I didn't know there was an American Morris.

**B** No, the girls didn't do Morris at that time. Er, I'm trying to think of the big mountains through America.

**B** and D Appalachian! She joined the Appalachian Cloggers here

**D** Oh, right.

**B** You can still see the emblem around here it's Hotfoot is the name and there's straight triangles, which are supposed to be the mountains and whatnot on there. She joined that and that danced at Halsway, we've still got the remains of that now dancing on the Morris side, Ladies Morris.

**D** Right.

**B** That was good but it got too fast. Laughter. It was very fast. Most of us slowed down and nobody took over from us.

**D** Oh, that's a shame.

**B** Yeah. It was very fast it was a kind of, they called it clogging but it was more like a tap dance but much faster.

**D** Right.

**B** And you wore tap shoes to go with it.

**D** Oh, not clogs, then?

**B** No, no and if you see them on television, any teams visiting and you see them on television or anything, you see that they're wearing shoes, not clogs, their shoes with the tap steels on them.

**D** Did the dancing lead to music for you?

**B** Yes. Dancing came first. We all enjoyed the dancing, we used to go to the little does where they were playing but then several of us got a bit cheesed off with just dancing, we wanted to do more.

**D** Right

**B** So sixteen of us actually got together and asked – here it comes again – Brian Heaton

**D** Laughs

**B** would he take us on? And he agreed to take us on and we held our first meeting in the cellars of Halsway Manor.

**D** Right.

**B** and I think there was one flute, one accordion, one drum and sixteen sets of spoons. Laughter. And that's all but we finished up as the Brute Force Band, which was an open band, anybody could come and play, even if we were out at a booking, anybody could fetch their instrument and join in. And when we finished, due to Brian's change of employment, there were 73 I think it is, players on the stage. Laughter

**D** On the stage at Halsway?

**B** At Halsway, yeah and we'd got Halsway for the day, so we had these players, anybody who had played with the Brute Force was invited to come and see it out. In the evening, we played for a free dance for all the dancers around here. But it was quite good, actually. But that was the end of Brute Force, which was something in itself.

**D** Sorry. What did you play in Brute Force?

**B** I was the one drum.  
Laughter

**D** I expect you had to play quite loudly to get over the spoons and

**B** No, I still needed to calm down, it was a snare drum and a snare drum is quite sharp, hence the snare on it gives a sharper tone, a sharper pitch.

**D** Was Sheila in the Brute Force as well?

**B** Not at that time, she came about half the life of the thing, she came through about three years. No, sorry, she didn't belong to the Brute Force. She may come to a dance with us but didn't play anything.

**D** Right.

**B** It was only in later years that she learnt, taught herself to play the mandolin.

**D** Right.

**B** And became a member of the Perfect Cure.

**D** So what happened after Brute Force broke up?

**B** Erm, well we split up around the area, some people were far away to do anything. We started up with Jan Musson, er a little group which consisted of Richard Harrison, Dr Harrison, myself, Rose and er Barbara.

**D** Barbara Harrison?

**B** Barbara Harrison, yes. Later on, we had another, we had a fiddle join us, er

**D** What did you call that group?

**B** Oh, that was Jan's Folk. Simply, at the time, there was a pop group called Jan's Folk, or somebody's Folk and so Jan Musson, we used Jan's name and became Jan's Folk but Jan was quite a serious musician and we were just come by stuff and she wanted a band of her own, it was a group band rather than a private band, it was a group band and she wanted to control the whole thing so she started up her own group called English Mustard.

**D** Right.

**B** Why, I don't know Laughter. but it was quite good. And they were based at Bradford again.

**D** But you then weren't part of English Mustard?

**B** Er, no, none of us were. We laxed off for a couple of weeks, cos Janet was the powerhouse behind the band, the leader, but we, the three of us, the four of us, rather, used to get together just to practice and play.

**D** All the Harrisons and you?

**B** Yeah. Well, Rose wasn't a Harrison then.

**D** Oh no, alright, okay.

**B** I've forgotten where I ...

**D** And Sheila was part of ...

**B** Ah, she was part of, she didn't do any music but she'd admired, when we went with the Belgians to Camp near Waterloo Monument there, the locals used to come in and join us in the marquee and do their turn at playing their instrument or singing or whatever it was and there was this great big old farmer used to come in and his hands, you can't imagine how big they were, they were just big and these hands on this delicate little instrument, they were brilliant.

**D** What instrument?

**B** Melodeon.

**D** Oh yes, yeah.

**B** Melodeon?

**D** Melodeon or mandolin?

**B** Mandolin, sorry. She admired this chappy on the mandolin and she, it made her fancy the mandolin and we were coming past the shops in Taunton there, the music shops and there was this mandolin in the window, a new one, and it was on offer and something I've never seen Sheila do before, was a spontaneous decision and go and buy.

**D** Right. It was fate.

**B** We went out to buy the dinner and went home with a mandolin.  
Laughter

**B** And she taught herself to read music and she can actually read music and did all the training herself, nobody taught her anything and she then joined the Perfect

Cure. And the violin left, which left the two married couples and so we got on much better with that. It went right on until Richard retired, for health reasons and age and none of us was strong enough to lead the band. In fact, I was completely lost with it, I couldn't do anything with the drum and experts. Yes, it was a good time.

**D** Did you play often at Halsway, Perfect Cure?

**B** Not really, we didn't do it very often, it was playing on our own ground. I think sometimes, I think, that trouble could have come from the Society and other musicians who danced there and whatnot, not liking the spot being taken. We did dance there, we usually danced with the , ah, no we didn't. I was going to say with Brian, Dave Dacey but Dave Dacey came later. He was a caller.

**D** Oh right. Okay.

**B** Nothing to do with the band at the Manor although he goes to the Manor now but they don't like him calling. I don't know why. I think that's about as much as I can put there.

**D** Okay. Well, let's move on to your handyman work. Viv calls you "Bob the Builder" How did that all start, your involvement?

**B** Well if you remember, I was Bob the Builder on your ward. Laughter. That started through becoming redundant and no work around.

**D** Right.

**B** So I'd always done my own work and I well. Let's see if I can make a living out of it. And that was it.

**D** Do you remember any of the projects that you did at Halsway?

**B** Well, it was general repairs, everything. Erm, I 'm just trying to .. I must have done something. Although when you see the state the Manor used to be in, I suppose what I did there was a big project. In the book, for three years, people complained about one of the bedrooms, I think it was bedroom Five, about the poor lighting in the room and anybody playing music couldn't see what they were doing. And I was looking at the book and I found this and I thought they're still complaining after three years and they're still complaining about the same thing. So I went upstairs and had a look and there's a 25-watt bulb in there!  
Laughter And that had taken three or five years to come up to be replaced.

**D** Dear oh dear.

**B** I was also involved in the work at the Mews.

**D** Right. What, converting the Mews?

Yes, yeah. I don't know when we took them over, originally they were stables, weren't they. Yes, but there was a big project and there was a bit of a fallout, so things needed finishing, which I did. But I used to go in once a week, I'd go in and see if there was anything in the book and do what was necessary. I could go and buy wood or anything like that, as I wanted it and I'd got the key to the Manor and the open chequebook if you like, which I was quite proud of really.

**D** It's an honour isn't it, to be so trusted.

**B** Yeah.

**D** So you enjoyed your work at the Manor?

**B** Oh yeah, yeah. Didn't meet many people, though, I was usually in the background somewhere, knocking a screw apart or something. You kept away from any holiday-makers or anything and you didn't do any work that was near them.

**D** Right.

**B** So you didn't really meet many of them. Names of people I know that are at the Manor from away are people I've met at Symonds Yat.

**D** That's the Folk Camp?

**B** That's the Folk Camp, which isn't the Manor.

**D** No, but it's very closely aligned, isn't it, with the Folk Camps?

**B** Oh yes, they come to Halsway for weekends. I used to join them quite often, for the afternoon, morning and afternoon, to join in the music they were making. It's only just down the road.

**D** Yes. Sheila was also very involved in helping the Manor, wasn't she?

**B** She was a seamstress and a very clever one.

**D** Right.

**B** That wasn't her employment, that was her hobby. And her and Shirley Driver used to work together and sometimes Christine and all, to do the repair work, the furniture and curtains or anything that might have needed sewing. And all three were involved in the hanging in the Main Hall, in the making of that.

**D** And what part did Sheila do of the main hanging?

**B** She did the, oh I've forgotten..

**D** Was it the Wassail?

**B** Wassail, that's it. She did the Wassail plaque, which I think is bottom right hand corner around there.

**D** Right.

**B** In fact, I can probably find the book up there. Erm,

**D** And I gather you did some modelling for Sheila?

**B** Oh, to get the funny shapes that the chap stands in with a rifle or a shotgun. It is a funny shape you get into when you've been doing it to model a shape. It is a funny shape you get into! It took, I think it took about a day to get the thing right that she wanted to see.

**D** Right. I expect you're very proud of that panel when you see it?

**B** Oh, yeah. It was clever work, not just Sheila's, it was all clever work and is worth going and looking at. And if you can get hold of the books so you can see it closer spot, a more detailed spot, I find in the book than on the wall. Erm, it's worth getting if they still sell it, it's probably sold out and no more.

**D** I'll certainly go and have a look at the panel again.

**B** Now you'll see Shirley Driver on there and Christine. I can't, oh there's one of Ron Rudd's daughters, all Halsway people.

**D** So has Halsway played an important part in your life, yours and Sheila's?

**B** Very much, very much. That's all I put down to 52 years together. We did pretty well everything together, you very rarely saw us apart. Erm

**D** So some very happy memories?

**B** Oh yeah, yeah. In fact, I think she's still here. Laughter

**S** Ah, yes, I expect she is. Bob, thank you very much for doing that interview. Happy memories, thank you.