

Yvette Staelens interviewing Gwen Poole on 18th March 2015

Yvette: Thank you Gwen for taking part in Telling Tales. Tell me where you were born and when.

Gwen: I was born in Leyland in Lancashire where they used to make Leyland buses in 1932. My father was a policeman stationed there. And we were there for three months before we moved on.

Yvette: Where did you go to, Gwen?

Gwen: Morecombe, because he was Lancashire Constabulary and then at eighteen months old, we moved to Seaforth, the home of Z cars, outside Liverpool. And we were there all during the war. And after the war, '48, we moved to Crosby. It was all part of the Crosby division, Seaforth division. Mum never worked outside the home because you didn't in those days. She did work for, both of them worked for Crossfields, which is a firm in Warrington in Lancashire, which is where the family comes from, and they made Persil.

Yvette: Oh, the washing powder.

Gwen: Yeh. And (?) Erasmic soap which I don't think's made anymore. So, mum worked at home, mum was at home and dad worked in the police force. We were evacuated, my mother evacuated us half a dozen times and I was brought up at Hillside farm, at my gran's, wherever we took root, really.

Yvette: And which farm was that? Can you say the name again?

Gwen: Hillside farm, belonged to my uncle, in Utkinton, in Tarporley, in Cheshire.

Yvette: Fantastic, so you had an interesting childhood.

Gwen: If you call being bombed during the war, yes. We were in the shelter when the land mine fell. We were all right, but some people weren't, obviously.

Yvette: Goodness, so tell me that story.

Gwen: Well, it was just we went down into the shelter, from where we were, from where we lived in Seaforth. On the other side of the main road, which was like the road down here was the largest ack ack site on Merseyside. Six of the largest ack ack guns. Well they didn't want them to land, the Germans to take Mersey and Liverpool. We could lie in bed and hear the sergeant soldier on duty calling the orders to load and fire. Very interesting. Saw Liverpool burning in the blitz. That was my growing up.

Yvette: Goodness

Gwen: I think when the actual bomb fell, we were in the shelter. I don't mind lifts, I just don't like confined spaces. I don't like being hemmed in by a lot of people. But there you are. I learnt to folk dance at Utkinton Tarporley during the war. I remembered doing "Gathering Peas" and "Rufty Tufty". And no doubt I did similar dances as well. I remember those, for a long time I couldn't remember, I knew the refrain and the boys going in and clap and the girls go in and clap and so on and I couldn't remember what it came to until I started teaching. And I taught English country dance when it was too wet to go out and I taught Scottish dancing and I went to Scottish dancing. I went to English country dancing in Crewe and I came home and went to Scottish dancing, home being Crosby, Liverpool, in my twenties. And a lot of dancing went on. Things like the 'Eightsome Reel' and 'Dashing White Sergeant' and barn dancing type thing. And eventually, I came to Wiltshire and I met a couple called Frank and Julie Bradley, who asked me, did I like folk dancing and I went to folk dance clubs in Wiltshire with them and I started the one in Broughton, where I lived. And they introduced me to Halsway. And when we came to Halsway, those were the days when the loos and the washbasins and the baths and the showers were down the corridor. You were lucky if you got a washbasin in your bedroom. And the first place I slept in was the priest hole. The priest hole was often, it is fourteen now, it was eleven then and you had to go through the main room to go out to the loo in the middle of the night. That was with Wiltshire weekend. In those days, the bar didn't exist. It was in the corner of the dining room, the long room and it was an honesty bar. I am sure one or two other people could tell you about that. And also in those days, the dessert trolley, rather like they do in the big hotels, was brought around to the table and it contained delicacies like syllabub, really, you know, not ordinary puddings, desserts. But, I mean, that was part of it. Eventually when I came, the manager was called "H" and I never knew what that stood for. And we did have a barbecue outside.

Yvette: What period are we talking about, Gwen?

Gwen: Well this must have been the middle eighties, 1980s onwards. I would have to look it up in my diaries to see when I came. And the Saturday afternoon walk was always out through the far gate, up by the side of Halsway, along the top to the Halsway post and down to the village, in this way we always did that, all of us, not all of us, a lot of us. You didn't have your lunch in Halsway, you went out or you brought something in. And we visited all sort of places around and about, because you had from twelve, shall we say, to at least four, before you needed to be back. Gradually things improved at Halsway in that they en-suited the Mews and various bedrooms here. Because people don't want to wander the corridors anymore. I brought a group from home here and they since said to me "Couldn't do it now, couldn't wander the corridors now in their seventies or eighties.

Yvette: When you first came, you've mentioned to me that you are musician, caller and a dancer, what capacity did you come as?

Gwen: A dancer really. I didn't take up the musician bit until about 20 years ago. I thought, one of these years, I am not going to be able to dance, so I need something else to do and that has happened. And there always is a caller and I usually call a couple of dances when I come to June Japes with Chris Turner and Across the Pond with Rosemary Hunt. I have done a workshop for Rosemary.

Yvette: And what do you play?

Gwen: Record, descant recorder. I decided that I couldn't be bothered carrying around bulky things, which is just as well now because it is too far for me to drive here, so I come by public transport or train and taxi and so my fold up recorder is ideal.

Yvette: Now you mentioned that you have been on the council.

Gwen: Yes, let's see, I came off twelve months last October, so that would be 2013, wouldn't it, or maybe it was the year before and I did six months and I was asked, there used to be someone here called Lyn Pratman, she asked me to go on, produced the form and "sign this and sign here, Gwen" and sort of thing. And I served six years. Interesting years. It was when we decided that, to survive, we had to expand, both youth wise and building wise. While I've gone along with the majority of things, when I've disagreed, I've said so. And they were happy years, I got on very well and I have been in touch with one or two of them since. But I am not sorry, because now I am in my eighties, it's enough. There is always a time to finish. You asked me about a specific wonderful occasion. It was a couple of years ago at Rosemary Hunt's week and I was calling a dance called "Merry makers Jubilee" and as it turned out it was the last dance for one of the most popular young woman, well younger than me anyway. She died of cancer in 2014, so it must have been a couple or three years ago and the whole floor took off. There is part of the dance where you do figures of eight across the ends and you finish up with a two hand turn with your partner. No they weren't doing a two hand turn, we hadn't had a good swing all week, we are having a good swing now and that's what they did and I will always and I remember Kathy, in front of me, dancing heart and soul and that was it for Kathy. Sad in the end. That was, that's one occasion that really sticks in my mind. The other occasion that sticks in my mind. We were here for the silver jubilee with Brian and Yvonne Limbrick with 3, well it was 2D then playing Chris and Julie Dewhurst, Nicholas wasn't there then. And we did the usual things and we went for a walk and it was billed as a "Rustic Ramble" R u s t i c ramble and we went up on the top, walked to the end to the sea, Holford, no, I don't know, I can't remember now. We walked to the sea, we had lunch in the pub and we set off back and the heavens opened and we all got drowned, and we, ever since then it has been known as the "Rusty Ramble". Came back, I was in the news, everybody was wet through and I went for a shower and I pulled the tag that you pull down, I pulled it off and I had to call one of the men to put it back. But, you know, there are these memories. The year after I had my knee replacement, playing with Dave Brown on the stage, because I couldn't dance. Playing with Moira and Peter now on the stage because I can't dance. I can but it is a parody of what I used to do. So yes, Halsway, Halsway's the place I come too on my own. You don't, I mean I have come for years with other people but I now come on my own because they're all dying by the wayside. I went to seven funerals last year. But it is the place to come too, where you can walk in through the door and you will meet somebody that you know and it is that friendly ambience, well everyone welcomes you with open arms, more or less and even this morning I had a member of staff come and say "I've been looking for you for the last two weeks." And she knew I was coming and she was pleased to see me. We came to Judy's funeral, a member of staff, last year and her sisters looked "I knew you would be here", they were looking for us. And it is, it's a place you can come too. It is just friendliness. I hope it stays like that for future generations. Yes, we need the young people, yes, we need the buildings but I don't want the ambience to alter.

Yvette: So if I was to ask you what this whole Halsway means in your life, how's it been?

Gwen: It's been my second home. Obviously family comes first, my church but my folk dance world means a lot to me and I was thinking this morning, "I'm going to have my ashes scattered here, in the woods." And I asked certain members of the music side to play at my funeral 'cos that is as important to me as our church, my religion. It's a place you can come too on your own and you don't need to make arrangements to come with anybody. So long as there is a bed for you, suitable and that's it.

Yvette: You don't know any ghost stories or

Gwen: No, I've heard other people talk of them but it's never happened to me.

Yvette: I'm glad.

Gwen: I think some people would say, "They wouldn't dare." I have that sort of a reputation.

Yvette: Fantastic. Well thank you very much, Gwen