

Dorothy King, interviewing Geoff Elwell on Saturday 6 June 2015.

D Geoff, thank you for agreeing to do this interview for the Telling Tales project.

G That's okay.

D Can we start with, erm, a little bit of your background, where you were born, brought up, (what) how your interest in folk developed?

G I was born in Gloucester.

D Mm hm.

G Do you want the year? Chuckles.

D If you'd like to tell me. Laughs.

G 1938.

D Right.

G Erm, but I lived most of my life in Exeter.

D Mm hm.

G Erm, didn't have much involvement in folk until I moved to Melksham in Wiltshire, erm and er, we used to give a chap, erm, Sunday lunch. One day he came back all smiles. We said "What's wrong then?"

D Yeah.

G He said : "Oh, I've been folk dancing, you wanna come!"

G So we did. That's it!

D Laughs.

G I can't remember the year to be honest with you, er, it must have been about '73.

D Right.

G Something like that. So that's my background. And, oh, sorry, Halsway, I came to Halsway with the Bristol Group for a weekend in 1979.

D Right.

G And thought that was quite good, so being on the Wiltshire District EFDS Committee,

D That's the English Folk Dancing Society?

G Yes. I, erm, we started organising weekends down here between 1981 and 1996.

D What were your first impressions of Halsway as a place when you came in 1979?

G Wonderful, wonderful. A bit, shall we say, basic but, er

D What, the accommodation?

G Well, yes. But that didn't matter, did it?

D No. I've heard about the dormitories.

G Oh, yes, right. Five or six men in one and split from the wife cos she went with somebody else.

Chuckles.

D Right.

G I mean some other girls, I meant!

D Laughter. What kind of dancing was it?

G Just ordinary country, Playford, that sort of thing. And then I joined the Halsway Manor Society in 1983, cos I thought it was a good idea.

D Was that the Committee?

G No, no, just a member of.

D Right. What was the advantage of joining the Society?

G Just supporting the facility and the idea, really, I thought it was a good idea. Ha! And then there was the Friends of Halsway Manor, which we joined in 1985. And there was the 200 Club.

D What was the 200 Club?

G It's one of these things where you have 200 members pay so much a month, half goes to the, well, half goes to Halsway here and the other half is the winnings, based on the number of people, er,

D Winnings from what?

G Well, if you've got, say, 200 people, there's £200, or whatever the people pay, to split halfway between the charity who they give the money to

D It was a draw, was it?

G Yes, a draw, yes. So we joined that in 1985.

D Mm.

G Sorry, '86. And won it a couple of times. And it's still going, somebody else has restarted it. I won that last month as well. Smiling voice.

D Laughs

G Only £65 but there you are.

D Better than a kick in the eye, isn't it?

G Yes, that's right. And then, erm

D What did the Friends of Halsway do?

G Used to organise things, well, things like the Fair that's on today. We used to do that. But because, well I joined it in 1985, cos at the Halsway AGM, somebody said "we want a treasurer". Nobody offered, so I did, like a good boy.

Laughter

G Erm

D Is that your work background, in finance?

G No, no, in computers. No, I do treasurers for other things. And that was 2004. So I was on that committee until 2010 when it disbanded, basically because two AGMs we gave them the chance to volunteer for committee, nobody would, so we had to close it down.

D Mm.

G Which was a shame. But as I said, the 200 Club has been reinitiated, so that's giving money back to Halsway now. Erm, I don't know what else there is, that's my involvement with Halsway.

D Are you still involved with Halsway?

G No, other than being a Member and a member of the 200 Club.

D So, how often do you come down here?

G Probably twice a year now.

D Right.

G And when I was on the Committee, of course, that was every couple of months.

D It's a long way to come from Melksham.

G Yes, that was one of the problems, getting people. Initially, when it started, it was all run by local people and they've all got a little older.

D Yes.

G They've moved on, not moved on, but moved out. That was the problem, not enough people. Er,

D Go back to your dancing days, then, at Halsway. Erm, do you remember any specific bands that you liked?

G Well, because I was running it for 16 years, is it, 15 years, erm, I was also the dance director at Chippenham Folk Festival for 21 years, so to actually say which bands I really like or don't like would be, erm, not a good idea.

D Laughs.

G I mean, there's some bands you don't like, some people don't like them, some people like them, you learn a lot about what to book to satisfy the majority.

D Mm.

G But no, I can't really say I'd like to name any particular band.

D So, what kind of bands did they like here, at Halsway when you were doing the booking?

G Well, most of my involvement is dancing, so folk dance bands – two, three, four piece, accordion, not the ceilidh noisy bands, there's a slight difference.

D Right.

G Particularly when you get a bit older.
Laughter.

G Yes.

D So, when did you, or did you change from dancing to calling, when did you start calling?

G Ah, calling. I can't remember the year, it must have been '78, when the club I was with in Melksham, the lady was ill, so there was nobody else to call, so they said "Well, you're good at calling", somebody said. Laughter. "You'd make a good teacher", which I'm not. "Have a go". From then I've been calling. Still do, barn dances, clubs. I used to travel a fair distance, but I've cut that down to about 35 miles now. By the time you go home afterwards, it's not easy. Erm but I like calling.

D (What's), what's the skill in calling?

G I've no idea.

D Oh!

G Patience, I suppose.

D Laughs.

G People say afterwards, "oh, you aren't half patient!"

D Because you're teaching as you go, aren't you?

G Yes, you do, yes. A lot of people think they know what they're doing but you've got to make sure that they do know what they're doing

D Hm, mm.

G Teaching. Yes, it's putting it over in the correct way, erm, encouraging people to do it. I mean, I do lots of barn dances. For whatever reason I don't know, people say "Oh, that's good that way. I didn't like the bloke who did the last one". Well, I don't know, I don't know what they did, so I don't know. Chuckles. So I'm still calling now.

D Right.

G But not as much as I was.

D Hm. Are you still dancing?

G I am but the wife can't now, cos she's very bad on the legs, back, balance.

D Yes.

G but she always comes where I go to listen to the music. So we're still a pair.
Laughter

D Do you think Halsway has been important in your life in any way?

G It's possibly concentrated me on various aspects. I wouldn't say it was any more important than any other folk activity.

D Mm, mm.

G I used to be a deacon in the church, free church. I felt that er I could do more with the community by doing dancing, folk dancing, calling than I could in the church, which is a, well, it's a funny thing to say, I suppose.
Laughter

D Well, I suppose it can be a bit limiting.

G Yes, they do tend to be, unless you get one of these happy clappy churches, which they're alright.

D They're fun.

G Yeah.

D How long will you go on calling do you reckon?

G Probably the end of this year or next year.

D Then you'll stop?

G Well, I might not stop clubs, but I'll stop barn dances, I think.

D Mmm.

G Yeah. They're quite hard work. I mean, (they don't) they don't look it and if you make them not look it, then you're doing alright.

D Yes.

G Yeah.

D Well, (they're) they're always fun to go to,

G Oh, yeah, yeah.

D even the ..

G Certainly, yes. I mean, other things, when I come down at New Year here for instance, they usually run a pantomime or a Mummers play or something like that, I usually join in those, make a fool of myself, dress up everybody laughs, you know, it's crazy, really.

Laughter

D I'm with you there, I'm a pantomime

G Are you?

D performer,

G Right, yes.

D yes, yes, when I can find one.

G Other things down here. I think you might be interviewing somebody else, or already have, to do with a helicopter or something. No? You haven't heard that one yet?

D No, I haven't heard that one.

G They (used) they had a helicopter down here once in preparation for a wedding. I've got a picture of that but I couldn't find it to bring. I'll let the person who's going to talk about that have the photo if I find it. Other than that, it's just enjoyment, to be honest.

Nothing untoward, it's just things happen; I can't remember them. Just have fun when you do it. I tend to be one of those who's on the floor there and clap my hands and shout and get an atmosphere going. Cos sometimes you go in there and it's all urrr, it's a bit urrrr so make some fun and noise and people think "what's this, what's this?" but then they all join in, so that makes a party of it.

D Yes. Well (that's) that's important cos people can be very glum,

G Oh, yes.

D and afraid of, erm, committing themselves to enjoyment.

G Absolutely, particularly the British.

D Yes.

G I mean, I have been on Folk Camps in France

D Mm hm.

G where the French are always up for it. So if you call to them, well call to them in French, then the English people say “hey, hey, come on, what are you saying? We don’t understand it!” So you’ve got to do a double language call!

D Laughs. I’d not thought of calling in a foreign language, but of course it must help

G Oh, yes.

D when (you’re) you’re abroad. Can you do it in Germany as well or have you just been to France?

G No, I’ve only been to France. I’ve been to Germany but I’ve only been to France for Folk. That was quite right before we couldn’t get down on the ground in the tents any more. So we gave that up.

Laughter.

D And now when you stay at Halsway you have a nice double room.

G We do, or sometimes it’s a room with single beds,

D Yes.

G but that doesn’t matter. Erm

D So will you be dancing this weekend, or calling this weekend?

G No calling, no, that’s all organised. We danced last night and we’ll be dancing tonight and I think there’s one tomorrow morning, I think. We actually used to have a dance display group called Wiltshire Folk. We came down to these events many years ago, two or three times. Er, Melksham Club have had a stall down here a couple of times in the past on these heydays but not so involved any more.

D No.

G Just come and smile!

D Come and enjoy, yes.

G I can't think of anything else.

D Okay, well you don't have to. I'll just say thank you very much for doing this and I'll email you a transcript so that you can have a look at it.

G Oh, right.