

Rosanna Boylan interviewing Paul James

RB: Thank you very much for participating in the Telling Tales Project and please feel free to tell me anything you like about your time at Halsway.

PJ: My name is Paul James. I come from Newbury in Berkshire and its funny how all through my life Ive been interested in folk and traditional music since I was about 11 or 12 years old. Ive still got the first tin whistle I ever started to play on and em, all through my teenager years I was very you know one of a small number of people, and people thought I was a bit of a weirdo really because I was interested in folk song and music and then em I started playing in bands. I play in a band call Blowazabella which Ive played in since I was about 20/21/22 something like that. Ive played with them for 35 years and em and so Ive been involved in folk music pretty much all my life and its funny how you come across Halsway. I didnt know an awful lot about it but I had come here, I cant remember when, I was in my early 20s and it was to a wedding, it was nothing to do with folk music, it was just a bizarre coincidence and I remember thinking what a great place it was. Then over the years you sort of bump into people em randomly. Now about Halsway life, my mother in law em whose from Yorkshire but lives in Pangbourne em just coincidentally knows quite a lot of people that used to go to Halsway Manor, you know, there's 64 million people in the country, you know. There's an ex girlfriend of mine, when I was about 20 my girlfriend's parents, who live in Liverpool, used to come to Halsway Manor you know.

RB: Were these all musical people?

PJ: Yes there was that connection but its quite a small organisation and it is in a very particular part of the country but it is surprising how many people have been here. I was talking to Maddy Prior from Steeleye Span and she came here when she was 17 or 18 years old and they All the musicians in the sixties came here at one time or another. I think, you know one of the things that Ive been very impressed by was actually the sort of, that we should value the memory of Bill Rutter. It wasnt just Bill but he was definitely the driving force that got Halsway going and em. Its amazing you know Bill and a group of people that I think he sort of cajoled started the Sidmouth Folk Festival, 60/61 years ago. He then started another group of people The Folk Camp Movement, still going. And then in the late sixties he started a thing called Halsway Manor and all those 3 things are still amazing, you know, between 50 and 60 years ago he started 3 things that are still going. Why? Because actually there are fundamentally, what they do doesnt really go in or out of fashion does it?

RB: But this is out of way, when you think we are in the middle of nowhere here.

PJ: But I think its become an advantage not a disadvantage because my take on it has always been, wherever you put it in England, its inconvenient for some people, you know there's some "well its an inconvenient place", "well for you maybe" for a lot of people its not that long. You know if you live on the sort of M5 side of life its not difficult to get to at all. I think wherever you put it, it inconveniences somebody but actually you know common sense would say you know get rid of it, build the perfect folk centre in Birmingham or somewhere. But it wouldnt have the personality would it, nothing against Birmingham, but it wouldnt have the atmosphere and thats special extra something that makes people want to come and get involved. And I think somehow people manage to find their way here. We are talking in the

middle of the Hurdy Gurdy and Bagpipe Weekend which Im leading here. And em there are people here, there are 3 people from Southern Germany, there's somebody from Belgium, and two people here from France. Well they managed to get to Halsway Manor so you know its not too hard.(haha) (looking out window at VW camper)

RB: Is that your VW outside

PJ: No! I wish it was!

Actually if you wanted to do this now, if there wasn't a Halsway Manor and you wanted to create one you would be hard pressed to find a place as lovely as this, would you, with, for reasonable money, they did buy it quite cheaply at the time, you know, people could get mortgages on old properties then, nobody wanted these big old houses you know, they were looking, land owners were looking to get out, it was costing too much money, so they got this place for a very cheap price, and that would never happen now.

RB: Yes, the countryside is spectacular

PJ: It is, and that's what I was just talking to Patrick Boufard – the French HurdyGurdy tutor who's teaching this weekend, like he said, what an amazing area, it's as fantastic as parts of central France or the massi central, and you know, just as beautiful but much less known actually the Quantocks, its not a big, it isn't a big tourist area. So I think it, for me it is in the right place because what is important is to be able to come somewhere where you can relax and focus on the activity and its hard to do that in a town, a rural location and it's a very quiet, very peaceful rural location, so all that kind of makes sense for me.

As I speak now I've just left Halsway Manor about a month ago, not, funnily enough, because I wanted to particularly, a job came up, very close to where I actually live and, a really good cultural job that I would have been mad not to apply for, so I went and applied for it, and to my surprise they offered it to me, so I. The four years I was here I very much enjoyed not least because it's the first time I had a job, where my job and my sort of my hobby are the same sort of thing, you know – folk and traditional music. And I think I've been able to you know all those years I've had in the folk scene, playing with Blowzabella so luckily you know, I do know lots of people across the scene and so I've been able to you know nobble quite well known people to come and teach here, and not charge us too much – that sort of thing. You've got to use your contact. So I really enjoyed doing that so I've had great times here. What I particularly, was I will always remember are the things we do with older people are fantastic and I think we should always do lots of stuff for older people because they particularly get something out of Halsway, but we have done a lot of new work since I've been here with younger people and what Ive been very, I knew it would happen, but I was pleased to see that they, some people, some young people were absolutely transformed by coming here you know, they were having difficulties. We did some work with some schools in Bridgewater and some of those kids are in the responsibility of the Local Authority you know, fostered, don't have many opportunities in their lives, and we've had some of those kids here and then afterwards we've had the teachers going I Can't believe the change in this young person, they didn't use to turn up on time, they would play hookie, they wouldn't wear their school uniform they had no self respect for themselves they didn't know.. and then suddenly they're doing there GCSEs and they've got a stronger idea [they've been motivated?] I don't know if it was to do with folk music so much it was just that we got them here with some really good young tutors and valued them you know, treated them like adults,

didn't lecture them and let them express themselves and the arts has that, whether its folk or any other all ages and types of people and that's why people came to kind of art, it this miraculous transformational effect on people as we, of Halsey cause they; the vast majority go away feeling better than when they arrived, they're very often sad to leave. There was a young girl who, I know, funnily enough she's from my village, so I got her parents to send her. Ellie Proud and on the way back she put on Facebook 'I'm homesick, I want to go back to Halsway Manor' (laughter) cos she had such a great time. She was nervous, because she didn't know anybody and then, you know, within the first day she made two new friends and they started doing all this, you know, working on her performance and all that sort of thing. I think that, I think, I still feel as strongly as ever I did that there needs to be a residential folk centre in England and actually if we dont have one then people would be disadvantaged. There are lots of workshops and events going on but there isnt anywhere, and people do put on residential you know dance and things like that but its usually in a hotel or its in a place that isnt that about folk music. The thing about when you walk in the door here this is what we do. We are not doing a wedding or some other you know doing holidays. THIS is what we do every day of the year, you know, Christmas and everything. And thats why Bill Rutter was right because that ability for a place like Halsway Manor to really create something special is their lives and help people to pursue their passion, you know for folk traditional music and it needs a centre like this as much in the early sixties as it does now and thats never goin to go out of fashion. There are different challenges now but fundamentally there is something very simple about what Halsway Manor does that people just get quite quickly – you know what I mean. So I think its very important that its a charity, that the charity is focussed on what it is and not to be too generalist. You know in theory we could do all sorts of other things but em. We used to do 7 or 8 weddings a year when we arrived here and we dont do any now but partly thats because there are much better other wedding venues around here frankly you know that are set up for it. But also we had those the first year, seven weddings that hogged seven prime weekends when we could have been doing really good folk stuff. So we were not a charity set up to do weddings we are a charity set up to get people participating in folk traditional music, thats what we're here to do. Thats what we should do and not get distracted you know by this other stuff and the challenge of course is to do that successfully and its not easy you know. Ive had my ups and downs there, somethings are done very well somethings have not, its a risky business but overall you know we do pretty well because I think there is a genuine audience, we never have to create an audience, we're not trying to put 2+2 together and pretend its 5, you know we are doing something very basic which people actually want.

RB: What particularly did you notice change in the 4 years you were Chief Executive?

PJ: Well the place had become, for a long period, overwhelming dominated by the, what we tend to call the social dance scene, the older end of the folk dance scene, you know there's nothing wrong with that, and it was very reliant on the folk dance club scene and the problem with that is, it still is, in massive decline and its not being renewed. Young people these days are folk dancing, they just dont join clubs, they just go to places to do it but they dont feel the need to be part of a club. Clubbism is a real post war phenomenon isnt it, its got nothing to do with folk music, its that generation where very much thats what you did to meet people, join a club whether it was a church group, cycling, or what that was what you did and its gone out of fashion. Im not saying that its a good thing its just the way, its nothing to do with folk, its society has changed and folk is just as susceptible to that as anything. So the programme had become overwhelming social dance and social dance clubs and of course they were going into decline so our programme we were starting to get problems , last year we had 55 people

and now theyve only got 40 and you know, some of them are doing really well but generally speaking they had their eggs. Instead of having lots of eggs in lots of baskets, a range of activities across their focus, they had one great big egg in one great big basket. The trouble with that is when something, Im stretching my analogies now arent I? ha ha but once something happens to that egg, that one actual thing that you do then you're stuffed you've got nowhere else to go. Actually all I have done, and its what the board wanted me to do, its not me, Im there as Chief Executive to fulfill the policies of the board but we were all on an absolute mission to broaden it right back again across the folk scene but also Im going to make a criticism here and Ive said this to lots of people so its nothing new, people who talk to me have heard this before was that it had become very cliquey, it didnt mean to, I think its just the way it happens and it was perceived from the outside, people who didnt know about it at all or they thought oh its just a place run by these folk dance clubs and its just for them and not for me. It had become, unintentionally, rather unwelcoming to others. I happen to know a couple of people who approached Halsway about folk and got a very negative response so what did they do they went somewhere else to do it and it was very successful so they cut their nose off to spite their face. So the programme had become narrower and narrower, I think the other thing that, which they're probably well aware of is amateurism is all very well, its the strength of the folkscene but it had always been too overly reliant on amateurs running it. You know years ago, did they really understand the budget, did they really know how to programme activities. They just didnt know enough people they knew everyone in the social dance scene but they didnt seem to know, there's a massive gap between the social dance scene and the rest of the folk scene. And the rest of the folk scene is much bigger than the social dance scene so, you see what I mean, it was narrowing down and down and missing more and more opportunities to embrace this wider group of people. This weekend we've got the 4th Hurdy Gurdy weekend, we're packed out, there are people staying the a B&B down the road, people in camper vans and these people had never been to Halsway before 4 years ago and 30% of this lot are new this year they've never been to Halsway at all. We've done this time and time again in the last 4 years there are lots of people now coming to Halsway and starting to get the Halsway habit and I always think the important thing is once you get them over the threshold they love it but you've got to get them up to the threshold, you know.