

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Jim Dickinson (part 2)

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

[Start of Minidisc 2]

This is Jim Dickinson disk 2 on the 15th November 2006. May I take you back a little bit to Moorends. Firstly I know that your granddad died more or less as you were born.

JD Yes that's correct.

And so that's why your family moved onto the moor. Can you tell me, what did he do, how did he come to be there, at the moor?

JD Well he'd had, he'd been a butcher and then he went from that to work for the railway and he was a signal man at Moorends in the cabin. And whatever job he did I think, you can see, he was a very formidable looking man. And I think it must have been, the job cropped up to be the manager or foreman of the mill, then he applied. It was just down the road from where he was in the signal box, cause you went down that line towards Goole, just look across the field and there's the mill. Anyway he went to do that job and we're not quite sure just what date, I'm trying to find out, I will find out. Anyway he was, they called him the foreman, but he was more like the manager of the mill and I don't think there were much trouble at mill in them days! Not with him, size of him, he could sort anybody out or problems associated with 'em. And mi' father had worked from being a school boy just about there as well, but mi' father and his brother, who was just a bit older than mi' dad, were the first two volunteers for the first world war. But mi' Uncle Jack, unfortunately, was killed in the last two or three weeks, he never came back. We've been and seen his grave mind, which was very touching, I might add. And so mi' dad then, when war's finished went back and continued to work for the company that operated the mill.

This was when, till it burnt down in '24 and again after they'd rebuilt it, it burnt down again in 1936, and they didn't rebuild it then it was just a maintenance department. But mi' granddad was just overall gaffer, as they say, say down in Yorkshire. Other than that I can't tell you much about him I don't know what sort of a character he had.

What was his name?

JD His name was Fred, cause I got, I got christened James Frederick, which was James after mi' granddad on mi' Darley's side and Fred after mi' granddad on mi' dad's side. Although they tried to refine it a bit and they called me James instead of Jim, I think he was Jim Darley mi' other granddad, and they called me Frederick, extending the Fred, cause he was straight Fred and they called me Frederick. At least, we've always, I've always said that I got the two more salubrious names if that's the right word to use. James and Frederick, I said it's probably been James or Eric, might have been the milkman, I don't know!

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[Laughter]

Is this a Darley as in Darley brewery?

JD Yes it is but it was no relation of ours. But Darley's brewery in Thorne was spelt exactly the same.

But you're not related to?

JD Not that we know of no.

ED We've never traced that back, but what we do know, Fred Dickinson came from Bilborough, outside of York and we've been there and found many of the graves, all family names and we've seen the baptism book in the church and went through it. And when we came to, to Reginald, which was Jim's dad's name it was November, when he was baptised and I said to the chap or to Jim, oh it can't be your dad, it's not your dad's birthday, because his dad's birthday was July the 4th and the curate chap said to me, he said, no this is his baptism. And then when we back up the register we found all of Jim's aunts and uncles had been taken back to Bilborough to be baptised. So we could, we didn't take that much notice then but obviously we're gonna go back and recheck. And it has, sort of, the date, the child's name, father's name and the abode of the father and there's obviously Reginald and then Jack and another one, who came before Jack?

JD Mary.

ED They were all taken, no Mary was missing, all taken back and the abode where they lived was the mill, Thorne. So we know it goes back at least four of these children have gone back that far. Now we, we're into it properly we're gonna go back and trace. So we're able to get possibly a date when the old man went to the mill.

JD You saw the stable doors on the end part of the building. The next bit was the blacksmith's shop with two, another two big doors and inside there was a fairly big area until you went through the side door into the blacksmith's shop. And there was a trap, you know, as with pony and trap and that would be the trap that he'd used to ship them 'or to Bilborough years ago. It were a beautiful big old trap, and a big one mind. I can imagine him getting himself and two or three kids in to take 'em there to get baptised.

How many children did they have?

ED Nine.

JD Nine.

ED But there's, looking at that..

This is the family photograph?

ED Grown up.

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So this is the family photograph?

ED That's the family, so some of them, we're, we're trying to reason why that photograph was taken, because in those days people didn't have cameras and take photographs like they do now.

Sometime there's a travelling, photographers sometimes came round.

JD Yeah, well...

ED If you look on there there's a name.

JD A lot of people...

Ed On the corner, it's somebody in Goole, we've been able to work that out.

JD Somebody said...

It says Thorne on this corner.

ED Oh, we've, we've tried to work out, it was maybe their wedding anniversary, like the fortieth wedding anniversary, because seven of the children are grown up. Where Reginald and Ellen, the two young ones on the front, there's a big age gap and that one's, that's Jack, the next one and then these are all adults really.

So that's your dad sitting there?

JD Yeah.

ED That's Reginald, yeah.

JD Left hand one.

ED So he, I would say he's about, ten, ten or eleven on there?

JD Yeah that's all.

ED So he was born '90?

JD '93.

ED '93.

JD 1893.

ED So that's probably about, 1907, 6 or 7.

And this is at Moorends?

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JD Yes.

ED That's the house, yes you can see it's the house.

JD My aunt was a organist at St Wilfred's Church in Moorends for sixty year and we've got articles about her, newspaper cuttings and all that, extremely complimentary.

What's her name?

JD Ellen.

ED Ellen Watson.

JD Ellen Dickinson.

ED No.

JD But she married Bill Watson. That's when she got married when mi' mother and dad and me moved in. Her and Mary, cause Mary was a bit of, if you're listening Mary, you were a bit of a bitch in them days! So I've heard.

[Laughter]

JD I don't like speaking ill of the dead but, I think mi' mother were glad to see the back of her, cause she'd been in and lived there quite a while and when an interloper comes into the, sort of family situation.

ED Into the kitchen.

JD Mi', mother had said, and been heard to say it in your company, that the Dickinsons were quite a well off family you know, that's us and..

[Both talking]

ED What, the, the funny thing..

JD She says the girls always wore nice boots.

ED The girls wore boots at school, where she only had shoes at school. This is Jim's mum telling me, you know. 'Oh when we went to school the Dickinson's girls always had boots on', you know.

You say he was the foreman at the factory, have you any idea what that involved?

JD Well, peat coming in off the moors on the barges, in those days when the barges were still operational and the, the turves would be fed into a machine inside the mill that would crunch them up, that's about only word I can think off that suits the bill. And there would be, they would then be filtered through sieves, screens I think they called 'em in them days. So that the stuff would all come out, a

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certain size, all the particles that were left after the, the turves had gone through that process. And then they would be fed into the presses. There would be a big, there's a photograph with one of the presses there, and they'd fill it up to the top and then it would, they'd get the power on and come down, compress it and then, before they put the peat in there'd be lats or slats, timber, at the bottom and then they'd put some at the top which helped to keep the bales together. You've never seen bales of stuff which has got wood to help the composition being kept together and then they would be compressed and wires would be threaded through over the top of these slats, these timber slats and they'd be fastened extremely tightly so that the bales were almost, what's the word..

ED Well it's what they were doing at the other mills.

JD You couldn't drop 'em and expect em to drop to pieces you know, they were very firmly packed by that time. And then they would be shipped to the window at the end of the mill and there was a railway line came down from the main line and there was a siding went down to the colliery but we had a siding that went right down the side of the warping drain and swung across towards our house and they would pull up right outside the end of the mill. And that's where the bales would be pushed out of that window and onto a railway wagon and there'd obviously be men there to make sure they were soundly packed on the railway wagon and then another loco, steam loco would come and draw the, draw the wagons back up to the top and then off to go to wherever they were destined to go.

So how, do you know how many men there were working at the mill?

JD Not off hand, but I would think there'd probably be round about, oh, sorry.

ED It's alright.

JD But I would say there'd be, aye that's a good example you see there.

ED They're the..

[Both talking]

JD That would probably be a full compliment.

ED They're the Dutchman.

JD Are you alright?

ED Yeah.

And these would be workers in the mill itself and not the diggers?

JD No, not on the moors no, they would be a separate entity, they would be the mill workers, cause mi' granddad's stood there right in middle of em and he would be knocking on a bit by that time.

Fourteen isn't there, fourteen plus your granddad.

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JD Yeah.

On this picture.

JD I would have said around about twelve or fourteen.

One of them might be an apprentice, he only looks like a young lad.

JD Aye that's Joe.

ED And that's one of the Dutchman.

JD There were a lot of Dutchmen came over at the..

I'll have a look at these later on, thank you.

JD Between the First and Second World War, you know, because...

ED No, before the First World War.

JD Aye you're right, I suppose it was really. That's why I said I can probably only provide you with so much information that I can guarantee is accurate.

That's fine, it's fine. Your granddad was obviously in charge of these men and the processing part of it in the mill.

JD Yes that's right.

When, when he's, and was that the extent of his job or did it extend beyond that onto the moor itself?

JD No, no, no it was just the mill that he was in charge of.

And was he a practical chap like your dad?

JD Oh he was, marvellous joiner like mi' dad. I had a bookcase for years that he'd made when he was, you know, his spare time. I don't know what happened to it. I think Kenny Darley might have ended up with that as well, my cousin from mi' mother's side. But oh he was a beautiful joiner and I don't know really why because I don't know his background going further back. He, he had a butcher's shop in Thorne, the tale goes and it was mi' Aunt Ellen that told us I think, that he could sup all guys in Red Bear under table, you know. He were a big boozier and then he signed the pledge and he went all religious and you know, he were a lay preacher at the chapel that we mentioned earlier and you know he could...

Which chapel, tell me about the chapel?

I think it was the Wesleyan Chapel, I wouldn't be certain on that but I remember hearing the terminology Wesleyan Chapel referred to on many occasions but we don't have anything in writing to

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substantiate that.

And was your mum, was your grandma involved as well in the chapel?

JD Well, put it this way, they'd both been asked to sing in York Minster, but because we have a cross keys...

ED You're jumping ahead.

Do you want to finish that bit off..?

JD Well just that, the Sam in York Minster he were a warden.

ED From Bilborough.

JD When they were living at Bilborough and they were awarded these two placard.

ED A brooch.

JD A lovely big brooch and it wasn't effeminate to the extent that a man wouldn't be prepared to, a man would still be prepared to put it on his waistcoat.

ED That's it.

JD It's there.

ED And read the back.

JD Where is it by the way?

ED The brooch? It's in my, it's my suit. I'll go and get it.

ED But that's...

Yes it's alright, okay, sorry.

JD I want to go, when you're ready, I want to go and show you mi' office and where I do mi' clerical work and mi' computer, I've took computers in there and..

Now, I was just interested in the, in their involvement in the chapel.

JD Yeah, yes, oh yes aye.

And their singing prowess basically.

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JD And what love?

Their singing prowess.

JD Oh yeah.

ED That's the brooch. We, we know from, from Bilborough, we've been back to Bilborough, the first time we were ever there the, we were wandering round the church hall, we were there all afternoon, nearly three or four hours. And we had a dog in the car and every time I kept going to check the dog was okay there was a house over the road, the curtains were moving with two old ladies. And I said to Jim, look we better go and explain what we're doing. We were literally hunting for graves, more graves in the, in the churchyard.

So we went across to these two old ladies you know, when Jim took the dog for another tiddle. And I went across and I said, I hope we haven't worried you, we're looking for my husband's family's graves, we've found quite a lot. 'Oh, what name is it, what name is it?' And I said 'Dickinson'. 'Oh, oh come on in, come on in', so we went in and she said 'Have you been to the church and had a look for the registers?' And I said 'Well we've been in the church' and I said 'but obviously there's no books around', and she said 'oh, I'll ring the verger'. So she rang for the verger and she was chatting away and she said 'You know, a few years ago these new incomers', probably meaning thirty years ago, she said 'they decided we had the smallest village green in the country and they wanted to claim that we had the smallest village', she says, I mean, these two old ladies must have been in their nineties.

JD Aye they were.

ED I mean, I'm talking about thirty year ago. She said, 'and we told them, oh no, that what you call a village green belongs to the Dickinson's. The Dickinson's were brothers who were, way rights, down,' and she told us where the house was. We knew from some old photographs that we'd seen from Aunt Ellen, and she said, 'and of course, Reginald who,' not Reg, Fred, 'who we knew, he moved away but he married Martha Britain who lived, the school teacher's, the school master's daughter, who was a school teacher' and that was Jim's grandma and grandfather you know, and we were delighted to find that out.

JD She lived in the house across the road.

ED It was the schoolhouse, and it's still there.

JD There was two houses actually...

ED Belonged to the Dickinsons.

JD And, cause his brother and he were close on the business side and..

ED And they were wheelwrights. So that's where the carpentry comes from you know, and I mean Jim can do things with wood, or he could, so it's in the genes you know.

You don't how he, why he happened to move to Thorne then?

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ED We don't know, this is..

JD Well...

ED We can't, we've never found out.

JD He must have...

ED Fallen out or something...

JD Well no, I think he's seen an opportunity, it might have been that butchering business and he's, he's gone after butcher's business and acquired it and...

ED We've tried tracing stuff back and we've got as far as going to York to some place in York, and you know...

JD It were Minster.

ED No it wasn't at the Minster it was some other building, and we said...

JD We fell a bit on stony ground.

ED We fell on stony ground. There'd been a fire.

Yes there was in the eighties.

ED And there's so many claims you here that now wherever you go.

Yeah.

ED But these two old ladies both said, 'You know, the Dickinsons and the Britain girls', so there must have been some sons and daughters from that side, but we don't know anything about them. There were all good singers and they were chosen, obviously, York Minster gone round all the villages picking the best out and they sang at York Minster and then when Aunt Ellen died that brooch came to light and I was given it, it was broken, I've had it repaired and I've had it silvered.

It's lovely.

ED And I wore it at Jim's cousin's funeral and two people admired it, asked where it'd come from.

The reason I ask is because I recently came across an article where, that mentioned that your granddad had been asked to sing at the, at the chapel and so on, so I had some inkling that he was a bit of a chorister.

ED Yeah.

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JD Yeah, well he was a lay preacher and he would have been a lay preacher at the chapel and it would undoubtedly have extended to singing because he'd already proved his prowess when he was asked to sing at the, at the York Minster.

ED York Minster. When they were young but we don't know how young, you know, that's something else we can trace, go back to York Minster, you know, find out.

Was he, was he also, was it your granddad who was the gardener who set out the gardens at the mill?

JD Well he probably would I mean it was his house and, I mean mi' dad continued, whatever was there mi' father continued to pursue that. And there was one half of the big gardens that was allocated to mi' Uncle Charlie and Aunt Bessie who lived next door when they moved from Birmingham to take occupancy in the house next door to us.

ED But that bit would belong to the Kempens before that.

JD Yeah before, it did, Kempens had that, so there were like two big gardens and there was a dyke in-between, there wasn't a fence as such. And I mean, when Aunt Bessie, when Charlie died he got gangrene and mi' mother had to dress his legs oh for weeks if not months, Bessie wouldn't touch them, she'd no stomach for it.

ED I remember you mum telling us that.

JD And you know, there were a few other relations that really realised how mi' mother had been dumped upon because, she used to go shopping about twice if not more than that, three times a week for us and for mi' Aunt Bessie and Charlie when he were alive and she only had a little BSA bike, a very utility war time bike that mi' dad had bought for her.

Is this a pedal bike?

JD Aye, and, once she'd got two bags either side of it, the handles bar were curved a little bit so, they lent there selves to hanging shopping bags on and she used to come round that lane, I used to watch her sometimes and think, my god, you'll have a flipping heart attack the way...

What was the lane like, was it a wide lane or was it...?

JD No it was only about, well...

ED Well a car could come down.

JD Aye, just enough for a car to come down. And there were little bridges over the dyke, cause there were a dyke ran parallel with it. When I used to come home from dances in village when I were a teenager there were a barn owl who had a nest in a box in stable in the loft and it, it seemed as though it waited for me coming from dance at about eleven o' clock, then it used to strike up and I'd just get through farm yard and onto straight road.

ED This was on a motorbike.

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JD Which was a mile, well, early days I were on a pushbike and then I got, little BSA Bantam next and this owl used to fly down, and the dyke were about this depth.

About three feet?

JD Ey?

About three feet deep?

JD Well the dyke was a lot deeper than that, but there were only about two foot o' water in bottom and this owl used to fly right next to me, you know at my, my speed, I set the speed and it just flew next to me.

[Laughter]

JD I felt as queer as a nine bob note, you know, I used to think, god in heaven it thinks it's a pet!

[Laughter]

JD I were really chuffed, you know, about it, because I'd got to stage in them days when I began to respect animals and birds a lot more. I mean, when I look back, got that twelve bore, I'll tell you I'd shoot anything that moved on moors and we never got trouble with courting couples.

[Laughter]

JD Cause they'd all heard about me you know.

ED They wunt dare!

JD Don't go on there, there's a bloke on there, he's like...

ED With a gun!

JD He'll blow your brains out!

So you, did, so when you were younger you, you, what did you think about the wildlife that was there on the moors?

JD Oh it was wonderful I mean, there was the odd fox, but having said that, I never shot a fox. It weren't, I wouldn't 'av said it were for want of trying, I didn't go hunting them, but on a night I've been to some of the paths I used to frequent during early part of the day and they used to howl at night like a wolf and it was weird you know and I were glad to get back home and in the kitchen you know and into warm kitchen. Cause it were so weird a noise, you know, if you were going to see a couple of Frankenstein films at picture house and there were anything approaching that situation you couldn't help but think about it and want to get back home. Because I, I didn't usually have mates with me, you know, I used to go on mi' own and paddle round all over the moors. I were never frightened of

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anything as such but I used to feel that there it was a weird, a weird relationship that I had with these animals. Rabbits they were round about the mill and I'd see em, you know, diving up between bricks where old chimney had fell and things and...

ED I've heard they used to pinch your, your cabbages and that.

JD Oh god, I've seen me and mi' dad put two hundred and forty cabbage, cauli, and Brussels sprout plants in one day, one afternoon, come back next morning and they'd eaten lot off! So I used to put traps down for them. We'd gone to Hurst, old ironmonger in Thorne and bought half a dozen gin traps. I don't know whether you've seen these traps, they had a square pad in middle where rabbit 'ud put his foot on and then trap used to close and I'd no end of rabbits running about our place wi' three legs. You know, they'd, they'd got in em and pulled and tugged, and they pulled their flipping feet off, legs and that and, there were three legged rabbits there. And I've seen the, you know, I've seen a rabbit run across where them plants were planted and there was a bit of a hole in the wire netting fence, it were inch and a quarter mesh. And the, they didn't appear to pause to go through the hole. How the hell it could get through it when I came to look at it, I think well how the hell's a rabbit, size of a rabbit, gone through there and at the speed it went through it dint seem to halt or struggle to get through this hole in wire netting, you know.

They have quite a lot of deer there now, were there a lot of deer when you were there?

JD No, none, I could say for certain.

ED You had wild cats though.

JD Oh yeah, did you say there is some deer now?

Yeah.

JD Is there. Ooh I'd be into them. We'd be having venison every week if I lived down there still!

And you told me about some snakes?

JD Well what happened there, it was 1947, I was eleven year old waiting for results of me, eleven plus to see whether I were going to grammar school or not, and I came, I'd been messing round mill or wherever and I came back and there's a, this bloke had arrived and I think you know his name, I'll tell you in a minute. And there was him and a young girl with him who was, I found out later, his daughter. And they'd gone round the back of our houses, cause it were Saturday afternoon and there was nobody in the office you see. Nobody else working, and he was in his shed, in his own workshop with the lathe and the lawnmower grinder, which he'd made, was there. Anyway I came home to the big drying ground as we called it, which looked into his shed, I didn't go diving across, you know, and straight into him, because they were in with mi' dad, talking to him. They'd obviously been made aware that he was the man that was, you know, they'd heard about, and the one that Bunting, as it was, wanted to meet.

Anyway mi' father saw me looking across the grass, just give us a wave you know, so I went across, you know, I walked into shed and he's says 'Jim, I want you to meet this gentleman, it's Mr Bunting

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and his daughter Anne'. And I looked at 'em, you know, and he was about forty two or three at the time and she looked about ten, maybe eleven at the most. About the same age as me, you know, she were very nice as well, I took a right fancy to her straight away, cause I were just beginning to start and look at, you know, the girlfriend proposition, anyway that's by the by. But he said 'Mr Bunting's been asking about the snakes round here'. I said 'Oh yeah', and he said 'Well what it is Jim', he said, 'I'm an entomologist and I'm into the research on the snakes that occupy areas within Yorkshire and the Moors, including Thorne Moors and Hatfield Moors where you live here and further into the moors, you know'. He said 'and I want to offer you a proposition', I said 'oh, sounds interesting'. He said 'Well,' he says 'You'll make yourself some pocket money out of this if it's of interest', I said 'Oh aye'. Anything for a few bob, you know. He says 'Well', he says 'If you can catch some of the snakes and put them in a bag and I'll provide you with one,' and he, he'd got some banker's bags, you know the old blue bankers bags about this deep. He said 'Put em in there and bring them up to my house at Brickyard Lane, just past, I gather you've an aunt lives up there, in the terrace houses that come up first on the lane.' I said 'Aye'. He says 'Well, we live in the council houses further along on the other side'. 'Aye', I said, 'I know where you mean'. He says, 'Right well the proposition is this', he said 'I'll give you a shilling a snake', and then it was either a viper or a grass snake at that juncture. But I don't know whether he said before he left, he upped the price and he said 'we'll make it a shilling for grass snakes and one and six for vipers' because he says 'as you probably know you can get bitten by vipers', he says 'they are, I wouldn't say lethal weapons,' but he said 'they're not very nice'. He said he'd been bitten several times.

Mind you, he'd picked one up one day, this is overrunning tale a little bit, and there were two of 'em having sex and he though he'd only picked one up, and he could see the head of the one and he knew he was safe with it you know and then next thing the head of the female popped out of the coils and bit him and he were that surprised at this that the other one, first un bit him, so he got bit twice in a few minutes, by the pair of em. Well he went down with it, you know, and they rushed him into hospital at Doncaster. And next thing we got a phone call in the office to say that Mr Bunting was in after two snake bites and they'd been hunting round their supplies of serum and they couldn't find any anti-serum that treats the snakes bites. And he said, the bloke on phone said, 'We've tried Wakefield, Sheffield, Doncaster, where they were, and there were another one, Huddersfield, or Wakefield, anyway, Scunthorpe, aye that were other one, and none of em had any. He says 'And Mr Bunting's told us that the only party that he knows has got some is you, or your son, because Mr Bunting gave your son some a year, a couple of three year ago in case he ever got bitten.' He says, 'and what we're saying is could you bring it through to the hospital for us to treat him'. And mi' dad says 'Yes, certainly,' he said 'I'm relying on mi' bike,' he says, 'I've got to bike it to Moorends, leave mi' bike at mi' sisters', that were mi' Aunt Ellen's, 'and then catch the bus to Doncaster'.

So he did all that you know and he got there, we walked into reception, told him who he was and why he was there and they just grabbed this bottle of serum off him, never said thank you, kiss mi' arse, nor bugger you, you know. That's how I generally put it if you pardon my French. Anyway everything went well and Bunting recovered, I can't remember, he probably came down and thanked mi' dad profusely for what he'd done, you know.

Anyway in the meantime I'd started thinking about the snake job and I used to see them nearly daily, when I were on holiday and it was September time and summer were in it's high, you know. And there was an area where the canal had finished as it went right up to the mill and mi' dad, when he used to use the big circular saw, occasionally he had to empty underneath it, because it were made up with

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sawdust, you know and it were getting beyond, convenience really. And he'd get the barrow and fill the barrow, maybe a couple o' times or three times and trundle it up to where this, what I call snake pit and it was the old canal and he was tipping it into old canal which was beginning to fill it up. And I used to go down and the sawdust was on the top obviously and when the sun was blazing it used to get fairly hot, as you can appreciate and the snakes used to bask in the sun in the middle of this. This snake pit would be about half as big again as this room and there was a path through the nettles, they were big nettles, cause there were willow trees in the side of the, where the old canal still prevailed but had no water in. But when there's trees nettles thrive like mad, you know and they had stalks on bigger than your thumb and you had to go down this path to get to snake pit and then tip the barrow, I've taken a few myself.

Anyway, on this occasion there'd been a burglary, somebody had been and burgled the office and mi' Aunt Bessie coming tearing out of the yard to our house, mi' dad were having his breakfast, I were just about ready to go to school and she shouted 'Reg, Reg! There's been a burglary they've broken into office!' She says 'I don't know what they've taken but there seems to have been some real disturbance.' So mi' dad put his boots on, you know, because he hadn't quite got ready for work even. I'm through that door like a shot, and I was straight round to office, straight in and safe that were in a compartment on the far side as you went through door was gone, and I could see the blacksmith's shop door, well doors were open, and there were a space underneath em, anybody could crawl under it, but nobody did, I mean nobody were interested in pinching anything. But they had, they'd taken the safe, dragged it across the yard and got the doors open, cause it weren't difficult to open when you could get in side of em and they'd dragged the safe into the blacksmiths shop, they'd got mi' dad's burning tackle and burnt a big flap in the top and that was pulled open, laying wide open and I went in and had a look. But they'd, it were filled wi' sawdust, between the two skins of steel, you know, it used to fill em up with ballast apparently these safes. Anyhow I'm looking at this and all of a sudden I looked down and there were, there must have been half a dozen, shillings, well they weren't shillings they were pennies.

ED Pennies.

JD Copper and there must have been about five bob or more laying amongst all this sawdust. Ooh I thought that's champion I've made a few more bob here, so I picked it all up and put it in mi' pocket, you know. I thought sod em, police hadn't arrived by that time. Anyway then mi' dad come across and surveyed the scene and he'd been in the office 'cos there were a telephone in there. You'd have thought whoever had done it'd pulled wires out but they didn't so he phoned up, must have dialled nine, nine, nine. I remember our telephone number in that office three, one, one, two, Thorne, three, one, one, two and he dialled and got the police down, within half an hour they came. Why they were, they were swarming all over the place, coppers. And there were one of 'em who were in charge, and I think he were a superintendent he were higher than a chief inspector anyway and he had big peaked cap on you know, and he'd more pips on his shoulders than god knows what. Anyway I got a bit bored, it got to about eleven o'clock and I thought this is a bit boring, I thought I'll go down to snake pit, see if I can catch myself a snake and I'll take it this afternoon to old Buntings.

So anyway I went down to snake pit and I had to walk sideways because I'd just a pair of shorts on in summer weather, you know, kid, eleven or I think I were about straight up eleven, coming up twelve, following April so I got down and as I crept through between nettles, I used to creep within about two yards of the end of this little path and I'd run like a march hare and look to see what I could see, if there were any basking in sun. They felt you coming through the vibrations, you know, and they were

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straight up and into nettles on, furthest outskirts of the snake pit, which is what happened. You couldn't pick more than, you could maybe pick two up if you got one in each hand, and that were it. Anyway I dives through there and there were one, god what a size, it were about three and half foot long, about like this, you know and it were just going, disappearing into nettles when it had heard me coming, so I run like a march hare and there were about that much tail sticking out I'd just get hold of it, you know and yanked it, come back here you bugger!

[Laughter]

JD And I yanked it out and picked it up and I though right that'll do, it'll have to be one then unless I catch another this afternoon. So I had it more or less behind mi' back cause I wanted to get, so I wouldn't get nettled going back between these nettles and this path. So I'm walking up the path and I've snake behind mi' back, holding it like that, an I were half turned, you know, I knew I was okay either side o' nettles. And all of a sudden it went a bit dark and you know, I thought what's happened is there an eclipse of the sun of something, you know. So I turned back to face the way I were going and there were this big copper we peak cap on all these pips on him and he stood like this, typical copper stance, you know, and he says, 'Now then, who are you, and where have you been and what have you been doing?' I said, 'Oh I've just been to catch this snake', and I just lifted it up right under his nose. He went as white as a sheet, and I thought he were gonna fall back'ards over into all these nettle you know. Never said another word and he just regained his balance a bit and I just walked straight past him and I never said another word. I'd told him where I'd been, who I was and why I were there and I went and got mi' little sack from down side of mi' dad shed and put this snake in, stringed it up you know, and tied it, you had to tie em twice and then bend it over and tie em again. Because first time I caught one I lost it and I told Bunting, I said 'It got out and I tied it as tight as.' He said 'did you tie it twice?' I said 'You never told me to.' 'Oh', he says 'I'm sorry,' he says 'You have to tie it and then move down two and half inches or thereabouts, tie it again and then turn it over so that the two lots of tying coincide and then tie again with two o' longest ends and they'll not get out then, they can't go round sharp bends you see'.

So anyway, I put it in sack and tied it up and I thought, well, I'll go and see what mi' dad's doing, you know, I never saw this bloke anymore. I went in blacksmith's shop and he's banging away on anvil making some hooks and he looked up as I came in. He says 'Where you been?' 'Oh,' I says 'I've just been down to snake pit, caught mi' sen a snake for Bunting. I'm gonna take him it up this afternoon.' He says 'Did you see that big copper down there?' I said 'Aye, I did actually, why?' and I thought I'm gonna get a roasting here if I'm not careful. Mind I never remember mi' dad either, he never laid a hand on me, neither did mi' mother, but I never remember him telling me off for anything either, when I come to reckon it all up. 'No,' he says 'He came in blacksmith's shop here about ten minutes ago,' he says 'he dint look well. And I'm thinking what's he come in here for, well next,' he says 'he asked me if your mother were in. He says is your wife in at home, over big yard? And I said 'Aye she is why?' He said, 'Do you think you could nip across and ask her if she could make me a cup of black strong tea!'

[Laughter]

JD Oh aye, I tell you, I nearly burst out laughing in front of him, you know, I thought that frattled that brute. Anyway I said, first one I caught, first snake I caught, it got out because I'd tied it incorrectly. 'Cause I'd gone up to Buntings, I wasn't going, and I went in house and I sat down and I

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said I've got some bad news I says 'That snake, first one I've caught', I said 'It's getting away', and I told him about it and I'm sat on his three piece suite, on settee, and all of a sudden he jumped up and reaches under seat and pulls this viper out you know, in the house mind. I nearly said Jesus Christ you know, I said 'what the devils happening here?' 'Oh,' he says 'Our Timothy's broke the glass case in front room', and he said 'There's about a dozen of em got out and they've been all over house', he says 'and we've got em all bar two now.' Anyway, they got em like and that was that visit.

I were going back twice a week with snakes for him cause I knew he never used to pay me straight away. He used to keep a check mind and so did I and he said 'Now then, how many is it I owe you for?' and I could allus trot straight out, 'fourteen.' I've got diary for 1947 in there ant I, and it's got all these scores in each day, I've earnt some money. I were richest kid in Thorne Grammar School. They used to say to me 'How come you've got so much, Jim?' and I'd say 'Well I earn it you know, catch snakes for a bloke'.

JD Anyway, I were just gonna say, I'd gone again another day earlier, later on in week or following week and I went in house and dropped the snakes at the door, I dint used to take 'em in house and he says 'Come in here and have a look', and he took me straight into front room. I've been in before like because it's where he used to put the snakes I were catching for him. And he used to take vipers to the, to feed the mongoose at London Zoo and would you believe he used to ride on a push bike to London Zoo. He were a fit man mind.

Not from Thorne?

JD From Thorne, he used to sleep under trees in a wood. I used to say 'How do you go on for a bit o' sleep?' 'Oh,' he says 'I just have a blanket with us in mi' saddle bag and', he says 'I just lay it down and roll it over mi' legs and body and I sleep under nearest tree.' He were a hardish bloke, but skinny with it, you know. Anyway, he says 'come in here and have a look in this one here', and I went in and there's this damn great snake in this glass cabinet about nine foot long. I says 'Goodness me,' I says 'What is it?' He says 'It's an Italian boa constrictor'. He says 'But it's not fully grown yet' and he opened door o' cage and reached in and got it out and handed it to me! It went three times round mi' flipping arm you know! So I gave him it back! I said 'Arh, very interesting', you know, I hated the damn things. All snakes, I never, I were never a lover of snakes but when they were paying me one and six a shot and a shilling for you know, ordinary ones, who the hell cares.

So anyway, he obviously had to get rid of that, and eventually would you believe, the council kicked him out and he were in street with all his furniture and his kids and his wife sat on three piece suite in middle o' road. He were a hell of a, he were an eccentric to say the least. Cause he used to go around all countryside and come on the moors. He always said that the moors was common land and it didn't belong to the company that mi' dad worked for, it was common to all people in the Thorne area. And he used to carry a stick, I mean I carry one now, and I used to say to him 'Do you ever have to use that Mr Bunting?' and he'd say 'Well I have done on the very odd occasion,' he says 'But most of these farmers leave me alone', he says 'I think they've heard how I've handled some of them previously'. I says 'By,' I says 'I bet you know, any of em 'ill know when they get a belt up back o' their head we that!' 'Oh', he says 'you don't do it like that', he says. 'I'll tell you now so that you'll always know in the future, what you do if you get accosted by farmers who've got no right', I says 'So what do you suggest like?' He says 'Take the stick', he says 'and just lift it horizontal and ram it into his, into their bellies', he said 'stomach, you know? A real hard thrust.' He says 'They'll go down', he says 'there'll

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be canny bit before they get back up.’ And I used to think, oh it’ll be a long time before I’m carrying a stick, but I’m carrying one now, when we go out aren’t I.

ED Aye.

JD I walk with it, you know. I’ve never, every time I get that stick and go through that door downstairs I think of all Bill Bunting and what he told me and I wunt have hesitation and if somebody had a go at me and I’d stick in mi’ hand I wouldn’t be trying to crack em at back o’ nut. I’d been sticking it straight in their guts and they’d go down, I’ve got no doubt, cause they’re a lethal weapon really.

Did you ever go out on the moors with Mr Bunting?

JD Oh aye, only once as I remember, he took me. I mean, there weren’t such things as paedophiles then, but had there have been some about, you know, mi’ dad and mother might, if they’d been a suspicious pair of individuals they might have been worried sick about Bunting taking me two or three mile into the moors. We got walking and it were getting a bit tiring and he says ‘Do you want to sit down?’ I says ‘Aye, I wunt mind’, so we sat down and there were a stream running between the peat and I’ve cupped mi’ hands and got down to get a drink and he knocked mi’ hands to side and mi’ water I’d got, spilt, you know. He says, ‘Don’t you drink that’, he says ‘you don’t know what the’, what it is, you know, the impurities what he were meaning, he says ‘there’s more impurities in there than you’d believe’. He says ‘Don’t drink that Jim’.

Anyway we sat back down, been sat there about five minutes, and all of a sudden he jumped up again, just like in his house with three piece suite and reached across, just down side of me and picked this viper up. Crikey, you know, I’d been nearly sat on it! Mind you he dint gi’ me one and six for it cause he’d picked it up, you know, I though god I were a bit slow there, or I’d have hold of that and I’d have got mi’ one and a tanner!

ED But didn’t you once have to catch one at school?

JD Oh aye, I come back from having mi’ lunch, I used to go to mi’ aunt’s for mi’ dinner. And I were coming back to the school because the majority of the kids had their dinners in the dining room upstairs at the old, no, it were the new grammar school then. And Mike Brennan it was met me halfway down drive as I were coming in. He says ‘Jim, Jim quick!’ I says ‘What’s a matter?’ He says ‘You’re needed up here.’ I thought what the hell, and I got to, nearly to gymnasium, there was the teachers’ office on the corner and then gymnasium and the kids, there must have been the whole of the school, just between end o’ playground and gymnasium. And there were two air raid shelters that’d been for the war, when it were wartime and you could still get down them. But when you got to the bottom they’d been boarded up well and truly so no kids could get in and go into the actual shelter itself. So I got there and I said to Mike ‘What the hell’s going off here then?’ He says ‘There’s a snake in bottom down there’, and there must have been five hundred kids, you know when they’ve said, everybody has, what is it?

ED Fifteen minutes of fame.

JD Quarter of an hour’s fame in their lives, well that were one o’ my quarter of an hours. And I

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walked up to where all kids were crowded round entrance to this, old underground and they all parted you know. Who were it, were it Moses?

ED Moses!

JD That parted all Jerusalemites.

ED The seas.

JD And water's opened for him, it were just like that exactly for me. And I just walked straight down to bottom, you know and poor little snake were there, weren't a, weren't a right big 'un mind, well it wunt have made any difference if it had of been. I just bent down picks it and up and turned round to come back up and you know the noise, with the lasses, cause there were lasses and lads as well and the noise that they make when they're hysterical nearly, it nearly drowned any other noise that were around about you know. And I walked up, whey they all, they dispersed in all directions, you know. I walked right through middle of em and Mike were walking more or less behind me, he says 'what are you gonna do?' I says 'I'll go up to biology lab,' I says 'There'll be teachers getting ready for afternoon teaching sessions', I said 'and I'll go see if they've got a glass container of some sort to put it in till I go at four o' clock when school finishes and I'll go straight to Bunting's and get mi' one and a tanner!

So that's what I did, I went upstairs and produced this snake. Teacher nearly crapped his self, you know, I don't think he'd ever seen one in his life before! I said 'You're alright', I says 'Just give us a jam jar that's got a screw top lid, or something of that nature', I says 'as long as it's a two pound jam jar I'll be able to get it in'. So I put it in and then I went back after teaching had all finished, you know, and picked it up and walked, I think I had a bike in them days, anyway I went back down to Bunting's and took it and he put it away where it belonged you know. I don't know whether I ever explained to him just what had happened.

But, by that time his daughter were at that same school, I'm nearly sure she were in one class lower than me. And last time I saw her she had a boyfriend with her and I were courting my first wife and we were coming together in Thorne park and Maureen weren't one to want to be introduced to any women I'd known before I met her, you know, so it were a very brief encounter, as the saying is. And she, she'd got this boyfriend with her, he were quite a big good looking tall guy, but I've never seen her since. I'd like to know, Bunting's dead now, I do know that, and, but there's nobody in the, he got the old police house in Thorne, you know, I don't know how, but his father had money I think, and he probably got it, he inherited some of his dads money and probably bought the, it was like, there were a jail in it. It were a police house but it had facilities for locking people up as well. 'Cause it were just across from that butchers shop want it, you didn't fancy going to have a look in with me! Cause a young kid came in army uniform and it was his grandson and he said, 'Who are you?' you know. I said 'I'm a friend of your dad's', and he looked at me very suspiciously and I'd heard there'd been another kid and I think it were Anne that'd had a kid and the old fellow and his wife, Mrs Bunting, she were a nice woman. They'd brought it up, you know, and this kid's about eighteen by that time. I went in and, he'd got maps all over walls of Thorne Moors and everything, you know, amazing.

I was gonna ask you what his house was like, because I understand that it was not just snakes that he collected that he had other things?

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JD Well I went down one day when he was still in, what they call it...

ED Council houses.

JD Aye, Alexander Street. He had a dustbin full o' locusts, lid on 'em mind, and he had a heater in, or it was big lamp and temperature thermostat to control temperature. Locusts, if them lot get in, you know, in public, down here, they'd kill half o' crops in flipping, in South Yorkshire. But he had em well under control. He knew exactly what he were doing with em. But I think it was partly that, that somebody had reported him and said what he'd got in that bin, I wouldn't have done that, but somebody had let cat out of bag and they'd gone down with a search warrant and when they found, and asked what they were. And he'd say 'Well what do they look like, they're locusts, but they're well controlled.' And that's when he got kicked out of the flipping house, I think it was at the same, that were the situation that prompted it anyway.

ED What else had he then?

JD Aye, he had a row o' jam jars on windowsill in front room and he'd got all Thorne Council in jam jars, dead, and he'd got Martha Lloyd who were on local...

ED All the different councillors.

JD Aye councillor that looked after schools and that, he were a right toad.

What do you mean he'd got them on, in, had he got pictures or something you mean?

JD No, he'd got real ones, but dead, the frogs and toads and all that, they were all dead but he'd put labels on and put their names on.

So he'd got animals in these things?

JD Only the frogs and toads. He were only interested in the reptiles at that time. Nicholson, cause this...

[Both talking]

Ed Christened them all after councillors.

JD Cause this bloke Nicholson he were on County Council and apparently there were a tale went round, I thought it were a cracker this mi' sen, Nicholson had gone to this meeting of the Thorne County Council or Doncaster County Council and he were late arriving and he says 'I must apologise ladies and gentlemen for being late for the meeting', he said, 'but mi' car broke down and I've had to come by public convenience', I said 'has he starting riding about in shitehouses!'

And he had cockroaches as well Mr Bunting, did you see those?

JD Aye, oh aye. He once told me, he picked up a beetle on the moors and he said 'do you know

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what they call this?' He knew all the Latin names off by heart, you know. And I've never forgotten name of that beetle, he said 'this is', and it were a brownish green colour and it were about as big as, about as big as that length wise. He says 'It's a *Dytiscus marginalis* beetle', and I registered that up here and I have never forgotten the name of that beetle. I've no books with it in or owt, but...

ED You had crickets though at the mill.

JD Oh aye, thereby hangs a tale, as well.

[Recording Ends]