

Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: John Hitchcock (part 1)

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's the 14th August 2006 and I'm talking to Mr John Hitchcock [wrongly said as Hinchcliffe]. Good Morning.

Good Morning.

I wonder if we could start by you telling me when and where you were born please Mr Hitchcock.

I was born in 1941, it's a long time ago, in Thorne, so, and I've never moved out of Thorne. So I'm born and bred a Thorne Man and that's it. I ant been across, I ant been abroad or anywhere. Only place I've been is Thorne Moors!

[Laughter]

And whereabouts in Thorne were you living when you were small, when you were young?

Well I was living not far from this present address, just round the corner at Lime Tree Grove, that's where I was born. So, and, mi' mother used to take me down t'moors in t'pram when she were a, cause there was a lady down there, at Elmhirst's, at side o' the moors, the buildings are all down, well they've gone now altogether, she lived on the moors and we, mi' mum was pally with her. So she used to, I can remember her taking me down in t'push chair down to, to t'moors like, you know.

And what do you mean when you said she took you down to the moors, what, what did you do?

Well I were only in a pushchair and she used to go there and see this lady and I used to play about wi' a goat and that what she had down there and that, you know what I mean. Like lads do, mess about wi' everything! And she was quite pally with her, so that was, a footpath not far from here, down Birtwhistle's land and that, past the lace factory and she used to go down there quite often. I can still remember it you know. Used to really enjoy it.

And how many were there in your family?

I've got three sisters and two brother, six altogether and there's, I'm the youngest of the family, there's twenty years difference between me and mi' eldest brother. I'm sixty-five, mi' eldest brother's eighty-five, so, I'm only just here.

And so did your mum take you all down there? Does the whole family have this connection with the moors?

No I don't think, I can't, seen as there's such a vast gap between me and me brothers and sisters I can't say what she really did, she probably did but, you know. I can't remember going with 'em you see, cause there's twenty years o' difference, so, I were still like a baby, they're like teenagers aren't they. So I don't know. But mi' brother used to go fishing and that down there and that and, we used to go over t'colliery waste land and there used to be a pond there what belonged to

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t'colliery and we used to fishing there and adjacent to moors and that. So apart from that I can't remember going with 'em as such, you know.

Did it have a name that pond?

It's Bell's Pond now, everybody knows it as Bell's Pond, but it's actually, before them it were Sharpe's, Sharpe's Pond and there used to be a lot o' fish in it at one time and Verhees' lived there, have you heard of Verhees? They lived adjacent in Whaley Balk and at that time, the pit water didn't drain into it and it's salty now. But when they, they first lived in it, the pond was dug out to make bricks and Sharpes who lived down there, you can, there's still the kiln still there, and he used to make his own bricks and he had his little cottage and then he extended it for his outhouses, his wash houses, he made his bricks and so he extended his building you see. So the pond was fresh water at that time, so the Verhees' they used to tell me there were all sorts of fish in. There were tench in and perch and pike and they used to go fishing as lads in there you see. It were a little focal point for 'em and, but when the pit started draining a lot of water into it, which is salt, and it's still salt now, killed all the fish, except sticklebacks, but it's still a nice pond but there's nowt grows in it because it's just salt water basically. You know, it's like a, well its seashore habitat now and there's a lot of things growing there what grows on t'seashore.

And did you join in with this group of lads that used to go fishing?

Oh, yeah, we all went, we all went down us lads and that and went fishing there and it were just a local point for going fishing and swimming and all lot like. In actual fact that pond as such belongs to t'colliery. It's right on the boundary of the National Nature Reserve, but it actually belongs to the colliery and I think English Nature is hoping to bring it in to their Reserve in the near future. Cause the tip as you know, has never been worked for quite a lot of years and it's, and they're filling it in now. So all the spoil from the tip is a nature reserve on it's own now, you know, there's everything on it, no end of wild flowers, butterflies, so they're trying to blend it in with the tip - with the moor, cause it's a really lovely area. So we're hoping that it does, the nature reserve will be extended for that part of the moor.

Tell me, where did you go to school?

Thorne Secondary Boys, that's it.

And did you have a particular favourite subject, or.. anything you were particularly good at, at school?

I warn't very good at maths but I were good at English and I enjoyed, at that time we used to have broadcasts every week, nature study and that were a favourite of mine, but apart from that. School's altered a lot now ant it, to what it is.

Tell me, tell me a little bit about your life when you were at school.

How do you mean?

Well I mean, you told me the subjects that you liked at school, what other things did you do, what other things did you get up to?

Do you mean sports or owt like that?

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I'm thinking in terms of, did you have work you had to do when you were at, also when you were going to school, what kind of social life did you have?

Well I were a bit of a loner and I'm still a bit of a loner, I used to be away and I used to be bird nesting and fishing. Mi' sister, she married a farmer so all mi' school holidays I went onto t'farm and helped 'em wi' t'harvest and that, you know.

Is that...

Allus fascinated with nature and country and that, and I still am. So I used to spend all mi' school holidays for a bit of pocket money helping wi' t'harvest and driving tractors and that.

Is that locally?

Yeah, yeah, oh yeah, just local, Hatfield. So, as I say, my holiday were spent out in t'fields and that, I mean now they're all on computers children aren't they, you know what I mean. That's all, they don't, I mean when we were lads it were bird nesting and collecting eggs and that, you know. We were out of doors all day, you know what I mean, your mother dint know where you was, where now, they daren't let you loose dare they.

Now tell me a bit more about that, you've talked about bird nesting and so on, and people, you know, they've said that we used to go bird nesting and fishing and what have you.

And fishing, I were a keen fisherman and that.

You were a keen fisherman?

Yeah, and then I went, and then I took up field sports, shooting and, that's mi', that's mi' life line, what's kept me - its summat I've always followed.

And how did you get involved in that, how did you start with that?

Well I were just involved wi' nature and, it's kept me sane really shooting and that, and like when you see birds and that flying about you want to acquire one when you're younger, you know what I mean, you've got to get one ant you. You've got to catch one or, it's like when you go fishing you've got to catch one or you've got to trap one and see what they're like and it evolves from there, you know what I mean.

When you used to go bird nesting, what does, what did you do, what does bird nesting mean?

Well climb as many trees as you can and get as many eggs as you can and then you, you're showing your collection off to your mates and have you got this egg, have you got that egg and things like that, you know what I mean. It were a, all year round ruddy campaign really, you know what I mean.

And did you collect a - were there a lot of different birds?

Oh, yeah, yeah. Well the Verhees', his egg collections in the moors, of the moors, it's in Doncaster Museum, what were collected off moors. When he died his family donated 'em to museum, and it's - but collections as such today is worth thousands and thousands of pound on the black market, you know what I'm saying. I mean there's still people collecting eggs, there's an underground

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movement even now, you have to be aware people who come on t'moors will ask you questions about this and that and you've got to vet 'em and think, you know, are they genuine people, they might come as genuine bird watchers and then behind your back they could be taking rare birds eggs. So you've got to, sort of, be able to suss people out. But in them days it were the thing to do warn't it. I mean there were no law as such until 1954 till t'bird protection act got out. I mean we used to collect eggs for food, you know, plover's eggs and wot not.

You did?

Yeah, yeah, we used to go on and collect lapwings eggs and that cause they're lovely for eating is lapwings eggs and, we used to go and get first moorhen eggs off of t'moors and make omelettes wi' it and custards. Mi' mum used to say get off and get me some eggs I'm gonna make a custard and might even get a swan's egg for a Yorkshire pudding, mi' mum used to make a full Yorkshire pudding on a Sunday wi' one swans egg cause they're lovely eggs you know, things like that.

So what was your egg collection like? Was it a good collection?

No, not really I went then from eggs to collecting stamps or summat else, you know what I mean, which I'm glad I dint. You can get hooked wi' things, and if it gets into your adult age you can, it's hard to shake off, you know what I mean, collectors are fanatics aren't they. I mean I collect cartridges and that now and guns and that, but once you get hooked with it it's, and if you're still hooked on bird's eggs it can get you into a lot of trouble can't it. Even plants, I mean, I've just been mentioning the one aspect birds eggs, but there's a lot of people collecting rare plants and they'll, they'll spend thousands of pounds for importing rare orchids from t'Amazon jungle and things like that, there's a lot of big money made, people are fanatic collectors. You know, even getting cactuses off of t'desert.

Can you tell me know about your - how you began with your shooting and so on. How did you learn to shoot and how did you come into contact with guns initially?

Well I were self taught, cause I was on the farm and there's rabbits running here to there and there's crows want disturbing off the crops if they're doing damage so mi' grandad used to say 'go and get that gun son and scare those crows off' and then you start shooting. They used to come threshing once a year then. I mean then the harvest, the farming was not like it is, combine harvesters, it were just binders, I mean nobody had a combine. They used to do, cutting wi' old binder, mi' grandad he had a tractor when they first come out, Ferguson tractors, but up to then it were horse driven. So the corn, you've seen how they done it where binders it were cut into sheaves and then stacked in stooks and then left in t'field to dry and then we built stacks, corn stacks and then they were there probably while into t'new year when t'thrashing machine come round and by that time the stacks were full o' rats and that you see. So we had a good time shooting rats and what have you and then there were birds used to come onto t'chaff, starlings and that, we used to shoot them. So that's how it evolved you see. It was there and something's wanted destroying, some things were nice to eat so, you started maybe with a three - a nine millimetre garden gun as they called 'em and then you went to a four ten and ten you maybe got a twenty bore and that's how you rolled up the scale and now, then you went wild fowling and deer stalking and it's just a way o' life you see. Then when I went keepering, you need your gun it's a part of your tool kit is a gun, foxes to control, rabbits, all sorts of things. So, it's just like another trade in't it, you know.

So your grandad had a farm?

Yeah.

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Where was that?

That was at Hatfield and not far from Tudworth Corner, Tudworth.

And is this your dad's mum or your mum's mum - dad?

Pardon?

Your dad's dad or your mum's dad?

Well, I call him mi' grandad, it was mi' brother in laws father, so what would that make him? I always call him mi' grandad, mi' brother in law, mi' sister married a farmer you see.

Yeah.

And he lived wi' mi' sister and mi' brother in law.

Okay, and how did your family make a living?

Mi' mother well she were mostly, she worked on t'land, she used to go potato picking and that for farmers and mi' brother went in t'army and then he went into t'pits, mi' other sister married a farmer. Mi' dad were like a brick layers helper and that, he were into building and that, building side, but he used to do a lot o' poaching when he were a young lad, he'd go netting partridges and that, he were allus, liked a bit of country life you know what I mean.

Netting partridges, how does that work?

There in't the partridges about, you know, to this day, I mean they're making a comeback now, but with the farming as it was then, little fields, plenty of edges, no chemicals on t'land there were partridges in every field. So it were part o', netting a few partridge for a bit o' 'bacca money and a bit o' food at that time and they used to go netting them on a night, you know wi' drag nets.

Tell me how you do it?

Well they find out where coveys are feeding in certain fields, you know. They might be feeding on a bit o' stubble on t'edge o' tatoes and that and they get to know where they're feeding. Then on an evening where they went to roost. and when they go into roost they all get in a covey and they all get together and you can hear 'em calling and they call one another in and that's where they stop for t'night and they used to pinpoint these areas and then on a night they'd, off they went with their nets, fifty yard nets and they knew approximately where the birds were and then they walked two abreast holding net dragging over the stubble, or grass, bit o' grass [inaudible] and then when the bird felt the net touch 'em they used to fly up and you could feel 'em on the net and they used to drop the net then and catch 'em, drop the net and catch 'em. And they used to bite their heads then, that's how they used to kill 'em, so they don't damage 'em, you know. Start ringing their necks, it'd spoil 'em so they just, used to just nip 'em on their head just to kill 'em and that. Then collect 'em up.

And how many would they take say, in one night?

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Well in them days you could get hundreds, hundreds on a good night, you had two or three good coveys, you know. Fifty or sixty on an ordinary night but just depended how much ground you'd covered and how many birds were knocking about you know.

And what would you do with them then?

Well they sold 'em, to friends, to family, some of 'em 'ud be sold for, 'bacca money and pocket money. and then it was the thrill of the chase as well to 'em, you know what I mean, bit o' poaching like. But them days have gone now, well game's not worth a lot o' money now and you know, and there's still some lads going out now just for the thrill of it, not for money making side of it, they just go for the thrill of it really and...

And this is on farmland?

Yeah, and now they're more into stealing poults and selling 'em on and they're worth the money now.

What's that?

Stealing poults, you know, birds that you've reared for the shoot and putting 'em in release pens and what have you, you know stealing at six or seven week old before they can, before they're out the release pen and selling 'em on and that you know what I mean. [Inaudible].

And did you ever go with your dad?

No, no.

So going with your life, you worked on- as a lad you worked on the farm in your holidays and all that kind of thing.

Yeah and then I went, and I left school and in a week, I were good at joinery, carpentry and joinery at school. I got a prize for woodwork. and I was the most popular boy in class as well, I don't know how or what, and so I wanted to do cabinet making and that. So mi' brother in law got me a job at Armitages at Thorne, wi' a funeral director, he would take me on, he said I had a fairly good report at school so he says 'I'll set you on. and then mi' sister sort of stepped in and said 'I don't think it'd suit you being at funeral directors and that, I think you might, you might like the joinery side but I don't think you mebbe, appeal to you really', you know. Anyway at that time then they're wanting shipyard workers, so I went for an interview at Thorne shipyard, it's gone now, it's finished.

Is that Dunstons?

Dunstons. So then I served mi' time in t'ship yard as a loftsman, shipwright loftsman and then I went plating and served mi' apprenticeship and I've got mi' indentures as a shipwright for serving five years apprenticeship. So I am a tradesman by rights. And then when I got married there were no room in my department for me so I went to Hessel ship yard, that were Dunstons as well and I moved there for a short time at Hessel. Got a house allocated through my work and I worked in Hessel and then I left Hessel, fell out wi' t'manager, and then I got another job elsewhere and went to Paule ship yard, stayed there quite a while and then, I left there, in the meantime I came back to live at Thorne and I got a job at Cochran's up at Selby, got a big ship yard there, they built all the Ross Trawlers, can you remember them. The Ross Fleet the Ross Valiant and that and I got a job there and then I found mi' own footpath back if you like and there was a lot more work came into

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being at Thorne again, so I came into this house. I been here forty two year and I went back into t'ship yard at Thorne and stayed there for quite some years. Then I left there and went contracting, cement [inaudible] cement contracting, which I dint like, I dint really like t'ship yard anyway, I wanted to be off fishing and out in t'country, you know what I mean, and then I wend in t'power station.

Which power station was that?

Went in all of these power stations around here rebuilding boilers and that, contracting, all round here, cause it were good money, when you first got married and that you needed plenty of money. But I dint like it and anyway then eventually I went to, I went game keeping and that then for twenty years. Then I went back with mi' son in law building industrial buildings, you know, grain stores and that. Then I had a bad accident fell off a roof and fractured all mi' arm and shoulder, here, so that were mi' days finished for contracting. So now I'm retired like. But in the meantime, all these years I've still been going on t'moors because we used to go poaching, we used to go, when I first got married, I were like twenty three, at that time I were into shooting then with a friend who lives local and I used to go onto t'moors shooting.

Shooting what?

Mainly ducks and pheasants and most game. Cause at that time he had an old Ariel track bike, single (pot?) old Ariel. And we used to load all us gear on, get us dogs and, in fact we used to, we used to miss work some weeks, we used to say we were that fed up wi' work we used to 'arh, we'll go this afternoon, we'll go on t'moors for t'afternoon and stick work'. So we used to load all us gear on t'motorbike, away we used to go, dodging Fisons, we used to hide us bike when we got on there, go shooting and then come back to where bike warh and then we used to hide us guns, bury us guns in a plastic bag, wi' all grease and that, bury it, so that if we got picked up on t' way coming off we'd no guns wi' us, so we just had what we'd shot. And then next time we went we used to go to the spot where we'd hid all us gear and then off we went again then for another foray like. Did that for years, allus dodging Fisons, cause they had a gun club on at that time. Eventually I did get caught, at that time then, firearms- crime if you like or, it wasn't like it is today, I mean, if you get caught now wi' firearms what's not on your ticket and that it's three years minimum sentence. Whereas them days- the time we got caught, they were waiting for us when we come off t'moors and I hid my gun up a drainpipe, I thought he could see it you know, one of these police men and he'd said 'where's your gun?' I said 'I ant got one.' He says 'Well we've seen you with a gun when you were coming'. Before they caught, anyway, told him where it was, it was Sunday morning, took us to t'police station, sat us in t'waiting room for about an hour like bad lads you know, and t'old sergeant come out then at Thorne and he said, he said 'Look lads,' he said 'I don't want to spoil your Sunday morning sport, but,' he says 'get your gun and get off home and be good lads in future' and that were it you see, never, that's how, you know, the policing today to what it was then, I mean, no comparison. When you've got Hungerford and all that- they've had shooting at school and that and, they've tightened up so much on your license, you know what I mean, and you'd go in t'post office and get a ten shilling license, where now it's, oh it's terrible to renew your license and...

So was the problem that you had a gun or was the problem that you were on somebody's land and you shouldn't have been?

Well we've always classed Thorne Moors as the land belonging to the people of Thorne which you've a right to dig turf, although- it's complicated. I mean in that book there I've just shown you, in this, Katherine's book here, the council rescinded the enclosure act where you could, the people,

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if they've registered Thorne Council or everybody in Thorne would have been able to go and dig peat on there by rights. The council rescinded that, so, it were only Bunting who took it to court and he had the rights up to- him and his family had the right to go and dig turf off the moors, nobody could do owt about it and, but nobody, nobody in Thorne bothered, you know what I mean. They just, 'oh, we'll go and get some if we want some', but he stood for all his rights you see and them rights have continued to this day. So anybody who goes in that house, the old police house in Thorne, that rights still bonded to that property, and anybody who lives in there has a right to go to Thorne now, even though it's a nature reserve and still dig peat.

I'll come back to your association with Mr Bunting in a while, but, did you feel at that time when you were out shooting ducks and things that you- how did you feel about that?

Well we knew, the right of panning, you know, the right of panning what you'd got, you know when you're, turbery and a right to dig peat and a right in new forest to turn out swine and that. These are, they were peasant rights weren't they in the past. but we knew we shouldn't be on there shooting because we've never had the rights to go shooting on there but we always class it as common land and it was sort of help yourself land if you like. You know for a bit of firewood, and during the pit strike and that, there were parts o' moors at back o' tip here they just cut it down, cause people couldn't, they'd no fuel, they'd couldn't get coal so they went on there and they were cutting silver birch down and there's areas now what's, what's established back but I mean they're only small trees, but in that time they were largish trees and everybody were going on there, they needed fuel for their fires. Can you remember t'pit strike, yeah. So I mean, they were breaking the law then, and they had t'police down quite a few times did Fisons but they just persevered and they turned a blind eye to it eventually because they just couldn't stop it. They were getting peat, getting firewood, they were gleaming coal off of o' t'tip and that, you know what I mean, all coal and that, so, that's how they went on, that's how they had to do.

So let's pick up the story from when you got caught, was that was a period of your life when you used to go on the moors and just take what you needed, was it just for the family or did you sell, or?

No, just for family, just for fun, for family, collecting eggs and that, and enjoyment of it of course and that.

So how did you get to be a gamekeeper then?

Well I've always, as I say, I've always been fascinated with the outdoors and always wanted to be, to go game keeping, but at that time, now, whereas, in this present time, you can go to college now you get a certificate for everything, can't you, at that moment in time then there were no college, there were no sort of system of getting qualifications then, it were all by word o' mouth. If you wanted to go and, if you wanted to be, go keeping or water management, water bailiff and that, you had to know somebody who were doing it and you'd go and help 'em and work for 'em and go bush beating and then they, and learn the trade like, in your spare time and then hopefully they might recommend you. Said if you applied for a job that somebody, the keeper might recommend you to go on, in your recommendations when you wrote your application.

And is that....

And you might get a job then if you were lucky, but there were no courses for game keeping and land management and countrywide management, ranger work and all this, this has all come into being in last few years now. You can pick and choose what you want to do, go to college and get your qualifications and hopefully you'll get a job. In them days there was nowt, there were none.

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So how did you manage it?

Well I managed it by going and helping certain keepers and getting to know 'em and I had some good dogs, working dogs, so they used to ring me up and I got to know everybody and eventually, I got a post, and got into it that way you know.

Can you tell me where that worked and, this is the first mention I've had you see of game keeping and that kind of thing, so I don't really know how it fits in, in this area, can you tell me a bit about it?

What do you mean how it fits?

Well, where it is and how big a concern it was in- when you started doing it.

Well first of all I went locally which is a farm adjacent to moors now, you've heard of Birtwhistle have you?

Yeah.

Birtwhistle, yeah. Well before that I used to, when the season started I used to go beating, picking up, bit o' night watching for t'keeper, sort of like part time. Even when I were at t'ship yard on a weekend and on evenings and things like that you see and then I went to Birtwhistle's part time, which he had a farmers shoot, so, I was doing it sort of part time and for the farmers shoot, so I was rearing birds, getting to be experienced like that as an amateur if you like.

And was it-, who controlled it was it like, you say Birtwhistles had...

It was his own land he controlled it, yeah.

So, he would employ a keeper would he?

No he dint employ a keeper, he employed me part time, you know what I mean.

Right, yeah.

To do the rearing and the game keeping.

And you said that there were other keepers that used to call on you and...

Oh there was keepers all round yeah, I mean, Kirton Lyndsey, there's game keepers there, there's gamekeepers at Sykehouse and all round, there's shoots all around like. We used to travel up to Kirton Lyndsey and when I were at t'ship yard you see, the ship yard owner Richard Dunstons, on a weekend he wanted beaters for his shoot when we were apprentice see, so it were a bit extra money Saturday mornings when we weren't working, he had a big shoot at Manton in Kirton Lyndsey. So all apprentices it were a days extra money for 'em, so off we went there and beating there on a weekend, you know from September right while February every weekend. So that were a good addition to us wages, you know, there'd be a brace of pheasants at end o' day and that.

And so what did you- what was involved in it? Talk me through it.

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What, beating?

No the whole the whole game keeping business, talk me through it.

Well when we went beating, you know how shoots is run, they go and stand on their stands, at certain stands on the upper wood side or the valley bottom and that and there's beaters, that might be twenty or thirty of us wi' t'keeper. We walk through the woods and drive the birds to the guns.

And this is all on that farmers land is it?

Well that's how we did on all different shoots and also here, Birtwhistles. and he had an occasional shoot, he dint have one every week, it were an occasional farmers shoot during the year. Well on paid shoots they're having one a year, they're having one a week, three weeks sometimes, three or four a week, depending how big the estate is and what their programme is. I mean at Hemsley, I used to beating at Hemsley, we used to put summat like thirty thousand pheasants down to shoot and we were shooting two or three days a week, they'd go there from all over t'world. They come there from abroad, I mean on t'grouse moors they come from Japan and Germany, France, they come from all over t'world to shoot grouse, it's a big, you must know about that it's a big concern is grouse shooting.

What I'm getting at is, it was on people's private land it wasn't on the moors?

No, although we did shoot a little bit of the moors what we shouldn't have done.

And can you talk me through the whole birds- the process of the bird's life basically, starting with how you got the supply of birds basically.

Well there's game rearers who supply shoots with, whether you want ducks, pheasants, partridges, whatever you want to stock on your land. we used to get 'em, I used to get 'em at day olds, rear 'em from day olds up to six week old the pheasants and then up to eight, ten, fifteen week old for partridges. So you were rearing up to that stage and then you put 'em out in release pens into fields to get 'em wild and get to know the area where they were living before the shooting started. So we used to be getting young birds, day olds at, I used to get mine beginning of June the day olds, some shoots shot later so they maybe got 'em in July depending on the lay o' the land and that, and then we used to buy ducks at day olds, you know. Some shoots even bought eggs and they had their own incubators, and incubated their own eggs and some shoots even bought their stock in as six-week-old poults. You know so they eliminated all the rearing and feeding and the birds went straight out into the release pens at six weeks, depending how they wanted to, how the management went, you know what I mean. Everybody has their own preference and that, some thought they could save money by buying day olds and having their own stock, even had their own stock with their own laying birds so they got their own eggs and dint have to buy any eggs, just stock birds. Everybody's trying different methods you see.

And then when they're in the release pens they're released...

Well then they're gradually, pheasants in a release pen when they get to, they put 'em in at six weeks, starting to fly then, so they get established in the area of the release pen and then they start flying out, wandering about into t'woods and then they just going back to a wild bird if you like, and you feed 'em out in certain places from t'release pens. So you're getting the birds as wild as possible but keeping 'em on your shoot you see. And there's private shoots and there's syndicate shoots, where there might be ten or twelve guns all pay into a pool, you know and contribute to the

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keepers wages, to the upkeep of the shoot, of buying the birds. So they've so much rent to pay every year for the rent of land and the upkeep of the shoot, the keepers wages. That's a syndicate shoot, and you have the commercial shoot what, there's people ring up and they want a days shooting, from all over country, they might be somebody come from Scotland, come down here to shoot partridges, or, somebody from here might go up to Scotland to shoot grouse, you know, that's a commercial shoot where they're catering for people all over t'country. And they book in, can you supply me with a weeks shooting or a days shooting at such and such date and they book in and they go all over t'country in different places shooting. They're commercial people who are running the shoot as a profit and then there's a private shoot where you get a private landlord. He has a shoot in like, Lord Scarborough, well he rents a lot of his land, he rents most of his land out but, private landlords where they have their own land and they invite their friends, his friends, totally, they don't have owt to pay, and he has his own land and his own keepers, he can afford to do it. That's what you call a private shoot and he invites who and when he likes, who he likes and when he likes and then he'll probably get invited to go to their shoot. But there's not so many of them about now cause o' costs, you know what I mean, you need to be a wealthy man to be, to have your own private shoot as such. A lot of businessmen have their own private shooting and invite their own business associates; you know its directors and that for different trades. So, you know, there might be, it's all business, come to my, whatever day shooting with me and then after t'shoot they discuss business all sorts of things in't there, all sorts of links in't there.

And how long were you a gamekeeper for?

About twenty years. So, you know, keeping's all involved with the wildlife, so you're among it all then, you know what I mean.

Can you tell me what your jobs were as a gamekeeper?

Phew! That's a big question is that! Well what do you mean jobs? Well rearing birds, releasing birds, making sure the habitats, cover crops for 'em, being there wi' t'farmers to put cover crops in, you know. Keeping the woodland rights clear, all sorts of jobs, night watching, vermin control, endless, endless. Making sure you're on good terms wi' your neighbours, that's one o' main things. Boundaries, keeping on good terms on boundaries. There's a lot o' jealousy in shooting and if you can stray over boundary wi' good intentions you can still be in deep trouble you know what I mean, you'll go for a wander round, say you went, there was some stalkers up Scotland, not long ago, I think it were last year. They'd shot, it was controlled, they was proper professional stalkers, went to look for a wounded deer that'd gone over the boundary and they went wi' their rifles looking for this deer what were wounded and they wanted to make sure it were, dint, weren't suffering in anyway, but they didn't kill it they, they couldn't find it. So they went to look for it and they went over t'boundary and they got caught and all. They'd no bad intentions but they should have thought, well we'll go and see if we can get it, cause it's imperative that they find a wounded animal and despatch it, you don't want to be, but the right way to have gone about it were, they should have known, they should have been, had a good enough relationship with the neighbours to say, well if we have a wounded animal can we go with intent to find it, and we've no problems if we get caught wi' your keeper, or if t'police come. In this instance they'd been in bad relations with the neighbour and they brought the police in and the police prosecuted them, cause they were trespassing with a firearm in pursuit of game on land what warn't theirs. So very important that you're in good, you know, that you're on, that your neighbour understands what you're doing and you're on good terms with him and vice versa, he might want to come and go to your side. But, you know what neighbours are you can, you can get in deep water with a simple incident can't you, you know that. Your neighbours, in your housing and that.

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I'm just curious as to how, when you're dealing with things like flying birds, how you can know where things are and keep them, well you can't possibly keep them within boundaries can you?

Oh no. Within reason you can, but the point is, if you're adjacent to another shoot, some of your birds will go onto his land and some'll come onto yours, so it's six of one and half a dozen of t'other. So that's okay like, but in areas where you're in an isolated shoot it is often difficult to keep the birds onto your property and you do lose a lot of birds, like, that way. But, that's part and parcel of being a keeper, knowing how to keep your birds.

And as a keeper what were your tools?

Tools? Every tool you can think of. Apart from your... I mean, your gun, your dog, your hammers, your chisels, your saws, everything you can think of. That's all I can say, tools of the trade. Spading, spades, chisels, hammers.

I'm interested in what the moors look like in those days, from being a child... You know, being here, your increasing experience.

Yeah.

Can you tell me what it looked like?

Well, the moors and the nature reserve as it is now on the western boundary is a good example of what is was virtually before Fisons got into the surface milling. Because at that time and there's still evidence now of it, they did graving where the people that worked on there they was contracted to dig a chain and they got paid by the chain, how much you dug out by the chain. So they did graving. Well I can show you better on here look.

I've seen pictures of- I've seen them graving.

See that's the old fashioned way.

That's right.

The graving, do you see?

Yep, yeah.

Now these, these were, they marked 'em off in chains, right?

Yep.

These are what they dug out, you see them slots?

Yeah.

That's what they dug out, right.

So these are a chain that way?

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No chain, in length, yeah, that's what they dug out and as they dug it out they piled 'em onto these areas what they dint dig out, yeah.

Yeah, yeah.

And then later on they was loaded into these, well they used to have barges wi' horses pulling them and they were loaded into, into the boats, some of the boats, Martin Limbert'll show you, they had barges, whereas it's railway now, right and they loaded 'em onto the barges and the horses pulled 'em to the mill. So these areas what they dug out, obviously were spoiled, everything had gone, you know, all the flora and fauna had gone, but the areas where they dug the peat and stacked it, the areas there what were left and not touched, they re-inhabited the areas what they'd been spoilt. So they weren't harming the moor as such you see and they dint do the drainage. See the drainage was- is killing the moor, although they was taking the peat off at such a fast rate, what's destroying the moor is the water. Once you take the water off it's very, very hard to get it wet again. For instance if you got a, we don't use peat in t'pots, we don't use it, but you've seen plants in pots ant you, what's all peat, these grow bags? Well once all the moisture's gone out of it, it's gone hard and crusty, it's very, very difficult to wet it again, you pour water on it and it just runs away, it just runs away. So it might be years before an area when it's been dried out, to get it wet again. But in the meantime by taking the water out it's destroyed all the, everything. It's destroyed the plants, the insects, all the rare, everything, it's destroyed 'em because they rely on the water. You know what I mean. So even if you dint take the peat off, by draining it you've destroyed it, cause it's relying on that, it's relying on the sphagnum for the natural process of the moor, which is sphagnum. Got sphagnum is growing, that is a peat bog, sphagnum moss. So when Fisons, in this book it tells you about when they brought surface milling out.

So what they do by surface milling, the old graving like they did, if they'd have carried on till this present day graving, the moor would be still in very good condition, because it would all re-establish itself and they d'int take, in the old fashioned days, maybe, they d'int do the drainage what they did then you see. They'd maybe do a bit of draining for their particular chain where they was, but mainly they're not destroying the moor. But surface milling, what they do is, they deep drain a vast area of peat, peat land and then they skim it off, as it dries off they skim it off inch, by inch, inch by inch, and then the peat's dry enough to go straight to the mill. So it's processed straight away. So they're doing vast areas and processing a vast amount see. So what they're doing is destroying the moor at a vast rate, although surface milling didn't come in here. Germany and Holland and even Canada, they were into the milling trade of collecting peat and that before here, so it were very late before we got the actual surface milling, which is a good job because, if they'd have got it years and years earlier and they did, there'd have been no moor left at all. So we're very lucky really that we've got left what there is.

Now you asked me what the moor was like. Well, if you go on the nature reserve now on t'western boundary that gives you an idea what it was like, but if you go further in now to Swinefleet and round to Goole Moors and that there's a vast area and a good example of it now is Hatfield Moors. It's just an absolute desert, nothing, just absolutely gone, bare peat, nothing. So people come on, come onto moors and they say 'oh, in't it marvellous this', you know what I mean, I say 'well it is here' but, they don't, they don't go in a lot of areas what's been destroyed they tend to keep to the reserve and think it's marvellous. But I say to 'em 'what you're seeing now is only a fragment of what the moors used to be', you know, it's virtually three mile square, Thorne Moors and Goole to Thorne to Crowle, you know, to Swinefleet, it's actually three mile square, which is a lot of moor in't it. Well it's the biggest moor, largest moor in England, raised peat bog.

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When you tell people that it's not like it used to be when you were small, what have you got in your mind's eye when you're thinking?

Well it was the old fashioned moor as I've just told you. The graving and things didn't disappear overnight they'd work certain parts o' moors and they'd be working that part o' t' moors and then, when they got, when they left it and went to another area and then it re-inhabited itself and blended back into moor, into nature. So it warn't scarred in a, it warn't devastated like it was with the surface milling. You know, they cleared vast areas, cleared all the trees off. You'll have to go and see it yourself, it's just, parts of it, Hatfield, it's just a desert, you know what I mean. We've got to get the water back to get the moors back to life. But, you know I think what they're doing now, they're flooding areas, maybe, certain areas if they can up to maybe three years to get it wet again and then gradually taking the water off. Because you can't have deep areas of water cause the sphagnum won't, it won't generate again, it's got to have stagnant water. So what they've done, they've put bundings and that over the moors. Do you know what bundings are?

Yeah.

Well the area [inaudible] well we're trying to regain and get it back to a bog again, you know, the peat what's left. I think it's supposed to be, I think it's half a metre, they've left on, Fisons. The vast areas where they've been surface milling, what they do is, they've done a lot of good work since they've relinquished their peat cutting.

Who has?

Well it's, Levingtons in't it. It's Scotts, that American company. Well when they stopped digging peat, I think it were 2002 when it finished there's a lot of work to be done on the moors to try and get it back and rebuild the areas what's been devastated. So instead of making everybody redundant English Nature's kept a lot of Scotts men on with the machinery and they've done a lot of good work with the machinery, rebuilding parts of t' moors what's been devastated, such as putting bunding up. So what they do is put bundings, which is banks, across the moors then they leave a gap and put another bank up so that the water what's in there isn't gettin blown too much with wind. Because the sphagnum and things won't generate if there's moving water on t' surface, it's got to be stagnant, you see what I mean. So it's like a windbreak so things can get established, such as your cotton grass and then, the sphagnum comes along and then you get the moor generating as it, as the moor does, it builds up with sphagnum moss what sinks and, which by the way only grows about a pristine bog. Peat'll only grow at three millimetres a year, which in't very much, that' if it's working properly, three millimetres, a very, very small area to generate, in't it. and I don't know what the record depth of peat on there is but, it's evolved over thousands of years, thousands of years.

You've obviously got a close affinity with the moors.

Yeah.

It's not just, you know, it's not just been a practical job, it's obviously something you feel.

Well it's, it's a spiritual thing with me, as I said before, it's- when I get out there it's not just- the remoteness, and it's a spiritual thing wi' me, I've allus, when I go there I'm like, I'm in another world! You know what I mean, so I've got involved with what's happening on there, even when I've gone shooting on there and that, I've got involved with it and I got involved with Bunting, cause they were trying to completely drain the moor and get off as much peat as they could. So if

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we hadn't- you've heard of Bunting, William Bunting's Beavers. We were the renegades who went and, as Fisons dug the new drainage ditches out to drain parts of the moors which they wanted to get the, reclaim the peat off, it was destroying 'em, so, when they dug new drainage channels we used to go and block 'em up. We used to get up to fifty or sixty of us sometimes, we used to go out for day and block 'em off and stop the water running off, what they'd dug and then-. so we were classed as renegades, you know, we were breaking t'law and every hand that were against him. You know, and big business and big money speaks loud words dunt it, and yet he, quite a few times he had physical violence threatened against him. that's why he used to carry a gun with him, because, he had it to defend his self, which he would have done an all for a fact. You know, he dint mince his words did Bunting.

So then when we'd done a lot o' damming and stopped the water and we'd all local naturalists and that helping us and people from village who cared, Fisons used to go and dynamite 'em all out, and gelignite 'em all out, you know and then, oh that were it then, we were all off and we used to go and block 'em up again and that's how it went on for years and years. But if it weren't for Bunting, we wunt have the moor today, the peat 'ud have gone off it and, not exist, we owe it to him. I mean he was the pathfinder, I mean fair enough English Nature's come along and picking up the pieces if you like, but, it's the pathfinders in my day what started it all off like.

I know there's a lot to talk about with, about Mr Bunting and also I want to talk about what you do now, and we've been going for an hour, do you want to do that another time or do you want to carry on now.

Well we'll have a few more, we'll have another ten minutes and then...

[Recording Ends]