

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: John Hitchcock (part 2)

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

Could you tell me- you just described to me the whole business of walling, and I'd like you to go through that again now we can- to record that. This is not graving by hand is it?

No, it's machine cutting turfs, which was cut and laid on the existing peat in squares from the machine. These had to be picked up and built in a wall style along a chain, the length of the chain where the machine was working at the side of the cutting.

Did the machine cut it like..

Cut it yeah, cut it yeah, and laid 'em.

So it lay, the machine laid it up onto the side did it?

Well it cut it out of the ground and laid clear from where it had cut it, at the side, on the edges what hadn't been cut on the area adjacent to where they cut it. They left room to stack what they'd cut adjacent to the cutting area, you know, like you did with the graving. You'd got to have somewhere to put it when you've cut it, which were these in squares. Now obviously when they were laid- cut, and laid on the floor these turfs they wouldn't dry out, which is, they have to get most of the moisture out before it went to the mill to process it. So these turfs were built in walls, you know, they might be two or three foot high depending on what sort of turfs they were cutting. Obviously fresh turfs when they're cut they're fairly heavy so at that time the contractors on the moors, people who were contracted to, by Fisons, or whoever, to do walling, a lot of men did the walling because they was fairly heavy, when you're working or bending and lifting all day it's heavy work and it's hot work in summer, very hot. So although women did wall, do walling, it were most, men did the walling, right.

Now after the walls had been left the elements, or whatever, depending on the season, if they were wet and so many months when they were cut. The drying process was proceeding, obviously the turfs on the ground they took longer to dry out so the process continued where the top turfs of the wall was replaced by the bottom turfs, so it was a process of even drying out so eventually the wall would become to a time when they thought that as much moisture was got out of 'em as they needed to process the peat at the mill.

So the men would build this wall. How big were the turfs that we're talking about?

I don't know about measurements but, you know they'd be- I can't remember, I don't know..

About eighteen inches long.

I can remember the measurements.

Something like that?

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And obviously...

Eighteen inches long by?

About six or seven inches square something like that. I can't remember t'sizes, but...

And the men would put these into a wall would they?

They did the walling then you see. They walled 'em. Then they had to be re-walled.

After about- a few months?

Depending on the season of when they were cutting, if they were cutting early spring when they'd all the summer to dry 'em out, they might be cut late so they'd go into the following year. But they knew what they wanted at the mill, they used to inspect chains what had been re-walled and then they'd come and load 'em up and away they go to the mill. So...

So the men would make the wall initially?

Yes they made the wall and then the women came along and re-walled 'em.

And re-walling is?

Is changing the bottom turfs to the top and the top to the bottom.

So you're rebuilding the wall upside down basically.

Yeah, upside down. So you're a chain after, so you got paid by the chain, how much you'd re-walled and that's how you got paid, per chain. I forget prices, but it want a lot o money, it were hard work for what you did and you can understand what it's like on a moor on a hot summers day when there's midges and, when the turfs got too dry and there were a wind on they used to blow up in your eyes, dust'd make your eyes really sore and it's a back breaking job. Cause you can't stand up, you know, but you're like that all day, working low, your chain. You see, it was called piecework so you only got paid for what you did and very hard work, very hot work, you wanted plenty to drink. That's all you wanted to do when you were on moors, drink, cause you were sweating all day.

So consequently when hot weather were on people used to go early morning. I've been on at four o'clock in a morning and get done for dinnertime before it's too hot, you know what I mean, and away. But, they did stop people later on at Hatfield, they stopped people going on at certain times because they dint always know when they was on and off and they stopped 'em going on at certain times for fire risk, you know what I mean. Cause fire were a very big risk on t'moors, so they wanted to know who were on the moor when they were working and when they warn't working, for fire risk and that you see. So if you stopped on too long, went too early they'd come and, you know, tell you like. But, you know, fire's one of the biggest risks on t'moors. We've had some bad fires on t'moors. So that's basically what you did when you went walling and re-walling.

And once you'd got your wall dried out then after you'd done it. Then what happened to it?

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Then Fisons men used to load them then into tubs, onto railway. Before that date they used to, they were all, boats, ship, little pontoons, horse drawn. When I was on it was track railway into tubs. Load 'em all into tubs and then take 'em to t'moor.

Take them to the factory?

Yeah. Process them for- horticultural, you know, for plants and...

So the first...

But before that it were all for bedding and what have you.

The first digging machine actually, just did exactly the same as what had gone before but it was just a mechanised way of graving?

Yeah, yeah. I mean that took over the actual graving with a spade, the machine.

So that- did that mean that it was maintaining the same- you've talked about how, when they were graving by hand they didn't harm the moor really.

Well that eliminated the graving then you see by hand. So it cut their costs down, Fisons. So all they were paying for then was, well they were using the digger driver and the machine but it cut the labour force down.

But the rest of the system stayed the same?

But, then the contract as such, or outside contracting work was the walling part of it, the walling and re-walling. So..

And did that provide a lot of work for people in Thorne?

Yeah, quite a lot of people, Thorne and Hatfield, yeah, it were quite a few. Can't say how many but, a lot of gangs went on Thorne and Hatfield, Swinefleet, you know, like they do on t'land, separate gangs and that went on, made a living in it.

Can we talk a bit about your connection with Mr Bunting and also the- what you talked about the idea that Thorne Moors and Hatfield Moors belonged to the people who lived here? How did you get started with that?

His son, his son was in my age group, so we, we were friendly wi' his son. And of course he went bird nesting and whatever like we did and we got to know his dad as we grew up. His daughter went to grammar school, they were very well educated. And there was cases where people had got caught ferreting or poaching or rights o' way, they'd been caught on rights o' ways and they'd gone to court and Bill he knew all the rights o' ways and he knew a lot about law and, got a lot o' people off from being prosecuted. He were like t'local solicitor, helped everybody out, you know what I mean. If people were wrongly prosecuted, I'm not saying they were allus within the law, but, they sometimes, well for instance t'river board and that used to put wires up, blocking rights o' way. When the government brought out the act where every foot path had to be registered and that and remapped, farmers used to be ploughing footpaths up and river boards used to be blocking banks off because- so they dint go on the new map, so that eliminated people walking on their land. They dint want people walking on footpaths and Bunting warh a, he knew every footpath there was.

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Can you tell me a bit about him? What was he like?

What were he like? Shall I tell you? I'll tell you exactly what he was, you must have read this, Thorne Moors- William Bunting.

And you're reading from Katherine Caulfield's book.

Yeah, but I know this anyway, but, it's perfect that, 'he's a naturalist, a pamphleteer, archivist, a rebel, a bad tempered old sod and mainly inspiration.' That describes him perfectly, perfect. And he didn't suffer fools did William, at all, that's one thing he didn't suffer, fools. Took 'em straight down to earth, they knew him straight away, they didn't tangle wi' him no more! You know what I mean, they tried to pull wool over his eyes, they only did it once and we got to know him that way. Well you know, we met him on moors when we were out shooting and that, you know, and he'd collar us and say 'hey we've got some work to do. We've got that such and such a dam to do, you can see what's happening. They drain all t'moors you'll have no duck shooting.' You know what I mean, he used to, he allus had an answer and so we got pally wi' him and that's how we got working for him and that then, you know what I mean.

Did he have a lot- did he generate a lot of support at that time in the village?

In certain quarters, not, I mean, a lot of people as you say, they didn't know t'moors even t'locals, you know what I mean and they thought well, he were a bit of a crank and eccentric, but, in a lot of cases he was. But as I say, he were inspiration he knew exactly what he were doing and he could see the damage Fisons were doing and they were gonna destroy the moor completely and he was, passionate. I mean if you've never met him you just couldn't, that's as best as I can explain him to you, he was, very learned man, very, very intelligent man and if he wanted to find owt out he wouldn't rest until he'd gone through all records, record offices, digging in t'libraries, digging every scrap of information out, you know what I mean. He wouldn't- once he got his teeth into summat it had to go the full turn, until he, eliminated every scrap of evidence and that really.

I mean, for instance, one day we went, he used to send his lad round here every week wi' a letter what we're gonna do, be down moors at such and such a place, such and such a time we're gonna do so and so and his lad used to run round wi' letters to people, what they were gonna do, you know, just a scribble on a- and, anyway, one week we went down. I says to a mate who used to do, used to go shooting wi', 'Bill wants us to go down so and so, on such and such a day', 'oh no, we'll miss it this week, we'll go shooting, we're not doing no work this week, we're off shooting.' So off we went wi' us guns and that, and guess what, we run into him dint we, coming off, and these people, there all, about forty, fifty of 'em. We run straight smack into 'em, and we told him we were gonna go and help him that week, just, we was wagging it one week like, bugger it, we're off shooting. We run straight into him, you know, well he stripped us down, called us all idle buggers under sun in front of everybody, you know what I mean. You shouldn't have been off bloody shooting, you should have been coming here working with me, you said you were coming and oh he ripped us to pieces, we were stood there like two bad lads. But that's how he warh you see. Then next week all were forgiven and off we went wi' him again and that, you know what I mean, but that's how he warh you see. Straight to the bone, you know, he din't mess about. 'You idle bugger, you said you were coming, you've sneaked off bloody shooting.'

[Laughter]

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We were like two bad school lads. But he were like that with everybody. It didn't matter whether you were judge, whatever, or council whatever, he were, you know, he dint mess about. In fact, he were ignorant to a lot of people but that were his, that were his way, but he were a kind man when you got to know him and that and he help anybody. He tried to, you know, tried to degrade him and make a fool of him, there's not many done that, even barristers and if you read this book here barristers in court and that he just ripped 'em to pieces. Once they made a mistake that were it, they never tangled wi' him no more.

You talked about the work you did for him and you've already mentioned about blocking up drains.

Damming, yeah, damming, yeah, we used to go down there we plastic bags and we used to cut, branches off o' silver birch and stake 'em into the drainage ditches we were blocking. Then we used to dig bags o' clay what they'd, you know, under the peat it's a clay base, we used to collect as much clay as we could and fill the bags up and drop 'em down t'side o' sticks and build 'em up then wi' bags, bag after bag and then we used to cover 'em up we peat. Dam them off to stop the water running.

Here's my better half.

Hello.

[Recording Ends]