

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Pip Seccombe

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's Wednesday 29th November 2006 and this morning I'm talking Pip Seccombe. Good morning.

Hello.

If we could perhaps just start by just saying something, a little bit about yourself and you could perhaps tell me when and where you were born.

Right, yeah, well I was actually born the day before the second world war broke out in, near Watford, in Hertfordshire and I left there when I was twenty one and got married and we came to Nottingham and then moved to Doncaster in nineteen sixty seven and we've been in an around Doncaster ever since.

What brought you to Doncaster?

It was my husband's job basically he was a clergyman and had a curacy in Nottingham and the second curacy was in Doncaster and then he's had various livings around as well.

Now I know that your main, your interest, you're interested particularly in the Natural World basically, you belong to Doncaster Nats.

That's right, yes.

Perhaps you want to say what Doncaster Nats are.

Right, Doncaster Natural History Society, well no, Doncaster Naturalist Society, which we can never talk about that because a lot of people confuse that with naturism, but we found that a talking point so we keep it.

[Laughter]

And did that interest develop early?

It did to an extent, I think really, basically I'm quite a nosy person really and I like to know what's what. But it really took off when we lived, when Mark was working in a parish near Askern and quite by chance I came across a meadow with some rare flowers in and that was my first contact with Doncaster Museum as I went to talk to them about it, and they came out to see the meadow, really enthusiastic, so asked me to keep records of what flowers were in this meadow and took it from there really, from becoming a general interest and a much more focussed interest in natural history, particularly wild flowers and things. And it was during that time, visiting the museum one day that I met William Bunting, whom I'm sure you've heard about. Well he didn't drive, I did...

[Phone ringing, paused]

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Where had we got to, oh, Bunting.

You were telling me that you met Mr Bunting.

That's right, yes. So I did take him, if I happened to be in the museum when he was there and he was going back to Thorne then I'd take him home and we'd drop him various places like Thorpe Marsh, when it was becoming a nature reserve and he was very angry about that because the interest there from the authorities was bird life so they were creating lots of lagoons and things and he was furious because they'd covered up a lot of orchids and a lot of it generally. He was a very passionate man.

Did he have a particular interest in terms of plants, or animals, or?

Everything, everything. I remember one instance particularly, because I hadn't got a hand lens in those days, and he said 'You can't be a botanist without a hand lens', and he literally frog marched me from the museum down into the middle of Doncaster and bought me a hand lens at the local photographers, which I still have and treasure, obviously. Yes, that was really generous of him indeed.

So you actually met Mr Bunting at the Doncaster Museum?

Yes, that was the first time I met him yeah.

What was he doing there?

He was in and out all the time, he was great friends and buddy with Pete Skidmore and Colin Howes and Chris Devlin who was also on the Natural History staff then. I imagine, oh and they'd got lots of his specimens as well, he donated large collections of frogs, newts, beetles and all sorts which are in the spirit collection in the museum and probably a lot more I have no idea about. I do volunteer in the museum quite a lot, so I've seen quite a few of the natural history stuff but I imagine there's lot's more I don't know about, but Colin would.

What was he like?

Blunt. Very strong, very wiry, very, he didn't care a bit what he said about people, how true some of these things he told me were I've no idea. I really can't repeat what he said about anybody actually because he, he had a very marvellous turn of phrase that I can remember quite well and he had a, have you heard about his visiting cards, I should have to look that one up cause I can't recall it, but it was a four line verse about taking land from people which he quoted in his correspondence. He was just a one off really, completely eccentric, but he, oh and also self taught, in all kinds of things, law particularly and reading, sort of, Norman French and Latin and this kind of thing, so he could, represent himself in court. I think I'm right in saying that when he was attempting to get the rights that had been taken away from the local people at the time of Vermuyden, which had gone back a lot further than that, he was trying to get these rights restored. And he went to the Courts of Chancery I think it was and for the first time they met out of London because of Bunting's health, which was beginning to fail by then, and I did call in a few times and see him in action in Doncaster and the courts there.

He was so dramatic, it was as if he was in a theatrical production really. He'd have the odd sort of collapse, and he had one of his sons sort of there, with all the documents, and he'd sort of dig them out and he'd. I can't even remember the name of the judge, but he was obviously quite, he was

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very well respected I think by the, the judge and the lawyers and the final outcome of that was that rights of turbary, which means the taking of the peat, was given to the actual hearths in the house that Bunting lived in at the time. Which actually is very interesting, it had been a police house, with cells in the house, and the last time I saw it I think was two or three years ago when it belonged to Thorne Town Council and, we just popped in, I was with Helen Kirk, we'd been on the moors and we just thought, wonder what it's like now, you know it was open, so we went in and they showed us these cells, they were still intact, but since then it's been sold and I have no idea what's happened to it and I also would like to know what's happened to these rights that were granted by this judge, because the hearths in that house would be very significant I would think. But what happened I don't know, perhaps you could find out.

Can we just go back a little bit to the discovery of this flower meadow that you were talking about?

Oh yes.

Now if I saw a flower meadow I would not know whether things in there were rare or not, so you obviously had some interest and knowledge before that?

Yes, yes I did, well I suppose initially from my mother really, and then particularly at grammar school we had a biology teacher who was very encouraging and in those days once you'd done your A levels you didn't actually leave school like you do now, you stayed on at school but, our biology, there were two of us, she asked us to do a census of the school pond. She didn't give us any leads or anything, she just said, well, 'there's the library, there's the pond now go and find out what you can about it.' Which was brilliant really, I still write to her, amazingly. So the interest had always been there and when, the flower I found in this meadow, which actually belonged to the church in those days it was part of what's called glebe, which was just at the back of our garden, so it was almost like an extension of our garden really, because it actually belonged to my husband in those days, but since then the rules have changed and it now belongs to the diocese. Although it's since been sold to the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust.

But yes, I found this, it's a fritillary, wild fritillary, which you can buy in any nursery, but, seen growing wild it's something else and it was a very tiny little colony, just one flower when I first saw with about ten plants. So, it very quickly became a triple SI, Site of Special Scientific Interest, this was in nineteen seventy four. Takes ages to get that kind of designation now, but in those days it didn't seem to take so long and so I've been wardening and monitoring that little colony of fritillaries, that little population ever since and it's spreading and doing well, although it's a very slow process I have to say. So that's where the interest really concentrated and took off and I got to know the museum staff and I became part of the Doncaster Naturalist Society.

So, I think it was, well obviously through Bunting it was the first time I went on the moors because at that time, do you know I don't think I ever went on with him actually, it was probably with Peter and Colin. And then eventually, oh I know, yeah, English Nature, or before that the Nature Conservancy Council, because the meadow was a triple SI, that's when I got to know the English Nature staff and Peter Roweth who was warden at Thorne, the meadow I was looking after was part of his jurisdiction, so it would have been Peter who first took me on the moors, yes. It's all coming back to me!

[Laughter]

And what was your first impression, can you remember?

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Yes, I was amazed by the height of the vegetation, even along the short pieces of public footpath. I mean, I'm quite short, I suppose Peter could probably see over the top, I mean, compared now when you've got these eleven miles of really cut and maintained footpaths. Yes, it was bit like a jungle in those days. Always glad that the pit head workings were there, because it didn't matter where you were you could see the pit head workings and you knew how to get off, but of course they're not there anymore.

What kind of vegetation?

Reeds, I suppose mainly. I'm thinking of the access going on from Thorne Colliery end. So first of all yes there was quite a lot of rhododendron in those days, and birch, but it would have been the reeds I think that would have encroached, made it difficult to see and bracken as you got further in, yeah.

Can you remember what date, or what year it was, or was around about?

It would have been the late seventies I think, yes. And I remember a summer field trip with the Doncaster Nats, and it absolutely poured, it was very, very hot and it rained and rained and rained and mean we were absolutely soggy, and I know one of the nats we're still very friendly with, he's a Yorkshire man with a lovely turn of phrase, he said 'Me arse has never been so wet since I was in nappies!'

[Laughter]

Yeah, and we also used to go on and see the nightjars on summer evenings. The first time I think that was with Peter Roweth, a group with him, which is such an evocative thing, have you heard the nightjar? It's a wonderful sort of rattle that they make, the males, they do this churring sort of noise, they sit, on a sort of post, churring post or a bit of birch or something and this wonderful evocative noise and they're actually feeding on moths and things like that, that come out at dusk and they've got a very slow flight, really, I'm not quite sure it's part of the mating process but they clap their wings every so often and you can hear this clap and they fly quite low and, yeah, amazing, amazing. Because it's so dark of course, I know we suffer from light pollution, horribly, but it's pretty dark and you can hear these lovely little sounds and see these birds, fantastic.

Can you actually see them?

Yes, not every time now. I think I've always seen one but sometimes closer than others, and it's when they're close that they're really, actually can see their wings and, yeah, I suppose, yeah, I don't know how the nightjar are doing to be honest, I mean, I see the figures and there, there is surveys every year and we're told how many breeding pairs there are and that kind of thing. And of course the, there's now been a lot of research into it because of the wind farms, planning applications for wind farms all around Thorne. I suppose in a way it's sort of lost that magical bit, you know, when it's all being done as a piece of scientific research it was rather different than going on the first or second time, experiencing this, without having to think about surveying or monitoring and that kind of thing. Just to experience it's fantastic. It takes, it takes something away when you're going around with a radio tracking machine because you need to know this, that and t'other.

And how have the, how have the moors changed, because you told me about..

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Well when I first went on English Nature only had jurisdiction in a very small piece, a national nature reserve, which was a very little bit. The colliery end was the easiest way to go onto that. So that was always as long as I've had anything to do with it, it's been a little bit special, particularly from a botanical and invertebrate point of view. But, nineteen ninety two, you probably know this better than me, English Nature were able to have an input when, as peat digging ceased on Thorne anyway, so access was easier. I'm not quite sure for the general public but certainly, yes I think it was for the general public, and they started to properly mow parts and it was much easier to get around. And then from those sort of lunar landscapes, which it had been of course when they were taking peat off really aggressively, English Nature started to rewet. Lagoons appeared and then the greenery started to come through and the cotton grasses at the right time of year and that kind of thing. Yes, so it's a gradual sort of evolution if you like really, from sheer devastation and then to the greening I suppose of the moors and the birds coming in and [inaudible].

I just wanted to get, I just wanted to capture your impression of the first and sort of nowish, I wanted to go back to when you went on in the early stages. You say Doncaster Nats in particular and you individually visited. What would you do on the visit, why would you visit and what would you do when you visited the moors?

Well in the early days I was just sort of Nats member without any particular expertise or anything and it was just the experience I went for. I imagine that there was somebody in the group who was taking records and recording the plants we were seeing and the birds we were hearing and the insects we were seeing. But I was just enjoying the experience to be honest and. I've always found the Nats are fantastic at welcoming people in and telling people what they're seeing.

[Someone joins conversation]

* Hi. Is that a Mac that we see down there?

It is.

* Oh right, very good.

When you used to visit the moors, particularly in the early days, either individually or with the Nats, what form did the visit take?

Right.

What did you do, how did you see it?

Yes, right, gosh, I can remember on one occasion going with Peter Roweth, I think he was, ostensibly he was going to put an aluminium bridge over a ditch, to do with some pumping operation which he'd got permission to do. It was after Fisons, it was Levingtons, was it Levingtons after that, yeah. I think it was when Levington's were working there, so I just had to stay in the Land Rover and take photographs, I wanted photographs. That's right, that's what I wanted, because I'd started by then going out doing talks about local wildlife and that sort of stuff and because the moors are so important in a well in a national context, but particularly it's part of Doncaster's terrific biodiversity and its so different from the coal measures and the limestone and that sort of thing. I really wanted some images of what the peat industry were doing and of course I couldn't do this officially.

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So that's right, Pete took me along in his Land Rover and I took photographs from there. This was while they were still very active on Thorne and I'm very glad I've got those images because they're really telling. Things like, they stripped all the vegetation initially and then made dug enormous sort of ditches to allow the water to sort of drain out of the peat, and then in the process of digging the ditches, they were pulling up tree roots from, sort of prehistoric forests and that kind of thing and they were just lying scattered on the surface, sort of like dinosaur skeletons really. I think it, it just added to the decimation and devastation of the place, because there was so much information in those tree roots. I can remember Paul Buckland and others telling me that they'd seen evidence of woodpecker holes, for instance, in the trees and of course all the work that's been done on the beetle remains that they found on there. But there was so much they didn't know, and here was these things, as soon as they hit the atmosphere, at the surface, they start to rot so all that information was just decaying before our very eyes, you know. I mean they'd all be sort of pushed up in to great piles and just left, very sad really. I'm sure I'm wandering off the point incredibly here.

You're not, you're absolutely on the point.

Right, yes, so I can remember that visit particularly, that's right, we drove along what they call the limestone road, which until that had been put in by the peat extractors, the moors had been the largest part of England I think that hadn't actually got a road through it. But when they put this limestone road in that ended that.

Yes, when I went on with the Natural History people, I'm not sure that there was in those days, I don't think there was a point to the visit like there is now. Because of modern planning laws and that kind of thing, recording that the Doncaster Nats do and other people of course has to be much more focussed you need to, if there's something significant you have to know exactly where it is, you have to know it's current status, whether it is still [inaudible] and you've got to know the habitat that's it's in so that there is going to be some kind of mitigation into protecting a particular species, you've got to be able to advise as to what they need to do to create a similar habitat. It's, I suppose like I was saying about the nightjar really, it takes something away from the experience in a way, although on the other hand I suppose you're probably contributing and hopefully towards the protection of some of these things in a more meaningful way, although it doesn't work very often I have to say.

You said that the area around the pit tip was particularly significant, can you tell me why that is?

I can't actually to be honest, remember why I said it was significant earlier in this conversation, but I do know that there, for some strange reason there is a saline influence, have you come across this before around there? So there are things like sea aster and sea campion growing, which really shouldn't grow that far inland really. And I'm not sure that anybody has really definitively come to a conclusion as to how that is happening or how that has happened. One of the theories is that when the pit was sunk, and that was dependent on German technology at the time, you've probably heard of this have you? It was started to be sunk before the first world war and they had a, some kind of method of freezing the ground so they could bore through and then the first world war broke out and apparently the German people were interned and spent the war in that way. Which, they were probably really relieved really! So the pit was never opened until the mid twenties I believe. But of course there's been pumping going on while the pit was active and of course it was mothballed for many many decades before it finally closed, there was continuous pumping, of this sort of ground water from way, way, way down which, I believe there was some saline influence in that.

I imagine it's been proved, but then there were also other things like warping which was done, where, this was a method of adding fertility to the agriculture land round about. Where there was

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sluices and rivers and at high tides the sluices were dropped so that the, the water, the sea water stayed on the land for a bit and dropped all the silt then they opened up again. So there could have been some kind of, you know, bringing in of some of these seeds and again saline influence there. But I mean I'm such an amateur in this, I mean these are sort of just little bits that I pick up really, so I'm sure there are people that you can get in touch with you who can tell you more about that.

There's also a book that Peter Skidmore has just written that the Forum have published called, it's an inventory of the invertebrates of Thorne and Hatfield, he's, and it's not only just a list of what's there, but he goes into a lot of detail to describe each of the many, many habitats on the moors and the brackish influence is one of the things that he's covered. I take the minutes at the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Conservation Forum meeting and that is so interesting. People who know so much about this and it's something that has come up recently, question whether is it chlorate or sulphate and why and has it changed and all this kind of thing, I just take the minutes.

[Laughter]

You say that you were first introduced to the moors by Mr Bunting?

Yes, although I don't think I actually went on with him, but he certainly waxed lyrical about the whole thing, terribly, really involved in trying to get the, peat extractors off. And he was armed all the time, this amazed me, he probably went round [inaudible]. He was telling me how there was a contract out on his life, so he was always ready for them and he pulled his jacket back and there was a holster with a really serious looking pistol in this holster thing, and I made the mistake of saying 'it's not loaded is it?' He whipped it out and shot it in the air, frightened the life out of me!

[Laughter]

Yes. So, yes he talked about it a great deal and of course also he was, have you heard of Buntings Beavers? I'm sure you will have done. They did all sorts of heinous things on the moors at weekends and then [inaudible] to compromise the extractors and their workings on the moors.

Can you tell me a bit about that?

I'm mean, really, Colin I believe was one. I don't really know enough about it. I'm sure you'll have heard in real detail from other people, my memory's not brilliant. I don't know. They would remove dams over the weekend that the extractors had put in and that sort of thing, compromise things as far as they could. And Bunting would always, I mean he didn't respect the barbed wire or anything like that and he'd just clip it, he always had wire cutters in his pocket and if he felt that the public should be allowed to roam then he'd cut the wire and through he'd go.

Do you know, I mean I'm asking a question and I'm not quite sure how much you know about Mr Bunting yourself but he was, obviously had this great knowledge and was interested in the natural world and then he also is well known for championing footpaths and access and people's rights. Did one develop into the other do you know, did you see that happening, or...

No, I just know that he was passionate about both, I didn't see him change in the few years that I knew him. I feel very privileged actually that I met him, it was towards the end of his active life really because he did suffer from quite serious ill health a number of years before he died. So I'll always be thankful that I met him when he was still active. But no, it was at the, towards the end of that stage of his life really that I met him.

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And you paid your first visit to the moors in the late seventies?

It must have been about then, yes.

Did you see any evidence of peat extraction then?

I must have done. Yes, I'm just trying to think how far on we could get in those days, because as you probably know the access from the colliery end, you have to walk quite a long before you actually get onto the moors and then, there's quite a bit of woodland before you get to a little open bit and they were always careful I think to screen their activities from people. I can't remember when I very first saw the devastation, but I'm sure it wasn't on my first visit. And again when you went at night to see nightjars and things you would be in the vegetated bits. It might have been when I went on with Peter on that occasion to photograph it, yeah that's, be good to remember things in the correct sequence. It was quite dramatic seeing that.

Also the actual process changed. So, because I was thinking that in the early seventies it would be before big mechanisation of it.

That's true, yes.

and so what I was wondering was if you saw any change in the impact on it and whether, but you, maybe you didn't.

No I don't think I did, I think by the time I got to see it the heavy stuff had arrived really, it might have got bigger, but no it was pretty, they were pretty advance technologically I think by then.

And just talking about access, you say that the vegetation was very high, were there footpaths?

Yes but very, very narrow, you know I'm not quite sure whether they would actually have machinery out there it was just with Peter going on, you know, he'd sort of created this path. Yeah, that's how I remember it.

And could you get very far into the moor?

Oh I know, yes, I think we got as far as the National Nature Reserve, yeah I think that would have been it, because English Nature would have, I mean that was theirs, in nineteen eighty two or something like that, they'd been allowed to have this piece [inaudible] I suppose, National Nature Reserve which hadn't been worked for a long time. So yeah, from recollection I think that's probably as far as you got and so you didn't really see what was going on.

And if the vegetation was quite high, could you at some points have a vantage point to see, a vista?

Not really, it's so flat isn't it. There's this high vegetation then deep, deep ditch and cross the ditch to get onto the, where it did open up in this little NNR bit. But I can't recall that from there you were able to see what was actually going on. Of course bracken also is, created quite a sort of barrier, because bracken gets very high too. Yeah.

The reason I asked the question was I was thinking of a couple of people who've talked about how dangerous it could be.

Oh that's true.

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To walk on the moors and I wondered if that was something that'd been apparent to you when you were there.

Right, probably not, I mean I knew that it was because of the nature of the place, but I went on, certainly with Peter the first few times. I mean and that's quite adventurous. Yeah I can't remember being compromised in anyway apart it'd have been thoroughly wet, but no I've never been, well not on Thorne anyway, in any danger of being sucked in or Hatfield either. Got close to it this summer actually in Bawtry Forest but that's another story!

[Laughter]

That was pure silliness yeah!

Now you've got this particular interest in the flora.

Yes.

Of the moors, and we've talked about how your early visits, you talked about the nightjars and so on. You continued to visit the moors presumably, you've continued to be interested in the moors. How's that developed?

Right, I suppose in two ways really, I can remember going on a fungus, well two fungus forays I think in particular when we've imported specialists in that field and I mean the moors are so vast I mean the two I went on were completely different parts of the moors. So those were quite focussed and of course that's only happened probably in the last decade since access has been so much easier. Some have been driven by the Forum with particular things happening, I mean like the track way that's been discovered. Helen and I were out within days I think of Mick finding that and then again when the experts started to come out and there was the odd occasion when we were able to go and see what was actually happening.

How did you become, how were the naturalists involved with the track way?

Well Mick Oliver is a member of the Forum and a member of the Doncaster Nats. So I think he rang Helen from the moors as soon as he saw it and he'd established what it was and of course Helen's got quite a good network as well. So she and I were down there.

Is this Helen Kirk?

Yes, yeah. So we were down there within a couple of days, took loads of photographs and stuff.

Did you take an interest in it as a historical and archaeological find or did it have some particular interest for you?

The fact that it, well I suppose I'd always been interested in, since becoming involved in the moors at all, the fact that although, there are, I now know that there are records of bog bodies from centuries ago and I knew there was a plane that came down during the war which is technically a war grave. I suppose although my main interest and where I came into it is through the botany and the natural history side of things, you cannot look at the moors as, as single minded as that. It's just so evocative of so much, I mean, the history of it from an archaeological point of view and a natural history point of view, but then you've also got the social history and the agro that's gone on over

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the drainage over the centuries. Well Bunting of course was my first contact with the moors and that was social history as well if you like, he was really fighting for the rights of the people. So I don't think it's possible to just sort of look at it from one point of view really because there's so much involved there. Amazing, yeah, I can't remember what the question was now and don't know if I've answered it or not.

Oh I know the track way and whether. It was just part of the whole really and of course although seeing it for the first time it so obviously was something that was man made and it hadn't just happened. But of course we had no idea how old it was at that point, so it's been really interesting to, you know, see if it's the, archaeologists got into it and, oh that's right, I went down, the first time a bloke from English Heritage came, which I'm not quite sure whether you can use this really, I won't mention his name. But he looked at it and said 'well of course it could have been beavers'! Honestly, well you're an archaeologist so you'll know, so yeah!

It wasn't Keith Miller, anyway. Yeah, so, that's right and another thing, this summer, do you know Tim Kohler from English Nature? Well there's supposed to be a really rare plant called the marsh pea, which is growing on what is now Inkle Moor, I can't remember when it was last seen in flower. But Tim asked me if I'd like to go on with him one day last summer to see if we could find this. Neither of us actually knew exactly where it had been recorded before, and I, I'd been on with Helen doing the same thing about four years ago. On neither occasion did we find it, but because this is part of the moor where people just don't go. Again it was like a sort of jungle in a way and I mean Tim's not much taller than me really so neither of us could see where we were going. He'd got a GPS thing so he knew what direction we were going in. But what was so exciting was seeing things like marsh cinquefoil, which is a most beautiful plant, you know, carpets of it, which I've only seen the odd plant of sort of in the drains on Thorne before. A thing called skullcap, a pretty little blue thing that grows into the boggy areas there's loads of that and not being able to see you know. The reeds were so high, you know, you're just sort of parting them like that and then there's something else in front of you.

That was, that was marvellous and then some of these old willows which, I just, they were sort of, well willow obviously grows in water or very damp places. But I don't know whether it's one particular species, but it's sort of fallen out in the shape of a sort of rosette really, it was still growing in the centre but then the branches were sort of growing in a circle, sort of flat and the mosses and the lichen which are growing on are fantastic. And one of the Nats is a moss expert and he's done quite a lot of work down there since he retired and he's found some, first Yorkshire records of all sorts of rare mosses down there and he's concerned because there's a lot of deer on the moors now and there are more and more and they're grazing some of these rare things that he's finding and it's so fascinating. So there's always something. I don't think I've ever, ever been on a field trip with the Nats or with anybody without having actually learnt something on that particular occasion or coming back with something I've not seen before or just something new every time that is fantastic. But that's not just the moors, it's wherever.

What, does the Nats see itself as having a particular role in Doncaster?

Oh yes, I'm just trying to think, what do we do. Our emphasis is certainly on local natural history attempting to conserve and preserve what we have and of course to do that you've got to know what you've got. So, yeah, we do a lot of surveying and Colin's really useful in this, he will point us in a particular direction, well not so much now actually, the structure of the local authority's changed, he used to be very involved with planning applications and things in that he would be consulted on all sorts. So if he was aware of a big application coming, so he'd sent it out somewhere and say, you know, see what you can find there. The structures changed a bit so he's no longer as directly

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involved. So we tend to do thematic things like last summer, there was some money I believe the local authority had to spend on improving the green lanes in the Sykehouse and Fishlake area, so we did some visits. We went to look at some of these green lanes which, before they got to work on them. Because the verges are very important sometimes and of course improving green lanes means widening them and making it easier for people to walk along. So it is important to know what's there to make sure that you don't trash everything really.

And what role have the Nats had on Thorne Moors, what kind of recording work? Well Thorne and Hatfield Moors of course.

Yes. The Nats are represented on the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Conservation Forum which I'm sure Helen has told you about, which is a force to be reckoned with to be honest, I mean I'd like to think the Nats are as well really. But we are consulted more and more on planning applications and core strategy documents and all sorts of things like that, which to be honest I'd much rather not be, but if you don't respond then you don't get consulted. So we do spend far more time than we would like on that kind of thing.

Is this the Forum or the Nats?

Both really. I tend to do it on behalf of the Nats and Helen on behalf of the Forum really. With the role of the Nats on Thorne you were asking about.

Yes.

Yes. I suppose the Forum would probably carry on happily without the Nats really, although, we, I think we're all aware of the fact that when it comes down to actually, particularly the botany on the moors, nobody really has got an organised idea of what's where and what the current situation is. Now Pete's done a fabulous job on the invertebrates.

That's Peter Skidmore?

Yes. But there's nothing equivalent on the botany. I suppose we have felt that it's really down to English Nature to do this sort of thing but when, I mean, I know they're Natural England now but the previous transmogrification or whatever it was, from the Nature Conservancy Council to English Nature, they're sort from our perspective it seems that the actual work on the natural history of their sites sort of ceased to be priority. It's much more the public awareness, producing glossy brochures and that sort of thing, fieldwork went out of the window really. But I mean, Tim spending that day with me in Inkle Moor is a real exception to that, but I think it was his interest rather than anything from his line manager [inaudible] spark that one off. So, there's probably a gap there that we haven't properly filled and we ought to be doing, well a lot of us ought to be doing.

You've talked a little bit about the recording, the recording of things and doing an audit.

Yes, mm exactly. Cause if you don't know what's there you don't know the best way of going about...

And how far would you say that's gone?

Specifically on the moors? Scratched the surface I suppose you would say. We did go, that's right, a few of us did go in the Bells Pond area which is one of the, where this sort of brackish influence

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is, just to check that the plants were still there, like the sea campion and the sea aster and some grasses and things. Actually we did commission a, a bloke did do it and I went on with him and another member of the Nats and we didn't find anything very significant. But he'd come from a distance and he was obviously anxious to get home for his tea and we were very, very disenchanted by that. So that stimulated Helen and Brian Eversham, is that a name that you've come across? The three of us spent a wonderful day down there, we found all these things that we were concerned about and came back with a fantastic plant list. I mean that was really important, but then you see now the pumping's stopped to the colliery we need to do it again to see whether there's been any difference. It's a terrific task, I mean you know the area, I mean how vast it all is. There are things happening on Hatfield which, well really ought to be, well actually things are quite difficult on Hatfield at the moment.

Why?

Has Helen talked to you about this at all?

I don't think so. Don't go into if you're don't feel comfortable about it.

No I think I'd rather not go into that, because it's all a bit sensitive at the minute and yeah and also it's quite, the track way is quite pivotal to all this too. So I think on tape I won't I don't mind talking to you not on the tape about that.

So the Doncaster Nats seem to have a particularly, quite, a very important role in auditing and that kind of thing.

Yes I think so, but then of course it's borough wide and it's a really big borough. So yes, we probably aren't as involved with moors as we, I won't say should. Because on one level, not an awful lot is going to happen to the moors, hopefully and the public access is another thing really. Which is going to be very important and we're going to have to work with English Nature on that one. But then Doncaster is developing at such a rate with the airport and lots of other things that are happening locally so, you know, we're quite a small group, we're very enthusiastic [inaudible].

I was going to ask you how large a group it was...

[Both talking]

I know, I think there's about thirty-six paid up members, but there's actually about a core of about ten of us really. We're very lucky in that we got expertise like the moss, the member who's really good on mosses. We've got another one who's really good on plant galls. We've got some good birders there as well and a couple of botanists. So, but for things like fungi, we have to go out to other people. We're quite good on the invertebrate lot, I mean, Pete Skidmore is another of our honorary life members, so, yeah. In these days of digital photography it's fantastic when you can email a photograph of something, I know it's a bit dodgy because sometimes there are features you can't show on a photograph but at least it points you in the right direction. But yes it is a small group being spread rather thinly around the large area really.

I'm very interested in what you're saying about the Bells Pond area for reason I'll explain later on, and I am, the reason being that we've got quite a lot of information about that area, not least because we have been talking to the people who lived around there and the Bells and Sharpes and Verhees.

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Have you met Mick Verhees?

No.

I think he lives down at the [inaudible].

No it's the sisters that I've been talking to.

Oh right.

But I know that they said how the area had changed once water from the pit started getting into the pond. It used to be filled with certain fish and then when the water from the pit started to drain into it they all disappeared.

Wow.

And so I was quite interested in that area anyway. So I'm particularly interested that you have talked about that area.

Yes, right.

So, and you're saying is it the water in the pond that has some significance or is it the, or is it something else?

Some of them seem to be restricted to the pond.

Is it actual, actual plants within the pond that are...

On the edges. But then the sea aster for instance that we, we came across that, I think it was near one of the dykes, I mean still within the same general area. The sea campion's amazing and that's on the colliery tip, that's incredible, I can't understand that at all. I mean other people might, but I can't. There's one, there's a reflex salt marsh grass which actually quite common now on the side of the main roads because of the salting, but I think it was found on Thorne before this was generally done and that was still there, obviously not from salting roads. It must have been the influence from whatever, so, but I suppose the pond is not isolated is it, I mean there are bits going out of the pond in various directions, to dykes and things like that. So yes, it's all sort of within that area that we found stuff.

And it's quite a significant thing, is it isolated just to that area or is it elsewhere in the moor?

No I think it is isolated to that corner of the moors.

And it's quite significant then?

Mmm, yeah.

They'd be very pleased to know that.

Now Mick Verhees he used to be a member of the Forum, but I think it's ill health really. Last time I heard of him he lived in a caravan at Harworth. But I remember going on with him, gosh, it's coming back now, and he took me to Leila's Bridge, have you heard about Leila's Bridge? As

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you're going from the colliery onto the moor before you actually get to the metal bridge, I'm pretty sure, there's the remains of the cottages.

Oh this with the, it had a brick wall on either side now it just has the one brick wall?

That's right, yeah.

What do they call it?

I'm sure it was Leila's Bridge, did he have a sister called Leila because she, or Leila lived in the cottage next door or something, this is where the cottages were where some of his family were born and he's always called it Leila's bridge because of this. When this book was published I was in Smiths.

Is this Katherine Caulfield's book?

Yes and there was a display of the moor land and I was looking at this and there was a lady standing next to me who was also looking and I just said 'this looks really interesting [inaudible] and it happened to Mick Verhees sister and wasn't it a brother of theirs who was very influential in the DDT research when they discovered that it was, because he'd been collecting birds eggs in the nineteen forties they used his collection to prove that the DDT was having an effect on the thickness of the egg shells or something.

That's interesting. That egg collection was Henry's collection, it's in the museum.

That's right yes Martin Limbert looks after that doesn't he. Colin probably told me that. Yeah just in conservation with this lady over the book, strange isn't it. Yeah. As far as I know Mick's still alive in fact I think Martin Limbert will probably know.

Well I'm in touch with the sisters quite...

Yes of course, sorry you said that, yeah.

I was, now sort of thinking, I was thinking about now the increased pressure that came to bear to actually preserve the moors. How did that arise?

Well, partly it was because in nineteen ninety seven English Nature expressed a desire to remove the Triple SI designation from large parts of those moors, particularly Hatfield but Thorne as well. I think probably the relationship with English Nature changed at that point as far as the Forum is concerned and it was absolutely down to the Forum that that did not go ahead. The Forum raised an awful lot of money to have some very academic research papers written. There was an amazing public meeting at Thorne Grammar School, four hundred people there and the Chief Executive of English Nature is reported to have said it was the worst night of his life! when he left the stage to get his train back to Peterborough or whatever. Yeah so that was absolutely pivotal, I mean they back-tracked obviously. And then it got lots of European Designation and then it wasn't that long after was is that the buyout happened so that was down to Michael Meacher I think really committing the seventeen point whatever it was, million pounds of our money, to buy back this wonderful resource really, yeah.

So a great deal of work on the Forum's part convinced the powers that be?

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Yes, I mean once the Forum had sort of collated all this evidence with a great deal of financial help from people like the World Wildlife Fund, RSPB, I can't remember where the money all came from but, it did, it was something like six thousand quid, although actually, no, don't quote me on that, Helen will know the figures. But it was a lot of money for a small organisation to raise but it did the trick. And when you think, quite, again, quite small but there are such incredible people in the Forum. Although it's sort of administered from Doncaster a lot of these people, they may have started local but they've roots from, academics from all over the place who are very [inaudible] the Forum.

How did the Forum come to be?

Then again I'm probably not the right person to ask cause I wasn't in at the beginning. Have you asked Helen about this?

I haven't asked Helen that question.

No, I think Brian Eversham was quite pivotal in this. Oh I know, yes, it started off with a small group in Thorne, a sort of heritage group, or local history group or something, and that sort of evolved into the Forum. I think I'm talking late eighties, early nineties, something like that. But I think you really need to speak to somebody else about this, because I came into it later on.

And it's called the Conservation Forum?

Yes, The Thorne and Hatfield Moors Conservation Forum.

Is it mostly people who have some interest in natural history or does it encompass people...

No it's much wider. Archaeology, we've got, well Mick Oliver who found the, his background's surveying I think, geology, mining surveying. Yes probably the archaeological and natural history interest are probably of equal importance really and also it isn't, it isn't confined to the two moors it's the Humber Head Levels in general. So it includes places like Fishlake and Sykehouse and down as far as Rossington Bridge. Yeah, we don't like to define our boundaries too much really. Oh and people, one of our members, executive members, is, she's retired now, but she was the conservation officer for the Environment Agency, lives and worked from Nottingham. But the Environment Agency boundary goes right across the middle of Thorne basically, everything south of that is administered by the Severn Trent, further north it's Yorkshire Water. We've had far more input from the Severn Trent really than the Yorkshire Water, although unfortunately since Valerie's retirement that interest seems to have gone, but Valerie is still extremely involved where the hydrology is concerned she is a fount of a great deal of knowledge really, which is so pivotal to what happens on the moors. I mean the hydrology isn't fully understood, but it's so important that's not compromised really. So there's a lot of expertise from all sorts of people.

And what kind of relationship do you have with English Nature?

English Nature are observers on the Forum and they now come regularly. Over the nineteen ninety seven thing, that was horrible, because they just, I mean, I don't know, we don't think that it was initiated from the Wakefield office, we think it was something from Peterborough but we don't actually know that. So it must have been very difficult for them, on a sort of personal level I have no problems. Well Tim Kohler and Kevin Bull are the ones we see most of. But I get the impression, I think we all do really that they are sort of shackled by bureaucracy if you like. So, I think particularly now that it's Natural England their priorities are going to be public access and this

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kind of thing rather than actual preservation and conservation. There's talk of putting a railway across to take tourists round the moors and things which, we would much prefer if they're going to go down that route to have some tractors with great big wide wheels and some trailers to take people on so they can choose where to go, where people can see without compromising things. But once you have a railway in situ, it would compromise a big area really. But we'll see what happens there.

And you've seen quite a lot of, or there's been quite a large period between two thousand and four when things, the conservation and restoration started and now in two thousand and six we've had a couple of years. Can you see significant changes?

You mean, like the sort of greening of, or are you talking of the management of?

The greening of.

The greening of, yeah.

Can you actually see on the ground physical changes?

Yes, you can yes. I mean it was obvious on Thorne before, they hadn't worked much on Thorne into the run up of the buyout, Hatfield had taken the brunt, I guess.

The brunt of peat extraction?

Yes, yes towards the end of the nineties. Peat extraction largely stopped on Thorne, it's still going of course nibbling round the edges, particularly in Hatfield and Crowle, in fact there's a public enquiry going on at the moment about the Crowle activities. And there are still legal niceties to be sorted out with some other sort of private extractors on the edges of Hatfield.

I was thinking you talked about, going on with Tim Kohler onto Thorne Moor and discovering these rare plants that you've not really seen much of before.

Yes, yes.

Was that, do you think that might be a function of the fact that you'd not been in that particular area before or the fact that it might just have, it might have been that things have changed?

No I think it was probably because we'd not been there before to be honest, yeah. No I don't think the particular area I was on with Tim I don't think much had changed there at all in the great big fragmartis beds, the reed beds. I think probably things might have happened a bit, there's a railway that goes across the top and there'd been some naughty things happening by the railway company. English Nature were very aware of this and they've put a stop to it. They were using some water from somewhere they shouldn't have done to wash lorry wheels or something, something to do with access for some engineering works they were doing. I mean, it's amazing the things that go on, you know, some of these big organisations and companies seem to think they've got the right to trash anything really, it's, if it makes life easier for them.

It's quite, I mean, both moors are absolutely encircled by other things, obviously, cause they don't connect.

They don't now no.

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And so they are surrounded by what could be potential threats, are they threats?

Absolutely, oh definitely I would say they are, yes. I mean the airport for instance, it's not that far away from Hatfield and I have to confess I did actually go to Pisa on an aircraft from Robin Hood Airport in the summer, yeah, they came right low over the Hatfield Moors when they were coming into land. Couldn't see where we were going, going out the cloud was so low.

Would that be a problem?

I would think potentially it could be a great problem. I mean I don't pretend to know enough about pollution levels through aircraft, but I mean, we're led to believe that it is the most polluting activity that we do and that there's no tax on the fuel that they use and flights are so cheap. Yeah I would think it could be a big threat because the Ph in the chemical make up of the moor presumably is very sensitive as the hydrology is and I would imagine, that, fall out from aircraft trails and things would have a significant effect on that over the years. I know there was a public enquiry before the go ahead was given for the airport, and there were conflicting papers, on this kind of thing, but money talks doesn't it really and on the coat tails of the airport I can quite see a lot of development happening on that side of Doncaster. They say it doesn't necessarily have to happen when they put this new link road in, don't have to have ribbon development you know, have to apply for planning and this sort of stuff, but you know, you don't have to be a cynic really to see that it's all cut and dried basically. Alright, they have to go through the motions but - .

Yeah I think there are big threats and the wind farm threats, to be, to begin with it was a bit of a, not there, generating wind power is a good thing to do, but to be honest, I mean the more we go into it the more inefficient it is, it's not actually going to replace any power stations but to put them there, the height of these things, think how far down they've got to go to sustain, you know to keep the things upright and the hydrology beneath the moors is so sensitive. They've only got to puncture this, to go through and all the water on the moors that comes from precipitation it's not fed by any streams or rivers or anything, so it's terribly sensitive and there are hundreds of these things in the process, or in the pipeline. So yeah, there are threats from all over the place really.

So work is ongoing.

Absolutely it is! It's sad in a way, it'd be so nice just to have them there to enjoy and survey and monitor but, life ain't like that really, yeah.

Well thank you very much indeed.

Thank you.

[Recording Ends]