

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Steve Hiner

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's the 7th December 2006 and I'm talking to Steve Hiner and we're actually in the cab of the soft track with the wind howling so I hope it's not going to interfere too much with, with what we're talking about.

Good morning Steve or good afternoon now it is.

Afternoon.

Could you tell me first of all when and where you were born?

I were born in Thorne, 24th May 1964.

And had you always lived in Thorne?

I lived in Thorne until I was three and then moved to Moorends.

How did your family make a living?

Me dad were a car sales man towards end of his working career and me mam was dinner lady, general, she were a housewife bringing kids up and then she did bits, like dinner ladies, cleaning jobs.

And did you have any sort of family connection with, with the moors?

Yeah, me granddad and me dad and all his brother used to come walking on moors as kids and me dad's eldest brother, his best friend was called Bell, who actually lived on the edge of the moors where Bells pond is, so there's always been an interest in the family, yeah.

Can you remember which Bell it was?

I think it was, could be Ernie Bell, I'm not sure. Well me uncle is in his late sixties, probably early seventies, so I don't know if Ernie Bell's still around.

And did he tell you tales about it?

He just, he used to tell me that he walked over here and they used to have an egg collection as they did in them days and they used to just generally play on moors in among trees and stuff round edges.

And was it easy to get to?

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He never said so much, I mean, in the early days it probably was difficult to get on 'cause it's the boggy terrain and such like unless you went on the main Fisons entrances, so he never actually mentioned how difficult it was to get on site.

Was it a long way?

No, it's a twenty minute walk from the village.

And you say you used to come on here as a child?

Yeah, we, I were brought up on an estate at the bottom of Jones' Cable, one o' entrances, Jones' Cable's a mile long lane that leads onto the moors and it's, it's grassland with bits of trees and scrubs and we used to play down Jones' Cable and build dens down there and just gradually worked us way further down lane as we got older until we used to, we found moors and start walking round on moors and making dens on moors and such.

And how many were there, in playmates?

There were four or five of us used to come on and then it sort of dwindled off in later years there were just two of us used to come on then, more bird watching, wildlife watching and studying and then I used to come on on me own a lot o' time.

And you say you made your way steadily down Jones's Cable as you got older, what, did, when you got to the end and you actually came onto the moors what did it look like?

It looked like a great big area of trees and big area of wilderness, trees, and you came through some trees and all of a sudden there were an area of open bog where Fisons had been digging peat and then it'd regenerated when they'd left it. But there were a lot, just a lot of trees as far as I can remember, you know, there were a lot of scrub on site.

When you say it had regenerated what did that mean?

Well, when Fisons had took the peat off, to take the peat off they clear all the trees and scrub off, to clear the area, and then they dig the actual base peat, and that area, with it being open, all the bog vegetation grew in the wet areas what were left behind after the peat, or in between the walls of the peat that was still stacked there and the cotton grasses and the heathers and such like came through.

So they dug the peat there and it'd started to regenerate but did you say there were still walls of peat there?

In certain areas there were walls of peat, yeah. There were like a wall of peat, a cutting where they'd taken it out of and then a, I can, as far as I can remember, like a marshy area. 'Cause what we used to do we used to call it peat hopping, we used to jump from the wall across the cutting and the marshy area to the next part and then just go running across areas like that until Fison's workers came and chased us off!

[Pause]

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Bear with me, there was definitely a line of questioning there, but it's just completely gone out of my head! Oh yes, I've remembered what it was. Did you ever see them digging peat at that time?

When you're kids and you're coming on and you weren't actually supposed to be on, so if we saw any, if you came through some trees and all of a sudden there were some workers in distance we used to sort of go round 'em, keep away from 'em. But I mean, they were decent blokes who were working on there, if they did ever catch you, they weren't bad they knew that you weren't up to no bad, you weren't doing no damage or anything, you were just bird watching, looking at wildlife so, they weren't too bad but we did try and avoid 'em whenever we could.

But did you see them, actually digging up with machines, were they machine digging?

There was machinery, I wunt know what type of machinery they were using.

So it's, you wouldn't come onto the moors and then suddenly be in the middle of a real sort of industrial process?

No, no, not unless you walked into that area, there were, it was just wilderness totally surrounding the areas they were working in, all of a sudden you just appear on 'em, you know, they dint, it weren't obvious where they were, you couldn't even hear them until you actually came upon them through trees.

A lot of people came on just as casual workers in the summer, did you ever see any of those people?

No, they were all in same area as the working, as the cutting, so they were walling with 'em, so what we were saying, we kept out of way o' that.

Now, this seemed to be like your back garden in a way and you came on because this was an area to play in, but what else drew you into coming onto the moors?

Through me parents and a life long love of natural history and I just like to be out, out of towns and away from people if you like, and it were wilderness, it were great and you used to come out with your bag of pack up and flask and that and just spend the day on here, just come out and study the wildlife and take photographs of the wildlife and such like.

Have you got any particular interest?

Reptiles, is my main thing. I've been reptile recorder on both sites now for I can't remember; from '80s I've allus recorded. I've got nature notes going back to 1980 of you know, wildlife I've recorded and adders and grass snakes, lizards have been my particular favourite study.

Tell me a bit about that, what does that involve recording?

It's, well over years I've, just lately it's been part of my work programme. I've been actually the reptile recorder and having to put a report together as part of my work programme and I'm recording the vegetation surrounding where I find the adders basking in the sun. I'm recording the surrounding

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vegetation the ground temperature, the surface temperature, how they're coiled, circular coil, oval coil or laid stretched out, and we're just trying to get as much information as possible when I find them in the basking areas of adders. It's just a species that interests me, I've really, got a number of, lots of photographs of it, I mean, I enjoy photographing and studying them.

And what other reptiles might you come across?

There's adders, grass snake and common lizard on this site.

Did you ever, did you ever come across Mr Bunting?

I went to see Mr Bunting, I think I was still at school, towards end of me school time, because a local farmer had cut a hedgerow down and I wanted to see if he had any ideas whether he were allowed to do that down Jones' Cable and that were the only dealing and it were a very brief dealing with him. I mentioned that I were a volunteer for Nature Conservancy Council and he weren't particularly fond of that organisation so he gave me short shrift like, so I went away quickly!

So what kind of impression did you get of him?

From that impression, he was, a difficult person, I think you'd have to win his trust before he'd have, from what I've heard from other people he was a, he had his ideals and he was a decent bloke but from that short meeting I had of him, he were frightening I suppose, in a word. But I were a youngster you know, he took me by surprise a bit.

So he must have had some standing in the community if as a youngster you would turn to him?

Yeah, his name were well known as, to, in connection with the moors, you know, he were the man who knew all about the moors and used to work 'em, he worked with the wildlife on here.

Did you ever see any of his reptile collection?

No.

[Inaudible]

No, I've seen photographs since of him with his hands full of adders and stuff, but no I've, I know he were more, I know he used to breed cockroaches and stuff like but no, as I say that were only dealing I had with him, I just knew his name.

If you, from what you described, in how you described the moors when you came on as a young person, what change did you see over time?

As in?

I'm thinking particularly the change from, in process, of the peat cutting.

The milling cutting, that's where you've got your like, your moonscapes, as people call it, that's where

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they cleared really huge areas and it dint, I felt there were a wildlife benefit in like that walling, there were, the birds used to nest in the walls and there was trees growing along the bankings as it developed on, and such like, I know that weren't bog vegetation growing but it were better for wildlife in them days and then milling cutting that's when it really became sort of public knowledge when people decided they were taking too much off and I think that's when all activists got involved when milling appeared.

What did you feel about that?

I could see why people got involved, I could see why people 'ud start thinking 'hang on a minute, what are they doing here?' Because it were just, it warh, cleared great big areas just looked like a farming type industry and that's what sort of alerted it to, to the public. I preferred it how it warh, I mean, late '70s, early '80s, I used to like coming on here, but then you've got that, everything in your memories 'cause it all seems better, you know, as you were younger, it all seemed, so.

Now...

I don't know if there's a bit of that in it.

Where did you go to school?

Thorne Grammar School.

And what happened, what did you do when you left school?

I went to, I got, I did a bit of youth opportunities work as a landscape gardener and then I went, I got a full time job in a factory and I ended up in same, local factory making drumsticks and I ended up, I started off going in sweeping up one hour every morning before they started work and supposedly the first week I did, I were doing five hours a week just sweeping up on a morning and I did fifty five hours that week 'cause I did fifty hours working on machinery as well, he kept me going during day, so, and I worked me way up through that factory, through machine operator, saw man, and I ended up setter and then I ended up manager of factory and the owner of the factory he was in his seventies and he decided shut it, so you know, I got made redundant from there.

Then I worked at harvesters, International Harvesters, tractor making and then when I, when I got, I had a spell in between, I went from drum stick factory to harvesters, then back to drumstick factory again and up to manager, then got made redundant so I decided to go to night school and do some countryside management, get me chainsaw tickets and things and I went self employed and then I got a ten month fixed term appointment with English Nature. Worked for three months with Scotts and applied for this full time job that I've got now and then I got the full time job, so. So I spent sort of the last, I think I've been full time four years now and then I had a year before that, so I've been on moor all that time now.

Did you do your qualification in Countryside Management with a view to working on the moors?

Yeah, I were. I applied for all different jobs that came up in conservation and I weren't even getting an interview, even though like I'd been a volunteer for thirteen to fifteen years. And I got like a two line

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rejection and you think well what am I doing wrong, so, I got, I were told what you need is a bit o' paper so I did, I were self-employed, I were going out doing contract work and I were doing night school Monday nights I went to Bishop Burton Out College at Donny and for two years I did HNC in countryside management and then I got an interview and a job so it did work.

Tell me a bit about what you do now?

Well the work now, I'm an estate worker for Natural England and basically site maintenance and habitat development and what we, it's, working on a peat bog is basically water management and scrub management and all the variations along them two main things, keeping the water on site, making sure the water stays in the places we want it to stay, getting rid of the scrub to build the bog vegetation, so, and keeping the track ways open, maintaining the track ways and maintaining the machinery to maintain the track ways, based at the shed on site.

And how many are there working altogether on this, Thorne and Hatfield Moors is what, eight, is it eight and a half?

About eight and half thousand acres yeah.

And how many is there in the team?

There's, in the actual on site team, the NNR team as we call it, there's one Site Manager, Two Assistant Site Managers and Two Estate Workers and we have a Humberhead Peatlands Project Officer above that.

So how can you possibly get all that work done?

Well it means I've got work for rest of my life hopefully! Because, without the, we've got a fantastic network of volunteers, nearly fifty people signed up and we've got an hard core of say twenty who actually come out and who help with the physical work and we have a Volunteer Coordinator, one of the Assistant Site Managers who coordinate the volunteers, who they come out and they work with us during the week and they have the work days, first Sunday of every month, and to be honest with you, without the work that the volunteers do, they're worth two, three extra people every week. So they do an amazing amount of work and they're really, we've got a good broad range of skills among the volunteers as well which we utilise whenever we can.

We talked a little bit earlier about making and maintaining track ways and path ways and so on, now I know you've built, or there has been built quite a few new pathways and access points onto the moors. Are they all built in the same way?

Well there's, some of the main access where we can get vehicular down is stone, we use granite and sand stone to fit in with the site so the maintenance there is basically gripping the puddles off, puddles form so we have to put a grip into the side of the drain so the water then drains out of the puddle and then fill it up with stone and used a whacker plate to top it back up. But on the peat land we use the corduroy path method, using the basic materials what we're cutting down, logging and then chipping on top of that to make a hard surface to drive on and to be able to get a mower across.

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Do you get the opportunity, it sounds like a lot of 'em, sort of hard work and, chopping down trees and that kind of management, do you still get chance to work actually with wildlife and....

Yeah, part of my work programme is the reptile report as well as, I take the nightjar Walks on, four nightjar Walks during the year and I take the Dawn Chorus Walk, one Dawn Chorus Walk during year so I get to interact with the public if you like. I actually lead the walks and show them the nightjars, on an evening walk. So yeah, I get a lot of wildlife, plus we record on a daily basis, we have a page a day diary we have to fill in the work we've done and any additional sightings. We can allus hang around as you're leaving site on a night and after your work time there's always, all wildlife's just starting to show itself, it's great.

What kind of things might you see?

The deer as I'm driving off from the shed, I allus get a lot of deer coming out and I get best views of deer on a night time.

Do they cause any problems?

Yeah they do browse a lot. To be honest with you, if they're ring barking trees, and they're killing the trees, we're getting rid of the trees anyway. It's the damage they do in the woodland that we might be keeping the Will Pits woodland, but I can't see too much problem with what they do.

Are they, are they natural to this area?

The red deer aren't, the roe deer are natural. The first roe deer I saw on site, 1984 and it were rare, a rare sighting in them days, just one roe deer I saw all that year, but now they've built up a good population. The red deer are escapees originally and they're, they're a sort of close knit flock, flock o' deer, you can cancel that one! Herd of deer, cause they've got the same stag so there's a, there is a bit of inbreeding goes off and sometimes we get the blue eyed ones with like the cataracts, the young ones, that are blind, so they need to be culled and also there's a farmer problem because they do go and graze on their potato fields in the crops and the farmers need 'em controlling, so they may be a management problem in future. But, but the red deer are a flock, cause there's a lot of red deer flock, flock, I keep saying flock, you'll have to edit that one, herd. A lot of red deer herds about the country have inbred with Sika deer so there's a lot of hybrid herds, but here is a pure red on this site, so it is quite good for that.

And what else other than the deer might you see?

Fox now and again, sometimes stoats, again rabbits round shed, that's quite good to see, in fact one time a rabbit run between me feet, I were dieseling this soft track up and a rabbit straight between me feet and a stoat chasing it. Stoat didn't even pay no attention to me and jumped on rabbit and killed it in front of me eyes and then tried dragging it under a pile of wood next to shed, looked like rabbit were still alive because back end were flipping up as it were trying to drag it under wood. But, weasels, bird life is fantastic, the marsh harriers you get great views of, everything really.

Tell me something about the nightjars.

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The nightjars, this year has been the best ever breeding population of nightjars on both sites, I think it were ninety pairs. What you do, I actually had the contract to record churring male nightjars, when I was self-employed I got that contract and they're basically a bird as big as a kestrel and they feed on insects about dusk and through night, so you can get some good views and what I do on me walks I'll take a white hanky and flap me hanky, it makes a flapping noise that supposedly imitates the, the male nightjars got a white wing mark and makes a flapping noise wi' it's wings and they come out to investigate. So I've managed to get some good views of nightjars for people on walks, which is quite good. It's just a rare bird, it's a Special Protected Area European designation this site because of the nightjar. Sometimes, they usually have two broods, lay two eggs, two youngsters when they get to twenty one days old the father will start looking after them and mother will go and lay two more eggs and bring them on if weather's favourable. That's basically nightjars.

And are they migrant visitors?

Yeah, from Africa.

So when are they here usually?

In the summer months, July and August, sorry June, July, August really is the best time to be hearing them and the hours, two hours across dusk if you like, either side of dusk is the best time to hear 'em churring.

Since the peat digging has stopped and the restoration work's been going ahead have you noticed any changes in the wildlife?

No, I think the wildlife, it's been such a short period of time you can't really notice the difference in the wild. As I say the nightjar population has increased but that could be, that could be a national trend anyway that that's what happens with wildlife. The only thing, since the peat digging's stopped, I say, it's not been that long so we can't really tell as yet, if it's making any, if any benefits or not. I don't know how it would affect because I suppose there's certain birds like scrub and we're getting rid of scrub and certain things like open areas of moor land so we're creating more of that, so we'll get, there might be a change over the years. But we haven't done enough of that, there's always gonna be, in my lifetime, there's always gonna be a large area of scrub, it's just physically impossible to remove it all with the amount of people we've got and even if we got twenty more staff it still wouldn't, we'd still be a long way off clearing all the scrub off site.

Well the restoration project's obviously a huge amount of work and you said that English Nature / Natural England have not got a huge amount of staff how's that being physically undertaken, how's it worked, who's been doing the work and how's that being done?

We've had money for contractors, Scotts have been doing a lot of the heavy machinery maintenance work, using their expertise with the Cat and all their equipment they've used to make the bundy walls, and as I say contract money is the main thing. We get big, we've got some very good contractors who come on site, who know, who are sympathetic to the natural history side of things if you like, they're not just going in there with their size elevens and trampling everything, they know what they're looking at, they know what they should be cutting, what they shouldn't be cutting and same with spraying. So we are lucky in that respect we've got some really good dedicated contractors,

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conservation contractors and they do quiet a lot of work, a hell of a lot of work.

And what about working relationships, you've got contractors, there's you and there's Scotts men, do you all work as one team or are you all separate?

No we all work separate, we sometimes do, the contractors are run by the site manager and the assistant site manager but sometimes we maybe have to get water out to 'em if they're not available for 'em for spraying, or if they need any help getting any equipment out or anything like that, but generally they'll be run by the site manager and the assistant site manager and they'll send them out. This is where I want you to cut, and they're more or less self sufficient after that.

And do you all know one another?

The contractors?

You know, all the people that are working on the restoration on the moors and the management on the moors?

Yeah, well the Scotts lads, I worked, as I say I worked three months with Scotts on the restoration and I worked with Roy Hibbard for three months solid, me and him were working and I know him really well, I know him from, he's from Thorne, local lads. A lot of Scotts lads I know, are local lads I've grown up wi' 'em, one o' Scotts lads I actually used to baby-sit for his daughters, type o' thing, as I first left school. So they're all, yeah, they're all friends and contractors, I know 'em from 'em working on here but they are really good lads as well, got same interests, same thing at heart. So, yeah.

Can I take you back a little bit to when you came on here as a youngster and you talked to me a little bit earlier about some of the things you did, which included bird nesting and egg collecting, which I know a lot of people have talked to me about and I think they all recognise that it's a bit unacceptable nowadays..

Yeah.

But it was acceptable in those days. Can you tell me what you used to do?

Just used to, basically you're studying your birds, you see your bird life, like you do when you're bird watching and you find where they're nesting and you go to the nest and take one egg out and we used to take the egg out and blow the egg and have an egg collection. Obviously you regret it now but you didn't know any better in them days, that's what people did, so really a bird watcher just going one step further and interfering with the actual nest.

And what did you do with you egg collection?

Just kept 'em in, like, cigar boxes and things like that and drawers, until you realise that it weren't the done thing. I can't remember what we did with ours actually.

And so, did you used to know a lot about the birds themselves?

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Oh yeah, the daft thing about it is the egg collectors actually know as much about birds as anybody because you get to know their habitat and the way they go about things and then you can find where they're nesting, you know, it's easier if you know about the bird and you know what type, what colour eggs this bird lays and you really get an in depth knowledge of the bird.

And was it something that a lot of you did?

Yeah, there were a few of me friends had collections and that and we used to swap eggs and things like that yeah, yeah.

So where do you think that things are going now, how do you feel about the way things are going now?

Well I think things seem to be going on in leaps and bounds, vegetation wise, we seem to be creating some good habitat. I say, it's a large area and we'll not be able to get it all done in my time but, the things I've been doing on habitat management I am seeing a big change and it's great to see and like I say when I were working wi' Scotts me and Bri when, we were doing, we had some really good chain sawing and chipping to do on the Creykes area just as you come in, that first block where there's all heather and cotton grasses that were scrub like this and we, we just cleared the trees and chipped it all off into a pile and we used the chips for repairing track ways and now you wouldn't believe there were trees there, ever, it's just a complete bog area, it's really good.

Right thank you very much.

No, thank you.

[Recording Ends]