

Heather Hughes

ME: Hello. This is the Fitzharry's Manor Estate website project. We're doing some oral history recording. I'm the interviewer, Marion Evans, and John Mears is supervising the recording. Today is the 11th May 2022, and we have the pleasure of interviewing Heather Hughes.

ME: When did you and your family move here?

HH: We moved here in 2005 when my son was two. We've been here ever since.

ME: Did you move here because of links with Harwell, or for other reasons?

HH: Sadly not. We were living in Abingdon in Exbourne Road, which was a Victorian terrace. We were looking for somewhere that had a bit more garden, a bit more garage, a bit less upstairs and a bit more downstairs. A friend had moved into Nuneham Square who's German. She moved from Winterbourne Road into Nuneham Square. We'd come to visit her new house and rather liked the look of it and thought that's what we'd like, and one came up, and we bid and we got it.

ME: What were your first impressions of the estate when you moved here?

HH: Well, I don't know if I should say this, but we used to call it our "ugly house", because compared to the Victorian redbrick houses it wasn't as beautiful, but actually the aesthetic of the estate is lovely, the open front gardens, the trees in the front gardens, the greens and the squares. Also, for us it was a very practical house which is what we were looking for, which compared to the Victorian house where every time you tried to hang a picture up half the wall fell down. These are very solidly well-built houses.

ME: In the early part of the century, what was life like here?

HH: When we first moved here, all of our neighbours - adjoined, and further along and across the road - were all very elderly. That dynamic has changed quite a lot. When we first moved here there were quite a number of people who worked at Harwell or had worked at Harwell, most of them were retired. Our neighbour Bert next door, he had worked at Harwell. Then in the time that we've been here that dynamic has changed as people have passed away or moved on or gone into care homes. Other people have moved in with no connection to Harwell.

ME: Did you find that the residents who had worked at Harwell liked to tell you their memories of the estate?

HH: Some of them did and some of them didn't. I remember meeting someone in your garden at a barbeque or a bonfire night who told me how he had been involved in the weaponization of sarin gas in his early career. Not at Harwell, but at Porton Down. Bert was

quite elderly when we moved in and he didn't talk much about his past. I guess the other thing to say about this house that we are only the second family to live here. The original family, the Evans's lived here, he was the doctor at Harwell. They moved in when it was built and lived here, rented it and then bought it. We were the first people that bought it after them. If you look on the outside of the house, by the front doorbell, I'll show you when you go out, it says Evans in pencil, because they had pencilled on the names the houses they had allocated to people before they'd got round to putting the numbers on. You can still see that.

ME: What have been the best things about living here for your family?

HH: Lots of things. It's so close to the schools – my son went to both the schools at the end of the road, St Nicolas and John Mason. It's so close to town. The aesthetic of the estate has grown on me a lot – the Festival of Britain look. The open green spaces were great when my son was growing up. I think it has got a really good community feel as well. Lots of nice neighbours and community events like the summer party and things like that. Definitely during Covid there was a strong community feel, people really pulled together and helped each other out.

ME: What did you notice that happened during Covid times?

HH: There was a system set up to make sure that all the older people and those without access to computer or email or anything like that could get in touch with somebody to help with shopping and prescriptions. There was a definite response going out on your doorstep and making a noise for the NHS - that was quite strong on the estate throughout the first couple of lockdowns. You just saw a lot of people walking.

ME: You've got a dog haven't you. What's the estate like for dog owners and dog walking?

HH: Great. It's so close to Boxhill Park, Flo's regular walk, and so close to the river which is where we go on other days when we've got a bit more time. Lots of people have dogs, they're very friendly and chatty about dogs.

ME: Are there other events on the estate that you would like to tell us more about?

HH: It's the place my son's grown up. We've had a number of babysitters for him when he was younger, all from the estate. As they grew up and went to university, we got another one, always locally from the estate. Things like that have been great. Cat feeders – yes – we have a very good cat feeder neighbour. People who let the dog out for a bit when are out for the day and things like that. I used to feed Jenny's chickens when she had chickens, and look after her dog. So, lots of good neighbourly support.

ME: Thank you very much Heather.