

Snowden, Malcolm

Will you tell me please your name and the year you were born?

A: My name is Malcolm Snowden. I was born in 1916 in a little village called Killen Park near Sheffield in Yorkshire.

Gan you tell me how you came to Abingdon?

A: I first came to Abingdon in the Spring of 1946 and at that time a number of scientists who had worked on radar in Malvern were invited to join the atomic energy project which had been started up by Sir John Cockcroft. The airfield at Harwell had just been taken over in order to build up the laboratories for this work. So, I used to come over from Malvern to set up the organisation for the laboratory in which I was going to work.

That must have been a very exciting experience?

A: Yes, it was. Things had got rather dull at the end of the war, with the end of radar work and we were looking at that time for something rather more lively and up to date to work on, so we were very glad of this opportunity. Of course, there was no accommodation initially, 'prefabs' were going to be built but until then we continued to work in Malvern. When the prefabs were complete, we moved into them and later into houses here in Abingdon. Travelling over from Malvern on one occasion, that was John Adams and myself, we decided we'd call in Abingdon to have a look at the site that had been proposed for houses for the Harwell staff. We came into the town, found our way to Bath Street to The Lodge, which at that time was the only part of the site that was occupied. The head keeper or gardener, Mr. Jones, met us and he showed us round the house, the Manor, and also around the estate.

The Manor was still there then.

A: The Manor was still there and there were still trees, fruit trees and I remember the surrounding country was just fields; a cornfield down where Fitzharry's School is. That was how we came to Abingdon.

So later on, you lived on the Fitzharry's estate?

A: Yes, initially in prefabs. Then the houses here were started in 1946 and by 1948 the site was complete; 140 houses all together. So many of us had moved into prefabs, when these houses became available, we moved here. They had a curious system of allocating the houses; it was on the basis of your salary, the number of years you had worked in the Civil Service and the square of the number of children that you had. So as a result of that there were quite a number of children on this site. In fact, I had to do a census at the time and I think it worked out at 2.4 children per house for 140 houses. So that was quite a large influx and necessitated the building of new schools, Dunmore and John Mason later, and it had quite an impact on the town. The societies and clubs benefited from the increase in numbers. I was particularly interested in music and the Abingdon & District Musical Society had just been started and it was formed by the SO[?]¹. Also, the town choral society joining together and Victor Leach of the printers here was the first secretary. Later on, I became Chairman of the society when Mr. Etty, an old family in Abingdon, when he died and I remained

¹ Esso Research, Milton?

Chairman for quite a long time but I decided I didn't want to die in post so handed over to someone else.

So, what were your early impressions of Abingdon? It was very small, a cosy little town in those days wasn't it?

A: Yes, it was. Well, I remember coming up Ock Street from the A34 road, a wide street with a lot of empty houses and derelict premises, looking rather dull I thought but you had to come along there to get to the centre of the town. Subsequently I attended a talk by Sir John Betjeman in which he praised Ock Street as being one of the classic examples of an old market town. I couldn't really share that opinion. The centre of Abingdon then there was a cinema, the usual family businesses and shops, Trotman's for bread, Bailey's for shoes, Mr. Leach of course for printing and Cullen's for groceries. Last but not least Mr. Beadle, Beadles for ironmongery, at that time it was the name of Brind and Gillingham that was on the shop.

The people of Abingdon, did they seem rather slow and rural to you?

A: No, I don't think we had any difficulty in mixing and joining with the people in Abingdon and I feel that they welcomed us. The exceptions probably were the few who blamed the bad weather on "The Atomics" and the few who objected to the expenses of having to improve the services, the sewage and things like that. No, we were quite happy moving in here. We joined the clubs and societies and got on very well.

I wonder whether living and working together on an estate, whether there was a tendency to talk shop a lot?

A: We used to travel to Harwell by bus and that gave us an excellent opportunity for meeting each other and forming friendships and talking shop. Our wives met here in the town and made friends. We had a very fortunate life here, a social life, no need to worry about baby sitters, we visited each other. I think the men almost certainly tended to talk shop, but that was inevitable.

So, the estate must have changed a great deal over the years - fifty odd years?

A: Looking out at it now, then there must be only about 40% of the people here who are the original Harwell inhabitants. We still know them of course and meet. Another of the great things I find about Abingdon is when you go shopping, it is a small enough town to be meeting people that you know all the time, so you always have to allow twice as long to do the shopping as you would if you went into a place like Oxford.

There are fewer children on the estate now aren't there?

A: We had to see our children grow up and inevitably with the sort of families that we had, our children left home, went to university, got jobs outside of Abingdon. So, as you suggested the numbers decreased, this is reflected in the number attending church. This estate was in the parish of St. Nicolas' which as you know is within St. Helen's and as a result of that a lot of the families here including all these children used to go to St. Nicolas, not all but a good number, so we had thriving choirs, coffee clubs and things like that.

That's interesting. That's how St. Nicolas' became part of your life.

A: Yes indeed. I was Church Warden for about 25 years.

I think it was in the 1950s that Abingdon hit the headlines with its defectors or traitors. That must have caused quite a stir?

A: Coming to that, I think it came as a big shock to all of us in the Laboratory when those two defectors were discovered. We had been used to seeing them, we made friends with them, and we invited them into our houses. I played tennis with them; Kiaus Fuchs was a resident at Lacey's Court and Pontecorvo lived on Letcombe Avenue. It was a terrible shock and we didn't expect it at all.

Lacey's Court was then like a hotel, was it?

A: It was a guesthouse; it is now the Headmaster's house at Abingdon School.

Yes. People didn't realise that I think, people who weren't in Abingdon then.

A: Probably not.

It must have been strange having these characters so near, people like Pontecorvo in Letcombe Avenue with his family?

A: Yes, but as I say we were not aware of it.

Were there any interesting characters amongst the Harwell scientists, any particular ones that you remember?

A: Yes, we had quite a lot of people joining us from university and some fairly distinguished physicists, some who had come to this country as refugees from abroad. There were, some, quite gifted in other things, pianists and musicians. One of the people that was particularly distinguished was Otto Frisch who was one of the co-discoverers of fission with Lisa Meitner. He was single at that time and was allocated one of the prefabs in Harwell. The other person I remember was Egon(?) Bretscher who had a large family and he was allocated two prefabs in Harwell. Frisch gave concerts, played the piano in what was previously the Officers' Mess at Harwell. A lot of us stayed there when we visited before the houses were built, and there was quite a community on the site at Harwell of people who lived in the Officers Mess.

Did you tell me once there was someone who had a pet duck that he used to take for a walk?

A: That was Pontecorvo, yes you could see him walking about with his pet duck on a string.

Most unusual

A: Very unusual. We still have ducks come around the estate.

We even get them in Withington Court. That is fifty odd years ago, isn't it?

A: Yes, it is.

How do you feel that life in Abingdon has changed in that time?

A: Abingdon is certainly a much busier town than it used to be. We find there are lots of people coming in from the estates on the periphery of the town that we don't recognise at all and haven't met. Fortunately, as I mentioned earlier, they are adding to some of the life of the town in the societies and clubs. But it is different. When you are in the centre of the town it is not like shopping in a small market town anymore. And I feel The Precinct was a mistake.

I think a lot of us do too.

A: Two things, I felt that and the other thing, the so-called relief road didn't give relief to anyone to Abingdon and really cut the town in two. I regret that it was made before the by-pass, think that if

the by-pass had been made earlier then there would have been no need for Stratton Way that of course they are now trying to change.

You did mention St. Nicolas'. How has St. Nicolas' changed since the earlier days you remember?

A: As I mentioned earlier, I was Church Warden for 25 years so I have seen quite a lot of changes there. When we arrived here, we went to the various churches at the time, St. Michael's and St. Helen's and we decided to settle down in St. Nicolas' because it was a liberal tradition. It had very good sermons which were given by students from Ripon Hall and had a very progressive honorary Chaplain in Leslie Smith who was a lecturer in English at Culham Training College. Over the years, the occupant of post of Chaplain has varied and each has added their own particular style to the church. When I first went it was a very small congregation, but over the years, we have built it up and now it is a church that is usually full for the main services. Earlier on we had a very significant choir, this unfortunately has decreased over the years and we also had active discussion groups which discussed relevant topics; I remember John Robinson's "Honest to God" being one of the things. In some way I have enjoyed that broad liberal attitude to religion.

It's the church at the gate of the Abbey, isn't it?

A: It is.

I think you also belonged to the Friends of Abingdon, didn't you?

A: Yes, my wife was involved with the secretarial work of the Friends of Abingdon and the Unicorn Theatre Club of course. We also helped with that, which was a very thriving and active thing for a small town like Abingdon to be concerned with.

It was in its infancy then wasn't it then?

A: Yes, it began in 1953 I think at the Unicorn.

Yes, because it linked with the Coronation in some way. Do you remember the Handel operas?

A: Yes, actually I sang off-stage. "Hercules" was one of them

They were a great feature, weren't they?

A: I enjoyed them very much. It was good publicity for the town; people came from all over the place.

It got into the national press reviews.

A: The Kitchens were the prime movers there.

Interviewer: Elizabeth Aldworth

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