

Moira Hinkley-Smith

Moira Hinkley-Smith was interviewed by Marion Evans on 16th July 2022. The interview was recorded and transcribed by John Mears, who added some comments in square brackets.

ME: This recording is for the Fitzharry's Manor website project. We're doing oral history and reminiscence work with some of our residents. Today is the 16th of July 2022. My name is Marion Evans. I am on the committee of the estate residents' association. We're here to talk to Moira Hinkley-Smith.

Moira, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to us about your early memories of the estate and life here. When did you arrive on the estate?

MH-S: We arrived on the estate in November 1952 as my brother had got a scholarship to go to Abingdon School. We moved from the prefabs at Harwell. Thereafter I went along to Miss Tatham's School in Northcourt Road because I didn't like Dunmore School. I think that it was too big, too huge, compared to our little school in Chilton. I subsequently stayed there until I was 14 and then moved on to Larkmead which was a bit of a fright – but there we are – it was a great change from a small school. But I was very happy here, we had lots of friends in the Square. It was a very friendly environment, there were all the girls that I played with right from being seven when I arrived here – Gilly Hannah next door, Olwen Hannah – she was very tiny but I used to look after her when I was about ten or twelve. Then when I was older, we had Jane Morgan come to live next door. I used to look after Caroline and Anne while she was busy marking papers. In general it was a very happy place to be.

ME: Did your family work at Harwell?

MH-S: Yes. My father worked in the reactor division on Dido and Pluto. As children we would go back to Scotland to see our grandparents, and often Dad would take us up there when he was going to see Dounreay. He would leave us with grandma and then he would pick us up the way back. He'd be up there for a week doing some work.

ME: In common with most of the mothers on the estate, your mother would have been primarily here for you children?

MH-S: No – my mother had started work when we were living in Chilton in the prefabs. When we arrived there, they had employed all the heads of departments but they didn't actually have a lot of administrators. So they set up a nursery school to which I started going, because my brother was old enough to start going to school. I went to the nursery school until I started going to the primary school. So, by the time we moved here, Mummy carried on working at Harwell for a short while, but then she went to work at ESSO research, and she continued to do that – well, long after I got married, so she did it all the time.

ME: Were your friends mostly the children of people who worked at Harwell? Was it easy to mix with the townsfolk?

MH-S: It was easy to mix, because once you went to school, just because we lived on the estate, because different children went to different schools they met up with different friends. I think several of them went locally to Dunmore. At that time, St Nicolas was a secondary school, it wasn't

a primary school. Also, we had a youth club, we had guides and brownies where everybody mixed. So everybody mixed. I don't remember there ever being anything unpleasant.

ME: On a summer's day like this when you were young and on the estate, what sort of games would you typically play? Would you be out, was there a free flow between the houses?

MH-S: Oh yes. We'd play out on the green or we'd go down to the mound and play. Big ropes and swinging backwards across there. There were a lot of outdoor activities. Children made up games or they put up nets and played badminton. The boys played football. We actually had a lot more freedom. Once we got into our teenage years, we would go off cycling – cycle down to Culham Lock and take picnics. Parents didn't seem to worry about that at all. Much less than they do now.

ME: Did children get on with each other? It sounds idyllic in this modern age – but were there problems?

MH-S: I suppose there might have been, but I don't really remember. Not on the estate anyway. I certainly don't remember unpleasantness. One thing I do remember was that there was a police sergeant called Sergeant Long who lived on the council estate and his son was at school with my brother. We'd be coming back from Guides, say, and he'd be going into work and he'd say "Come on girls, hurry up and get home, because I know where you live". It was a very friendly atmosphere, there was nothing I can particularly remember. We were quite naughty at times...

ME: I do remember you telling me one thing that you used to get up to.

MH-S: "Knock and Run" you mean? Yes, I'm just about to tell you about that. Doing things like that, very naughty. Particularly on the Manor Green, because you could knock at the door, and then you had the alley way to escape to and then you could also run off down either way. You didn't have to run into the Square, you could run either way down Letcombe Avenue. Yes, we did naughty things, occasionally.

ME: And no scary adults telling people off?

MH-S: No. Margaret Loveday lived in Sutton Close and if her father saw us, he would come to collect Margaret and say "Come on, it's time you all went home, and if you're not there I shall come round to see your father". It wasn't horrible, everyone was quite concerned.

ME: Did the house suit your family? Was it adapted much over the years?

MH-S: We've changed it once then secondly...sadly, Dad had a stroke, so what had been an outhouse, as a lot of people had, was made into a bedroom, and there was a little alley way which became part of the house. We used to have an outside loo and a coal hole, because everyone had Rayburns, but that was all knocked together and made into a wet room for Dad. Until he passed away, or both of them passed away, it stayed that way, but when we decided we would stay here, we made it very different out there. We made a breakfast area and shut off the garage entrance and made different doors – and just made it convenient for ourselves.

ME: So the house over the decades has been quite adaptable?

MH-S: I think you'll find that anyone who lives here or people who come to buy that most of the builders are quite surprised there is no studded boarding. It is all solid brick built.

ME: For your Mum, what was life like here?

MH-S: Everyone was very friendly, most people knew each other. For instance, my mother went out to work as I told you, but we had a lady called Mrs Smith who used to come and make sure we were OK. We weren't at our grandparents in the holidays. But also, we were one of the only people who had televisions early on, and when Wimbledon and things like that, we'd often have Olwen Hannah who used to live next door and Lorna Pearson, and they used to call father Jock, and she'd say "It's OK Jock we'll leave the door open because we need to have Wimbledon" and mother used to say "Yes that's fine" so they often used to come here and watch Wimbledon and things. Eventually, obviously, everybody got their own television. It was a very friendly place to be. I don't remember any arguments amongst neighbours or anything like that. Of course, looking out into our garden you can't see anything, but somewhere I have some pictures of my father just standing in the garden and all you have there is just solid cement posts and wire fencing all the way round. I knew the Riches very well, the Listers, all the people, everybody knew everybody.

ME: How has that changed now?

MH-S: Well in the Square we are very much the same except we have two houses that are rented out. One we now have a French family and they're lovely. They've gone back to France for the summer. We have number x – I'd like to knock on the door and ask them to remove the old chair and the builder's bag, but it's not my place to say that.

ME: The houses have open frontages so we're aware of how people keep their front gardens. Was it always like that, what was the estate like when you moved in?

MH-S: Going back to when we first moved in here, you weren't allowed to do your front garden. Because the Harwell gardeners did it all. They ran their houses on the same system as the service, every seven years they painted the outside of the houses for you, that sort of thing, and it wasn't until 1963 when they decided that it was time to move on that they put the houses up for sale. And then, of course, everyone changed, and this front lawn and I suppose the Manor Green is mowed by the council.

ME: Does it seem as if the estate isn't as well kept as it used to be?

MH-S: Definitely, yes. Mainly because, perhaps, people have never done it, and I've lived a regimental lifestyle, living here as it was, and then when I got married and my husband was in the Air Force it was very regimented there. You had to look after your quarters. They maintained the front garden but you had to look after everything. It's a shame.

ME: Were there people who found the estate overly restrictive in the beginning, because from the original handbook it can appear that there are heaps of regulations about what you are allowed to do? Was the freedom welcomed by some people?

MH-S: I don't know, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't know there were restrictions. I suppose coming here aged seven, I don't suppose it really bothered me very much. The only restriction I had was if my father stood at the gate and he called me and if I pretended I didn't hear him, and

then another voice would come again, and I'd go to the gate, and he'd say "What's your name" and I'd say "Moira Campbell" and he'd say "What's my name" and I'd say "George Campbell" – "My house my rules, in". Those are the only rules I knew.

ME: You said a bit earlier about knowing the man who laid out the gardens...

MH-S: Oh, John Clark, yes. I knew John Clark when I was little, at three, and didn't really know him, but his daughter and I went to the nursery school at Harwell (which I have pictures of) and they became very good friends because there were quite a lot of Scottish people who came to Harwell, and there was a Caledonian society and my parents got to know them. And when John found out that they didn't lay out the Oxford estate as well as this one, it's very different, and I think he found that after his time here that he couldn't do any more so he got a job and he went to become parks and gardens superintendent in Scarborough. But because of the friendship with my parents we kept in touch all those years until all of them passed away really.

ME: It's lovely to know the person who helped lay out the estate. I think that's a lovely memory.

MH-S: Because you see, you know where you have your garages in Letcombe Avenue, that used to be for the gardeners' – part of it, not all of it, they had part of it – and the little hut that's next door, at one time, that was the Brownie hut.

ME: And of course it was the bus stop too.

MH-S: At one time there were only about five cars on the estate, because they all went to work in the blue bus. And the only reason Pa had a car was in case anything went wrong with the reactor when he was on call. They had buses that took – I think there were about 3 girls on the estate that went to Oxford High School and the rest seemed to go to St Helen's School.

It was a very happy place, I don't remember there being any kind of unpleasantness on the estate. One thing that was quite noticeable was the Kandyers [JM: spelling uncertain]. In Fitzharrys Road, right at the end, the last house on the left-hand side was Pete Kandyer and his parents. Now, his mother was white as driven snow, and his father an African gentleman. He was a scientist, he came to Harwell, and they had three children. Pete, who I saw a couple of years ago – I missed the reunion because I was up in Lincolnshire with my brother, but they had the Mousehole – the cafe [JM: beneath the county hall in the marketplace] – that's where the kids used to go after school and a lot of the boarders from Abingdon School used to come there as well and then when the first bell went at quarter past five, they evacuated because they had to be back in school by half past. We have what we call a Mousehole reunion and of course we haven't had one for a couple of years [JM: because of Covid lockdown]. They did have one a couple of weeks ago, but as I say...

ME: What happened to that family?

MH-S: They moved, but Peter, and his sister - he had a younger brother who unfortunately got killed in a motorbike accident – but Peter's fine, and the Fords...

ME: What about events? What about the Coronation?

MH-S: Yes. We'd just moved here, and as I said, Daddy had a television, the screen was about half the size of this paper [JM: half the size of A4]. The Hannahs, the Cooks who lived at number 9, the

Fords who lived at number 10, Joy Pearson, we were all sitting in here watching it. How we saw it I can't remember because it was so tiny.

ME: What can you remember, can you remember the dresses?

MH-S: Only because – my mother was not a great one for keeping things – I do keep things, and as a child I had all the books that came from the Queen – but when I got married my mother just decided she didn't need the rubbish because I went to Bahrain when I got married in the Air Force which was quite exciting, in 1965 when they hadn't found oil and there was nothing much there. You do remember things, but only when things are triggered like now for her Platinum Jubilee, and then you remember all the things you saw and had.

ME: Were there other events on the estate, I know that on Nuneham Square you often had an annual party?

MH-S. Well, we did for a long time. And everybody – it would be one year that the odd numbers did the desserts and even numbers did the starters but everybody brought their own meat and we had a barbecue and we did things like Easter egg hunts for the children. But that only really started since I moved back here, and it wasn't from my instigation, it was when Julia Litt moved in and she was very keen on family activities and did Easter egg hunts and things for the children. It's always been a very friendly community, this little square particularly.

ME: Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?

MH-S: We'll I'd just like to say one thing, that a lot of people who perhaps haven't lived here since – well, Daddy died in 2003, so it depends when you moved here, but he had a stroke in '86, and most people on the estate still knew him, and he would not have an electric wheelchair. So he used to push himself all around the estate, backwards. It was lovely, because everybody knew him and he'd been a great gardener and so quite often he would come home with runner beans here and tomatoes there [JM: garden produce tucked around him in his wheelchair, I remember seeing him on the estate in the mid-1990s] and everybody made him very welcome. That was a very nice thing for both myself and my mother to know, because sometimes I would nip home – because I went to work at Miele when we moved here – my mother would ring me at lunch time and she'd say "I don't know where he is", so I'd come home and I'd go and look for him and he'd be in somebody's house – you know in their garden – having a chat, he couldn't speak, but you know, they were very kind and it was very friendly, so that was nice.

ME: These are all wonderful memories of how free the estate was for younger people and much older people.

MH-S: I got married when I was 22 or something like that and I don't remember there being anybody's father saying sort of "Get off my garden", nobody being unpleasant at all.

[JM: omitted some chat]

ME: I believe at one point there were 300 children on the estate.

MH-S: I'm not at all surprised. There was Barbara Finieston and people like that, there was the Fords, they were all boys...

...I think the reason it was able to open up into such a nice open community was because all the chaps went to work on the bus together. They didn't all go to work and go to their various departments, somebody might be late and they'd say hold up the bus because Jock's not here. It was a very chatty thing. There were two buses.

ME: Did men socialise much on the estate here, was there a cricket team or debating group?

MH-S: My father used to go and play crib down at the Horse and Jockey, I know that. Dad wasn't a drinker you see, I think when I got married was about the first time he had a drink.

In Letcombe Avenue, the Smiths, he was at Harwell, his wife taught at St Helen's, and he was part of Abingdon Cricket Club, and there was always the Abingdon Cricket Week.

Because my father was a great gardener, all he really did until quite late in life, he used to go in for growing that side of the garden with vegetables, they used to have a smallholding, competitions.

ME: Did we ever have a produce show here on the estate?

MH-S: No. It was part of the Abingdon one. There was never anything formal like that, but there was a lot of good fellowship, you know, open fellowship.