

# DERSINGHAM 2000 HISTORY PROJECT

## INTERVIEW 26

**Date interview conducted:** 27th March 1998  
**Name:** Clifford James Riches

My nickname was Cobbler as my father was a shoe repairer and shoe maker.

### When did you first come to Dersingham?

When I was born, 85 years ago in Hunstanton Road.

### Do other members of your family live in Dersingham?

*The tape did not record properly here but Mr. Riches spoke of his family in the village. We are a big local family.*

### What are your earliest memories of the village?

I can't remember my parents moving to the shop up here where the shoe shop is; I was six weeks old. The shop belonged to my mother's sister who lives in York; they bought it in the end. Father he was an apprentice to a man called Sanctuary who was a shoe repairer in Chapel Road. When my dad was 15 his father died just before Christmas. He still had a sister going to school and alas there was no health service then or Social Service then and Dad had to give up his apprenticeship. I think he had about another year to do. Gave up and he looked after his mother and sister still going to school.

He met my mother, 'cos he had one of these very old fashioned Edison Bell Phonographs; not a round record, like a jam-pot you know. Anyway, he sent his sister out to ask my mother to come to listen to his phonograph and that was the beginning of the friendship. They were married in the Wesleyan Chapel. *At the chapel on Chapel Road?* Yes and I was baptised there. I went to school there; my mother was ever so proud of her kids. *You know about anniversaries they used to have?* Every year we used to have an anniversary and the children all were all up on the stand on the dais and had to say a piece of poetry; I hated that.

Also one of my earliest memories there was our Sunday school treats; always looked forward to that. We used to go to Snettisham beach in farm wagons. Mr. Stanton, not young Dick, but his grandfather, they used to have their farm wagons and they used to take us. The horses all had their manes all braided with coloured ribbons, flags flying, and the sun was always shining somehow. Do you know I can remember going down the beach road to Snettisham the

wild roses. I've always loved the wild roses. They were always out when we had our treat. In the summer, the summer treat. I can remember the ham sandwiches and iced cakes we had. We loved it. It was lovely.

The other Methodist Chapel they had their treat as well they used to go somewhere else.

There was the Wesleyans my family belonged to. There was the main church and three chapels then. *Where was the third?* You know where the car park is opposite the little primary school that used to be. The little building there. That was a chapel but I can't remember what it was called.

We used to have what we called Hospital Sunday. The hospitals weren't run by the government, the money came from the people and we used to have a Hospital Sunday and I used to have a collecting box. A lot of us outside the shoe shop and we put a banner across the road. Dersingham Hospital Sunday. There weren't so many cars then of course but as they came along we'd shake the box, and they'd throw the money out. That was for the hospital. Also we used to pay so much a week only a few coppers because a man worked for 29/3d a week old money. Things were much cheaper. It weren't a lot of money.

School? Yes here at the little school. It's closed now and its a social place. The one by the Feathers. I was either three or four years old when I started school and I can remember as though it were yesterday holding my oldest sister's hand and going across to school. In my innocence I thought I was going in with my sister. When the bell went, we used to have a bell you know, they used to pull the bell, and she had to go and line up over there and I was shoved in the entrance.

The Infant teachers were called Miss Jessica Smith which was Hill House Farm's; the daughter of the old farmer there. The Superintendent of Police Twiddy, his name was and his daughter was the other teacher.

I won't tell you one of the stories that happened I don't think I should really. A little kid four years old fancy not letting him go out to the toilet; they wouldn't then. I was busting and I weren't going to go home in wet pants so I wee'd on the floor and of course another little kid stood along, I can remember as if it were yesterday, "Please teacher Cliff Riches had wee'd on the floor." This isn't being recorded is it? *Yes.* Oh dear. Anyway she asks "Was that You?" I had to admit it. She smacked my behind. *In those days you got smacked.* Yes. I got mixed thoughts about corporal punishment. I mean with big lads and things like that what deterrent have you got.

In the army, I was a sergeant in the army with 76 blokes in my platoon. 70 of them are all right. Other six you get trouble makers and make it bad for everybody. So what do you do?

Of course there was no water. We fetched our water from a pump three doors down the road. No electric light; no street lights and no sewerage; just a bucket in the little house; it was all we knew.

I tell you a little story about when the electricity was being laid on. Proposed. Had a meeting at the Forester's Hall and I went with my mother; I was only a kid. There was an old boy called Donkey Daw; that was his nickname Donkey Daw. He had a donkey and cart. He lived right next to the Post Office. He was there and he was a proper old country man and he got up. They asked for comments, "What was good enough for our forefathers was good enough for us. We don't want the electric light and we ain't going to have it." People were old fashioned.; I suppose I'm old fashioned compared someone today.

The shop was two houses then. Where you go into John's shop now was a separate house; so two houses turned into the shop. My father when we first went there there's what we call the old wood shop; a wooden building. It's still there that was his work shop and it was two houses. Then they turned the one house we lived in into the shop. Incidentally my father was a very well respected man. It was open house for all the lads in the village. Nights were dark, nothing for them to do and he had forms all round his shop and I've seen literally over 20 chaps from left school age to 20 years old sitting round in the evening to have a chat. Dad used to work from five in the morning till 10 at night fixing shoes and he also sold little packets of biscuits and mineral waters, cigarettes and the blokes used to spend a bob or two. It was the youth club; they had nowhere else. Boys used to say, "Where we go tonight - lets go to Arnies."

My father's name was Ernie. Dad was really a good old boy. He had pneumonia. You be surprised what these blokes clubbed together and took him. The only money coming into the house was 10/- a week from a club he belonged to. The Stanton family, old Mrs. Stanton that's Dick's grandmother, was very good; sent milk and things like that.

He made shoes mostly for people who were cripples or had bad deformed feet. Made for measure you see; soling and heeling; I can tell you how much. Hand sew; take about two hours or more to sew them on by hand; was 5/6d old money. The only time I saw my dad lose his temper there was a family (no names no pack drill) they sent the daughter round. He used to put toe caps

on when the toe was worn through, we throw them away now don't we, Used to sew the toe cap on and sew it all round there. Well old dad sat there and sewed a toe cap on this shoe and the girl come and collect it and took it home; charged 9/9d old pence. The father came round, "Arnie" he said, "Daylight robbery charging me 9d". *They used to hand sew the shoes down.* Yes I've had hand me down. We used to have the shoes from the family in York and then they went from us to village children. In our way we enjoyed life.

We used to go down to the beach; over the station and run down there. We hadn't got bikes or anything then. We'd run down there for a swim in the evening if the tide was right camp down there at weekends, take streaky bacon. We used to cook it burnt but it tasted lovely. The first tent I had we made from Tate and Lyle sugar sacks. The sugar used to come in sacks. The first time we camped down there was me and my brothers the two older brothers middle of the night dad biked down in his trade bike 'cos he was worried about us.

*Can you remember about the war?*

The first war yes; the first war I remember the Zeppelin raids very well. I suppose about 1916 they probably started; I was four. I can remember that ever so well. You must remember when they drop bombs that impress itself on a child's mind. My mother use to take us all up in the pantry, in the larder, under the stairs. They always thought that was the strongest part. I remember this night and I can tell you exactly where the bombs dropped. The Zeppelin came over our house, from the sea side. The first bomb fell, do you know where Wellswill house is in Manor Road? It's now Manorside. Well that used to be a field, the first bomb dropped there. There was a crater there. The next one dropped on the Open Common. You know where they've been doing all this clearing; well where they haven't done it, the crater was there. We used to go and find bits of shrapnel. Then luckily it went and dropped the rest of its load on the fen.

One bomb didn't go off and I remember the next day I was only a small lad. Dad kept a few chickens and I went up to the baker's shop that was opposite the White Horse, Jarvis, to get some corn for his chickens. They hadn't told people or at least we didn't know. This bomb went off and I dropped the corn all over the road; we were terrified. It killed a woman that night up Dodds Hill; you know where the square is at Doddshill. You can still see some shrapnel marks from one of the bombs on the chimney if you look across there's Houses. This woman was caught outside and she was killed; name of Dunger.

I remember my parents taking us up the next day and some old boy got a

collecting box, was sitting on the bomb crater collecting money. Two or three three times we had the raids like that. I saw one of them with a searchlight on it one night; like a cigar. My father take me out in his arms. I can remember that.

*You must have gone through the General Strike.*

I remember that as though it's yesterday. *Did it affect Dersingham?* Yes, we didn't get the Durham marches here of course. The agricultural workers were on strike too you know; I remember them marching. You know where the farmer's club is, used to be the Old Hall. Well there's the Church Row, the church cottages, on the grass there I remember them all sitting down there and resting there.

*That led us onto the next war*

Before the next war, you may be interested, I worked at Sandringham. I was living in the Bothy then. It was the place for the single men who come from away. Very nice and you had a little room of your own. Very funny really; you had a big dining table 'cos there was about 24 of us in the Bothy. We all had our loaf of bread in front of us on this long table, bottle of milk or you had it in a jug, whatever. For main meal during the week we had a woman come in who used to do the cooking. Meat and that sort of thing were put together and divided by the number of people and you paid your whack, probably about six or seven shillings. I loved the Bothy you were free.

On Christmas Day 1929 or 30 the Prince of Wales, later the Duke of Windsor, now you hear a lot of things about him, but I worshipped him. I thought he was a wonderful chap and his brothers. The Prince of Wales was a great golfer and He'd been on his world tour in the Renown, the battle ship Renown. He covered the whole world. He was the best ambassador we had. Anyway this Christmas Day I'd gone home from Sandringham and was having Christmas dinner with my parents. Now we were all sitting round the table and a knock came on the door; it was the head gardener from Sandringham. I used to golf caddy for the Princes and their guests when they came. He said, "The Prince of Wales had rung me up; they had their dinner and he and his three brothers want to have a round of golf". They had a nine hole course in the Park. "Can you find 4 caddies?" I said, "Yes I expect so". Anyway my brothers, the blacksmith, my brother who lives in Australia now, and the boy who we lost in the war, he was only a tiddler, "I'll go Cliff 'cos half a crown you got". I said to poor old Claude, 'cos he was only a kid, "You could never carry the bag boy". "I can carry them." So away we went; four brothers caddied for 4 royal brothers that day; the Duke of Gloucester, Prince of Wales, Duke of York (later King George VI) and Prince George who was the youngest one of the four princes. He was killed in an air crash during the war on the way to Iceland. Their youngest brother and my youngest brother

were both killed in the war.

### **What was the worst time you remember?**

Personally there are two or three things. First of all was losing my wife. My young brother and John at the shop they got the blind girl, and when I knew that she was blind.

Maybe the 1953 floods, I don't know. I remember very well. There was no television but we had the radio and I was a postman then here. That day the wind did howl, a howling gale, you couldn't ride a bike against it; you couldn't hardly walk against it all that day. I remember the old marsh shepherd, his name was Lincoln, I took a letter to him and, "Boy," he said, "that water will come over tonight." Anyway always used to watch the play on Saturday night, listen to the play on the radio. We were listening to that when my second son Ian said, "Dad."; I said, "We're listening to the play boy. ". "Dad", I said, "After the play's finished. It won't be long. When the play finished he said, "Dad, the sea is up to Dersingham Station". I said, "My God ". I went out and I made me way down there. The wind was blowing straight in and I got down there and true enough the sea was up to the station Just got through the gates there and what terrible things was there. There was things there; it was dark but you could see. I picked up a board and do you know what that was. Board from the railway station at Heacham. It washed there in that time. It didn't come home to me even then. I didn't realise that people were dying there. I don't know why. A local chap, he used to live up Dodds Hill; he died not so long ago, what's his name .... anyway it doesn't matter, he was there with another chap; he said, "Billy Bird's got his cows (he used to have his cows about 100 yards down Beach Road,), they can't get out, " he said. "How about getting down there?" I said, " Not me boy". If that would have been people there I would have had a go. It was terrible and the water was like ice. Anyway they managed to get out, up to the wire fence along the railway line. Freddie Cross he cut the wire and let the cattle out. He didn't have to swim down the 100 yards 'cos he couldn't have done it. I always thought he did a marvellous job.

After that morning on the Sunday it's indescribable what it was like. I been through war, Normandy and all that sort of thing it gives you some idea what it must be, cattle. The first thing my son, who'd come in that night, told me about it. He and his friend picked up a 18 month-old baby, just by the station. And it was weeks, literally weeks, we used to scour the marshes and found the last body.

*Do you think it will ever happen again?*

Yes. I think there is inevitable. It happened many times in the past you know.

If you go to Lynn, St. Margaret's and go round to the main door you see it on the wall. And also in our library is the Reverend Lewis's' history of Dersingham file. Our village sign I did the research for that.