

DERSINGHAM 2000 HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW 03

Date interview conducted: Not recorded
Name: Alan George Cross

When did you first come to Dersingham?

I was born in the village in 1933.

Do other members of your family live in Dersingham?

I have a daughter that lives in the village.

What are your earliest memories of the village?

My area in the village was around the common and the heath land. As youngsters we spent a great deal of time there, catching rabbits and this kind of thing. At the time the village dump was on the “closed common” and we spent a lot of time scavenging around the dump to find anything we could make a go-cart from. We would make them and use them to go down the hills on the common. This was long before the days when there was as much bracken and heather on it as has happened in recent years. Sledding could be done more readily then than can be done today. Very little traffic in those days. It was a Sunday occupation for most people to go to the common where there were six or eight seats. Most would be occupied on a Sunday to watch what traffic there was coming along was quite an event in those days. Many would break down and a break down was an interesting point. There were 2 or 3 garages in the village at the time. Over heating was a common fault then. Punctures were a frequent problem as tires were used until they were totally bare.

We nearly all had errands to do as youngsters. My elder brothers had done errands for one lady in the village. This was a chore that got handed down through the family depending on how old they were. So my chore also was on Saturdays to collect the groceries mainly from Parkers Stores and Playford’s Bakers. But I got the sack one day after taking my purse and half a crown and jumping the dykes along Manor Road; by the time I reached the shops the purse and half a crown had disappeared. I never found it. I reported it to the lady who told me to leave it and do her errands when I was a bit older. Three pence was the wages for doing that. Invariably on sweets but in my young days it was just the start of the war and sweets were not available. It was a rare occurrence for the local grocers to have sweets. Many weeks would go by and there were no sweets to buy.

I remember once my mother promised me something if I did so and so and I was given an orange and that was a treat.

During the war in many ways perhaps we in the country nearly everyone had allotments. We all had big gardens and that was part of the thing we had to do to help on the allotments and in the gardens which meant we had a good stock of vegetables. Many places also kept chickens which gave you food from the eggs. Indeed when the chickens got old from the chickens themselves. We used to have sport by catching rabbits. They were a basic diet. So food wise we didn't do too bad. Vegetables and what you could produce yourselves was one of the main things. It was a healthy diet everything was natural very little tinned stuff at that time. Milk was plentiful. There was never a problem with milk. Farmers had their own milk rounds then.

We had to walk everywhere. I lived at the end of the Drift in the village. I went to the local school. I walked to school, about a mile plus; home at lunch time, back again after lunch and home again in the evening.

The Secondary school was built just before the War but it did not open until after the war. It was used by troops for military purposes during the war. It opened after Easter and I left school at Easter. I missed out on the new school. The school leaving age was raised to 15.

As soon as I left school I started working. As agriculture was the main thing in this area I worked on a farm most of which was beyond the railway line. I started there at 14 and continued there until 1953 when the floods came. I had been deferred from the services until that time which was a common thing for people who worked on the land. When the floods came 90% of the farm was inundated with water. My reasons for deferment disappeared as the farm could not be used because of the amount of salt that had got into the land. National Service was still going and I went into the Air Force. After I came out of the Air Force I got involved in building work. I've done that ever since.

My parents had always lived in the village. My father was in the First World War. My mother's family had lived next to the Heath. Heath House was their family home. My father lived in the village. He was involved in working at Sandringham Estate for most of his lifetime. As so many people in the village did at that time.

What can you remember of the effects of the war on this village?

The schooling made a great deal of difference because the schooling was quite poor at the time. Many of the young teachers had been called up. Sport was completely out as far as school was concerned. In many ways they were very

poor years. I remember Miss Boyce and Miss Robinson were very good. Miss Cook was her name; she married and became Mrs. Boyce.

We weren't allowed to go on the Pastures to play sport at all. It may have been because of Air Raids. They had trenches dug in the school gardens and on the Emblems which was we had to evacuate to if there was an air raid. We had to take our gas masks everywhere. There were thousands of troops manoeuvring around here; it was wonderful entertainment for us. We could find a few thunder flashes on the Common which the troops used.

The floods changed my line of life although you didn't realise it at the time. After my initial training in the Air Force we did Coronation Route lining in 1953. I went out to Singapore; I spent 2 years there. I was called home on Compassionate Leave as my father was ill. I was posted to West Raynham where I completed my service in 1956.

Going back to the floods. Had there been warnings before that this situation could have arisen?

There had been a series of floods of a much lesser degree. Snettisham has always been a vulnerable place. There were floods there in 1947 but no-one visualised anything on this scale. Snettisham had been allowed to build properties that people were living in permanently along the sea front. These folk suffered the most in this area. On the night 31st Jan/1st February some bungalows were lifted up and came to land again near the railway and broke up; people in them had no chance at all. Since then there has been a substantial secondary bank put in all the way along so that the tide would have to rise more than it did then. People are not allowed to live in the huts on the sea side of that banking.

The Wash is silting up now. About 20 years ago another area was reclaimed at Wolferton and Wootton when a new bank was created. Several hundred acres of land was brought back into agriculture.

Have you belonged to any clubs or organisations in the village?

I currently belong to the British Legion and The Ancient Order of Foresters. I've been involved with the Ancient Order of Foresters, a Friendly Society, since I was in my 20's. We've been involved with the running of the Local Court. The organisation started back in the 1800's; our particular Court started in 1840. We had the Foresters Hall built but its not now used as a meeting place for the Foresters due to a decline and lack of interest. The Hall was built in 1893 I think and still belongs to the Foresters. The name Court means the same as Branch; that is how it was known.

Around the 1900s up to the Second World War there was no such thing as the Health Service and these clubs were the forerunners in a way. If you did not belong to some such club and you fell on bad times you had no where to turn to. So it was important to belong to an organisation to insure against illness. It still applies today but to a lesser degree. They were different to Unions. The employers would treat the unions as hostile but not the case with the Foresters. If the members belonged to the Foresters and hit bad times the employer would not have to look after them. The funds came from the members contributions. The unit that was insured for used to a 10 shilling a week unit. The Organisation nationally is now quite wealthy. Our court at present has just under 100 members; not all from the village. If you join today it is all proportionate depending on how much money you would need if you became sick what you would pay.

The Court meetings were a thing the members were expected to go to. We used to go in large numbers. It was an important thing. We organised dances, Tombolas. We used to play dominoes and darts. It has been used for many things the Hall; a church, a play school, Bingo, Cinema, weddings etc. When the school became a Community Centre it tended to kill off the lettings for private halls.

What was the worst time you remember?

The floods; it affected us so much. The morning after the floods we took a boat and went down the marshes looking for bodies as there were so many people missing; it changed my life. When the floods came everything in its path was brought to the railway line area. Corn stacks, were all brought up bodies of cattle rabbits; it was all among the debris. There was two feet of straw. I remember a heel of a water boot sticking up. I gingerly picked it up hoping no-one was in it.

It didn't affect the railway as the embankment was above the marshland apart from where there were ditches or culverts underneath the railway was a barrier to the floods.

What are the biggest changes you have seen in the village?

There has been a huge increase in properties built in green areas; mainly since the war. The current development will increase the population by about 25%. This is changing village life into a small town status now. I think it is a shame but it will go on. Although most of the land has been taken up now; if the pressure is there for more land it will be released by Sandringham Estate. We are hemmed in by Sandringham land. There is a small field near Parkers Corner of about 6 acres that could come in. An area up Dodds Hill on the left stretching

round if necessary to Carpit Corner. You can see how the village expand in these areas.

As for the allotments as long as there is still a need of people wanting the allotments it will be a long while before building takes place on there. It would need sanction from the Charity Commissioners and they would be very reluctant.

The restriction has been not to allow one village to merge with another. Life Wood is owned partly by Mrs. Bell who lives opposite. It was part of her father's estate. Woodside Close was built into what was part of Life Wood.

There was a lot of local resistance to the Supermarket but having established itself it serves the village well; many use it.

We must remember we are a village and concentrate not on these big projects like a swimming pool etc. but maintaining the ones we've got.

The bank has been sadly missed. If you add the time and trouble it takes local people to get to the Bank in King's Lynn it outweighs the cost the Bank is saving.

What would you like to see happen in the future?

For the village to remain the size it is now; more done to the Commons to bring them back into line. I remember every year when it was a dry year fires were started by the steam engines . Much of the fen and common got burnt off. I can remember fires starting at Wolferton and sweeping across the Fen and it could not be stopped but the Fen was the better for it. The land soon regenerated and got rid off all the rough and dead foliage each year.

Many places now where you used to have a clear vision right through to Wolferton because of all the trees it had become almost forestry now rather than Heathland. We are now trying to restore it to Common Land. It was an open area and if people were on the Common you could see them. It was the afternoon outing in the Summer. There would be a lot of people on the Common; it was principally heather but now the Birch has choked it off. The lack of rabbits also has made a difference; Myxomatosis started in the 1950's had a big effect.