

# **DERSINGHAM 2000 HISTORY PROJECT**

## **INTERVIEW 21**

**Date interview conducted:** 28th January 1998  
**Name:** George William Pratt

### **When did you first come to Dersingham?**

I came to Dersingham 45 years ago; before that I lived at Anmer.

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

Yes, my son. My eldest son lives in Thetford and my daughter just outside London.

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

My earliest memories when moving here it was a smallish village. But with all the services that one would require. Everybody knew everybody in the village.

Even in those days, going back, in the summer the village was clogged up with traffic. In those days there use to be a special constable standing at the four cross roads controlling the traffic, particularly on Sundays.

We had all the small shops in those days. A lot of them have gone now. I think that's regrettable to be quite honest. I'm one of those people who still support the small shops; and I don't visit Supermarkets. I think the convenience of supermarkets is nice for people who haven't got transport. Because obviously there was lots of travelling backwards and forwards on buses. They played their part. But you could get everything they sell before they even built the supermarket.

*Were you here when the railway was running?*

Yes, I used to travel from Dersingham railway station into Kings Lynn on the train in those days; or to Hunstanton on the train. I hadn't got a car when I first came here to live. That was another regretful thing when they did away with that railway line. It would be nice to think that one day we will have a railway running back through Dersingham again; but a lot of the line has been sold, closed and ripped up. If we wanted to do it now we'd have to have a completely new route. That would cost a vast amount of money that is not perhaps possible. Everyone's got a car nearly now. The days when I first came here to live, I moved into No. 42 Gelham Manor Estate, the council houses, and I don't suppose in those days there was more than two people on the estate that had a motor car. Now, of course everybody's got one, perhaps two.

*The standard of living of people in villages is now totally different.*

Oh, yes, it's increased from what it used to be. There are still some people who can't afford those things; but not as many as there used to be.

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

*Now you have belonged to some organisations in the village haven't you?*

Well as you know I'm chairman of the Parish Council, and have been for the last 28 years. And I've been on the Parish Council for about 38 years. So obviously from that you get asked to be put on things you wouldn't normally do. I'm also chairman of the County Council, and a member of the Borough Council. I'm a Governor of St. George's School, and have been for quite some time. I pride that perhaps. My most important and most enjoyable ones I serve on. More so they have just had the Ofsted report and as you well know it was a very, very good report. We should be proud of it in Dersingham. St. George's has always been a good school. All my children were educated at St. George's, all three of them.

I serve on the Churchyard management Committee; a small committee of members of the Church council and the Parish Council. We make a grant from the Parish Council every year to the church of, at the moment it stands at £1800 a year. I serve on the management committee of the Sports Ground. I serve on the Halls Foundation at Snettisham which is a charity that gets money from the use of the carrstone pit at Snettisham and they then give that money, it has to be used for the education of the children. We use to give grants to Smithdon and to St. George's here in Dersingham; and they're just a few of them, there are others as well. I serve on the Road Safety Committee. Up to a few years ago I was a member of the Community Health Council. But when you are 70 years old you are too old to serve on the Community Health Council. No representation on that if you are over 70. Then I have the committees I serve on for the Borough Council.

I think to be fair we have been lucky in Dersingham we have always had a fairly good press coverage. Ever since I have been Chairman of the Council we open up 15 minutes of the meeting where members of our Parish can attend and ask questions. So that has helped. Recently of course we've had a very good press lady who is also a member of the Council in Mrs. Ruth Mountain. So I think we've had a fairly good coverage. Recently within the last 2 years we have a permanent Council Parish Office where it is manned 4 days a week from 10 in the morning to 2 in the afternoon. That's based here on the Police Station so if you see the clerk calling at the Police Station she's not been arrested she actually works there.

*You must have dealt with things the villagers felt strongly about.*

The main one I shall always remember and I was very pleased to see the Eastern Daily Press ran a comment on it although it happened a few years ago. When I first went onto the County Council we had been trying since 1928 to get a by-pass for Dersingham. It had never been successful mainly because people said you couldn't do this and you couldn't do that. And I was determined when I went onto the County Council that was going to be my favourite push to get a By-pass for Dersingham. And, as you know, we were successful because in 1991 they actually opened the By-pass for Dersingham. That was brought about, not only for my own point of view, but from the pressures we got from people who lived in the village.

*Because it was becoming almost impossible to get out from your road?*

That's right.

*I don't think people who've moved in now have no idea—*

Of how bad it was. That is the main thing that I will remember because I got a terrific amount of flak from people like The Friends of the Earth, the bird people and all those sort of things who didn't want it to go through a site of scientific interest. And I, although I'm not an anti naturalist, in fact I got a great interest in it, I felt that on this occasion human beings should take priority rather than anything else. I stuck me neck out, pushed it ahead and eventually we got it. We got the money and it was opened up in 1991.

*Now, looking forward to do with the Millennium, when we had out original meeting one of the things suggested was a village hall. For various reasons we decided there was no need for a great village hall. One of the points raised was where was it going to stand. You are well aware of all the land in the village. Where would it go?*

I have to truthfully say to you I don't know where it would go. Because the only two places where I suppose it could go would be on where the allotments is now, which would raise a terrific objection because people want those allotments. The allotments belong to the Charity Trustees. So the Parish Council would have no say, well they'd have some say but the Charity Trustees would have to release the land and I don't believe they would release the land. The other would be on the recreation ground which would take away an amenity we already got. There's no point in taking one amenity away to give it to something else. That would be the only two places other than that you'd have to look for land which is the ownership of her Majesty the Queen. I must admit I wouldn't want to say it isn't necessary but I think we have got a good Church Hall which is not fully used. We've got the Youth Centre which certainly isn't fully used. We've got many other places where the facilities are there if people want to use them.

*Someone suggested would it be possible to enlarge the space in the Church Hall?*

You would have to buy the land to start with. Another thing you have to think of if you extend it you will draw more people into it you would have to extend the car parking. There wouldn't be space for the amount of cars you wanted to park.

*Another thing is all the information that is being collected for the Millennium, these tapes and interesting information, have got to be available to the public who want to read or listen to it. One of the places suggested is the barn, our famous barn.*

*Would that cause difficulties?*

I don't see why it should. It's in the ownership of the County Council and it's used for two purposes. One is they store antique pieces of road furniture in there and part of it is used by the church for the stuff they use for the flower show. I wouldn't want to see the church turfed out because they haven't got anywhere else to store their stuff. It's a big place in the barn.

**What was the most important day you have ever spent in the village?**

I think the day that the by-pass was opened; that was the best day because it was lovely to see what happened because it was well planned I felt. They had police either end of the new by-pass, and they literally stopped all the traffic, and all the people who were there for the official opening drove all the way. Well they came from the picnic area, down to the roundabout, turned round the roundabout at Snettisham and all the other traffic followed them. For that day I suppose Dersingham must have felt completely dead. I remember that day more than any other.

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

*Can you remember any of the awful times like the floods.*

Yes. 1953. Well I was involved in it; I was permanent staff of the Territorial Army at the time at Dersingham Drill Hall. In fact all the property that was recovered, the old furniture, was stored in the garage at the Drill Hall. Part of the Drill Hall, the rear end of the Drill Hall was used as a mortuary for the people who regretfully lost their lives. That is another thing I shall remember for a long time.

The flood came up just the other side of the railway station. There were a lot of houses at Snettisham, about 30 people at Snettisham lost their lives. The last body to be found was found by a territorial army soldier two weeks later and that was just the other side of the railway station at Dersingham in that little wood. I think that is the most terrible day. I remember it well.

*Do you think that could ever happen again?*

Oh yes I think so. I think with the force of the sea if you get the wind and everything else and tides going together then I have to wonder if the bank would be strong enough to hold it. There was a river bank before and I think a piece of that bank 40 feet long literally was lifted and shifted into Dersingham by the force of the water. I think it could happen again; I hope not. There have been floods since then. In 1978 but nothing as bad as it was in 1953.

You still got property down by the Snettisham beach where people live in them all the year round. Because you can't make them shift because they were there before the planning laws. I wouldn't think it would be possible I suppose for the flood to come and get those houses built just on the side where the railway line used to be.

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

Too much development.

*Everybody says that, is this 'not in my backyard'?*

I think so; Dersingham has more than trebled in size in the 40 years I been living here.

You could name all the big estates that have been built – Mountbatten Estate, Valley Rise estate, Centre Vale, two estates down Chapel Road [three Old Hall Drive King's Croft and Saxon/Tudor estates now], Holyrood off Manor Road behind the Police Station. All those were built in the last four years. I think in some ways it has spoilt Dersingham because it has made it three times bigger than it was 40 years ago; I think development should stop. It's not so much a village as a small town that'll be nearly big enough to have a Mayor, not that I am suggesting we should have a Mayor!

*Is there now anywhere in the village left that can be built on?*

The only places would be infilling with the odd house unless the Royal Estate release some of their land but I can't see them doing that but that would be up the hill and not closer to the sea. We couldn't become a suburb of Lynn; that would be the last thing I would want.

**What would you like to see happen in the future?**

I would really like to see more people become involved in local government as it affects everyone on the spot. The more people that take an interest in it then the better service people will get. I think a lot of people don't get involved because they don't want to be involved with kicking up a fuss but you must also do things that are correct for the whole community not just yourself.

**Do you expect to be buried in Dersingham?**

*Oh yes!*

**What does the Millennium mean to you?**

I'm coming up to 78 years old in June so I shall be 80 when the millennium comes. There isn't much I could say except I would just like to be alive; to me it's just another year. It will be interesting to see if people want to spend money would it not be better to help those people who need help now.

**What would you like to say to someone in Dersingham in a 100 years time?**

I would hope that they would continue to look after the village of Dersingham as it has been in the past and keep the services that we have and improve them. One of the things I would like to see before I go is, as a lot of others have said, is to get a bank back in Dersingham. When it was a quarter of the size we needed one. Now they won't even let us have one for one day a week; it doesn't make sense to me. The Post Office isn't enough and people who think it is must be short of some brain cells because a Post Office isn't a bank. A nice new bank will be my next achievement.

*Thank you very much.*

-----