

Title: Major Robert Barnes Interview

Creators: Rick & Julia Goldsmith

Project: 'The Close in Living Memory: Hereford Cathedral
Close oral reminiscences''

Subject: Autobiography, Living and working around Cathedral
Close in Herefordshire, Heritage

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Robert Barnes

Identifier: Major-Robert-Barnes

Interview Date: 2010, Hereford

Interviewee: Major Robert Barnes (speaker, male)

Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony & Julia Goldsmith (speaker,
female)

Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)

Producer: Julia Goldsmith

Language: English

Type: Video

Width: 1440 pixels

Height: 1080 pixels

Scan type: Progressive

Stereo/Mono: Stereo Mixdown

Duration: 11 min 31 seconds

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Transcript:

(00:00)

Robert introduces himself, born during the Second World War in 1944, and his families close ties to Herefordshire. His family have owned the little street that runs from the Cathedral to down to what he calls the 'dutch quarter' beside the Wye bridge - called Gwynne Street. The little terraced cottages there have been in Robert's family for about 160 years and it is his job as the custodian for his lifetime to look after them, keep them in good order and pass them on to the new generation.

(01:01) Robert feels very privileged to be under the shadow of the Cathedral in his daily work now - which is to look after those 11 properties and the tenants as well as doing a bit of farming having recently planted a small pear orchard. They say that "he who plants pears, plants for his heirs" and Robert, having looked at some pear orchards nearby, was told of a tree that was 120 years old which bears a ton of fruit a year and at the bottom of the same land were 4 trees that were 250 years old that still bore fruit. Though Robert thinks he's perhaps left it a little bit late to plant perry pears!

(01:49)

Robert relays an anecdote of discovering a plague pit. A little bit before he was born, around 1939/1940, his cousin John (who was born in 1930) was there when they dug a large pit nearby to put in a large concrete tank so that should the cathedral or part of the school go up in flames as the result of an incendiary bomb there would be water at hand. (02:25) The diggers came and they dug this colossal hole and unbeknown to them there were bodies there, skulls and skeletons, and the boys being boys would pick up the skulls and were throwing them to each other like rugger balls and having a lot of fun. Then it was discovered that it could well be a plague pit and so all the boys that had handled these bones were called and all had to go see the doctor and be given a jab in case they had caught some terrible disease from the bubonic plague.

(03:04)

When Robert first started working in Gwynne Street in the early 1980's, on what must have been a Tuesday night before market, a group of bullocks broke out of the market and wandered into Widemarsh Street - the police were a bit concerned by this as they had a dozen or so bullocks that they had no idea what to do with. So they herded them down Broad Street and herded them into the Bishops Palace, whereupon they closed the huge wooden doors so they were safe for the night and in the following morning they could deal with the situation. (03:53) Unbeknown to them and unbeknown to the bullocks that in the middle of the grass area underneath the walnut tree there was an old icehouse and the bullocks went over the top of this icehouse and it collapsed and one of them went into it. Of course in the morning when they found this huge cavern in the middle of the lawn they thought to themselves 'ah we have underground passages and possibly crypts and all sorts of things!' but when Ron Shoesmith had a look at it he said that no, he was pretty sure it was an icehouse as well and they let that one rest.

(04:32)

Robert recalls a few one of the funnier characters he's met - down at the bottom of Gwynne street there was a dear lady called Mrs. Edinburgh and she was there all through the 1920's and the 1930's in fact only leaving there in the 1980's as quite an aged lady. She had become a little bit insane at the end and had to go to hospital, so they used to take her on occasions over to the general hospital. Of course when she came to and realised where she was she used to leave the hospital in the middle of the night and wander in her nightdress across the grounds into the Close and down Gwynne Street and knock on Mrs. Morris's door and say 'Oh hello Mrs. Morrie I am sorry, I just popped out because I thought it was the cat and I've locked myself out, do you think you could let me back in again?'. She would get back into her own house and her own bed and that's where she stayed again. (05:55) The police would find this dear lady walking across the Cathedral close in her nightdress at sort of 2 or 3 in the morning and ask her where she was going and she'd say 'yes, I'm going home'.

(06:07)

Robert talks about some of the people who have lived in the cottages on Gwynne Street; he had the Bishop's daughter at one point, one of the stonemasons who's done quite a remarkable job on the tower of the Cathedral a talented mason called Saul Sheldon, a number of people who were in the regiment in Hereford that stayed there when they were in other parts of the world. (06:50) The most recent one that he's just lost unfortunately, she's in her 70's and finding it difficult to get about due to arthritis, was a dear lady called Mrs. Parry. She started the flowers in Gwynne Street, and for many years Gwynne Street was 'more colourful than Chelsea Flower Show' it was quite something to behold. Thousands of people used to flock down just to see the flowers in Gwynne Street.

(07:41)

When asked about his relationship with the Close Robert pauses for a moment - The Close was just part of life's playground, you don't realise until you get older what a wonderful place it was. Robert feels now that it's lost some of its dignity and he's very pleased to see that they are going to replace the railings around the front of it that will give it more dignity - it needs that. (08:28) Years ago nobody would dream of cycling through the close, nobody would dream of sitting down and drinking beer or coca-cola or anything else on the grass there. When the idea of putting the railings back in were mooted Robert's family went straight to the chapter clerk and said you can count us in for some financial support. They then heard that they weren't going to put in railings but instead 12 cast iron poles to represent the Apostles - and Robert went to the chapter clerk and said sorry the family has had a talk about this the deal is off and he said "no no I don't think it will come to that I think the railings will go there" and he's glad to see that now after 15 years it's almost happened, and he's sure they will be splendid when they are there.

(09:44)

One of Robert's ancestors, he comes from a line of Baldards (spelling?) who live in Malvern today still and were great engineers, Stephen built the Hereford-Gloucester Canal and the main line between Utrecht and Amsterdam via Gouda and taught his nephew about railways who went out to Australia and built railways that are still there today. (10:16) Robert read in Stephen's diary in the year 1858 he was asked by the then Bishop to rebuild the bank of the River Wye so that the Bishop's Palace didn't get washed away down into the River each time it flooded. While he was digging and putting in a stone wall, that is probably still there

underneath the magment, he came across a rather beautiful ring and he gave it to the Bishop
- Robert doesn't know what happened to that ring, but would love to one day find out.

This film was made by Catcher Media for the Hereford Cathedral Close project in association with In Our Age and supported by The National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Watch the video interviews on the vimeo showcase:
<https://vimeo.com/showcase/7908663>