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Project: Herefordshire Life Through A Lens  
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Evans Studio 1950s-80s  
Subject: Autobiography, Fownhope Heart of Oak  
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Identifier: Biggs, Denzil\_Interview\_Complete  
Interview Date: June\_01\_2018  
Location: Fownhope, Herefordshire  
Source: Catcher Media Social CIC  
Interviewee: Denzil Biggs (speaker, male)  
Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony (speaker, female)  
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)  
Producer: Julia Goldsmith  
Language: English

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Type: Video  
Video Format: MPEG-4  
Bit rate: 14.36 mbits/s  
Frame rate: 25 FPS  
Aspect ratio: 16:9  
Width: 1920 pixels  
Height: 1080 pixels  
Scan type: Progressive  
Audio Format: AAC  
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz  
Audio Bit rate: 192 kb/s  
Stereo/Mono: Mono  
File Size: 2.29 GB  
Duration: 21 min 17 seconds

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Type: Audio  
Audio Format: MP3 audio  
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz  
Audio Bit rate: 258 kb/s  
Stereo/Mono: Mono  
File Size: 39 MB  
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Transcript:

Well, I'm Denzil Biggs. I was born in Fownhope, lived here all my life except for a few years in the army and what not working in London. I joined the Heart of Oak Friendly Society when I was five, in 1933, and when you had to have a medical because it was a friendly society and they...you couldn't join if you weren't fit. So I remember going to see the doctor believe it or not. And my elder brother, who is sadly no longer with us, he failed his medical and also my younger brother failed. I didn't know that until the other day and he told me this. And yeah, you had to do that of course then you become a member.

My first walk would have been in 1933 and whether I made it or not I'm not sure because at that time I'd started school, I was born April 29th, and the walk of course is the nearest Saturday to Oak Apple Day. And the first two or three weeks at school, it may have been longer than that, I was knocked down by a car and spent a few weeks in hospital, so I'm lucky to be around. So whether I made the '33 walk I'm not sure. I'd have either missed the '33 or the '34. And I walked up until war time, when it was discontinued during war. Well that was my early memories of the walk. I've got to gather myself a bit now. The walk really was the highlight of our life. It was quite tiring because little children we used to do quite long walks. They would be from.....well they always met in the early days in front of the Green Man on the main road and you marched up to the church behind the band and then you visited various well-to-do houses where you were entertained around the village. And our longest walk was to Morney Cross, which was probably about three quarters of a mile out of the village, best part of a mile. When you're a youngster, it's a long way and your feet would be dragging a little bit by the time you got back to the village.

Memories of those days was of fruit cake and pop and the men had beer and bread and cheese probably. That was sort of my early memories of it. Of course, that day was also very important because they had the fair once a year, very important to us. used to have lots of fun there. my father was a farmer, small farmer, and we used to go home after the sports, there were always sports after the walk. The men used to go to the lunch, they used to have lunch in the Green Man, the club room it was in those days. And I don't know what it was we used to do, whether we went home or came back to the sports in the afternoon. And then we'd go home for the milking, milking the cows because dad had a small dairy farm and back down to the

fair in the evening, which was really the highlight of the day. That's the memories of the club in those days.

You wore your Sunday best. Probably grey flannel trousers and a grey jacket, which you only wore on a Sunday, a cap of course, that was it, polished shoes. And of course, it was all male, there were no girls involved in that in those days. Yeah, Sunday best, that's about all I can think of regarding that.

My mother always did our stick. The other thing about the walk, when you're a junior anyway, you were very much put in your place for the walk. The seniors walked at the front of the parade and when it came down to the young men and the boys, you were very much in your place. So when I went to my first walk I was right at the end, right at the back. As you got a little bit older and younger ones came in you moved up a bit and of course that was always much better to get from the back. You were very much the underdog right at the back. It was always mother who dressed the stick. I was the only one in the club in my family. Dad was never a member but he used to go to the lunches I recall. I think he was probably on the parish council and very involved with the church, and as a local farmer he would be invited to the lunch. And of course, the MP was always..... I think he was always the president of the society in those days or made the local MP the president. I'm pretty sure that's right. Because the one MP I recall from my childhood, he used to spend his weekends in Fownhope, called Rockhouse, which was quite near where I lived at that time.

As I said, it was the highlight of the year really, when you were young anyway. Yeah, it was great fun and of course pop and fruitcake always came in nice. bit special. But the whole day and the fair in the evening, it was a good day. And the sports in the afternoon. I could run pretty well when I was a little kid but not anymore.

Oh, there were many many characters. Well stories I wouldn't really want to say about some of the characters. OH, we had some wonderful characters. Jim Brookes was one who comes to mind. He was deaf and from the first world war, and as a lot of first world war veterans were, lost their hearing. He was one of those. There was Tosh Pocknell, a ghillie, and he used to keep his boat down where my dad had the farm, where we lived and he kept all his fishing gear in our mill. And of course, there was always a barrel of cider there. and when we were kids my brother and I, old Tosh would be there having a tot of cider you know: 'well I think I'll have just one more before I go', squeak of the tap, you know. Yeah, he was another one but there were many characters, as villages do have, don't they? We've got characters now but they're not like the old days. But they were very entertaining these old boys. There were quite a few war veterans, I can't remember much about that, but a lot of them would have been in the walk. My uncle on my mother's side, the

Watkins side of my family, who were the Walkers, members of the Heart of Oak. My grandfather was a member. I don't think he was one of the original members, but I use this stick, in fact I've got his club stick that I still use. Little story about that. That was recovered by an aunt of mine. My uncle Denzil, she was his wife. She said, 'I think you ought to have this stick, Den, because your uncle will probably use it for a broom stick or something so you better have it'. She gave it to me many years ago before she died, which is strange really isn't it. So I've got granddad Watkins' stick. I've got three uncles, they were all walkers. It was a proud moment quite a number of years ago when my uncle Donald, Donald Watkins, when he was 90. So it was quite a memorable occasion. That's a number of years ago now. And he always walked, always at the front of the parade. Yes, and there was Gerald, and Denzil and Donald Watkins. So it was all on my mother's side the club walk came into our family. I think it was important to her. Because of her brothers of course and her father. Yeah, because they lived locally, long before dad came on the scene, they lived at Mount Pleasant in Fownhope, so they've been around here for a long time.

My stick stays at home, in my little box room, what I call my office, where I've got all my memorabilia. With the ribbon on it ready for next year. My wife dresses my stick, since I've been married anyway. Mother did it before. No, I wouldn't claim to do it, god no. No, I wouldn't have a clue how to do it really. I've got an idea, but it probably wouldn't look as good as what she's done. She's knocking on now, she's getting near 90 as, so she does it very well.

Well, my wife Cath always dresses my stick and has done since, well, we were married. Yeah, she does it very well and takes pride in doing it I think. I can never claim to do this the way she does it. So Cath has done it and she's getting older now but still does it and looking forward to doing it tomorrow morning, so she tells me. Whether she does or not is another matter. I make the bacon butties in the stick making time. My daughters come as well and granddaughter. She dresses her husband's stick as well. Now she'll be doing a stick for her little girl, who will be 15-months-old, so she'll have a stick tomorrow.

My son-on-law, Harrison Leonard, American. My granddaughter, Alison, she uh, they met, in fact it's quite a romantic story. They met on the internet when they were 15, and Ali started work as cabin crew on British Airways and Harrison's home is in Los Angeles and she did a little trip to San Diego I think it was, she used to do long haul, and he got in his car and they arranged to meet in San Diego, and the romance really took off. So probably a couple of years later and they got married. They lived in London and now they live in Bristol. Alison his wife decorated his stick and of course a very proud moment when they won the best stick for the seniors, so he was quite chuffed about that. Oh, he loves tradition, traditional things, yeah.

Oh, he's a traditionalist alright, so he fits in quite well.

[The Flower Walk] has been part of my life for all my memories pretty well, so....I did miss quite a number of walks. When I'd finished my army service I worked in London for three years, got a bit of experience. I'm a motor mechanic by trade and I came back and started my own business. As a one-man band in those days the walk would interfere with my work and I'd have jobs to complete on a Saturday and I'd see the band go by and 'oh god, I must go to that'. And I used to miss it and try and catch up later in the day with the sports and the fair in the evening. No, I missed it for quite a number of years sadly, but we've caught up since.

[Do you remember when women were first admitted] Well it was the friendly society part of it, the old club disbanded I think it was in.....the old banner is in the church. The date is on there, it's laid up in the church. I think it was in the eighties perhaps, late eighties. And then of course it was open then to girls to come in. but now we get girls as well. Of course, you get the Brownies and the Guides, different groups joining, the British Legion joining, couple of members of the British Legion bring their banner. Oh, it's quite an occasion for the village. It's a family day, absolutely. We've got people who move away, take for instance my family they come back because it's very much part of the day, part of their life as well, so. And you do see people there who come back every year, different parts of the country who have moved away. An old saying in Fownhope, if you dip your feet in the Tanners Brook you will always return. That's an old local saying and the Tanners Brook, well it runs through the village.

It is important, it's part of the community. I don't know how much longer I will be able to walk, I don't know how far I will walk tomorrow because walking doesn't come as easily as it used to. I'm going back to my early days when I was five or six, I probably find it harder to walk now than then. but it is a very important day of the year to the village and to me and to my family, very much so. It's important my family are taking part, that's very much part of it. Yes, my uncles and my grandfathers. Yes, it is important.

How long is the club going to carry on? I would have hoped it will continue for generations. We've got a good history group, a local history group, they've done quite a bit of work in this field. I think history is important, isn't it? Well I read quite a bit and get more pleasure out of historical things than anything really so it is important to record it. I'm reading a book at the moment about the America Indian and the demise of them, so history is important, I think so.