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

I'm Roland Clarke, I'm know to the majority of people as Roley. In fact, if I get a letter addressed to Roland I know it's going to cost me money. We're in the garden of my cottage at Fownhope, the Lupins, where we've lived for 42 years and which prior to that used to belong to my grandfather.

The I'm wearing I've had for a number of years, it's a hat I always wear on club day now, put the badges one on side as when they're issued, and on this side I usually find some oak apples and some oak leaves which they are some life over from last club walk. Bit withered up now but I leave them in til next year just to remind me of the previous club walk really. But yes, this is the hat I always wear on club day, so it's part of me on that day.

My grandfather was Albert George Godsell and before he moved here he had a small holding in the village, a small farm, about half a mile up the road, and his father, who would have been my great grandfather, Charles Godsell, was a founding member of the walk in 1876. So consequently, to that side of the family, the club walk has always been very very important. Grandfather had one son, Cuthbert Godsell, who, like his father and his grandfather, joined up as a young man, joined the club parade as a young man and took part in the processions. He got called up in service in the second world war and in June 1940 I think it was, he got called up and unfortunately got killed in 1942. Being a very close-knit family, it hit grandfather really hard. They didn't have a procession during the war but they kept the monetary aspect of the club still going and grandfather was a trustee and he, I'm sure, found solace in the club because, to keep it going, I think it was the connection to the son that he had lost. Because the day was so important to the family. And I really do think that he thought by keeping the club going, and keeping that connection going, he was in effect, keeping Cuthbert alive. So when I came along he took a great deal of time with me because I was filling a bit of a void in his life maybe.

The walk was just something I was brought up with, how important it was. Because you got to remember that grandfather would start planning for the next club walk on the Sunday after the Saturday when it was held. On a Sunday he would be thinking about next

year. So consequently, it was always a topic of conversation. There would be other events through the year maybe, but not possibly as many as there are now – there was not so much entertainment generally – and the club walk was of such great importance within the village that it was quite a topic of conversation anyway. So it was something I was brought up with yeah. It was just an important day as it is now to me and a lot of other people too.

I prepare by really growing stuff to coincide with the day. We're looking at a late May, preferably early June, club day, because it's held on the nearest Saturday to Oak Apple Day, which is May 29th, so I tend to grow stuff that is going to flower, because it is just so important to have it looking right. Because it's an old fashioned English tradition. Years ago many villages would have had a club, a friendly society, and there's very very few, if not none left in our form. So it's vital to keep it going.

This is a stick I carry, which was carried by my grandfather on the occasions when he wasn't carrying the banner. Most of the time he was carrying the banner so this would have been the one my father would have had until, in later years, he took over in carrying the banner from my grandfather. In the end there's a hole, where at one time there would have been a carved acorn on a peg pushed into there, but over the years it has disappeared, like we're talking pre-super glue days here, but it's just got lost. But ideally I would like to get one carved. The other stick that we've got here is the juvenile stick that the youngsters compete for. This one and the actual senior stick were both carved by one of our members, Mr Williams who lives at Manor Farm, he kindly carved these beautiful sticks. And this year my grandson won it, who is five, and I had the very proud experience of seeing it handed over by my granddaughter who had won it the previous year, who's aged nine. And she's won it twice in those nine years, so I'm really pleased about that. The senior stick evaded my capture this year. I have won it several times in the past and in fact in 1997/98, and I missed '99 because I didn't take part in the walk in '99 and I came back and won it in 2000, which seems to me I was really pleased about. But the committee then came up with a devious scheme to sort of thwart this and decided whoever won it the previous year would judge it the next year. So consequently that was altered then.

I don't remember my very first walk but I've got pictures of me on it. When I was four. When you're the youngest person in it then you're the focus of attention, like the oldest member of the society is. In those days they were picked up by the Hereford Times for photos. So I can't honestly remember the first walk, no.

When I was a boy the parade was made up of just male members.

Woman folk weren't allowed in the parade and it was a very, essentially male world really. Although saying that I still feel and know that the woman folk did form an essential part, maybe dressing the stick or behind the scenes. It was a very formal parade in that we marched in pairs, the sticks carried on our outward shoulders, whichever side we were on. And if you were a child – the older members were at the front – you marched at the tail end and were kept in order by an elderly club member, who was quite stern and he commanded a lot of respect, so he kept the children in order.

Going back to the woman folk, they weren't involved with the parade like they are now, since the club has been reformed they now take part in the parade and are actively encouraged to. But as I said before the woman folk did take a part in it because, as my grandfather always used to say, they must have taken part in the enjoyment of the day because grandfather used to say that when he was a young man, that after a late May or early June club day, that in the early part of the next year the vicar would always be busy doing Christenings. So I guessed he enjoyed doing the early afternoon or the late, but definitely the evening.

The stick decoration is really dependent on what flowers are ready or to hand really. The best sort of flowers to have are rhododendrons really, azaleas, peonies, old roses, stuff with hard stems. Stuff with soft stems are no good at all. And the correct, old fashioned way of decorating a stick really is to work each individual bloom in as you go along rather than just lumping them all on at the end. It takes a lot of skill and I have to thank my wife that, and she learnt her trade from my mother. So again a family connection goes on. But it's really about growing the right sort of stuff and knowing what you're doing.

There's always been an element of 'bet you didn't have that growing in your garden' sort of caper and always been a bit of competition and banter, but yeah, if I seen something that needs pruning off a footpath in the past, I probably did my duty and did a bit of prune like. You know, on the night before or early in the morning. But one year this could have had serious repercussions because I'd been in the churchyard on the Friday evening tending the family grave and I happened to notice some lilac that was dangling over into the churchyard from a neighbour's garden. So early next morning, I got the secateurs in the back pocket, went to the churchyard, and anyway, snipped this lilac off and of course I was rushing and the flagstones were wet and mossy with dew and I went a complete flier. And, trying to protect the lilac, but fell on the cutting edge of the secateurs, which I managed to stick into my nostrils. So I arrived back down here and blood, white shirt all covered in blood, blood pouring out of my nose and Pam looked horrified, you know, what the hell's happened. And I tried to explain but

she already had this mental picture of me being apprehended by the vicar who vented his own form of justice see. Now anyway, no, I didn't get no sympathy because she just kept muttering about divine retribution for me being in the church yard. And anyhow, it eventually stopped bleeding but I spent the rest of the day walking around with a nose like Cocoa. And the bottom line was that the lilac, that we carefully put into the stick, that I had carefully saved when I fell over, all disintegrated. So maybe there was a judgement from above about that.

There was romance on the day, definitely, but from personal experience no. but it potentially depended on how much ale you'd drunk, because after you'd had a fair proportion of ale possibly the opposite partner might get a lot better looking, you know! The men definitely used to look forward to club day, when they could really let their hair down. I remember as a child, as I said, we used to come here on club day and the Friday before, because Friday night was an integral part of club walk weekend. The fair would be operational, there would be skittles across the top of the New Inn car park and if it was a Friday night in the summer there would probably be playing quoits in the new inn. And they would have a clay pigeon shoot, very often on a Friday night. So it kicked off on a Friday and the old boys used to get in the swing of things then, yeah.

But I remember, particularly after a day of having the occasional drink shall we say, I remember one evening, or one night, and we were here and I was only a small child, and we heard this commotion outside and woke the whole house up and we came down. I remember coming down with mother and father was on the lawn just down by the cottage, and there was a big Bramley tree there then. And he was on all fours under this big Bramley tree with his hands tightly gripping the grass and hollering at the top of his voice. Anyway it turned out the next day when he explained – by that time he was capable of explaining what was going on – and he said he felt like he was on a roundabout and he was about to be thrown off. Now what the hell he'd been drinking that day I don't know. But there was a funny sequel to this actually. Because the Blenheim tree, when we moved here the Blenheim tree was still here, so he decided the Blenheim tree wasn't safe, and it was quite close to the back of the cottage so decided he was going to fall this Blenheim tree. So he came down armed with an axe and a chainsaw. We were a bit perturbed about it falling down onto the cottage. And he assured us, no, no, no problem with that, it's not going to fall on the cottage. And he was absolutely dead right. It pushed a hole into the roof of the coal shed instead, but it didn't fall on the cottage. But yes, they really enter into the swing of things because very often it was their one day of year to really let their hair down.

I would say women started walking was when the club was reformed in 1989, a less formal society, when the new society was formed

and the old part of the friendly society was dissolved. Because up to 1988 it was classified as a friendly society, whereby you paid in a subscription and if you fell sick you could draw money out. Then it became evident there could be tax implications so they decided to dissolve the old society and reform it. And when they reformed it – but it was just to keep the tradition alive. I always remember, I think 1987 it was, just before it finished, and I fell ill with hepatitis. I was quite ill and father said 'you've paid into the club all these years, why don't you claim on the club, because I could still claim then. So I said, ok, alright then. So I had to go to the doctors to get a certificate and the certificate cost me a pound. And then I found out that the club was paying a pound a week so for the first week I broke even on the deal, which didn't sound too great a deal to me really. But it hadn't kept pace with modern day really. Because I've got a copy of the accounts from 1927, I think, or 1929, and in those days they were getting paid out 10 shillings a week, so it was worth having. It was prior social security days and you've got to remember most of these guys were in hard, low paid employment like agriculture labourers, builder's labourers, estate workers, council road men. so yeah it was a big deal and that's what it was formed for, yeah.

My son now, I'm very proud that he carries the banner as his grandfather and his great grandfather did for a while, and his two children, Emily and Tom take part in the parade, and it's all just part of keeping that family tradition alive and going, that connection. But I would like to say to people, you don't have to have a family connection going back years and years to take part, just a passion to keep an English tradition going. It plays quite an important part in the wider community because being a charitable organisation, since it ceased to be the members enjoy the benefits, we now try to ensure that the local community benefits from any money that we raise. So we have raised quite a bit of money for different projects, for donations to different projects in the village and I must say surrounding villages as well. So we're still trying to make that sort of connection with the community as a charitable organisation.

When women were first allowed to join the walk I don't think it changed to any great degree. It's the actual whole concept of it that has changed. It's a completely different ball game now than what it used to be. Completely different. When the fair ceased that took a big element of the day away. It was a real big draw. Because you got to remember that in the old days, the pubs, and here there were three pubs, and they had to get a special licence because they were open all day and that was quite a novelty. So consequently people were coming out from Hereford to take advantage of open all day hours.

It has changed dramatically. The old guy who used to run the fair was an old guy called Billy Watkins and several of the older people within the village community can remember when he

used to take a wheelbarrow full of silver, in a bag, to the post office, the old post office, for the post mistress to count and bag. They would have taken a considerable amount of money. I would say the fair stopped in the 80s. because after that they did have a small children's fair which used to be in the, there used to be an orchard near the New Inn, they used to have sort of a small children's fair in there. Because I can remember my son actually attending that the one year, and they had some swinging boats there. And he, like a lot of children, had been eating and drinking all day and probably blagging a few drinks when he shouldn't have been drinking here and there – when an adult's back was turned he was probably taking a gulp when he shouldn't have been having cider. He must have been about ten and he was on the swinging boats with his mates and of course he started to feel unwell and whenever he got to the top of the arc he started to feel unwell, and the lad in the bottom of the boat, his mate, kept getting the benefit of this, kept getting the benefit of the eruption. The swinging boat kept going and the poor kid in the bottom, whenever john reached the top the kid in the bottom started scream because he knew what was going to happen. Anyway it eventually stopped and we got him off and he was absolutely drenched and he had to go home and get changed. I thought it was hilarious.

On the morning when we gather in the New Inn, I usually disappear and have a drink. It's always traditional that I always have a drink for the parade, so I usually take my stick inside. But saying that I'm always looking around and seeing what other people have got and where the flowers have appeared from and making sure none have appeared from my garden.

The one year a guy turned up there with a bunch of flowers plonked on top of a broomstick and the broom head was still attached to the stick and he just pushed these flowers on the end, and I thought that was great. It was all about the taking part. But there is still a lot of competition and envy amongst people because they're just weighing it up and seeing what people have got. There is a lot of pride in it, yeah.

I wouldn't go in other people' property, no. just if something was looking a bit scruffy and hanging over the footpath.

Although I've been a member for over 55 years, I can't say I've always been a continuous member. There was a period mid-sixties, when I started work, I started work at Prales in Hereford, and I had a motorbike and it didn't' seem the cool thing to do to walk around with a bunch of flowers on hour back. So it wasn't a great inconvenience when I discovered that I had to work Saturday mornings. One Saturday morning I'd gone to work and was coming back into the village and the parade then used to go out every year to a place Morning Cross, which is just outside the village on the Hereford side, and they used to go either to one house on the one side and the opposite the next, and I was quite happily coming back from work, it was a lovely day, I'd, the previous week taking the baffles?? Out of the exhaust to make it sound even louder. The band and the procession had made their

way to Mr Barclay's house and had just struck a tune to let Mr Barclay know that they had arrived, and so we were both blissfully unaware of the approach from the other side. I sailed over the top of the hill on the bike to be confronted by this mass of people and flowers, and instruments and whatever, and anyway, fortunately the braking on the bike was good because it was a Japanese bike, and if it had been and British bike of the day I would have been facing a charge of man slaughter. But anyway, pulled the bike up, stopped ok. Father fortunately that year was carrying the banner, which kind of restricted his movements, because he couldn't do anything because he was holding the banner. But I could see him sort of saying something and it wasn't, 'hello son how are you' like! So anyway I crept off home and came down to the sports and the fair in the evening and kept out of his way.

By the time he got home I'd long gone to bed, so next morning I was a bit perturbed coming down to breakfast but he was pretty quiet actually because mother had given him her normal dressing down, the post-club walk dressing down, for arriving home at some unearthly hour as opposed to me, so I never heard any more about it.

We've always had sports on the day, which children take part in, a couple maybe of adult races – I've mentioned the fair, I've mentioned clay pigeon shooting, we used to have a pole and pillow fight which was very popular, particularly among members of the farming community, who always seemed to be the strongest and able to stay on their the longest. And skittles across the end of the New Inn carpark. Skittles were always very popular, outdoor skittles. The actually alley was laid across the top end of the car park, with the skittles on the Green Man hedge side, so occasionally you would get somebody coming out of the New Inn, with probably too much ale on board, they would end up bowling a wide and the ball would manage to evade the straw bales at the end and disappear through the hedge into the Green Man car park. In all probability it clattered someone's pride and joy parked in there, which happened on a few occasions, which I don't think we would get away with now. But it did put a whole new perspective on 'come we have our ball back please'. I remember once with the skittles I'd just come of the bar, the New Inn, and they used to have a prize for the ladies and a prize for the men, and a woman had just recorded the highest score for the ladies. So she turned round to me, she was a visitor from Hereford I didn't know, and said: 'I've just got the highest score, what do I win?' and I said normal country prize. She said 'what's that?' I said, pig. So she looked at me and said, 'pig? A real pig?' and I said, yeah, he's real alright. And you could see her brain thinking, how am I going to get this pig home like. I said, it's ok, we'll give you a bit of string like. And the poor woman went back outside and she was almost willing every other participant on the ladies to get a score that was better than hers. And eventually I felt that

sorry for her I and to go and tell her the truth. But it was quite a good joke while it lasted.

As a child I had an inspiring sort of character was a friend of my grandfather's, who took part in the walk and this guy's name was Henry, and we all knew him as Harry Jauncy. And he lived in a neighbouring small farm near where grandfather lived. They were very good friends. Now this old boy always used to have an immaculate stick, which comprised of lilac and old roses, peonies. And he was my inspiration this guy because as a small child I can always remember looking in awe at this creation he carried. And ever since I've always tried to grow stuff, to almost compete with that vision that I've always held about this old boy's stick.

I would like to say that the Heart of Oak Society is open to anyone to join and take part in, not necessarily to have family connection within the village, just a passion to keep alive an old tradition. So you don't have to live in the village, you could live in another part of the country, just come and share in the experience of taking part and the joy of seeing other people enjoying themselves, and the colour. I would like to get across to other people that it is totally open that there is no restriction, male, female, whatever. Just come along and enjoy a nice day out in the countryside.

The grandchildren we try to involve as much as we can. They are fortunate really in that they can come out here the previous week and say to Pam: 'nanny, can I have that in my club stick? Can you put that in it?' so they essentially – we try and get them to come out and choose when making the stick and make them involved in it. It normally works alright. We don't have them here on the Saturday morning when we're dressing the stick, probably in case they pick up any words they wouldn't be taught in school because occasionally there's a bit of friction and occasionally flowers go up in the air, but they always tend to land in the right place, magically. So the end result is normally good but they're usually here a couple of days beforehand selecting what they would like in their sticks. It's important in that aspect to get them involved in the day. Dressing the stick is very stressful, the morning of the walk, yeah, it is stressful because we have to find flowers for three sticks, two juveniles, one adult. And the one adult is really more of a big kid than the other two when it comes to this, because he wants to be the number one with it. So it's got to be right. So yeah, quite stressful. But it all comes right in the end.