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Interviewer: Julia Goldsmith (speaker, female)
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Transcript:

The Showman's Guild runs this fair, the May Fair in Hereford. They run quite a number of fairs throughout Wales, 'cause we're the South Wales section of the Showman's Guild, there's ten sections of it. And the South Wales' section runs Hereford, Neath and Pembroke. And what happens, the members apply, the fairs advertise in our local paper for their ground. And their application is processed and if the application is successful they come along to Hereford. And we have stewards at the Fair, members of the committee, they are fairground stewards. And they mark out the pitches and everybody gets on with the business of setting the fair up. They've come from all over the UK here today and we get people who get from everywhere. There's lots of other fairs but not so big as Hereford. It's a major event. This is a major fair, a very historic fair, and we get people come from everywhere.

[The Fair] was a Charter from one of the Kings and Queens, I'm not quite sure which one it was, but that was granted to the people of Hereford, the City of Hereford, and the Fair has been going on since then really. I mean it didn't start with the dodgems and waltzers and all sorts of things like that. And it's basically a hiring fair. So, the local farmers would come here today, or over the next three days rather, and they would hire the workers to do the various jobs. And the entertainment would be the showmen, we would put the entertainment on for everybody and there would be a very social event. But people looking for work would find a job here. It's market day here on a Wednesday so they would come in on a Wednesday. That part of it is long gone, I should think the turn of the century that all altered. The way employment has changed, I should think after the First World War, and things were done differently after that finished. No, I don't think any of that is about today.

My family has been coming to Hereford for well over a hundred years. Things have changed in the way it was years ago. I mean roundabouts would five or six trailers to put it on, where now one trailer, it all comes in and sets up. So, that part of it is a lot easier for everyone, so, yes, it has changed that way.

I was born in the fifties and I do remember it. It was sort of phasing out. Over the next ten years the striptease and the lion shows, these sort of shows lost their popularity and they changed to different ideas. White knuckle rides came in then, like these big rides that go upside down and stick to the wall, they just took over and the others have gone into the background. But I do remember them. They were very popular at

one time, but things change, people's outlooks change. It didn't seem to be flavour of the month anymore. So it's gone, sad to say. The only places that do have things like that are in the steam rallies, like Blandford steam rally. The big rallies do have these kind of shows, to create the atmosphere of these steam rallies. But I don't think you'll see it in Hereford again.

A lot of families, like my son is in the business with me, but a lot of the families come from various parts of the United Kingdom. We've got people coming from London to the fair here in Hereford. It's a family business, something we've always done and the family all get involved in it. It's very interesting. It's nice to meet people and go to different places, but it's very hard work and you've got to have a lot of dedication to keep going in it.

But everyone comes into the Hereford to make the fair for three days and when they finish here they go back to all over the country to various other places. I'll go on to Kington, because I'll do the May fairs, as I call them, which is all around Herefordshire, but that's how it works.

Not all the family stays in the business. I've got a brother Henry Danter, he went out of the business shortly after he got married. He had a place in Ross-on-Wye called the Barrel Pub and he went into being a landlord, slot machines etc etc and then he had Stouport-on-Severn Treasure Island beach and he's also purchased Barry Island pleasure beach and he's also got Symonds Yat between Ross and Monmouth. So he didn't stay in the business in the same I have and my other brothers. We're still travelling the circuit dad was doing because we like to keep the tradition going, keep the business going, but Henry went in what we call the settled down area of the business, not moving around. I think it's important because tradition is everything and if we haven't got tradition of the fair we've lost something. Once it goes, it disappears out of everyone's minds and they look for something else – it won't come back. Tradition is what it is all about, to keep coming. You keep the continuity of the fair coming every year. People know when it's coming, they expect and know it's some inconvenience for some people. I think the majority accept and want it. There's a small minority that think, oh the fair's going to be outside my front door, a bit of a nuisance. But I think if they walk around the fair and see the pleasure it's bringing maybe that will overcome it. But that's as far as I can say on that.

The Fair being in the middle of town is most important. It creates a magical theme and it's just so much pleasure watching everybody enjoying themselves and eating candy floss and hot dogs etc etc. Yeah, it's very important to be in the middle of the town. It's a big social event. People meet people they haven't met for some time. It's very good for everybody I think.

Good social event.

The swapping of the bushels is the payment of the hiring of the said streets I believe for the fair. So many bushels, 12 bushels of wheat and that exchange is to, probably the Bishop I think. We pay him for that and he allows us to have the fair. So that's how it was, but obviously it's a lot more involved than 12 bushels these days, there's a big amount of money involved in it. So that's how it works.

(RE: the ceremony) Yes, I'll be there on the dray today at quarter to four with the Bishop and with the Mayor to do the official opening of Hereford Mayfair. I think the Bishop and the Mayor are very supportive. A few years back we used to have the Golden Carasol on the Cathedral Close but of course they had a redevelopment there and that's no longer available because of what they had done in front of the Cathedral. But for many years it was there.

Our yearly circuit starts on the 14th of February at half term and we start off somewhere like Newport and we carry on down into Cardiff and then down into Swansea and then we do an Easter Fair at Mumbles bay in Swansea, then we come back up towards Hereford and then we'll do like I said the May fairs and then we'll go to do all the summer carnivals in June and July, and then in August we'll do Merthyr Tydfil in the Macarthur??? Park there and we start in Neath then for September. And then we do Neath fair and then Pembroke in October, Tewkesbury and Stratford, they call them the backend Mops, which is another hiring fair. Like the May fairs were the hiring fairs, these back end ones as we call them, the October mop fairs in Stratford and Warwick that were hiring the workers for the farms to do the winter work. So that's how the circle works, and then we go into Hyde Park for winter wonderland, we do that for six weeks. And there are various other winter wonderlands as well, in Swansea and Cardiff. So we're very busy all the time.

When do they ever get to go home in Gloucester?

That's a good question. Well we go home once a week to pick the post up and catch up on things and then when we have weeks off when we don't have an event on we go home and spend a week at home and do some maintenance. But there's always plenty to do. There's never a dull moment in the Showmen's business I can tell you.

I'm at retirement age but I haven't retired. I think if you've got your health you're in a mind to keep going. But some do say at 65 you know we're going to knock it on the head and we're going to retire. Well the children come up, and they're usually in the business, are married and have their own children so it's being carried on and if you want to call it a day there's no reason why you can't. but it's hard to let go, that's the

problem we have. You know we're in Kington on our own this week and waiting for Hereford fair to finish, so Stuart my son's not there, my grandchildren are not there, my wife is saying to me it's very lonely. I said make the most of it, it's only for a couple of days. But I think if you're happy enough to carry on then you do. The motto is, my motto I should say is, play a lot and work a little, that's what I'm trying to do at this moment.

That special moment is when it all lights up and comes to life and you see the children enjoying the rides and the mums and dads having a wonderful time watching them. And that's what it's all about, a magical moment. You forget all about heartaches and being stuck in field and can't get out. When those lights come on and the band strikes up, it's all a distant memory, and tomorrow's another day.

The funniest thing I ever witnessed was the Bishop of Hereford riding on the handlebars of the wall of death in the Cardiff big weekend. I never thought he would do it. But he got onto the handlebars on the wall of death and they rode him round. I think he raised quite a number of hundreds of pounds for charity. But I really thought that was brilliant, it was really funny. This was about ten or fifteen years ago, we had a big event in Cardiff, in the streets there. Like Hereford. And the bishop came down for the opening and they coaxed him onto the motorbike, the Bishop of Hereford. They invite him down, the Mayor and the Bishop of Hereford, usually comes to Neath as well if they've got the time obviously. He completely relaxed and flopped into my arms, because the motorcyclist was here, and he sat across the bars and he flopped. He said if you go stiff we'll both come off, let me look after you.

Watch the video interviews on the project website:
www.herefordshirelifethroughalens.org.uk