

Title: Downie, Graham\_Interview\_Complete  
Creators: Rick & Julia Goldsmith  
Project: Herefordshire Life Through A Lens  
Tagline: Films, stories and exhibitions inspired by the photographic archive of the Derek Evans Studio 1950s-80s  
Subjects: Autobiography, Hereford May fair, Show families: Studs, Danter and Deacons, history of chartered and 'mop' fairs in England, fairs links with agriculture, Pat Collins, Gallopers, history of Showman's Guild, Biocscope - early pioneers of cinema, Chipperfields, Important role of women, discrimination and intolerance of Show people, male roles in fairs, American rides, Music: rock and roll, mechanical organs.  
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Location: 50, Lichfield Avenue, Hereford  
Source: Catcher Media Social CIC  
Interviewee: Graham Downie (speaker, male)  
Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony (speaker, female)  
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)  
Producer: Julia Goldsmith (female)  
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Type: Video  
Video Format: MPEG-4  
Bit rate (overall): 27.1 mbits/s  
Frame rate: 25 FPS  
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Type: Audio  
Audio Format: MP3 audio  
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz  
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MOM: can we start of by introducing yourself?

GD: I'm Graham Downie, I'm the chairman of the Fairground Association of Great Britain, which is a club for those people who are interested in fairs and also, I act as an advisor to the National Fairground and Circus Archive at the University of Sheffield.

MOM: what led to your interest in the whole sphere of the fairground?

GD: it started an extremely long time ago, when allegedly, I'm told, at the age of four I watched the local fair arrive. Now I'd not seen that before and it was a very curious sight as far as I was concerned. And this procession of strange vehicles came down the lane where we lived, turned into the recreation ground opposite our house and having had my curiosity aroused, I decided I would cross the road to see what was happening. I was four years old at the time. My mother sensing that I had disappeared then came across the road to find me and I was apparently stood there waiting to see what was going to happen next. She dragged me back a d in order to prevent me doing it again, she tied the gate up but I climbed over the gate and I've been doing that ever since.

MOM: could you give us some sort of timeline around the whole nature of the fairground in the UK? And where Hereford fair falls into that?

GD: the fairground scene that we see today is a result of several centuries of history. It depends on a calendar of fairs that in the main are more than two hundred three hundred years old, in the case of Hereford, soon to be 900 years old. That provides the framework of the showman's season. It's a very varied season. There's nothing constant about it. Some months are busier than others. May for instance, when the Hereford Fair takes place, is one of the busiest fairs of the year. We're now

in July, which will be one of the quietest months of the year. And daft as it may sound, there is a very good reason: because we are now entering the period of harvest, and at a time when the majority of the population of this country worked on the land, come July, August, they had to be in the fields getting the in the harvest, and there was no way they were going to be able to take a day off to go to the fair, so you didn't have fairs during those months.

MOM: so, when the fair traditionally took place in May, was that because there was a lull in the farming calendar?

GD: Precisely. Well May is a month we always consider to be a month of ancient festivity, the start of the summer. You know, part of the Celtic calendar, but more importantly and more practically, it represents a more quiet period on thy farm. By the time you've got to May, you've done practical things like ploughing the fields, sowing the crops, the lambs have been born. Your next important job won't happen until June: getting in the hay. So, May was a quiet month, though there were other jobs to be done on the farm, but there were plenty of opportunities for a day off. Hence the vast number of May fairs that there used to be.

MOM: Hereford May fair is 900 in 2020. Does that make it a particularly special fair in the greater scheme of things?

GD: Yea, Hereford is very importantly in as much as – as far as I am able to trace – it is the oldest-surviving chartered fair in the country. There aren't' any other fairs that have survived longer. There may have been other chartered fairs before Hereford, but they don't exist any longer.

5.00

MOM: why has it survived?

GD: That's an important point, yes. Well it obviously had a vitality about it, it had a purpose which it has continued to serve. Initially that purpose would have been trade, but over time there would have been the element of entertainment, the pleasure part of it, and as the trade side of it waned, as it probably would have done from the 18th century through to the 19th century, and the pleasure side took over and it's been maintained. It's retained a popularity. It may have attracted a different audience over the centuries, but nevertheless it is still viable, and that is the one thing about it: it works.

MOM: can you explain what a chartered fair is?

GD: the business of chartering fairs was a direct result of the Norman invasion. Prior to that, prior to 1066, if there were any fairs in this country, we don't know about them, they're not

recorded. There probably were events of some sort because the fair itself is a fairly ancient institution, probably going back to pre-history. But when the Normans came over here and looked at the scene in England, principally, there was nothing much that interested them commercially. So, they set about chartering fairs. In the first place these were probably given away as gifts to their friends and acquaintances who had helped them in the Conquest. They were given the right to have a fair, because if you were given the right to have a fair, you were given the right to collect the rent from the fair. It was a way of earning money, a very substantial one. In the case of Hereford, that right was given to the Bishop of Hereford and was probably a very important acquisition on his part, because it probably provides a great part of his annual income I would guess.

MOM: is Hereford Fair particularly well documented?

GD: it's certainly well documented through the 19th century, mainly through reports in local newspapers, but more importantly, it's a well photographed fair. There are photographs in various collections in Hereford which date back to the 1870s probably, which have continued through until the present day. Derek Evans' collection represents half of last century probably. So, there has been a very strong continuity of photographic documenting of Hereford May Fair.

MOM: I understand under Henry II fairs used to take place on the Cathedral grounds. Can you tell us a little bit more about that?

GD: Fairs were originally held in the church yard but in the case of Hereford of course it would have been held in the Cathedral close. But I think it was in the latter part of the 13th century, 1280 or something, the monarch of the day, who was one of the Henrys, was getting a little bit concerned about that fact that these fairs, ostensibly trading events, were somewhat rowdy institutions, and he decided that they could no longer take place in church yards. So, they were expelled from there into the streets.

MOM: what can you tell me about Ronnie Taylor's boxing booths?

GD: Ronnie was a long-term tenant of Hereford May \fair. I don't know when he first came here, presumably in the 1930s as a young man, and certainly after the war, by which time he started his boxing booth, he was a regular visitor to Herford. He stood on a site just off Commercial Road but then later on I think he moved into the centre of the town. I can't say that he appeared at the fair much later than the 1970s I expect.

MOM: what about the Wilson family and the dancing girls.

10.00

GD: there were two families who were related, who had shows along Commercial Road. They were the Prices and the Stevens. Mrs Stevens in fact was a Price by birth, so they were closely related as well as being closely positioned in the fair. They also offered sort of rival attractions, during the 1950s they ran what were known as glamour shows, young ladies performing inside, who in some cases did a striptease, unfortunately, lighting usually failed at the crucial moment, so the punters never got full value for their money!

MOM: do you know anything about the Methodist Church getting rather upset about these side shows taking place outside their premises?

GD: Yes. I heard they were a bit concerned on moral grounds that the shows were positioned immediately opposite their church and they usually complained each year about it. But then there's no such thing as bad publicity. It only served to increase the number of people who went down Commercial Road to see the shows!

MOM: could you describe the fair of those days?

GD: if we're talking about the late 1950s/1960s when the fair still went along Commercial Road, we were at a point where there was a change between the traditional ride of the certainly the 1920s and the 1930s, and to the rides that were then starting to emerge in the late 1950s early sixties. Mainly American imports. Because development of rides here in the post war years were affected quite a bit by the fact that there was a shortage of material and there was also a short of ideas I think. And any new ideas came from across the Atlantic. And it was helped by the fact that in America their insurance rates on fairground rides are such that, it pays owners to move them on quickly. The longer they keep them the higher the insurance premiums is. And as a result, rides were being exported to here, only in very small numbers initially, but they provided a new element to the fair ground. And it was only later on that British engineers decided that they'd better have a go and started to build a whole new generation of fairground rides.

MOM: so, what's the distinction between the gallopers and the carousel?

GD: yes, the roundabout that epitomises the British fairground is still known by most people as the gallopers; the galloping horses. A ride that first appeared in the 1870s probably, 1880s, which can still be seen on fairgrounds today, in fact there are still a number of sets being manufactured to fairly modern standards. But they are mistakenly described by some as being carousels. Now there is a crucial differences, well several crucial differences, between the ride that we know in this country and the ride that started on the continent that became known as the carousel. They came from two different traditions.

In the case of the carousel, it was based on a device that was used for training cavalry men the 18th century. It was in essence a small roundabout upon which the trainee, the apprentice cavalry man rode, sat on a wooden horse presumably, and he had to lance a ring hung from a gibbet positioned alongside this ride. And because of the fact most people would hold a lance in their right hand, that machine went anti-clockwise. British roundabouts travel clockwise, because they were based on the convention of riding a real horse and you mount a real horse from the left. So, the ride has to progress clockwise.../

20.00

GD: that's the difference. Rogers & Hammerstein have a lot to answer for! I mean the reason why American roundabouts are known as carousels is because the first manufacturer of carousels in America came from France and Germany and Italy. They simply exported, or took with them, a European tradition. The British tradition was totally separate and alien to them.

MOM: what can you tell me about the Chipperfields?

GD: Chipperfield? A very long-established family in the fairground and of course circus business. They were initially showmen who I think started in the 18th century. By the end of the 19th century, the family was visiting Hereford May Fair they had a menagerie – wild animal's shows were very popular then – but in the 1890s bioscope shows, moving pictures were catching on. In fact, most people were introduced to moving pictures via the bioscope at the annual fair. Cinemas didn't come into being until about 1910. So, for those people not only was it their first experience of moving pictures, but it would be their only annual experience of moving pictures. It was very popular, drew great crowds. The showmen of the day went to great lengths to make their shows more attractive than their rivals. They were elaborately decorated. They had these wonderful mechanical organs, imported from Messrs avioli ????? and Merenghi ???? in Paris. They had dancing girls on the front to attract the punters, and in side they could probably accommodate several hundred people. Chipperfields were not slow to capitalise on this and they converted their menagerie to a bioscope show. But then later on – in a sense they went full circle – in the 1930s the then Chipperfield who was running the business, I think it was Jimmy, but there's a Jimmy in every generation of the Chipperfield family – married somebody from a circus background and they combined their traditions and talents to form Chipperfield Circus.

MOM: what about the Wall of Death?

GD: That's an attraction that began in the 1920s. it's not a native invention. I think it came from America. Again, it was a

form of a live show. It was very popular and its heyday in fact was the 1930s. it lost its attraction, possibly, after the war. If for no other reason, quite a lot of people had their own motorbikes by then, and you could do your own thing as it were. There are probably a couple of Wall of Deaths still travelling but that's about it.

MOM: can you tell us a bit about the families that have always come to Hereford, for example, the Danters and the Scarrotts?

GD: the family that is best associated with Hereford, certainly at one time, no not so much today, is the Studt family from South Wales. The Studhs were originally from Germany. They came to this country in around the 1830s/1840s, at a time when there was a depression in Europe, there was starvation in fact, there was wars going on. A lot of people migrated from central Europe to this country looking for work. They went to South Wales and found work in the local iron foundries at Merthyr Tydfil. But at one point, Jacob Studt, who begat the dynasty, decided he would earn a bit of extra money by attending... /

25.00

GD: .../the local shows with a children's ride, and it all grew from that. He became very successful, he was a good businessman. He became the largest operator in South Wales and of course Hereford is part of the South Wales area. It may be England, but in fairground terms, it's in South Wales. He eventually became the biggest tenant at Hereford May Fair. He had more stuff there than anybody else.

MOM: so, when did that change?

GD: it changed probably in the 1930s when one of his family married Mrs Deakin. Mrs Deakin was the matriarchal head of A Deakin & Sons, again from South Wales, from Brynmawr, not too far away, near to Abergavenny. In marrying into the Deakin family, she became, if she wasn't already, a part of Hereford. There is a tradition of success in these things. And she took over, at least the Deakin's did, all the positions that had previously been Studt pitches. So, it continued, under a different name. there may be members of the Studt family still attending the fair, but don't have the same dominance that they once did.

MOM: do families have the same pitches every year?

GD: if you've occupied a position for a certain number of years it became, as it were, a matter of habit. The fair at Hereford has been run by the South Wales section of the Showmen's Guild since before the Second World War. The Showmen's Guild has a rule which says, if you've occupied a pitch at the fair for two years in succession, you are deemed to have rights on that position. It was a rule that was bought about probably in the

1920s in order to regulate the behaviour of members of the Showmen's guild in situations that had perhaps become a little bit too competitive. There used to be places where there were no, as it were, pre-allocation of places, it was just a question of whether you got your poles down first, as they say. So, there was a bit of a rush to get on the ground and a bit of a rush to get the best position. And as you can imagine, it could become a little bit hectic. There used to be a fair at Pershore in Worcestershire, it was held on June 26th every year, where on the morning of the 26th of June, all the showmen lined up on the bridge over the River Avon and at a certain time, I think it was something like 8 o'clock in the morning, the local Bobby would blow his whistle and the showmen would go racing down the road into the town centre in order to grab the best pitches and there was a little bit of a commotion about it. Now this happened at other places and the Showmen's Guild said no, we're not going to have this. Members have got to behave in a decent and proper manner. We will institute a rule that ensures that they do and that recognises that their colleagues do have rights and not be a question of that biggest man wins. We're all going to get a fair shot of the business.

MOM: what families do we see at today's Hereford May Fair that have been there for a long time?

GD: I suppose the family today that can claim to have the longest association with the fair is probably the Deakin family. No longer travelling as A Deakin & Sons, various members of the family appear in their own right as it were. Another important family that appear at the May Fair is the Danter family, quite a large family, many branches, occupy quite a number of positions at the fair, and interestingly the man who started their business, Bill Danter, actually worked for one of the Studts. That's how he entered the business, so it's a matter of progression and development.

MOM: tell me about the women of the Showmen's Guild?

GD: women have always played a very important part in the business of the fair ground. In some cases, the actual business of the fairground has been entirely run by women. Mrs Deakin for instance who took over after her husband died unexpectedly young, took over the running of the business, aided by relatives and possibly run it better than her husband, had he lived. She certainly was a very successful business woman, whose empire as it were, stretched from Brynmawr in South Wales throughout the southern part of the principality and right across the Midlands. There were quite a few other matriarchs, who their impression upon the business. There was the famous Mrs Shepherd of Birmingham, who I think was widowed fairly young and who was at one time quite a close rival to the famous Pat Collins. Pat Collins was the biggest showman of them all and for someone to hold him to account it was quite something. But in the running

of the business generally, there was always this tradition that you must make sure that the daughters were literate. They must go to school, they must learn to read and write because they're going to be the people that are going to have to keep the books. The boys, eventually to be the men, have got to learn the practical aspects of the business; how to operate a machine, how to strip down an engine, how to drive a lorry. All the sort of manual tasks that the woman was not going to be allowed to do because there were certain other responsibilities that were left to her. And to a certain extent that still happens to these days. Although in the last half century I suppose a greater accent has been put on ensuring all showmen's children get an education.

MOM: was that not always the case?

GD: no. Most Showmen's children would probably only attend school only in the winter time for obvious reasons: it would be the only time they were settled. Whereas they girls, who also only probably went to school in the winter, but were encouraged in their studies and probably realising the responsibility they would eventually have probably showed more commitment to it. Whereas the boys, I've got to learn to drive a lorry, I've got to be a painter, I've got to be an electrician. All these sorts of manual skills that you need to be a good showman.

MOM: tell me about Pat Collins?

GD: ah, Pat Collins. Very interesting man. He was the son of an Irish horse dealer. There were two brothers, John and Patrick Collins, they were from a little place called Ballinasloe in Ireland, who came across to this country every year to sell horses, now this would have been in the middle of the 19th century, when horses were still the principal form of transport for most things. There were horse fairs then that were viable because there was still demand for them. Anyway, the brothers, John and Patrick, used to come over with how many horses that they'd accumulated and they'd arrive at a harbour on the Wirral and they would then I think it was about five or six fairs in the north of England. One of the Collins' family once told me they were held at intervals of six days. They started at Altringham in Cheshire, they then went to Congleton, Macclesfield, Leek in Staffordshire and they ended up in Derbyshire, the name escapes me now. Bu which time they would have hoped to have sold their entire stock of horses. And off they'd go back to Ireland to come back the following spring. One particular years, one brother, John Collins, decided that he would stay over here, I think there might have been a romantic attachment involved, and first settled at Cheshire, I think it was at Northwich and later moved into Chester, where I think most of his children were born, including Patrick. Now he was the second son, there were three altogether, and two daughters. By this time the father Joe Collins had stopped selling horses

at fairs and switched to running amusements at fairs. So, young Patrick had an apprenticeship in fairs and at the age of 21 he married a young woman from Wrexham, Wrexham was one of the fairs that they attended each year and he'd obviously met this young lady, Flora was her name, the daughter of a jeweller from Wrexham. They were married when he was 21 and they decided they would head for the Midlands. And initially, it's possible he worked for another showman. He was a very energetic and enterprising showman, it was not long before he got his own ride.../

30.00

GD: .../he very quickly became the owner of not one ride but several rides, he established a base at Walsall and he started running fairs by himself. By the beginning of the 1890s he was quite a substantial showman. In fact, he was one of those who was responsible for the foundation of the Showman's Guild in 1889. He was then regarded as a leading, riding master and showman. He was extremely shrewd as I said, he had a very good head for business, and he realised very early on that one of the things that was essential to the life and business of the showman was to have security of tenure. It wasn't just a matter of turning up a place like Hereford and your pitch was there and would be there for years to come. You had to make sure you did a bit more than that and he started buying grounds so he didn't have to ask anyone's permission to put a fair there. and he eventually became president of the Showmen's guild in 1908, was the president for 20 years. No one is ever going to beat that because you can only be president for three years now. But he was president at a very important part of the Guild's history. It was very much in its formative period and he, with the first general secretary of the Showmen's Guild, the Reverend Thomas Horne, a vicar, guided the Guild along its way. Thomas Horne, the parish priest, provided the ethical background to everything, Pat Collins provided the flair, the know-how I suppose. And by the time it got into the 1920s, not only was he a Councillor in Walsall, but he became but he became a member of parliament for the town in 1922. And he was elected as a member of the Liberal Party, eh was re-elected the following year, they were troublesome times the 1920s. and he was re-elected at the following General Election and lost his seat in 1924, but it added further kudos to his standing. But by then he was running four fairs every week from February through to December. Now that was a terrific achievement. Nobody's ever beaten that and nobody ever will. Burt of course because he had decided to invest in land, he had places he could have these fairs. He didn't need anybody's permission. He not only ran travelling fairs but he also ran permanent fairs. He had a fair at Great Yarmouth, he eventually took over the famous Barry Island site in the late 1920s. he went on to have a permanent site at Sutton Coldfield. These permanent amusement parks provided a further addition to his portfolio of entertainment, which also included cinemas, theatres and skating rinks.

MOM: do they marry within their groups?

GD: the important thing to remember about the fairground business is that it is based entirely on the old family unit. There has to be a strength in each individual family until. Marriage in a sense is highly prized. Divorce is almost unknown in the fairground business. If you marry somebody you marry them to death us til part. And as I explained earlier, the man provides the practical side of the business, the woman provides the clerical side, the business of adding up the figures etc. and of course not only bearing the children, who will be your successors, but also you have to feed the staff etc etc. and because of this fact, most marriages in the fairground business are within the fairground business. It obviously makes great sense to marry somebody who not only is used to the business but also realises the sort of responsibilities that either he or she will have to meet over the course of married life.

MOM: what about the role of music in the fairground?

GD: Music has always played a very important part in the life of the fairground from bands of musicians two hundred years ago that accompanied shows of the day, to the mechanical organs that began to appear in the latter part of the 19th century, either as part of rides or part of shows. And then I suppose during the 1920s, 1930 with the development of the gramophone and public-address systems, and instead of having an organ blaring out, you could play records. Come the 1950s with the advent of rock'n'roll, showmen suddenly realised here was a form of music that not only echoed the appeal of the rides, the liveliness, the excitement, but it made a direct appeal to their best customers: this was the new teenage market. I wouldn't say this is where you heard rock'n'roll being played for the first time, but where you would hear it played more than anywhere else.

MOM: was the May Fair an informal marriage bureau?

GD: yeah, I suppose the fair ground is as good a place, if not better, for meeting people of the opposite sex. It brings young people together. No doubt many a romance has bloomed at the fair.

MOM: There has been the suggestion that the May Fair has been a bit risqué in its time. Is that fair?

GD: The fairground has always, as it were, push the barriers. It's got to be a bit different to everyday life.../

40.00

GD: .../the shows that you saw in the 19th century were all sorts of things that you didn't see anyway and didn't see for the rest

of the year unless you lived in a big town or city. Similarly, with the rides, they provided you with an experience that you wouldn't get otherwise. So, they were always going to be reality plus, like the glamour shows of the 1950s. I suppose there we were, a bit tight lipped and puritanical and these shows provided you with a glimpse of humanity that you might not have seen otherwise.

MOM: can you tell us about the Showmen's Guild?

GD: The Showmen's Guild came into being in 1889, came into being in a sense as a form of protest. In that year, a man called George Smith, who was an evangelical preacher from Leicestershire, tried to promote through the House of Commons, or through Parliament total, a Bill called the Movable Dwellings Bill. Now he'd already had success in putting through, or I think put through, a bill that affected the lives of people who worked on canals. He did it, he always declared, in the interests of the children of these people. Though one suspects that he had a certain authoritarian, let's say, view of these things, and wanted to see everybody conform to his view of the world, which was an extremely narrow one. Now in the case of the Movable Dwellings Bill, he promoted this in order to place restrictions on the lives of those who lived in caravans. This would affect people in the gypsy community and the traveling showmen. Initially, perhaps, the showmen were not too aware of what was happening, but there was a newspaper in those times called the Era, which was principally a newspaper for theatricals. Most of it was devoted to what was going on on the stage each week. But it also covered travelling showmen. Which of course enabled showmen to advertise and so on, and the man who was the general manager of that newspaper spotted what was going to happen, said to one or two of his showmen clients, 'look, if you don't watch out, your lives are going to be extremely restricted'. Because one of the restrictions of the Bill would have ensured every showman had to have a licence to travel from the county in which he resided. But of course, showmen reside in numerous counties. That's their job, they travel from one place to another. So, you would have had to have a licence not only from the county you started in but from the next county you went to and so on. And it would become extremely, well, totalitarian I suppose. The showmen realised what was happening after having been told this and they called a meeting which was held at the Black Lion Hotel in Salford. The leading showmen of the day were there, including Jacob Studt from south Wales, John and Pat Collings., the Murphy family from the north, the Wilmot's from Scotland, and so on. And they agreed they'd better to combine together in order to oppose this Bill and they set up a body which was known initially as the Van Dwellers Protection Association, in parenthesis, the Showmen's Guild. They lobbied various members of both Houses of Parliament they'd been in contact with. And after a four-year period, they managed to get this Bill thrown out.../

45.00

GD: .../but once having done that they decided rather than go back to where they were before 1889, this new organisation of theirs, had certain other merits and that they would continue to keep it going. I think in the first few years after that I think it probably declined a bit as things would tend to, but during the early part of the 20th century, with the appointment of the Reverend Thomas Horne as the first general secretary and of course Pat Collins as their president, it was energised, and it started to develop. initially it was administered through a series of city-based committees. There was the London committee, the Birmingham committee, the Cardiff committee, the Manchester committee, the Newcastle committee and so on. These committees were invariably dominated by principal showmen of the region in which these committees were to be found. So of course, the big man in south Wales on the Cardiff committee was the Jacob Studt. His counterpart in the West Midlands, was Pat Collins and so on. The areas under the influence or the administration of these committees of course reflected the territories covered by their principal members. They later were changed into what were known as sections. Sections were a very popular thing then, you had then in the Co-op, you had them in old Women's Institutes etc. so I think around about the end of the first world war you had the London Committee section formed, the South Wales Section, the Midlands section and so on. And that is the basis of the Guild that has continued to this day.

MOM: I wonder if you could make the distinction between showmen and travellers? And why it matters, as it appears to.

GD: the important distinction between travelling showmen and other travellers is the difference between vocation and ethnicity. Travelling showmen come from a wide variety of backgrounds. Some of them in fact may have Romany heritage. But that doesn't qualify you necessarily to be a travelling showman. It's a distinction I suppose which certainly traveling showmen like to preserve and in fact emphasise, if for no other reason than that they suffer, or have suffered in the past, and probably still do suffer, from a degree of intolerance on the part of the settle community. Which intensifies the moment they're suspected of being gypsies.

MOM: Fair ground business, is this show business as Emily Wilson described it?

GD: yea, it's an historical thing. Showmen came before the riding masters. If you were to have attended a fair, let's say this time two hundred years ago, the principal attractions were the shows. There weren't any rides apart from little rides of swinging boats or little hand-turned roundabouts. The big rides didn't' come about until the late 1860s, when the Kings Lyn

engineer, Frederick Savage, mastered the problem of how do you turn a fair ground ride using a steam engine. Prior to his invention, which became known as the centre engine, rides were, as a matter of necessity, were small because they relied on the power of the human hand or arm to turn them round. Or in some cases, the power of a pony to take them round. Once you freed the ride from such restraints, they could become much bigger, more glamorous, could carry a lot more passengers of course, and the rides took over from the shows. But.../

50.00

GD: .../the travelling showmen continued to be known as showmen because that was their history, their heritage. Today there are no live shows at the fairs as there used to be perhaps 60 years ago, but they're still Showmen.

MOM: Les Misearable scene where fair arrives in town and they were buying teeth and hair!?

GD: all sorts of people appeared at fairs, including people who pulled teeth. There was one very famous dentist, travelling dentist. I'm, trying to think what he called himself. He had an adopted name. but he went round pulling people's teeth. Presumably well before the National Health Service was created. I suppose you could get all sorts of things done at the fair that you might not normally be able to avail yourself of in the normal working week. Perhaps you could have your hair cut as well. Again, we're back to the business that the fair brings people together and creates a market for all sorts activities, whether in the form of trade or entertainment or buying hair for people's wigs.

MOM: what are the links with the hiring fairs?

GD: the hiring fairs represent what was originally a completely separate tradition. It arose out of the Black Death 1348/49, which resulted in the death of possible between 40 and 50 per cent of the population of this country. In the aftermath of the Black Death, there were many fewer pairs of hands available to work the land.

MOM: can we just do hiring fairs again Graham from the top?

GD: the hiring fairs represent a completely different tradition as far as fairs today are concerned. They began as a result of the Black Death, the plague of 1348/49, which killed possibly between 40 and 50 percent of the population of the country. In the aftermath of the plague, there were considerably fewer hands to work the land and market forces very rapidly came into effect and the labourers of the day suddenly realised that they had the upper hand for once. And if the land owner wanted his land worked, then he was going to have to pay considerably more than

he did prior to the Black Death. No doubt some land owners were happy to go along with this, because they needed their land worked. But the Monarch of the day, one of the Edwards, was petitioned by certain land owners, who were rather aggrieved at having to shell out more money, and he passed what was known as the Statute of Labourers. And that compelled every able-bodied man to present himself once a year at a stated place to hear what rates of pay were to be paid for the following year. In other words, it was a form of incomes policy. In fact, it was laid down in this statute that landlords were not to pay any higher wages than were attained in 1346, in other words, two years before the plague started. The local magistrates were given powers to give what were known as petty or statute sessions, where these wage rates were to be announced. And I suspect in most cases the local magistrates decided that the most popular place to make these announcements was at the local fair, because that's where everybody would congregate. So, in addition to possible special sessions being called, they were tacked onto existing fairs. But over the centuries, the one thing became rolled into the other.../

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GD: .../They very quickly lost any importance as far as pay rates were concerned. What they did become however, were forms of labour exchanges, because masters would go there looking for servers. And eventually a tradition began where if you were somebody looking for a job and most people worked on the land, you would need to identify your own particular skill to your prospective employer. So, if you were a shepherd, you wore a tuft of wool in probably your lapel, in your hat band. If you were a thatcher, a piece of straw, if you were a carter, a piece of whip cord and so on. And these little emblems of your own particular skills became known, or were known, as the 'mops'. Hence the use of the term mops, particularly in the Midlands, main South Warwickshire, where the hiring fairs became known as the Mop Fairs. And they were called Mop Fairs not because young women came up carrying a domestic mop but because the men folk turned up there with these little symbols of their trades, and these were the mops.

MOM: there are always dissenting voices when the Fair arrives in Hereford. Can you talk about that?

GD: yes, it's always bedevilled the fairground industry, the fairground culture for centuries now. There will always be people opposed to these less than rigidly controlled goings on. The puritanical streak runs deeply where some people are concerned. They don't necessarily like people to be seen enjoying themselves. They don't approve of it. These days of course it's reflected in terms of the managers of national retail outlets who complain their takings are down on the day the fair is held in the town, in the streets of course. But

those fairs were there before those firms even came into existence. One is tempted to ask the question; do you complain about not being able to open in Christmas Day.

MOM: I wonder if there is a sense of the Showmen's Guild being 'other'?

GD: yes, it came into being because they were 'other'. They were separate from everybody else, they were likely to be discriminated against by this George Smith Bill. They've always had to fight separateness and intolerance. It's part of their mentality. They have always tried to be a part of wider society, hence the fact they will always try to involve themselves in local communities, whether it's whether fair's in town, they will put on a free afternoon for children from special schools because they realise that people like that are in the same boat as them in a sense.

MOM: going back to the bioscope again, could you talk about how quickly the Showmen adapted to new technologies and incorporate them into their businesses?

GD: Moving pictures was very important as far as the fairground was concerned. The Lumiere brothers first demonstrated their particular version of moving pictures in I think it was 1895. There's the famous film of the railway locomotive coming towards you. They demonstrated that film first I think it was in Paris, then they came to London to show it off. It was a technological freak at the time. But the showmen spotted its commercial potential.../

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GD: .../and by the winter of 1896, showmen were putting on displays of moving pictures. It was generally reckoned for some time that a showman called Randall Williams was the first man to show moving pictures, or showman to show moving pictures, at a Christmas fair in 1896. In fact, evidence has come to light in recent years to show there was at least one other person who ironically also shared the name Williams, who at Hull Fair that year was showing moving pictures, and I suspect there were a few others who were also doing it. It caught on very quickly, it was a great attraction as far as most people were concerned. It was their introduction to moving pictures and hence the cinema. Cinema permanent theatres didn't come about for at least another 14 years. So, during that period the fairground held sway as far as moving pictures were concerned. And they in a sense provided the market for the first film companies and Hollywood ultimately.

The important thing about fairs is, and showmen recognise this because it's their bread and butter, they always innovate, they must always present something new because their public, the

people who come to the fair., they expect to see something new. They've been to the fair the previous year, they want to see what's different, what's new this year. So, innovation in a sense is their second name. they've got to be producing novelties for ever. This is the thing that provides the stimulus for the business, the thing that keeps it going.

MOM: are they afraid of controversy? This year there were complaints about the scantily clad women on one of the rides?

GD: I know about that criticism and I think I know about the ride they were referring to but that's been coming to Herford for the last few years, why have they suddenly decided it's not acceptable. It's acceptable everywhere else and the images used on this particular ride are ones that are derived from other aspects of our culture, the film industry principally.

MOM: Can we talk about the importance of the Hereford May Fair?

GD: the Hereford May Fair in simple terms is its longevity. The fact when it comes to 2021, it will have been in existence for nine centuries is remarkable in itself. When you look around and see so many aspects of our history and culture that have perhaps not survived a hundred years, let alone nine hundred, the fact that this is still going. This is still a vital institution, it still has a purpose. It's not a piece of ancient history that's being re-enacted, it's a piece of modern history that is ongoing.

MOM: do we have similar examples along the Marches?

GD: there was, and still is to a certain extent, a preponderance of fairs along the Welsh Marches. Mainly because the month of May was the time for hiring along the Welsh Marches, whereas in other parts of the country they had different time of year for hiring. In the Midland Counties it was mainly Michaelmas, September, beginning of October; in the north west of England it might have been Martinmas, going into November. And on the Marches, it was May. May was a popular month for fairs because it wasn't a terribly busy time of the farm. You had the ability to go to the fair, take a day off, work was not pressing. It was also a time where you might find another job.../

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GD: .../ If you look at a map and pin point the fairs that still exist, you will find there is this sort of skein for fairs that come down from Montgomeryshire, right down into Monmouthshire, which is still inexistence. If you were to go back before the war, just after the war, you would find considerably more taking place. They were at places that weren't big enough to sustain a fair. But there was a time when they were. I remember an old showman, who came from Monmouth originally, so of course knew

this area extremely well, and he travelled it for most of his life, he once told me that during the first three weeks in May it would have been possible, and I think he was talking about the 1930s, for you to have attended a different fair every day of the week in this part of the world.

MOM: evaluation: why is recording your stories worth doing?

GD: it's like many other aspects of history, it is worth recording because I certainly won't be around for ever, other people won't be around for ever and whatever we might know personally, may then be lost. So, we have a responsibility in fact to record things so the future generations might benefit so not only from knowledge and experience but previous generation's knowledge and experience.

MOM: You're not a showman. How have you been welcomed into their 'group'?

GD: It's fallen to me because that's the sort of thing I do best. I can't drive a lorry, I can't strip down an engine, I can't build up a ride, I can't run a show, but I can record the business of doing that. We are complimentary.