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Creators: Rick & Julia Goldsmith
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Interviewee: Derek Foxton (speaker, male)
Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony (speaker, female)
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith
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Video Format: MPEG-4
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Transcript:

My name is Derek Foxton, I've lived nearly all my life in Hereford, and I was born in Lincolnshire at a remote RAF station. Still well-known today as RAF Cranwell. In 1939 when I was born they had a hospital there and war had already broken out, father was not allowed to go where mother lived, so she was given her train ticket before I was born to live in Cranwell, and I was born in the RAF Cranwell hospital. And soon after that we relocated back to Hereford. We were renting a house in Putson and after the war they purchased the house. And went to school in Hereford and then London university to do dentistry and then decided I wanted to emigrate after graduating. I was at home one day had a visitor friend, Derek Evans, and he said, 'I've got a friend who wants some help'. The question, what help does he want? He's a dentist, he's going to fight the local parliamentary election as a Liberal candidate. And I said, well I'm applying to go abroad. Well, it's only for a few months. Why don't you meet him? So I did. And I worked in a very sort of temporary surgery in a spare room, very basic, to see the first few extra patients that he couldn't deal with because his business was expanding. And as soon as he started taking up the reins to fight the election he left the whole business in my hands. I had only recently graduated and I was in at the deep end with the help of his nursing staff. His name was Ken Falstaff, this dentist, so people in Hereford would probably know the name. he would pop in occasionally, sort out any problems, which amazingly were few and far between. And after the election the end result was he failed to get in, so he said, 'do you want to stay temporarily?' so I said well yes, til I've got a job. So this temporary surgery I stayed in and within a short time it became a full-time job, and the arrangement was that I could leave as soon as I found a place I wanted to go to. And then out of the blue after about six months he said, 'I've got a parliamentary electoral position to fight in I think it was Oxsted, as a Liberal potential candidate', and he said, 'do you want to buy the business!?' I said, I haven't got any money. And he said, 'well, we'll sort that out'. Anyway, to cut a long story short, he went I purchased the business and I was on my own in Hereford, in at the deep end, running a business with a dental technician, nursing staff and reception. And that's the start of me being resident in Hereford, still living at home annoying parents etc.

[I first picked up a camera] probably when I was about five.

This would be towards the end of the war. Film was not readily accessible. I think If I remember it was left-over film from the RAF base. At the end of the war there was a lot of materials left around, hadn't been thrown away, and I started playing around with a camera. Getting the films processed at that time, I remember complaints from the family about how expensive it was. Had to take it into the chemist to get it processed. Taking photographs was very sporadic until I was about ten or eleven and I taught myself how to develop them, black and white negative film, and then contact prints, and then soon want to do more, wanted an enlarger, couldn't afford one obviously so I made one. And my contact for photography then was a dear gentleman with a business, Wye Vale Photographic, and they had a shop in Broad Street, next door to the city library and museum, and the proprietor was Godfrey Davis. He used to find me outdated film to use and I could buy that with my pocket money, I could buy the chemicals because they were quite cheap to develop and print contact prints, and then when I wanted to make an enlarger to enlarge prints, I had to make my own enlarger. He provided me with a broken plate camera and the rest was all do-it-yourself. A big tin to put the light bulb in. the camera had basically everything you wanted, plate camera, to put glass slides in and out, and a wooden post and a wooden base for the enlarger, to do my own enlargements.

This gentleman that owned the Wye Vale Photographic, when I asked about sort of doing a Saturday job, he had two sons who helped him out so that was a no go. So he said, go just down the road, still in Broad Street, just this side of the Green Dragon, go through that door, upstairs above the Women's Institute, to a photographer there. go and talk to him, tell him I have sent you and introduce yourself. And that photographer was Derek Evans. And I don't know why but he said yes, you can come in on Saturdays, because I was still at school, and the year would be around 1957/58, you can come in on a Saturday and come and help his father. Derek's father used to go in on odd occasions and sweep the floor, clean the camera lens and, according to Derek, get in the way a little bit. So I went in and, Derek's father, I can't remember him very clearly, but he wasn't highly active and as a result of having a youngster there, he was more than pleased to stand back and see someone with some energy and get around and do things. And that's really the start, so Derek offered me the job. And I don't remember what he paid me but if it was just 2 and sixpence it was very welcome because I had no idea how much it was at the time. Possibly some Saturdays I went in because I enjoyed it and didn't expect any remuneration at the time.

There were times when various things had to be put in the post obviously, the post office was just down the road and in the late 1950s the only way of getting a photograph to Fleet Street quickly was through a commercial drum scanner. Derek didn't have one and so I sort of had to put the print into the envelope,

and, I don't remember who did the drum scanning, but someone would come to collect it, somewhere in Hereford, and they scanned and wired to wherever he wanted the pictures to go.

Derek was on the top level of the building, the south side of the Green Dragon, that's the Cathedral end of Broad Street and he was on the top floor and below him was the Women's Institute and he had virtually the suite of rooms on the top floor with a window out to Broad Street, or two windows out onto Broad Street. I've got very haze memories of the lay out of the business now and almost impossible to describe it at all. Derek did smoke but when you are a youngster and you are a school boy – my father smoked – it was something I didn't really notice. Then you lived in a smoke-filled environment and you accepted it. It just didn't bother me then at all.

My memories of that (mentoring and teaching) not trying to teach you anything, I think, as far as he was concerned, I was a spare pair of hands and if I could do it and save him doing it, that was fine by him. He treated me like a friend, which was rather nice, and really never in the studio tried to show you how to hold a camera or anything. It was a case if you were interested, watch me, and if you are not really interested I don't really want you around. Because I was really interested and he could see that I was probably like an animal, I watched every movement he did, the adjustments on the camera and I'd ask questions. But at the time I was doing it to try and earn some money. I was interested in photography but as time went on and over the months and I got to know Derek quite well. I'd go round with him and his father to his father's house, which was then in a little courtyard off Commerical Street, where Gilbey's is now. Sometimes Derek would have his camera or his 16mm cine camera and we would be calling in there on route to a job somewhere and call in on his father, sometimes to pick him up, and I'd carry some of the equipment. One or two jobs, mainly if it was for TV – TV channels that I remember that he was deeply involved with was a channel in the Midlands that was called ATV and a Welsh channel called TWW Television Wales and West. And if there were any still photographs to be taken sometimes Derek would say, there's the camera, take a photograph. And he'd quickly visually check that the exposure was about right and having played around with the camera in the studio focussing was becoming sort of second nature, and it was a case of press the button at the right time, and Derek never, and he was doing his thing with the 16mm cine, it was left to me to take the pictures. It wasn't very frequent, but afterwards, after taking a roll of film, you've got to remember then a roll of film for a Rolliflex was just 12 exposures, and today with a digital camera you can take exposures in half a second. Each exposure was important then. I'd take probably half a roll of pictures and with a bit of lunch there would be one or two that were sharp and were without camera shaking and can be used. Then I realised I could do this a little bit better than with a box camera. A box camera is very

restricted with a small view finder. A Roliflex viewfinder is big, bright and with a sports view finder it's a direct line of sight so could take photographs very easily. That was very encouraging when you got back to the studio take it into the dark room and Derek would say, 'yes, we've got one, or two'. That really made my day because being able to do that is a hell of a thrill for a youngster. And probably on two or three occasions in probably six months that happened. Probably the most memorable before I went to university, we went to Belmont Abby and he said then that I would have to take some of the still photographs because he would be very busy. It was their celebrations for their centenary, I think that would be the year I went to university, 1959. and I took still photographs, I took a few obviously to make sure there was something there. he relied on a school boy to get photograph with his name on it because any photograph taken in a studio situation is always the principal's and the apprentice is no one. But it's a thrill for the apprentice or school boy to be there anyway. And one of the photographs I took on that occasion appeared in the Times, not the Hereford Times, The Times and I've still got I my attic that cutting. It's very special for me to have that first picture in a national paper, whereas the other pictures were for papers in Hereford, which I didn't follow up so much. But I realised then, just before going to university, I'm enjoying this, and that's what really triggered things off. I didn't really get any acknowledgement from Derek. I don't know who was his Saturday boy before me, if anybody did the job, because he also had of course Mike Charity with him at that time. And when I was there, more often or not, Mike wasn't always there at weekends, so this is where I was a sort of spare hands, which obviously Derek wanted around. And it was one-to-one on occasions, which was great. But Mike Charity, sadly we lost him a couple of years ago now. He and I would often go out on different jobs and on one occasion we went out towards Hay-on-Wye, I have no memory of what we went to photograph for one very good reason. On the way back, Mike was obviously driving the car, Derek's car, I remember the car, it was a Renault Delphine, and we were near the Whitney bridge and just around the corner I think we hit some wet leaves on the road, we skidded and we ended up more or less upside down in a ditch. We were both scratched and grazed and somebody rang for an ambulance and we were brought into Hereford. We were discharged after anti-tetanus vaccinations. But the job we did in Hay-on-Wye I don't remember!

I didn't really meet any other photographers at the studio. I remember John Bulmer occasionally visiting Derek. There seemed to be a bond and a friendship between John and Derek. On the Saturday side of it and holidays, and it was holidays when you saw more of week day life, meeting other photographers was almost non-existent. Hereford Times photographers were probably the only ones we saw and there was one dear old man who I saw frequently, and his name was Gough Johnson. And he always struck me, with the camera there, that he was from another era, the

Victorian era, because he used a larger camera rather than the smaller Rolliflex that Derek supplied and used. A big plate camera and you thought, why is he using that when he could use a role filled camera and take 12 photos in just a couple of minutes? He was the Hereford Times photographer. Think there were a couple of others but he was certainly in charge of the photographic department at the Hereford Times.

When I was at Derek Evans, the whole studio I was really the background boy and not given the responsibility. I didn't have the experience. There were no occasions at all when I was asked to go out and take a photograph by myself on a job. If that happened that would be when Derek's assistant, Mike Charity would have done that. I would have loved to do it but on the other hand but I don't think I would have been happy taking on that responsibility. A complete lack of any experience. But very privileged to be in the studio and being there I realised even then Derek was known internationally having had photographs published around the world and if I remember for the National Geographic Magazine used his work and the jazz world had used his photographs and he had close contacts I seem to remember in that sphere. He was on the phone from time to time discussing various jobs with, seemed to be either big names in newspapers or the hierarchy in the two television channels. And as a result when there were news items for the TV obviously, it had to be cine film, then, often by motor bike courier to be processed. When it came to photographs locally, on odd occasions, yes, he was involved, but I wasn't involved then.

In the late 1950s before I went to university people in the studio obviously met up with Derek, he was in and out, and Mike Charity, and any other visitors would be more casual visitors whilst I was there.

There's a lovely story going around from Derek, that in sunny weather, at break time they would go through a window with a French balcony and go out there, and Derek's joke was that I would go out onto the balcony and it was closed. And he assumed that I had climbed up and climbed through a window at the Green Dragon and came back out through a bedroom, and back through to the studio. That was Derek's story and joke but it's not quite true. I was eventually let back into the studio. I think Derek told that story for years later. He even told my receptionist at the surgery that I got locked out and got back through somebody's bedroom but in reality, no, but it made a lovely story.

If I had a look at Derek's photographs and tried to put them into a social historical context, at the time being young and no doubt being naïve, I didn't really associate with what he was taking as being historical. It was just to record now to go in the press tomorrow and then thrown away and be down with it. That fact that I was aware that Derek kept all his negatives and

quite a lot of prints, it didn't really register that we have really got something that is going to be so much appreciated fifty years on and its now getting on to fifty years since I was associated with his business as a very much junior part timer. Coming forwards to my last year at university, having worked as a freelance part timer selling photographs of university news photographs to London Evening Standard student supplement, I was home for the last six months of my university course with no more lectures to go and sit through, I had finished all of my practical work, treated all the patients, got all the necessary marks for that and had no more practical work to do. So I came back to Hereford and theoretically revise for final exams and my parents lived just down the road from where we are now in Lichfield avenue, they lived just in Brookside with a few other houses and next-door neighbour living at the end of the garden in Lichfield Avenue, was the assistant editor of the Hereford Times. His surname was Mr Lewis and you know how neighbours talk at the end of the garden, I used to chat to him because I didn't have a lot to do and told him what I had been doing I London, he basically knew because my parents had told him, and he said, we're short of a photographer, so he offered me a job for a few months at the Hereford Times, fulltime photographer. That's in the days when the Hereford times was in Maylord Street and the negatives and all the processing and everything was done there in the darkroom. The darkroom was in the cellar, in the cellar there were racks of glass plates that had gone back to maybe the Victorian years. I at the time wasn't interested in what was there but there must have been thousands of negatives and glass plates there. so I was quite familiar with what was there. and years later they had to relocate because Maylords orchard was redeveloped. In 1984/85 period they moved out I would guess, and they relocated to Bath Street, Berrowes House. The archive was not moved and the stories we hear of the negatives being left behind are true as far as I know. And bulldozers moved in and I don't think the bulk of what was there was taken out. I know one photographer had the copyright of his own negatives and if he was there at the time and he would have retrieved them but generally we lost a lot of Hereford's history.

During my last year at university I had six months with my own time just for revision and I was back at home in Hereford and during the early summer months I was out in the garden and talked to my parents' next-door neighbour, who was assistant editor at the Hereford Times. he had a knowledge of my photographic background and my efforts at dentistry and he asked me if I would be interested in part time work working for the Hereford Times. And that part time work turned out to be virtually seven days a week. So I worked for the Hereford Times for a few months just before my finals and the processing of the photographic work at the Hereford Times Maylord building, was down in the cellar, the dark room was down in the cellar and the stores must have been very extensive and very ancient, even possibly going back to the Victorian times. Around 1984/85 they

had to move out of the building, it was part of the Maylords Orchard redevelopment and it was relocated to Berrowes House in Bath Street, and the photographic archive, the main bulk of it, was left behind in the cellar of the Hereford Times and they demolished the buildings and we lost, now we realise, an enormous amount of our history in photographic form.

[The importance of the Derek Evans' archive] well associating myself with Derek, having known Derek from my school boy days , known him after graduation, he was a patient of my predecessor at the dental surgery, which I eventually took over , so I was in contact with Derek and his family and children, and talking to Derek over the years , I had a slight insight to what he had been doing and then began to appreciate the importance of what he was doing; the negatives that he had , the subjects that he'd photographed. A few cases that I was involved with, going out to take photographs, there are other places I went to take photographs, I think there are a couple of instances in the book published on Derek Evans, called Herefordshire Life, I was actually there, and two of the photographs I may well have taken and are in the book. So looking back from the present day we are just so fortunate that Derek kept his negatives, he virtually kept an index of the negatives. fortunately they were all mainly on roll film, not like glass plates that are heavy and take a lot of space, and they were able to be just kept on the side. and now we look back – I went with Derek to some of the Fownhope parades and other events, went to one or two football matches with Derek, and mainly to carry his equipment at football matches. he was a very very sharp photographer we realise and then appreciated. And only now do I realise that he had an enormous amount of valuable historical material.

Yes, I went out with Derek on photographic expeditions Greenman at Fownhope. The Greenman had some renovation work done, they had a large ballroom and it may have been fairly newly built but more importantly we went out to photograph a local artist painting a huge mural on the wall and the artist was Trevor Mattison ?? and at the time he was painting a famous Fownhope boxer, Tom Spring, and I clearly remember taking a few still pictures and I think one of my pictures did go into print somewhere.

Going with Derek and photographing them with Trevor Mattison, if I can show that to the camera, and the Green Man on the mural is also the local court so you've got pictures. that to me was more important because the local boxer Tom Spring, who was a national champion, and I think they were boxers from the days when they were bare fisted boxers with softer gloves on their fists, so he was quite a famous champion. Importantly Derek took the film for TV of this artist's work.

We've got a picture of Trevor Makeson and on the left side is Trevor at the Green Man Fownhope and Trevor o the right-hand

side, Trevor at the Three Counties Hotel at the top of Aylestone Hill, the building has now been demolished.

I just wonder if I can find the tractor one, it's one of the oldest tractors in England and we went down to Symonds Yat. And then on screen here clearly pictures of horses' competitions. And I did go with Derek to I think two places, more agriculture fairs, cart horses doing demonstration ploughing rather than competitions. I was there with Derek as his assistant and admiring his technique but not taking any photographs. Seeing a photograph of a ploughing horse brings back memories. Ah, also going onto to Fields agriculture shows. My parents weren't the slightly bit interested in so for me it was the start of a life time experience. Pictures of the Fownhope parades. I only remember going just on one occasion to one of the Fownhope parades and Derek was then, when I was there, taking mainly still photographs. So I think and hope that there are a lot of still photographs in the archive. This unique event because in the old days the local farming community from a photographer's point of view I could see that they were real characters and they just had to be recorded. And when we got back to the studio and see Derek's prints afterwards I couldn't believe that on a single photograph to take a picture of one of these local people and on the photograph, you could read their character. He captured them just that split second, and that's the sort of photography that appealed to me. Something you see and some people think, oh I wish I had a camera, I wish I'd captured that. That is something that seems to be in my system. To this day when I take a photograph I press the trigger, even with a digital camera in the rare occasion I use a fast drive, it's from Derek Evan's days capturing that moment. I think somehow, I got that lucky shot and it seems to happen quite frequently. To me it's weird. Why does it happen, I can't explain it? It's just one of those things.

Now the photographs of the hop yards. I never went to photograph hops with Derek. I used to go to school in Ledbury from Hereford by bus every day, to the Grammar school in Ledbury, used to drive through Dormington, pass the hop yards there, and used to see the gypsy encampments and all the characters. And it was passing then before I took photographs, I had the feeling, the subconscious feeling, there is something there to be recorded, which at the time I didn't realise was there, and something there again. In its my system and its developed over the years since then and interesting now. none of the pictures on screen are studio pictures. He's had to take the photograph with the available lighting, he's in front of a character he more or not didn't know, and Derek's own personality, in just a few words, could obviously bring out the best of who's he talking to. And with so many pictures he took, the subject's not camera shy. Look at his pictures and there are lots now in books you can see there's no body sitting stiff like a soldier rigid ready for a photograph. They're just in their natural environment they seem

to have that sort of invisible contact, that magic touch, to be able to put the person at ease to take the photograph, he was in the right place for the lighting for many occasions, subconsciously he'd have moved around the subject so the lights would bring out the best of the person's features. Taking pictures in bright sunshine is an art of its own and when I look back at some of Derek's pictures and the lighting in some of them is just perfect, as if he thought about it for an hour and arranged it. The few occasions I've been with him, it's instinctive to him, to be in the right position, move around, take the pictures and the subject quite often is unaware that his photo has been taken.

You can see how the clouds the way they're lit up. In the studio no doubt there's be a bit of enhancement you can't do in the old fashioned wet dark room to what you do on a compute4r nowadays. And to be able to enhance the clouds and get the horses darker, shadows, silhouettes there, it's quite a skilful process to be able to do this in the old black and white wet process. This is something you can look at it and you don't realise what's gone on behind the scenes. And that's what Derek's skills, to be able to print something in a dark room and then go through all the chemical processes and you end up with something which is undoubtedly could be an award-winning photograph in any exhibition.

Yes, there's the Heart of Oak, yes. There again, a photograph taken I Fownhope and it's the Heart of Oak procession. Derek's taken this photograph of a subject, not so any camera shyness, you can see the character, this gentleman, you can see the features of his face, the lighting and the way that's exposed this, first class, and then you also get a black and white print and to be able to enlarge it to exhibition standards that is the skill that Derek had. It is to be admired.

I've homed in on a photograph of a gentleman holding looks like a hop bine, hop field. He well may be part of the Romany community and I know Derek was in close contact with the hop yards at Dormington, possibly Claston farm. I don't know this occasion but it's a guess. Once again there's quite a bright sunlight to the right of this photograph onto this gentleman's left-hand face. Derek's got the exposure spot on to show the shadow detail. He's captured everything you could dream of to show one of these rural characters, so I quite admire it. I think more often than not he went by himself, when I went I was just a spare pair of arms just to carry the cameras no doubt. So his instinct again on this photo of a football match, a match but I would have no idea what's going on, but I'll hold this towards the camera and you can see how he's captured a photograph of a football match. And even in this day and age with modern cameras to get a photograph with just a..... with a ball in the position like that, to do that with a roll film camera is I think due credit to the skill of Derek Evans. It's

got everything a modern photographer could wish for and if that was in colour it would be wow. Of course then to take the sports photographs, look at this. It's a very sharp photograph and that indicates it had been a very high shutter speed to capture somebody in mid-air. One footballer is a foot off the ground or more and that's maximum shutter speed for the camera. If it's a Roliflex it's a 500th of a second and you press it once for that particular sort of football episode. You've just got to click once otherwise you miss it. Click once and to me it's a millionth of a second.

Now I've homed in a photograph of the Old House looks like a vintage car meeting, the photograph taken from the upstairs of one of the shops. Looks like Gustus Edwards, which today is one of the shops that was gutted by fire in high town. Not only is this of interest no doubt to vintage car owners, it's yet another historical record of Hereford. You can see into Commercial Street, it's a moment in time. To see a photo of Hereford taken by Derek and hopefully from his archive, we might have a date from when that was taken? That historically is as good as you are going to get.

I've homed in on a May fair photograph and this one I think is very special. It's a picture I don't think can be reproduced unless you had hired a crane. It was taken from the top of the helter Skelter to get that angle. It might be a one-off, I don't know. There's just no way it is physically possible to find that view point. From a photographer's point of view that is the dream position. It just gives the whole story, it gives you, to anybody looking at the photograph, it gives you the atmosphere of the May Fair. It's an evening photograph that shows the detail as well. It's another skill of Derek's. This is recorded for posterity.

I think the Derek Evan's archive is a gem. One reason is because I have personally been involved, albeit a long time ago and maybe a little bit remotely because I was never a proper employee but treated more like a friend in many respects. We've got recorded history. Derek was a skilled photographer with an instinct second to none in photography to be at the right place at the right time, the angle right to just the camera shutter button at the right time. What is important for the future is now to get some memories of what it was like back in the old days, now photographs were taken then, and even today people don't realise what it was like to take photographs with the old cameras. And when we see Derek's archive really the conditions were relatively primitive to what you can use today, a telephone, mobile phone out of your pocket, you can take some photographs and put it away without even thinking. Then you had a bulk instrument that you had to carry around, had to service it, keep it clean, know how to use it, there was very little that was automated about it. You had to be in charge of everything, especially the focussing. Future generations, unless

somebody will explain to them what went on, they won't appreciate it. Then to see what's been preserved and the history of the area and further afield, because Derek did go further afield as well, he photographed the Aberfan mudslide disaster in Wales, obviously there were lots of other photographers involved there, but for us, it's Derek's view of it. I think he went shortly after the horrendous incident. For other things as well, historically, it's a brilliant archive. The fact that we're able to do this, we've got the backing to do it, it's going to be a valuable contribution to what has been done and preserve things for the future.