

Title: Goodwin, Nicola_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-1980s
Subject: Autobiography, Fownhope Heart of Oak
Walk, Heritage
Publisher: Catcher Media Social CIC
Tags: Nicola Goodwin, Fownhope Heart of Oak
Walk, oral history, heritage, PV,
participatory film-making, community
film, Herefordshire

Identifier: Goodwin, Nicola_Interview_Complete
Interview Date: December_14_2018
Location: New Inn, Fownhope, Herefordshire, UK
Source: Catcher Media Social CIC
Interviewee: Nicola Goodwin (speaker, female)
Interviewer: Julia Goldsmith (speaker, female)
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)
Producer: Julia Goldsmith (female)
Transcriber: Marsha O'Mahony (female)
Language: English

Type: Video
Video Format: MPEG-4
Bit rate: 25.1 mbits/s
Frame rate: 25 FPS
Aspect ratio: 16:9
Width: 1920 pixels
Height: 1080 pixels
Scan type: Progressive
Audio Format: AAC
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz
Audio Bit rate: 192 kb/s
Stereo/Mono: Mono
File Size: 2.4 GB
Duration: 12 min 42 seconds

Type: Audio
Audio Format: MP3 audio
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz
Audio Bit rate: 261 kb/s
Stereo/Mono: Stereo
File Size: 23.9 MB
Duration: 12 min 42 seconds

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Records Centre

Full transcription Interview with: Nicola Goodwin

Abstract: NG is a journalist for BBC Hereford & Worcester. She spent her early years in Fownhope, attending the village primary school. She recounts the wonder, the colour and the excitement of Club Walk Day. Before women were officially allowed to enter, NG slipped in – maybe because she was a tom boy or no one noticed – she had a stick decorated by her mother. Describes the fun fair on the field afterwards, drinking the dregs of beer by the club revellers, and returning Corona bottles to the New Inn to get money in return.

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JG: can you just start off by telling us who you are and what your connection is to Fownhope?

NG: I'm Nicola Godwin and I moved here, actually, right next door, when I was about three or four years old and lived here until I was 22. And I've still got lots of friends in the village, I went to the village primary school. And before the houses were built between our former house and the New Inn, there was a lovely paddock, and one of my abiding memories is of the pub smells coming across the grass, and also Jelly the grumpy donkey. She used to drink beer and we could see her from our bedroom windows. She lived in the paddock next door.

JG: so tell us about the Heart of Oak walk and what it was like?

NG: I can't remember life without Club Walk. It was just the most amazing day when you were a child. I still think it's brilliant now as an adult. So colourful and the first thing I would hear would be the sound of people talking here in this car park and men seemed to come from everywhere and wearing I would guess could be their only suit, they were quite ill-fitted, buttons bursting, and they would all be gathering here. And the brass band would arrive and they would start to warm up. And then you start to see all of these amazing creations come from across the village. And obviously when you're quite short and growing as a child, everything seems huge. And Mike Andrews would bring this oak down. Now as an adult I realise it's not quite fully grown. I really thought it was a huge tree from the forest. And the way people dressed the sticks was just brilliant, phenomenal, so much colour. And then everyone would walk. And when you were growing up there was also a fair behind us here, and that fair was just brilliant, there would be fancy dress, you could win gold fish and got to go on the rides. Just

the amount of noise and colour in the village seemed utterly brilliant. And when I went to university and left Herefordshire I remember describing it to friends there, who thought we were totally bonkers! That was the first time perhaps I became aware of the heritage of it and it could appear quite pagan to people, you know, the Green Man link, but at the time it just seemed normal. Surely every village has a club walk, every village has a heart of oak society, and it's not until you grow up that you realise that they don't.

JG: so tell us what it was like for you as a girl on the walk?

NG: I don't remember ever thinking girls can't walk with sticks and still not sure I guess when that changed. It was just the men in their best suits, some of them fitting well some of them not so well, would have these amazing sticks over their shoulders and parade and young boys would do it as well. And some of the ways the sticks were decorated were phenomenal. You know, real pride. And I guess a lot of the competition was people dressing them. And I remember thinking when I was about seven or eight, why can't I do that. My brother wasn't that bothered and I really wanted to do it. And one particular year, don't remember if my brother Johnny came as well, but I remember mum doing a stick for him, it was an old broom handle I think covered in flowers, she likes flower arranging so spent hours on it, and I said, can I go as well? So she did a second stick. So walking downstairs and saying to mum and dad, well can I go? Well just go and ask and pay your 50p. if they say no then you'll just have to go to the back. So I walked into the car park here and I remember that the man seemed quite grumpy, it might have been because I was a child (laughing) and walking up and giving my money and just joining in. now at the time I was a real tom boy, it might have been he didn't realise I was a girl, and yeah, I just walked with a stick, and didn't think anything of it. And now thinking back and I don't know how many other women did it or how many other girls did it. But yea, just seemed right that I could join in.

JG: did anyone say anything to you or did it go unmentioned?

NG: some of my friends I remember being quite cross because obviously would have loved to be done it as well. And we used to all have to walk at the back, the women were following on at the back and the girls would as well and the children used to intermingle. So I remember them being there but I don't think they had sticks. Maybe they did midway through. Maybe they did at the end, I'm not quite sure. But yea, I remember a couple of them being quite grumpy that they hadn't had the chance to do it. It just seemed the most natural thing in the world to do it. You know, why can't we join in.

JG: so did any of the old regular guys mention anything or did they think you were a boy?

NG: well most of them must have known who I was because I knew everyone in the village and I was at school here. I think if they did say something then I didn't really take any notice from what I remember. I just remember it was great fun. And I did have a stick a few other times then I went back to walking with everyone else. But as a child it was the most amazing day because when you got a bit older, perhaps ten, 11, 12.../

5.00

NG: .../you would walk around and try to get the dregs that would have been left, because you would go to three or four homes and they had some alcohol there people could drink, and friends got quite drunk I think when we were about 13 (laughing) but yea, it was just a brilliant chance to go and look in people's gardens you hadn't had a look in before and the whole village seemed to be out and so many people used to come out from Hereford and other places. Just a wall of colour and noise is what I remember and miss about it. It's amazing really that it survives and is still as big as it was.

JG: why do you think it is important that it carries on?

NG: It's really important for two reasons I think: it's a great community event and there's lots of wonderful community events in Fownhope. I think it's one of the best places to grow up because you've got everything you could want. You've got a church, at that time we had two sweetshops, just before I moved here there were three, you've got playgrounds, you've got plenty of space, you've got the river. it's a great way of bringing the community together. But also the links to how it started and why it started is such an important part of heritage. It's only as I got older that I started to realise what the Heart of Oak society was about. It's pre-NHS, pre-social services. There was absolutely nothing for people who might have lost their husbands, their brothers, and to have that society there, must have made such a difference to people in the village.

JG: is there any clue why people decorate sticks? There's no indication where that's come from?

NG: I think I've just been told it's just always been the way. It's obviously to do with the oak and the importance of the oak. And I've always thought, and it's probably just been how I assumed, whether it was based in historical fact or not, always assumed it was a way of saying thank you and welcoming the summer but obviously the time when we are getting more light, it's a chance to celebrate. Surrounded, the village is surrounded by nature. We've got the woods up on the hills, we've got the river, obviously not far at all from the village, it just seemed to me a really nice way of showing what we have. And if we go back to the Heart of Oak being a Society to help, most

of those men would have been working on the land, so it just seems a natural link. Perhaps It's a nice way of showing off because it's really competitive still: who's got the best stick?

JG: did you ever win one?

NG: no. I think I did fine in fancy dress though. I've got a photo and I was a little Dutch girl and my cousins came over from Bishops Frome and they dressed up as well. I think I definitely remember a fancy dress prize. We won a gold fish and I always assumed that the gold fish was replaced year after year, as parents do. But apparently not. That goldfish survived for 12 or 15 years and Doris the goldfish also survived being taken out of her tank by the Labrador and flapping around on the floor. Luckily, she was saved and put back in.

JG: tell us about the fair and what you got up to?

NG: the fair was always in the field behind the New Inn and behind the Green Man and behind where we used to live, which was called the Old Shop then. And that field now is the community field and people use it daily. And at the time the fair used to fill it. Even late 70s early 80s it was a very old-fashioned fair. Lots of wooden rides and the swings that you sit in and were on wires, and it goes round in a carousel, and the old-style horse carousel that you sit on. You could win gold fish then because obviously the laws of animal welfare hadn't come into place, and there was a big fancy dress parade. Whether that was part of Heart of Oak or done by the fair people I don't know. And also everyone used to spill out from the back of the pubs. So there was lots of drinking and lots of drunk adults. Loads of people used to come out, people who perhaps used to live in the village say. And one thing I really remember is the Corona pop bottles with sort of dapples on the top, you could get money back for them as a recycling scheme. And we used to go and look in all the hedgerows and places to find them and bring them round the New Inn and get our money back. And we realised that Mr Gummery was putting them in the crates round the back! And it was a really naughty thing but I'm sure he knew. We'd pick them out of the crate and rub them in the soil a bit and take them back round to the hatch and get a bit more money. (laughing) That was amazing. And 20p 30p, that was your pocket money for the week and you could go down to the sweetshop. Aniseed balls you could get two for 1p. You could get the most enormous piles of sweets just really from doing a bit of recycling and a bit of cleaning up.../

10.00

NG: .../it was a real competition. If a friend found a bottle you would be really jealous. I remember the telephone exchange one day and looking down and seeing three massive Corona bottles. And that was amazing! That was just like winning the Lottery.

JG: so tell us why you think it's important?

NG: as a journalist I thank god, every day, in fact thank people like Keith James or even Derek Foxton, who are still photographers who have realised the importance of archives, whereas loads of people were just binning stuff. But hang on a minute, we're going to preserve those and make sure they are archived, because when you need to source something, and when you need to make sure things are accurate, sometimes you can't do that and photographs are wonderful for that. Somebody referenced a building, you know, the memory can sometimes play tricks on us, the building was there until 1970. The photograph in fact showed us it was demolished in j'65. It does help us massively. That's probably the working reason, but for me, who loves my county and loves history, it is so interesting and every single photograph you pull out, you go to look for one for one reason, then you find another. if you go into the archives and you're looking for anything in the photography section, allow yourself at least three times the time you thought because you go off on a tangent and thing, 'what's that?' Pictures and history are interlinked, aren't they? You want answers but you always find more questions. I think people can be a bit too romantic about the past. Sometimes when you see photographs you think, 'do you know what, life was wonderful then because we were children, but actually, particularly with the poverty in Herefordshire in the past, it's a real eye opener ad you look at some of these photographs and think, that' just one or two generations back, how lucky we are and how well we live now compared to how our neighbours and relatives lived in the past. Perhaps on a more serious note, why I think history is so important is we need to learn from mistakes and not make the same mistakes again. But equally, and I'll contradict myself totally, don't dwell too much on the past because that can lead to anxiety. Perhaps look at it, learn from it, enjoy it then think, shall we make things better in the future? But mostly they're just great to look at. They are so much fun, prompt discussion, and I'll tell you get some photographs out in a pub and you'll never leave.