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Transcript:

Right, I'm Geoffrey Hardwicke. I was born in the village at Oldstone Farm, lived here and worked here all my life, we're from a farming family, so when we talk about the Heart of Oak Society, it's a big part of my life, my father's life, his father, and it goes on and one. Yeah, quite a big thing in our family.

I've got the pleasure of being the Chairman of Fownhope Heart of Oak Society, I took that post on this year in the AGM. I took it on from Mike Andrews, who has been Chairman for nearly 40 years I would say. He was looking to stand back so I was very honoured to be proposed and voted in, so here I am Chairman of the Heart of Oak. My father was treasurer yeah. I believe he was treasurer for 22 years, that was some mean feat.

The morning of the Heart of Oak was just a normal occasion to us. dad would go around the farm, make sure livestock was safe and sound and as it should be, and then he'd busy himself dressing the club sticks ready for day. And so he'd do three club sticks, one for himself, one for my brother John and one for myself. And we used to have a little building by the side of the farmhouse of old stone called the Dairy and that's where he'd be, have all the flowers laid out on the slate bed there, and just get on with it. I'd just peek through the door watching him busy himself dressing these sticks. I used to admire how confidently he did it. I find it difficult doing one, but never mind, he had three to do but he just got on with it, busied himself doing it. Always produced some tidy sticks. I aspire to do that every year but fail miserably.

What I find interesting with the flowers is in those days – and people talk about climate change – and I've, he used to use a lot of bulky, woody flowers, woody stemmed flowers, so he used Red May from the trees, Hawthorne trees, and White May, and lilac, so they were bulky, and peonies, something a robust flower that would sort of last the day. You get a flower on a stick and it's not drinking water, it's going to wilt a bit. So, a robust, big bloomed flower was a good thing. And I find this day and age, certainly the lilac and the May, their seasons have changed and the flowers have gone over so they have to look elsewhere now, which makes it more taxing, more difficult to dress the stick. But people complain every year, we'll never have any flowers for the stick, but come Saturday morning, there they all are, a lovely array of flowers on everybody's sticks,

which is a great visual sight and an aroma, a brilliant aroma, especially when you get in the church. Yeh, it's good.

When I think back to my childhood, what I find different these days in my father's time and before it was all very regimental. The members were all dressed up in their finery, collar and tie and their best suit, because it was probably an annual day for them, probably the only day they'd have off in a twelve-month period, so it was a special occasion, and so they'd dress up and they lined up side by side. The senior members at the front of the parade, working back to the junior members at the tail end, led by a silver band, the bough and the banner of course. This day and age it is much more relaxed and of course it was men only, it was a male orientated society and they wore hats so it was just a smart occasion you know. Yeah, I sort of miss that in a way. I think the way people's lives are today it's just not going to happen. But it's good to see people walking that's the main thing.

My mum and sister were always there in the background and probably mum was busy getting breakfast ready, because we'd have a full English breakfast and probably Christine my sister would be helping or just watching everything going on. Because it was a male-orientated society they just kept out of the way really let dad get on with it and let the men enjoy themselves really. That's the way it was!

[Sports activities in the afternoon] The afternoon, it drew a lot of people in. it was quite a big event, there weren't many of those sorts of events going on in the county, and because there weren't many other things going on as well, it was a day off for everybody, it brought a lot of people in. there were I was talking to somebody the other day, they were.... they said they used to enter the mile race. Quite a lot of effort went into the sports programme and of course there was always the backdrop of the fair that they used to come in. that was a big attraction for people. They used to set up and the young lads in the village used to like helping to set up the fairground and dismantled when It went off the following week. They'd be looking to earn a few bob for their pocket money and get filthy dirty in the process doing it. But everybody used to enjoy it, muck in and do it. The sports tailed off in a little bit but we're trying to revive them as more of a family entertainment and traditional sports. Yeah, we're getting there. whether we'll quite get the fairground back, I don't know, but who knows.

The parade assembles at the New Inn, we walk straight down, from the New Inn, to the Church, where they hold the service. And it's quite a short service, 25 minutes as a rule and we always sing three same hymns. And I've always believed these three same hymns were the same because people could memorize them. Many years ago, probably not everybody could read so it gave them an opportunity to join in because they would know the words,

remembering them from previous years. And so, we stick to that now, the tradition is to sing the same three hymns and heartily sung they are and having the brass band, well the silver band, in the church as well, it creates quite a brilliant atmosphere I think. For anybody who is quite shy about singing they are always drowned out by the band so, that's no bad thing.

When we move out of the church and then we congregate either around the vicarage, but luckily this year we've stayed in the church yard so we've got a bit more space, quite a nice area in fact and that's where we do the judging of the senior stick. And that creates quite a bit of competition I have to say. We see some proud owners with their sticks lining up ready to be judged. We have a Heart of Oak mug which is quite sought-after thing, which was introduced a few years ago by John Ridler, and he bought these mugs in and thought they would be quite a good idea for a prize. So they're quite unique. Yeah and so it creates a lot of competition, a lot of envy, but it produces some good sticks and that's the important thing and, yeah, it's good to see.

Since I've been Chair I do feel an importance to try and maintain the heritage of the Heart of Oak. It does get difficult as time goes by because we all lead busy lives and there's small group of us that spend a lot of time and effort maintaining this. I do feel it's important because my, I suppose my family go back a long way. It's to do with 'raw' heritage and farmworkers and the like, so it'd be a really nice thing to keep it going but it depends on the support I suppose and peoples' interests and whether outside of the committee other people want it to happen. I suppose because my father was involved, my grandfather was involved and probably my great grandfather, yeah, I'm just another line of Hardwickes carrying on the tradition and I try my hardest to do it. I've got a granddaughter, which thinks it's one of her favourite days of the year and when you hear that coming from an eight-year-old girl, little granddaughter, it's just, how can you not try keep it going. It's phenomenal. I do my best for her if nobody else.

I've got a grand daughter and a grandson. Evie is eight and Stanley is six. He's a typical little lad who I don't think's quite got the concentration span to walk at the moment, but Evie is definitely well into it and she wants to stop over Friday night. When I dress my stick, she will probably be there and I'll dress hers the way my father dressed mine. I keep that tradition and the Hardwickes going as best I can.

Because we go around, we rely on hosts in the village to call into, so when we leave the churchyard and the church, we've had our service, we go to various households and we're very lucky people invite us into their gardens homes and take over for an hour or so. So they have the privilege of the heart of Oak and the Morris Men and the Brass Band doing their thing, and the

judging of the junior stick. Yeah, over time we try and vary the places we go to. We used to go quite frequently to the doctor's residence, Mr Rowan's before the new medical centre was built. It's a lovely property with a beautiful garden, great backdrop, lovely black and white building, not far from the church so we don't have to walk far. Yeah in my time it was Dr Hammage and before him Dr Malkin, and there'd be a barrel of beer so we'd all participate in a lovely glass of beer. Yeh it was just very relaxed, fun time. It's really important to try and go to different places, it keeps the interest. People like to go to different households, look around their garden, yeah that's what makes it special as well.

I was out last night, hunting around the hedgerows and flowers for my stick, and I thought, I'll try and get an oak apple in some of the foliage, so ...You're never quite sure whether you can find them, but I go to my favourite tree where I generally find something, and if I can just grab it. So here we are, for anybody who hasn't seen an oak apple and that's created by the gaul wasp as far as I know, quite how they go about doing it, but they lay their egg I suppose inside there, so it's protected, and little gaul wasp grows and emerges and off he goes to look at the Herefordshire countryside. I'll try and get one of those in my club stick and that might just swing the balance and I'll win the club stick for 2018.

And another interesting thing you might like to see is I've one of the original club sticks. It's been passed down to me, it was passed to my father's cousin, Clive Patterson, and I assumed it was Cyril Patterson's club stick he passed onto me. It's got the oak finial there on top, acorn, which not everybody realises is there. on closer inspection, I was looking and I saw a name stamped on there and it wasn't Cyril Patterson's name stamped on there, it was an E Jones and the only E Jones I knew was Edmund Jones and he walked with his club stick in the club and quite how Cyril Patterson, or Gladys, got Edmund's stick I don't know. So that will be a mystery, so there we are. It's what I'll be carrying on Saturday morning bedecked with a floral array and oak apple. There we are. I'm not quite sure how old it is. I've had it for 30 years I suppose. It's got to be 30 years older than that, 50 years, 60 years, it might be older, I don't know to be fair. I try and look after it. It's very precious to me, I don't want the woodworm to get at it, but there we are, the club stick. It hasn't got my name on it, id di think about it, might be a nice thing. Whether the club, the society stamped everybody's name, their own club stick, I don't know. Because they are all very individual to themselves. I think they might have got mixed up maybe after we had been round visiting all our hosts and had one too many beers and propped them up against a rose bush or something and someone grabbed someone else's. it's only the following year you realise you haven't got your own club stick. So maybe that's how they get mixed up. I do wonder with the stamp if they Society had a stamp, stamped them and

then issued them to club members. So maybe we can do a bit of research on that next year. And next year I might say it is the 30th year since we reformed. We dropped the friendly society and wanted to maintain the club day but without the friendly status, so next year it will be 30 years. So we're pushing the boat out next year and hopefully we'll gather a lot of old memories, who haven't walked for a while and have a good old show for everybody.

I'm really pleased I'm sat here talking to Catcher Media and recording this. I think at the time you think nothing of it, it's like looking at any old photos or films, you drag them out and then you start looking around and you look at the cars and the way people dress and how young you are, so that's good for me when I look back, when I'm not here and my family look at it, they'll have a smile and think, 'oh, did he really wear that' or 'did he walk like that' or 'look at those cars'. Yeah, so it's a fantastic record really and I feel privileged to sit here talking about it. Yeah, great, good stuff.