

Title: Michael Moreton Interview

Creators: Rick & Julia Goldsmith

Project: 'The Close in Living Memory: Hereford Cathedral
Close oral reminiscences''

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Interviewee: Michael Moreton (speaker, male)

Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony & Julia Goldsmith (speaker,
female)

Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)

Producer: Julia Goldsmith

Language: English

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Stereo/Mono: Stereo Mixdown

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Transcript:

(00:00)

Michael introduces himself, fourth child of Canon Moreton who was the Canon of the Cathedral from 1935 until his retirement a year before his death in 1966. They lived in the big house that is in front of the Elgar Statue (at time of recording) - five windows wide and as deep as it is wide, being a rather large house. (00:42) Michael was originally born in Yorkshire on the last day of 1931 and was there for about 10 months until his father moved to Pencombe in Herefordshire where he was a rector until about 1935 when he was made a canon. He moved to Cathedral Close when he was around 5 or 6 and lived there until he did his national service in 1950 when he did 2 years in the Army. Then returned to Hereford for another two years before moving to London. Michael went to both Cathedral School and the Prep School before that, he didn't go to school until age 6 and three quarters and went up to Cathedral school when he was 10 and a bit. (02:00) When the school bell rang everyone who was in the playground, or should have been, walked around into the Cathedral and had their daily morning chapel in the Lady chapel. Michael could hear the bell going if he was late and rush across the Close and join in without being late - though you would never have run across the grass, it had chains around it and no-one was allowed on the grass. If you were caught being on the grass the Close keeper Mr. Lowe would reprimand you. (02:40) There was one old lady called Mrs. Bull who lived in a house at the Close end of St. Johns Street and was a bit of a character - she used to go out in a white sheepskin coat at night and scuttle across the grass and people thought it was a ghost, much to Mr. Lowe's chagrin. On one occasion Mr. Lowe put up a tripwire, so when she went across she fell over and didn't try it again! She was the daughter of a famous person called Dr. Bull, and there's a plaque on the wall there still to commemorate him. (03:43) Michael used to have a little peddle car which was marvellous, he used to go around the roads on the close, as there were no cars or cyclists there making it quite safe. Yet whilst he was whizzing around aged 6 or 7 the ladies of the close used to complain to his parents that he was going too fast and might run them over - so he had to keep a bit clear of them. (04:08) Michael remembers once trying to get into their car which was parked in front of their house and a man came along and told him off, making him rather upset, thinking he was some boy from nowhere trying to break into the car.

(04:37) Michael recalls the barn next to his house, technically an outhouse where wood was kept, one end would have been for the carriage when there was horses and carriage and had stable flooring that went down in the middle along with fixings on the wall for hanging up a harness. At the other end Michael's father had cut lots of holes in one of the walls to make room for his car, he had a Morris 16 which was an enormous car and wouldn't go in with shutting the door until these modifications were made - likely without permission! Enabling him to have the car peeped through from where the carriage would have been into where the horses would have been. (05:37) There were stairs up and a little fireplace, probably before the war there would have been a coachman or a gardener who lived there, above that was the place the hay would've been with a trapdoor for pushing the hay down. Michael's brother Wilfred, who was a bell ringer like Michael, made his own bell having gotten hold of an old school handle bell that he jammed into a piece of wood and made into an imitation bell by putting this frame over the trapdoor. (06:25) One day Michael was down below looking up at this contraption and the bell wasn't fixed in terribly well, flying out and hitting Michael above his right eye leaving a scar. Wilfred was 8 years older than Michael, making him probably about 16 at the time. When Michael says he's a mad bell ringer it's because he was hit on the head by a bell as a child.

(07:00) Michael used to play on this upstairs part of the barn, with candles and a little bit of paraffin in an upturned lid of a cocoa tin, making wicks out of a bit of match or something. On one occasion the candle fell over and rolled across the floor and nearly went down between the floorboards, if it had the whole thing would have gone up in smoke as no one would be able to get under there to put it out. Bits of the floor had terrible woodworm or dry rot and they were not allowed to walk on it as you would fall straight through. Of course Michael's parents were none the wiser! (07:57) After Dunkirk probably there were lots and lots of wounded soldiers back in England, and some were sent to Hereford as they were spread around to ease the burden on hospitals, when they first got off they were lying on the grass on the Close - nobody told them to get off of course as they had been saving England being perhaps the only time anyone would have been allowed to sit on the grass.

In fact it is a churchyard and in the middle there are one or two stones still there, though barely noticeable. (08:42) One thing that did happen in the war was that they were going to dig in front of Michael's house to put telephone cables or something down and as they were digging someone exclaimed "Look there's a skull there!" - of course a long time ago they didn't necessarily dig a grave 6 feet down always. All of these bones had to be carefully collected up and reburied. Though all Michael knew at the time was this great mound of dirt in front of the house, only being told of the skeletons later.

(09:12) When Michael and his family moved into the big house on the close and at the end of a long room at the back of the house there was a bay window, and when first visiting Michael ran towards the bay window and looked out at this marvellous garden about 50 yards long with grass and then trees and all the way at the far end a greenhouse, exclaiming how amazed he was at the garden much to his mother's satisfaction. The vicarage in Pencombe was fine, but she wanted him to be excited for the new house - it had cubbyholes under the stairs and a cellar and things like that. (10:02) At the far end of the garden was a mulberry tree. During the war it fell down with a great crash and there was a fear that it might die, but it didn't, half of the trunk was still attached to it and it lived on its side until a tree specialist came in and banked up around the base until lots of little branches came out only then cutting off the bit that had fallen over. It's still there as far as Michael is aware. When Michael's nephew Ken was at the house he ordered silkworms as they feed on the leaves of the mulberry - though Michael recalls that the mulberry at the house isn't the right sort to feed them, having as a boy taken the leaves to the prep school as a boy. Silkworms only feed on a different sort of tree and it's said that this goes back to a man who wanted to have a lot of silk grown in this country to save paying a lot of money to have it brought from China - meaning most of the 400 year old mulberry trees in the country originate from then but they ordered the wrong sort so silkworms don't live on the mulberry trees typically planted in England.

(11:38) Michael enjoyed living so close to the school, he used to walk to the corner and look around and his mother used to wave to him from the front door - though he was halfway to school by the time he got there! (12:20) In the back between the house and the barn there was a cobbled yard where Michael used to play with ants, with a bowl of water and putting an upturned jam jar in it as an island and then getting the ants to walk on a stick that would then be bridged onto the island. This was in the time before he went to school. (12:58) Michael remembers going to tea with friends from school, which was the thing you did, and played together and then came back at about 6. Going to bed not long after. There was food rationing at the time, from when Michael was aged about 8 or 9, but it didn't stop them from eating - in fact they say that the British people were fed better during the war as an average. As everybody had the same rations, and there was no overeating - the longest expectancy of

life is for those born in 1931 'they say', as before that they were too poor and after that they ate too much.

(13:48) Michael's dad went off to be in the army, and the other canons weren't very pleased as the canons took it in turns to be on duty. There were three canons so Michael's father was on duty one month in three - when he went to war the remaining two had to do half each and weren't very pleased about it. (14:16) Michael and his family kept chickens, others said that 'ooh you can't keep chickens on the close they'll make a noise and people will hear them' but it worked out and Michael's mother used to go and collect scraps and bits of food from the other canons and the dean if they had some and provide them with eggs in return. The egg ration at that time for the six of them, both parents and 4 children, was one egg for the whole family - which Michael used to get being the youngest, though once they were keeping chickens it was no longer a problem.

(14:58) The Deanery was commandeered by the army and given to the American forces when they came into the war, in 1942 or so. All of these American trucks would come around and reverse into the Close from St. Johns street to the front of Michael's house. They would get so close there ended up being a big black mark on the wall from where the exhaust pipes would be. (15:30) Michael was largely unfazed at the appearance of the American troops but some people would try and get sweets out of them - there was an expression 'you got any gum chum?' though Michael doesn't recall ever doing that. (15:52) They had the occasional air raid practise, though Michael doesn't think we ever had bombs in Hereford as the Germans didn't know about the big munitions factory by Brobury Lines. The odd bomb would be dropped in Herefordshire fields as if they had been to Birmingham and were coming back with a bomb they weren't allowed to take it home with them so it would be dropped anywhere. (16:20) When Michael was about 12 or 13 he would cycle out to little villages with his friend George Davis to do bell ringing around Eaton Bishop and Madley and such places. On the front of their bikes they had little lights that they had to angle downwards so any German planes couldn't see it, as if they saw any lights they would drop a bomb on it, so that had to be careful about that. (16:46) When the air raid drills happened a normal siren would go off and they would go down into the cellar which Michael's dad had strengthened so that if the house fell down they wouldn't be squashed. He had also put up wire beds and such so that they could sleep, Michael remembers being down there once when the sirens had gone off and his mother had secreted away a bar of chocolate to keep them going in the hours of the night which was marvellous - though they were all warnings he thinks and not real air raids. (17:20) Michael was absolutely certain they were going to win the war, because the British had always won wars, and was cross because they had beaten the Germans once but 'they hadn't got the sense to be beaten' and it was 'started all up again'. In the Great war Michael's uncle was killed at Ypres, his dad's younger brother. His dad's elder brother was shell-shocked and after the first war he sat on a sofa for nine months without talking, they didn't know much about post-war distress then it was just not known, in the end he never really fulfilled his potential but he looked after the chickens at Michael's grandfathers smallholding in Brockweir by Tintern Abbey that had one hundred chickens. (18:22) Michael would go down there when he was 7 or 8 to visit and go around with his uncle looking for eggs in the hedge as, if you got a broody hen, she wouldn't want to go in the normal nest spot as she'd know that the eggs were taken from there pretty often. So she would go and find a little secret place in the hedge, and of course Michael and his uncle would go and find it and take all these 10 eggs away and the poor old bird would come back and find nothing. (18:56) They had a stream on this small holding, which Michael once dammed up. Eventually it burst its banks and all the water got very muddy as you could imagine - the next house down in this

village got their water straight out of this stream and came complaining that he'd made all the water muddy. (19:23) Michael recalls VE day when they all went out and danced, around 5 in the afternoon as he remembers it, in Hightown doing the Hockey Cokey jumping about happy. (19:47) Michael used to go to the Kemble Theatre as that is where they used to have the pantomime, though there was another theatre down a backstreet further back ('possibly maylord street but I'm not really sure') called The Garrick and that was known as a bit of a flea-pit - not that there were any fleas there but that it was pretty cheap. They didn't have films regularly in these places, the regular ones were the Odeon and The Ritz. To get to the Odeon you would go down St.Johns street and down the Booth Passage. (20:52) Michael remembers when Snow White came on at The Ritz, his brother and two sisters were going, but he was not allowed to go - as it was too frightening! (21:28) In those days there was no television, Michael knew of only one family and that was a clergyman, the vicar of Kington called Greene, who had a television before the war and the screen was about the size of a large postcard. They must have been used for test broadcasts and things he supposes.

(21:54) Michael went to services at the Cathedral, though his dad didn't like Cathedral from the point of being a family parish church - so they all went to All Saints. Michael's mother taught in the Sunday school, his two sisters sang in the choir, Wilfred was a server. Michael was also a server when he was old enough being a 'boat boy' carrying the incense. (22:31) There were no 'sunday best' clothes, having clothes coupons and his school suit that was all he wore - unless it was hot and he didn't have a jacket on. Michael would go to Sunday evening song with his mum sometimes and sat in the front where there was a special row for the Canons' wives and family, in front of them would be all the boys in the Cathedral school with the borders. They would sit there and keep an eye on Michaels two sisters, who were very popular with the boys. Though that didn't give Michael too much of an advantage except for perhaps one time - when he went to school without his tie when he was 11, he was reported by somebody to one of the monitors and was sent out to this schoolhouse study which was a tiny little room and questioned 'where's your tie' and such. They knew that Michaels sister was Sheila and they didn't do anything cruel because they knew jolly well who would find out. (23:48) He couldn't have simply nipped home to get his tie as walking out of school would be a terrible crime, even though it would have been less dangerous then it simply wouldn't be done.

(24:07) Michael remembers the Mayfair that was marvellous. They had three days and were allowed to completely occupy all the streets - all of Commercial Road, and the whole of Hightown and Broad Street and King Street had these enormous funfair rides and stalls. It was noisy and went on being noisy until about 12 o'clock at night, when they would all be in bed. One of the first times Michael went to the Mayfair there was a ring toss, and if it landed and completely went down the spike you would get a prize, Michael tried it and first time he won a box of liquorice all-sorts. The man who ran the stall said 'oh doesn't he want to have another go?' and Michael said 'oh no I've got my prize, I'm not going to waste another penny' he must have been impressed that Michael was very astute as the chances of getting this ring to land correctly were very little. (25:24) Michael didn't go to the Mayfair with his family after the first time where he went with his mother when he was 7, except perhaps maybe with his eldest sister depending on what age he was. Once he was at the age of 10 he could get on his bike and cycle anywhere, though definitely not on the Close. (25:52) There was a man who looked after the grass, Mr. Lowe, who was a lovely chap, a great big fella with a moustache . Mr. Lowe would take Michael to his little workshop where he made things, which was lovely and always smelled of wood and glue and such. It was his job to cut the grass, and he was particularly good at edging - he would be the one that if he saw somebody trying

to cycle across the Close would bellow and put the fear of god into them, thus no-one cycled in the main. (26:44) Cars were not allowed in the close as it's not a public thoroughfare, of course Michael's dad's car could come right up to the front of the house to pick up people or drop people off. Once a year, just on that corner by the old barn they would put a chain across on Good Friday , and every year you have to stop them from doing it to retain the right to keep it as a private thoroughfare. (27:43) People didn't stay on the Close much like they do these days, there were one or two seats where a few old ladies might walk across and sit down, but usually there would only be people walking across the Close. People would push their bicycles across the path there. (28:46) There were never any really big events on the close, the nearest you would get to that would be the Mayfair but they would never be allowed to actually come up on to the close.

(29:05) The Mayfair was only allowed these three days, it started at midnight and ended at midnight. So they had to get in there at midnight and set up and on the last night of the three quickly put everything away in time. Though Michael couldn't see it from his house being set-up or taken down. You needed money to visit the fair, Michael's pocket money when he was about 8 or 9 was a penny a week, which he used to usually spend on a thick liquorice stick which lasted a long time - it was very hard and took about five minutes to chew a little bit off. Though for a long time his elder siblings didn't have any pocket money, and if they wanted sweets they would have to ask for it. (30:07) Michael certainly didn't do any courting on the close. His sisters used to go around to the school and used to get in through a window occasionally into the studies. Though Michael doesn't know much about that, she was six years older and certainly wouldn't have come home and told them. (31:10) They used to have plays in churches that were medieval, at All Saints they had a marvellous thing called a pageant that was about the Christmas story but apart from Jesus, Mary and Joseph all of the characters were in 12th Century costume.

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