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Transcript:

Interview with John Ridler

I'm John Ridler. Originally, I was born and lived for seven years in Fownhope, then moved into Tupsley, kept my association with the Heart of Oak in Fownhope because of my best friend, John Hardwick. He still lives there, still does. Went to the Cathedral School, which meant Saturdays or Sunday mornings, which intruded on the Club Walk day. Bit of a shame but still managed to go afterwards. In my teens used to cycle out there and join John Hardwick and go to the fair. Try and sneak in without paying because they used to charge for entry and we'd crawl through the long grass and hope we didn't get spotted, which was good fun. And then I finished school when I was sixteen, was in the army for ten years and found out I couldn't be a member of the Heart of Oak because the army were providing medical care for me and I couldn't take the medical care monies from the friendly society. When I left the army in 1977, I was able to re-join and that was thanks to John Hardwicke, my best friend in encouraging me to join. He also then encouraged me to join the committee. And I've been a committee member now, apart from 14 years in surrey, ever since that day. So if anybody wants to take over the secretary of the Heart of Oak Society, I would willingly give it over to them.

I must have been five-years-old [at my first club walk] and I'm not too sure if it was a rainy day or not, but I think I had my mac on. That seems to have been the general attire for most of the walks that I remember. It always seemed to be raining, when I was young. I know there must have been quite an atmosphere in the house as I was dressed up and given a stick by my, I presume my father would have made a stick, found a broom handle or something like that, my mother decorated the stick for me. That was all very well in the comfort of my own house, but I was a bit of a shy lad and then going down to the village and having to join in and the perennial problem of you march in pairs. Now if you've got a good friend who is marching with you and you've joined up and you know you are going to be with him, because there were no girls then, then that was fine. But I went there, my best friend John Hardwick, 18 months younger than me, not a member yet, so of course I was put with someone I don't know who. And I was there in my mac, cap, because we always had a cap as well in those days, marching with somebody I didn't really know, along with what seemed a lot of big people. Because all the farmers and the farm labourers etc and we as the youngsters

were at the back. There can't have been many places that we went to but I do remember after the church service, which was absolutely packed to the gunnels, and I believe in those days we all put the flowers out in the vestry or out in the churchyard. We didn't bring them in and the banner didn't come into the church either. But it was packed to the gunnels, lots of singing. And I remember in the pew there being dwarfed by all these members, these people who were a lot taller than me as well. And after that we ended up at the doctor's, we went to his garden he hosted us, Dr Malcolm in those days.

The one incident I do remember was when the photographer from the Hereford Times was talking to somebody and they said well he's the youngest, and I was pointed out to the photographer, who then wanted to take me into the end of the garden. I was aware there was an arbour of roses. Now being a good lad in the advice of my mother and my father I wasn't going anywhere with a stranger, so I pulled back. They tried quite hard to persuade me to go into this arbour with this photographer so I could have my photograph taken. And in the end, they relented and took my photograph outside.

But my grandmother on my mother's side, Grandma Jones, she was given the, I think my parents must have bought the paper that had the photograph in it and given it to her. Because she cut it out, the photograph out of the paper and sent it by post from Birmingham, she lived in Birmingham, because that's where my parents originated from, she cut it out and sent it to my mother. So many years later my mother gave that photograph to me, which I've still got. I would have loved to brought it along but I can't find it at the moment, I don't know where it is. So one of these days I will find it and bring it along. So that's my earliest memories and it always seemed to be that we were marching somewhere but I never really knew where in the village, because we lived just outside. And then of course in my teens I'd go there after school as I said, mainly to go to the fair and join in the sports. I was famous for doing the slow cycle race and win. Yes, it was always a big day, a grand day. And of course, as with most things, there were far more people there then there are now. But the lovely thing is that I think because I went back to Fownhope a lot and when I got a bicycle and I used to cycle out there a lot to see John and his brother Geoff Hardwicke, and I've been part of the community from youth, from birth, somehow all the older villagers, the more established families who've been there for years and years and years they, I wouldn't say took me to their hearts, they knew me and I was part of the village and part of the historical centre of the village. So they all said hello to me. Now I'm terrible with faces and names and remembering people's names: someone will be talking to me and saying hello etc and I'll be thinking, I know you, I know you but I can't remember your name. yes so there was always that pull, that family, that community sense of the old village, but it's still there. the old village occupants are

still there, still come back and year after year we greet each other and say it's lovely and fantastic. If ever there's a chance to get together, and that's not very often, then yes, we all get together.

Like I said I left school, joined the army, spent ten years in the army and came back, re-joined the society. Bill Lewis at one stage, after a few years, said, he wanted to retire as secretary and he knew somebody who'd take the job on and he groomed me into becoming the secretary, which I carried on with through the, I'm not too sure if he was secretary and treasurer during the transition from friendly society from what we now run as the Heart of Oak Society.

At some stage, I don't know how, Bill got to know that the friendly society as we were, was going to come under new financial strictures. I think it had been highlighted in the late 70s early 80s, that several friendly societies had been robbed by their faithful treasurers and the government were going to strengthen the laws governing the friendly societies. Because if they were robbed then the members lost money, which would have happened. So Bill got to hear about this, he researched into what was going to happen and came to the conclusion that if we became a friendly society or continued as a friendly society with the new strictures, the new rules, then it would cost us more money and we would have to put up the fees for the membership fees. We had a large proportion of our members who were old aged pensioners and paying just a few pounds a year to be a member. Now with the costs of say having a full audit of the society and being forced to join the friendly societies Society, and umbrella organisation and pay all their fees, their members fees etc, the subscription would have to rise. And if we did that then you would probably go beyond the means of the members to sort of pay the annual subscription to keep the society going. So he suggested we fold up the friendly society. And we all said that's such a shame, we look forward to this every year, the march etc, and as a committee we said well, shall we put it to the vote, we'll go along with changing over from the friendly society to the normal society to the now Heart of Oak Society as a committee, and keep the tradition, the centuries old tradition of marching through the village. So we contacted all the present members and had a meeting in the old school hall and said would people be interested if we became just an ordinary society celebrating the tradition of marching through the village and being hosted along the way. And there was a majority shouted yes. So at that point we were in the throes of getting the old banner, which now resides in the church, refurbished because it had been noted it was in a bad state of repair. We'd had somebody come along and look at it and say yes, it does need refurbishing.

Right in 1989 after Bill Lewis the treasurer and secretary had researched into what would happen if we stayed as a friendly

society and what we could do. So in 1989 we held a meeting with all the members, saying would you like to continue the tradition of the friendly society marching through the village and it would not be a friendly society anymore it would just be called the Fownhope Heart of Oak Society, and they all voted for it. So that's what we did.

My affinity with Fownhope stayed with me even though we had moved to Tupsley in Hereford in 1957. And a year later my sister and I and our next-door neighbour, who was a girlfriend of my sister's, we decided we would go out to Fownhope and see my friend John, John Hardwick. So they got a bike each, that was fine, and I'd got a scooter. So off we went, down the road, scootering away, it was summer time, it was lovely weather, and we went off towards Mordiford and then Fownhope, and as we got nearer to the Hardwick's farm, which we were going to knock on the door and say, 'here we are!' we got a little bit anxious about that fact that we were out on our own, we'd been on the main roads and my foot was sore from all the scooting because I'd got was a scooter. So we decided we wouldn't call in just in case we got into trouble. So we went down to the river, at the bottom of Capler, splashed around in the water, cooled off then headed back home. And I do remember, I'm sure it was Desmond Biggs who was employed at that stage by British Telecom or the GPO as it was in those days. I was over taking my friend and my sister on the scooter and he came around the corner and I heard the screech of the brakes. He knew who I was and I was a bit worried that he would tell my parents but he didn't. but when I got home I'd got a hole in my shoe, my right foot, which was the scooting foot for pushing off, and I had to explain that to my mother, but I got away with that I think. The distance in all must be about six miles, five or six miles to get out there and five or six miles to get back as well. We did get caught in the end because Mrs Hardwick, John's mother, came and visited us soon after that, sat down in the front room with my mother having a cup of tea, with the china out, the best china out, and chatting. And what I didn't know at the time but I found out later was that she's told my mother that she'd seen me, my sister Wendy and the girl next door, Gill, go past her place in Fownhope a few weeks before, and then that's when my mother realised that's how I got the hole in my shoe. So that evening it was up to bed, up to our bedrooms, my sister Wendy and myself, for a very early night.

No, my sister never became a member. And the first time that women were allowed to enter the walk was when we became the new society. So before that, no, it was sexist. Nobody seemed to mind, you didn't do it deliberately, it was just one of those things.

[What was the reaction when women were eventually entered?] A lot of enthusiasm by a few dedicated women, who thought they would take up the opportunity to walk. But most of them were

traditionalists and weren't really interested in marching. They used to be on the side-lines, and I hope it's not sexist saying this, but that's where they wanted to be and watch us doing our thing, and save them having to do a floral decoration as well. But a few did want to and therefore they joined us and we were pleased to have them.

[Can you describe the ritual of dressing the stick?] I handed them to my wife! I have tried but my wife is very artistic and she does a beautiful job and it's a case of if I start to do it then it's not right.

Now, the dressing of the stick, a lot of the men are serious about doing it for themselves and using the best things going. I'm not very artistic but my wife is. I started trying to dress the stick when we were married, when we first got married. My wife would sort of push me to one side, which I was quite happy for her to do. She would do the stick and then I would end up with a lovely stick. But I have tried on many an occasion to do it myself, but now I just assist.

As I am society secretary and also the Marshall of the parade and I don't live in the village either, that's a little bit awkward, I'm not up that early, not as early as Mike for the cutting of the bough, and several other members I know get up very early. I think Robin Piers does as well, because he has a lot to do on that day. I'm up by 6.30am, 7 o'clock, have a hurried breakfast, I've got everything prepared the night before, we do the stick, that's my wife Sally (???) and myself do the stick, or should I say, she does it, and I will leave her there at the house and I will be in Fownhope by half past eight, nine o'clock, so that I make sure that the church is all set up and that we've got the place settings on the poster, so that people know, because quite a few people go to the church before we get and so they want to sit ready, so that they've got their favourite pew etc, need to get the members seated and the band and all the juveniles as well. So by the time I've sorted that out I'm down at the New Inn by half past nine, quarter to ten, something like that, waiting for the band to turn up, the Morris Men, hand out the leaflets that we've prepared for the programme of the day, the events of the day, and just generally socialise when I can.

I've always had to drive to get there [the club walk] so I haven't drunk much at all. In the seventies when I was younger, not being a member you couldn't get into the gardens for the free beer, so John Hardwick and Geoff could go in there but I couldn't because I was in the military. So it wasn't until 1977/78, when I left the army that I could join again and go for the free beer. But no, I never drank too much. And I wonder if he managed to remember? How could he keep up the counting? [Re Mike who allegedly consumed 42 pints once club walk day]. I mean after half a dozen pints I wouldn't be able to remember if I'd

had half a dozen or ten. But, yes, Mike's well-known for his consumption, much to Rose's annoyance. She tries to keep a check on him if she can.

Back in 1992 I think it was, or '91, we had a financial slump in this country and there was very little work in this area and so I re-trained as a teacher and I taught maths. The only job I could get at the time was down in Surrey, so we decided we would move to Surrey, keep our cottage in Ocle Pychard, rent it out, and live down in Surrey for five years. Well that stretched out to fourteen years. But I always knew when the club walk was coming on, so whenever we possibly could we would drive from Surrey up to the Hereford area, either stay with my sister, one of my sisters who lives in Cross Keys, or we would camp at Lucksall and join the parade. It's quite interesting when you are staying in a tent trying to dress a stick.

Fownhope somehow is in me, it's a draw, it's a fascinating draw. I mean in the seventies, sixties, well I mean, late sixties, early seventies, even like through to the eighties even, Fownhope was the place to go. The Green Man was always packed out on a Friday night, Brockhampton Court, was a big venue for parties, and before we went up there we all congregated in the Green Man at Fownhope, the young farmers congregated there on several occasions. So it was the hub of the entertainment world and that's where we all graduated to. And it was also all part of my background having been born there, so it all sort of came together to be one big draw to go to Fownhope. And of course, my best friend John Hardwicke was there and that's where we would meet up or finish off, getting the last pints if we could.

So in the 1990s, early 1990s, the slump in the construction industry, which is where I was working in, retrained as a teacher and found a job down in Surrey. Was only supposed to be for five years but fourteen years later we came back. However, Fownhope tugged at my heart strings and we always knew when club walk was and we would endeavour to appear on the Saturday for the walk.

I'm not sure how old I was, but the one of the occasions that stand out for me for the walk was that we walked towards Mordiford and we went to a place called Rock House. And I'm not too sure what that area is called or just before Lucksall. It was outstanding because as a child there running through the gardens, well you couldn't run through the gardens, but it's on a steep, well very steep, almost like a mountainside, and it was a fantastic venue. It was quite a long walk out of the village. The other one that we used to go to a lot and somebody else will have to tell you the name of the venue, was just before Rock House, just after Geoff Hardwicke's, Letchmore Lay (?). going from Fownhope towards Mordiford, there's Letchmore Lay and you start to go up the hill there. and it used to be where we as Cubs, when I was in Fownhope as a child, age six or seven I

joined the Cubs and we used to hold our meetings there. and I can't remember whose place it was. I think he was, he wasn't a doctor, he might have been a politician or a business man, I'm not too sure. Those two occasions stand out for me. And the other one I know was something like the Jubilee year, when the car park in the New Inn and the car park in the Green Man had got all sorts of stalls, there was bunting, there was hog roast, there was tombolas, all sorts of things going on. And I think it was organised by some of the younger members in their twenties, some of the more party-going type of people, the scouts, the guides, people like that. It was a really enthusiastic day.

I remember my first club walk as a real juvenile, a youngster, I was only 5-years-old and the excitement in the house, getting everything ready for me. But then the petrified state I was in having to find somebody to walk with because John Hardwicke was too young to be a member and he was my best friend. And I remember all the tall people there, they were all a lot taller than me, I was a shorty, dwarfed by them. And being the youngest member on the day, the photographer from the Hereford Times wanted to take my photograph and because he was a stranger to me I refused to go into the rose garden area, so he had to make do with me being photographed outside.

I'm terrible for names. I'll tell you one though, because we always used to have the pole and pillow fight. So we had bicycle racing, we had running competitions, three-legged races, sport in the afternoon and there was a fair too. And the highlight of the day there was the pole and pillow fighting. And all the local lads of course wanted to be the best. They'd have been to the pub, which was the Ferry in those days, the Ferry pub down Ferry Lane. Or they'd have been the New Inn and they'd have had a few beers inside them. And there was one, Billy Taylor. Geoff Hardwicke's wife, Annie, it was one of her brothers. She had many brothers and sisters. And he was the champion. He was built very stockily and he had a very big beer gut, and he was just right for sitting on the pole. He would take swipes from everybody, just take them and sit there. and then quite often it would just be one big thump from his pillow and the guy would be off the pole. Now I was never brave enough to get on that pole because I didn't want to come flying off and landing on the floor. So yes, he was one of the outstanding members.

I've only got one, my son Matthew. We enrolled him when he was a youngster to be in the Heart of Oak to walk. So he's walked on many an occasion. Now lives in Basingstoke. If he gets a chance he comes up. This year he came up and helped us with the sports but he didn't manage to get here in time for the walk itself.

I think the importance of the Heart of Oak and its tradition is beneficial to the village for a start and to the members of the village and the community and it is something that we are missing these days, and it's community spirit. And the old

families as you might call them, all turn out or try and get there, come whatever weather there is, whatever their ailments are, try very hard to make it for the day and to continue that tradition. And I feel that it is a strong draw for me to go back there. It's got tentacles Fownhope has and it just takes me back.

Well this year's walk was again fantastically good because we had the lovely weather. We've had a number of summers where we've had good weather for the walk. It was a bit hectic at the start. As I said before I got to the New Inn started socialising and getting people sorted out, making sure that we'd got cubs, there were no brownies unfortunately this year. One thing that made a little bit fraught was the fact that the bank was late. They turned up quite late this year, half past ten instead of the normal quarter past, so I was panicking a little bit. We did have the Morris Men, they turned up, they did a few rounds for us in the New Inn car park. Got the parade formed up with Mike Andrews at the front with the bough, we had the banner with four people on the ropes, then we had British Legion, three members of the British Legion marching behind the banner, and then the band. And then senior members, junior members and we then had the Cubs and anyone else with a pushchair. So off we went to the church, it was busy in the church, it was lovely, it was full. The band was up near the alter these days, which gives it a lovely sound coming down through the aisles. Then after the brief church service we went outside and we were entertained by the vicar and his wife with squash and biscuits, and then then Morris men did a few turns for us, and the band did and we said thank you very much to the vicar and his wife and the helpers and the tradition of three cheers was carried on. And then it wasn't very far from the church to the next one. So once the service in the church is over we go outside into the churchyard where we are plied with squash and biscuits by the vicar and his wife and the helpers. That's where we judge the juvenile stick, this year won by a young girl, Geoff Hardwick's granddaughter won the stick this year. The Morris Men performed, the band performed for us, we gave three cheers to the vicar and his wife and helpers, then we processed, formed up outside and processed to the Cohens which is just across the road anyway, and that's where we held the group photograph taken by John Hardwick, who has done that for many many years for us now. And then after the Cohens we came out and we went up into the back of the village, past the sheltered housing, where we stopped and the band played a few numbers for the residents there and then we carried on down towards the fire station, turned left and back up to the village and the Green Man and we went into the Coopers, where we had the judging of the senior sticks. So from the Coopers we formed up outside, briefly held up the traffic, turned left into Wye Leisure and out onto the fields. We were guests again of Maggie and Arthur Williams, who own the Wye Leisure Centre. And that's where we all had our picnics, there were lots of people out in the lovely weather, sitting on the grass waiting for the

sports to start. So we ended up in the Wye Leisure field at the back of Wye Leisure, guests of Maggie and Arthur Williams, who've entertained us for many years now. On the field there were several stalls, there was a display by Catcher Media, which was very very interesting, a lot of interest in what was showing there, all very excited about some of the photographs and naming names of villagers, some of whom were still there. then we had the sports in the afternoon for the children and it all went off very well indeed.

I wonder what would have happened if I'd never joined the Heart of Oak? I think it's the initial thing. If I hadn't joined when I was young then I probably would never have got involved. Yes, it's hard work, it's hectic, it's a full-on day. We need some youngsters joining the committee. There is something I suppose in a way that I'm not too sure would be interesting, but might be etc. the banners because when we formed the Heart of Oak Society and relinquished the friendly society, we couldn't technically continue using the banner because it belonged to the friendly society. It was also in a state of bad repair and was going to cost over a £1000 to repair. Now we couldn't take funds out of the friendly society so as a committee we were quite young, well we were in those days, and we decided to raise the funds we would need to repair the banner and put up in the church. But then we wouldn't have a banner so we would have to buy a banner. So having raised just under a £1000 to repair the old banner we had to raise a £1000 for the new banner. So we had a subcommittee organising all sorts of things. We organised a duck race down the River Wye, which was supposed to just be for the committee members and a few friends and people got so excited about it they all wanted to buy a duck and I had to rent a thousand plastic ducks from Stratford on Avon Round Table or Lions Club I think it was, to put them in the river wye. We had a car boot sale on the same day as well, so it was quite a good event.

Personally I find them fascinating. Stories like this. They did a five-minute broadcast of people sitting in a caravan somewhere, the Listening Project, I find that fascinating. A lot of people do and people are interested in history and sometimes they want to delve into their own personal history and things like this would help, especially when you get together and there are names coming out and I remember this and remember that, who that was and what happened then. Because once it's gone it's gone and how many times have people said, oh, my grandmother had a fascinating life, and if we'd sat down and talked to her and what she was doing here, there and everywhere. I mean my father had quite an interesting life during the war and I wish I knew more about that. And he was a tremendous sportsman as well. I'm not the only person who would like to know more about that and I think probably half the population of the country would like to know more about their ancestors and what's happened. Maybe not the youngsters of today. They've got it all on tablet, haven't

they? I think it's interesting and necessary to keep in touch with life.