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Interview Date: May\_09\_2018  
Location: Cathedral Close, Hereford Town  
Source: Catcher Media Social CIC  
Interviewee: Emily Wilson (speaker, female)  
Interviewer: Marsha O'Mahony (speaker, female)  
Camera & Sound: Richard Goldsmith (male)  
Producer: Julia Goldsmith  
Language: English

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Video Format: MPEG-4  
Bit rate: 22.54 mbits/s  
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Aspect ratio: 16:9  
Width: 1920 pixels  
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Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz  
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Type: Audio  
Audio Format: MP3 audio  
Audio Sampling rate: 44.100 kHz  
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Transcript:

My name is Emily Wilson and I'm part of the Bob Wilson company. We're at Hereford May Fair operating the Storm Ride and I have been coming to Hereford for all my life, going back four generations. My grandsons are with me today as well but we've had four generations with me in Hereford. My grandfather Matthew Stephens started the, he was in Broad Street just along there with coconut shies and then my other grandparents Mr and Mrs Tom Price, and my mother and father, Mr and Mrs Billy Stephens, we used to have the dancing girl shows in Commercial Road. But unfortunately, when Commercial Road went there was no room, the Council couldn't allocate any more space so we lost out with the big rota, Mr Barton's big ghost train, there used to be Mr Chadwick's freak show. It was all novelty shows in Commercial Road, which I think was something that made Hereford unique.

(Tell us more about the dancing girls?)

Well it was the can-can girls, Cuban dancing girls, on my grandma's show the girls used to do the can-can, and on my mum and dad's show the girls used to do more like American dancing. And we used to have staff through an agency, but most of the time the family was on there as well because my older brother, Billy, and my sister Tilly, they were on it with staff, and then when they got married and they did their own thing. Me and my other brother, Arthur, unfortunately my late brother, we took it over. And then when Arthur got married we done it for about two years and then we packed it away. And so, it's been packed away I would say for about fifty years.

(You used to dance yourself?)

Well it was nothing because I've been brought up to do it. My mother used to do it when she was a girl. It was just the family trade. My mother would have learnt my sister and my sister learnt me. And my brother would have learnt my other brother to do the spieling on the show. So yes, it just goes back generations, but remember as well my grandma they had one and my uncle, my mother's brother, he used to do the spieling on their show. So, the two shows would stand next to each other and my, was there some opposition. Because there was drums and bells and everything. Spieling is telling a tale down through the microphone about what you are going to see inside. What it was my uncle would have lent my brother to do the spieling. By spieling I mean telling the tale on the front of the show, encouraging the people to go in, telling them what they was

going to see inside. So again, that would go through the family. My uncle learnt my elder brother, my older brother learnt my younger brother. So it's very much family, family, family. Most sites the shows would be side-by-side and there would be a lot of competition because it would do to get the most people into their show. And there'd be drums and fire eating and bells ringing and it would stop the streets, you know, so that's what it was all about. The better you was on the front of the show the more people you got inside. So then that's you earnt a living.

It was for all ages, you know. Families would go in and men thinking they were going to see something they weren't going to see, generally all-round audience yeah. My sister was on it before me. Some of the staff would go on to be Tiller girls after they learnt, but no, we didn't. We got married into the business.

There was ever so such a variety down Commercial Road. There was a rotor, big wheel, Mr Barton's ghost train, which he was a local person, he his house in Hereford. I think this is what the fair is lacking now, the variety. Most fairs are because you haven't got a line of what you call novelty shows. I mean you'd have the 'fattest lady in the world' and 'the smallest midget', so that to me was show business.

Well today we've moved up so fast. The rides now are more thrilling, daring. We are coming back though to more families. Went through a stage of about four years that families didn't come, very few families came, it's more the teenagers. But now we have noticed that the older rides, the dodgems, that kind of ride, are coming back stronger because there's more families coming. Where the teenagers now and the big thrill rides are going to the pop festivals. So that's where the balance is tipping now, either to the pop festivals, that's where they go for more thrill rides. On the local fun fairs now families are coming back because it's a safe place to be.

My father's family was into coconut shies, before they was into coconut shies they was probably horse dealers, not gypsies, horse dealers. And then they used to have coconut shies Commercial Road and then it was in Broad Street outside the Green Dragon hotel. And then so my grandfather and my aunty would dress coconuts so they could go on the back. So I've come through all that with my grandparents. And then they started with different stalls, few kiosks and of course with the rides, the difference between rides now, 99 percent all computerised. So it's the whizz kids that knows what they are doing. I'm not a computer person so that's why I rely on my grandchildren.

I think the fair when we first started had much more atmosphere, a lot more atmosphere, because they used to give children the day off school, one day for the opening day and it always seemed to be local elections on the second day or the third day so of

course the schools was closed for that. So there was much more atmosphere because people create atmosphere.

(Did you enjoy the early days working on your parent's stall)

Loved it, that's why I'm doing it now, grandchildren are doing it, because it's a wonderful life, go to such beautiful places. I mean we have a home, got a home in Tenerife and got a home in Birmingham, but I wouldn't want to stay at any of them. We go to such fantastic places. I mean we don't have to pay to be on holiday here in Hereford. We go to Kenilworth, Stratford on Avon, Solihull, Windsor, we go to some.....so we've got beautiful gardens nine months of the year.

I'm now looking at a wonderful photo of my mother and father, Mr and Mrs Billy Stephens' 'Glam Parade, Cuban Dancing Girls'. On this lovely photo, you can see my mother, she used to take the money and she used to put the music on for the girls to dance. Holding the one ticket up is my eldest sister, Tilly, who married John Locke, and her son is still at Hereford Fair now. And my brother, my eldest brother, Billy Stephens, who used to run that show. And then after Billy and Tilly got married it was down to the younger generation, which was my brother Arthur, unfortunately we lost him eleven years ago, and myself to carry it on. And it's been now, must be fifty years since that show was out. But that actually show as it is seen on this picture is in a container in our depot in Birmingham. It's been stored away and it is there and it's not been out for fifty years. But I can assure you it is still in mint condition.

This photograph I am looking at is of the, my mother and father's show in Commercial Road. You can see on the photograph my mother, who used to be the DJ at the time and she also used to collect the money. That is my sister Tilly, she is the eldest but one, and that is my brother Billy, who was the eldest of the family. Now they ran that show for many until they both got married. And my sister Tilly, her son is actually here at the fair, again John Locke. Then my brother and I run the show. Unfortunately, we've lost my brother, who was the past president of the Showman's Guild, Arthur Stephens, eleven years ago. Where them two is now, me and my other brother would be. And that actual show has been packed away for probably fifty years and it is stored in a container in our depot at Haymills, Birmingham and it's still in mint condition.

This lovely photo I'm looking at is a photo of Mr Albert Barton, who was a local from Hereford, had a house here and his sons and daughters went to school here. Mr Barton used to look after the ghost train, owned the ghost train, which was in Commercial Road for many years. Wonderful man, gave lots of joy to families as you can see on the photos with his ghost train.

I've been coming over 70 years. I've not missed Hereford fair.

In fact, one year, or two years the Showman's Guild lost the tenancy and Mr Gerry Stephens was a member of the Showman's Guild, took the fair rides. And even them two years father still fetched me to Hereford Fair, so I've never missed a Hereford fair as long as I can remember. I would say the Stephens family has the longest tenancy here. My granddad Stephens and my grandma Stephens I would say before this century they was coming here with their coconut shies. I would say yes, the oldest family in Hereford is the Stephens family.

You'd go down Commercial Road and that's where all the shows was, and that's what we used call the entertainment street, you'd have people talking, spieling on the microphone about the smallest lady, you'd have them talk about the fattest couple, Mr Chadwick mention about his freak shows, the dog with five legs, you'd have Mr Barton's ghost train, you'd have Taylor's boxing show, and then you'd have my mother and my grandma's variety shows. So every one of those, people wasn't just walking, everyone would stop to be entertained. And then the best entertainment the more people went into their shows, and that's how it was.

Hereford was always a very late fair. We open at Hereford til midnight because, one because it created so much atmosphere, the children always had the first day off school and the second or the third day always the polling day so the local schools closed for the polling. So you'd have the children and the families all day. And then in the evening, because the people were out in the fields picking hops and doing whatever their trade was, then they would come into the town about 7 o'clock, so then they'd go and have a few drinks in the local pubs, meals wasn't a thing then, just go and have a pie and a pint, and then they used to go out and really enjoy the fair. So, there'd be as many people here at midnight as there would be at six o'clock. 'cause they used to come from all the villages all around Hereford and I think the coach companies used to do promotions to get people here. We seem to have lost a lot of that unfortunately. There's not enough being promoted. I mean I can remember there used to be coaches coming from Gloucester and from Cardiff to Hereford May fair because it was a big part of the social season and it was over the first week in May. Everyone used to go on the good weather and it usually was nice. so, it was a part of the calendar like Ascot Racecourse or the races, the Derby, the FA cup, the May fair was the highlight of their year.

My family never had rides. My husband's family they did the big rides. My father-in-law started way back, early nineties, and they used to bring a carousel here. So that's how I married into the rides, we was always the shows and the stalls, the food.

Re the dancing girls, the biggest problem was staff, families getting married, so there was nobody to carry it on. That was the biggest problem, the younger generation didn't want to take

it on. The reason why the shows didn't carry on because they was all families and then as the families got married there was nobody to carry them on. Unfortunately, the younger generation could see more in rides. And it's like the bingos and we used to have the old-fashioned spinners, they finished really when the big boys come into the bingos, bingo halls, so it has a big circle.

You will have to record the heritage of the May Fair by recording all the different changes, won't you? That's what you have to go, go back from when it was a horse drawn carriages coming in to set up the fair and steam engines. Because remember they went from horses to steam engines and to motor vehicles. Who knows we might have planes next.

I think you should be recording stories like mine, very much so. Without heritage, what have we got? Nothing. The May Fair needs promoting more. You see everybody in the olden days would know when the May Fair was, first week in May, the first Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday in May. Well the people that's come to live in the area they don't know what it is so they are telling. It was like when I was younger there was always coach trips from Cardiff, from Gloucester, coming to the May Fair. It was on the social calendar, the same as the Derby, Ascot, the Cup Final, Hereford May Fair was a social part of the calendar. So it really does need now the Council, the Showmen's Guild, and everyone else that can help promote it and let's fetch it back to how it was.

There's not been many sites that's had a May Fair since 1114, so that's where the heritage comes from, doesn't it? And you've got the wonderful cathedral. I mean coach firms could put coaches on. I'm sure people from London have never been to Hereford and would love to see it. They go to Windsor, so why not come to Hereford.

It's important to record these stories, very much so, because I mean once it dies off it dies off. We have to sit down and tell our grandchildren now what it was like. Without heritage, how are they going to know. The don't teach children in school unfortunately. So it's very good there's people that does the archives that will fetch it to the front and more it comes to the front the better.

I think our stories should be put in the archive very much so. There are people on this site now at the fair that their grandparents came and great grandparents, so it should be told. We're not just people coming into town and taking the money and going, we've been part of Hereford for a long, long, long, long time.