

## INTERVIEW WITH JOHN WIDDICOMBE

[JA]

The 14th of October 2025 and I'm in the home of a senior citizen of Whitney. Let me introduce myself, I'm John Abrams of the Whitney Museum Oral History Unit and I'm being helped this afternoon by Emma Morse, also a volunteer with John at the Whitney and District Museum. Right, also present we have a very senior citizen.

Would you like to tell us your name sir? I'm John Whiddicombe. And how would you spell it?

W-I-D-D-I-C-O-M-B-E. Right, and with us we have your daughter. Would you like to tell us your name?

I'm Sarah Whiddicombe. And with her, your husband? I'm Rob Adams.

Thank you kindly. Right John, let's get down to the serious business shall we? Yes.

Would you like to tell me where we are exactly today? Number 11? We're in number 11 Swan Court, Whitney.

This is just off Gordon Street. Right, I'm going to go through really your life history, would you like to tell me where you were born? Yeah, I was actually born in Hampshire.

Whereabouts? Alton I think, I was born in Grey Shops, which is near Hindhood. Right, and did you grow up there?

No, I didn't grow up there. All my first memories were Hillingdon, Middlesex. We moved there when I was still a baby I think.

I see. So you went to school in Hillingdon and left school? No, I didn't.

[JW]

Oh dear.

[JA]

They home schooled me for two or three years and then they sent me to a boarding school in Abingdon. In Oxfordshire? No, it was in Berkshire in those days.

Oh of course it was, yes. Yes. To study what, anything in particular?

No, it was just, I went there when I was eight and I left when I was 12. Then I went to another boarding school in Hertfordshire until I was 17. I see, and then?

I didn't pass any exams for various reasons which I needn't go into. Yes, no. But of course that was the time the war started, so I, my first job was in a war factory making parts for aircraft.

You weren't called up then? No, I, well I got fed up of the factory so I said I'd like to go into the air force, so I volunteered for the air force. I see.

And I went in as a mechanic. A mechanic of what? Aircraft, airframe fitter.

Right. And most of the time I was stationed near Bath. Till the end of the war?

Well, till after V-Day, then I went to India for a year and I was just after I got there, it was V-Day day, so I had a year in India doing not very much.

[JW]  
With the air force?

[JA]  
Still looking after Spitfires.

[JW]  
Yeah.

[JA]  
Did you ever fly one? No, I didn't fly. Well, no, no, in one then?

No, you couldn't fly in a Spitfire because the only thing was seaters. Ah, I see. The double seaters you may have seen were invented later after the war.

Right, and presumably at some stage you came back to this country? I came back to this country in 1946 and wanting nothing to do with any aircraft or anything, and so I went into horticulture, did a year's practical and then a year's theoretical horticulture. It was government-sponsored, because they were rehabilitating ex-servicemen, and then I did various gardening jobs after that.

How did you arrive in West Oxfordshire? Well, I had the idea that I'd like to run my own market garden, having no money and not much experience, and so I bought this place in North Lee, which was £2,000 I think it was. Anyway, I had a chicken, about a hundred chickens, and I had big greenhouses and I grew tomatoes and grew a lot of flowers and vegetables to sell.

Some at the gates, some at shops, and eggs were collected every week by a firm in Freeland. Would you like to tell us exactly where this enterprise was, because I think North Lee's probably changed quite considerably since then. It has, yes.

It's in Park Road, which is next door to the school now, because the school wasn't there when I went there. That was open countryside, was it? Yes, it was cows in the fields just over the fence.

But I had a big piece of land, over an acre. Would that have backed on to the allotments somewhere? Were there allotments then?

There were allotments, no it wasn't quite, it didn't quite touch the allotments. The far end of it was where Windmill Road is now. So who did you sell to, the villagers?

Yes, I sold a lot of stuff at the gate, and I took flowers to various flower shops, some in Oxford, one shop in Oxford, and a couple of shops in Whitney, the one down Corn Street. How did you deliver the goods? May I ask a silly question?

Well, I had a little van, which my brother-in-law gave me, because he'd been stuck in a barn in a farm in Wales all through the war. He said, you can have this van if it's any help. So I learned to drive, and I had to go to Oxford to learn to drive.

And the van kept me going for three or four years. You did tell me at one stage you had a milk round as well. Well yes, as I wasn't doing very well in my market gardening, I thought I'd better get a job as a milkman.

So I worked for Whitney Dairies, and they paid £9 a week at the time, which I thought was riches. And I delivered all around Whitney. Whitney Town, as it was then?

Whitney Town, High Street, Corn Street, Church Green, and Smith's Estate. That was quite a round of milk. It was, yes.

Was there any competition? Yes, there was a co-op, and there was another private. But you beat them all?

No, I worked at Whitney Dairies, and the co-op, and Neville's Dairy, I think it was called. I see. What made you give it all up then?

Well, my marriage broke up. Oh, I'm sorry. Well, that's another story really, but we had five children.

At that time I had four children. And my wife decided to go off with somebody else, which was a bit more financially able than me. I see.

And she had the children. I kept in touch with the children all the time. They lived in Buckingham, so I kept in charge.

I kept in touch with the children. And one of them is here today who looks after you.

[JW]

Yes, that's right.

[JA]

Well, I don't know if you want to hear the whole story. No, no. Let's press on a little bit.

What did you do after the Market Garden? I drove for Brazil's. What was Brazil's?

Would you like to explain who they were? Brazil's was a cooked meat firm that operated down Bottom of Corn Street next to the bus station. They made pork pies and steak pies and sold hams and sausages and all the other cooked meat sort of stuff.

Did you collect any of the raw meat, or was that all delivered to the factory? Oh, no. I had nothing to do with the factory.

I just drove the finished product around Bampton, Carrington, Camfield, Marlborough, Wantage. All the local villages and just a bit further afield. Yes, down as far as Pewsey in Wiltshire.

So you mentioned that as Brazil's. Was that the name that it always had? As far as I knew, but they were owned by Bartlett's originally, I think.

I think it was Bartlett's that started. But Brazil's came from Amersham in the first place. And then they settled in.

Well, Whitney was just one of the branches. I think they had one or two other branches somewhere else. I'm not sure where.

It was a fairly big firm, I think, at that time.

[JW]

Yes, it was.

[JA]

Eventually, of course, they were taken over by Buryers, but that was after my time. So from there? After four and a half years of that, I went into the post office, and I worked for 17 years in the post office.

Now, that must have been quite an interesting change. How did you get in the post office? Well, I was getting...

We had a new sales manager, Brazil's, and he started pushing, you've got to sell more, do this and that, and I got fed up of that. And I saw an advert for the post office, so I applied, thinking, with great preparation, what's it going to be like working indoors all the time? But in actual fact, it was the best thing I ever did.

So tell me, can you remember being interviewed for the post office role? Yes. Tell us about it.

Well, I think... Well, I gave it a little test, had a few figures, that's one thing I remember. Anything more?

I can't remember much detail about that, actually. But... Where was the post office in those days?

Oxford. I mean, the head office was Oxford. I had to go to Oxford, the main post office, for the interview.

There were several people there being interviewed. Right. I don't know if they took them all or not, but anyway.

I worked for a month or two in Oxford itself, the main post office. Trainings? Yes, and they said, would you like to work in Whitney as a gap?

I said, well, yes, please, that'd suit me fine. So a transfer was arranged? A transfer was arranged, and I worked in Whitney then for 17 years, until I retired.

Where was the post office in those days? The post office was in 1 High Street, which later became a toy shop. But we moved into 2 Market Square, the building was.

I think it had been a doctor's surgery. It was now a sort of pub restaurant kind of place, wasn't it? What was it like actually serving in the post office in those days?

Because when would this have been, 1970? Yeah, 1967 I went into the post office. I did a year's...

I mean, a month's training at Bletchley Park, then a month in Portsmouth, and then I was supposedly fully fletched. I came to Whitney and started working there. The mention of Bletchley Park, of course, will mean a great deal to people these days.

Well, it does, yes. Well, they told us there's lots of secret things went on here during the war, but we're not allowed to say anything about it. And you didn't see anything?

No, we didn't see anything. They didn't show us anything much. We just lived in the huts.

So what were you doing exactly in the post office, on the counter? I was on the counter all the time. And what was it like?

Who did you meet? What were the people like? Oh, the people, that was the best part of it, really.

Every week you saw the same people come on on the same days. For what? Well, the Tuesdays they'd come in for family allowances, and Thursdays was the biggest pension day.

They'd queue up for their pensions. How would you identify them and their pensions? Well, they had pension books.

Issued by? Issued by the... Government, yes, by the National Insurance.

It was a pension by the government thing, anyway. What about children's? Did they have books?

Yes, they had family allowance books. The mothers used to come in with a family allowance book, or fathers. Can you recall any of the sort of pension, general pension prices, or children's allowances from those days?

Yes, the pension was about £4.10, wasn't it? I can't remember. Well, it was me, chap Hanson and St Pence to start with, anyway, until 1971.

Then we had to convert. To decimal? Yes.

Did you see any characters coming into the post office?

[JW]  
Oh, yes.

[JA]  
People that you feared or were a pleasure to see? Oh, there were one or two we didn't want to see, but the majority were very pleasant people. You got quite friendly with some of the old pensioners, because you saw them every week.

They'd always like a chat. And you liked to... Go on, sorry.

But you didn't always have time to talk if there was a long queue. And there used to be queues. You know, three or four queues go on and on some days.

How many people served at the counter then, like yourself? Well, it varied. Two on a Tuesday afternoon, because it was early closing, but three generally, and sometimes four at busy times.

We all had... They got all the times mapped out, so they had the right amount of staff as far as possible. Tell us, if you will, something about the money.

Did you have to balance every night? Yes. Well, when I first went in there, they balanced daily.

Then they changed to weekly balance, which was quite a relief, really, because you'd spend so much time trying to balance. Why was it so difficult? I don't know.

However meticulous it was, I could never balance exactly. So if you didn't balance, what happened then, supposing you were £100 to the credit? Well, it was the other way.

If there was a mistake... Well, sometimes you'd have too much, sometimes you'd have too little. It all went...

The office, each individual till, you had your own till. Each balanced their own tills. Then in the back room the next day, whoever was in duty in there had to balance all the four or five different tills and the balance the whole conclusion from the whole country.

And eventually, if there were any mistakes, of course, they'd find them. Did they? An incredible system, for you should know.

It's nothing to do with me. Did anything else happen while you were there, or did you just serve on the counter? I personally just served on the counter.

Well, yes, we served on the counter. But sometimes we had to answer the phone for telegrams. You took telegrams, did you?

Yes. Well, tell us what happened. What would happen then?

Well, normally whoever was working in the... What's it called, the back room? The writing room, they called it, the back room.

Whoever was working in the writing room would usually answer the phone and a bit of telegram would come through. He or she would have to write it down, then take it out to the postman to be delivered, because the sorting office was there as well. And if there was nobody in the writing room, somebody off the counter would have to go and answer the phone.

So you got to know the voices of the telegram people too. You recognised their voices. Where did the calls come from then?

It wasn't obviously from a member of the public. No, the calls had come from... I don't know where the office was.

The office was at Oxford, I suppose. There was a telegraph office somewhere. They couldn't ask you to send a telegram?

Yes, they could. Oh yes, we used to send telegrams as well. People would write the telegram and you'd hand it to the writing room or you'd phone it through yourself.

You had to go and take the phone in the writing room and... Who was that connected to? Who was the telephone connected to?

Well, presumably the telegraph office which was, I suppose, was in Oxford. And the main things all happened in Oxford itself, I think. So if the telegram was...

All the offices, all the crown offices and all the sub-offices would have to phone the main office. I see. So you didn't telephone the town directly?

No, no. You'd phone the telegraph office and then that was their job to phone up the relevant office wherever they was going to. And how did you calculate the cost?

Did you do it on the counter? Well, yes. We had to count the...

Yes, if somebody hands a telegram in, you count the words and work it out. And they had to pay at the time, presumably? Oh yes, yes.

That's right, pay. And we had to go in your till and be recorded and it's all part of your balancing your till at the end of the day. It sounds quite an intense business.

Oh, it was. It was quite complicated because you... I mean, you didn't just do stamps.

There was the licences and there was insurance stamps and postal orders. Tell us what a postal order used to look like. Well, it was like a cheque, really.

You had to... They were all marked up from sixpence up to... I don't know, was it pound or five pound?

I can't remember. From sixpence, six old pence, I suppose. Well, six old pence in the beginning.

That changed gradually when I first went in. And when did telegrams stop? Can you remember?

Or remember it happening? No, I can't remember it happening. Well, no.

Because I had a telegram from my second marriage. It was 1972, so it was still going in. I don't know when they stopped.

[JW]

Oh, that's fair enough.

[JA]

I didn't know whether it was perhaps in those early days when they changed to decimalisation. No, after decimalisation, they took away the telephones. They separated the telephones from the post office.

Before that, we were completely free with the telephone. You could just use the phone. Just people used to use the phone all the time, private calls and all sorts, because it was all...

It was a perk of the job. It seemed to be a perk of the job, because it was all part of the one organisation. But when the telephones were privatised, we were told you've got to be careful now with these phones, because you're going to have to pay for them.

So the post office had to pay the telephone people for every phone call. So you were caught out in the end. Yes.

And you issued all sorts of other licences, did you say? Yes, gun licences and dog licences. Did you have to take any precautions, or could someone just walk in and say, can I have a gun licence?

Well, I'm not sure about gun licences. I can't quite remember that. I think they had to have a certificate from the police before they'd get by with those.

But dog licences and wireless licences. Wireless? What's a wireless?

Radio. Well, they were called wireless licences, weren't they? They were called wireless in those days, yes.

They were, yes. But when you talked to... You always said, wireless will be young.

Yes, I fully accept that. But of course, the wireless and the radio are quite subservient to the television now. Well, yes, they are.

Did you issue television licences? Yes, we did. On behalf of the BBC?

Black and white and colour. Did you? We had separate of them.

Black and white were quite cheap, weren't they? A pound or something, but the colour, you had to pay a bit extra. And eventually, then, the number one market's High Street, I think you said.

We changed over in... After decimalisation, it must have been about 72 or 73, we changed over from one building to the other. Did it make any difference?

Were there any big differences? Not really. The counter was a bit different, but it did make a difference, because in the old office, the tools were on the left, and in the new office, the tools were on the right.

So it took a little bit of getting used to. So you helped yourself to all your colleagues' money to pay out? Well, that was the danger.

It's a start. Did you undertake any other responsibilities while you were in the post office, then? No, I didn't.

I was just a boring old clerk who never got any promotion or anything. But it was satisfying in its old role? Oh, yes.

I mean, it was quite an enjoyable job, really, though sometimes you'd be worn out at the end, you'd have queues all day long, quite tiring. And when did you retire? 1985, when I was 63.

Did you have to, or was it voluntary? No, I would have had to at 65, I think, but I went a couple of years early. And what did you do then?

Anything? Well, yes, I worked odd days in other post offices, including North Lee. Which ones?

Any in particular? Yeah, I went to one in Summertown for a few months. Then in those days, there was a bus back in the evening, so it was quite handy.

A bus from Summertown to Whitby, which was quite handy. And then you ceased altogether? Yes.

It was the end of my post office career, yes. But after that, well, I worked for Norline News and volunteered one or two things. I worked for the church and various things.

Now, one of the things I think you did was join the museum, did you, when it first opened? I volunteered for the museum, yes. Where was that?

Where it is at the present time? Oh, yes, the museum is where it is now, yes. And who were the people there?

Can you remember any of the names? Yes, no. Oh, is that a bit unfair?

Oh, I can't remember the names now. There was a funny little lady who lived in the almshouses down the bottom of Newland. You're talking about Sheila Cuss?

Sheila Cuss, that's right. She's just moved house just in the last fortnight, and she's got one of the houses on Church Green by the boys' school. Oh, has she?

Yes, she's still going. The bread and beef houses? Yes, the bread and beef houses.

Yes, I know Sheila Cuss. She was the one who got me working in the museum, actually. Was she?

Because she was a member of U3A, and she got up one day and said, may I say something we could do with some volunteers for the museum? So I said, oh, I'll do it. So that's how it happened.

Mum, what did you do? Any jobs that you can recall in the museum? Well, mostly I just sat there taking people's pounds.

If they came in, there wasn't very many. Not very many, no, but people used to come in and talk a bit, but they just all walked around. Did you educate yourself on the history of Whitney?

Not particularly, no, I suppose I found little bits about it gradually. Anything else you joined U3A? What did you do with them?

U3A? I found a member. In 1985, just as I retired, somebody suggested starting up a branch in Whitney.

So I went to the first meeting, and they found a chairman and a secretary, and I said, well, I could do treasurer. Having worked in the post office, I got up. I didn't know anything about accounting or anything, so I was treasurer for seven years.

Can you describe the activities? Yes, well, you know how U3A runs, they have main meetings a couple of times a month, and then they have special interest groups, groups of people, eight, ten, twelve people, who do whatever there is, like table tennis, or listening to music, or dancing, or playing spabble, or whatever. Do you still belong to it?

I do, but I haven't been going to meetings lately because I haven't been able to, it's a bit far to walk, and it's a bit much. So, what have we been doing in the last few years? I do belong to one group, I get a lift to a remnant of a history group, and there's only five of us left now.

So, once a month I go up to a house up at Tower Hill for a coffee meeting, and somebody talks about some historical figure or something. Has it got a name, the group? It's called History Coffee Group at the moment.

It did start, it was a very flourishing group at one time, 12 or more members, but they gradually moved or died. Did you ever come across a man called Stanley Jenkins? Oh, I did, yes, I remember Stanley Jenkins.

Because he ran the museum, well it wasn't connected with the museum, an independent history society from about 1977. Oh yes, I did meet him, yes, in the museum. I'd forgotten about him, yes.

Right, and now you're fully retired? Very fully retired, yes. We haven't mentioned it yet, but just tell us how old you are.

I'm 103. Lovely, congratulations on living this long. Well, yes, it was wild.

Right, anything else you would like to tell us that we might be interested in? Well, yes, we had a harvest lunch in church the other day, and all the people I talked to, not one of them was a native Whitney person. Good Lord, which church would this be?

St Mary's Church, I'm agreeing there. It's surprising, there must be a lot of native Whitney people about, but they seem to be overwhelmed by incomers. Oh, you consider yourself a genuine Whitney person?

I'm not a genuine Whitney person, I've only lived here 70 odd years. You're talking about incomers? Yes.

Well, we think our witness has expanded from 1954, when I first knew it, to now, it's about six or seven times bigger than it was. That's true, true. Did the streetlights go out or anything, half days, do you remember?

No, I don't know. Nothing else peculiar that happened in Whitney in your days? Oh, I can remember various fires blazing away, when Cook and Boggess was burned down, and another fire up where Sainsbury's is now, somewhere up that way was a major fire, wasn't it?

What about this site where you live now? Well, it was the laundry. Strong laundry?

I don't remember, yes. And that caught fire? Yes, it was a very convenient fire in Whitney.

Well, it suited you, you're living on the premises that they occupied. Yes, that's right, yes. Not quite the same, but there we are.

Not quite the same, no. Well, thanks John, you've talked a long time, and I don't want to go on too far. Have you any questions, you?

Any comments you'd like to make at all? I'm just generally addressing everybody in the room. No, the heads are nodding.

No, it was really interesting and educational. It's a really good place to live, isn't it, Whitney? I think, most people I talk to, it's always a really good place to live in, a nice place, they enjoy it, they like it.

And you must like it to have stayed here. Well, yes, I didn't have to get up and go to go anywhere else. There we are, I like Whitney.

All right, well, thank you very much, John, for your time and your memories, and we'll call it a day at that. Thank you very much.