

## INTERVIEW WITH STEVE FLETCHER

[SJ]

Thank you. So, hello, my name is Sonia Jervis and I'm a volunteer at Whitney and District Museum. Today I'm recording an oral history interview with our one and only Steve Fletcher from our town.

We're here recording in his lovely shop, the Clock Workshop, as part of our work to capture local memories, craft editions in Whitney. Steve, thank you for joining us to begin. Hello.

So, first of all, we'd like to sort of possibly talk about family origins and beginnings. Now, can you tell me about the first member of your family who worked with the clocks?

[SF]

Well, my great-grandfather, he came down from Belper to Oxford to actually take over management of a printing works there. But in his spare time, one of his hobbies was tinkering and repairing clocks. And I don't know, but I think that's where my grandfather got his interests from.

And he came to Whitney to do an apprenticeship at Pike's Clock Workshop, which was on Back Hill. And then he went off to war. Luckily, he survived, which was probably to do with the trade, actually.

And then he came back and later he set up his own business, clock and watch and jewellery shop in the high street. And then my father joined the company and became a watchmaker. My grandfather decided to sell up and retire.

Let me start that again. In 1964, my grandfather wanted to retire from the shop, and my father didn't want the responsibility of running a business like that. So he set up as a trade watch repairer for local jewellers and a lot of the Oxford jewellers as well.

And that he did forever until he died. But meanwhile, I didn't ever want to be a watchmaker because I used to see my father working in a small workshop, like 10 foot by 10 foot all day long. He used to come into the house absolutely tired.

His eyes were really tired. So instead of sitting and watching TV, he would sit and listen to TV while resting his eyes. And I thought, there's no way I want to be sat in a little workshop, not seeing anyone.

So that was the last thing I wanted to be. So the reason why I went into the trade is because the things that I wanted to do, like being a vet or a silversmith, which I couldn't get an apprenticeship for. As soon as I mentioned that I wanted to be a clockmaker, my father and grandfather were very, very pleased.

And they organised for me to go to a college in Hackney, which I did when I was 16, which is a great, great experience. Not just for learning how to repair clocks and watches, but for life and everything. And that's where I started in the trade.

And I'm sure that it goes back to my great grandfather's hobby.

[S]

So yes, no, that's amazing. I mean, what kinds of clocks did your ancestors work on at that time?

[SF]

When my grandfather started, he worked on all sorts of clocks and watches and a lot of new clocks back then. They were coming in from America, actually. And so he'd work on those, but he'd work on all the local churches, you know, lots of those sort of clocks.

[S]

Including our own Whitney clock.

[SF]

Yeah, he would actually go up to St Mary's every single day and wind it up, which I'm sure kept him really fit.

[S]

And did he get paid for every single day?

[SF]

No, he did that back then because of his love for the church.

[S]

Wow, that's amazing. Yeah.

[SF]

And not only did he do that for the church, but he used to play the organ as well for services.

[S]

So his involvement with the church has been, you know, our St Mary's church has been quite longstanding.

[SF]

Yeah, absolutely. And, you know, as soon as my father came into the trade, he took over the maintenance of the clocks. And after a couple of years of me being in the trade, they said, well, come on boys, it's time you took over the mantle and started looking after the clock.

Although by then it was, it had been electrified. So the winding of it happened automatically as it does now.

[S]

So no, that's fantastic. I mean, I would imagine the crafts and the traditions have changed over the centuries between family, from your grandfather, even right down, obviously, to Fred now. I mean, what tools, skills or techniques have you sort of seen have changed through the generations?

[SF]

A lot of the ways that we repair are exactly the same as the generations past. And we're very, very careful to keep up those traditions of the way that we repair things. But there are new tools out there.

There's ultrasonic cleaning machines. There's a lot of electrical machines that we use now to help us, but it's all very, very similar. And there's not a lot has changed.

[S]

That's really nice to hear, isn't it? Especially, you know, where it has been so, you know, like four generations now, really, and to know that things haven't changed massively, you know, with the craft is very, very interesting. Do you have some memories as a small child of your grandfather and the clocks?

[SF]

Yeah, I remember going into the shop in the High Street, where he had four watchmakers at one time all beavering away, repairing watches, because there weren't the electric clocks around like there are today. And, you know, everywhere you look in the house, there's a clock, there's one on, you know, the cooker. Here, there and everywhere.

But back then, a watch and a clock was the way that people used to see the time, know the time. And so it was more important back then, all the timekeeping things.

[S]

For every type of, you know, way of life, wasn't it? You know, what time you left the house, came back, you know, for different things, you know, like going to work, you know, time is always very, very important. And clocks, you know, through the years have, you know, been a very big part of everybody's life.

[SF]

Exactly. I mean, there was the big revolution in timekeeping with the course revolution. And I can remember my father getting very, very down about that, thinking that his trade was done for.

But actually, he just expanded the amount of shops that he worked for, and just kept up being very, very busy the whole time. And in actual fact, now that people are liking to wear a mechanical watch on their wrist rather than an electronic one, albeit now that smart watches are taking over again. But I think there still will be that love for wearing something well made and mechanical and something that isn't going to be thrown away after a couple of years, because it can't be reprogrammed or anything.

It's nice to have something to wear that a good quality that you can actually hand on. Yeah, yeah. And they can appreciate it because the watch is almost like a piece of jewellery.

And people find a lot of sentimentality about that because it's been close to someone they love.

[S]

Yeah, exactly. Definitely, definitely. I mean, do you think Whitney still has, you know, the importance of clockmaking business in Whitney in the community?

Is the business still very much part of the community here?

[SF]

It is. Albeit, we've sort of spread our net further. And it's very, very interesting at the moment to see what's happening in the trade.

There are clock shops that are closing down every week because they're finding it difficult to sort of carry on financially. And we're sort of bucking the trend in a way because I could have retired a little while ago, but it's more of a hobby to me. So I'm passionate about just keeping the business going.

[S]

And that passion shows massively in yourself and your business, especially with the generations of family that have been involved. So you can feel that passion within our town of your business here. So do you have any stories to tell us, you know, about notable local clocks or people that have been involved with our town that you have worked on their clocks?

Or do you have any little story to sort of add to our interview today? Possibly the Buttercross clock or St Mary's clock or a personal clock of someone's?

[SF]

Yeah, like the Buttercross, we actually, the Buttercross is quite an interesting clock because the mechanical mechanism was taken out, I think, back in the 50s. And there was an electric mechanism put in, which worked absolutely fine for years and years and years, but then it started wearing, actually wearing out. So I put a new radio controlled mechanism into it some years back.

And also put in, put the bell back in that had been out of it since the 50s. And it'd been in my grandfather's garage and then my father's garage. And I always wanted to get that bell back into the Buttercross.

And which we did, the mechanism is there to do that. There's a lot of work that needs to be done in the Buttercross. And that is actually stopping us at the moment from getting that bell working again.

But it's all there. It's back in place and all ready to get working as soon as all of us have more money to do all of this very, very expensive restoration work.

[S]

So when the Buttercross clock gets restored, will it chime or make a noise? Or so will it be in, you know, the same sort of, will it chime alongside the St Mary's?

[SF]

It will. It'll strike the hours.

[S]

Yes.

[SF]

And because it is radio controlled, the strike will be absolutely bang on every single time it strikes, which for me is quite important. Because like on Remembrance Day, having the clock right is quite important to me. And one thing that I've always done on Remembrance Day is first thing in the morning, go up to the church and set the clock seconds perfect so that when it strikes, it'll strike the right hour.

Wow.

[S]

That's amazing. And you know, something very important, again, that you are doing for our town, there is a story in Phyllis Randall's book. She was a little girl who used to live in the Market Square and her father had Ransom's chemist.

And one of the stories that she wrote about was that she would hear the Buttercross clock literally a couple of seconds before the St Mary's clock. But as a little girl, that

was really important to her and she didn't want that to change. And again, we're going back to, because that would have been in your grandfather's time.

[SF]

Well, actually, I can remember Ransom's.

[S]

You remember Ransom's chemist?

[SF]

Yeah. I remember because it was in the Market Square. That's right.

Next to the Corn Exchange and used to have these wonderful, huge glass like vases, massive things in the window. That's my biggest memory of that shop actually.

[S]

And I think it's like it was part of the community and people would go there obviously to buy things, but they'd also would go there, you know, as a local community and share their community stories. And that was actually where I read the story again about your grandfather and the clocks and every single day he would go up and, you know, wind the clock up or set the clock every single day for the town. So the Fletchers obviously have been, you know, part of our town for a long, long time.

Do you think, I mean, you've already explained that people's relationship with clocks has definitely changed over the years, but I feel that we're definitely going back to, you know, I'd love a grandfather clock in my house, you know, but if I'd said to probably my niece, she'd be like, what? But, you know, again, it was a very big part of the household, wasn't it?

[SF]

It was, it was, you know, an awful lot of houses would have their grandfather clock, if not the grandfather clock, the mantelpiece clock. And it was the main timekeeper for the house. And I think that the way things, the way that clocks are viewed now is very, very different.

Whereas it was more of a utility piece before, albeit nice utility piece and people would hand it on. Now there's more sentimentality about the pieces and all the memories that are attached to the clocks. And I think that's what's going to keep our trade alive.

And that's why it's important that we keep crafts like this alive. Absolutely. Because there are so many skills and techniques that are passed down through generations.

And that's, that's what's actually kept those skills. As soon as that's lost, then the next generations would have to learn it all again. And it could be really, really quite difficult.

I was only talking to someone earlier on about this because he wants to go into watchmaking, which his grandfather and great-grandfather did. And his grandfather's in his eighties. So I said to him, you have to just go around to your grandfather's all the time and pick up all this really, really solid skill.

[S]  
And is that what you did yourself?

[SF]  
And that's why, yes. In fact, when I left college, when I was 18, my grandfather wasn't quite retired. He always tinkered, did a little bit.

He never, ever retired. Can't come watchmakers rarely, rarely.

[S]  
Did he sort of invite you in as a child to come and learn?

[SF]  
Well, no, not, not necessarily. But, but I always watched him. But, but when I came, when I left college, he used to come into my workshop for one or two hours a day and just stand next to me and just enjoy watching his grandson repairing the clocks.

Quite often telling me that I was doing it wrong. And I was always trying to prove him wrong, but then realised that actually he was usually right. And, but it was, it was the most golden, golden time for me because not only did he talk about the clock repairing, the clocks that I was working on, but he'd also talk about his time, not only in the clock trade, but his time in the war.

And I learned a lot, a lot. And yeah, it was, it was a really, really special, special time to have.

[S]  
It was a close time.

[SF]  
Yeah, really close. I'm so lucky to have had that.

[S]  
Yeah, absolutely. And you know, and what an amazing man, you know, was he as part of our town and, you know, and do you find that, um, your son, Fred, you know,

are you, it's not the same experiences, um, as such, but is, do you find that Fred is learning from you also?

[SF]

Oh, massively. Yeah. It takes years and years and years to pick up all of these skills.

Um, I would say probably, uh, 10 years to, to become a really good clock or watchmaker.

[S]

Wow.

[SF]

So Fred's done, um, I think six years now, so he's well on his way. Um, and in fact, what he's doing, uh, sometimes he's picked up skills of doing fine work. Um, and when I started, I didn't ever do the fine work because if there was any fine work needed, I would give it to, to my dad to do.

So, and he should have said, no, do it yourself. So, um, I failed by going to him and he failed by saying, not, not saying, no, you do it yourself. You need to pick up these skills.

So, uh, Fred, um, my son, uh, he can turn up the, the most tiny, tiny pieces, um, little pivots that are as fine as a hair and as brittle as glass. Wow. And he'll, he'll hand turn those on, on a watchmaker's lathe.

[S]

I think it's absolutely amazing that you, the four generations of family, um, it's quite a rarity that that actually happens. Um, and I think it's really important, you know, that the biggest part of me talking to you today is really to get that out there that we actually do have four generations, um, within, like you said earlier, you know, within your own definition of, of what you do. Yes, exactly.

[SF]

You know, And not only do I have, um, Fred, who's, who's a clockmaker, but also, uh, my daughter Millie, um, she actually manages the business, uh, which is really, really important because, you know, we've got 10 people, um, working at the clock workshop. And, uh, if I was managing the workshop, then I wouldn't be working, uh, and doing all the, the stuff that I'm really good at. Um, and, and also I wouldn't be able to spend time, uh, going around handing on my, my skills to the others, which I see is, is, uh, where I should be now, um, in my, my 70th year.

[S]

Do you think, um, that is a possibility of, um, making the, um, the clock making industry, um, much more widely, uh, you know, out there for possibly apprentices to

come into, um, cause you went to college, um, and your experience is there within learning the trade also.

[SF]

Yeah, I think, I think it's important, um, that, that, well, I went to college. There are some, um, the college that I, I did go to college and the college that I went to in Hackney, um, has since closed. Uh, but we do have, um, Birmingham University, uh, running a course.

We have, uh, Woestep, which are in Manchester running watch repair courses. We have Westin, um, down in East Sussex, which is the most amazing college. Um, and it's important that anyone that, that would like to go into the trade, it's important that they get a grounding from one of these colleges, because it's much easier for a business like ours to take in someone that, um, has got some sort of knowledge and skills before they start.

Otherwise it takes someone away from the bench and has all sorts of, um, issues and things. So, um, I'd always suggest that someone goes to a college first.

[S]

Absolutely. And I think I'm, you know, lots of trades now, you know, be it, um, stonemasonry or, you know, everything is coming back to, um, you know, what our forefathers and, you know, family did before. And I think that is just like so important.

I mean, do you, do you have any other stories that you would like to share with us, uh, concerning possibly your father or your grandfather that you could share with us as a town, um, memories of the town, um, as a young boy for you? You know, um, this interview is really, it is about, um, the clock making industry and the personal, uh, side that it means to you, but also it is about our town and, and, you know, we would like you to share your memories, be it, you know, whatever in the town. So Steve, do you have any memories of the town?

[SF]

Yeah. I mean, from, from when I was a child, um, I mean, Whitney has changed so, so much. Um, there, there weren't any supermarkets, uh, when I was a kid.

Um, so, uh, uh, my mother, um, there were four, four children, um, and every day she would go shopping, um, and go down to the, the, uh, sort of grocers, the butchers, the, uh, fishmongers, um, you know, each shop rather than going to the supermarket and getting everything. And she used to go every day, um, depending on what we were going to eat or do. Um, and a lot of those shops in Whitney, they were family run shops as well.

Um, and, and also multi-generational as well. So, um, and all of that has, has gone almost, I mean, I think that we're, we're one of two last standing multi-generational businesses. Clark's Timber Merchants is another lovely, lovely, um, family business.

Um, but, um, I've been racking my brains just recently and thinking if there's any others and, and I can't think of any. Um, so I apologise if there are, um, but going back to when I was a, a child, you know, going down the street, it was so different. It was so old fashioned.

It was, uh, uh, I'm not saying it was all good. Um, but it was a different way of life entirely.

[SJ]

The face of our high street has massively changed and the families within our high street, um, we used to be more of a together, um, and the high street was a massive part of that. You know, you could go and share your problems in Ransom's Chemist or, you know, um, with your grandfather within his shop.

[SF]

Um, yeah, absolutely. I mean, when I used to go with my mother shopping, you know, every shop we went into, um, she would be talking not just to the shopkeeper, but to all the other people that were waiting to go in there. So it was a real communal event, just going shopping.

Um, and, and I think that sort of brought everyone together as well. Um, so yeah, very, very different from, from, from now that, you know, you'd get into the car, go to the supermarket, get everything for the week and, and what have you. So, um, very, very different.

I'm not saying it's wrong now. It's just very, very different.

[SJ]

I mean, we're sort of looking at talking sort of towards the end of this interview now. And, um, I would like to sort of, if there's anything else you'd like to share with us, um, you know, about the family's clockmaking history, your own personal experiences, um, anything that you think that the people of Whitney who will be listening to this oral history's recording that you think is really, really important that we should know.

[SF]

Yeah, I mean, I, I, um, I come from, uh, a proper Whitney, uh, background. Um, and it's not just, um, on the Fletcher side that, um, there were businesses that, um, my great-grandfather, uh, Ernest Long, um, had, uh, wheelwrights and bicycle shop down where, uh, uh, Mike Wheeler's used to be next to the bridge. Um, and he had that for years and years and years.

Um, in fact, he, one of his best friends, uh, was a guy called Morris and, um, Morris came to him once and, um, said, uh, we ought to get into making these motorcars because Morris had his bicycle, um, car making place in Oxford. So he wants to get into making motorcars and, uh, my grandfather, my great-grandfather said, um, uh, yep, okay, let's do this. Um, but my great-grandmother said, no, no, motorcars were just, they're a flash in the pan.

They, they, you're not going to waste any of our money on that. And then we know that Morris and Moses carried on to become a major, major force.

[S]  
Absolutely.

[SF]  
Um, but I love, I love all those sort of things, those, those bits of history that, you know, if you made a decision one way or the other way, it just changes life.

[S]  
Absolutely.

[SF]  
In such a big way.

[S]  
I think history, um, is so important and for us to capture the history is really important too. Um, before we finish this interview today, and thank you, Steve, your stories of help kept witness clockmaking heritage and the town ticking for future generations. Um, just would you, would there be a last sort of sentence or something that you would like to finish this interview with to pass on to our future generations of children, young adults?

[SF]  
Yeah, I think what I'd like to say is that, um, today when, uh, kids are more interested in putting, pushing, uh, buttons on a electronic device than working with their hands or doing anything with their hands, I think it's important for, uh, parents to let kids have a bit of danger by using real tools, um, and using their hands, because if you lose that dexterity, um, and ability with your hands, um, you won't be, well, it makes it very difficult in another day if you want to go into doing, um, some craft where you have to use your hands. Um, and I just think that kids should today be set tasks to make things properly, and I'm not anti-health and safety, I'm just saying that, you know, a little bit of danger that they might cut themselves is not a bad thing. Exactly.

[S]

Well, that actually concludes the oral history interview, uh, with our amazing Steve Fletcher. Um, thank you for sharing your stories and your thoughts. Thank you very much.

The Whitney District Museum really appreciate it.

[SF]

You're very welcome.

[S]

Thank you.