

INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN RUDGE

[MF]

This is Mary Franklin at 21 Abbey Road, Whitney on the 11th of December and I'm interviewing Susan Rudge of 100 the Crofts, Whitney. Thanks Sue. Okay, so let's start off with some questions about how you came to live in Whitney.

Well my parents moved to Whitney when I was five from Birmingham and I'm one of the very few people that arrived in Whitney by train from Birmingham. I was five years old, my mother took me for a walk across Church Green after we came off the train and compared with Birmingham I thought that I'd arrived in heaven because it was so green, so clean and so magical to me as a child and we lived actually in Britt Street in a house that was part of Daniel Young Engineering Company which was opposite Smith and Phillips blankets, so that's where we started our life.

We lived there for, dad was actually a toolmaker and managed the engineering side of the company, so we lived there for about a year and then moved to Carterton, then moved back to Whitney and lived on Windrush Valley Housing Estate from about the age of nine. And did Whitney keep its magic for you or were there things that you missed from Birmingham? The only thing I missed from Birmingham were my relatives.

There was absolutely nothing that would have induced me to go back to Birmingham and be and live because as far as I was concerned at the age of five, six, I'd actually left a bomb site because all the buildings were blackened and bombed out, so you can imagine how Whitney appeared to me, especially Langle Common which I again thought was heaven. And what keeps you living in Whitney after all this time? Oh that's a difficult question to answer.

I think it's the humane size of the town and the humanity of the people that live here and the facilities that are easily accessible and also it's very very nice and I've got friends here so why would I want to live anywhere else? Do you think Whitney has a feeling of community? Very much so.

I still think although it's increased in size from 10,000 when when I arrived in 1956 to well over 30,000 I think, nearly 30,000, you can still walk down Whitney and see people that you know which is important. And do you have any favourite places that you like to go to to meet friends or to go and take part in activities? I don't think I have any favourite places at all, I think I like it all actually.

There's nowhere I avoid if that's the answer. And what about, because you know Whitney as you said has grown in size, what are your hopes for the future of Whitney? My biggest hope for the future of Whitney is that they will clean up the windrush and get the fish back in there and the sticklebacks and the frogs, the clear water, the ducks and the swans and I would hope that I live long enough to see these reappear.

Yes I think we can all hope for that. So one other question, do you have any thoughts on a sort of particular day in Whitney that's special to Whitney? Is there anything that happens for you in Whitney that feels particularly memorable?

Well I don't go but I think Remembrance Sunday is important and I know that that's been increasingly so lately over the last few years. I would have said in the past when I was a child Whitney Feast but I'm too old to go to Whitney Feast now. So when it was Whitney Feast time when you were a child what was special about it then?

The lights, all the different sideshows you could go on and the rides and funnily enough meeting all the people that you, from the surrounding villages. So we were just talking about Whitney Feast, going there as a child and enjoying the sideshows and the people there. How did Whitney Feast start for you?

Did you go on the first day or at some point during the day? We always went in the evening and I remember having my photograph taken with a monkey, holding the monkey and I remember Dad saying afterwards he couldn't tell which was the monkey and which was me. I've still got that photograph.

And what was your favourite ride or sideshow? I liked fishing for the ducks, well I was only little you see, so if you fished for the ducks you always got a prize and it was my favourite prize to get was a little camera where you had little negatives you could hold up to the light and see the pictures of inside. Sounds good.

Six minutes ago. Oh was that your pocket money? No, no.

Right, okay. So let's jump forward then to when you were a good bit older and you had a job in your school holidays, is that right? Yes, I went to Whitney Grammar School and in the morning I would walk up Corn Street to Whitney Grammar School to get in there for nine o'clock.

We started at nine and on the way up Corn Street you had the smell, the wonderful smell of meat pies wafting over the town. That was just to the right of the bus station that is now. And so that intrigued me.

Next to that, the other thing that intrigued me was the sign writers studio so I used to smell the meat pies and have a nose in the sign writer studio to watch writing the

signs. So when I was about 16, I think it was probably after O Levels and I could actually get a job if I wanted. They wanted to have people in the holidays for working in the factory so I applied and got a job.

But the interesting thing was there was history in terms of people working at Brazzles because where I lived on Windrush Valley Housing Estate, economically what happened was the men would come home from Smith's Industries on their bicycles, they would arrive home at 4.30 because they had a short working day. They'd have their meal ready for them when they went in but their wives would then get on their bicycles, a lot of them on Windrush Valley Housing Estate and cycle down to Brazzles which was very close by and start a five o'clock evening shift working in the factory. So that's how a lot of people supplemented their income.

And what time would the women work until? Till nine o'clock. So they'd be working all day as housewives, get the food ready and then as soon as their husbands came in they'd head off on their bicycles and go and work at Brazzles.

And did men work at Brazzles as well? Absolutely, yes. Actually my uncle did work there for a while as a line manager but that was when it was Bow Years.

They tended to do the more heavy lifting type of work, sort of collecting, stacking up what you needed to process and taking it away, cutting the large joints up and things like that. So yes, so when I knew that they wanted people in the holiday I thought oh well it can't be that bad. And actually they paid reasonably well and at the end of the few weeks that I worked there it was the first time I'd ever had a full weekly wage packet in a brown envelope with your deductions.

And my mother, much to my annoyance, took two pounds ten shillings off me each week. For your keep? My keep.

She started as she meant to go on. I was outraged. So can you describe the factory itself, you know, the building and sort of where you went in to the factory?

If you think of the bus station now, if you stand in front of the bus station, the entrance to the factory was on the right and there were gates there, quite wide impressive gates, and then further along to the sign writers there was actually a very nice dry stone wall high and on there there would be lots of billboards for things that were happening in Whitney and the environment, what was going to come on at the cinema, what was going to happen at the Corn Exchange and so on.

So that was there and opposite it were a row of little tiny cottages, one up one down, might be one and a half up one down, that have been demolished now and I remember a little man used to stand there looking across to the factory smoking a pipe. So and behind that there was a big yard so you went in and I can't really remember what the actual building looked like but it was more like warehouses

rather than an impressive building. I can't even remember whether it was brick or what it was or cement, but as soon as you stepped in of course you clocked in and then you went into the production line and you were given your job to do, so but of course you had to have a uniform.

So it was a green overall and a white hair net for food hygiene presumably. Yes and how automated was that whole process of manufacturing a loop pipe? It was not automated really at all, I was actually doing heat sealing the bacon.

So what happened was the young lad at the beginning of the line would be cutting up the sides of bacon and distributing them to girls who sat in tiers, two rows towards the back and they would weigh out the bacon for the sizes that people wanted to buy and they would then pass them to somebody who would put them into plastic containers and then they would then be passed, this all happened by bins, pass them to me and my friend at the end of the line and all we had to do was pick one out, bring a lid down and it would heat seal it, pass it behind and some person would, man, would take it away to wherever it went after that. So this was raw meat that was being?

Bacon, yes. That was being vacuum packed? Yes, slices of bacon like you buy in the supermarket now.

Okay and do you have any idea where that meat was sourced from? That's an interesting question, I would have thought it was pretty local actually. I don't know where the main office was for brazzers, whether it was in Trowbridge or somewhere like that, I don't know, I'm not sure, I have to say I don't know in reply to that question really.

So the meat was there being cut and then you were part of the packaging process?

[SR]
Yes.

[MF]
So what was happening elsewhere in the factory? Well I can only say elsewhere what was happening in terms of where I was sent from different places, so one of the most hottest and most unpleasant jobs in my opinion was actually being sent to do de-tinning. So this is when all the meat pies, just a word about the meat pies, they were usually steak and kidney pies and I had, we did eat a few because we used to have them on Saturday mornings with HP sauce and they were very nice.

That wasn't the only thing they made though, they made meat pies, obviously they sold sausages, bacon, garlic pies, you name it, but these were meat pies that came out of the oven and they came out on big trays and the idea was, I don't know how big trays came in front of us, but they were steaming hot, we had to pick up with a

tea towel or some kind of oven glove, pick up a tin of a meat pie, tap it on the side and in theory the hot steaming meat pie would fall out whole and then you'd put the tin somewhere else so you'd like, steaming hot, de-banging these tins and meat pies were falling out. So it was quite noisy? Yes, yes, yeah.

And hot? Yeah. And did the meat pies obediently tip out?

Most of the time, yes, yeah. And what happened when one didn't? Well I don't remember, I don't, I don't even, I know they didn't, but what happened when those meat pies that had been de-tinned had collapsed?

Because that big tray then went somewhere else, so in theory perhaps somebody was throwing out, maybe they sold the ones that collapsed. Maybe. Yeah, for themselves.

And you said, you mentioned you were working there with a friend, did you know many of the other people who were working there? Um, not really, no, no, I, I knew the health inspector who came to inspect it, so one day my friend's father, Mr. Hetherington, appeared to do his public health inspection and everybody was very, very careful to show him all the correct things and I could sense that was, you know, this was an important time, they've got to, you know, maintain their, their hygiene standards and match what Mr. Hetherington would want for them, so, but I was a little underling at that point going, all right that's another one, heat sealed, that's another one, heat sealed, oh there's Mr. Hetherington. And what about the managers, did you have any dealings with them?

Not at all, no, no, I wasn't really aware of a manager, it was all run by young lads and young girls really, older women, there were quite a few older women that worked full-time, but presumably they, they hadn't got children to look after or that was what they wanted to do, so the shift was a day shift and a twilight shift, so yes, there were people, anyway, they were good payers, I was thinking about it afterwards, because I had a friend who worked there and I can't remember the exact figures, but she, this is in the early 1970s, full-time, she worked there, she earned a better wage than I did as a qualified staff nurse, so they weren't bad payers at all. And what were the full-time hours?

I think I had to get there for half past seven, I think it was half past seven till half past four, very similar, I can't, I can't swear to that, but it was quite early and it didn't feel any hardship, because it was in the summer, so it was light. And was that Monday to Friday or did the factory run over the weekend? I don't, I don't know whether they ran over the weekend, but I worked Monday to Friday and the twilight shifts were Monday to Friday.

And the twilight shifts, were they the shorter hours that you mentioned? Yes, they were, they were working from five till nine, I think, roughly, approximately, can't be

certain of the exact time. And how were the pies and the packs of meats and packs of bacon, how were they distributed?

They had big lorries that went around and took them, they, yeah, big lorries took them to various shops and supermarkets, well there wasn't big supermarkets at that point, they were just coming wavy line and such, like Price Writes was just opening on the corner of Market Square, so yes, they had brazzled lorries. I have a feeling, now don't quote me on this, I thought they were brown, but I don't know, and they took them around, it might have been green. And were they, were they sort of priced for, you know, ordinary families to buy?

Was it an affordable product? Yes, I don't remember the price, but it wasn't a luxury. We used to like heating them because they didn't involve much work, just shoved them in the oven and heated them up and had them on your plate with HP sauce, but certainly I don't think they were expensive.

And was the factory unionised at all? Oh, I don't know, I have no idea, sorry, I don't know. Yeah, okay, and do you know who owned the business?

I didn't know then, but I believe, actually you can find it out online, I won't say something I don't know, but definitely if you do a search on Bolliers, there's a man in the Amersham Museum who did a talk on starting the Bolliers factory, which started off as Brazzles, so if anybody's interested they can pick that up there. Okay, and it was Brazzles when you worked there? Yes, yes.

And when did it become part of Bolliers? I don't know, I honestly don't know, and I was trying to find out when they closed. I think it closed, their central factory closed in 2003 or something like that before, but I recollect that the one in Whitney was closed before that, but I don't really know.

One minute to me it seemed to be there and one minute it didn't seem to be there. The other thing about Whitney in terms of walking along like that and you're getting the smell of meat pies, so you get the smell of meat pies, wonderful, wonderful, going to school, and then you turn it into the crofts and you get the smell of the ale brewing in the brewery, wonderful, wonderful. Did the two ever meet and have steak and ale pies?

I don't know. Okay, so and then suddenly one day there was no smell of meat pies because it was no longer functioning? No, because I think people don't realise, Whitney was quite a smelly place in the 1950s, but a lot of those smells have gone, like the smells of the lanolin from the mill operations and various other brewers, so horses, so it has become more sanitised.

Were there still things being delivered or buying to the horse and the calf then? No, but there were a few horses around. Opposite, funnily enough, opposite Brazzles, on

the opposite side of the road, there was a paddock there where there was a riding school with about, I think they had about seven or eight horses in there and people used to ride around Whitney having riding lessons.

In fact Annie, my sister-in-law, had a riding lesson, used to get riding lessons from there. And you mentioned the sign writer, what do you remember about the sign writer's business? All I remember was that it was so intriguingly neat and precise and he'd be sitting there sort of first thing in the morning with a huge board in front of him or you'd see a board to one side, you know, with a pub sign on it.

I wonder if there were any of those signs left, I'd love to know if there's any in the county archives of the signs that that guy did, I don't even know his name. And when did that close? Oh, a long, long time ago, yeah, because he, yeah.

That was just him, yes, yeah. Okay, any other memories of Whitney from that period? Have I any other memories?

The cinema, because at that age, I'm talking about the age of 16, it was Saturday afternoon matinee was the crush, you could go in and watch a film, two films, I think it was for about one and six, might have been even cheaper than that. And yeah, you went and watched a film and everybody was very badly behaved. And I was badly behaved too.

But you were allowed to stay in the cinema? Yes, well, there was a man there that used to try and control, he did sterling work, but he was difficult for him. When you've got a whole row of teenagers sitting in the balcony, throwing sweets and bits of paper and drink cartons over the top at their friends below.

So was it mainly teenagers who went? Yes, yeah. At the matinee, yeah, but the cinema was well served in the evening and showed some really good films where people went and were well behaved.

And then on the way home, the usual thing was to get a bag of chips, fish and chips. Where would you get that? I mean, obviously the fish and chip shop, but whereabouts was it?

Mr. Del Nivo's fish and chip shop, Corn Street, Corn Street. Yeah. Somewhere down almost where the dentist is on the left, somewhere around there.

Okay. And did you do just the one stint at the meat pie factory or did you go back another summer? No, I didn't go back another summer.

No, one stint was enough, although I enjoyed the money and I enjoyed being there with the people and it wasn't unpleasant, but it was hard work and it was a shock to

realise what it meant to earn your money to do this job day in and day out. How did you cope with the repetitiveness of it? By talking, talking to my friend next to me.

So what was the atmosphere? What was the working atmosphere like? Fairly cheery.

We didn't have a radio on or anything like that. I remember doing an awful lot of flirting with the boy behind, taking away the cartons. So it was worth going.

There was a lot of banter.

[SR]
Yes. Yeah.

[MF]
Yeah. Yeah. Just take your mind off the fact it was another meat pie to tip out.

And I don't remember getting a coffee break or a tea break, but we must have done. Because they were sacrosanct in those days. And I think I went home for lunch, so you would have got an hour off for lunch and came back in the afternoon.

And when you were working there, was it still a meat pie for dinner on a Saturday night? Well, for a long time, I couldn't eat a piece of bacon. Oh, yes.

And I loved bacon because we used to have Sunday morning. Dad's job was to fry bacon, egg and tomatoes while we listened to the archers. So but I couldn't eat my bacon anymore.

And was it Brussels bacon at home? Yes. Yes.

Of course. Well, I guess most people would buy the Yes. Yes.

Yeah. Okay. Is there anything else you want to share?

About what do you think? Anything else you can think of about Brussels or working life? I think I was wondering about Smith's Industries.

I'm not the person to be able to share that with here. But Smith's Industries were a very large employer in Witney. I think they employed about 700 people at the height of their production.

And it's almost getting to the point perhaps there aren't that many people alive that actually remember working there and what they made and how it felt. So I think maybe Smith Industries is something that would be interesting to do in the future. I

worked there for a little while and I did get around the factory doing various bits and pieces, but I wasn't knowledgeable about it.

What do you remember of it? I remember there were a lot of components to make car heaters and it was my job to keep a track of them. So it meant that I was wandering around all the different stores, calculating how many of they've got of each particular component and what the stock was and whether they needed to reorder components.

I remember walking through the press shop and it being incredibly noisy. I also remember how, this is funny, people worked very hard and they clocked out. Imagine they're going to go home and the whole yard is silent.

When that buzzer went off, people used to burst out of every orifice and they used to run down, literally run down to the car park or to their bikes and literally steam out of the place. It was incredible. I've never seen anything like it.

And was this another holiday job for you or was this full-time employment? This was full-time employment. I was just there for a year.