

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots, Exeter's Multi-Coloured History Interview Transcript

Name of interviewee: **George WALKER**
Name of interviewers: Ghee Bowman & Crystal Carter
Date of interview: 8th October 2013
Location of interview: At George's house
Transcribed by: Dawn Eldridge

[Description of TOSFOR work by Ghee Bowman]

Before we come to Madame Josephine, I would just like to know a little about your childhood in Newtown, what do you remember about Newtown before the war?

Well what I can tell you is that Newtown was a very close-knit community. Predominantly working-class people resided there and it was a nice place to live and grow up in as a child. My childhood memories are all good apart from school days – I didn't particularly enjoy school, I think it is probably correct to say that I wasn't as academic as my teachers would have liked me to have been, and in those days, unfortunately, Newtown schools, where I attended school first, teachers took the view that they had to knock knowledge into you rather than impart it to you gently. So during school term, I must say that my memories are not so good of school although I enjoyed the companionships and friendships that I had with other children who were all similar to me, all in the same boat, all in fear and dread of the headmaster in particular. I don't want to be unkind to him, but his name was Mr Lawrence, his first name was John and we referred to him as Johnny Lawrence.

This was Newtown Primary School?

This was Newtown Junior School – I did attend the infant school, as it was named then, it would be a primary school now, in those days it was the infant school and I commenced with the infants and then moved up into the Junior school and that was when I received my rude awakening if you like, because I'd enjoyed the infant school where we were all treated very nicely and suddenly, it's no longer Christian names, but surnames, and as I said the emphasis seemed to be on discipline and if you were a slow learner, and I think I was probably a slow learner, you often received a little cuff around the ear or a whack with a cane to help you become a quicker, faster learner, but it didn't work with me. But, nevertheless, I do have quite a few happy recollections of school time outside of Mr Lawrence's maths lessons in particular.

Any particular stories?

Any particular stories about time at that school? I can remember having a conker confiscated, I am sure you are familiar with the game of conkers played by most school boys, of my era anyway, and this particular day I was playing conkers in the playground and, I should mention it had been banned – conkers in the playground had been banned, because it caused a litter problem when conkers were smashed it just made a mess in the playground. And, as most boys played conkers, they decided that it would be a good idea to put a stop to the practice during playtime. But on this occasion, I was breaking the rules and playing conkers behind the pillar when the duty playground master, whose name I recall was Mr Wert, came upon us and he confiscated, not only my conker, but the conker of the chap, the lad, I was playing

and I was particularly upset because my conker had already 'conkered' about 14 others and so I lost a conker 14 which was, you know, pretty valuable to a school boy – and I never got it back. That was one little incident I can recall.

Did you bake your conkers or dip them in vinegar?

We did yes, we'd bake them and soak them in vinegar to try and harden them.

And that wasn't cheating in your school?

Yes, you weren't supposed to play with a 'bakie' as we called them. Before you commenced playing you'd say to the other boy: Is that a bakie? And of course he would lie and say no, or you would lie if yours was a bakie. Bakie's were hard [laughs].

George, do you mind if I ask when were you born?

I was born in 1930, 19th July 1930.

So you would have been at Newtown Junior School from about 1937 or 38?

'36 until moving up to the Senior School in '41.

Which senior school?

St Luke's College, no longer there as a school. The school did exist, took on the name of St Luke's, but dropped the college. I attended St Luke's College School when it was part of the college and it started out in life known as St Luke's Practising School, where the students who were training to become teachers would go in to the school and practise on the boys. And so it was known as St Luke's Practising School and it came under the auspices of church.

The Diocese.

Yes, that's the word I was looking for.

So where.. because I went to St Luke's College myself, I did a teacher training course there. Where was the school then?

The school? The school as you stand on Heavitree Road facing the school, the college, then it was on the extreme left-hand end of those buildings, and the entrance is still there today: a small entrance with a low stone wall. That led down into the playground which I note, when I pass by there, has been built on now, the playground no longer exists as it did.

I think the playground is now Baring Court. So going back to a bit earlier, and where did you live then George?

On Portland Street.

What number?

56 just about halfway up, going up.

Tell us something about your family George.

I will do, if you will forgive me, I just thought of something else about Newtown School. Newtown School, being right in the heart of Newtown, was not a school blessed with playing fields, so it just had a tarmac playing area, playground, on a slope, and so to encourage pupils to get some useful exercise, the school had erected, what we used to refer to as 'the ladders'. Ladders were slung under what we used to call the shed, there was a long shed alongside the playground, and under the rafters of the shed, they had suspended, horizontally, a ladder. And on one end, the playground was on a slope, the top end of the ladder, was a vertical ladder which you climbed up and then your position on the horizontal ladder [laughs] and then swung, monkey-fashion, across the ladder to the end, and that was good exercise and strengthened the upper body and the arm muscles, and it was always a competition between the boys to see who could miss out the most rungs as they swung across. And when you commenced as a new boy, it would be just going like this: one rung in the front, then by swinging missing one rung, then when you got more adept and smarter at it, you would smartly miss out two rungs. Three rungs – almost impossible. But there was one boy, and he is still alive today, I do bump into him occasionally and I do recall that Bill Coleridge was the only boy I knew who could swing the length of that ladder missing three rungs.

How many could you miss?

Two. Bill could miss three – I might have done it once or twice, but he could do it consistently, he was like a monkey.

Did he have particularly long arms, or strength?

I think he probably had longer arms, but he was, as it turned out in later life, quite athletic. So he was an athletic boy, but I remember when you missed three rungs it meant that your head had to be tucked in as well, because missing three rungs drew you up, you see, so in order not to bash your head and be able to reach quite far, it was necessary to tuck your head in as you swung along. And Bill was very good at that, and that was the ladders.

The other thing we did at Newtown School... with the headmaster as much of a disciplinarian as he was, I must say he had a great love of cricket and although we weren't blessed with a cricket pitch or even a grassed area to play on, we did play cricket on that sloping asphalt playground, because Mr Lawrence had fashioned two sets of stumps and set them into a wooden base and so he would bring these out at playtime, during the Summer, and place stumps down at the lower end of the playground, pace out 22yds and place – I would imagine it was 22yds. – and place the other stumps at the other end, and he would organise that all the boys would play and get a chance at batting.

And you would sit around the perimeter of the playground waiting for your name to be called to the guy at the back and, as boys were bowled out, Mr Lawrence would call the next boy, probably use the register, I don't know, but you were called eventually. And we used to sit there hoping, and it frequently happened, he got so carried away because of his love for cricket and wanting to encourage boys to play, he would get

carried away, and we would be thinking: let's hope he forgets it's maths next lesson. And oftentimes he would, he would get carried away, and sometimes, I can recall, spending the whole afternoon playing cricket, or just watching boys playing cricket, waiting for your turn. I believe I am right in saying that at one time, he played for Exeter, or it might even have been Devon, Johnny Lawrence himself.

And that was one of the nicest things about him, he was a chap who liked cricket and encouraged us to play cricket. Get him in the classroom teaching maths and he was transformed into a tyrant with a cane.

Were you good at maths, did it go in?

No. In those tables you would learn, tables for example, by rote and one of the things that used to happen, they commenced the maths lesson by going through the tables, everybody repeated the tables starting from second times table right up to 12, and I can remember sitting there mouthing, pretending and then he would occasionally stop and pick on me and say: what is 7 x 7s', you know, and of course if, like me, you were just pretending, you would get caught out.

Can I just go back to cricket and games – did you ever go up to Belmont Park to play games?

With the school? No. But Belmont Park featured very much in the lives of boys who lived in Newtown. After school we would make for Belmont Park, especially after tea in the summer, or indeed in the winter it would be football, and we would play there until dusk or when the playground was locked up, because in those days, there was a park-keeper who resided in a house at the top of the park on Blackboy Road, and at dusk he would come down and lock the gates. I don't think there are gates on the park any more, but to us boys, they were tall metal gates, you know, too high to climb on them. And he would lock the gates and ring a bell as he came down through the park to warn everybody that he was now locking up the park and you should be out of there, you know. But yes, we played games in Belmont Park and, in those days, Belmont Park was a hive of activity. There were children everywhere playing games. If it happened to be football, you would start out with a few boys on each side – one boy would bring a football on and, as boys arrived, they would stand at the side and say: can I join in? And we would say, yes you are on that side, and the next boy to come along would be on the opposing side and so on. And you would often end up with about 30 odd boys on each side and it would take up the whole of the park area eventually. That would continue either until dusk or it was time to leave the park or, as frequently happened, the boy who owned the ball would pick up the ball and say: I am sorry, I have to go now, and that would bring the game to an end, that was it.

And what was in the park at that stage, George, were the huts there?

No, that's another story [laughs] – I am sorry I am going to be a bore for you...

No, it's ok.

In the summer time we played cricket, but because we were poor kids, we weren't blessed with expensive cricket sets, occasionally there might have been a kid who had three stumps and he would bring them along, but nearly always we used trees

as stumps. And at one time, the tree in the main park as you walk in to Belmont Park from Clifton Road, the main path leading along the lower edge – I think they were plane trees – the plane trees then, most of them, were scarred at the bale height, because we would hack off the bark with our bats to show the level, the height, of the wicket. And then we would have one boy obviously batting, one boy bowling, the rest fielding. Leather balls were not permitted – that was against the rules of the park, so it was usually tennis balls or a rubber ball, we weren't allowed to use proper cricket balls, it was too dangerous to other children. But the park was always, always extremely busy with kids playing their different games. The swings came some time in the '30s, the swings and the seesaws – there were two seesaws, a set of four swings, if I remember rightly and Uncle Tom Cobby and a maypole, and a slide. And I remember all that being installed, because when I first visited the park, we obviously knew this work was going on, we couldn't wait for work to be completed, and the ground was still muddy when we used those apparatus for the first time. Eventually I think they tarmac-ed in that area as well. You were shaking your head when I said: Uncle Tom Cobby – you not aware of... an Uncle Tom Cobby is a long seat suspended on bars at each end and it goes from left to right, if you can picture perhaps about 8 boys all sat either astride of this thing or side-saddle and one boy at each end, of the Uncle Tom Cobby, would hold the supports, there would be like an oblong steel structure to support this thing, and two bars coming down to each end of the seat. And you would have one boy stood at one end working it up with this motion and another boy at the other end doing the reverse, you see. And gradually this thing would go at quite a speed.

And did you sing as you did it?

Yeh yeh we'd sing. People like Coleridge I mentioned earlier, the athletic Bill Coleridge, he would be climbing the bars that supported this thing, and doing all kinds of tricks and turning over and putting his feet through his arms.

This is fascinating George and, I should say that we've come here to talk about, to ask you about specific things, but I suppose I am thinking that I know people now who work for the Newtown Community Association who would be very interested to hear this, and people who work in the Belmont Park, so I think it's really good to have that. But I just want to move it on slightly – I don't know if you remember, some time in the '30s – do you remember – there was a meeting of the Blackshirts in Belmont Park?

I do indeed, I didn't attend it because I was only a kid, but it so happens that my mother had a couple of lodgers who were staying with us and one of them was a Blackshirt, and he used to attend these meetings, much to the dismay of my father who was a 1st World War veteran and he didn't approve of the Blackshirts or the fascist movement at all, but this one fellow that lodged with my parents, he was a Blackshirt and I can remember as a kid, sitting listening to the sort of political discussions that used to take place around the fireside, between my father and this chap who was a Blackshirt. And I mean it didn't mean anything to me at the time, I didn't understand what was going on, but I do recall the Blackshirt era.

Do you remember the name of the lodger?

It might come back to me in a minute – we had two at that particular time. They were there, because they were on the construction of the Savoy Cinema which stood in

the London Inn Square, both the Savoy Cinema and the London Inn have both since long departed.

Waterstones Bookshop I think now.

That stands on the corner? Yes that was on the corner, the top as you look down, top left-hand corner, looking into the square and the Savoy Cinema looked up towards the High Street and backed up almost to Northernhay, that's where the Savoy Cinema stood.

This is again a bit of a diversion, but could you, I'd like you to look at these photos – this is a book called 'Black Shirts in Devon' by Todd Gray and there are two photos in there which are supposedly Mosley in Belmont Park.

Yes that looks like Oswald Mosley.

But does it look like Belmont Park to you? Because I've tried to locate that photo and I've failed because I don't actually think it's Belmont Park.

It's very difficult to tell – I would guess there's a good chance that that's somewhere in the vicinity of Belmont Park and the thing that makes me think that is this sign here, because on Clifton Road there was a garage – although there weren't many cars around in those days – they did car repairs, and it was called Abbot and Munday and I see the name of Munday on that sign there.

Whereabouts was the garage?

It was destroyed in the Blitz, but it was next to the Globe Inn – as you come up Clifton Road, past the Globe Inn towards Belmont Park, Abbot and Munday's garage was right there, on the left.

I think there is a car park there now.

Yeh

OK maybe then.

Although I don't recognise anything else there, but it's in a very densely, built-up area judging by the chimney pots – it could be Newtown.

Thank you for that. You seem to know so much and you remember so much, it's fantastic.

My wife, if she was out here, she would say: he's got this fantastic memory for anything around his childhood era, but he can't remember what he was supposed to do last week, you know [laughs]

Can I move you on to Madame Josephine – tell us what you remember about Madame Josephine.

Well the thing that stands out about Madame Josephine is that, if you can picture Newtown pre-War, we didn't really see anybody unusual or from outside our own

community or from the city, people that were like us. And then this lady appears, black, dressed differently – I seem to remember she wore either a cape, yes a cape she wore, and some sort of head-dress but it didn't conceal her face, you know it wasn't as the Muslims wear today, but it was definitely a head-dress, more like a nurse would wear I suppose, and so for that reason, when she arrived and took, what I assume to be a lease on this shop in Clifton Road, we were all amazed and curious to know what she was going to be doing. But it turned out that she was a herbalist and in that shop window would be displayed things like plant roots and stuff that looked like, I can recall seeing, liquorice root, you know, stuff like that on little plates and baskets. And so we used to look in this window and think: what does she do with that? You know and, as kids would, we'd think she was a witch doctor, she's come over from Darkest Africa and she is going to practise over here. But I can not honestly recall seeing anybody enter the shop, but I think she must have had clients because how would she have existed otherwise. I never ever spoke to the lady, she didn't speak to us, passed her many a time and she would sometimes walk through the park or around the edge of the park and I'd since learned, I didn't know then, but I know today, that she actually resided on Park Road, which is a road leading off Polsloe Road. I only know that because I do have a 1941 Besley Street Directory of Exeter – I've got it there for you to have a look at. And I looked it up and there she is in Park Road.

And what do you think a herbalist in 1939/1940 – what do you think she did, what do you think it meant – herbalist?

I think it was obviously one of the earliest forms of alternative medicine, but it's hard to believe that working-class people in Newtown would have had the faith in such practises, you know. I think people would have been highly suspicious of it. It would have been a trade or a profession completely foreign to most working-class people.

And you remember something about her daughter?

Yes, I remember she had a daughter and I think the daughter received a good education, I think she went to Bishop Blackall school, now closed. I can remember seeing her in a school uniform.

And how old would the daughter have been in relation to you?

I think she would have been a similar age, about my age.

And I found that Madame Josephine whose family was Clinton as you told me, she lived in Exeter in Park Road until 1970, and I wonder what happened to the daughter?

Yes, she could still be alive.

I am hoping that the Express & Echo are going to put something in...

They might flush her out, yes that would be interesting.

That's very good. Another thing I thought I would ask you, because we are interested in people who come to Exeter in all sorts of different ways, is if you remember an Italian ice-cream shop on Summerland Road, Summerland Street.

Indeed I do: Mr Morrelli.

Tell us about Mr Morrelli and his ice-cream shop.

Well, Mr Morrelli who was one of the first ice-cream vendors I can recall seeing in Exeter, he used to push his wheelbarrow, custom-made ice-cream wheelbarrow, it was a cart as opposed to a wheelbarrow, I suppose it would be regarded as a cart, and he would push it around and station it at various places around Newtown and ring a bell, dressed in a white apron and a trilby hat as I recall. He had a round face, he was quite a chubby, cheerful sort of chap. Sometimes on a Sunday I would be sent up to Mr Morrelli's to get a basin full of ice-cream. Maybe not full of ice-cream, but enough - a couple of scoops maybe. Sounds a bit.. a basinful, I don't think we were that well off, I think it would have been a generous amount of ice-cream, perhaps if mother was a bit flush that week, we would have ice-cream with our dessert or something.

Do you know how much it cost?

Well it would only be pence, you know. It would be like 2 or 3 pence worth of ice-cream. Yeh... Mr Morrelli. I think the war put paid to Mr Morrelli, because you couldn't manufacture ice-cream because of the sugar, shortages of sugar etc. so ice-cream sort of disappeared from Exeter until after the war.

And he had a shop on Summerland, was it a shop or a place of making ice-cream, do you know?

Well he made it on the premises. I seem to remember it was on Codrington Street as opposed to Summerland Street – I'm a bit hazy on that. I think I used to go to a shop on Codrington Street, which.... Codrington Street largely disappeared during the Blitz – it's where Western Way cuts down through now.

Do you remember the Blitz?

I do – you don't want to get me talking about the Blitz do you?

OK, maybe we'll save that for another time [laughs].

I've actually done this with Newtown Community Association – they've got my memoirs of the Blitz on record.

OK – as an audio interview?

Yes, they came out here and did it like this.

Well in that case, let's move on and ask you about the American soldiers, the black GI's – what you remember about the Americans when they arrived and what they did and the separation...

Well, it was quite an exciting time for kids, during the War. Thinking back on it sometimes I think well surely we must have been scared, but I don't think we knew enough about warfare to have that fear factor. You know, it was an exciting time in a

way for children, until one experienced an air raid, especially the heavy raid we had in May in the 1942 Blitz that you referred to. Then we realised that it wasn't all fun and games, but it was an exciting time to be a child because you had all these troops come into the city and Exeter was full of servicemen, you see, not only our own, as it turned out, but after Dunkirk, we saw these chaps coming back from Dunkirk, walking the streets of Exeter.

And I can remember we had, at that time, another lodger living with us, he was in the Army Pay Corps, and they were where the huts were built in Belmont Park and this chap was a Cornishman but had been sent up to Exeter with the Pay Corps and he brought his wife with him, and they lodged with my mother for a while and, after Dunkirk, all these chaps were arriving and we boys were keen to get as many souvenirs as we could from these foreign troops you see, so this school teacher – oh I'm sorry I didn't mention that this chap's wife was a school teacher – and so I said to her I'm going to go and see if I can get some souvenirs from these Frenchmen who are walking around Exeter, and she said well you won't know how to ask for a souvenir. And I said yes I will just say: have you got any souvenirs mate? Oh no, she said, I will teach you what to say, and so she taught me my one and only French phrase: "Donnez moi un souvenir s'il vous plait", and I've never forgotten it. And so off I went up to the High Street with a couple of young mates, and we stood there and as these soldiers would come along, we would say: "excusez moi, s'il vous plait, donnez moi un souvenir, s'il vous plait". And this was fine you'd get given a few francs or sometimes a button off a tunic or something like this, and then I remember stopping one chap and he said: "I'm British son". We thought everybody with a black beret was French, you see. And this chap eventually came along with a black beret and we stopped him and he said "I'm English mate".

Wow, that's amazing. So they came straight on trains from Dover to Exeter?

Not from Dover, from Plymouth.

Oh I see, they came the other way.

A lot of them came from Plymouth.

This was end of May/beginning of June 1940.

Yes it would have been. They put them into barracks, because in those days, we had not only Topsham Barracks but we had Higher Barracks and I think they utilised the barracks for them and as I say, some of them were billeted out as well, plus no doubt there were cases where they were under canvas. But the place was alive with troops, soldiers, sailors to a lesser degree, airmen – quite a few airmen. And then of course America entered the war and we had this great influx of GIs, and we became aware that America had this segregation problem and the black American troops were confined to the St Thomas area of Exeter and they were actually under canvas on what was then the County showground, where they played rugby and they had a dog track there as well, greyhounds, and the black contingent of Americans were there under canvas, and they were forbidden from coming across the river up into the town. Well, of course, that's all very well to say but difficult to police in practice, so these chaps were keen to join the life and the party that was going on up in the town, and they would find ways of coming across the river even if it meant going quite a way around to get across rather than the old Exe bridge, and they would end up in

the town but, inevitably that would lead to problems when they would come across white Americans who resented them being there and they would end up having fights.

And I think it was around about that time that we first became aware of how people used knives in fights. Pre-war you never heard of a knife fight, but whilst the GIs were here, there were frequent fights where knives were used – by both sides, black and white. And sometimes as boys, we would, in the Summer months, not during darkness but during the Summer months sometimes, I would go with a couple of mates, young lads, and stand opposite a pub which would have been heaving with service men, and just wait to see the action, you know. And you would find American MPs – I think Americans have a different name for them – but their nickname was ‘snowdrops’ because they had helmets which were white, you see and the ‘snowdrops’ patrolled the town with long truncheons, and would sort out any troops that were getting up to mischief. And so we boys would just station ourselves opposite a pub entrance and wait for the action to occur. And it frequently would, and you would see Americans being evicted, or would tumble out of the pub having a fight, and then the ‘snowdrops’ would arrive, hit them over the head with the truncheon and throw them up into the back of the wagon, and take them away. And that was quite common.

And these were fights both between black and white GIs, and between white and white GIs?

Oh yes.

Any particular pubs where that happened?

The place that we used to make for was the London Inn Square, and there was a pub down there at the side of the old Savoy Cinema – it was built into the side of the same building - that was called the London Inn and that was very popular with Americans because it was more modern than the rest of Exeter. Remember I told you that I watched the Savoy Cinema being built in the mid to late 30's – I think it was built just prior to the war, I think '38/'39, somewhere around that time. And so it was a modern building and as a result, this pub, the London Inn, was modern compared with all the old pubs that had been in existence in Exeter for generations, you see, so I think for that reason, it was popular with Americans especially, because it was more in keeping with the times. So that's where we used to make for, the London Inn Square to see the action, but they used all the pubs.

Another popular place with Americans who were entertaining their lady friends, was the Rougemont Hotel where they would take them and hire a room for the night, or two. And so we would frequently see Americans coming in and out of there, because that was more expensive so probably Americans who were better heeled than the average GI – maybe they were officers or senior NCO's.

[Crystal Carter speaking]

I know that there were dances, they used to have American Red Cross dances and things like that, did you ever....

I was too young to visit a dance hall to see what went on there but yes, you are right, they did have dances and one of them was at the Civic Hall – no longer in existence

– in Queen Street, the façade is still there, it's the entrance to the Guildhall shopping centre from Queen's Street, you've got steps and the big stone columns there – that was the entrance to the Civic Hall. That was popular with Americans. And a little classier joint was the Embassy Ballroom alongside the Rougemont Hotel – part of the Rougemont Hotel – that was a little classier. But as I say, I was yet to discover... I was of an age of innocence and yet to discover all these things that happened in later life.

And did you go across the river at all, did you meet the black guys over the other side?

We went over the river, yes, there was nothing to stop us from going, but that was quite a long walk from Newtown, so we didn't go down to St Thomas very often – had no reason to go there. But we'd very often see... in latter times I think they must have relaxed the rule, probably found it too hard to enforce, because I can remember seeing black GIs walking quite freely around Exeter with the others. Rougemont and Northernhay Gardens was a very popular place for all troops but particularly Americans of a week-end, Saturdays and Sundays, they would just be lounging... Until the war, there were signs all about 'Keep off the grass' – you weren't allowed on the grass, the war changed that, and the Americans changed that and they would be lounging about all over, hundreds of them, and of course we would go in search of chewing gum, that's what we were after: 'Any gum chum?' because we couldn't get candy, or very little, I think 2ozs. a week was the ration, from memory, for sweets, and there was a very limited variety of sweets that you could obtain. But these Americans all came chewing so we thought: 'well, they've got chewing gum, let's see if we can get some'. They must have found it a little bit annoying really, to have all these kids constantly coming up saying: 'Any gum chum?' but they were very liberal and very friendly towards children, they would give you the gum if they had it to spare.

[Crystal:] *I've heard it said sometimes where British children would ask: 'Any gum chum?' and the GIs would reply: 'Have you got a sister, mister?'*

Oh yeh.

Did you know of anyone around Newtown who met a GI, or who met one of the other sort of soldiers during the war?

Yeh, but we'd better be careful what we are saying... as kids we didn't worry about it too much, but British servicemen were very resentful of the Americans because I think, from what I've been told, the average American serviceman was paid about five times the amount the British serviceman would receive, and so they had money to entertain the opposite sex and attract the opposite sex. They had everything going for them, the Americans, they had the money, they had smart uniforms – the Americans wore – compared... the British soldier wore khaki serge, very thick, I mean I became a soldier myself eventually to do my National Service, but the British servicemen wore thick, khaki serge, the Americans wore uniforms which appeared to be made of a gabardine type of material, a smart cut, tailored and they were attractive I could tell. You know it's easy to see how ladies would be attracted to them, because they were good-looking fellows, I suppose there were a few not such good-looking ones, but even to we kids, we all thought the Americans are so much smarter than our own men, you know. They were good-looking fellows and they

were well-dressed and they had the money. And so they could treat girls very well and, as a consequence of that, we would see lots of girls and young ladies (and sometimes married ladies) that we knew of in our localities, who would quite openly be going out with American servicemen. And one or two ended up becoming pregnant and having children.

Part of that story is that there were, at the end of the war, so-called 'brown babies' who were children of black American GIs and white British girls, including some in Exeter. Do you remember that at all?

I can remember that happening, I can't say that I knew of any personally, no, but certainly I knew, even on the street where I lived, there were a couple of ladies who had children by white American GIs. Yes.

I guess we'd better not ask any more about that [laughs].

I can remember the names of the people, but it wouldn't be fair to discuss names. And it's understandable how they found themselves in those situations really, looking back upon it, you know. Their own husbands, if they were married, were away serving often out of the country, overseas and here were these very attractive young men who weren't at all shy or bashful compared with the reserve that we British had, the Americans were very outgoing and didn't hesitate to tell a young lady that she was attractive and how would she like to go to the movies tonight etc etc.

[Crystal] During the war did you ever.. people say they saw Americans playing baseball or football, did they ever come into your cricket pitch at Belmont Park?

No, I can remember the odd occasion when an American GI would be in the park, he would come over and kick a ball with us, you know, wanting to be friendly and join in. But I do recall one occasion when there was an American football game staged at St James' park, which is near where you live now, and I can't remember exactly... I think it was a navy team playing an army team, and the navy team I do recall was known as the Seabees. And the Seabees, that name came from CB - Construction Battalion, and they were stationed on Topsham Road which, as we speak, is now being developed as a huge housing estate. But right up until recent times, fairly recent years, that was Royal Navy stores because the Royal Navy took over those stores after the Americans left. But during the war years, those stores... we didn't realise till after they'd gone how vast the area was they occupied. But they erected a lot of Nissen huts there and they carried there the stores that they were keeping in readiness for D-Day. And in the American Navy, they had what they called a Construction Battalion and they were known as the Seabees - CB, they called them Seabees, and I remember this football game, which was free for us to go in and watch, we just discovered it by accident, I think, I don't think it was advertised - we boys were out and heard the noise and we went in. And here was the Construction Battalion playing an army team, I'm pretty sure they were playing an American army team, and each time they scored, they had a gun there which fired a blank. You know when I say a gun, it was a fairly substantial gun, and they fired this gun every time they scored, it was a blank. You just reminded me, I'd forgotten that.

And they'd erected the posts for American football. Wow, I wouldn't have thought St James Park was long enough for that.

Yes, well I suppose they adapted it.

[Crystal..] In the summertime I guessing, not in,,,

I can't remember what time of year it was, but it was American football and, you know, they had all the kit, they were clothed in American football kit. That was quite novel for us because we'd not seen that.

So were you convinced, or did you and your friends think it was rubbish? [laughs]

Yeh, we couldn't see the point of it, we couldn't understand what was going on, because every so often this gun would fire, and we would think: 'Why are they doing that' you know, then we'd twig that it was because that was a score, you know, and that's in fact what it was.

Do you remember Polish or Czech RAF people in Exeter?

Indeed I do, 307 Squadron I think it was, and the reason why I have such good recollection, well reasonable recollection of that is, my friends, Geoffrey Samuels, who lived at No. 66 Portland Street, just a few doors up from me, even numbers on one side odd on the other, so that's only five doors away from me, Geoffrey Samuels parents had billeted on them a Polish airman with his wife. And, Mr Woyczinski, was his name, Mr Woyczinski, and Geoffrey and I, sometimes I'd go to play with Geoff, and Mr Woyczinski, because he flew at night he was oftentimes at home during the day. He was a pilot, a sergeant pilot, and I remember him as a very friendly chap who would often help Geoffrey and I sort out some meccano, he was particularly good with meccano and Geoffrey and I would be struggling to make something with this meccano set and Mr Woyczinski would say: 'Let me help you boys' you know, so yes I remember 307 Squadron. And whilst they were there, Mr & Mrs Woyczinski had a baby Michael, who a couple of years ago, I got to meet, through the Express and Echo, he'd written a letter in to the Express & Echo and I thought: 'I remember that, I remember him being born'. So he's been down here now and we've met and we correspond.

Wonderful.

Yes, I remember his birth.

I'm interested to know how Sergeant Woyczinski's wife managed to get to England?

No, she was English and English girl.

I wonder if they met in Exeter?

I don't know if they met in Exeter, but they met over here. I think they might have met elsewhere, because they were stationed somewhere else before coming to Exeter.

I think that's true yes. And, still on the war, do you remember any POWs, any German or Italian POWs?

Yes, we used to see them around because, after a while, when it was apparent that we were winning the war at last, they used to use them for various jobs on farms, agricultural labourers, and they were allowed a little freedom, and they were allowed to visit the town, and indeed go to the cinema. But they were easily recognisable because they had large patches sewn on, they wore like an English battledress blouse, and on the back of the blouse, I think it was a circle, a patch, I think that was how we were able to tell right away that they were POWs. So you would see POWs walking around quite freely and going to the cinema.

But I didn't get to know any POW until after the war, and I did get to meet a chap who was.. he'd been in the German navy and the ship was torpedoed and he'd been taken prisoner, but he didn't want to go back when he was released because his home was in East Germany and he didn't want to go back to live under the Russians and he stayed on, and he got a job as a waiter at the Imperial Hotel on New North Road. And my father used to frequent the Imperial Hotel and got to know this young waiter and brought him home, and I would have been, this would have been about 1947 or '48 because I can remember I was occasionally going to have a drink in a pub, although I might only just have been of age to do so, and this young chap wasn't a lot older than me, and father brought him home and introduced him to the family, and I've got recollections of going out to the pub with this chap, whose name was Horst Klippel. But he preferred to be known as 'Paul' because at that time, as you can appreciate, right after the war, anyone who was German was a little bit conscious of the fact that they'd been fighting us, and not only fighting us, but been up to other things that didn't exactly put them at the top of the popularity poll, and so Paul was very conscious of the fact, Horst, and so he asked to be known as Paul, and he'd tell people that he was newly introduced to, that he was Swiss, rather than German. It's just reminded me, I did know of another chap too, ex prisoner of war, who did the same thing, can't remember his name, but he used to drink in the same pubs that I used, and he used to tell people he was Swiss. Yes he was a nice chap.

That's very interesting, and you sound remember where the POWs were particularly stationed?

There was a camp up, somewhere on Haldon Hill, top of Haldon, camp up there,

In the woods sort of?

Yes I think it was. It was near Chudleigh, because this chap I'm telling you about, I got to know him, Paul, actually married a Chudleigh girl who he'd got to know when he was let out on day release from the prison, when they started easing the restrictions. Because the camp was in close proximity to Chudleigh, he wandered in to Chudleigh with a couple of his friends, I suppose, and got to meet this Chudleigh girl and he married her.

We've taken up a lot of your time, George..

Well, it's alright as it happens because my wife is... I should go and check on her presently and make sure she's alright.

I wonder if you remember from that time, or subsequently, anybody else, because you've got such a great memory, meeting anybody else in Exeter who was from anywhere else in the world?

Anywhere else in the world?

From anywhere at all, from Africa or Asia...

It was mostly Americans, Polish – I mean you are right, there was every nationality you could think of really, French people who were in the free French forces, people who were from other occupied parts of Europe, joined up the airforce and army and stuff. I can't remember getting to know any other nationalities, not getting to know them well.

Do you remember any Imperial forces in Exeter, so people from West Africa or India or from the Caribbean?

No, no doubt they were here, because Exeter airport was RAF Exeter and there would have been chaps there probably in the RAF from West Indies maybe, Jamaica places like that, but I didn't get to know any of them personally. And at school, occasionally we'd get visits from American troops who would come in and speak to us and I remember on one occasion, when a couple of servicemen who were teachers back home in the States, they visited the school and spoke to us in Assembly. But I don't remember any other nationalities.

Do you remember changing much on D-Day, so in the Summer of 1944 was there a sense of everyone leaving?

Yeah, a big exodus had taken place and we hadn't realised just how many of them had been there, and suddenly they're gone. We can remember watching rehearsals where the RAF planes would be towing gliders around Exeter on practise tows, but no-one knew when D-Day was going to take place, and this became quite common, you know, you'd look up and see planes towing gliders and you wouldn't know if it was a practise or not really. Just look up and wonder, yes the skies were quite busy in those days.

I think I've run out of questions.

[Crystal...] I've one question, I've heard that Joe Louis, the boxer was in Exeter. Do you remember, were you aware of that or...

I can remember kids talking about it in school and most people not believing it: 'No, no – Joe Louis, not over here no'. But there were boys in the school who lived in that area close to Topsham Barracks and I think that's where the fight took place that he staged, an exhibition bout it would have been, and boys who were from that part of the town, came in to school and said: 'oh yeh, that's what been happening, Joe Louis was at the Topsham Barracks' 'No, got that wrong, Joe Louis wouldn't have been doing that' but afterwards, we discovered it was true, he'd been here.

George that's wonderful, thank you.

Well, I love talking about it all that time, as you can probably tell. They were interesting times and as I said at the onset, it was a time when we, as children, didn't know fear, we didn't know what it was to be fearful of these terrible things that were happening until... we started to get bombs dropped on us, and then we realised, you

know, you saw death and experienced people who had bereavements and stuff and terrible things that happened, lost their homes, then we realised that it was a bit more serious than we had previously thought.

There were direct hits on Portland Street, weren't there?

Yes there were. In fact I think that was one of the things I mentioned to the Newtown Association. Prior to the Blitz, the Blitz was May '42, I think it was in April '42 when the sirens went and after a while you know these sirens would go quite frequently, because if the German planes were detected in any sort of reasonable sort of proximity to the city, they would sound the alarm because they didn't know if the planes were coming to raid the city or whether they were just passing to go somewhere else. And so the air-raid alarm would go frequently and oftentimes, you would get out of bed, you imagine what it is like to be woken in the middle of the night, you'd get out of bed, come down to take shelter, and then you're down for half an hour and the all-clear would go, you'd go back to bed for an hour and the siren would go again. And this would be going... and sometimes nothing would happen, there'd be no bombs dropped, and you'd get a bit blasé about it, you know, and you'd think: should I get out of bed, can't be bothered and then a bomb would drop, bombs would drop, and you'd think: 'My God, I'd better get out of here'. I forget what I started to say about that....

Direct hit on Portland Street.

Oh yes, a direct hit on Portland Street. April '42, this particular night, my brother was home on leave from the Army, and he slept in the room, three storeys, he slept in the room right at the top. We'd been issued with what was known as a Morrison shelter. A Morrison shelter was a table structure but reinforced steel and it had a spring mesh in the bottom, you could put a mattress under there and make a bed in there, you see, which is what people used to do. Anyway, this night the siren went, mother got me up, father went out, as most able-bodied men did to fight fires and try to put out incendiaries if they landed, and generally look after the safety of the neighbours.

Mother and I took shelter, my brother, being a macho soldier, couldn't see the point of getting out of bed for an air-raid, so he stayed up in bed. Mother, who I must say from memory, used to be extremely nervous about air raids, she was all of a tremble and kept shouting up to my brother to come down, but he wouldn't come down. And then, all of a sudden, we hear this high-pitched whistle and we knew that was a bomb dropping. You'd hear these high-pitched screeching, whistling sounds you knew there was a bomb coming. And so that's followed by an almighty explosion and crash and a bang and dust and God knows what else. My mother by now, is almost hysterical thinking my brother is probably dead, the bomb's landed so close he's got to be dead. Although we were alright in the shelter. Seconds later, my brother comes diving head-long into the shelter. What had happened, opposite, round about No. 70 Portland Street (remember I lived at 56) this bomb had dropped into the middle of the road, destroyed houses on both sides, killing two members of one family. And a granite kerbstone, which must have been the length of that hearth and probably as deep, if not deeper, and about that thick, had been thrown up from the road and had come down through our house, and that's why it sounded, and made mother and I feel that our house had a direct hit. And that kerbstone came down through the house and embedded itself in the wooden kitchen floor. We didn't know that until the next morning, but my brother comes scuttling in. After the raid is over,

we'd come out, looking around, the ceiling's down and glass in and all the rest of it, because the blast would blow the windows in and stuff like that, so we had a lot of mess to clear up, and then go out to the kitchen and there's this damn great granite kerbstone embedded in the kitchen floor. Well, if my brother had been under that, he would have been dead.

Anyway, father enlisted the help of two or three other chaps and they manhandled that granite kerbstone down to the bottom of the garden where we sort of incorporated it as a sort of step. That kerbstone is there to this day. We discussed this with the Newtown representatives when they came talking to me about the Blitz, and I took them around to see it, kindly helped by the neighbours who live there now. They didn't know – I knocked on their door and said: 'I used to live here' and told them about the experience and I said I'd like to show you where that kerbstone is. They said: 'well come on in', took me through to the back garden, and I said: 'there it is, that's the kerbstone that came flying from opposite No. 70 Portland Street to arrive in the kitchen of this house'. It's there to this day, I tell you it ought to be preserved really, somehow, they ought to put a notice up there to say: 'don't do away with this stone, it's history'.

That's amazing. Thank you George.

I am sorry I've taken up more of your time than you wanted to.

No, it's absolutely wonderful. I feel like there's so much more we could ask you, but maybe some other time.

Yes, I'd be delighted, any time, any time.

End of interview