

Oral History Recording 6 November 2019
Subject: Len Claisse (LC) Interviewer Chris Ellis (CE)

CE

Right, we're recording now. This is a recording of Len Claisse by Chris Ellis on the sixth of November. 2019. Now, let's start by when you came to Chestfield. You said to me before that you came to Chestfield in 1996.

LC

1996. That's right.

CE

Was there a particular reason that took you here or did it just...

LC

We needed to move. We live in Addington, West Malling, in a two bedroom house and my wife couldn't get up, down the stairs any longer. She had knee operations twice. And so, it was necessary to have a bunk in there. And my daughter, one of my daughters, lived in Beltinge at the time. And we were visiting her and on the way back, we came through Chestfield. We saw the number of bungalows that were there and so we decided this would be a good place to start. We contacted the local agent and came down the next day or two, and had a look at about a dozen new bungalows and decided on this one.

CE

So that was pretty straightforward. So it wasn't you already have relatives here or anything like that.

LC

Well, apart from my daughter at Beltinge.

CE

Well, when you came down, you quite quickly got involved with the community.

LC

Yes.

CE

In particular, of course I'm thinking of the Parish Council, but were there any other organisations that you're involved with? Were there any issues that people were talking about?

LC

Oh yes. I was in Neighbourhood Watch. I was doing things for Chestfield Society. And then I found there with two or three vacancies on the Parish Council. So I made contact with the Parish Council, and I think normally there's a rule that you must live in the Parish for at least two years, but Linda Livingston seem to waive that because my being a counsellor in Beltinge, so I joined in.

CE

When was that?

LC

Well, certainly by about 2000.

CE

And did you quite quickly move to being Chairman, or what was it like?

LC

After about one year I became vice chairman. And then, I think Dorothy Hewitt was the chairman at that time. And she decided to resign. And because I was Vice Chairman, I got pushed up to be Chairman.

CE

Yes, I see. I'd always assumed that you took over from Brian Barnes, but he was in fact a bit before your time.

LC

Yes. I knew Brian Barnes because I used to do the magazine distribution and they used to do their little bit of the Parish. And ... but I didn't know him as a Parish Councillor.

CE

So, at that time you were involved with the distribution of the Parish magazine. You kept on Neighbourhood Watch, I guess.

LC

Yes. Still am actually.

CE

You should be getting a gold watch! And then you were joining the Parish Council.

LC

Yes.

CE

Now, at that time were there any big issues that were of interest and concern to people

LC

Well there had been. As far as I could manage to glean, and from reading the Chestfield Tales the Chestfield Society had been rather divided because of the bypass. They were either having it this end by the side by the railway or on the south side up near where it is now.

CE

Yes, the north side road was simply, if I remember rightly, going to be an enlargement of the existing Thanet Way.

LC

I think there was going to be some sort of overhead business to avoid the railway and the roundabout,

CE

Oh I see. I hadn't heard of that. I can understand why because that roundabout, you know, it's been tricky ever since. So, when you said, there had to be problems or issues that people were concerned about what were they?

LC

Well, it really rather divided the Chestfield into two societies, the south end and the north end. And it led to the demise of the Chestfield Society because in the end they couldn't get any officers. The Secretary, Mrs. Steadman, was going to move away, her husband died, I think. And Mr Stickles, of course was chairman. He wanted to resign, and they just couldn't get any replacements. So, in the end they put out a leaflet saying if nobody will volunteer we will have to close down. And that's what happened. Which meant, all the emphasis then went to the Parish Council.

CE

Right, well that's interesting. And it's news to me because I had assumed, not that I've seen any documents that prove it, I just assumed that the Chestfield Society had worked hard to get a Parish Council, and once the Parish Council was created, which was in 1988, Chestfield Society simply wound itself up, but obviously that wasn't the case.

LC

Well, it was sort of interesting and bound up with what I was saying about the officers. They couldn't get replacements and I think people thought - well we've got a Parish Council now, why bother. And with a fee- I had to collect from everyone in Plantation Road - the Chestfield Society was a pound a year. And you had to knock at every door to get these pounds and that used to take ages, because people were out at work.

CE

And I bet a few found a reason not to give the pounds. I know from collecting myself from our Road Association, it can be a bit tricky, especially with the last few, you know most pay. Well, was there a division in what the Chestfield Society was doing in the late 80s and 90s and what the Parish Council did?

LC

I wouldn't say so. No, I mean the Chestfield Society had been running a long time whereas the Parish Council was new. And, obviously, there were some members of the Parish Council who didn't know anyone in the Chestfield Society. So, there was a division like that.

CE

Was there also a geographical division? I mean you went up and down Plantation Road for the Chestfield Society, getting subscriptions. But was it that the Chestfield Society was patchy, and it actually only drew people from certain areas?

LC

Well, it was only so many in each street who belonged or paid their pound.

CE

Were there any arguments between Chestfield Society and the Parish Council?

LC

None, to my knowledge, but I think there had been when the bypass was being discussed. And there had been a North and South division. But I think that had blown over because the bypass was being built when I came here.

CE

Yes, I know. I arrived in 98. And I think it was just about to open or had been opened. I do remember that the people we bought our house from, Arthur Porter and his wife, thought it would spoil Chestfield. Did you meet Arthur at all?

LC

Porter? Right, okay. He was a city Councillor in this area, but probably he'd retired by then.

CE

He said to me, once he had my money in his pocket, that it was going to be ruined by the new bypass and that it was terribly noisy, and so on and so forth. You know, in the end we have been okay. So, there was the argument of the bypass.

LC

Yes.

CE

And maybe one or two others, because one of the things that I found was (I've got quite limited information about it) was there was an argument over the possibility of constructing a community centre on part of where the Recreation Ground is now.

LC

Yes, there was, that was certainly true, but there were some people who said well there's already two. There's the WI, and another one in Swalecliffe, and we don't need another one. But really the WI isn't big enough to accommodate lots of games and societies and such things. So, there was a lot of discussion about a site where the new Hall would be built. There was one discussion about being out there where you said. There was another discussion about it being up near Birkdale Close.

CE

Do you mean towards Molehill Rd?

LC

Off Molehill Road yes, near enough where the ponds have been made. Yes. That was one site. And there was also the site down towards the Ridgeway. Where you run down, where the Grasmere field is. Yes. That was another suggestion. And another one was going out

towards new bypass on the left hand side, there's a big field there. After the houses and before you get to the bridge. But it all fell apart. Nothing happened. Because they hadn't got the land, and they were looking for somebody to donate a field to build on. But it didn't come to anything.

CE

Where would the money to actually build the building come from?

LC

Well they seemed to think they would run raffles and all sorts of things to raise the money.

CE

Well, it would have to be a pretty big scale raffle to pay for a building as big as that. But anyway, talking of buildings on sites, do you know when Sainsbury's and B and Q, and the Medical Centre were put up?.

LC

They were here when we came. I think it was about their first or second year.

CE

Did that make a lot of difference to people? I mean, if they were already built, you probably wouldn't have known about it before but I wondered whether, for instance, it did a lot of damage to the trade of the businesses here and the Broadway just across the Railway.

LC

I'm sure did. But that was Swalecliffe. And there was always some antagonism between Chestfield and Swalecliffe. This was the Upper Class and beyond the railway was the Lower Class.

CE

Right. I'd love to hear what a Swalecliffe person would say when they were describing things, but I do know what you mean because of course, a large part of the Swalecliffe development was Council housing.

LC

Yes that's right

CE

There were a lot of private developments.

LC

Oh yes

CE

...that mirror what's over here. When you go, as it were, towards Herne Bay.

LC

That's true. But there's still a gap in finance.

CE

One of the things that surprised me, and you may not have any information on this, was that there's a Roman Catholic Church but there's no Anglican Church.

LC

Well there is the one in Swalecliffe. Because of course before the railway was built this area all came under Swalecliffe.

CE

Was that because of it being part of what was it then called, Whitstable Urban District Council, or was it something else? And when you say came under Swalecliffe ...It must have come under Whitstable and then Swalecliffe.

LC

No, Swalecliffe was here in the first place and Whitstable grew. And it's in here (shows Chestfield Tales book). I don't know whether you've got one of these copies

CE

Oh yes it was that that really inspired me and the others in the History Society to produce our own book.

LC

Yes, that's right.

CE

Have you got the new History as well? Yes. Good. I don't know if you've read it and you spotted any mistakes in it. Certainly, if you did, I'd love to hear about them, but that's another matter.

LC

Nothing that was worth raising.

CE

You're very polite! You'd have known a number of people mentioned in it. Now with the book that you've just shown me [Chestfield Tales], we think of it as being Tony Blake's book. It says that in fact it was a joint effort by a number of people

LC

Yes.

CE

Now, it was published in 2002, so you would have been here by then. Do you know how it came to be produced? Was it really all Tony's idea or did the Parish Council fund it, or what?

LC

No I don't think it was anything to do with the Parish Council at that time. I think when that was envisaged, and work done it was purely Chestfield Society.

CE

Really, so it was Chestfield Society which was going on right through until about 2000.

LC

Yes

CE

...that was the moving force behind it.

LC

That's right.

CE

...the Chestfield Tales book. Ah, right. I haven't made that connection. And so far as Tony Blake himself goes, did you meet Tony at all?

LC

Yes.

CE

Was that purely in his role as a history person?

LC

Well, he used to run little cinema things, that's where I got to know him, in the WI Hall.

CE

Was this cine films that he made himself?

LC

Yes. And he got hold of things from other people too I've seen. And he put them all together and made a series of films. And that's how I met him at any rate.

CE

It's my impression that there were more opportunities for people to do things that would get in groups of people back in those days about the turn of the century than there are now because there's just so much more that people can do in their own home.

LC

That's right. Television had not really taken over.

CE

Do you think that there were more social societies and groups of various kinds then? Are there any you can remember that came to an end, because eventually there weren't enough people who were interested?

LC

Well the WI was quite strong

CE

It's still strong I think.

LC

As far as men went, I don't think there was very much going on until the chap who lives next door to the WI Hall became a Councillor, or his wife became a Councillor, on the Parish Council. Yes, and they started, table tennis, and they had it in the WI Hall until the WI complained they were tearing out the floor with their shoes.

CE

Yes, the table tennis club or society or whatever it's called is still going.

LC

Yes

CE

...but it's gone over to some place near Tesco's.

LC

Yes. I forget what you call them now. (*Editor's note – Chestfield Warriors*). They had the shop near Tesco's. Yes, in that conurbation there.

LC

Yes, the John Wilson Business Park

LC

That's it, yes Business Park.

CE

There are two business parks or trade parks or whatever they are out there. There's the one, close by us beyond where Sainsburys and B and Q is. And there's the one at the back of Tesco.

LC

There were two sons. One was Sam. The old boy...and he had two sons,

CE

Which old boy was that?

LC
well....

CE
You mean George Reeves, or Pout?

LC
no ... John Wilson, yes, is the father who gave each of the sons, as I understand it, a site to build a sort of business park. And so you've got the one that is John Wilson I think and the other which is something else Wilson.

CE
Right. And they do slightly different things. For instance, the first one, the one that's a continuation of Sainsburys as it were, has a radio station in it. It is all "officy", whereas the other is more close to being industrial.

LC
Yes

CE
Well, I never really knew who John Wilson was.

LC
No I've never seen ... It's just a name to me,

CE
We've uncovered a number of dynasties as it were, there's the Silk family. There's the Reeves family. There's George Fitt, and I think his son also was involved in things. And presumably the Wilson's are yet another one. Oh and the Pouts.

LC
I think the Pouts owned a lot of land round here. Yes. Because of course, George Reeves actually, probably, bought a lot of the ground from him.

CE
This would have been way back in the 1920s

LC
Yes.

CE
I don't know if you know this, but one of the things that interested me was that there was a plan to actually construct a big estate, just on the far side of Grasmere Pastures that would have more or less taken up any demand there was for housing around here. And it was by one of the Pout family. It's the area around Clover Rise. And it even had its own Golf Club, which was called Grasmere Links. Oh yes, and Grasmere Links was where Grasmere Pastures now is, and also covered the land on which Sainsbury's and B and Q are.

LC
Yes

CE
... and add to that Health Centre. What about local services, talking about the Health Centre. I mean, do you go to the Health Centre?

LC
Yes, it's my local.

CE
Of course, do you, have you used any of the Swalecliffe shops at all? Or do you use the library up there?

LC
I used to, well until I got this electronic reading thing. And I used to go to the library and also when I went to the newsagent who was originally based near Tony Blake.

CE
Oh you mean where the shops are now with a dentist.

LC
Yes.

CE
So that newsagent moved to the new sites where it is now. Is that right?

LC
It went from near Tony Blake's, by the Hall, the WI hall, to over by past the station,

CE
Which is where it is now?

LC
Well it is the Post Office now, and a general store, but that was the newsagent. Newtons or something they were called.

CE
I think I'll be able to find that out because we've got an advertisement that all of the local businesses chipped into in 1938 that lists all of them. It has a big sort of picture map in the middle and then all around are advertisements for the individual shops that were there, so I'm sure it'll be there. And it was useful for us to know because I had actually assumed that the Broadway was built after the war, but it wasn't, it was already up and running in the 1930s. But that's before your time and mine.
So, what about the other shops around here. I mean we do have shops around here. We've got the dentist. We've got the computer repair place.

LC

Well the dentist is quite new.

CE

Really?

LC

Yes, there wasn't a dentist here, because I still go to the one in Canterbury because there wasn't a national health dentist in Chestfield at all.

CE

Well of course there's now one in Swalecliffe. I go to the one in Swalecliffe.

What about shops that were there but are not there anymore. I ask because I have had an oral record, nothing proven, that there was a sort of garden centre that sold bonsai trees. Have you heard of that?

LC

No. That must have been before we bought our house.

CE

Yes it probably was. And there were shops. Certainly one shop that sold milk and so on down at the far end of Chestfield.

LC

Yes that was right.

CE

So, and that's all of course in my book if it isn't in the Tony Blake one, So, going back to the Parish Council. You mentioned Linda Livingstone who was Clerk and she was Clerk for a long while, wasn't she?

LC

Yes, and we had two sites. One was in the grounds of the Castle. Down in the basement of the lodge of the castle. And then she had to move because it was so damp, water used to pour in there.

CE

This was in Whitstable castle?

LC

Yes.

CE

That is quite a way from Chestfield.

LC

Yes. Then we moved down to ... actually in the little road that goes through Whitstable itself. There was Council offices there, and she had an apple store room there.

CE

Would that have been the Urban District offices?

LC

It would have been in their offices, yes. And she had an upstairs room. There were two of those, and then they were going to close it down but I don't think they ever have, they still own it. Linda had to move again, just at the time she was retiring.

CE

And when would that have been?

LC

Well it was time. I could probably tell you from the present set of Council Clerks applications. We've still got applications.

CE

Did Amanda Sparkes take over from Linda directly?

LC

There was a whole series of interviews until we finally got Amanda.

CE

I get the impression that both ladies have done a pretty good job.

LC

Oh, I think so. Amanda likes to work from home and doesn't use the office all the time. If you go down on the Tuesday and Wednesday Amanda does go down there because she must have all her apparatus there, duplicating and that sort of thing.

CE

Yes, she does work a lot from her home. Well, let's now look at one or two of the personalities, I mean, looking back on it. Were there any people during your time in the Parish Council you particularly remember because they were marvellous, straightforward, just interesting?

LC

Well, I've still got most of the printouts of the counsellors.

Hang on. [Len goes to a back room and returns with papers]

One was a fireman who lived up the top of Maydowns Road - Keith Stanford. His wife, no his daughter, got some dreadful disease, and they had to give up because he had a daily routine to take her to the hospital. And John Finch is still about. Now, they moved away, they live down on the Sea Front.

CE

He's not the same Finch as the man who does the gardening?

LC

No he is Greenfinch. Now, David Fitzpatrick is back on the Council, yes right, still with us now. There was George. George Gad and his wife became Councillors for a very short time. And they live, more or less, at the corner of Molehill Road and Chestfield Road. Just around the corner.

CE

I see you've got the lady called Sue Shillam, who was from Broomfield Gate, we've not succeeded in recent years in having anyone from it.

LC

Her husband got a different job, and they moved to Chelmsford I think it was. Linda Wickings, that's the one who does the table tennis with her husband, right.

CE

Now she still does this. When did this date from?

LC

2003.

Now 2004 and no change there. No change... no change.

CE

So, the people who are on now. They're all pretty new arrivals I mean,

LC

Yes, Steve, apart from David. David Fitzpatrick, who was off the Council, and now he's come back. But, Steve Bailey and Chris Brealy are both relatively new there.

CE

I see you got a fair number of these [records] that go through the years.

LC

Len Shorter, Lodge Field Road. Right. And he did quite a lot of work with footpaths.

CE

Which was my interest originally when I went to do the circular walk.

LC

Right.

CE

Okay. Well, I mean looking back on the time that you were there which is really from about 2000 and up until about 2015, wasn't it.

LC
Yes.

CE
Is there anything in particular that you remember as contentious or difficult?

CE
Well, we had to meet certain criteria to become a certified Parish Council accepted by the whole of Kent I think. We had a badge on our magazines, because of it. And they only lasted for a couple years, but Linda Livingston put together all the information they required. You had to show that you had a Parish magazine, that you looked after footpaths. And you did this, that and the other in order to qualify for the badge.

CE
Was this to enable you to join an organisation like say the Kent Association of Local Councils?

LC
No, we had always been regulars of that

CE
Because this was after you actually got your legal Parish Council status wasn't it?

LC
Yes

CE
So it wasn't to do with that.

LC
No, something else. This was a scheme the government brought in to try and encourage an upgrading of Parish Councils, and therefore they set down the criteria of what you had to meet. And Linda did all the work to get us accepted for this. And, well, I think it only had a lifetime for about three years, then it died to death.

CE
Oh, so originally the idea was that you would have to reapply, but the whole scheme itself just dropped out?

LC
Yes, well that's not unknown in government.

CE
Fair enough. Well, there's one other thing that I wanted to raise with you. And that is local characters outside of the Parish Council itself. As you know I was constantly bumping into evidence, so for instance a chap who was in the SAS and he built his own house ... can't remember his name now. And there were, you know, there were several people who made a bit of a splash on various occasions. Do you remember any of those?

LC

Not really, [Len refers to notes he is holding] I had a look in the appendix here.

CE

There was a lady who I believe was the step daughter of D. H. Lawrence, who lived here.

LC

That was Dorothy Perkins. We named the little bus shelter after her. She left some money. And we spent it on a bus shelter, which at the time caused a lot of controversy because the owner of the grounds didn't like it.

CE

He didn't like it because it was named after her or he didn't like having a bus shelter?

LC

He didn't like the people standing outside his house waiting for the bus, and inevitably children as well, who used to drop rubbish on the ground.

CE

I've got some sympathy for that. But of course, that's what's going to happen at bus stops, particularly because so many of the children can't go to school here because there isn't a school here they can go to.

LC

They have to go to Swalecliffe. However, it's very interesting to see. And finally, someone called Delany Jones used to live in this house [Len's own house], which was called "The Squirrels" at the time. And he went to a little school, which was in the back garden. One of these original little schools that came before the Education Act that took everything as though it needed replacing.

CE

So when was this? If he lived in this house it couldn't have been that long ago, could it, because the house presumably was built, what, in the 1930s or 40s?

LC

[refers to notes] There you are - "Julian Delahay Jones dwelled as a child in Swalecliffe and he received his early education at Miss Schofield school, The Squirrels at 17 Chestfield Road. Julian became a banker and was honoured with the freedom of the City of London. He retired to Chestfield, and settled in Robin's Grove, the Drive, until his death in 1999."

CE

Right. And these are all the other people here so there's. Oh, Raymond Rickett. That's interesting, because, yes, I met Raymond Rickett. In my work he was director of Middlesex Polytechnic. And he was a very substantial figure in the education world. He got a knighthood I see. And he lived in 36 Chestfield Road. Well if I'd have known that when we met, I would have said I live in Chestfield.

So there's a number of people who became the great and the good. Ah now, Percy Tarling, I picked this one out because Tarling lived in my house with his wife during the 1930s. They were entertainers, and often held weekend parties for friends from the BBC. Mrs Martin from the grocery shop would cook the dinner. There is Douglas West the photographer, of course, yes I've forgotten about this list here I'll go back to that and have a look at it, particularly if they lived in places that I've been in myself. And Charlie Chester. Charlie Chester lived on the corner of the Drive

LC

Well it's actually in Chestfield Road, the corner house,

CE

You were saying, the woman who was the step daughter of D. H. Lawrence,

LC

Perkins, Dorothy, Dorothy Perkins

CE

She's not here, is she?

LC

Actually she's just mentioned somewhere. Right, okay.

CE

Because quite aside from being the step daughter of the author, she also I think was quite active.

LC

She was locally connected with the church. You can find out more from records from Linda's time.

CE [referring back to Chestfield Tales]

Yes. So, what I can do is go back to have a look myself and check these things out. I'm pleased to see that the Tarlings are there because of them living in our house, but I was quite touched by seeing the Director of Middlesex Poly he came to see me a few months after I was setting up the venture that I was responsible for at the University of Kent, and he was very positive and he said lots of nice things to me. How far he was just encouraging me, if he had any confidence in me was another matter. That covers everything that I wanted to do, is there anything else that you'd like to raise with me.

LC

I don't think so. I mean, I've got to the stage now where the garden is a bit too big for me. I find difficult to get round to the shops. We drive to the shops, walking from the car park into the shops and around the shop tires me out a lot.

CE

Yes, I was speaking to Kathy Wagner and she said that she met you there a few days ago. Do you know her? Got a sort of helmet hair style. Dark hair.

LC

Yes, I think I know who you mean. I don't always know people's name,

CE

I'm getting more dreadful that way myself.

LC

You know, people who were in the Neighbourhood Watch for instance. And, well I organised a get together of the various Neighbourhood Watch in the area. And I got awarded a Turner prize.

CE

A Turner Prize! What does that mean?

LC

It's the Canterbury Neighbourhood Watch society. And they meet once a year and have a get together with the police and all that, attending. And I was astonished to find I'd got an award.

CE

Well that's very good. Is it Turner, as in Turner the painter or is it...

LC

I don't know. Hang on.

[Len's just going off to check on things.]

CE

Right. Okay. [reads] "The David Turner award. This certificate is awarded to Len Claisse in recognition of valuable and dedicated service to Neighbourhood Watch."

Very nice. I'm not likely to get something like that! It's still very nice, very nice. I hadn't realised ... does Canterbury and District Neighbourhood Watch Association have a district that is the whole of the Canterbury local authority district?

LC

It's got 26 different Parishes

CE

Oh well it would have then.

Right. Good. Oh well thank you for showing me that.

Okay, as I say, I think we've covered it now. Well thank you very much indeed. And I will now turn this off.

LC

And I hope that has been of some use to you.

CE

Yes it has. I'll be passing it on to the fellow members of the History Society and I'm sure that they'll be criticising me telling me that I've not asked you enough.

LC

Okay, thank you.

