

Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

INTERVIEW BETWEEN PERCY REBOUL AND JACK PRIME AT 12 PARKWOOD, OAKLEIGH ROAD ON 14 AUGUST 1983

PR The date is 14 August 1983 and this afternoon I am talking to Jack Prime at his home in 12 Parkwood, Oakleigh Road, Whetstone.

Now Jack, just for the record, you and I have been talking about old Whetstone and memories of many years and you have kindly agreed today to talk to me about some of your memories of old Whetstone but I do want to put on record the fact that you are very much an amateur historian in your own right and you've written a number of pieces, all of which I've seen and I think are really excellent, including one called *A Trip Down Memory Lane*. You've written one about your schooldays. These, I think are lodged or will be lodged with the Local History library, so we've got a complete record of your memories. Now Jack, just for the record though, I see, looking down *A Trip Down Memory Lane* that you were born at Russell House, Whetstone on Friday 9th September 1904. You say: "but my memoirs start from 4 Whetstone Place". Before we talk about those memories, Jack, I'd like to find out just a little bit about your background. What did your father do for a living?

JP He was a gardener. He came from Suffolk, from a place called Needham Market the other side of Ipswich. I don't know what made him come to London because he'd got quite a few brothers, but he was the only one that left home and came to London. As a matter of fact he did work for Harmsworth.

PR The newspaper magnate?

JP Yes, when they lived at Poynters Hall Totteridge. He was one of the gardeners, there were several gardeners and after that he worked, still in Totteridge, a place called Northbank. It's been burnt down since. Just past South Herts. Golf Club and he was there about 20 years until the end of the 1914 war. He left there about 1920. Because these people – James was the name of the people – they had a son that married and went to South Africa and a daughter that married and went to Australia, so they packed the house up and went touring to see their son and daughter. I always remember that he'd been working for them about 20 years and he got a golden handshake of £20.

PR I suppose that was something, at least. But Jack, talking about Needham Market, there is a very famous old Victorian photograph showing the Post Master at Needham Market whose name is Prime and I think you think that is probably your grandfather?

JP No, no my father's uncle, my grandfather's brother, that would be.

PR That really is one of the great famous Victorian photographs and it showed him in his uniform and his funny hat.

JP That was in, what was that book called, *A Country*.....?

PR Yes, it's been published in Penguins and others. What about your mother? Was she a local girl?

JP She came from Norwich, she was Norfolk but she had a stepmother and they didn't get on very well and I always remember my mother had a scar where this stepmother had burnt her with a hot iron so when she was about 12 or 14 she left home and went into service and I don't know how she came to London but I remember her talking about She was a cook you see. She worked for Arding & Hobbs, the big stores. She was cook for them.

PR So how many were there in your family?

JP Well I had one sister die before I was born so there would have been four girls and me. I am the last but one.

PR And when did your parents die, roughly?

JP My eldest sister that was alive when we were kids, she died in 1948, my mother died in 1949 and my father died in 1950.

PR I'd like you, if you would, just take your mind back to that little cottage that you lived in. Can you give me a description? How was it heated, for example?

JP It was the old fashioned fireplaces. The kitchen..... you see there were two rooms downstairs and two rooms up. That was all there was. Outside toilet, outside water where three people had to use that same tap.

PR It was a tap was it? Not a pump?

JP No it was a brick building with a tank on the top and of course in the winter it all froze and everything but three had to use that and all along there were outside lavatories

PR They were water closets, were they?

JP That's right, yes

PR So tell me about the two downstairs rooms then

JP Just a kitchen and the front room. The kitchen had the open fire with an oven at the side. We used to do the cooking there. In the corner stood the gas stove, we did have a gas stove.

PR Gas lighting was it?

JP Well when we were kids it was oil lamps and it was not until I started work I got one of the plumbers.....oh no, we did have a gas whatisname but it was a jet, like a blue flame

PR Yes, before the mantle, in fact

JP No, no mantle just a jet. We then of course when I started work I got the plumber and he came and fitted us up with a proper light with a mantle.

PR Was there a gas meter?

JP Yes, penny in the slot. The coal was under the stairs. There was a cupboard under the stairs and they used to shoot the coal in there.

PR So all your mother's cooking and hot water was done on that stove?

JP Yes.

PR Was it a hard life for your mother, Jack?

JP It must have been. She had to go out charring, half a crown a day. My father was earning about 2 guineas a week when we were kids. As a matter of fact, when he first came to London he did work for Sweets the nursery people at a guinea a week and he paid my mother the pound and had the shilling himself. Then he got on to private people

PR So you weren't clearly well-off Jack but you never starved or anything.

JP No. She was a good cook and we always had good grub. Every Sunday we had a joint or one thing or the other and I mean at that time of day a joint, well I don't suppose it was two bob was it, a joint of beef or lamb and we always had a pudding on Sundays. I couldn't tell you what we had during the week. Stews and all that sort of thing I expect.

PR Anyway, there was not what I would call real hardship there.

JP No

PR When you were a young shaver you were expected to contribute something as soon as you could. What was your very first? Did you do a job when you were young? How old were you?

JP My first job, I remember one of the local chaps, Jack Catlin, he was a boy for earning money – anything to earn money

PR Was he a boy or a grown man?

JP Boy about the same age as me. We were about 10, 12 years old and he said: "Come up the golf with me caddying". So we go up the golf and my first money was 2/2d. That was 8d. a round, 4d. what we called dinner money and 8d. for the second round and 6d. for cleaning the clubs. It made 2/2d. and you walked about 10 miles for that.

PR Well it was a lot of money

JP Oh yes. That 2/2d. I expect I gave my mother the two bob and had the tuppence myself.

PR What about before that Jack. Were there any little jobs you used to have to do?

JP No. That was the first job but after that I took on several jobs. As a matter of fact, in that book there is a list of different jobs I had.

PR I know and one of them was what you called The Lather Boy. How old were you then?

JP Well that was just before I left school. I must have been 13. I had two jobs there. I had this job where I worked in Totteridge and I used to take the old dog for a run every morning. I don't think I went Sundays but it was every morning 6 days a week. Take the old dog for a run, bring him back. I was supposed to have combed him and all the rest of it. I used to stay there all Saturday morning. I cleaned the knives, the shoes and help my father a bit in the garden. We used to come home to dinner. He worked Saturdays as well. His job was six days a week and in the evenings during the week I was lather boy for Simpsons.

PR Now where was Simpsons?

JP It was opposite the *Swan with Two Necks*.

PR A barber's shop

JP The *Swan with Two Necks* was pulled down, but the barber's shop is still there but not a barber's now. I think it's a café now. I used to work there evenings from about 5 till about 8 o'clock at night except Thursdays – that was half day – and all Saturday afternoon until 9 o'clock. For taking the dog for a run I used to get 3/6d. and as lather boy I got half a crown.

PR Tell me about being a lather boy. Is it a bit of an art? Now what sort of clients did they have?

JP Anybody. It used to be a horrible job. Their breath used to smell. All sorts. Drunks, decent blokes and occasionally, very seldom it was, you got a penny tip. Baldwin the blacksmith, he used to come in there and I believe he used to give us a tip.

PR This was the era of the cutthroat razor wasn't it?

JP Yes

PR When you say you were a lather boy you obviously had a brush but tell me about the other implements you used.

JP The old shaving pot where you used to have the soap in the top and you'd get a brush full of lather and go round.

PR Was it hot water you used?

JP Oh yes. They had an urn there

PR What about their collar and tie? Did you have to take that off?

JP No, I just put a little towel round

PR Then what?

JP You lather the chin and then you rubbed it in with your fingers and you kept on until – there was Len Simpson and his father, they were both the barbers, haircutting and all the rest of it. Saturdays which they don't do now. They don't do shaving now, do they? But they'd be haircutting or shaving and you had to keep lathering until they were

ready to come and shave, see? In the finish I started shaving. One or two he'd let me. My father, I used to shave him but I didn't like the job.

PR It was a skilled job, though. Could you strop a razor Jack?

JP Oh Yes. I tell you what amuses me, going away from that. You see on the pictures these cowboys, they've got an open razor and they shave him and they've got him square on the face instead of lying them over at an angle. I thought how can they think of shaving like that?

PR Jack, let's talk about your schooldays and I just confirm that you have in fact written your story called *Jack Prime's Schooldays* which is in the local history museum. Let's just talk about that. How old were you when you first went to school?

JP Four years old

PR And which school did you go to?

JP St. John's, Britannia Road, Finchley. How I know I was 4 years old was because, as I say, I was born 1904 and one of the schoolmasters lent us the old registers and in it was everybody's name and when they started and I went to school 1908 so I could only have been 4. You went until you were 14

PR To the same school?

JP Oh yes, all the time. There again, see now I wouldn't have been 14 until September but the summer holidays were July and August and I left school then. I really should have gone back for about a fortnight.

PR What were the early teachers? Who was the head teacher?

JP Mr. Mellor was when I first went there. There was Mr. Mellor living in the school house, his son George Mellor and his wife. His wife died and then George Mellor went to another school and then old Mr. Mellor he carried on and then he died that would have been during the 1914 war and we had a Mrs. Cowling. She became head. Oh wait a minute – Berry took on after George Mellor left. This Mr. Berry became headmaster but he had to join the army during the 1914 war so Mrs. Cowling became headmistress and of course she carried on right through. I wasn't in Berry's class but I did get the cane off of him a couple of times. One was for....strictly you mustn't climb the fence or anything like that and I was swinging on the gate and somebody told him so he fetched me in and said "You've been climbing on the fence". I said "I haven't". He said "Well I was told you had". I said "I was on the gate". He said "That's nothing to do with the fence is it?" But I got the cane for it.

PR That would have been the same George Mellor that became Deputy Headmaster at Woodhouse and I think he retired in about 1940. I think he wrote the words to the school song, the Woodhouse school song

JP Yes, I know he went to a better class school.

PR What's your general impression about your school, Jack? Were they happy days?

JP Oh yes, I reckon so. You got the cane but you daren't go home and tell your mother you got the cane. You'd get a clout round the ear for it. She'd say: "Well you must have deserved it". Now these kids are dead scared of having the cane.

PR What was Whetstone like at that time, Jack? The trams came in fairly early, but you can remember before the trams came?

JP No, not before but I remember them altering the tram standards from the centre of the road to the outsides. I haven't the faintest idea what year that was (IT WAS ABOUT 1914)

PR Would it have been before the First World War?

JP Oh yes

PR I think it must have been about 1912.

JP Maybe, yes.

PR Was it a fairly tight-knit community? What did you do with yourself? You were working most of the time and I imagine your parents were. What sort of recreation did you have?

JP Sand pits, what is now the Whetstone Stray down Swan Lane. There's a pond there. Now its all been ornamented and the kids play but that old pond, when we were there, was just a hole in the ground and we used to go in there bathing. Strip right out – nothing on. Get behind the hedge to undress, come out and dry yourself on your shirt and of course further over in the pond it was rather deep and swimmers would go in there and that's where three kids got drowned.

PR Three in various years?

JP No, altogether. They made themselves a punt or a couple of punts and they were jumping from one to the other, upset the lot. There were four kids there. One scrambled to the bank and ran home but never said anything for some time but then they went down there and I saw them when they brought the last kid out.

PR About what year was that?

JP Now I was working at Margate at the time. '24, '25, '26 round then.

PR But you had all the countryside didn't you?

JP Oh yes; Totteridge and all round there but most of our time was spent down the old pits. We had a two-hole golf course down there – one up and one down. Then they used to have clay fights and all that, sling lumps of clay at one another and stone fights – terrible!

PR What was that? Rivalry between various parts of Whetstone, would that be?

JP Well no. I don't know how we used to pick up sides like that. But of course, there again the other side of the pits was Woodside Lane and all that and they were rather toffish kids there.

PR That was a rather well-to-do area, wasn't it?

JP Yes. We had air guns and they had air guns and we used to have fights with air guns, shooting the bullets at one another. I got a hit right in the corner of my eye, so I packed that up and I sold my gun then. There again, we had a chap, George Holt. He was almost a cripple, his knees were locked, and he could scramble along and he was Indians and cowboys mad, he was. I can see George now. He was always in the cowboy line.

PR Let's talk about some of the characters that used to live around. You mentioned a strange thing the other day about the people who lived in the wall.

JP That's right, yes.

PR Let's have a look at the map, Jack. Just to confirm, we're now looking at an 1894 map, which is a bit early, of Whetstone. Your house is shown there. This is the 25in. Ordnance Survey map and we can really see each of the buildings. A little further down the road from you there is St. John's church. Did you go to church?

JP Oh, yes. We were married at St. John's church and the vicar was Shepherd. The well-known Shepherd family, there's several of them.

PR Is that the family of David Shepherd, the Bishop of Liverpool?

JP Yes. I don't know if it was his brother that married us.

PR But it is the family. There's the vicarage there. What about church? Did it play much of a part in your life, Jack, when you were younger?

JP No, not really.

PR Did you go to church every Sunday, for example?

JP No. Sunday school, now the funny part, I don't know why it was, I was between two churches. I used to go to St. John's church at times and I used to go to the Congregational in Oakleigh Road. I don't know the distance between.

PR Did the churches run any youth club or anything like that?

JP Well we had the Scout troupe, St. John's

PR Were you a member of that?

JP Oh yes, the 93rd North London. I was a patrol leader

PR Did scouting play much of a part on your life?

JP Well, it was fun. We went to a camp at Elstree. As a matter of fact, that was the first water I ever went on was the old reservoir in Elstree and we stayed in a Swedish barn. We weren't in tents. Now Sophia Loren, when she came over to do a film, she lived in this barn while she was over here. It was all made up posh. That's in my book of scraps

PR O.K. So we go down and we see that there was a brick wall and there's a nursery shown there going north. Quite a big nursery. What about that?

JP That was B.Tew. He owned it and he had a shop in Finchley where he sold plants and all that sort of thing. Then we go further along and take it that they would be the cottages.

PR Yes there were two cottages which are really right on the wall aren't they?

JP Near enough .You went through an archway in the wall and there were these two cottages.

PR And you called those.....?

JP The people that lived in the wall, we used to say. Just past there and opposite the police station was the old water fountain where you pressed the button and got yourself a drink.

P: Tell me about that. I don't know about that

JP Don't you? It's a pity it's gone, really, isn't it?

PR It was one of your old-fashioned fountains was it?

JP Yes and it had a big thick old aluminium mug. It was about a quarter of an inch thick, this mug on a chain. You pressed the button and out came the water

PR Did it have a name, that well, do you remember?

JP No

PR Was it dedicated to anyone?

JP I couldn't say now. That was just before you came to what is now the old people's home.

PR Did you know any of those people there?

JP No.

PR Then you get down to Totteridge Lane. Well Jack, just for the moment going opposite the church where Friern Barnet Lane sweeps round, we were talking about the smithy and so on a bit earlier on, what are your recollections of the people who lived along there?

JP Well in the shops there was Cook's the bakers. On the corner was Floyds the dairy where you could go and get a ha'p'orth of milk round the back and Cooks the bakers and there was the Manor Farm Dairy where they sold milk, cream, butter and all that sort of thing and that was Chapmans lived there. There were two girls and a boy. They went to St. John's school with us. Next to that I believe it was the motor shop and then an alley. At the bottom of the alley was a big shed and we used to have magic lanterns there and a library.

PR A library? An open barn was this?

- JP No it was a proper covered in, quite decent sized shed. Sundays, Philip Jessop ran a sort of We used to go there and sing all the choruses of the hymns. There was quite a crowd of us used to go to that.
- PR What sort of magic lantern shows? What they called improving ones were they?
- JP Yes, most likely, yes. Nearly all to do with the Bible. A funny thing – when the 1914 war first started we used to go there and cut up paper, about inch strips, and run the scissors and make curls of them. They were supposed to have been for the pillows for the soldiers. Whether they were or not I don't know. We used to do that job.
- PR What newspaper?
- JP No, it was more of a stiff paper. Cut the strips, run the scissors up them and they used to curl up
- PR So that was your war work.
- JP Yes. After thatof course Booths were later on and Vivians the greengrocer, I remember him well and his wife and the children and again used to come to St. John's school. There were a couple of boys and a girl and I always remember outside he used to have a stand with a block of dates on it just as it came out the box. A big box about that high....
- PR That's a tube about 12"
- JP And you could buy a ha'p'orth of dates off him. He'd cut a lump off. And then there was an open space with Gilmour's. I think Gilmour the builder, he used to own that. At the bottom of the field was Russell's the blacksmith and in the front of that was Johnson's who worked for Russell, he was like his assistant and when Russell died Johnson took over this blacksmith's. And then you go along and there were several friends and schoolpals there. There were the Webbs; Jack Webb, Maud Webb and the Rolfs. I'm only telling you a few, I don't know a lot of them. There was George Rolf, Bert Rolf, Bill Rolf. They were all St. John's scholars. I knew most of the people along there.
- PR Lawsons was there at that time wasn't it?
- JP This was before Lawsons. When you got past those few cottages there was a ????? that stood back.
- PR Yes, that's where Lawsons is today
- JP Yes that would be Lawsons where the cottages were. No, Howards lived in one of the cottages there; Ted Howard, Dolly Howard, all school pals. Of course, the old police station.
- PR Did you know any of the old coppers?
- JP Yes
- PR What were they like?

- JP Well, they were strict. I remember there was Holbert, he's Pilgrim's (who owns these houses) wife.
- PR The house you live in now, do you mean?
- JP Yes. Pilgrim built these and he married Ada Holbert. They lived next door to us up the road when we were in 156 Oakleigh Road. They got on with their building. They gradually bought a bigger house and a bigger house and all that. As I say, that was Holbert one policeman. Seal was another. Now he was the fellow that when I went down the pits when these kids were drowned, he was the one that found these kids. They got a ladder across the pond and they would straddle this ladder, a couple or three coppers and they got these props what you pull the curtains down in shops sort of thing and they were prodding about in the water and he said: "I've got him". It wasn't too deep; he put his hand down and pulled this kid out. He'd been in there about two or three hours then he had. Berryman, that was another policeman. There was Reedman, Daisy Reedman who ran our little old scholars' association. Stebbins, Gear. These were the kids who came to school. Their fathers were policemen.
- PR And they lived in the houses near the police station?
- JP No, they were all scattered about. Some of them lived in Rasper Road and round that way.
- PR Did they have bikes, Jack or did they foot it mostly?
- JP Foot it mostly. Occasionally there was a cyclist but not often. Then there was Detective Sowley. I can always remember him with his waxed moustache. A very upright fellow.
- PR Was there much crime in the area?
- JP Drunkenness mostly
- PR What about the pubs? We're coming down *Hand & Flower* and *The Griffin*. What are your early memories of them?
- JP Well, people used to go there and get boozed. Occasionally you had a piano playing, somebody singing. Mostly the working men played Dominoes and all that.
- PR But would a woman go into a pub, for example?
- JP Not on their own, not at that time of day they didn't. If they were with their husband they'd go in the saloon, see, and sit there and have a drink. So that's the *Hand & Flower*. Then of course these cottages where Sweeney and O'Leary were. Sweeney was a shoemaker, O'Leary was a French Polisher. Then there was Dovey the watchmaker and Wilson's the paper shop right on the corner
- PR Just going down the south side of Oakleigh Road for a moment, we were talking about a chapel there
- JP That's right. Yes Colonel Pewdy at school. I don't know whether it was the Baptist Chapel. The Baptist Tabernacle it was called, and he used to run the school there. That was before St. Johns and that were schools.

- PR It's before your time really.
- JP Yes, but what I can make of it, it would be about 1905, I think I read. But this school broke up and the boys that were there, some went to St. James's in Friern Barnet Lane and some went to St. John's in Finchley.
- PR And the school closed down or became a chapel?
- JP Yes, well it must have been a chapel before. I suppose they just had the school in the chapel because it was on the wall, Baptist Tabernacle. I remember it in the stonework. It was written in the stonework
- PR Of course behind all this, Jack, was Sweet's Nursery which must have been one of the biggest employers in the area. What were your memories of that?
- JP Only that they had some very big carts where they used to go to Covent Garden with flowers and plants and all that sort of thing. He used to do a lot of stuff for weddings and all that, supply all the plants for weddings and of course there they reckoned he had the finest grape vine in England. There was a grape vine in one of the nurseries. They grew tomatoes, cucumbers and all that sort of thing and there was quite a lot of people worked there at a guinea a week.
- PR Jack I'm deliberately not talk about your working days because I've got those separately recorded under *A Carpenter's Tale* so that's there for posterity but it does give me a chance to talk about some of the other things that were going on in Whetstone outside work. There are two things that you've mentioned on and off to me that I'm interested in. One of those is cinema. They used to make a lot of films around here. Can you tell me about that?
- JP That was at The Woodlands, going back towards Finchley.
- PR It's opposite where Mann Egerton is
- JP That's right. Well Berryman's had their place too. It was a big old house and when we were kids we always used to reckon it was haunted. Nobody lived in it and we never went in it. But they came to the school and wanted some of us kids to go there because they wanted a school scene.
- PR Can I get this clear; there was a film company that took over that house. You don't know what they were called?
- JP No.
- PR So the producer came down and what happened?
- JP We went there on the Saturday. We were there all day come to think of it, quite a lot of us kids and we were supposed to have been in school and the teacher teaching us and her boyfriend was a sailor and he comes into the schoolroom and he wants to cart her off home, I suppose. So he gets a handful of pennies and slings them up in the air and of course us kids all scramble for them. I know I had a penn'orth of that.
- PR So the thing was actually shot in the schoolroom at St. John's?
- JP No, no.

PR It was a set, was it? Where did they build the set then?

JP It was out the back. There was a big house and out the back was like a very big conservatory where they filmed

PR Did they have real desks?

JP I can't remember that. I think we just sat there in chairs

PR But the actress stood up, did she? Was she a pretty girl?

JP Oh yes, yes. she was a smasher. They gave us ham sandwiches and lemonade lunchtime and we sat out on the grass eating that and there was one of these Monkey Puzzle trees and I remember one of the actors there said he'd give anybody £5 if they could climb this tree. Well, you couldn't get near it and I remember we were talking to this actress and she had got her eyes all done up and we were asking how she did it and she said it was done with a hairpin over the flame of a candle.

PR What sort of year are we talking about here Jack?

JP Now, that would be during the 1914 war

PR What about lighting? Was there artificial lighting?

JP Yes, they had big arc lamps shining.

PR Electric arc lamps?

JP Yes. I never finished about that. We had this scramble and after that they picked me (I don't know why they picked me. Perhaps I was the scruffiest one) to be the paper boy. I had a couple of papers under my arms and I'd go past the house and she's sitting in there and it's supposed to be lead lights in the door but what it was was an open panel with strips of black tape but I go and put my hand through it so we had to do it again She gets a paper and gives me a penny and she reads where the ship has gone down with her boyfriend. I forget what carried on after that but when we left they gave us all 6d. each. And another thing, the actor asked me to go and get him a packet of Players, elevenpence ha'penny for 20. He gave me a shilling so another three ha'pence I've made. I had about tenpence for the day and a nice day out. I'll tell you another thing about that. At the side was a little cottage like a lodge and Moore Marriot lived there before he became a film star.

PR Who acted with Will Hay?

JP That's right, yes. But he used to act in crowd scenes and all that. I remember him and his wife and he must have had about four kids. There's another bit of history that ought to be recorded. I know of a couple of people that he borrowed money off and never paid them back.

PR He was that hard up. Was he a professional actor at that time?

JP No. He was just caretaker there and then he got on. He was very old with all his old teeth and that but when he used to go out he used to come next door to Mrs. Britain

and they used to go in the *Swan with Two Necks*. He'd got false teeth then and he was quite a smart looking fellow.

PR Do you remember anything about the camera, Jack? You might not have seen it but it would have been hand cranked.

JP That's right, it was hand cranked. I remember that but what it was like I don't know.

PR Did you actually see the film?

JP No I didn't and yet it was shown at the old Grand Hall. It was called *The Girl of My Heart*. I never went and saw it.

PR It would be something if we could get a copy

JP It would. I'd like to see it. I'll tell you who else acted there. Carpentier the boxer. He did a film there and I believe they did *Ivanhoe*.

PR Really? Did you see that being made?

JP No.

PR What, all in that little place, well comparatively little studio.

JP It was quite big, fields and there was a pond there.

PR Who starred in *Ivanhoe*? Do you remember?

JP No. But I always remember I saw that at the cinema and I always remember the fellow I was sitting next to. This chap's on horseback and he said: "Three times round the lake" and this chap goes three times round the lake. Supposed to be going miles, I suppose.

PR So how long did they carry on making films there?

JP That again I couldn't tell you. No idea. But at any rate, while we were there we did go in the old house, although we reckoned it was haunted but going there sort of spoilt that idea for us. In this old house there was all sorts of paraphernalia. Policemen's uniforms and all the rest of it

PR For making a film?

JP Yes

PR That must have been quite an exciting interlude really

JP Yes.

PR You touched on the other subject I wanted to talk to you about. You mentioned Carpentier. About boxing in Whetstone. Have you got any memories of the boxers?

JP Yes, now Len Harvey, he trained at *The Black Bull*.

The Tape runs out here.

Second Side:

- JP A black man and a couple of other fellows out running in Totteridge Lane and my father said “That’s Jack Johnson”. Jack Johnson did a bit of fighting in England and he trained at the old *Black Bull*.
- PR He trained as well there?
- JP Yes. Of course, this is all donkey’s years ago. About 1910, 1912, something like that. Otherwise boxing – they were about the only two I know.
- PR Just carrying on with the cinema then, what were the local picture palaces that you went to?
- JP Do you know Avenue Road at Finchley? We used to go down the side and up some stairs and it was over the shops. It later became the gas company and a greengrocer shop underneath but that was about the first cinema we knew. We were only kids. It was about a penny to go in. Then there was another one in Stanhope Road by Woolworths and Pearl White was the heroine there.
- PR That wasn’t a purpose-built cinema, was it?
- JP No.
- PR Just above a shop, was it?
- JP Well that one, I don’t know whether that was purpose built, the Stanhope Road one. I couldn’t tell you now but I know it was down there on the left hand side. Then, of course, there was The Bohemia at Church End. That one you went through a shop
- PR That’s the old Bohemia
- JP The old Bohemia, yes. On one side was The Winter Garden. On the other side was The Summer Garden and right down the bottom was the cinema. That was taken over - was it during the last war or the 1914 war? – as a factory.
- PR What did they make?
- JP I believe they made balloons there. I believe it was a balloon factory. Then, of course, it became Kiwi’s the blacking factory. And then further down was what they called The New Bohemia. Now that was a cinema with flats over the top. The builder that built it, I expect he’d gone broke but he hadn’t finished the flats so the governor (I worked for M C Wade) he completed the flats there. There again, now talking about Wade, next to that was the North Middlesex Gas Company. Well he built their first block of workshops and offices there. Next to that was the Arcadia. Wade built that and that was built as a dancehall. Then it became a skating rink and now it’s a motor works, I think
- PR Talking about skating rinks, there was one down in the Whetstone area wasn’t there?
- JP Yes that was the Grand Hall.

PR There was the Grand Hall cinema. Let's just talk about the Grand Hall because I would like to put it on record here because you worked on that conversion didn't you?

JP No, not on the conversion

PR On the old Grand Hall when it was converted

JP Oh, the Grand Hall, Yes. Yes.

PR Sorry, I'm sticking with cinemas.

JP We're on the Grand Hall, not the rink?

PR Just tell us about that, Jack. Was it Wade?

JP Yes Wade did that. Well I'll tell you what happened there. Next to it was Geary's the timber merchants and you used to have to go down the side to go in the Grand Hall and Geary's caught fire and burnt part of the cinema so they made the entrance in the front of the cinema off the High Road but then Wade put the canopy right through so if you were queuing up you stood in the dry and the new entrance to the cinema.

PR What year was that?

JP I'll tell you what picture was on – *Peck's Bad Boy* if you can find anything from that.

PR Well, I'll try (IT WAS MADE IN 1921)

JP *Peck's Bad Boy* with Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan. They used to run the cinema through to sort out the music to suit and of course we were working there so we stood there and saw *Peck's Bad Boy* for nothing.

PR But you only had a little time to repair it and renovate it didn't you?

JP Yes, we went in there Saturday night after cinema had finished. We worked all night and all day Sunday and then it was made so they could go in the cinema and we could carry on finishing off. I remember we had partitions and all that so they went down the alley into the cinema.

PR That was before the Gaumont was built or the Odeon, wasn't it?

JP Oh yes, before those yes. The old Finchley Rink cinema, that was next to the *Swan and Pyramids* and I can remember them digging the floor up and all that. They made it a slope for the cinema and it became the Finchley Rink cinema.

PR When did that get pulled down, Jack. Do you know?

JP No. The police took that over didn't they? It's a police thing. But there again, it's a funny thing. There was Reg Hutchison, Len Simpson and myself. We had peashooters, see, when we were kids and Reg Hutchison's brother Bill worked at Elf Bakers so went there and we had a ha'p'orth of peas for our peashooters. The three of us got a pocketful each for a ha'penny. Any rate we goes walking towards Finchley and we're shooting at one of the lamp standards. This is outside Sir Clement Daylesh, the judge's. He comes along, and he looks up and he looks at us and he goes in so of course we packed up when we saw him. So, we go from there and when we get to the Grand Hall,

it was a tin roof on the Grand Hall and we're shooting peas and they're going plink plonk, plink plonk and the manager came out and he said: "It's very pretty but it's quite enough of that". I expect they could hear it inside.

PR I'm sure they could. But that Finchley Rink, had it been a skating rink as well?

JP It had been a skating rink and they turned it into cinema.

PR Skating was quite a fashionable think then

JP Yes. I don't remember it being used as a skating rink. I can only remember it being altered. I'll tell you another funny little incident. I told you we used to bathe in the pits pond in the nude, well I remember Len Simpson (I suppose we were about 12 perhaps) he came over there and of course we'd got bikes and he got me to come out. He said "Here, you've got a couple of tennis racquets, haven't you?" I said "Yes". He said: "Lend me one and we'll have a ride to Finchley". So, we ride to Finchley on bikes holding our tennis racquets because he'd met a couple of girls and he was having a little swank. We couldn't play tennis. Funny, these little incidents.

PR What sort of people did you meet, though Jack? I mean in work and so on. There were obviously a lot of characters around. Who sticks out in your mind?

JP Well, on the building at that time of day it was more like a music hall. They were always singing and whistling and all that and we had one fellow, Bob Williams his name was but his father was a tinker, so he was called Tommy the Tinker and he'd keep you in fits of laughter, Tommy would. As a matter of fact, he did go on the television with the open the box – do you remember that?

PR Gosh that's going back a bit

JP Yes. He did go in that and I remember (I forget the fellow's name that used to run it) he offered him money (they used to offer them money for the whasisname didn't they) and he said to Tommy "Would you take so-and-so?" and old Tommy said: "How much is that in pints?" He asked him what he was. He'd packed up the building then and he's gone as a dustman so when he asked him what his trade was he said: "I'm a bin-basher". Another little incident about Tommy. The old pits, Wade bought the pits and he built several house there. Of course, it was sand and gravel they used to get out there. Wade used to sell the sand and gravel and all that and there was a gate in Woodside Lane leading into it and Haynes were the carters at that time of day. They had them tip-carts. So, any rate, there's Haynes's cart outside. Wade comes down, the gate's not open. Tommy's got the key, so Tommy arrives about ten minutes later so Wade said "Come on Tommy. It's so-and-so and so-and-so. These carts have all been waiting". So, Tommy said "Well, I have to do a paper round before I come here". He was a proper coon, really.

P: Any other characters, Jack?

JP Characters? No they were all good blokes.

PR What about the shopkeepers and so on? Were they fairly obliging?

JP Of yes, they were quite good. No messing about. I mean you got your stuff and you paid for it at the counter

PR Looking back on it, Jack, there was a lot of grinding poverty in Whetstone? Were you aware of it at the time?

JP Yes, well you knew they were very poor, all these people. I remember the soup kitchen. There was a soup kitchen in Rasper Road. As a matter of fact, I've been up there myself with a jug to get the soup.

PR Tell me about that. What year would that be?

JP I can't remember

PR Before the First World War?

JP It most likely was, or might be the beginning of the war perhaps

PR What happened? What did you do? Who ran the kitchen?

JP No idea. I don't know if it was run by the church or what.

PR What did they give you, then, when you went to the soup kitchen?

JP A jug of soup. You'd take a jug and they.... I don't know. Twopence I suppose

PR And the bread with it?

JP No, you brought it home and had it.

PR Did you ever go in any almshouses or the workhouse or anything like that in those early days?

JP I did work in a workhouse over at Hendon. I couldn't tell you where it is or anything. I did a job in there. I couldn't tell you what the job was but I know they brought us round a cup of tea – a whacking great thick mug of tea.

PR I wonder where that was?

JP I don't know

PR Have you got any impressions of it now?

JP Well, I can only remember a passage. That's all I can remember. Of course there was a workhouse at Barnet as well

PR Did you ever go in that?

JP No. The almshouses, those in Friern Barnet Lane, I have been in those. Little dodgy places.

PR What about the farms in the area, Jack because in those days there were farms.

JP Well now, there was, as I say, Floyds. They used to bring their cows up and milk them didn't they? Then there was Morleys down in Russell Lane. No Friday the butcher, he used to do his own killing round the back. I remember seeing them. The animals used to come along, sheep, bullocks and all the rest of it and go round there and it seemed

as if they knew. They had a proper job to get them in the back of that place. That's all the farms that I remember except in Totteridge. There were several farms up there. I don't know much about those. Of course, Totteridge is a very interesting place.

PR I think perhaps, in conclusion, Jack, we ought to talk a little bit about you and your great hero Harry Vardon. Just update us with that thing you were talking about a few minutes ago.

JP What Lord Legard? When we went up the golf club of course Harry Vardon was the professional there

PR We'd better establish which golf club you're talking about

JP South Herts. Golf Club in Totteridge. When I left school, we heard they wanted a boy in the house. The job was you waited on the toffs in the week. You cleaned the brass and the cutlery and washed the glasses and all that sort of things. Weekends they had a waiter and a waitress extra, so your job was just washing the silver and the glasses. I went there on August the 17th 1918, before the war finished. I was there when the war finished. We used to have a woman come there on a Monday to do the washing. The napkins and all that sort of thing. Now I remember this particular Monday she came and she said "The War's finished". We couldn't believe it but it was right. It must have been 11th November. So, any rate, her husband was one of the groundsmen there on South Herts.

PR Do you remember her name?

JP King. Jack King was the gardener and his wife. Of course, there was old Harry Ray that lived near where Lawson's is but after the war, 1918, my father hadn't been to see his mother for a number of years. She was living just outside of Ipswich, so he decided to have a holiday and go down there and I said: "I wouldn't half like to go down" so I said to him I wanted a week's holiday. They said "You can't have it. You haven't been here a year". See, this was in the following July. So, I said I would go down there and pack the job up. I thought to myself I couldn't stick this all my life, a job like this.

PR Still you'd seen Vardon

JP Vardon, yes.

PR And you were doing a bit of caddying

JP Yes. When I worked in the house, if there were no caddys there and perhaps he'd got somebody to give a lesson to so he used to ask me if I'd go and they used to drive the balls up the course and after they'd driven about two dozen I had to go and pick all these up and bring them back for him to drive again and I think I used to get about a shilling for that. So any rate, when I thought of packing up I asked (I was interested in woodwork) I asked him if he'd give me a job in his shop. He said: "well I can only give you ten shillings a week". In the house I was getting ten shillings a week and all my food and I was making about thirty bob a week in tips, so I thought well that's not good enough

PR But you liked Harry Vardon didn't you, Jack?

JP Oh yes. He was a great fellow. I did caddy for him at times and to see him drive that ball it used to give you a thrill, honestly. Dead straight and miles it used to go. It was really thrilling just to watch him play.

PR Did he ever give you a tip at all?

JP No. I remember of course working there. I picked up clubs and balls and bag and all the rest of it so in the evening I have a few holes, so I remember I played the first hole, putted out and the ball was on the green and I'd still got my putter so I just gave it a swipe over to the second green. Well I played round and when I came in he said to me "Don't you let me see you do that again or I won't let you play". That's driving the ball off the green. What else? Wait a minute, there was his shed up there where they made the clubs and he had his little office. Now weekends, if it was raining, there was about three toffs. I think I could tell you their names. There was Johnny Hamilton, now he was the organiser of the Stock Exchange sweepstake in his day. There was Johnny Miller and Bob Patterson. They used to go up there and they used to get me to take them a bottle of whisky and four glasses. 13/4d. a bottle of whisky was that time of day, and they used to have a gamble on a game they called Slippery Sam. They used to play that. Harry Vardon died about 1937 but Mary Vardon still lived in his house. She was his niece. Harry and his wife never had any children and they adopted this Mary from, I think, his brother Paul. Her name was Vardon, see. She was Harry's niece. Now he came to Whetstone in 1903. Well this was what Mary told me. He came there in the spring of 1903 and she went to live with him in the autumn of 1903 but he'd come from Gandon golf course in Yorkshire. He was born 1870 so about 1969 I saw Mary and I said: "Have you got anything I could put up for a plaque in our little golf course down the road here?" So she said "Well I wish I'd known that before because I let all his trophies go to Jersey where he was born". He started golfing out in Jersey. She said: "I'll have a look". I said: "Even if it's only an old boot". She said "Come down Saturday and I'll see if I can find anything". So, when I went down there she'd got three big volumes of a book and a volume of Conan Doyle. It had got several stories in this book. It was a smashing book, gilt-edged and everything. So, I said "Well I can't take them three big books". She said: "Well I'd rather you had them because his name is in there" and written in the book was "Presented to Harry Vardon by Lady Legard September 2nd 1902. Now I reckon it was a going away present from their coming to Whetstone because Lady Legard married a Finchley fellow didn't she? The Hamiltons. Anyway, I got on to her about a plaque. I said: "Wouldn't it be nice to have a plaque on the house"? If you spoke to her about Harry Vardon there was nobody like her. Top of the world. She was about 80 then. She said: "Would you like to do the correspondence?" Of course, I did all the correspondence hoping to get it done by 1970, the centenary but it went on and on. They had a strike at the Council Offices. I'd told South Herts. all about it. Dai Rees was going to be there and the Secretary and all the rest of them. They rang me up and said: "We're coming to fix the plaque" and it was about the next day. So I let Harry Vardon's nephew know. He lived in Bristol so he came up for the whatsisname. I rang up South Herts and told them and Dai Rees was playing up in Scotland. The Secretary came and it was a proper wash-out really.

PR That was a blue plaque

JP It's on the house, there. 14 Totteridge Lane. The number now is 35 Totteridge Lane.

PR That's where he lived?

- JP Yes. Now there again. You take that. Six-time British Open champion and when he first started, their prize was about £50 for winning. Now his house, I suppose when it was built it cost about £400 and instead of a Rolls Royce he had a push bike. Six times champion. What would he have been worth if he'd done that now? A millionaire, wouldn't he?
- PR Well, thanks Jack. That's as good a point to conclude on as any. Thanks very much indeed for all your memories of Whetstone.