

Friern Barnet & District Local History Society

INTERVIEW BETWEEN DAVID BERGUER AND PERCY REBOUL AT SOUTH HERTS GOLF CLUB ON TUESDAY 20 MAY 2008

DB Percy, can you tell me when and where you were born?

PR I was born on the 21st Jan 1930 and was born in what is now 171 Oakleigh Road North, which was one of the Council houses built in the 1920s and was occupied by my grandmother and grandfather. And I never thought about this until what I thought was my parents' Silver Wedding Anniversary and I made a lot of preparations only to discover that I had got the wrong date – my mother was embarrassed after 25 years! There was obviously a shotgun wedding and she must have gone through hell with my grandmother, a formidable woman.

DB What year was that, the Silver Jubilee?

PR I really don't know exactly. I imagine they were married about 1929.

DB Where did you go to school?

PR My first school was in Friern Barnet, in Holly Park, because we had moved to Bellevue Road, the house is still on the corner.

DB What number?

PR I really can't remember. It is on the east corner of Bellevue Road and Holly Park Road. I was quite amused because I was coming out from the Incognito Theatre one day and a group of Japanese were coming out of the house, so it's now occupied by the Japanese. I went to Holly Park School; I would have been about four or five.

DB So you had moved from Oakleigh Road to Bellevue Road? How old were you when that happened?

PR I must have been three or four.

DB And what about secondary school?

PR We then moved from Bellevue Road to 167 Oakleigh Road North, a couple of doors away from my grandfather's house and I then went to the Oakleigh Infants' School, next to Myddelton Park and I went there until I was six. Miss Melhuish was the Headmistress and this was where John Heathfield and I first met. John lived just down the road in another Council house – we were from the same background. We were working class kids. When I was six I went to St James's in Friern Barnet Lane.

- DB With John?
- PR Yes John was there. He was an obnoxious child. It must have been in 1938 they erected a sign virtually opposite the school. I often wonder what happened to it.
- DB I recently interviewed someone who had worked in the Town Hall and he actually renovated the sign in the 1960s and, within two months or so, it had been demolished by a car and was put in the car park of the North Middlesex Golf Club and it's just disappeared from there. He actually gave me a photograph of it shortly after it had been repainted.
- PR The Headmaster there was Mr Yeaxlee, Mr & Mrs, a husband and wife team. It's a Norfolk name. Yeaxlee had been there for donkey's years, so many years, in fact, that they had taught my father. It's not many people that can remember their first day at school but I remember him being tall and cadaverous and saying "What's your name, lad?" and I gave it, and I remember his face falling and him saying: "Oh, not another one!" It was a good little school and there were a number of people who went on to do jolly well in life. Ian Bedford was the captain of Middlesex Cricket Club. It was a typical church school.
- DB What were the class sizes?
- PR I would think they would be about 30 – 35. It gave you a good all round education. Some of the teachers were very good and everyone who went to St James's in my days will remember Miss Leroy. She was young then and very pretty and she stayed with the school until her retirement. She ran the boys' football team and she was just a nice warm, caring person, unlike many of the other of the teachers who were strict and formal.
- DB Where did you play your football?
- PR There was a little alleyway which went to the fields which were owned by the Railway Clearing House. During the war the shelters were built there and I was there in the 1940s, and this was during the thick of the air raids, and we used to have to run from the school to the Railway Clearing House grounds.
- DB Whereabouts was that exactly?
- PR It was a whole complex with fields, but it is round where Sweets Way is. I remember that as we were going to the shelters, which were about 150 yards from the school, what was called a Molotov cocktails were dropped and we were literally running across the playground to get to the shelters, with these incendiary bombs dropping all over the playground. Looking back in it, it was a very dicey thing. The poor caretaker, one of his jobs was to clear up the incendiaries, put them out. I can remember looking up at the aircraft battles.
- DB So you left St James's in about 1941?
- PR Yes and I then went to Woodhouse.

- DB And did John follow you there?
- PR He was a couple of years beyond me. Woodhouse had not been evacuated, it was one of the schools that remained – a lot of schools in adjacent areas were all evacuated, but not in our area. There were very small classes because so many children had been evacuated.
- DB So did any of the Hornsey kids come up to Woodhouse?
- PR Yes because Friern Barnet was just on the fringe. Indeed, many of the leading boys in Woodhouse, particularly at sport, came from Tollington Grammar School at Muswell Hill.
- DB So they must have travelled by bus?
- PR Or trolleybus. I am really thinking of the Muswell Hill area more than Hornsey. And Woodhouse, looking back on it, was a very fine school. But during the war most of the masters were gone and most of the teachers were ladies. They came out of retirement and most of them were trained in Victorian or Edwardian times - it was part of their war effort - so you got the old-fashioned teaching methods, which were not always bad.
- DB Well, they had discipline, which they don't seem to have these days.
- PR And they also had an interest in the love of classical things, and this was true of St James's, like Greek myths and the German myths and that fascinated me, as it still does today. I think it was that that started me with an interest in history. I can remember, I must have been about seven and I went into the library in the classroom, it was a shelf of books, and picking up this one about cavemen, Stone Age Man, and there was something about this that really caught on with me and it was at this point that I got hooked onto history.
- DB When did you leave Woodhouse?
- PR The war was over then, '46 or '47, and it was the usual pattern, you just waited until you did National Service.
- DB Where did you go, the Army?
- PR Yes, I was in the Military Police in the Special Investigation Branch.
- DB How did it work, did you have a preference for the Army?
- PR My dad had been in the Army. But looking back on it, it was that that shaped me. It was the discipline and it was very, very harsh and you came from a Grammar School so you thought you knew it all. Because a bloke with one stripe on his shoulder said; "Do this", however irrational it was, you did it. There were thirty of us in a squad and they were from all walks of life, we had three railway firemen,

and we were an absolute shower collectively but at the end of 16 weeks training the pride in the unit was absolutely remarkable, you gelled together as a unit, and nothing was more important than your squad, your mates.

DB Did you ever keep in touch with them?

PR I occasionally saw them.

DB Where were you stationed?

PR I was stationed in the Tower of London for six months, but we trained outside Woking at a Victorian barracks, a terrible place. It has now been demolished. Then I got a very good posting to Trieste which at that time was a trouble spot and then was a huge scrap between the communists in Zone B and the Americans and us in Zone A.

DB And you were a Military Policeman by then?

PR I was an SIB then; it was the CID of the Army. I was 19 and I was doing rapes, manslaughters and really serious crimes and you grew up fairly quickly. And I had an officer from Friern Barnet and I so enjoyed myself out there that I decided to sign up. And I went to him and said "I've come to sign on" and he said: "Don't be a bloody fool – get out of my office". It was the best piece of advice I ever had!

DB So what did you do when you were demobbed?

PR I had intended to join the police and I can't remember what turned me on...

DB Was it being a Military Policeman?

PR The thing is when you went in to the SIB the training was very good, you learned about criminal law and it equipped you for being a policeman when you left. The thing is all policemen start on the beat and I thought, I can't be spend two years on the beat, so I started to look round and there was, of course, plenty of work then. People tend to forget this, Europe was rebuilding and in '45 and '46 they were full of hardships – it was worse than the war years in some ways, and the rations went down.

DB Plus the expectation that things would get better.

PR Yes, exactly, and they didn't. OK the lights went on, because the blackout was the ultimate horror for most people, and certain other things improved, the radio and entertainment and that kind of thing. So there was no lack of jobs; I was really lucky, I think and there are those bits of fate that come in your life and point you in one direction or another. I went into the rubber industry, it was a Malayan Government-run organisation, called the Rubber Development Board, and our job was to get natural rubber going again because synthetic rubber had grown vastly and pinched the markets. And I went on from there to plastics.

DB Did you just see this job advertised?

PR No, I went to the Labour Exchange and he said: "There are four jobs that I think would suit you, and here's a list of them" and they were all in the City and the first one was in a solicitor's office and I went there and I couldn't find the building, so I went to the Rubber Development Board. So I could have been a solicitor's clerk...

DB Or a judge perhaps.

PR I have been very happy in my work and look forward to every day, every day was different.

DB Tell me a bit about Friern Barnet when you were young.

PR I don't have many memories because living in this house in Bellevue Road...

DB Did you have the whole house?

PR No, we rented a couple of rooms.

DB When did you get married?

PR It was '52

DB So you were 22

PR One of the things I remember was the trams which ran along Friern Barnet Road.

DB The trams stopped in 1938.

PR Yes, I would have been eight. I remember going on the tram with my mother to Wood Green at Christmas with the market place lit by naphtha flares and the sheer bustle of the place has always stayed with me. I remember going to Lord's once, there was no match on but I was rather captivated by the place which I had read about in one of those school books.

PR When you got married you were still living in Bellevue Road?

PR No, we had moved to Oakleigh Road in 1936. When I was six. I can just about remember the Council houses there and it had one of those black kitchen ranges. I saw a gas mantle in a box in one of those junk shops and it reminded me of the gas lamps and the house being lit by gas.

DB They actually gave a very good light.

PR Oh, yes. And much of our life was centred around the church. Neither of my parents were church goers, but the churches ran the scouts and cubs and John and

I sang in the choir at All Saints' church and I think it was there that I got my love of music and I can still sing some of the masses – only the soprano part. And John was very musical and he is a teacher of singing, but he won't teach me!

DB So I suppose you have lost contact with Friern Barnet.

PR Yes.

DB When did your interest in local history begin, because I think your dad was very involved?

PR My dad went to St James's School as I told you and he left school at 14 with virtually no education but he was a very good tradesman – he was a bricklayer – and he was always in work, but he had this incredible knowledge, unrivalled, actually. He was born next to the Black Bull in the High Road and he was always talking to me of his memories, like playing football in the High Road, damming up the Dollis Brook and making a swimming pool. As a young man he started to collect photographs and things and he was untutored, a real gorbliney, and I was amazed when he was invited by one of the Women's Institutes to give a lecture and he came to me and said: "What I want is some pictures and I've seen this device that you put some little pictures in and it blows them up." So we made lots of slides and he gave lectures and although I never went to one of these lecture but there must have been something about his simplicity and his passion because he got many letters from schools because he was talking about things that kids were interested in.

DB When did he start this, when he retired?

PR Oh, yes. But that's why I've got so many tape recordings, because my dad used to say: "I've had a word with so-and-so and he's a character, go and talk to him." I am named after him, so if my name is on a book, it might be him! He used to take a small handful of books on a bus, follow the conductor around and sell them and he did quite well out of it.

DB So when did your interest in local history start?

PR In the seventies, because at my work we had some guys who were very keen on film making and tape recording and I got interested in reel-to-reel tape recording and I went off to see some of the older people because my dad's generation and earlier were beginning to die off and there had been such a transformation in the area. You could not believe some of the stories – talk about hard times! But I hear people moaning today and I wish they could hear about some of the hard times.

DB And what about John Heathfield's interest in local history?

PR They coincided and we formed a partnership that I think has worked very well. We do our own thing and we get together once a week.

- DB And what about your writing for the *Barnet Times*, do they say: “We want an article once a month?”
- PR No, for example John came to dinner last Friday and we started to throw a few subjects around. In downsizing I had come across a book about Finchley becoming a Borough in 1933 and we decided to do something on that. And this is where John is so strong, because when you say: “How did Boroughs come about?” he says: “The Lord of the Manor etc...” but the thing is we have to get it into 250 words and John writes a draft and we put our ideas together and what I can do is to write something that excites people. We get a fair response and we also get paid for it. The publishers of the *Hendon & Finchley Times* are American very rich and very mean and when I say to the journalists: “What are the NUJ rates?” they say: “NUJ? You must be kidding!” I went last year and said to the editor that we want an increase and he said OK; if you don’t ask, you don’t get.
- DB And you have written books together, how did that come about, were you approached by publishers?
- PR Yes. I think it might have been *Barnet at War*, because we were both interested in the War and John’s dad was a Territorial Army man and as kids we always played soldiers. And John goes up to the Archives and he knew more about the files in the Archives than the archivists. And there were certain areas that I was interested in and we divided it up, we work as a partnership. If we are arguing about something, we say: “How strongly do you feel about this?” and it’s no good arguing your corner.
- DB Are you working on anything at the moment?
- PR No, John seems to be captivated with the idea of reaching 80 and he sees that as a cut-off point, which I find rather sad. John’s main strength is his lecturing and I think he’ll go on till he drops.
- DB I think he should.
- PR I think the bond we share, because we are quite different personalities, is the one of childhood. It was the playing together. Behind our houses was this field and that field was everything to us and we spent hours playing soldiers and digging trenches and it was absolutely magic. Those are the memories that we share and it was a very happy childhood.
- DB I think you made your own entertainment. That’s why when I hear kids today saying: “I’m bored” I think, how can you be because you’ve got so many things today, electronic games, sports pitches etc. How do you think things have changed since 1965 when Barnet was formed? Do you think the new system of local government is better with big areas is better or worse than, say, the Friern Barnet UDC?

- PR Well, you remember there was this phrase in the '60s "Big is Beautiful" but I think it's inevitable. But there were 16 of these little rural districts that merged to make the London Borough of Barnet and it becomes impersonal.
- DB I was talking to Karl Ruge and he was a local councillor and he was saying that they would discuss the finances in open debate with the public and if there was overwhelming opposition they would change the plans, which seems far more democratic than nowadays.
- PR One of the really significant people was Alderman Pike, who was Mayor of Finchley and he was Conservative. His great passion was housing and he said they had to do something about the poor conditions. One of the things I do regret is the ethnic composition of Friern Barnet and by that I mean the essential character and spirit of the area no longer exists. It was a question of being proud to be British and with people coming from Eastern Europe they don't have those loyalties and I think it tends to show.
- DB You can't expect someone from Poland who comes to work here and pays his taxes to be interested in the British way of life and British history, because he's interested in Polish history.
- PR And that reflects in the local newspapers, they've got to reflect different views. That's why I look back with some delight in the way that it used to be. Wartime exemplified it, when everyone was in the same boat.
- DB I suppose The Falklands was the nearest we got to it, but nothing since.
- PR It's been a very good place to live in.
- DB Have you transcribed all these memories that you recorded?
- PR No. I felt that the first job was to get out and talk to these people before they die – as you know transcribing is a long job and I'm perfectly able to do it – but it's more important to get out and talk to people. Transcription can be someone else's job. And it's true of my own industry where records were being destroyed at a huge rate and the task was to go out and stop them being put in the bin and at least some of the stuff had survived. I don't know how much is being saved today in Friern Barnet.
- DB There is a bigger interest now in family history.
- PR And radio and TV has triggered a big interest in family history and the next thing is the history of houses and the thing grows from there.
- DB Do you get many letters form your articles in the paper?
- PR Not many. People sometimes write to the paper but they don't bother to pass them on to us. Unless it's a complaint. Now is the time when we ought to be getting the

memories of the current generation. I'm of an age that I am not really interested in modern ways.

DB I think the older you get the more attractive the past becomes.

PR Yes, nostalgia. My grandmother was frightened of using the telephone. I don't like using the computer.