

Interviewer - *I'm currently at the home of Ailsa Williamson at Brewery House in Littlebourne and I've come to talk to her about her life in Bridge. Ailsa was orthoptist at the Kent and Canterbury Hospital. Her husband, John, ran the Tannery in Canterbury, which had been in the family for generations. His mother, Catherine, was the first woman to become Mayor, and she and her husband donated their house and gardens, Tower House and Westgate Gardens, for the use of the citizens of Canterbury. Ailsa when did you come to Bridge?*

I came to Bridge in 1958 when I married John Williamson and we lived first in Beech Hill and about 1961 we moved to Hillside and changed the name of the house to Beechmount.

I'd been working at the Kent and Canterbury Hospital as an orthoptist and also working at Margate and Ramsgate General Hospital when they had no orthoptist there, travelling in those days by bus. The reason for moving was that the A2 which ran past Beech Hill was getting increasingly busy and the garden which was unfenced made it impossible to keep pets and in the long term with children it would make difficulties. I had noticed this house Hillside from riding on top of the double decker buses when I was coming home from work and had mentioned it to John because there was really not much in the way of property available for sale in Bridge. By chance John knew John Took who had an aunt who lived in this house, through business and it was in some way to do with Whitstable harbour because John was at that time exporting hides to Denmark or importing them equally. When old Mrs Chapman died, he rang John up and said was he interested in buying this property. We said we certainly were, and you might say went round to view it at once.

*Beechmount has gone through at least two name changes. What was it originally called?*

The original house was in the garden, of which I have photographs. It was called Olivers Court for what reason it was taken down I have never really had time to research. Possibly the local papers would tell us but it was a very big house but why it was taken down I do not know and what remains of Hillside was the stabling belonging to this larger house and clearly it was built onto as a gardener's cottage or something of that sort.

*Bridge in 1958 –it was just before the big expansion of Bridge I guess. Was life different in Bridge at that time?*

Well, I suppose there were fewer people. It was a very happy time, very enjoyable but the traffic was building up slowly. You say the expansion of Bridge but there was only limited expansion because there was no main drainage. As I understand it the main drainage could not be put in because the road was the A2 and was so busy. However it didn't affect us because we were joined to a larger house and had an enormous cesspit and were therefore never bothered with the drainage problem.

*I think that changed in 1974 when we became part of Canterbury. What about the shops in Bridge at that time, did you do your shopping in Bridge?*

I certainly did, yes. There was Price at the bottom of the village, which I'm sure other people will remember which was a high-class grocer with Maurice Stacey who was one of the people who served there.

*That was in what became Skippers?*

That's right yes. Eve Stacey still lives in Bridge. There's a person possibly to interview. There was also Mrs Turner's, a greengrocer's shop, which was a hive for meeting people. One of the things I remember about that was that Mr Turner grew the most lovely chrysanthemums and in the Autumn these great chrysanthemums were for sale of course outside the shop and even if I couldn't always afford them they were worth going to look at, they were most

beautiful and I hope he exhibited in the Horticultural Society which in those days of course was held on Faggs' Farm and now is built over with the Green Court Estate.

*I understand that Mr Fagg did open up his field for the flower show.*

Yes.

*And also for riding and that sort of thing, gymkhanas?*

Possibly, I don't actually remember that but then perhaps you might say I didn't have children of that age. Mrs Hunter kept a horse and I rode that once or twice, which she kept in the stable at the end of her garden. Now of course it's a garage and an art studio.

*Along Union Road? Now Conyngham Lane was Laundry Lane. Were there houses there built before you came?*

There were a few houses there. They were just being developed. Conyngham Lane was a muddy track. It was really of course a footpath over to Bifrons and Patribourne. A few of the houses were already in place. Dulcie Cotter, I think, is the only resident in Conyngham Lane who is still there who was there before us. Otherwise the buildings were really Copse End, which I think was the Laundry House and the house which was used as a school by the Conynghams. The last one on the left in Conyngham Lane. There was a small bell there to summon the children to school, if you look directly at the house, on the left hand side directly between the house and Copse End.

*That preceded the main school?*

As I understand. I haven't got the dates.

*You married John Williamson and of course the Williamsons were a major family in Canterbury. How did you meet John?*

A mutual friend told John that I had taken the job at the Kent and Canterbury Hospital and he contacted me and we met up and went to an Archaeological Society meeting at the County Hotel in the days of Edgerton Banks.

*We know about the business there. John was developing the business obviously, selling abroad? I think you mentioned sending hides abroad.*

I think he was selling hides abroad but it was always changing and competition could be quite fierce, so I couldn't always keep up exactly with what he was doing. Times were very difficult and a good many tanneries were going to the wall, but they managed to keep afloat and by which time my mother in law was also in the business helping with the selling.

*Where did the hides come from?*

As I understand it at that particular time a great many of them were coming from Denmark, Esbjerg, and that's where the Whitstable connection would come in because there was a boat going between the two places. The reason for getting Danish or Scandinavian hides in particular was because of the warble fly in this country and barbed wire scarring the skins of animals and making them imperfect. The animals in Scandinavia are kept inside or with much more shelter and therefore the hides were of greater and better quality, the high end of the market that the Williamsons were looking for.

*Williamsons' started up in the eighteenth century, was it?*

1791 – 1999.

*Just to talk about Canterbury. Your sons went to King's School, so they were very much local boys. Do you think Canterbury has changed a lot from the time when you arrived to go to the Kent and Canterbury and now?*

Oh enormously. Not least because when I arrived there were no universities and life in Canterbury centred much more round the Cathedral, in my estimation. When I met my parents in law I thought it was much more an older generation, which is what the younger generation think now. But it was very friendly, it was lovely, but certainly before the University came it was a quieter, more provincial place shall we say. The University has injected a lot of life into the city and John in particular embraced it enormously. He went out and met people and certainly I hope did a lot for town and gown.

*I was going to ask about the Kent and Canterbury Hospital because that will have changed over time. Did you notice changes while you were working there?*

Oh yes there were huge changes. Of course it was the Health Service when I was there but the department increased, everything has increased in size. When I arrived in 1958 for the whole of the East Kent area there were two orthoptists. I was doing Canterbury, Margate and Ramsgate and all on a bus from clinic to clinic, so you see what a waste of time travelling could be. Of course the population has increased and as far as I know (I could check on this) it's twelve whole time equivalents doing the job that we were doing but of course the population has increased with the University, Pfizer's coming and so on.

*Now, just more generally about Bridge. You served on the governing body of Bridge Primary School for, how many years?*

Thirty two. I was Vice Chair for quite a time and I think I chaired it for six years.

*Were you involved when it moved up to its new site?*

No, I only joined in the time of Miss Tomlin, who was a very able Head.

*And you saw it grow in numbers quite considerably?*

Yes, we were extremely fortunate with the staff there.

*What about other general activities if we can go back to the late 1950s? Social life in Bridge - you mentioned the Horticultural Society, what other activities were there for people?*

I think the W.I. was probably pretty strong. I actually resisted joining simply because in 1962 we had the first baby. We had an extremely cold winter then, extremely cold so one had to be inside. The electricity failed on numerous occasions. I certainly remember having to light the fire in the sitting room at Beechmount and the baby, the dog and myself could cocoon in there and make it really warm and when the gas failed we would have to use camping gas. I also had a very good friend, Gene Ringland, as she was, at the end of the lane in Laundry Cottage, and with small babies we often combined in these rather difficult circumstances just to help one another out. What is that house called at the end of the lane, I should know it, it's annoying? Anyhow she had gas coming all the way across from Bifrons in a very ancient pipe put in by Bifrons House. Anyway, that managed not to fail too badly and we managed to support one another.

Anyway there were quite a number of us; six or seven with young children so we would congregate together. We called ourselves 'Rent-a-Crowd' so if you wanted a party we asked each other and we had a party. It was good fun.

John belonged for many, many years to the Archaeological Society in Canterbury, that was one of his greatest interests. He and Laurence Lisle worked together and Laurence in particular putting programmes together. That was his great interest. I enjoyed the Canterbury Choral Society under Alan Wickes in particular so there was an agreement between us that I would be in when John wanted to go the Archaeological Society and he would be in when I went off to the Choral Society.

*For children, was it a good place for children to be?*

It was a very good place for children to be. We were extremely fortunate in that when we first went to Hillside, some of the garden had already been purchased by Bridge/Blean Council because they wanted to widen the exit to what was Laundry Lane and changed to Conyngham Lane. The result was that we had a wall, which goes round the edge of the property, which goes from the High Street into Conyngham Lane. It made our garden extremely safe. The result was that local children would come and play. I'm thinking particularly of the Hill children Jonathan, Robert and Nicholas and the Kirk children, William and Julian, because they were on the right side of the road they were often up and played frequently in the school holidays in the garden. A little less frequently because they would have to cross the road were the Muir-Little children and the Pentins.