

EDITED EXTRACTS FROM INTERVIEW WITH ESTELLE LINNEY

AUGUST 2016

RESIDENT OF BIRCHWOOD SINCE 1978. AROUND THE TIME THIS INTERVIEW TOOK PLACE, ESTELLE SERVED AS A COUNCILLOR FOR BIRCHWOOD TOWN COUNCIL.

SF: when did you first move here [Birchwood]?

EL: 1978, so I was thirteen, you still had the kind of UKAEA [United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority] police that used to drive around, you still see them now. I used to be on my bike 'cos it was ace, it was all open space. Risley Moss was open then, Birchwood Park was open but the bunkers were still open as well, you could still get in, you weren't supposed to get in, but being a kid (!) and I used to come back with all the cigarette tins and tobacco tins and stuff like that the RAF, the soldiers and stuff had left them but I used to take them over to Risley Moss, because they had a big exhibition, do you remember it?

SF: Oh yeah

EL: and then at one point there was a bit of an old bomb that I found!

SF: Wow.

EL: I remember walking over with that, but it was so good, and the amount of rabbits that were over there was absolutely incredible.

SF: So was that before the Birchwood Forest Park had been landscaped and there was that little centre and what not, it was all before that

EL: Yeah, didn't really have any of the parks on there, Risley Moss was the main thing.

SF: And the fact that you've pursued a career in Ecology, that's quite interesting, do you think that is connected?

EL: I think so yeah. The Moss used to be open as well, it didn't have that big green fence around it, obviously because that is for health and safety now, but the actual Moss itself used to be open, and you could follow the old railway track that used to go - you know for peat cutting - a railway track that used to go through the centre. I used to play 'chase the dragonflies' and all sorts round there, there were foxes and goodness knows what else and then got a job there. So yeah, I suppose that helped on my career path. Well, one of my career paths. I preferred it when it was like that, but obviously it was unsafe.

SF: So when you say 'the Moss' [...] you are saying there was more to it than you now can't get to?

EL: That where the tower is, you could go into that moss..

SF: ...right the way out...

EL: Yeah, you could walk right into that moss, and the railway, the Liverpool to Manchester railway is at the top, well you could go all the way up to there, and walk along there. [...] But

we still walk, all round here, and near the centre and Chadwick House and up to the lake we call it. We've even stopped off and had coffee in the centre, not the Birchwood Centre, near the Alive and Well. But when we moved up there was nothing like that was there?

EL's mum: No

EL: It was just all open. Trefoil and Campion hadn't been built [...] And we had a cattle grid at the entrance [of Violet close] Don't know why! There was no sheep or cows or anything [...] I'm just wondering whether they made use of an old existing track, it was a very old..so they may have used an existing track. I have always wondered what that cattle grid was because it was so old.

SF: Because there must have been the odd farmhouse, and maybe it was a track up to a farmhouse or whatever. So was that where the cobbles are now at the entrance to the close

EL: Yeah, that was a cattle grid!

SF: So where did you move from?

EL's mum: Salford

SF: Right, whereabouts in Salford?

EL: The Crescent, near what is now Salford University. Where the old Salford Royal Hospital was, it was behind there that we were. It is now apartments. Yeah we had a pub.

SF: Who did?

EL's Mum: My Mum and Dad

EL: It's in a conservation area now, it's for sale, and they can't do anything with it. [...] It's a conservation area, it's where the old county court was, which is now apartments and a lot of the flats that used to be round there are now student's residential digs whatever they are. Salford Royal was made into apartments, they are going for millions, the County Court has gone, well that's apartments. The Vicarage is still there, the church is still there where we were all christened and married! Well I wasn't but you[EL's mum] got married there, your sister got married there, I was christened there, Julie was christened there...

SF: And do you remember anything about how you first heard about Birchwood?

EL: I think it was Dad wasn't it?

EL's Mum: What made us decide to come up here? [...] I think, we came down to have a nosey.

EL: That's right, I remember that. Dad said 'let's go and have a look', and then you said 'this is nice'

EL's mum: yeah, we were quite interested..

EL: and then we put our name's down

EL's Mum: and then we made enquiries and that's how we came to be here

SF: Do you remember if anyone came out to interview you when they were allocating these houses?

EL: Yeah they did

EL's mum: yeah they did, but I can't remember anything about it now!

EL: I think they just wanted to come out and see what the family were like..

EL's mum: It was all very very nice. They were friendly, very friendly.

EL: Nice people, very chatty, and then that was it, we just went through the system and then we moved.

EL's Mum: I mean, I've never talked about this till now, it's bringing back memories...

SF: I've been going over to Chester and I've been looking in all these archives and one of the things I came across was a sheet of paper, the rules if you like for who could get a house here. So it had to be things like you had to work in Birchwood, Warrington or Greater Manchester. An elderly family member could come, as long as they were related to someone who was already living here...

EL: That's how we got Granma yeah...

SF: There was a thing about ex-servicemen being able to get a house here, there were other things but it was about being employed, they didn't want anyone that wasn't employed is what came across...

EL: Oh no. It was strict wasn't it, and I think that's what relaxed a little bit with Oakwood. I think I mentioned it at that whatsit, I think Salford Council started to say that Warrington, Birchwood New Town, Warrington Dev Co were taking the cream of the cream and leaving Salford with.. and I think Liverpool was as well [...]

SF: But do you think the way they planned it, like you were saying you used to go over to the church in Oakwood, but they basically planned here so there was the shop, the school, the church the pub...

EL: More sensible isn't it...

SF: ...so you almost didn't need to go to the next neighbourhood along.

EL: They did it on both didn't they. Every..Oakwood's got a little community centre where it had the church and the school and the shop, erm, and the pub. And we did, so they put the infrastructure in for the kind of community facilities, the only thing they hadn't done was the high school.

SF: yeah that came later didn't it...

EL: a lot later

SF: That was '86 I think

EL: I was 13, so all the kids that were secondary age had to go to Culcheth

SF: So you went there, and had your high school years in Culcheth

EL: Yeah. The school was built way after, when I was working in London. So it was a long time coming the secondary school, a long time. And people used to go to, they were scattered, a lot of my friends came up from Salford, that I went to primary school with in Salford that came, and one of them went to Penketh, a few went to Padgate, the majority went to Culcheth, but I think it was on numbers, how many they could take. SO you were just kind of passed from, the kids that came up here, were kind of passed from pillar to post really.

SF: So did quite a lot of people move at the same time from Salford?

EL: I think you'll find the majority of people in Locking Stumps, there's a lot from Salford. A heck of a lot. Or Flixton or Urmston, that kind of area.

SF: So can you talk to me about what it was like when you first came up, what did it look like?

EL: Brilliant.

EL's mum: There was no big trees.

EL: No, it was just new houses. Bricks. Bricks and mortar. You had a little bit of lawn outside each house, and that was all open plan because you weren't allowed to put walls up or fences up, it was very strict.

SF: Was it?

EL: Oh gosh yes, When you look at our deeds, you couldn't do anything! You really couldn't do anything. Some of the rules in your deeds what you could and couldn't do from the Dev Co were amazing wasn't it.

SF: So when you moved in, did you buy straight away or were you renting?

EL: No, rented at first.

EL's mum: well that's how they were coming out weren't they, you couldn't buy...

EL: You couldn't buy these ones [Dev Co built]

EL's mum: Everyone was renting.

EL: It was only out on the other side of Glover Road when that started being built that were for sale, the private ones. And then the majority of them, here in Locking Stumps, when that right-to-buy came out, I think the majority of them have been bought.

SF: That was kind of funny timing because that coincided with the end of the Development Corporation

EL: Yep, no-one was going to look after it so it's got to sustain itself.

SF: Right. Well the other thing was about Spectrum Arena. You said you'd done a..

EL: I worked there yeah

SF: What I didn't know about Spectrum Arena was that it was set up as a charity and a community run venue.

EL: Yeah it was [...] it was wonderful, we saw so many concerts there haven't we?

EL's mum: yeah

EL: The Three Degrees have been there, Howard Keel, Bucks Fizz, then they had a big circus then they had the Benson and Hedges snooker. [...] What else did they have? Danny La Rue, that was great, Freddy Starr! I worked through all that. Saw them all, but I used to like it, I preferred it when you turned it back into the sports centre, but you can turn it into a theatre or whatever, that was the beauty about it, was that you could change it overnight cos the seats were just pully out seats.

SF: They were going on about how there was a sauna in there

EL: Oh it had a fitness suite, oh gosh yeah it was dead posh, really posh! As you look at it now, you've got Betfred, that side of it that was the health suite, that side was the wine bars, then you had your reception and at the back was all your squash courts, tennis courts, big football..it used to change overnight. You could have it as a five a-side football thing[...] it was a beautiful place. It was a good place, it should never have gone.

SF: It sounded like they got money from central government, but they also go money from the Diocese of Liverpool.

EL: I've no idea where they got the money from.

SF: It was like a few thousand, but like I say there was residents on the board

EL: I didn't know that there were residents on the board, because it was all very cliquey, it was very cliquey. Because the offices for it, used to be, you know, there not there now, they used to have the citizens advice bureau, didn't you, then there was like, the walkway, above, the offices where the managers used to sit for Birchwood was just on top of the citizens advice bureau. I think there used to be a bridge didn't there?

SF: I don't know

EL: There did used to be a bridge there, I'm sure there was, that you could walk across [...] It was also good because the community bit was, at the weekends, and some of the evenings, we used to change it into a the roller rink, so right at the back there was just a whole ruck of roller skates for hire, where the kids could come in and just used to do roller skating [...] When Spectrum went, there was virtually nothing in Birchwood.

SF: So do you think that is something that is like "a hole" now, something that's...

EL: They are doing something about it thought aren't they? Yeah, there is new development plans for Birchwood, where they have knocked down all the citizen's advice bureau and stuff, and where the Silver Birch used to be that's all going..

SF: That's all going as we speak.

EL: I *think* there is going to be more restaurants and leisure facilities all sorts of stuff going in there. Because that would bring back what was missing when Spectrum went. And I actually think, being honest the loss of Spectrum split up Locking Stumps and Oakwood.

SF: It was kind of a bonding thing

EL: Especially because of the kids, the roller rink and everything else, and also the Silver Birch pub, was very liked by both, so that was where Locking Stumps and Oakwood had their own little hub. That was the middle one between both of them. Birchwood Centre's doing that now, 'cos I meet people when you go shopping, so it's kind of doing it, but not on a leisure basis. So perhaps the closure of Spectrum had bigger implications than was expected.

SF: When did it close?

EL: Can't remember, I was in London by then I was mortified when I came home. Would have been '87 somewhere round there. You should be able to find that. 'Cos that's a big thing, I would say that was.. 'cos you only went to the shops to get your groceries.

SF: Exactly.

[...]

EL: The only place when we moved up here, we had no shops apart from this little shop here which used to be called Ricafegs [...] "I'm going up to Ricafegs" [...] We used to go "Rick-u-fegs" I think everyone used to take the mickey out of it. 'cos on a Saturday, everyone in Locking Stumps used to head down to Culcheth to Presto. So Culcheth did very well out of the new..and then of course when Birchwood Centre opened, we all went there.

SF: [...] Do you ever think of the way it is designed as 'over-designed', where the layout controls your movements to an extent?

EL: No I think the design is quite nice. I think they were quite good with the gardens and the space and everything else. The houses are so robust. [...] When we moved in, we saw them build Trefoil [close] and Campion.

[...]

SF: Was it noisy, was it like a building site?

EL: No it was great, you wouldn't have known anything was going on. There were no trucks, there was no nothing. The workmen took their own little plot, so there was one 'gang' of workers working on Trefoil, you'd see the house go up, the builders would be there, and then you would see the electricians coming in, you'd see the plumbers coming in, and you'd have the plasterers, that's how it was done, in small pockets. It wasn't just loads of houses going up at once.

[...]

SF: If someone asks you where are you from, what do you say?

EL: Salford. You do don't you mum – yep – Salford.

SF: Would you ever say Warrington or Birchwood?

EL: No. We never have. Even now, if we say we are going into town, our town is Manchester, not Warrington. We've never really kind of, we've lived here, but we've never really – the identity that we've got is still Salford, we've never taken on the identity of 'Birchwood' really, or – if people say 'your address' then Yes, I live in Birchwood. So roots wise, I think if you weren't born here, you probably wouldn't say Warrington.

[...]

SF: So your grandparents moved here from Salford? Did they live here long or?

EL: Well, they moved back.

SF: Did they?

EL: Granma did. Grandad died here, and then Granma didn't like it, obviously it was very isolated. She did like it, but she got a bit confused and she wanted to go back to what she knew, so she went back to Salford. [...] when they [broader residential population] came up, they looked after it. They took ownership of the houses, and the community, but I don't think took the identity of Birchwood and Warrington. That is interesting.

[...]

SF: I remember when some students from "old" Warrington came to Birchwood High because their school had closed, and I hadn't met anyone from "old" Warrington at that point! I remember thinking – "oh, their grandparents would be from Warrington – that's weird!"

EL: Yeah – They were the interlopers, it's like "this is our school". Cos that's how I felt at Culcheth, we weren't welcomed at Culcheth High School, didn't like us at all. And that carried on, right up until – well, my best friend did come from Culcheth. But it was a definite "them and us", busloads of us going back to Birchwood! Whereas a lot of the kids would just walk home. And they could do nice cakes in cookery, because they didn't have to squidge on a bus!

SF: Did you notice in the nineties there was more overgrown vegetation in Birchwood? People didn't seem to be cutting things back as much.

EL: Well we couldn't. Because that was instilled, because it was all done for us, and to have touched any landscaping that was done, because Warrington Dev Co always did that and it was "you're not supposed to do it". That is why you couldn't put a fence round your front garden or bricks. We had it where somebody did put bricks round their front garden and Warrington Runcorn Development Corp said get them down. [Talk about how in the deeds to house it says what you can and can't do to the house as per rules of Development Corporation]. They were brilliant, Sue and I from next door, we were sat here, "oh, I didn't know we couldn't do that!" "oh and look at that, we could have had that"! Sue was dead impressed, because she realised she could do something with that side bit! Where that walkway is, she put a load of plants in there straight away! That only happened two years ago, because I kept to the rules and regulations of the Dev Co.

SF: The Development Corporation ceased in September of 1989, and I got a sense that in the nineties there was more overgrown stuff than there is now really. In the nineties there were areas that were so overgrown you couldn't really go.

EL: Still can't, back of Strawberry close you can't get past at the moment. But the other thing is the responsibility is not all with Warrington Borough Council. There's 'Your Housing', isn't it. So 'Your Housing', if there is still rented accommodation over here, it is 'Your Housing'. So you've got Warrington Borough Council, Your Housing, who are not ploughing in any money at the moment, and then you've got [Birchwood] Town Council that kind of pick up the pieces. So, if residents complain, and if we can do it, we'll do it. That's why we pay extra on the poll tax.

SF: What about the play areas, they used to be dotted around, and –

EL: They've all gone now. You've got the skateboard park, you've got the hippo round here. Hippos been there for donkeys years. Then there is another little play area round the corner on Violet. But nobody plays on it! But it's ok – it's still there.

[...]

It's a prime example of a New Town I think. I think a lot of that credit goes to the residents. You'll find a lot of people are very proud of Locking Stumps.

*Interview edited in August 2020*