

EDITED EXTRACTS FROM INTERVIEW WITH GAYNOR KERRY

AUGUST 2016

RANGER WITH WARRINGTON RANGER SERVICE SINCE THE MID-1980'S. CURRENTLY BASED AT RISLEY MOSS NATURE RESERVE, BIRCHWOOD.

So could you just outline what your role involves here?

GK: Right. It has changed over the years, because right in the beginning I was based next door at Birchwood Forest Park where the Ranger Centre is there, so in the beginning it was very much people based, community based. Whereas I got moved here nine years ago to Risley Moss. Of course I knew it, because it was only 200 yards away! But it's much more nature oriented and conservation oriented. Because at Forest Park, a lot of your time was spent just trying to liaise with the communities. We did the big community events like Birchwood Carnival, I organised that, just trying to get as many people involved as possible. We also had a fantastic bonfire, I organised that for about seventeen years and that was a massive community event. So the idea was to get...well the philosophy of the New Town was to get the people into the parks because a lot of people had come from Salford, and Manchester and Liverpool into a totally new place so it was to try and get people to connect with their parkland, to try and get them to see it as their own, so the events and things were a complete mixed bag, it wasn't just all about "oo, well you've got to do nature, and you've got to do wildlife", we used to do as I say, bonfires, carnivals, artwork, camping! We used to take them camping overnight on Pestfurlong Hill, making all sorts of art sculptures in the park or doing events like getting the kids to come down and clean up Birchwood Brook, get dirty and smelly, get stuck in! But to try and see it as their own landscape in the hope that they would look after it in the future.

SF: would you say that there was something like that now, that community facing role now. The other question we can get on to is do you think that people did take ownership of the landscape and the environment. Can we go on to the first one?

GK: Is there still the community?

SF: that role that you had, is there something like that now?

GK: Not quite so much from the Ranger Service. There is in that we do events, but unfortunately the numbers have dwindled massively. In the New Town days when I started at Forest Park there were actually seven rangers there, doing all this work with schools particularly. We were in schools all the time, we would just walk into a school or a teacher would ring up and say can we do a group with you this afternoon? It has changed quite a lot in that there isn't really..we can't do as

much as we did because there was more than 20 Rangers in the service, there's now six of us across Warrington. We can't do an awful lot. Hopefully there are community groups that take on that role but not to the extent it was. And things have changed dramatically anyway and teachers are not now in a position to just pick the phone up and say 'can we come on down', and likewise, we can't just walk into a school. But we did used to have a lot more contact I think, because it was very community oriented. A lot more contact than we do now really because we've taken on different roles over the years as things have generally changed usually to do with budget constraints. We now do a lot of our own sort of, looking after the Park, whereas in the New Town days, that was all done for you. It was done by contractors, they swooped in, picked the litter up, they came and they cut back all the bushes, whereas we've taken on a lot more of that role meaning there is less time to liaise with the community.

SF: and that second question about where the community is in relation to the landscape now, do you sense that ownership, and sort of stewardship if you like, from the community of the area?

GK: I think there is really, particularly because the generation that were children then are now grown up and probably have their own children. We quite often meet children who we used to do mini-beast hunts with or treasure hunts and they do bring their own children to our events and I think that there is quite a proportion of the population that do feel quite strongly about their patch and I do think they have taken on ownership of it.

SF: As regards the changes you have talked about over the years, I would be interested to hear more about what happened after the Development Corporation [DC] wound up. [...] Could you talk about what happened in the early nineties in that change over period? In terms of how things were maintained.

GK: Yeah. The park I was at, Birchwood Forest Park, the football pitches were actually handed over in January 1987, and it was just that triangle which included the Birchwood Bunker exhibition as well. So I was working with the council then. It was quite a strange situation to be in working for the New Town but having to liaise with the Council over this area and they took that on because of the sports pitches. It became evident that that they weren't able to maintain the planting belts up to the same standard, totally due to lack of money and resources. I think there was an amount of bad feeling from the Borough Council towards the New Town because they [Development Corporation] had loads of money basically! And freedom to design what they did and I think it was probably a fantastic thing to work for, I wish I'd been in there earlier on 'cos it was a fantastic organisation. They probably did make mistakes, but I think there were difficulties there particularly in the early days because the Council had a very different way of working, they

were two such different organisations, so there was a lot of difficulty in the hand over. The council staff had been trained in a totally different way, to mow the grass short, have neat flower beds and tidy trees, so the New Town naturalistic approach was something quite new to them. Then the big handover on April 1st 1993 when all the landscape went over properly, and the staff, again, unexpectedly – last minute thing that the staff went as well – again we were expecting to lose our jobs. It took some years of sorting out, it was chaos actually at first, no-one knew who was looking after which bit, because there was also the Housing Association involved, Manchester and District Housing Association at the time. And of course over at the Science Park, there was that area as well, most of which had already gone over to the Science Park, they'd been taking chunks out. But it was such a massive thing for the Council to suddenly take on they were unable to keep up with the maintenance that the New Town were able to, they just didn't have the resources. And a lot of the time, they didn't have the same ways of working either because they didn't have the naturalistic approach. So the planting belts along all the roads, they saw as messy and they thought "well, what should happen there is you cut out all the undergrowth and you have lollipops, standards in grass, is how the Council wanted it. The New Town also had a way of cutting the grass, so differential mowing, so they would leave long areas of grass and try and encourage wildflower meadows and so on, there was difficulty with the concept of that, the Council taking on that concept that you don't mow the grass to make it look like a bowling green, just down to a completely different way of working. The New Town employed their own litter pickers and landscapers to do the work, whereas the Council had to take on the whole lot themselves and it was just such a massive undertaking that the quality of the landscape did deteriorate in a big way. It was a very steep learning curve for the Council. But it's paid off, because if you visit Birchwood now in the summer or early autumn you'll see the amazing wildflower areas that the Council now sows on the grass verges. Kevin McCready is responsible for them!

SF: As far as I'm aware, there has not been something like Birchwood in the rest of Britain. I understand it was very much inspired by Swedish and also Dutch approaches to landscape. But do you think it's because it is such a unique thing it was going to be inevitable that an organisation like a Borough Council wouldn't have shared the design, the concept, the ethos if you like.

GK: I think so, I think there was a lot of 'old school' people working for the Council then who've absolutely never come across anything like it before so I think it does play a bit part in it and also a lot of the residents who - Later on, when everything did start to grow, a lot of people had a problem with trees and planting belts at the bottom of their gardens, they found that they actually didn't like it. I know in the sort of latter days of the New Town, we were just constantly contacted

by local residents: who wanted rid of the trees! “we don’t like the trees at the bottom of the garden”. So it wasn’t everyone’s cup of tea.

SF: I’ve been looking at a lot of photographs of when it was first opened in ’76 to about 1980. And obviously everything is still saplings with little supportive struts and it all looks so neat! Obviously things are going to grow, clearly that was part of the design, people who designed it are aware, they can see 10 20 years in the future, how this is going to look. Do you think this was shared by the residents that this is all going to get bigger and more dense!

GK: possibly it wasn’t shared by a lot of the residents because it must have looked amazing it must have looked so strange when they did move in and new. I’ve heard lots of people say “oh it was lovely in the early days, it was all clean and shiny and bright”. So I think maybe because the New Town was so on top of the maintenance in the beginning then possibly the locals expected that would continue and somehow they’d maybe keep the trees short or something! Maybe there was a perception that it would always be neat and tidy. But also I think because the trees are mature now, and possibly in the days of the New Town there was a lot of over-planting because they used a lot of the nurse species to bring on the oaks and the ash and I think well into the planting they realised they were putting too many of the quick growing species in to protect the trees and they didn’t actually need to do that, and I do remember in the last few years when it became Commission for the New Towns [CNT] which was just an extension of the New Towns, but then I think they were reeling in the assets then, they weren’t spending the money that they did spend pre- 1989. They were trying to claw back whatever money they could so the actual deterioration of the landscape did start in 1989 even though it was under CNT. They weren’t thinning out as much as they should have done, ‘cos I know in the original plan they were supposed to thin out the nurse species and planting belts every three to five years, a lot of the planting belts weren’t thinned out at all so that’s meant that some of the areas have just become very very overgrown, or just very dense looking. I think, like a big ‘wall of trees’ which is not how the New Town saw it. I think they wanted to see it with the large trees, and the structure, and the middle size trees and the undergrowth, in a perfect world, that’s how they would have liked it. But again, when the Council took that on, they didn’t understand. I think in those days, the Council training was basically horticultural, there used to be flower beds and so on that they would look after that’s how the guys who worked for the DSD then wanted to see the short grass, the lollipops and the flower beds, so they really had no background in coppicing, or any kind of woodland management, and didn’t understand what the New Town was trying to achieve so that caused difficulties. So again, with a lot of the structured planting, it wasn’t actually thinned out as it should have been, so you ended up with a lot of tall straggly trees in some places because there wasn’t any thinning

out and you do need to be able to see gaps in it. And another way of management that the Council ended up with was they would come along and they would flail the edge of a planting belt which doesn't look good and that somehow exacerbates the effect of the big green wall and I think a lot of people are not comfortable with that especially if it is at the bottom of their own garden.

SF: And there is also considerations to do with people's safety, I mean perceptions of safety. I'm not suggesting it is unsafe, but there is a perception in some areas of Birchwood, particularly say the bits between Birchwood High School and Locking Stumps where it's like a walkway, dense vegetation and often not lit at night, in the nineties when I was going through there as a Birchwood High School student! Have you ever encountered that kind of reaction on the part of the residents?

GK: Absolutely yes. Because in the early days as a ranger, part of our job was to patrol the site constantly and just report anything to the New Town and they would sort it out. That did include all the tiny little walkways because it was a complete cobweb of walkways! And as the planting started to grow, there was a perception that it was absolutely definitely not safe. Because the lighting, they had these sort of globe-like, round very dim lights were here and there and which ultimately started to disappear as they didn't work, or got used as footballs. There was definitely a perception that it's not safe. I mean, one of the little paths I had to walk down was called muggers alley, as far as I know, I don't think anyone was ever mugged there. But that was just the perception of the public. So particularly when the whole lot was taken over in '93 a lot of that went to Manchester and District Housing Association [MDHA] so it was a nightmare for them to sort out who owned which bit first of all there was little areas handed over to the Council, small areas handed over to Housing Association, also the Woodland Trust were involved as well. I'd say for two to three years, no-one was really sure who was managing which bit and how!

SF: So where did that leave you as a Ranger Service then from '93 to, let's say..now! Where did that leave you, were things outsourced, you've said you've ended up taking on more responsibility for maintenance and stuff but surely if there is only six of you across Warrington...

GK: Well, particularly moving from Birchwood Forest Park to Risley Moss, that was actually more the site itself because the rangers at Risley Moss always did mow their own grass and do a lot more of the site management because it is a nature reserve and it's a SSSI [Site of Special Scientific Interest] and an SAC [Special Area of Conservation] so it's protected so that was always the case, so that was more to do with my transfer from Forest Park to over here, however, because particularly since the crash in 2008 things have changed because there has been a massive reduction in not just Rangers, but council staff so a lot of the lads who would have been out there

mowing the grass and cutting back, the workforce is tiny compared to what it was. So it's just been the way of the world in councils at the moment due to massive massive council cuts, we've lost lots of staff but they are actually giving us more work so the ranger who is now over at Forest Park now spends at least fifty percent of his time out there cutting back and picking up litter, doing jobs like that which back in the new town days, we wouldn't really have had to do.

SF: He does it personally

GK: Yeah, and works with volunteers to do that

SF: Has there been any growth in volunteer activity since 2007/8

GK: Yes, definitely. That's been the result of a few things: There has been a push towards it politically, there's been a push towards 'let's get the volunteers to do the work', but also as people have seen a deterioration in the maintenance of the landscape, those people who do have the ownership, the strong ownership, have hated seeing their local park, whether it's Birchwood Forest Park or St Elphins Park in the Town Centre, they've been very unhappy about the deterioration. And sometimes it can just boil down to mowing the grass. Because the Council have had no choice but to not mow the grass as regularly as they did, and it's a great shame because in some areas I think it's now on an eight week cycle so there'll be all the small areas that the New Town put in on purpose, the little local parks for children to play on, may have very long grass, which of course nobody wants to go and play in. And it gets the public annoyed, because there is a snowball effect then, because you get litter caught up in it, and all sorts of other mess and it just starts to look worse and worse. So I think that has caused there to be a rise in people saying let's get together and do something about this. So there's been quite an increase in the number of local 'Friends of' groups, there's Friends of Culcheth, Friends of Forest Park, that one is just starting up.

SF: Is there a Friends of Walled Gardens as well?

GK: That one has been a bone of contention for some years as well because the Walled Gardens sadly has deteriorated quite badly. Again, that was during the CNT days, because it was fantastic in the beginning and so from 1989 the resources put into that did diminish, 'cos it did need an awful lot of work to keep it as it was, because of its trellises and there was a horticultural area and it did come in for quite a bit of hammer, vandalism locally because it was a perfect place for teenagers to hang out. So yes, there are a lot more groups trying to save whatever it is that is in their patch.

SF: Not thinking about Forest Park and Risley Moss, in what ways are the Rangers involved in the wider estate, in whatever way, schools, maintenance, anything like that.

GK: Across Warrington?

SF: Well. Birchwood I was thinking

GK: Right, well we still try and keep as much contact as we can, it's just that we can't do the volume that we used to because I think looking back on it, we were probably doing several school groups a week, plus events, whereas now it is much more occasional. We still do liase with the schools, we particularly liase with Gorse Covert Primary School and we will do several groups a year with them. We might take the young ones out and just have a walk round and tell them about the place. One of the things that we do do is the history because Birchwood has got such a fantastic history! So we tell them all about the peat factory here at Risley Moss, then of course the bomb factory, people love to hear about the bomb factory. Every year we take the whole top class out from Gorse Covert Primary and we take them out into Birchwood and there is a little history trail where we can show them things that relate to Birchwood's past including the farm and the bomb factory. They love that, so that is a standard one we do every year without fail. So we still do that.

SF: Do you discuss the history of the New Town with them? In a sense that is what I am trying to do with this project, is add that story to what is considered to be the history of Birchwood! Does that seem too abstract to that age group? I don't know.

GK: We do mention it, but I think, they don't understand it I think, at primary school age, they don't get it. We do have a group that comes regularly from Manchester University and we've also had some from Sheffield and we've definitely focused more on that area.

[...]

SF: So what is your opinion of how residents have been..we talked earlier about there is a sense of ownership there, do you think it's changed over time the way the residents have interacted with the landscape, have taken responsibility for certain aspects of it and things like that, do you think it's always been there, they have always been supportive, is there, do you see changes in how that works?

GK: I think in the very beginning there was probably only a few residents with the ownership, but I think quite quickly in the early years, that developed into 50% of people having that ownership. There are some people who have never had the ownership and have never really bothered with

it but over the years, and I think it's very hard to say, because there are just certain people that you come across again and again when it comes to community aspects and you will see the same people who are on lots of different committees. Maybe that's a personality trait of those particular people. So there is a core, and I think there has always been a core of people who love where they are because they have moved from somewhere not so nice and they've loved it and they've cared for it. But I don't really think it's the majority. I think you do see a change now, it's hard to pinpoint when, that people aren't as linked to it as they were, that could be just to do with social media..has a lot to answer for, 'cos people don't get out and about as much, there's phones and TV's and all that. We do still get people who say "I've just come for a walk here, I've lived here for thirty years and I've never been to Risley Moss and I live at Gorse Covert", and that always astonishes me! So yes, there is a core of people, there will always be a core of people who love their environment and appreciate and understand it. Having said that, having worked on Birchwood Carnival Committee for years, we always always struggled to get people on board to come in and join in and do something it was always the same old faces, but that was just the thing of people, just saying "I want to come to the carnival, and I will complain if there is no carnival, but I don't actually want to be involved in helping" so we have always had that problem here.

SF: Do you think that has anything at all to do with how people come from such different..when I say such different places, Liverpool Manchester aren't that far apart but I certainly remember growing up there being this Manchester Liverpool thing..

GK: Definitely.

SF: I wondered with *any* New Town, when people are moving from different parts, has that got something to do with the fact that they don't get involved is that ultimately they are not from here?

GK: I think there is definitely an issue there. Definitely. Like you say, there has always been the Liverpool *or* Manchester thing, that is quite strong. I think some people have struggled to feel like they belong here. In some ways, we've always felt..'cos I live here now as well, I've lived here now since I think the early 1990's. I don't *quite* feel like I belong either! Because I came from Chester. But it does lack a core, a lot of people have said, the idea is fantastic, of course there have been lots of problems as in the traffic, because there is so much coming in. I think in the early days they didn't really plan for how car ownership was going to escalate, but then they kept on building the office blocks so more and more people coming in, so that's always been an issue. So there is a feeling that it is almost a transitory place, that a lot of people come in, they work here then they go home and I think a lot of people in general feel it needed a core really. Cos Birchwood centre

isn't enough as the town centre, it closes at 8 o'clock first of all, and then, it's a sort of shopping mall isn't it, it's not like a town centre. I think it suffers from that, and I think that has a knock on effect on the community. Because I know it was very idealistic when they planned it, they'd have the villages of Gorse Covert, Locking Stumps and Oakwood, but then there wasn't enough at each site.

SF: And do you sense in any way that there is not that..people who live in Gorse Covert, people who live in Oakwood, people who live in Locking Stumps, there is a sense of 'well this is my bit', there is a lack of coordination in some way or..

GK: Oh I think so, yes, yes.

SF: Almost that they are seen as different in some way because they are in this different part of the area of Birchwood

GK: Absolutely, yes, I think so.

SF: what do you think that is based on

GK: It's hard to say really, it's hard to say. I think it's because they don't mix really. People from Oakwood, they would have no reason to go to Gorse Covert, because why would they, because there is just a pub, new [indecipherable] well, new as in the 70's, there's nothing to draw them there so they don't liase with each other really. Whereas if there had been a big town centre, or a bigger town centre, that was open at night, with maybe just a bit more community centres, I think a lot of the youth clubs and so on have folded as well 'cos there is nobody to run them.

[...]

SF Why do you think Risley Moss is important to have in Birchwood.

GK: I think it's massively important to have as a focus. A lot of people will come here several times a day to walk there dog. They feel very very strongly about it. It's a perfect little place to come and relax, it's not very big it's only a mile to walk round, so it's very very good for elderly people, and path surfaces are good, so there's a lot of people who can come here and use it and they feel safe coming here. 'cos some people going over to the field over there, feel a bit exposed whereas this place provides somewhere that feels safe, and tranquil and it doesn't get massively massively busy, so a lot of people enjoy just coming here to relax, sit down, look at wildlife. And for us it's a fantastic teaching resource, we do have lots of primary schools that come in, well all sorts of schools, it's just that primary schools is the biggest number of schools that we get. We get occasional high schools and University groups that we mentioned before and then we also get a

lot of focus type groups. We might get a call from the University of the Third Age, they come here quite a lot, for older people, retired people. They can come here and do a health walk or a ramble or they might be interested in birds, so we can focus on different things. It's a brilliant place in that a group of any sort of interest can come here and say "can you do something for us" and we can probably come up with something because it is such a lovely site.

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