Mapping Museums project interview transcript

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Role: Ex-Secretary, Nidderdale Museum Society (retired); current Secretary, Nidderdale Museum Society.

Museum: Nidderdale Museum

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Interviewer(s): Toby Butler

The project is based at Birkbeck, University of London. The interview recordings and associated materials are archived at the Bishopsgate Library, London.

For readability the transcript has been made using 'intelligent' transcription (removing ums, ers etc). The interviewee has reviewed this transcript and minor amendments have been made for clarity.

Please note: in this interview references are made to a written account of the foundation of the museum by Eileen Burgess, which appears in a chapter of Traces of Nidderdale in 40 Years and 40 Objects*, by Joanna Moody (2014).*

TB: Just start with your name and date of birth please.

EB: Eileen Burgess; XX-XXX 1929.

TB: That's lovely and just tell me about your background.

EB: I came here 60 years ago from Wharfedale, the next dale. I was a school teacher here, ended up at Glasshouses School, as headteacher.

TB: Let's start right at the beginning. Just tell me how and why the idea of a museum came about.

EB: A group of 28 people had been in a WEA class, which after 9 years work under Bernard Jennings, published a history of Nidderdale, which at that time was a milestone in local history writing; because no Adult Education Group had ever done anything on that scale and depth before. After the third edition, we had some money to spare, not much in today's terms, but a reasonable amount in those days, and we offered it to people to write on local history topics, but instead of actually spending it, it seemed to grow. And after one of our AGMs, in 1973 I think it was, the treasurer and I said to each other, ' What we really need in this area is a museum'. There had been a couple of years before another group, The Nidderdale Society, which had tried to set up one. But they brought in the professionals, who said that if you have got less than 7,000 people in your village, it won't be viable. So they were discouraged even though they had actually got the premises promised from one of the hotels which was closing down.

[00:02:21]

TB: OK, so this was the Kings Arms, is that right?

EB: That was the King's Arms, yes.

TB: So were you involved in the society when that offer was made?

EB: No I was just a nominal member, yes.

TB: So it was the Council that came up with the 7,000 figure?

EB: it was Museum professionals from Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council.

TB: Yes. I don't understand that given this place is a tourist attraction, why the amount of the local population mattered - was that a question of people donating objects?

EB: I don't know. As I say I wasn't present at that meeting, so I don't know.

TB: But this was very discouraging for that group, to be told by these experts.

EB: Yes.

TB: So they decided not to go ahead with that offer.

EB: Yes.

TB: So the idea had been around but you weren't directly involved in that group?

EB: No, none of us who took this project on, were involved in that at all.

TB: OK. So tell me why it is that you wanted a museum, personally, what was your driving force there?

EB: Because I felt that what we had done in this [group] wasn't concrete enough. We had also had two exhibitions, while we were preparing the book, and people had brought stuff for a day's exhibition, and we knew that there was a lot more around. Also in the whole area, farms were being sold up; there was a farm sale nearly every week, and stuff was going out of the dale. And the final straw was that just down the road here, we had had a cobbler's shop. And when the cobbler died, it just disappeared. We understood that it had gone to York, and if it has it is in one of their many warehouses, and it has never been seen since. And we felt that the whole of the history of the dale, belonging to ordinary people, was disappearing, and would soon be gone.

[00:04:56]

TB: I see what you mean. Just to go back, this book, was it co-written by various people in the evening class?

EB: 28 people, 29.

TB: One of which was you? So you have got a chapter in there?

EB: I have got quite a lot in there. And I typed it all up, the first typing; I learnt to type on it.

TB: So this is a history of Nidderdale, and it is very substantial, you're looking at, I don't know...

EB: 380 pages. We read hundreds, hundreds of wills, 16th and 17th century wills.

TB: So tell me some more about this. Bernard Jennings was the lecturer?

EB: He was a WEA tutor; and then he transferred to Leeds University, and from a straight WEA course it became a Leeds University and WEA joint course; and we worked for 9 years on it.

[00:06:08]

TB: And so was he the driving force behind it?

EB: He was the driving Force, and he did an awful lot of reading of mediaeval manuscripts and translating them for us. He would bring a sheet of translations to a class on a Monday evening. And that we would read through them. The next week he would give us the general background to them. And 3rd 4th and 5th week we would study them and get the information out that was relevant, and generally discuss it.

TB: I see, so why were people so keen to write this up as a book, those classes, or at least to do more work - was this part of what you were talking about before, about this idea that things were changing?

EB: Yes, yes. And Nidderdale hadn't had any history writing of any consequence since the 1890s. There were a lot of people who would talk about Wharfedale and Wensleydale, which are much bigger dales; and they had had their researchers, Arthur Raistrick in Wharfedale, and Marie Hartley in Wensleydale, but nobody had done Nidderdale.

TB: So there was absolutely a gap there. And what would you say was the motivation of the people that got involved. Presumably they may not have been worried about whether there was an academic gap, particularly, what do you think their motivation was for writing this?

EB: Just to share an interest; we were a very varied group. There was a road man; a mill engineer who worked in the lead mines; another chap who had worked in the lead mines; a goodly number of teachers, as you always getting this sort of thing; quite a few house-wives, I was just a housewife at that time. A local doctor; nurses, local government people; we were a real spread, right through, from the doctor with his degree, down to the road man who could hardly write. But everybody... Bernard Jennings was fantastic. He made everybody feel important, and necessary.

TB: Did you divide up the work between yourselves then, different topics of interest?

EB: Yes, some things we did as I said as class projects, alongside, yes.

TB: And off the back of that you said that there were two exhibitions; which I suppose was as a group a way of dipping your toes into exhibition work.

EB: Yes the first one, we hosted a big WEA rally here, and the first exhibition, we filled a room as big as the largest one up there, just by asking people if they had got anything about the dale that they would like to show.

[00:09:39]

TB: What's this objects, or photos or both?

EB: Mostly objects, a few photographs. And then the second one was when we were hoping to launch the book, and we took the Memorial Hall and filled that one day. So we knew that there was a lot of stuff there. And it was half a dozen of us, eight of us from the class who were involved. And then we brought in another 8 people that we knew were interested. And one of the men had 1,000 photographs, when we started to put the museum together.

TB: I see. Right - so 50% of the people were involved in this evening class. OK, that's quite important isn't it. So those exhibitions made you realise that there was an incredible amount of objects that you had access to, and could put on display. And again this might be a personal thing, but you could have amassed those objects and put them in a room, something that was appointment only, or you could have set up an archive. But you didn't, he decided to go for a museum which is public. So why is that, that's quite a big step to decide that.

EB: Because we wanted to share everything. And it seemed to be the right thing to do; we never considered just having it. The opening times were limited; we couldn't afford to pay people, so in the early days we just had from Whitsuntide to the end of September, every afternoon. And gradually over the years we extended the hours, but not a great deal.

TB: In those early days, you said you wanted to share it - but who with? Who did you feel you wanted to communicate with at the beginning?

EB: The rest of the local people, and the visitors; because there wasn't much for people to do in Pateley, in Pateley itself. There's Stump Cross Caverns, and that time Fountains Abbey wasn't properly restored. And they were both expensive. One of the virtues of this place is that we have always been able to keep, because we are all volunteers, because Harrogate gave us the premises, we were able to keep our costs down. And we get families coming in regularly, saying thank goodness there is somewhere that doesn't cost the earth.

TB: You mentioned local people as well; were you thinking about younger people there, or just everybody?

EB: Just everybody. We cooperated with the schools a good deal; and we always give the local schools free admission. That was one of the conditions that the local charities gave us, educational charities gave us money in the first place, but it has continued so anyway.

[00:13:00]

TB: I see. So it's the point then to be sharing some of the things that perhaps have been forgotten or lost with these newer generations?

EB: Yes because in my lifetime, everything has changed considerably. And what I remember from my grandmother's life, it had already changed considerably by the time we opened. But it has changed again since then.

TB: OK let's drill down then about that. I'm thinking particularly in terms of the local area, of course because this is a local history museum, so what are those big changes can you give me a sense of...?

EB: Well the domestic things; the means of power. I mean I can remember my grandmother's house getting electricity just before the war. After the war they still had outside toilets, not flush toilets. And this was common; the whole Dale didn't get pipes water until 1962. We had it in Pateley, but the villages didn't. The basic things of life were changing rapidly at that time.

TB: One of the things about rural society that fascinates me is that often they are quite literally 50 years behind the cities, because it takes time for infrastructure to get out, doesn't it. So you were seeing those, in some areas but have been Victorian things changing, but actually you're seeing them in the 1960s; things like running water. That's amazing. And also just in terms of local industry and work, there's been some changes there?

EB: Yes, and again the lead mine's that closed down in the 1880s; the stone quarries closed down in 1914; and the mills were closing at that time. The laundry had just closed, I can't remember exactly, but there was certainly all closing by that time.

TB: By the 1970s we're talking about?

EB: Yes.

TB: OK.

EB: Going over to other things; to pick one down at Summerbridge, that went onto carpet manufacture, for carpet yarns, but it didn't last very long.

TB: So some big Industries were basically finished. And also you mentioned shoe menders...

EB: And again, you see, our type of footwear. We don't have cobblers anymore. But in my childhood everybody's shoes were leather. They were constantly in and out of the repairers. He was very important, every Village had two or three.

TB: I see, so you're also seeing, in terms of the town high street, some big changes as well.

EB: Yes, and also the commuter belt was coming out, where previously the community it's all been inward looking; we were now getting, as the years went on, commuters coming further and further out, and getting a wider spread of population.

TB: Now that's really interesting - so I guess we are talking about newcomers I suppose, coming into the Valley.

EB: Yes instead of being concentrated, for example Summerbridge was almost entirely people working in the Mill, or working on the land. Shaw Mills was similar; Birstwith was similar. Pateley had been the mining and quarrying; instead of that they were getting people coming in as commuters.

[00:17:34]

TB: Yes. Do you think, did that set up some problems, in terms of the community?

EB: No I don't think it has. People who have come in have brought fresh life to the place.

TB: So when you set the museum up you said it was partly for local people; so did you have in mind perhaps...

EB: A lot of these new incomers, yes.

TB: Who didn't perhaps know much about it, OK. That's really interesting. There lots of histories here, aren't there? There's the work; there's the shops, going back to even archaeology and so on. Is there any part of that history which for you, has been really really important, the things that you really wanted to save or to display? Going back to those early days?

EB: The coracle... [*EB not sure of the meaning here* …] not really, I'm just interested in everything; people's lives in general.

TB: And what is it about people's lives that you think is important to transmit?

EB: How they adapted to their circumstances. The vast distances that they had to walk; I mean particularly interesting are the Methodist local preachers, who would have to walk from 10 miles

down the dale, up to one of these upper villages; and give three sermons and then walk back again. How far they had to walk to markets, if they weren't using the Pateley one. How they had to go from Pateley to Ripon to church; from Middlesmoor to Masham, over the high moors, before the chapels of ease were erected.

TB: Is this within living memory almost?

EB: No it's not living memory, it's looking back a long way, but people survived and did these things; I just find it amazing. These are not really things that we can illustrate in the museum because we don't have that sort of artefact. But it was still an important part of their life, and their social history.

TB: There is something that we discussed earlier that I'd like to get onto the recording; in the account that I have read and the chapter that was so kindly given to me, it said that from quite an early stage you decided to focus on life in the dale, basically. That's quite a bounded thing, of course you've got to focus on something, I'm not arguing with it, but just tell me about that decision, and whether it is been easy to stick to it.

EB: Basically yes, because Nidderdale is a small dale. It is the smallest of the major dales; and the watersheds are pretty well defined. But we did have to move out into the Washburndale, a very small dale to the south, because their textile mills worked alongside, Nidderdale's textiles. And to some extent with the abbeys owning the upper dale and part of further down, we had to put in some of that work. But basically, we keep within the structure of the dale itself.

TB: Is that because culturally, did these dales have different cultural characteristics would you say?

EB: Yes they did, yes. For one thing the dialect, the basic dialect is on the watershed to the south; to the south of the watershed it's a Midland dialect; from here northwards it's a Northern Yorkshire dialect. And there are completely different words for things, in some instances.

TB: Is that because of the communication routes, it was much harder to go over those hills?

EB: Quite, yes.

TB: And also I suppose industrially mills tended to be a long a river line, and I suppose later on people will collect [around them].

[00:23:04]

EB: And with the mills, as I explained, the flax went down the Valley, to Knaresborough.

TB: Yes, so with that came toing and froing, and cultural contact I suppose, or frequent discussion, and I suppose words would change wouldn't they. That's really interesting. One thing that struck me in the book was that you were offered this cobblers workshop, but it wasn't in the valley! Just tell me about that decision to include it.

EB: Well it wasn't in the valley, but Christopher Binks, the last one, used to come over the top, of the head of the valley, to do work with the navvies who were constructing the reservoirs at the head of the dale, and he would meet them at their lunch time, in one of the public buildings. And he would

take measurements for their new boots, or bring the repairs back for them. And then he came down to Lofthouse, and stayed with his cousin.

TB: So that was connection enough for you to justify having it?

EB: Yes.

TB: Any other examples of things that have been outside that you've had to bring in; we've had the flax and that example but any other tricky decisions, thinking is this for us?

EB: Communications generally. The road system, the turnpike roads, because you had to have roads going over the hills.

TB: But you decided to include that.

EB: Yes.

TB: I'm fascinated by it because there are different conceptions of what local history is; and I suppose over the last 20 years really, ideas and geography that in fact places are networks of people, of coming and going really, as well as people they've been there for 90 years, actually there were lots of travellers passing through, and communications, and these are quite difficult things I think to draw a line around, simple as that.

EB: Yes we didn't have any major routes through the valley, until you get down to the A61, Harrogate to Ripon Road.

JM: I'm not sure if I am supposed to say anything here.

TB: Please do, that would be great.

JM: I'm not sure how much Eileen has spoken about the Railway, and the importance of the moment when the railway in fact stopped coming to Pateley Bridge. Because that would be not long before you got really going with the museum, seriously.

EB: It was 1955/6.

[00:26:18]

JM: The railway came out of Harrogate and then it was extended up for the building of the reservoirs. And then that was shut down, the bit from Pateley up to the reservoirs; and then the railway from Harrogate was shut down. So all your comment about communications and the roads gains increased importance, doesn't it, because we have been dependent, without the railway, on the bus service, on the roads and the cars and so forth. And you've obviously featured that quite strongly, I think, in the museum.

TB: Yes that's really important. Something else in mentioned in the chapter was your work changing a chapel into a play house, or a church tower play house. And I know this is a bit strange but it struck me that you were probably converting a historic building into something else, that's quite a prescient set of skills that you brought the party here, just tell me a little bit about that and whether it was important.

[00:27:25]

EB: Well actually the playhouse was my husband's baby. He was the secretary at the time of the Dramatic Society, and he saw that through.

TB: So what was it, a church that was abandoned?

EB: It was a Primitive Methodist chapel; I haven't got my keys on me or I could take you in.

TB: So it's here in the town?

EB: It's just down the road here. It's been a Primitive Methodist chapel since 1859. And it closed in 1933 when the connections nationally united, and the congregation went to the Wesleyans. it was empty for 3 years and then in 1936 the Salvation Army took it. By 19 58 or 9 they dwindled, and it was empty again, and we were turned out of the place where we rehearsed which was the yard at The Crown, up some steps at the back there. And where we were performing which was a cinema at the bottom of the hill here which was closing down. They were turned out of those in the month of August, we were in Ireland at the time. We came back to find that everything was in chaos. My husband had had the idea, and put it to the society the year before, that this would make a lovely little theatre. Because of this problem they had another emergency meeting and decided to buy it, which we bought for £125, which was less than its demolition value actually. But the Salvation Army wanted it off their hands, because there was actually a beck that runs underneath it.

TB: What's that?

EB: Oh sorry, a beck is a stream. It's a word we always use up here. And it flooded several times, so they wanted rid of it, so we got it for that princely sum. And we used it for rehearsal and storage. But everything we did to it was the idea that one day would be a theatre. And now it's the most lovely little theatre isn't it, Joanna? It seats 75 in a horseshoe, and it is really lovely.

TB: So presumably you learnt fundraising, property renovation, lots of skills that you developed just from being involved with your husband.

EB: Yes and Pateley is wonderful, if it's local people doing projects, they will back you to the hilt. But if somebody from outside comes in and says this is a good idea, it'll fall flat as a pancake.

JM: Don't quote her publicly on that [laughs]

TB: This is brilliant because my next question was clearly you literally turned away a fortune of council funding for this museum; but must have been quite a big decision because they offered you a lot of money to set this up.

EB: Well we just realised, from the chap, Mr Brown, that it wasn't going to be our museum.

TB: Did that matter?

EB: Yes. Because we were going to have the hard work of getting it together, and we knew again that Pateley people, Nidderdale people would give things to Pateley people. They wouldn't give it to Harrogate because there was a terrific animosity against going into Harrogate.

TB: Oh I see that's fascinating, so people wouldn't give objects, you think, if it was council run.

EB: No.

TB: Because they had just been hit by this reorganisation in 74 of [local government]. So that's a really interesting topic, because this has come up in the last interview, and I haven't really thought about it. So just tell me about how that decision to reorganize the government had an impact on people sense of identity or locality or...?

EB: Well for one thing it's taken employment away. Because as you can imagine, this building which was the council offices, employed quite a lot of local people. It took away our status; and you felt instead of being a large fish in a small pond, we were a minnow in a big pond. And from other communities around, places like Otley and Wetherby that have been sucked into Leeds, they lost their sense of community, to a great extent, because they have been sucked into these large places.

[00:33:14]

TB: I see. So it's no longer local people making decisions, or they might be with their having to go miles and miles to...

EB: They've got to make their case to others; to detached people; where they can say, this is what we want, here, now.

TB: In this town that had a big impact. Was that the case and many other towns as well?

EB: Oh yes, yes. Generally I think probably the whole country felt that way.

TB: It might be difficult thing to establish a very close correlation, but do you think there was much local history societies setting up around that time, Museums setting up around that time, might have been a reaction to that in some way?

EB: It could well have fostered it yes, indeed, because people wanted to keep their sense of community. Why are we alike? We are now; it's been destroyed.

TB: Yes, yes. So maybe you're making that decision, that this is the story of the dale, in that respect it is not the story of Harrogate, which is not part of the dale. So that might have been in the mix anyway, that feeling of annoyance. OK great. But very concretely you benefited as a museum because you literally took over the old Council building.

EB: Oh definitely. Turning down that money was the best thing we ever did, because they have supported us without question ever since, 40 years.

TB: Wasn't there also another string to that decision; you didn't want the money, in the account you said that it was a lot of money and perhaps that you couldn't justify it really.

EB: No, quite.

TB: So just tell me a little bit about that; you felt uncomfortable about the level of funding.

EB: Yes, we could see that as Mr Brown said, he was going to employ consultants. He was going to buy new showcases and things like that. We felt that if you have that sort of money, it was going to look like every other municipal museum in the country. We wanted to be something a little more idiosyncratic, I think. Personal. Part of the life of the dale, I mean as you probably noticed, most of our cases are very old ones, old shop cases and things like that; all home made because we wanted it to be a homely place, and not a museum, a municipal museum.

TB: That's interesting. So even the cases reflect locality; not looking the same as all the others. That's lovely. Also you mentioned that you did visit some of the museums for inspiration. What did you learn from those visits; did you model the design on any one?

EB: No we learnt things not to do. We learnt to be scrupulous about recording acquisitions and things like that.

TB: Where did that come from? Was that from some of the research that you did with the book, or did someone warn you?

EB: We were given a real horror story when we went to Millom in Cumbria, where they had been given a very handsome, ceremonial sword. And they hadn't catalogued it properly, they hadn't got the... and somebody else on the same family came in and demanded the sword; and they had a terrific problem, and in the end they had to say, 'you take it away, we don't want anything else to do with it'. So we learnt quite early on to be quite scrupulous and say, is it yours? Because if it isn't, we don't want anything to do with it. In fact I had a case a few years ago, where somebody brought something, that he thought had been put out for the tip, and it ought to be rescued. And something similar was on Antiques Roadshow or something. And the person who put it into the skip came and demanded it back. So I had to go to the person who gave it to us and say, ' you come and take this away and settle it with that person before and if it comes back to us'.

TB: And you also said that in the early days, this is when you were taking me around, that everything wasn't given to the museum; it was loaned, because at that point you weren't sure if the museum was going to carry on.

EB: No, we were given it for the first season, on trial.

TB: So presumably it changed after that, once you had become established.

EB: Well we went on doing loans until relatively recently, about 10 years ago, when we suddenly realised that really. When it became registration, then we had be more specific, and we had to have been given it; they could only be loaned for a specific period of time; we couldn't have things on permanent loan. So we had to say, if you really want it back, please take it back now; or otherwise lend it for a little while and eventually we had to say sorry, but we are running out of space, we have already got three of these, will you please take it, can we please give it back to you.

TB: By the way, do so if you're tired [small talk and break in recording; JM gives me a copy of her book, *Traces of Nidderdale in 40 Years and 40 Objects*]

[00:40:30]

JM: It is a combination of the story of the people, of the objects, of the way of life, of the industry, of the education.

EB: The objects illustrate life. We had a period about 15 years ago when it dawned on me that it was becoming a museum of objects, rather than story. And I made a point, it wasn't long before I gave up being secretary, pointing this out and that's when we did quite a lot of revision, to make sure things were focused on the story, and not on the objects.

JM: And that's what I hope I have managed to capture in the book; the story of the pedlar, behind all the objects there. The story of the Shoemaker on his bike, coming into the dale; and the story of the people at Scar, there was a chapter on Scar that you should read before you go up there, if you are going to.

TB: I'd love to. So by story, you were talking about individual's lived stories. And perhaps others too I don't know.

EB: Not merely the individuals but the development, as Joanna was saying, the development of the education, the story behind that. I mean it is easy to demonstrate the school; but the idea of the schoolroom is that's how people, how children learnt. It is not that these desks are any different from desks you're seeing other at areas. But these are the ones that the children of the dale actually sat at.

TB: So a modern school child sitting at those desks can make that comparison, and just understand that a journey has happened there; that story of change you could say.

EB: Yes. Does that answer your question?

TB: It does absolutely that's great. Just going back to the council again; as well as the funding issue you also said that in the period when the museum is up and running there was a tension between the council, was it Mr Brown you mentioned, I don't know if he was the one that came back again, but you were felt that they were trying to take it over, or have control over it, once it has been set up, is that right?

EB: That was not my feeling; it was the feeling of two or three members of the committee. I knew, because of my contacts, that there was no intention of taking us over. But they wouldn't accept it. And in fact it was quite a tussle when we got to preparation for registration in the first place. And it was Pat Clegg who was the district curator; it was her work that really resolved the situation and turned it round completely because she was not very well treated at the beginning by one or two of our members, I was ashamed to say. But she was really charming, and most persuasive and helpful.

TB: When did you become accredited?

JM: I think it was 2012? 2012 I've got here. *[in the book]*

TB: So was that the first accreditation, 2012?

EB: No we got it in 1992 the first one.

JM: That would be registration.

TB: 92 it was registration, great, and 2012 is accreditation.

JM: And then when it came up for RE accreditation which must have been 2015, three years later, it was so onerous a task, and we were getting on OK without it.

TB: What you were talking about there with the area curator, this was presumably from Harrogate Museum service, she came to advise you on registration; why did you want to get registered?

JM: I wasn't here then.

EB: Because at that time museums were organised within the local area; there was the Yorkshire and Humberside Museums Council and Museums Service, and they had money available which we could tap into, if we were registered.

TB: So it was simply being able to get access to things like that.

EB: Yes. And not so much the money, although that did help us with major projects, but also we could tap into their expertise, by that time I think we has reached the limit of our expertise.

TB: So you got to a certain size and you felt that right we do need a bit of guidance here.

EB: Yes.

[00:46:40]

TB: So for the registration part, you had set up systems already from the beginning, so how hard was it to be registered? It sounds like it wasn't too difficult.

EB: It wasn't difficult at all because we had got everything sorted out.

TB: And then you decided in the run up to 2012 to go for accreditation. So why did you decide to do that, was it a similar situation?

EB: It was the development of registration. The whole business of Museum organisation from the top, the Arts Council, I think, took over and resorted it. They closed the Area Museums Services, which was terrible, from our point of view.

JM: So to have a museum mentor at Harrogate, necessitated, since we have lost our accreditation, that's now out of date, we no longer have a museum mentor, so we don't have that support of the Harrogate museums service any longer. Our opportunities for funding of course, well, they are non-existent really, for applying for funding. I mean there might not be, we might be able to apply for something like HLF resilience funding, to help us to get re-accreditation, that kind of thing, but that's for the future, that's not the past which is what you're interested in, I think.

EB: Once they closed the area Museum services down, it all became very centralised, and focused on the National, and large municipal; all the resources went there, whereas Yorkshire and Humberside, over the years, had built up a lovely relationship with the small voluntary museums, and got them all raised up. I mean we could just pick the phone up and say, 'we want to do this, can you tell us where to find the resources, where can we order this from?' and they would come out and advise us on things like lighting and so on. And we lost all that.

JM: Yes, so independent museums are now really, truly, independent; not having the council interest, the museum interest that did exist in the past.

TB: So when did that go, I'm not aware of this, and I should be, this would have been when roughly? Pre-accreditation or around that time?

EB: With the accreditation process.

JM: There must have been a process around 2010, 12, when things were changing.

[00:50.00]

EB: And suddenly everything became extremely formalised and obviously structured towards the large, professional museums. And the bigger you were, the more money you've got, proportionally.

JM: But then we realised, actually being a small independent museum, and able at the present time, with Harrogate support with the accommodation, with the premises, that we could go it on our own. But....

TB: you became accredited in 2012, but then in 2015 you had to get that renewed, is that right?

JM: Yes which meant a whole new process of accreditation.

TB: But why did you need to have it renewed after just 3 years?

EB: Well that's what we can't understand. And obviously they are again looking at the big museums, who can have members of staff doing that. Where else we have to do it all in our spare time. It was 50 odd pages of tightly written legal stuff; most of which had no real relevance when we got down to the bones.

TB: Just to check, do you have any paid staff here at all?

EB: No; the only paid staff is the cleaner.

TB: So after wrestling with this you decided to forget it.

JM: It sort of went on hold. We now have a new secretary in myself; Anna couldn't cope with that again. And we have got a new chairman - chair man, she doesn't want to be a piece of furniture - in Sue Welch, and she is looking at the sustainability of the museum for the future. We are all getting on as you can see; how are we going to cope. Does the place need a paid administrator, if it does? So there are thinkings about getting re-accredited, possibly applying for HLF resilience funding or whatever, thinking seriously to the future. But I am sure that a lot of museums will be thinking that way. We can't be the only ones. If you go up to Ripon, Ripon have a paid administrator. It is very demanding on time and resources and so forth.

TB: Do you open the museum year round?

EB: Easter, 1st April, to the end of October. This year we went to the end of November didn't we.

JM: Just on weekends in the winter; 1.30 to 4.30pm. But then in the summer it is every afternoon. It used to be all day until about 4 years ago, but we just went out of stewards to do that.

TB: So what's your visitor numbers annually at the moment would you say?

JM: In there looking back you will see that there is a figure of about 8,000. I have done a tally and I think it's around 6,000 now.

EB: It's got up to 12,000 at one time. But that was when there were very few other attractions, and we didn't have Sunday trading. Sunday trading: it just went down like that.

TB: That's interesting so people are going to shops on Sundays, not coming out.

JM: And there aren't as many group visits now; I have dealt with 12 group visits this year, when there used to be say 20 or 30, because I think people are going further afield for their groups, group tours.

EB: And also it is the cost of the buses, particularly for schools.

JM: There aren't the school visits like there used to be. We were talking earlier about a lot of school visits; we have had perhaps 3 or 4 schools in the last year whereas there used to be schools coming.

TB: So what's happened there?

JM: Oh come on, the curriculum in the schools, they just haven't got time, and the costs. [informal chat].

[00:54:32]

TB: One thing, Brown signs. This is something which I spoke to other museums about, who are desperately trying to get this, and the councils are not letting them have them. So just tell me about brown signs and how important are they?

EB: We had the most awful time with the brown signs. We couldn't get them; people used to come in, and they still come in, saying we can't find you.

JM: They still do.

EB: Because people don't read signs quite frankly. It must have been the county councillor who put pressure on. So this chap came out and we stood, it took all afternoon, where we were going to put round signs around the town. And we stood at the bottom of the High Street, by the bridge there, arguing for 10 minutes, and when they came they were all wrong.

TB: In what way? The wording?

EB: The spelling was wrong; in one case it pointed in the wrong direction. Two were missed. I can't remember all the details I think it was in the account. It was appalling. Luckily at that time we had the Highways here, so we went to complain to him. And eventually suddenly, new signs appeared, and we actually got the cost, which we had had to pay for them; we got a cheque from the County Surveyor, to pay for what we'd done, and they were done; but even so, there are still not as many as we would like. But it's very difficult.

TB: But you managed it; it sounds like it was a bit of a struggle to get them agreed in the first place. So what's the relationship like with the council? In those early days you wanted it to be yours; it seems from your account, from your account it seems like they made suggestions, but you sent them off for the flea in their ear, and you did your own thing. Does that still work? Is it a bit us and them with the council, that feeling, or have things moved on a bit?

[00:57:37]

EB: Our relationship is excellent.

TB: Because they're still in the building and you're getting it rent free, so that is an important relationship.

EB: Ever since... I have always had a very good relationship and when I was secretary I could just ring up the buildings and maintenance officer, or whatever, and get them to come out. The animosity was only two or three of our members, it wasn't anything to do with basically our relationship. And in fact we had one or two very good people in Harrogate on the staff of the council, not directly involved but who could put in a good word for us, when we wanted it. And every time we wanted repairs or anything doing, they did them.

TB: So where do the animosity come from with those individuals? Do you think it was going back this thing about local identity?

EB: It was just two people, particularly; they were both dear friends of mine, but I have to admit that they got fixed ideas in their head and nothing would change them.

TB: A quick question, in the beginning you decided that you're going to be the secretary

EB: And Muriel was going to be the treasurer.

TB: But neither of you wanted to be the chairman, and I thought that was interesting; you invited the local headmaster to do that. Why did neither of you want to be the chairman, or why should you feel the need to have someone else do that?

EB: Because those were our natural roles.

TB: So you knew what you were good at, and that role didn't fit either of you particularly.

EB: Yes.

TB: OK, I was just wondering.

EB: We had the same relationship in the history class; we just sort of grew into it. It sounds as if we were autocratic, that wasn't the thing but we knew from experience that if you were starting something off, you would have to go with your plans made. Otherwise you just sit and witter and it'll all die away. So we sat down and we really talked it through.

TB: And you just had community meetings didn't you, when this was put to people, and it sounded like you managed to gather up a few key people to actually get involved, from those; and others just said, 'yes, that's fine'.

EB: And then we brought in several of the people who we knew were very interested. One chap who had been nagging me for years, that we needed a new Museum, because he had this large collection of tools, agricultural stuff that his father-in-law kept telling him he wanted them out of the barn. And he and his wife are still members. They and I are the only original members left.

[01:01:09]

TB: If you could name just one highlight of the whole experience, could you put your finger on it?

EB: All the friends I've made.

TB: Yes, with 50 odd volunteers, that's quite a few relationships, isn't it; over the years hundreds I'm sure.

EB: Yes, hundreds.

TB: And the toughest time? The toughest time that you've had?

EB: When they reorganised the heating and lighting, which was supposed to take a fortnight and took 3 and a half months. In the middle of winter. And we had to have somebody here every day to validate the insurance. And it was a freezing cold winter; so two people have to be here, sitting, just doing nothing. We couldn't have any heating on at all. And it got to Maundy Thursday and there were still electrical problems; that was the day before we wanted to open again, and somebody got an electric shock.

TB: Is there anything that you haven't said that you like to say here, I'll transcribe this and get it sent to the archive.

EB: I can't think of anything else, but if you want clarification just give me a ring, you've got my phone number.

TB: Wonderful thanks so much, that's brilliant.

[Ends]