

Flying Boats and Fellow Travellers

Interviewer: Rose Smith (RS)

Interviewee: Vera George (VG)

Date of interview: 20th February 2007

Subject: Work in the Sunderland Flying Boat factory

RS

This is Rose Smith, 20th February, 2007 and I'm interviewing Vera George of Windermere. So have you lived in Windermere all your life?

VG

All my life. I lived in the same house, down in the village, for sixty three of them. Sixty three years. It was a family house. They all were there. They all got married, each and every one. Except me, and I stayed at home with the older members of the family.

RS

So how... did you have brothers or sisters?

VG

Oh yes. There was nine of us altogether.

RS

Goodness, and did... and so what did you start off doing when you left school?

VG

When I left school I was directed to Shorts, the flying boat people.

RS

How old were you then?

VG

I was 15.

RS

15.

VG

15 years old. And it was a very stran... it was a very hard thing to do, to go from school to a place where there were about 2,000 people milling about. And being put into work that I'd never done before.

RS

When you were at school what were your favourite subjects?

VG

I didn't like school.

RS

Did you not?

VG

My favourite subject was... well really mainly travel and geography, anything to do with the travel of the world. And geography, which of course went with the travel. That was my favourite. I hated maths, and I hated anything to do that you had to use your head.

RS

[Laughs] I can empathise with that. So when you went you went to Shorts, what was your first impression when you walked in?

VG

I was put into the...

RS

Obviously the people, the number of people.

VG

Oh the masses of people walking through the gate. I think they said there was about 2,000 from the South, and they came down from the North. And I was put into a little store called the Jig and Tool department.

RS

Can you remember who was in charge of that at the time?

VG

Oh yes. He was a little gentleman of the Jewish faith called Ash Lions. And he was sent up from London, brought up here, and he was a drummer in London in one of the bands, big bands. We had all the evacuees sent here. And really it was quite amazing who you did... I had a dancing teacher, Janice Heart, and she was in the theatre in London. So really we were very lucky in many respects. We got all the best people.

RS

Yes, that must have been interesting.

VG

Well the useful people, let me put it that way.

RS

So was there many people working in the store?

VG

In the store...

RS

Where you were working.

VG

...there was myself and the gentleman in charge, Ash Lions.

RS

Right. And so can you remember what it looked like? Can you describe...

VG

What it looked like?

RS

...to me what it looked like?

VG

Well it just looked like, I suppose any store. I'd never been in any store, so I suppose it was just two walls down filled with goods, and a way to get out and a way to get in. That was about it.

RS

Where was it in relation to the factory?

VG

Well it was just at the door as you came in, at the factory door. It was on the left hand side as you came in.

RS

And what was your job?

VG

My job was to come to the counter when somebody arrived on the other side. And they'd tell me what they wanted and I had to know. I had to know what it was they wanted. And go and get it.

RS

And what sort of things did they...?

VG

Well tools, various tools and bits for the plane. I mean they used to take the mickey out of me, because they used to say 'Well it was a piece like this Vera.' No they used to say 'It was a piece like this.' I said 'With a piece more out of here, or just another piece altogether?' 'Where did you come from here?' I said 'Well I'm a local, which is more than you are, so tell me what you want and clear off.'

RS

And try not to laugh too much.

VG

Yes, I, well I was always the life there. My son will tell you I've always been one of the jokers. I'm the only joker in the family I think that's left. But oh no...

RS

So did it take you a long time to get to know exactly what they wanted? Was that difficult for you?

VG

Well, no it wasn't. I used to make them tell me exactly what it was, and even draw a little picture. So I said 'Oh you're not a very good drawer are you? Nothing like what I thought.' So that's how I got on. And I went in 19... I left school and I went in when I was 15 in 1942 and I left in 1945, when the factory was closing.

RS

Before you left, before you started there, what was, what were the conditions like in Windermere during that first part of the war?

VG

Well of course I've always loved Windermere. Windermere is my home. And Windermere was spoilt really by all the people that came in, because they weren't used to a country village. And it was a pity really. I got on all right with them because they did what I said. So I always liked that as a child. And it was a shame really because we always thought it might have been a much bigger place if they hadn't come. But they came because it was needed. They needed to come here because they weren't safe in Rochester, they weren't safe in London.

RS
Exactly.

VG
And why should we get all the safety up here? Although I must admit we have paid for it.

RS
In what way?

VG
Well I mean it always costs more to live here. It always has. You probably know yourself, you can shop cheaper in Kendal, eight miles down the road. And you can shop cheaper in many places. It's always been an expensive place to live.

RS
When they first came up here, had the village been built at Calgarth, where they lived?

VG
Oh no, that was built for them, all the little houses.

RS
So where did they live before that?

VG
Well they had to find rooms and things.

RS
Lodgings.

VG
I think they probably got into boarding houses and places like that.

RS
And was there many air raids or anything before, during the period '39 to '40, 1939 to...?

VG
Air raids here?

RS
Yes, was there any at all?

VG
I only saw one plane. No we didn't have no, no there was nothing here.

RS

Never?

VG

Never. We did have, we did have... people came up to the, Grizedale, the Germans. And we used to go up to the station to see them arriving.

RS

Oh did you?

VG

Yes. They used to come on a Thursday night. I don't know where they came from... they were prisoners, prisoners of war. And the vans were waiting there to take them over to Grizedale. And of course all the children used to 'boo', as children would.

RS

Yes, so was that before 1942 or after that?

VG

Oh no, this was during, and getting towards the end of... when things were moving, I would say. The end of the war is coming, and they started moving people about.

RS

So while you were at the Shorts factory there was no air raids? Do you remember any?

VG

Well I don't think they thought there was worth, anything there to bomb.

RS

No, I think there was some air raid shelters though.

VG

Oh yes, there was always air raid... there was in the village.

RS

Yes, where abouts were they in the village?

VG

I'm just trying to think. I think there was something down by the library. There was nothing very elaborate. They made areas that were safe to go. But down at Shorts, they built a whole town. I mean it was quite an enormous undertaking. And they did tell the Minister then that it would all be taken down at the end of the war. But they did want to do it, because the houses were of course of great asset.

RS

Exactly. What did they local people think of Shorts factory when it was...?

VG

Didn't like them.

RS

They didn't like them.

VG

No, no.

RS

And what did they think about the actual building of Shorts, because it was a very large building wasn't it?

VG

Yes, it was. It was big. Well of course a lot of them made money, by taking people in and... I think they had a grudge against them. They felt as though they were taking over their village. It didn't matter to me. But I don't think my mother was so keen.

RS

No, did they local girls... were there a lot of young men that came up to work?

VG

Oh heavens yes. And there was the RAF. Yes, they used to come into the factory. Now I was attached to an office, and I can't tell you what it was, but Colonel Howarth was in charge. And he used to say 'Vera, here', and he used to give me a sheet of paper. You see I wasn't very old, I was only in my teens. I think he thought I was the safest. How wrong he was. He used to give me a sheet of paper, he said 'Now there are some RAF coming in, just go down and get their names.' He said 'and numbers, you don't get their addresses.' He used to say... but he said 'Go down and get...' I can remember if it was yesterday, all these young RAF men coming up towards me. I wrote a piece in a magazine, did you see that magazine?

RS

No.

VG

I'll have to show you it.

RS

Please.

VG

I wrote it, and there was a photograph of me. You see nobody took photographs in those days. So it wasn't very, anything very exciting. I know I had a wool turban on and I was... I had a sledge with me. And I always remember these RAF boys coming towards me, and I wrote it in this magazine about them.

RS

Oh I'll be very interested to see that.

VG

Yes, it... well most people enjoyed it. And they enjoy... I wrote a little book, I've never had it published because you can't... it was really going to cost me too much.

RS

How do you mean you wrote a little book?

VG

Well, it was a story.

RS

Really, have you still got that?

VG

Yes, I've still got that, I was reading it the other evening.

RS

Excellent.

VG

Yes, I've still got the story about how we used to get... I was in charge of the entertainments for Shorts. The factory had their own little band of entertainers, and I used to take that down to Grange. There was an airfield there. Well at Cartmel was it?

RS

Yes, it could have been Cartmel.

VG

There was an airfield there and we used to go and entertain them.

RS

What just as a band or as singers?

VG

No, no band, no instruments. Singing, dancing. I had a dancing team.

RS

Really, goodness me.

VG

Yes.

RS

So how many were in dancing team?

VG

Five or six.

RS

For local...

VG

Local girls from the factory.

RS

Local girls. Were they Windermere girls or...?

VG

Yes.

RS

Yes, are any of them still alive?

VG

Oh yes. I saw one, one day this week. Must have been Monday I think when I was down the village. And...

RS
So perhaps you could give me their names afterwards in case we haven't got them. That would be really helpful thank you.

VG
Lilly Burn, I can remember her well. She was in my dancing team. But of course your memory comes and goes, when you get to 80.

RS
Well it's pretty good.

VG
I mean I could remember everything. But I'll let you read the book, the little thing that I wrote.

RS
That would be wonderful, thank you.

VG
I've always thought I'd like to get it printed because it is a memory.

RS
Exactly.

VG
But it's a bit of history. And it's a history of Windermere.

RS
Exactly, this is why we're doing all this recording because, you know we want to cherish this history really, and preserve this history.

VG
Oh it was such an entertaining place. I mean you had all kinds of people here.

RS
It must have been. So you, it sounds to me as though you got on very well from the start, and got to know people very quickly from the start.

VG
Oh yes. Well my son will tell you that I'm that kind of person.

RS
I can imagine.

VG
I, you know, I perhaps get in where I wouldn't be and... But nevertheless...

RS
What time did you have to start in the morning, can you remember?

VG

Sorry?

RS

What time did you have to start in the morning?

VG

Oh well we used to go on the eight o'clock bus. And I think I got... it's in my little book somewhere. I think got 75p a week. And my mother kept the 75 and gave me 50 back. And out of that 50 I used to have to pay bus fares.

RS

And can you remember how much the bus fare was?

VG

I can't. It can't have been very much because that 50p a week wouldn't last very long would it?

RS

No. And what time did you finish?

VG

We finished at... well that was always the bone of conten... Friday's, married ladies got off at four o'clock, to be able to go and do their shopping because there were no later. There were no late night openings, there were no supermarkets like there are now. And they used to get off at four o'clock, and I never did. I never got any... what were the things that were short of? To eat, not peaches? It was a piece of fruit, and we couldn't get them in this country. So I never got any of that. I never got any food, never got any overtime. I was either too young or too old.

RS

Did you have a lunch hour, or lunch break?

VG

Oh yes, well yes. We did get lunch hours, and we used to go to the canteen for that. And there was always entertainment in the canteen. ENSA used to come.

RS

Yes, what every day?

VG

Not every day, no.

RS

But how often?

VG

But quite often during the week. Because of course they liked coming to Windermere.

RS

So where were they based?

VG

I don't know where they came from. I think it was somewhere in Yorkshire, I'm not sure. Because I didn't take much interest in them because I ran my own little entertainment business, on the quiet.

RS

Exactly yes. So tell me a bit more about the entertainment business.

VG

Well we used to, we used to go off and... and you see I was always a very bad traveller. Car traveller, bus traveller. And we used to go out, well wherever there were places. I mean there was an air field at Cark, and I was always sick. It was an awful thing. But nevertheless I used to go, I was determined. And they used to enjoy it. And we went to Meathop where all the men, they were Navy I think, they were all there with their little white masks on, because they had this disease which seems to get Navy men. I can't just remember what it was now. But they all wore little white masks. And...

RS

What was at Meathop then, was it a hospital?

VG

Milnthorpe...

RS

Oh Milnthorpe.

VG

No, not Milnthorpe I beg your pardon, it was Meathop.

RS

Yes, was it a hospital, were they there...?

VG

It was a hospital yes, for... I'm trying to think what they, what the disease was they had. It was pretty bad.

RS

A lung disease?

VG

Could have been, yes. But, because they all wore these little masks.

RS

So you used to go into the hospital to entertain them?

VG

Yes, yes. And I was at one place, and I think they thought I talked a lot, which I did. And he said to me 'Well I think you ought to come to Grizedale', I said 'Grizedale Forest?' 'Yes'. But I said 'Isn't that where the German prisoners of war were?' 'Yes.' I said 'I'm not going to go and entertain Germans.' I said 'All my family are in the forces, certainly not. Let them make their own entertainment.' And I can remember saying that and he was absolutely flabbergasted. He really was, he couldn't believe it, that anybody would say... I said 'My... all my brothers and all my family are in the forces. My sister's in the army.' I said 'Certainly not.' So he walked away and I don't think he was very pleased but that was my attitude.

RS

Who was that who'd asked you? Can you remember?

VG

No. I remember some of the names. Like... I ought to find my book, because that can... I don't think it's here, it might be upstairs but you'll have to read it because that gives a lot of the names of the workers. As you can see I've changed my... I'm now into... a friend of mine wrote that. Most of my friends are writers.

RS

Really?

VG

Yes or...

RS

Can I have a look?

VG

Can you hold that while I go and get the little booklet?

RS

Yes, no that's fine.

[tape restarts]

RS

...what the Sunderland aircraft?

VG

The Sunderland aircraft, the last one that came, I went down to the factory to see it arrive. And it was so... I could have cried. It was so lovely to see this big bird coming down, and that I'd been used to seeing during my war years. It was...

RS

What year was that, can you remember?

VG

Well, when the last plane came, was it 1998 something like that? It's in one of these books. Ah now that's an e-mail from one of the guys that I sent that... that's Lee, he lives in New York.

RS

Golly, how did you meet him?

VG

How did I meet him?

RS

Yes.

VG

Well I used to go out with a fellow called Joe Robison, and he's an actor. And Lee had lost touch with him, Lee from New York. And so he got in touch with me. Now how he got to know that I will never know, he won't tell me. But he got to know that I knew Joe Robison. And Joe Robison was here at the time... well not in my house at that moment, but he came that evening. He used to come to eat. And I said he was coming, so he said 'Would you ask him to give me a ring?' Which I did. So that's how they got to know each... how they got started again, because he'd only met him in New York.

RS

Gosh, it's a small world isn't it?

VG

Well it is a small world. I've found it very small. My sisters and the rest of the family don't seem to have done so. But I've always met interesting people.

RS

Exactly.

VG

They've always been very interesting.

RS

Yes, yes, exactly. That's what I've found too.

VG

Somebody was saying to me about a fortnight, three weeks ago, 'When are you going to write your story of your life? I'm looking forward to seeing that.'

RS

So what's the answer?

VG

And the answer was 'I'm not writing it, not until they're all dead. Then I might think about it.' ??? (22,33), I'm touch with all these kind of...

RS

So are you in touch with anyone that was at the Shorts factory?

VG

No.

RS

No-one.

VG

Although I must say that I was in Windermere about two years ago, down in the village shopping, and I heard a voice. I was looking in W H Smith's. And I heard a voice say 'That's Vera George there.' And she recognised me from when I... and her husband was with her, and he was an engineer at Shorts. Now I was 15 when I was at Shorts. And he was getting on this guy, and yet he remembered me.

RS

And did you remember him?

VG

No. No I didn't remember him. I had a young man came to see me about a month ago with a friend of mine. She brought him. I was ill, and I must of looked a sight, that I used to go out with. We used to... he had an MG and we used to race up Berthwaite Road. I didn't even recognise him.

RS

Well that's not surprising. I wouldn't be worried about that.

VG

But I think it was because I wasn't well.

RS

So was there a good social life at the factory?

VG

Oh yes, but you see I didn't get much of that because I was too young. I used to go to the dances, down at the factory... at the, on the estate where all the... because they had a little room.

RS

A hall.

VG

And I used to go on a Saturday night, my mother used to let me out Saturday night. Now just remind me what I'm looking for will you?

RS

Your book.

VS

That's right. Well I'm beginning to think... just excuse me a moment and I'll just slip upstairs.

[tape restarts]

VG

...James Bond.

RS

Golly. Where was that?

VG

That was down at...

RS

Pinewood? Elstree?

VG

No, it was down, actually it was in one of these big do's that they have at... going down towards London. The Homecoming, or My Short Story by Vera George.

RS

Oh brilliant thank you. So can I... would you mind if I borrowed that?

VG

No.

RS

Oh excellent, thank you very much. That's fabulous. Can you remember either Francis Short or George Gretam... Gretham?

VG

George?

RS

Gretam?

VG

Gretham? Oh yes I remember them. I used to have a desk not far from the first one.

RS

Francis Short.

VG

Francis Short. He was just a very little man. And his sister lives in Windermere still.

RS

Does she, what's her name?

VG

She very often passes me when I'm in the coffee house. They don't call her Short. But I knew the family, I can't just recall her...

RS

No, well I'll leave you my phone number and then if you do recall any names, that would be great if you could give me a ring. Has... I think Alan King, has Alan...

VG

Alan King oh yes, I've met him several times.

RS

Yes, he's been to see you.

VG

At these kind of affairs where you go and talk and...

RS

Was there, the part of the factory that you worked in, was there a number for it? A centre number for it?

VG

No.

RS

No.

VG

I wasn't in the centre, I was in an actual store. It was just a store, perhaps about as big as... about as large as this and the dining room. That was about how large it was. They weren't the big things that were kept there. It was the kind of...

RS

Small bits.

VG

Small bits.

RS

Yes. What was... so your typical working day would be starting work at what? At half past eight?

VG

Well half eight I think 'til five.

RS

And just passing out these bits of equipment for anyone that came in.

VG

Yes, yes, they used to come with a little card or whatever. And 'One of those please.'

RS

And did you have a uniform to wear at all?

VG

Oh no, no.

RS

No. What about jokes and tricks? Were any jokes and tricks played on young workers there? Can you remember at all?

VG

Oh they were pulling your leg all the time because of the age you see. I was young.

RS

How old were many of the workers that came up then?

VG

Well of course they came to even be old, old age. I mean when I say old age, it's what I am now.

RS

What to 80, 80 year olds?

VG

Well perhaps not quite 80 because they used to... I mean I don't, I haven't worked since I was 60. I think, my opinion was when you retire your job's needed for somebody else. And you've had a job for 'x' number of years, you ought to retire and give them the job. That's always been my opinion. You shouldn't carry on and carry on until you're too old to work really. Although they won't say that you see.

RS

So what, they were aged from what, about 18, 15? What was the youngest person that had come up from London, Rochester?

VG

Well they were about my age.

RS

15 years old.

VG

14, 15.

RS

Really?

VG

Well we left school at 14. But I didn't go... I didn't do anything for a year because there was a lot of sport going on that I was involved in. Racing and all that kind... I was quite an athlete really. And I just said 'No, I'm not going.'

RS

So you stayed on at school?

VG

I stayed... no I hated school. Stayed on at home.

RS

But you stayed...

[Laughs]

RS

Which school did you go to?

VG

St Mary's.

RS

St Mary's.

VG

Down by the church.

RS

Right. Was there a large number of local girls your age working at the factory?

VG

No there wasn't really. There was a few, but not a lot. That's one of the actors that I used to go out with, Joe Robinson.

RS

Oh he was very good looking.

VG

He is still good looking. His biggest problem is he knows it.

RS

Was he in films or stage?

VG

Yes, he's done both stage and films.

RS

Really, what films has he...

VG

He was the lead in... and you know who those are of course. They're The Beatles. He...

RS

Who's that signed by?

VG

Sorry?

RS

Who's that signed by?

VG

Peter Best, he was one of the... I think he was one of The Beatles.

RS

He was the original Beatle wasn't he?

VG

Oh was he.

RS

Yes, I think so.

VG

I don't know because they were never my... I met them and I had to ask them who was who. And I said well who was the boss?

RS

When did you meet them? Do you still have their... do you have an autograph from them still?

VG

Who The Beatles?

RS

Yes.

VG

I don't think I did, I just got his... Then I was in with the American Presidents of course. William J Clinton Presidential Centre.

RS
How do you mean you were in with them?

VG
Pardon?

RS
How do you mean you were in with American Presidents?

VG
Well I used to be in touch with them.

RS
Really?

VG
Yes.

RS
In what respect?

VG
And I said to Andrew...

RS
Gosh I can't up with you.

VG
No, I said to Andrew 'Just tell me, who's Clinton?' Well he was... I thought he was going to say he was the manager of somewhere. And he said 'Well heavens mother, he was the American...', well I said 'How've I got all of these...' 'Well' he said 'I don't know how you got hold of him' because he said 'you've got hold of most people.' He said 'I daren't ask sometimes.'

RS
Have you been to America?

VG
No, no desire to go. I'm not really that keen on Americans.

RS
So do...

VG
Bill Clinton.

RS
Yes. What about the Birmingham workers, did they start at any time an industrial action? Can you remember any of the workers going on strike or threatening to?

VG

No, they were very happy to be here. And really they were treated very well, because nobody was very keen on them coming. Least of all me.

RS

And what about the aircraft, how were they moved on land? Can you remember how they were moved at all, the aircraft?

VG

The aircraft, the Sunderland?

RS

Yes.

VG

Oh they were too big to move in any way, shape or form. I mean they were down at the factory on the tarmac, and it went up like that from the water into the... where the gantries were. I must try and find this book for you.

RS

The book is... the story you've written?

VG

No not that one. It's the little one that...

RS

And did you ever see them being moved on to the lake then, the aircraft?

VG

Oh yes I've that yes. They just slid down the... from the gantry, slid down into the lake.

RS

Did they launch them, was there a sort of big launch for them, or was that a normal occurrence?

VG

Oh no that was... you didn't get to see anything like that. I mean you had to be in the County ??? (33.38) to get into that. That's me in it. But no I've got a better one than that.

RS

What inside...

VG

Inside the Sunderland.

RS

Really. So did you see them fly at all? Did you see them take off from the lake?

VG

Yes I've seen them take off from... Oh that last one I did. I went down specially to see it.

RS

Yes, but I mean during the time that you were with the factory? You didn't ever see?

VG

Oh no. No, no you were kept inside.

RS

Really.

VG

Oh yes it was, I think if anything it was treat really rather secretly. I mean you had to... you hadn't to say anything, you hadn't to say anything outside.

RS

What about the air crew that came to fly them, did you get meet them at all?

VG

Oh yes, you could meet them at the dances if they were down on the Saturday, at a weekend.

RS

And were there many down?

VG

And they were always very nice. Well I don't think they'd dare be anything else really.

RS

So you got to meet, did you get to meet any of the pilots?

VG

Yes actually, it's rather strange. I came over to Kendal, there was something over at Kendal about two, three years ago. And it was at the Brewery Arts Centre, that's where my son worked. And it was up at the Brewery Arts Centre, and we got on talking, and he said 'Well I came down to Shorts.' I said 'Did you? I don't remember seeing you.' 'No' well he said 'you wouldn't do.' He said 'But I was a pilot.' 'Oh well' I said 'you must have been a good one because they only pick the best to fly Sunderlands.' And you had to be very, you had to know a lot about them to be able to get in to be a pilot. 'Oh yes' he said 'I know that.' And it was strange because there was a young fellow there, and he came over and he said 'I saw you talking to so-and-so, so..' I said 'Oh yes' I said 'He was telling me at Shorts, well I used to work there when I was a young girl.' He said 'Yes', he said 'Well I'm surprised I never met you because I used to come down to Shorts regularly. I used to fly into Shorts.'

RS

But you can't remember his name?

VG

Can remember him, but he lived... I'll tell you where he was from, he was from Hawkshead.

RS

Really?

VG

Yes. He told me where he was from. And my son came over... it was only about a couple of years ago, two or three years ago. My son came over, he said 'Mum, do you know that man?' I said 'Well I've just found out he's from Hawkshead' and I said 'he used to come to Shorts, flying ??? (36.43)' 'Well' he said

'just be careful because you don't know.' 'Oh' I said 'don't tell me...' I said 'don't tell me I've found somebody.' Good grief.

RS

So can you remember any of the pilots names when... that were...?

VG

No. Well I did remember 'til quite recently one. There was one I thought I remembered, and I thought they called him Peter Gibbons, or Gibbins or something like that. But I couldn't... now they might be in my little book. I mean if I was terribly impressed. Because I'm afraid I've got to be impressed to...

RS

So, but when you left you must have been what, 18, 17?

VG

When I left, well I was 15 when I went.

RS

In 1942 so... 18...

VG

And I was there three years.

RS

Yes, 18 then. So by that stage did you have any boyfriends that were working at Shorts factory or...?

VG

No I've never had a boyfriend that's lasted.

RS

Lasted what, longer than...? Really?

VG

Well perhaps a week.

RS

Yes. When did you get this 'Welcome to the Whitehouse.' Is that from Bill Clinton?

VG

Oh, well it would be when I was in touch with Bill Clinton.

RS

Can you remember why you were in touch with Bill Clinton? Is it something that you'd written to him about?

VG

That's Dr No, NEC Birmingham.

RS

Oh my goodness me. I think I'm going to have to come and interview you again about something. About, not about Sunderland aircraft, about all your film and life.

VG

Well he's a brother of Joe Robison that I used to go out with, he's the brother. But I've never met him... and Joe told me not to get involved with him.

RS

When the RAF came to the factory, did they receive any training actually at the factories as to how to...?

VG

Yes they did, I don't know quite what... the training was indoors and it was up in the offices. Just across from my... I remember one particular little Welsh sergeant who came down, and I was talking to one of the RAF boys... because they were in half were the doors. And I was, I had the back, the top half back and I was stood talking. And he said whatever they called the boy 'I sent you down to study girls... boys... no airframes not girls frames' that was his, I always remember that.

RS

So this is one of the RAF staff being trained.

VG

Yes, yes.

RS

Yes. You don't know what sort of training they had at all?

VG

I don't. Well I would imagine they would be trained as to what to use for what. How to fly... because Sunderland aircraft was very difficult to fly. Not just anybody got the chance to fly.

RS

Yes, they were very heavy machines weren't they?

VG

They were heavy machines. And...

RS

What about the...

VG

Who's that? Does it say?

RS

That's Bill Clinton.

VG

Oh it could be. Does it say it was Arkansas? If it was it is him.

RS

Yes, yes. What about the Home Guard? Were there any Home Guard?

VG

Oh the Home Guard were absolutely... the Home Guard down in Shorts, they were a laugh a minute. Those... the boss man was called Tommy. And he said 'You call me Mr, don't call me Tommy because you don't know who's listening.' So I said 'Well I don't like calling just Mr.' 'No' but he said 'You call

me by Mr my last name.' 'Oh no' I said 'I couldn't do that. No, no I couldn't do that. No' I said 'it's either Tommy or nothing, I don't speak to you.' And he went off and he was muttering about the kids of today, what terrors they were. I'm going to have find that book.

RS

And was he from Windermere, Tommy?

VG

Sorry?

RS

Was Tommy from Windermere?

VG

Yes.

RS

Yes. But how effective was he as a Home Guard?

VG

Well he was the sergeant. He was a sergeant in the Home Guard.

RS

Yes, and did they have a drill or...?

VG

Yes, they used to meet so many nights in the week, the Home Guard. And we always said, well I used to repeat this, that they put their money down like... they put their feet down like runny money.

RS

Is that a local expression?

VG

Sorry?

RS

Is that a local expression?

VG

No, I don't think I've ever heard anybody else say it, but I've always said it. I don't know where I got it from. But...

RS

Can you remember... so was Tommy in charge of the Home Guard?

VG

Yes, he was, of that particular part. He used to...

RS

You can't remember what his other name?

VG

He used to march them up to the gate and back.

RS

You can't remember his other name?

VG

Tommy... I really will have to start. I'll get my little book and write all these down because I'm tending to forget them.

RS

So how did you start off your entertainment?

VG

Well we just, we were behind the singer. We had one singer...

RS

Did you ask for volunteers or, you started it did you?

VG

Yes.

RS

And what did you do, pick up...?

VS

Oh I didn't have any trouble finding people. They came up to me and said 'I'll be in it.'

RS

Did they? So you had a singer...

VG

Tommy Green was it... Tommy, no...

RS

So you had what, a singer, several singers?

VG

Sorry?

RS

You had several singers?

VG

Oh yes we had some very good singers. There was one fellow, Jack... he was a very good, he was a lovely... he had a lovely voice. Whether he went on to entertainment afterwards I don't know, but he'd a very good voice.

RS

Can you remember the songs you used to sing?

VG

Well all the songs, I've got them, I've got some songs on... Oh that's the Whitehouse.

RS
My goodness.

VG
They sent me that.

RS
Excellent. Golly how interesting. Yes, you've got all the songs. Have you got them on a CD or...?

VG
No, well I chose these songs because we used to sing them.

RS
I see you've got his, their autographs.

VG
Oh yes. The Honourable W J Clinton, Washington DC.

RS
I'm surprised you haven't got his personal phone number. How interesting. And so singers, dancers, what sort of dance routine did you do?

VG
Nothing very special. I can't remember it all but my... the girl who was in, I was talking to her a few weeks ago, one of the girls, Dilly Burns. And she said 'Oh yes I remember so and so, so and so, when we were dancing. But...' she said '...you did it all.'

RS
How often would you go? Every week, once a week, twice a week?

VG
Well just about once a week.

RS
Once a week, yes, to these various places.

VG
Because we all had other things to do. It wasn't really the 'be all and end all' of it.

RS
No, and did you actually perform at the factory itself?

VG
Oh yes, yes.

RS
In the lunch hour or after?

VG
In the lunch hour, yes. And we used to take our concert to the place at... out towards Grange. There was an air force base there.

RS

Yes. And what about in the hall at Calgarth, did you perform there?

VG

Yes, we took it there. And they, the locals used to come to that of course. And the lads that were staying there.

RS

So do you think your concerts were better than the ENSA concerts? What were the ENSA concerts like?

VG

Well I thought that some of the ENSA concerts were absolutely obsolete.

RS

In what way?

VG

Well, I don't know what it was about them, but they didn't seem to have the... whether they felt they should be in war work I don't know. But they never seemed to get really with it. In my opinion.

RS

So they were old fashioned?

VG

Yes, and they didn't sing any of the new songs that we were expecting and things like that.

RS

Did you have any comedians in your troupe?

VG

Not too many. I don't think they found there was anything to laugh about.

RS

No, I can imagine.

VG

There were some that...

RS

I've got some photographs here of the factory which I can show you.

VG

Oh I say.

RS

I don't know if...

VG

Now that's a friend of mine in the... that's taken in... I'm not sure whether he was in Japan there. He's a writer, Lee Pfeiffer.

RS

That's the one who wrote the book.

VG

Yes, that's right.

RS

Yes. Obviously with a James Bond display.

VG

Oh of course he was very... that's how I got to know him of course through James Bond.

RS

Yes, you said, yes.

VG

James Bond was one of my...

RS

Let me just show you these photographs before you look for your book and it might bring back some memories for you. That was a picture of the Sunderland built... that was in Singapore, May 1959.

VG

Oh yes, May 1959.

RS

How long were they? Sort of what were the equivalent lengths, say compare it with a double decker bus.

VG

They were very large.

RS

Two double decker buses?

VG

Probably. They were very large. I mean, no I don't think anybody had any idea 'til that one came to Windermere a couple of years ago, how big they were. And how much room they needed. And this one, because I asked... I was quite friendly with the guys down there because I used to go down. I painted it.

RS

What you painted a picture of it?

VG

A picture of the... yes. And Edward Holton got it, my picture, he's a billionaire of something like that in London.

RS

Really?

VG

Yes.

RS
Did you used to do a lot of painting then?

VG
I used to do quite a lot of painting.

RS
Did you?

VG
I used to go out with my little pad and things.

RS
And how did Edward Holton know about it?

VG
Well when I was down at... when I went down to see the Sunderland, I met Tom, not Tom Hurt, I'll have to look in my book. And he said to me 'Edward Holton should have that picture you've painted.' 'Well' I said 'I'd like, I wouldn't mind him having it if he appreciated it.' I said 'But I want somebody to have it.'

RS
Why did he think him in particular then?

VG
Well he, Edward Holton bought it.

RS
Oh he bought the Sunderland aircraft.

VG
He bought the Sunderland.

RS
The one that you saw in 1999.

VG
Yes, and it went out to America eventually.

RS
This was in 1999 was it, yes?

VG
Yes, it was 1998 or 9. Yes, he bought it. And he said, I was talking to him and he said to me... because he was trying to get Hurst, the Hurst fellow who was down at the factory said 'This girl should be opening a shop down here and flogging things for you.' He said 'She's marvellous, she knows all about it' and so on and so forth. And this guy, this Hurst said to me 'Well you wouldn't want to do that though would you? You wouldn't want to come back?' 'No' I said 'not particularly.' I said 'I'd have to start paying bus fares again and, or walking and I don't think I want to do that now.' I think I only got about 75p a week.

RS
Can you remember the wages of any of the other people there? Can you remember what they earned?

VG

Oh no because, no they never told me because I was too young to get any overtime. And...

RS

Did a lot of them work overtime there?

VG

Oh yes. Yes, they were the, they were what I called 'the workers with the money'.

RS

Did they work at the weekends?

VG

Yes, they'd work at the weekends, they'd work at night. But you see I couldn't do that, they wouldn't allow me to that. And my mother wouldn't anyway. Oh that's the Shorts...

RS

So that... that's yes, that's the Shorts, that's down at Rochester and that was when there'd been an air raid I think. Which, yes, that was the main gateway that had been bombed.

VG

How did you get this because they weren't very...

RS

Alan King gave them to me.

VG

Oh did he?

RS

Yes.

VG

Because they weren't very keen on people having these.

RS

No. And...

VG

That's Windermere.

RS

That's the detail shop being built.

VG

Yes. I used to come in at this side.

RS

On the left hand side. And whereabouts was your shop, your store in relation to that?

VG

My store was... you went in the main door, and turned left and it was there.

RS

Right, so it was actually inside...

VG

It was inside yes.

RS

Yes. And that's the detail shop finished. And these are the air raid shelters.

VG

These were the air raid shelters, yes.

RS

Did you ever go inside...?

VG

They used to have practice ones.

RS

Did you ever go inside one?

VG

Oh yes.

RS

Did you? Did they go underground or...?

VG

No, they were... that was it. That was an air raid shelter.

RS

How many people could fit in there?

VG

Well I don't know, but there seemed to be a lot. But they only practiced you see, we didn't have any air raids.

RS

No, and also it shows how big the hangers were doesn't it, by comparison.

VG

Oh yes, tremendous. The gantry was tremendous. That was where they built the bolts. The bolts were fitted on to the gantry.

RS

I think there's a photograph in the next one... that one... oh that's the office block.

VG

That's the office block, I used to work in there. I had the desk next door to Mr Short.

RS

Was that at the same time as you were in the store or was it a...?

VG

No, no, no. I got improved.

RS

Oh right, so you got promoted.

VG

I got promoted.

RS

So how long were you in the store for then?

VG

Well I was in the stores for perhaps 12 months, 18 months and then I went into the office. I was up-graded.

RS

Up-graded, can you remember whereabouts you were in there?

VG

No. I was somewhere near the stage. And the, where we used to eat, where we used to go and get food.

RS

Canteen.

VG

The canteen.

RS

And what was your job there then?

VG

Well I was just an office wallah. One of those people that used to write things down. Mainly I seemed to be attached to this Mr, or Major... Major, did I say his name? Major Howarth, yes Major Howarth, and he lived down on stores. And he used to send me down to the... to meet these fellows coming in and get their names and numbers.

RS

That's right, you said yes.

VG

I thought he was great.

RS

Meeting all the men, did you enjoy that, yes?

VG

Meeting all these, all these, yes, RAF guys.

RS

And that's looking towards the office and the detail shop.

VG

Yes. I loved it down there.

RS

So was that your job 'til the end of the war?

VG

No, I was made redundant. I was there three years.

RS

In the office?

VG

In the offices... stores and offices.

RS

Yes, so you carried on with that job from, for...

VG

Yes, well when I left there I went to... who did I go to from there? Norweb.

RS

Right. Now can you remember the village, the Calgarth village? Did you used to go there very much?

VG

Oh yes we used to go there for dances on a Saturday night.

RS

This is a display of factory items in a drapers shop at Bowness.

VG

Yes, in Furness'.

RS

Yes, is that shop still there, Furness?

VG

No. Oh no that was closed down.

RS

Yes. Now these are some of the workers...

VG

Oh these are the gantries.

RS

You don't remember any of these workers?

VG

Oh no. I don't recognise any of them. You see they're all older than me.

RS

Yes. Inside the detail shop this one.

VG

Yes, these are the sides of the gantries, tremendous things. Those are the floats.

RS

The floats?

VG

You know, I don't think a lot of people bother to ask questions about things. When we had that 'do' down at Shorts, about two, three years ago, and I went down. And no... I was talking to somebody and I said... it might have been this young fellow from Hawkshead, I don't know. They used to sweep the lake before a Sunderland could take off. In case...

RS

Really, how do you go sweep it?

VG

When I sweep it, they used to take something and get rid of all the stuff that was on, you know tell them to get to one side. Because it was a big thing for a Sunderland to take off.

RS

The boats... when you say 'sweep', was that to clear the boats?

VG

Well sweep is a word they called it, for getting rid of all the traffic.

RS

Right. So there was traffic allowed on the lake even when...?

VG

Well, down towards Bowness.

RS

Was there any traffic allowed where... on the lake next to the Shorts factory?

VG

No. No, no they didn't...

RS

How did they stop it going there?

VG

Well they probably used to shout at them.

RS

So they used to...

VG

But no, they knew.

RS

And the floats, the floats was to make sure that the aircraft was...

VG

Well the floats went on here, on the base part. There, on here, underneath. That's what the thing floated on. The main hanger, yes I remember that.

RS

Did you used to go in these? When you were working there, did you used to go in...?

VG

Yes, well my office was in there you see. Where I worked in the...

RS

So you were always walking through then, seeing them?

VG

Oh yes.

RS

Was it very noisy?

VG

Yes, it was a bit noisy. In fact I think you had a headache most days. When you came out.

RS

What was Mr Short like?

VG

Well to make you laugh, he was a short guy. Yes, he was a short little fellow. That's aero floats you see.

RS

Oh that's the first one being... yes that was the first one being launched. And that was a Christmas card.

VG

Yes.

RS

He was a short guy, what was he like as a person?

VG

Well I always thought he was rather nice. But I always did get on well with the bosses. But he was rather a nice guy. Just a little fellow, and always spoke to you. Hello or good morning or...

RS

Did he have a secretary himself?

VG

Oh yes.

RS

Was she from Windermere or...?

VG

No I think she was from Rochester. No I think she was from Rochester.

RS

These are inside the Sunderlands.

VG

Yes, looking forward. I've got a photograph of myself inside.

RS

Yes, you showed... I've got it here.

VG

Have you got it there?

RS

Yes, I've...

VG

But mines in colour I think.

RS

Oh is it?

VG

Yes, so you can tell what colour the curtains and everything were. Oh...

RS

That was with senior management, the last Sunderland. Do you recognise any of those people?

VG

Well I don't to be honest. Well that was the welfare lady.

RS

The lady was the welfare... what about the dog?

VG

Yes. Well it was hers of course, and she used to bring it with her. She was the one, I went for... my sister and her friend had got a bit of a sore throat they said. So they went to the, this person, and said they've got this bit of sore throat. So she said 'Oh I've got just the thing for you' and gave them sweets to suck. You know blackcurrant, those kind of sweets. So they came back and told me. So Vera says 'Right'. So I went and I said 'Ahh ha, ahh ha, ha, ha... I've got a bad cold.' She said 'I've got just the thing for it Vera, come with me.' And she... I said 'Oh well you've got sweets I think, blackcurrant.' 'No' she said 'but yours is much worse.' Do you know what she gave me? Quinine. Well I've never tasted anything quite as bad as that. I said 'Well my sister didn't get this, she got sweets.' 'Yes' she said 'I know. Now...' she said '...we're not giving them to everybody.' She said 'This is much better for you. This will do the trick. It will get rid of your cold.' Quinine!

RS

So your sister worked there as well did she?

VG

Oh yes, two sisters worked there.

RS

What were their names?

VG

Ida, Ida Stainton, she was married. And my sister was called May George.

RS

Are they still alive?

VG

Oh no. May died two years ago... or did Ida die before her? I've got to remember via the funerals, whether she came to the funeral or not.

RS

What were their jobs in the factory?

VG

They were just office workers, you know. Ida worked for one of the bosses. She was like his secretary. But I was too young to get into any of the good jobs. You know, again, you were given the job according to your age group, like you were given the fruit, which I never got.

RS

How do you mean, you were given the fruit?

VG

Well, there was something we were very short of in this country during the war and I can't remember which piece of fruit it was.

RS

Bananas, apples?

VG

Banana, it could have been bananas. And some came in, and I never got one of those because I was too old to get them, they were giving them to the children. So I never got a banana. I think it was bananas.

RS

What was the food like in the canteen?

VG

Oh it was quite good. But then I've never had a very big appetite.

RS

That was the Sunderlands on the lake.

VG

Yes, marvellous.

RS

Yes, it's a terrific sight isn't it?

VG

Beautiful boat.

RS

A terrific photograph I think, that.

VG

It really is, did Gretham take that photograph do you think?

RS

I don't know who took that. Now this is the village, this is Calgarth village. That was the original plan and this here is a photograph, so the main road went along there.

VG

Well both sisters lived on here.

RS

Both your sisters?

VG

Yes, yes.

RS

Can you remember where they lived?

VG

They lived... now this will be the wood...

RS

On the right hand side.

VG

...on the right hand side. And they lived just in there. You came out of the wood into here. Because I came down that wood, and they didn't know about it. I came to a dance, which was in the hall here, and I dropped my handkerchief. And one of them went out and found my handkerchief with my name on it.

RS

Was that a short cut then into...?

VG

Yes, down there.

RS

How did you get into the wood?

VG

Well, now I'm pointing it out as though it's there. But when you go on down towards Ambleside, there's a road turns off to the left.

RS

I know yes.

VG

You know it?

RS

Yes.

VG

Well you went... there was a wood there and you went down through the wood.

RS

Yes. The one that leads to the lake is that?

VG

Yes, the... well it goes right down to Holgarth.

RS

Yes, where they built houses now, quite expensive houses.

VG

Yes, yes. And there was a wood there, and I used to go down through that wood to get to my sisters house.

RS

Yes, so you think...

VG

Which would be, she'd be down here somewhere.

RS

So this was... was that Ida?

VG

Ida.

RS

Which, can you remember exactly?

VG

Not really.

RS

No, but one of those.

VG

And the other one lived over this other side.

RS

May?

VG

No this was Ella.

RS

Ella, so that's another sister?

VG

Yes, that was another sister. My sister May didn't live here at all. She went to Leeds, she married a Leeds boy. So it was only Ida.

RS

So Ida... what was Ida's surname?

VG

Ida lived over here somewhere. And Ella lived over here.

RS

What was Ella's surname?

VG

Varden.

RS

Varden. So she lived in one of these houses.

VG

She lived in one of these houses.

RS

And Ida lived near the woods.

VG

And Ida lived over there.

RS

What did Ella... did Ella work in the office as well?

VG

Ella worked... no Ella didn't work there. She didn't work at the factory. Her husband was in the navy, and Ella worked just in a shop in Windermere.

RS

And did you have any brothers that worked in the factory at all?

VG

No, they were all in the army or navy.

RS

So you just had three sisters that worked in the factory?

VG

Yes. Yes.

RS

Like you. So that was the village, then there's a photograph...

VG

Oh yes, this is these yes.

RS

Now these are the hostels. Can you remember the hostels at all?

VG

Well I never went into them but these are Troutbeck Bridge houses aren't they?

RS

Yes. Did you remember the boys that came after the war, the Jewish boys?

VG

Yes. Oh I was very friendly with... and I was the only one the girl remembered... what did they call her? Ruth Oppenheim. Now Ruth Oppenheim came, paid a visit a few years ago, and she said I was the only person she remembered. And we met.

RS

Goodness. Can you remember the boys coming to Windermere?

VG

Yes, I do remember them coming. But we didn't have a lot of dealings with them.

RS

You don't remember...

VG

I don't remember any of their names or anything.

RS

No, right. So they were... I think they were here about six months.

VG

Yes. But I do remember them coming here.

RS

And that was inside the main hall.

VG

Yes, I've been on that stage quite a few times.

RS

I bet.

VG

I don't think they had those lights though. They must be new.

RS

That was their football team, Calgarth Village football team in 1947. Mostly factory workers.

VG
Well I left in '45.

RS
Yes.

VG
That's Harold Patterson I think.

RS
So the third man along...

VG
Him.

RS
...on the lower row is Harold Pattinson?

VG
Yes, Harold Patterson, he was one of the local Patterson's.

RS
Yes, is he still alive?

VG
No. Do you know, when I come to think about it there are very few people left of my age group. That's probably why people come and ask me about things, is because I seem to be the only one that's still alive.

RS
That's a view from White Cross.

VG
White Cross Bay.

RS
Yes, that's a photograph that Alan King took when he flew above White Cross Bay.

VG
Oh he was really there, I was going to say what's he in to get down there?

RS
Yes. So now that's now, this is the old hanger when it was taken over to Liverpool. And this is the detail shop, it's now used as a bus depot in Newcastle.

VG
Well I'll be blowed.

RS
So that's it really. That's just a form I have to get you to sign at the end.

VG

Felt, what is that for?

RS

That's the name of our organisation.

VG

Felt?

RS

Well it was just set up by two or three artists who wanted to, sort of originally...

VG

Record.

RS

...originally it was to record, just record sound and do sound pieces as an art piece. And the name 'Felt' was chosen because of the felt on piano and also to do with an artist called 'Joseph Boyce.' But now... and then Felt applied for some heritage lottery funding to do this project about Shorts factory and Calgarth. And the project manager is Liz Rice who spoke to you on the telephone.

VG

Yes, that's right.

RS

And I'm one of the artists involved with Felt so they asked me if I'd come and interview you, because they said I would enjoy meeting you very much, which I am.

VG

What made them think that? Has someone else met me?

RS

Has Trevor Avery met you at all?

VG

Trevor?

RS

Avery.

VG

Well Trevor sounds familiar.

RS

Trevor works at the Brewery, he's a visual arts officer.

VG

Oh yes. And the reason I know him is because my son worked at the Brewery. And that's how I got involved. I gave a little talk one evening at the Brewery.

RS

What was that about?

VG

[Laughs] now you ask me. Well I think it must have been about this, that we're talking about now. Because that is what I know most about, and the Sunderlands. But I'm going to find my little book to show you.

RS

Oh thank you that would be terrific.

VG

I've had it down this week because I've been... I was reading one evening in bed and I was having a good laugh at it. I thought well you're a cheeky girl.

RS

When your sisters lived in the house, can you remember the inside of the houses in Calgarth?

VG

Oh yes.

RS

Can you describe... could you possibly describe them to me?

VG

Well, there was just a kitchen with very poor cooking facilities I thought. There was a kind of ring and there was a little oven stuck something. But a tiny little thing, you'd just get a plate in.

RS

So you went in the front door where were...?

VG

Well if you went in at the front door, you got into a kind of hall effect. And then you were into the, what I've got down there, a long passageway with shelves on to store things on. But they were very ordinary. But good enough for people to live in. Two of my sisters lived there. And then when they closed them down, they came up here to live.

RS

Did they like living there, did they enjoy living there?

VG

I don't think they were that keen. They preferred up here. And one lived... the back of the house comes down to here. That's my back, and her back came down to here when she moved up. And...

RS

Did they have coal fires inside?

VG

Yes, down at Shorts... down at the factory yes, Calgarth.

RS

Yes, Calgarth, yes.

VG

Yes.

RS

Inside toilets?

VG

Yes, oh yes, there were proper bathrooms and everything. They were very nice little houses. I mean I didn't want to live there because I had a home in Windermere, in Main Road. And I lived there for 63 odd years of my life.

RS

And when did you come up here?

VG

I came up here about 15 years ago I think. Well I'm 80, so whatever it was.

RS

65, so that would have been what, 1992 about. Can you remember when the village was... when the houses were pulled down? What the reaction...?

VG

What down in ???(71.46).

RS

In Calgarth.

VG

Well in Calgarth there were... Well I think some of them didn't like it. But some of them went back to Rochester of course. Some of them didn't stay.

RS

What were the local people like in the village?

VG

Well they came up with Shorts when they came up.

RS

Yes, but the people that lived in Windermere, in 1961 I believe it was, when their houses were pulled down, what was their reaction?

VG

Well they didn't like it.

RS

They weren't pleased, no.

VG

No, no. No, no. I'll just go and try and find this little book so you can...

RS

Thank you.

VG

Now that's... did I show you that e-mail from that friend of mine who's...

RS
Lee, yes.

VG
He's quite well known in the literary circles.

RS
I think he must be. Do you have any photographs taken of you at all inside the...

VG
Inside a house.

RS
...inside the house or inside the factory?

VG
No never took... you took very few pho... that's me inside.

RS
That's you inside.

VG
I'll just go and see if I can find my little book.

RS
Gosh that's an amazing certificate you've got here.

VG
Sorry?

RS
Empire Day 1941. 'Vera George has helped to provide comfort and contentment.'

VG
Oh that was absolutely the... all the lads down there, the Aussies and the New Zealanders, they all laughed at that. Because they used to come here and have a...

RS
Why did you get the certificate?

VG
I don't know.

RS
What were you doing at the time, can you remember, to help them?

VG
I don't know what I did to help them. Of course they all thought it was the obvious.

RS

'Who rallied to the cause of safeguarding freedom, justice and security.'

VG

Exactly, well it was nice to have wasn't it?

RS

Yes, excellent. So this was in the parade Support for Short Brothers.

VG

Oh well nobody had entered for the parade, and a friend of mine said 'I've got one of those little old cars Vera, will you come and be in it?' So I said 'Yes.'

RS

So this was in Windermere and...

VG

There was a... right from Windermere station, right down to the promenade.

RS

So I would imagine that there was some photographs in the Gazette at the time.

VG

Probably.

RS

Yes.

VG

I think the dates there isn't it? Is it, I don't know.

RS

I don't know, there is a Gazette here, I wonder if that's got it in.

[tape restarts]

RS

I just realised I forgot to press the recorder then. So yes, so this is the beautiful gardens.

VG

Yes, it was a lovely... they were lovely rose trees, so it must have been a good place for roses. I only wish I could... you know I've got one or two rose trees. That's what I've already asked for on my 80th birthday.

RS

Is it, some rose trees?

VG

Some more rose trees.

RS

When's your...?

VG

They will actually grow in pots, because I can't do the garden. I've got a gardener.

RS

When's your 80th birthday?

VG

My 80th birthday is on April 17th, this year.

RS

Oh alright.

VG

So I'll be 80 then, I won't be fit to...

RS

Did you carry on running? Did you... so you enjoyed running a lot?

VG

Oh yes I enjoyed all the sports: swimming, tennis. I used to play tennis every week.

RS

Did they have any swimming races in the lake or anything like that?

VG

No, there was the swimming... they used to swim in the lake. We had an awful lunchtime, I remember one lunchtime. There were two sisters working there, one sister got drowned. During the lunchtime. And oh, I didn't go swimming for ages after that. It took me so much by surprise, that anybody got drowned in the lake. And yet there were people every year getting drowned. But it was this, knowing this person.

RS

And so they'd gone swimming during the work hours, in their lunch hour?

VG

Lunch time yes. Well it was easy enough you see, you just went into the cloakrooms and got dried off and put your clothes back on.

RS

So that was a common thing for everyone to do then presumably in the hot weather?

VG

Yes, oh yes during the hot weather. And we used to sit out on the hill which was on the right hand side going down to the lake and the last time I was there, there were rabbits all over the place and I said to the warden who was down there, I said 'my god, you wouldn't have seen these when I worked down here all these rabbits, they'd have been taken home in somebody's bag for their tea'. They came out after the war, they were there, we knew they were there, but they wouldn't come out while you were there, down there during the day.

RS

What was the best prize that you ever won when you were running in sports days?

VG

I think it was a cut glass bowl. I don't even think I've still got it.

RS

And you won a handbag?

VG

Well the handbag was for work, I didn't bother with that. But I liked nice things.

RS

Did the lake freeze over while you were there at all?

VG

Oh yes when I was a baby in a pram, that was my first trip onto the lake.

RS

What about when you were working at the Short's factory, did it freeze at all?

VG

Well there, we've never had as much frost I don't think, not a really strong frost, it was over 3 or 4 days or a week. It soon melted. But I never liked it after that, knowing this person.

RS

That must have been terrible for you.

VG

It was awful

RS

Yes. Do you think they hadn't been..had they not been swimming before. Just got into difficulties?

VG

The lake's a funny place because it has all these cold spots and you can just have- Millerground is one of the places. I was down there swimming on my own one evening, not another sole about and outside the swimming pool, on the left hand side, looking out towards the lake on the left hand side, I went under and it was absolutely cold, it froze me and I was gasping and I did this and it took me up to the top so my head was out of the water, but that was an awful sensation.

RS

So you think that possibly might have happened to this girl?

VG

Oh that could have happened to her, but I mean we used to swim across the lake out in the Lake Windermere Swimming Club, I was the secretary for many years.

RS

Did you swim when you were at the Short's factory, did you swim right across to the other side?

VG

Well I didn't go across the lake then, no, you weren't really allowed across, you weren't really allowed on the lake at all then. Down in Bowness they used to take those boats out occasionally, but you shouldn't be in a boat and really, I said that when that last boat came in, the one we had a couple of years ago, I said

'has anybody told....got the lake swept?', and they looked at me 'got the lake swept?' and I said 'yes, you must have the lake swept before the Sunderland can come onto there'. I said 'It's very dangerous if you don't'.

RS

And so did they?

VG

They must have done but I mean, their own common sense would tell them that if someone in a little rowing boat or a little one of these they're using now, kids, er, they're like an Indian thing

RS

Canoe?

VG

Canoes, that's what I'm trying to think of. If they'd been on the lake and one of these Sunderlands had tried to come down, what would they do? They couldn't get out of the way in any hurry and they're very big things the Sunderlands. Well, they can't be moved like this, like a...

RS

Going back to the two people who were swimming then in the accident, where had they gone into the lake from?

VG

Well, they had gone down by the factory.

RS

But they weren't really supposed to?

VG

No, they were swimming off the shore, off the shoreline. Shouldn't have done it.

RS

After that were they still allowed, did they still go swimming?

VG

Well no, they realised it wasn't safe to do that

RS

So they stopped it?

VG

So they stopped doing it, but not before they'd paid the price.

RS

How awful

VG

It's very sad, but

RS

Can you remember any accidents actually in the factory itself?

VG

What, indoors?

RS

Yes

VG

Well no, I never really took a lot of interest in that. I took an interest in what the job I was doing and that was my lot. But you were told you hadn't to say anything outside and you didn't. It was like a, it was like a secret code, no you don't say anything outside the factory. So you didn't, you didn't talk.

RS

Do you think anyone did?

VG

Well they might have done, well we'd all kind of people here. All kinds of people. Which they, they didn't have any reason to be faithful towards the Lake District or Windermere in particular. It was a great shame really, but that factory, of course, did a lot of people a lot of good. Because they'd never had money like it, before they'd used to have to work in houses as helps, cooks, they never had money like...

RS

Were you sorry when it closed at the end of the war?

VG

Well, I'd left before it closed

RS

Did you?

VG

Yes, because, well I was made redundant because my age group were being taken into the army, and the navy and the airforce, they were being taken as (?). I didn't want to leave, but I had to leave because my time was up there. And it wasn't the same working anywhere else. It was a wonderful place to work, not because, well you got better pay than you would've got in the village, but because it was so friendly:everybody was friendly with everybody else, you know, as much as they were all local people, except the ones that came from the south. They weren't very popular.

RS

Did they mix well?

VG

They weren't good mixers, I didn't think. They thought they were, I know they thought they were, but they weren't. In my opinion, they thought they, because they came from where they came from, some of them had been working at Short's down in the south, they thought they were something very big and these local jobs were just nobody. So we had to show them. But really, as far as we were concerned, they were just the end, the end of the war (laughs).

RS

That's excellent, thank you very much. That's been really fascinating.

A further 1.28 mins. of Vera singing.

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