



A voice for our village

Interview with Ron Thompson

Alfred Ronald ("Ron") Thompson ('RT'), born 1 July 1917

Interviewers : Irini Tzortzoglou ('IT') & John Batty ('JB')

Date & Time : Tuesday 10th June 2014 at 14.30 hrs

Location : 10 Townend Meadow, Cartmel

Recording duration : 36 mins 24 secs

JB The first thing is to record the date, and I think it is the 10th of June 2014. It's just 2.30 in the afternoon and we're at Number 10 Townend Meadow which is the residence of Mr. Ron Thompson. And Ron, thank you very much firstly for agreeing to participate in this interview – it's very good of you.

The first thing I would like to ask you is if you could tell us your first name and date of birth?

RT My first name is Alfred Ronald Thompson, my date of birth was 1 7 1 7 – the first of July 1917

JB The first of July 1917. So you will shortly be 97-years old – is that ...

RT That is correct

JB Excellent. And Ron, when did you first live in the village of [1 min] Cartmel? When did you first move to the village?

RT Well, father was demobbed from the army in 1919, and he had been apprenticed to a music shop in Ulverston, and learned to play the piano and the organ, and was organist and choir-master at the Parish Church in Ulverston. When he came home, the job had been given to someone else, so he was looking around for an alternative appointment. And as it turned out, Cartmel was looking for just that sort of person. And he was appointed.

JB And when you first moved to the village – sorry, were you actually born in the village Ron?

RT Oh, no, in Ulverston.

JB [2 mins] And you were about two years old then when you moved to the village.

RT That's right, yes.

JB And where did you live? Do you remember which house it was?

RT Well, we moved to the Cottage known as Clogger Beck. Do you know that?

JB Yes.

RT It was a joiner's workshop with a house attached, and we lived in the house for just a short while before we moved to Barngarth House.

JB And what do you remember of that house? Do you remember how many bedrooms it had?

RT It's a four-bedroomed house with a walled-garden, a large walled-garden at the back and a field opposite. And we rented it from the Rawsthorn family who were farmers from Gateside Farm on the road [3 mins] to Cark.

JB What sort of heating was there in the house?

RT Precious little apart from open fires, I would imagine. I never remember being cold. We had a large live-in kitchen at the rear of the house and we more or less lived there, and mother kept it warm I suppose with a fire.

JB Did you go to school in the village?

RT Yes. I started at the Primary School, it would be in 1922.

JB Is the Primary School where it's located today?

RT Absolutely the same, yes.

JB Has it changed very much over the years?

RT No, apart from the furniture inside. We sat on long forms, in the primary end, but the youngsters, [4 mins] and we got splinters in our bottoms I remember.

JB What time did the school day start in those days, Ron?

RT I think, nine-o'clock.

JB And in the afternoon, you would finish ...?

RT Finish at three, just the same as it is now I think. Can't remember the teacher's name or the headmaster's name.

JB You must have had a break for lunch?

RT Yes, well, we lived just round the corner so it was very handy. We didn't have school meals in those days of course.

JB So were you able to go home at lunchtime?

RT Oh, yes.

JB And in this first house, because this is still the first house isn't it that you lived in, or is this in Barngarth?

RT This is in Barngarth.

JB Can we just go back to the first house?

RT Clogger Beck.

JB In Clogger Beck. How long did you live there for?

RT I can't remember. Just a short while, I think.

JB And do you remember [5 mins] about your neighbours there at the time?

RT No, I don't think there were any neighbours. No.

JB So the house stood by itself, did it, in those days?

RT Well, the house at Clogger Beck was joined onto the joiner's shop.

JB The joiner's shop? And was that active? Was there a ...

RT Oh, yes.

JB What kind of work did he do, Ron, do you remember?

RT No, I can't remember that. No. But general joinery I would say.

JB Yes. And what about your neighbours in Barngarth? Do you know who it was that was living in Barngarth in those days?

RT No. I've no recollection of neighbours at all at that time.

JB So in the village, as well as the Primary School, what else was there in the village at that time?

RT Well, there was a Grammar School ... for boys and girls who [6 mins] reached the age of 11 plus.

JB Where was that located, Ron?

RT Well, that is on the road past the cemetery with the racecourse on your left going out.

JB And that is the building that is today the care home, I think?

RT That's right. Yes.

JB So that seems like quite a small building for a school. There can't have been many students?

RT I don't think there were. No.

JB In those days, did the students all come from the village, do you know, or did students come from outlying villages?

RT I imagine mostly from the village, possibly from local villages. The alternative was to go to Ulverston Victoria Grammar School, or Lancaster.

JB [7 mins] So as well as the school, what else did the village have to support itself as a community? Was there a doctor's in those days?

RT There's always been a doctor. Yes. I can't think who the doctor was when I was a child, at a young age.

JB And was the doctor's surgery where the surgery is today?

RT Oh, no. No, it was at a house called Fairfield.

JB Where is that, Ron?

RT The entrance drive is opposite l'Enclume.

JB Oh, right. Did you ever have to go to the doctor when ...

RT I can't remember ever going to a doctor in Cartmel. No.

JB You must have been very healthy!

RT Could be.

JB Did you ever have measles or mumps or any of those ...

RT I think I had all those, yes.

JB So would the doctor come to your house in those days?

RT [8 mins] Oh, yes.

JB At any time of day?

RT More in the daytime.

JB Visiting hours were during the day, yes? And of course we've seen the telephone exchange, the building which is the telephone exchange, and I think we've seen the Police Station. So what other services were available in the village, like those? Was there a Police Station?

RT I don't remember it, but there was one in Priest's Lane. The telephone exchange was in Cavendish Street.

JB So there was a telephone system which was working?

RT A very limited number of telephones, I think.

JB Did your house have one?

RT No, no.

JB [9 mins] So when your father wanted to contact local residents he would just have to walk out, and call on them at home?

RT That's right.

JB Was there a Post Office?

RT Yes, at the village shop which was run by Harry Teasdale. Henry Teasdale.

JB And what did the shop sell in those days?

RT I remember going with mother when she did her weekly shopping there – practically everything.

JB So, as well as fresh food, were there also dried foods and other goods?

RT I've no memory of that. All I remember is seeing large chunks of meat, hams and things, hanging from the ceiling ...

JB [10 mins] These would have been

RT ... all part of the curing process, I think.

JB These would have been provided by the farms in the area?

RT Yes.

JB Was the village built up in quite the same way that it is today?

RT It hasn't changed very much. You see, when the monastery was here (which was founded in 1190) there was no village and the monks put a wall around the monastery which covered most of the existing village today. Remnants of those walls still exist, as part of some of the houses in the village.

JB And the traditional [11 mins] boundaries of the village, do you remember where they were?

RT No, I've no memory of that at all.

JB So, I'm just trying to get a sense for what kind of community life existed in those years – there was a doctor, there was the Grammar School, there was the Primary School as well ... was there anywhere to eat, were the pubs there in those days?

RT Yes. Previously, I think, there had been lots of pubs, more than there are at the moment which is quite adequate, having four at the moment, all doing pretty well. I think there were quite a few more. I wasn't interested in that, of course, at that age. But [12 mins] there was an eating house in Cavendish Street, called Mrs Ayres' Eating Place, Eating House I think it was.

JB And what kind of meal would be available at Mrs Ayres'?

RT Well, mostly afternoon teas.

JB If you wanted an evening meal, could you eat an evening meal there?

RT No. The pubs didn't serve food.

JB Did your father go to the pub?

RT He liked a pint of beer but I've no recollection of him going out. But he could very well have done. But he was very much occupied with music. He took on the local Choral Society while we lived here. They used to rehearse above the Gatehouse.

JB So, [13 mins] the Choral Society – would they be performing at the Priory, or was this a separate society?

RT Nothing to do with the church at all, no. I don't think they even performed at the church, no.

JB So this was just a separate society for people who enjoyed music, singing and performing?

RT Yes.

JB And what role did your father have in that, Ron?

RT He was the conductor.

JB So he conducted ... was there an orchestra?

RT No, just piano.

JB So, piano and the singers?

RT Yes.

JB Do you remember what kind of music they performed?

RT Not from the period we are talking about. Later, when we came back, I joined the Choral Society and we sang [14 mins] four-part music, very often with the purpose of competing with other villages at the Westmorland Music Festival in Kendal.

JB What was it called? Westworld?

RT Westmorland. Mary Wakefield founded the Westmorland festival.

JB So just to be clear, what point we are talking about now Ron because you stayed in the village from 1919 until ...

RT 1924.

JB 1934?

RT 1924.

JB 1924. And then when did you come back to the village?

RT The year after I married Joan. We married in '47 and we were looking for somewhere to live and the bank arranged to take me to Grange-over-Sands, transferred me there [15 mins] in the knowledge that if I did there was a chance of renting a cottage in Cartmel.

[break in recording]

JB So, Ron, the District Bank – the sub-branch of the bank in Cartmel – you said would just do Cash transactions. Cash-In and Cash-Out. And the main branches in Grange and Ulverston would handle all of the commercial side ...

RT That's right.

JB And you were the Manager of the branch at the end?

RT At Ulverston, yes.

JB So what would your responsibilities have been?

RT I was concerned mainly with lending money to farmers. But we had some industrial customers, too.

JB And the farmers would be having loans would they, secured against the crops, or their premises?

RT Usually, mortgaged premises. Yes, and [16 mins] insurance policies.

JB And did everybody repay the loans in those days? Or did some farmers struggle to make the repayments?

RT Well, I was very happy to retire not having had any failures in the lending side.

JB So the farmers would always find a way to repay, even if ...

RT That's right, yes.

JB If they had a bad year with their crops, what would happen?

RT Well, that is when they needed more support from the bank, of course. I made a point of not insisting on farmers coming to see me, and having to put their best suit on, by visiting the farms, and having the meeting in the kitchen, helped by a cup of tea made by [17 mins] the farmer's wife.

JB So it was a nice, casual, friendly atmosphere?

RT That's what I tried to create, yes.

JB Did the bank encourage that?

RT No, it was my idea of getting to know the farmers and their farms, what their farms looked like.

JB And it was successful, I think, so did other managers adopt a similar ...

RT No, I've not heard of anyone else, but we didn't discuss these matters, centrally, at all.

JB So it was really your decision, locally, as to how you managed your customers?

RT Entirely, yes.

JB How big an area would your responsibility have covered, geographical area?

RT Well, parts of Ulverston, which was the original bank, as I've [18 mins] mentioned, Lancaster Banking Company. There were other banks in Dalton and Barrow. But agriculturally we covered a lot of the Furness peninsula. The other banks, Dalton and Barrow branches, didn't really have much to do with agriculture. Ulverston was the centre, with the central auction mart.

JB So you were very much a specialist were you, in agricultural business?

RT Yes, that's how the Ulverston managership evolved, yes.

JB Was Grange different to that?

RT Grange was discovered by [19 mins] Lancashire businessmen, cotton men, who saw the possibilities there and developed the town and built the hotels, large houses ... it was a different sort of business to the bank.

JB And when you were working in Grange, were you the Manager then or the Sub-Manager

RT No.

JB What was your title?

RT I was second cashier. We had three cashier points, and I used to deal with the sub-branch at Allithwaite.

JB Was the District Bank in Grange where the Nat West is today?

RT That's right, yes.

JB Where in Allithwaite would the sub-branch have been?

RT Originally, it was next to the [20 mins] pub where you turn off to go to Cartmel. Three way junction. And it was just the front room of a house, then. Then, after I left, they built a separate bank, up the road to Cartmel, near the timber depot.

JB And in Cartmel itself, in The Square, you said there were two branches.

RT Three.

JB Three branches, I'm sorry, and we know that today there is a Bank House and a Bank Court – were those where the sub-branches used to be?

RT Either side of Bank Court, yes.

JB Which was which, Ron, do you remember?

RT [21 mins] Well, looking into the Court, the District was on the left, and the Martins on the right.

JB That's very interesting. Can we talk a little bit now about the Priory School, which I understand you were involved with as a Governor?

RT Yes, I was involved right from the word 'Go' when we had to raise money.

JB Was the intention that the Priory School would replace the Old Grammar School?

RT Oh, yes.

JB So until that time, the Old Grammar School, on the way past the Racecourse, had been the school for boys – and girls, was it?

RT Yes.

JB Between the age of 11 – 16 perhaps?

RT Yes.

JB And that was to be replaced by the new Priory School?

RT That's right.

JB But the Old Grammar School, was [22 mins] that connected to the Priory?

RT No, not in any way. No.

JB So why did the Priory become involved with the establishment of the new Grammar School?

RT Well, the existing incumbent at the Priory was very much involved in the fund-raising and establishing the place. And Lord Cavendish – 'Mr' as he was then – gave the land, and we raised a lot of money to build the place.

JB And you were involved with the fund-raising?

RT Well, a lot of us were, yes, it was very active. And then when it [23 mins] was completed, they formed a Board of Governors, and I was invited to be one.

JB How were the funds raised in those days?

RT By direct appeal to the local inhabitants. People were very generous.

JB Local businesses, were they?

RT Yes.

JB Do you remember how much money was raised?

RT I can't remember, no, no.

JB When the school started, did all of the pupils from the Old Grammar School transfer into the Priory (School)?

RT Oh yes. And we attracted a lot more, from a wide area. The whole of the peninsula, leading right up to Haverthwaite and Newby Bridge, and that [24 mins] area. And Grange, of course.

JB Did you have any famous visitors?

RT Well, Princess Margaret – the Queen's sister – opened the School.

JB And that would have been in which year, Ron ?

RT I can't give you an exact number, but it was early 1950s I think. Or late '50s, perhaps.

JB Did she just make a flying visit, or did she stay in time to speak to the Governors? Did you meet her in person?

RT Oh yes. Yes, she met all the Governors and spoke to them, shook hands.

JB Did she stay for tea, or something to eat?

RT Oh yes. There were refreshments, yes. She came on the Royal Train to Cark station, I [25 mins] remember. I don't know where she stayed, possibly at Holker (Hall).

JB Do you remember, was she an interesting lady?

RT Well, she was a good-looking lady. She was smaller than the Queen.

JB She was a little bit younger, I think, than the Queen?

RT Yes.

JB So if this was in the late '50s, probably she would have been 30, around 30?

RT Could be, yes.

JB Do you have any other memories, Ron, from your time as a Governor of the School?

RT Well, from a certain point of view it wasn't satisfactory, because they had their meetings in the afternoon, and I was working in Ulverston, and it wasn't easy to get away, on a regular basis. They used to have meetings about [26 mins] every month, I think, so I was absent.

JB What kind of responsibilities did the Governors have?

RT Well, not as much as they have now since it became an Academy, and they're now members of a limited company. We discussed a wide range of things, probably a lot to do with finance.

JB Was the performance of the students a subject of discussion?

RT That would come into it, yes – the Headmaster was always there to answer questions.

JB Did the [27 mins] Priory have a direct involvement ? The school is called the Priory School ...

RT Oh yes, it was very much linked to the Priory, and the local vicar is responsible for the religious education, holding services in the school. Canon Fullerton was one of the moving ... what's the word ... one of the instigators of the need for a school, among others and he was very active.

JB Can we go back and just spend a few more minutes on your family? Did you have brothers and sisters, Ron?

RT One of each.

JB Were the older or younger than you?

RT Younger, and my sister was born in Barngarth House.

JB And your younger brother?

RT [28 mins] He was born after we moved back to Ulverston. He was eight years younger than me.

JB What were their names?

RT My sister was Muriel, but always known as Bunty, and my brother was Alan. He was the brainy one. He went to the Grammar School in Ulverston, and from there to Cambridge, to Emmanuel College, and got a very good science degree.

JB Your sister Muriel, you called her Bunty, was that a common nickname for Muriels?

RT I don't know about the connection with Muriel, it was the midwife apparently who started calling her Bunty and it stuck.

JB Did she stay in the area?

RT [29 mins] She married a man who worked in Barrow, at the steelworks, and she stayed in the area. They lived in Ulverston.

JB Where did your brother, Alan, end up?

RT He worked most of his life for Boots in Nottingham. At the Head Office.

JB And your own family, Ron, you have ...?

RT I have ... I had two daughters. The elder one died in her forties. So I've just the one daughter now, and she has two sons. And they are both married. And one lives in Cheshire and has two [30 mins] sons. And the one in Sussex has a daughter.

JB Do they visit in Cartmel?

RT The people ... the ones from Sussex come to see me every year, in October. I see the ones from Cheshire more often.

JB What do they think of the village?

RT They love coming here.

JB Is it the village or is it the Lake District or both?

RT A little bit of both, yes, yes.

JB OK, before we finish, do you have any other memories or recollections you would like to share with us?

RT During the five years I was here as a child, father was working hard to improve the music [31 mins] at the church, and he was very much helped by the local vicar, the incumbent, who was the Archdeacon of Westmorland. His name just escapes me at the moment. They worked together very well. And father built up the choir, and arranged special musical services. I don't think he was paid very much, but one thing led to another, and he took over the Choral Society as I said, he took over the Grange Operatic Society, conducting them.

[32 mins] He did a lot of travelling around on a motor bike. He conducted the Ambleside Choral Society, Operatic Society.

I used to tag alongside behind him at weekends. I was interested in the Priory, I used to go in and wander around, and I got to know the Archdeacon and we became good friends. And he called me, he insisted on calling me Roland, in spite of my childish attempts to get him to change, but he never did. He had a son about the same age as me [33 mins] called Jimmy. His surname was Lefone, an unusual name ... L E F O N E ... or L A F ... I think possibly. And he used to talk to me, if he was doing anything in the church. Like on one occasion he was opening a parcel, and in those days parcels were tied up with string. We didn't have Sellotape in those days. And he said to me, "remember, when you are opening a parcel, and you have to cut the string, always cut it near the knot, then you can use the string again", [34 mins] he said. So I thanked him and I've always remembered that.

He, as I say, he supported the music and he went to see Grange Operatic Society perform HMS Pinafore by Gilbert & Sullivan. And the, the fashion in those days after the show had been on for a week, the men of the chorus stayed the night in Grange with friends, and turned up for morning service at the Priory. And, this was father's story, probably apocryphal, but [35 mins] the Archdeacon opened the vestry door on Sunday morning, before the service, to find many of the crew of HMS Pinafore the night before putting on robes. And he was equal to the occasion. He delivered the words, pronounced or sung by Captain Corcoran, the Captain of the ship, when he came on the quarter-deck, he said 'My gallant friends, good morning' and this is what the Archdeacon said when he came through the vestry door. As I say, possibly apocryphal but it is a good story.

JB It's a very nice story indeed

RT And father enjoyed telling it.

JB [36 mins] Ron, thank you very much indeed. That's been absolutely tremendous, and we want to thank you for your time, and for sharing all those fascinating memories with us, and maybe, if you are still interested, we might come back another time and ...

RT By all means.

JB ... continue, ask you a few more questions, when we can think of them. But for now, thank you very much indeed. [Recording ends at 36 mins 24 secs]