Voices of Hickling

Interview Transcript: Murray Ferguson

In conversation with Ann Louise Kinmonth on 23rd August 2018

ALK: *Could you start again at the point y ou were telling me about going to school. You went when you were 8.*

MF: **I went when I was 8 and I was ten years at Abbotsholme. From the very bottom to the top, um, it's an interesting school.**

Founded by a chap called Cecil Reddie who was ex Indian Army and he founded the school, remarkably enough, um, with the idea of training people to be all-rounders and quite capable of doing, chopping down trees and God knows what so that we could all become District Commisioners in the Empire, MF LAUGHS**, which, of course, we still had in those days.**

ALK: *How did you find it being at boarding school from the age of 8?*

MF: **I thoroughly enjoyed it.**

My one regret was all my friends were at boarding school and I knew very few of the local children when I went on holiday because you were, you were boarding school orientated. Funnily enough. Difficult to explain but that's, that's how it was.

It was, it was a very small school and you knew all the masters very well and they were very good. They changed quite rapidly, because during the war one or two were called up or went off doing other jobs.

And we tended to get people who had been invalided out of the army or the air force. We had one chap, Rod, Rodney Hall by name, and he was a wonderful pianist and he'd give like concerts in the school, on the school Steinway. Playing away quite happily throughout quite a complicated piece of music, Beethoven, Chopin and all that, and, er, he would suddenly stop, "Its gone", and burst into tears and walk out of the room. Because he'd been shot down twice in Hurricanes and, er, he was certainly a…!

He was a very, you know, he really was a real gentleman.

ALK: *So you were about early adolescence, sort of teenager then.*

MF: **Yeah.**

ALK: *What did you do in the holidays?*

MF: **I had a large scale model railway which ran on the house.**

It was in a big five acre block of Derbyshire hillside, so it had a fairly good, um, gauge railway with a couple of steam engines – one of which exploded, MF LAUGHS**, luckily with no loss of life.**

And, er, I spent a lot of time on the moor behind the house, um, about a mile into the moor, it was a huge affair, just watching the birds, listening to nature and, er, just generally enjoying the complete solitude of the place – except for quite a lot of RAF bombers used to use the Derwent Valley as a, they used to use the dams at the top, especially when they were training the Dambusters: Howden Reservoirs which have got very similar features, and they'd fly on down the valley, turn left and more or less lift themselves over the moors and come flying back to Lincolnshire, I suppose.

They used all sorts of aircraft, Lancasters were the frequent ones, a few Halifax, well several Halifax actually – they were quite common, too, and Sterlings, and, er, sundry fighter aircraft, just generally buggering about.

Um, the occasional German one would come and, er, I had a little 2:2 rifle, which I've still got actually – a Heinkel 1-11 I think it was, came flying towards me and, er, I fired two shots at it with this repeating 2:2, but I'm quite sure I missed.

It didn't really matter because ten minutes later it was shot down. MF LAUGHS.

ALK: *So your childhood was in the shadow of war.*

MF: Oh, totally.

ALK: Yeah.

MF: Totally.

ALK: And your brothers more directly involved or, because they were older.

MF: Yes, er, they were.

Ian was an engineer by trade really, and working as an apprentice up at John Brown's – on the Clyde. And he was, for the whole war, sort of clocked in as a, instead of going into the Army he was helping to build the Indefatigable, the aircraft carrier, the Vanguard, the last battleship we had and, er, repairing general battle damage for the British ships that came in and had been knocked about a bit.

So he had a tough life.

ALK: And your father continued working…

MF: Oh yes.

ALK: …..I expect, because he was a surgeon.

MF: Yes, survived the Great War. He was in, he was a, a medic in the, um, 14-18 war. And he never spoke about it.

ALK: Yeah, yeah.

MF: Yeah. I've got a photograph of him somewhere.

ALK: Yeah, yeah.

MF: Oh, number 1 squadron. Um, it wasn't the RAF in those days, 1915, the rugger team - won 14, drawn 1 - and there's my father sitting in amongst these, 'em, 'cos he used to go up in sundry aeroplanes spotting where the, where the gunshots were landing, landing down telling "You're firing over the top" or firing underneath.

Very, very lucky to survive.

ALK: Yeah. A hundred years ago.

MF: Yeah, yeah.

ALK: Good, so we, we've got you born up there in Derbyshire, with your family – your mum's a teacher and your father's a surgeon. You're happy at your boarding school, on the moor and at the birds in the holidays. What happened when you left school?

MF: I was whisked virtually straight, was going to university to, um, read natural scientists, sciences I mean.

Marine biology was my choice, but life was very, very different in those days and I was whisked off within weeks of leaving school and spent 5 years in Intelligence, which is all I'll say about that.

ALK: *So, when you came out of that, how old were you then?*

MF: **Twenty……, nearly 24.**

ALK: *And what happened next?*

MF: **Uh. I was really rather told by the boss to bugger off, 'cos I'd done enough.**

Come back in 6 months' time and he'd get me a job doing anything I liked.

Which was how it was, he reeled off several things – BBC was one, ITV, of course, didn't exist.

But, er, he said now, um, "With a recommendation from us you can do what the hell you like, Fergie."

ALK: *And how did you know what that was?*

MF: **What?**

ALK: *What you liked.*

MF: **Well, when I wasn't operational I was on a farm in Shropshire. Old AG, he knew what I was up to and covered for me while I was away.**

Um, when I was on short periods off, off duty, so to speak, I'd be very high profile, driving the lorry to cattle markets and totally making myself known. Utterly.

When they decide to hide you in those days, you were totally hidden with enormous amounts of cover behind you and I was untraceable by the, by the opposition shall we put it.

ALK: *But you use your name now. But, was your name changed as well, everything changed, or just ….?*

MF: **Sometimes, sometimes it was. But, er, I sometimes went abroad as somebody else.**

ALK: *Yeah.*

MF: **But it was usually me.**

ALK: *But you felt safe when you were, I don't know if demobbed's the right word really?*

MF: **No, it isn't.**

ALK: *No.*

MF: **But, er, yes, because I knew they would know where I was and we had a pretty widespread internal network of people – still have.**

For all I know you are in it…

ALK: *Yes.*

MF: **Ah, but you would never let on.**

ALK: *No.*

MF: **So, er, you felt as …, yes, we did, yeah.** MF LAUGHS

ALK: *So, we are coming to Norfolk I think now.*

MF: **Yes.**

ALK: *What happened in Norfolk?*

MF: **I was told to keep quiet for 6 months, 9 months, whatever and old John, the boss, said "You'd better leave Shropshire for a time and go anywhere you like, anywhere remote."**

And he actually suggested East Norfolk with the comment that nobody ever goes there, which in those days actually was virtually true as it doesn't lead anywhere does it?

You were either going to East Norfolk or you were going to East Norfolk – that was that. Who would really want to go there?

So, that's why Norfolk, and, er, ….

ALK: *No family connections? No friends here? Nothing?*

MF: **Nothing.**

ALK: *Yeah.*

MF: **Totally, totally new ground.**

ALK: *And did you come here to Happisburgh immediately or …..?*

MF: **No, I ran a farm for a friend in Hempstead, just down the road there and, er, hit family life really for the first time in my life, and, in due course, I married Julia, their eldest daughter.**

ALK: *Ah, so she did have roots here?*

MF: **Oh! She's Norfolk born and bred, absolutely. For generations.**

ALK: You parachuted onto her lap? BOTH LAUGH.

MF: **Yes, yes. Yes, that's more or less how it happened.** BOTH LAUGH

ALK: *And have a family of your own, have children?*

MF: **Yes. Yes.**

ALK: *Who, who?*

MF: **Tom.**

ALK: *The elephant man?*

MF: **Yes, they're both doing something quite different.**

Robert runs his own private or travel company and is deeply into conservation of Africa – elephants, you name it he's into it.

And Julia is a teacher and gave up that when we had our two kids and, er, went back into it afterwards.

ALK: *And, how did you come to be here, er, at Mill Farm?*

MF: **Oh, it came up for sale in 1959, so I bought it. More or less next door to the farm I was already running.**

ALK: *You continued to run that, or …. ?*

MF: **Yeah, yeah.**

ALK: *And what's your approach to farming been? There's been huge changes in farming since 1959, how have you taken that on?*

MF: **Oh, um, compared with '59 you're living on a different planet, totally. And, er, I got involved with rescuing a rare breed of cattle – the Old Gloucesters which we still have - and the…. I never actually basically regarded myself as an out and out farmer.**

Um, but it's changed. It's been very interesting. The changes have been absolutely enormous and, er, some people asked me just before I got these cattle "You must be an organic farmer?" I said "Like hell, I would never do that on this sort of scale."

Because nowadays you can control things like yellow rust, brown rust and sentorium, that sort of fungal disease.

In the early days of old fast wheat, that sort of thing, you'd be growing a super crop which would probably yield two and a half tons an acre if you, which was pretty good in those days, and er, in would come yellow rust and you would end up with probably a ton.

And there was absolutely bugger all you could do about it. Now …..

ALK: You'd lose the lot?

MF: **You'd lose a huge percentage, yes. You'd get some rather dwinged up grain and that's why they had rotations which they stuck to as strictly as a way of controlling it.**

Um, then, of course, gradually chemicals came in and we now grow, you know, 5 tons an acre.

You've always, in farming you've got to remember you always do the best you can but it's "upstairs" which says yes or no. This year it's a definite no with the drought we've had.

ALK: So what kind of range of things do you grow so that something is always going on well?

MF: **Oh, we used to, well, wheat, barley, sugar beet of course, potatoes, um, we packed up about 10 years ago – we used to grow about ten acres of daffodils and five acres of tulips. Um, but things come and go and change and the rotations change, but basically it's the same old story.**

ALK: Is your farm disappearing into the sea?

MF: **No. Not yet. It will. People say, you know, "Oh you must be your farm must be like and I point out to them not too long ago – certainly in geological terms, you know, half an hour ago – the sea was probably about, um, well it was about two miles out over marshland.**

Eccles church is on the beach, whereas now it's out of sight and, er, mustn't forget that, um, the North Sea wasn't there at all one time and, er, they just discovered some very early man, traces of man up, just by Happisburgh church on the beach – footprints, a set of many old axes of, you know, flint origins from the Neolithic age and Robert, our son, being a trained archaeologist he stumps over the farm with a metal detector and very sharp eyes and he's found bits and pieces and some lovely arrowheads which nobody else would even recognise – um, going back to the Neolithic.

And that puts you in your place. That you're here for less than the blink of an eye. So you do the best you can.

But I'm not, um, I'm not a dyed in the wool farmer. Um, quite a lot of it's been done just for the interest and getting the natural history sorted out a little bit.

ALK: Tell me a bit more about that. Because whenever you talk about the natural history you kind of perk up quite a bit.

MF: **Well I've always been, it's always been an interest of mine from the year dot, I suppose.**

And, er, watching the ring ousels, the curlew etcetera on the moors.

Um, so I suppose its always been there and, er, I'm just interested, I knew E. A. Ellis, who is a fine naturalist, and in the old days, in my early days in Norfolk he'd be off stumping round the farm, um, and he knew a lot about virtually everything.

He'd suddenly stop and find a minute little toadstool or something on the grass, explain it, what it was, and then I'd have to show him – we've got a little colony of harvest mice round the corner.

So its always been there.

ALK: *And how did that bring you to Hickling, that interest?*

MF: **Um, well I knew, I knew of Hickling and in those, I'd come to it for years, it was before Myra Wall, but there was a warden there, Colonel Sankey, who was the warden and John Blackburn I'm sure will tell you.**

I met him and when he had an open day he'd ring up and say "Murray, can you come up the tree hide?" Which in those days was a pretty ramshackle affair. I mean Health and Safety would have kittens now if they saw it.

They had this old wooden ladder, half way up a tree, another one round the corner, there was a platform.

And, er, he would paddle me across in his canoe and, er, he'd always scoop a handful of water – "Bit salty today, Murray.", but he never spat it out, he always drank it.

So, he was a great character.

Well, that's really what made me aware of Hickling.

You know, I had a sailing boat in those days with Julia's family and we used to sail on it.

Yeah, but he was a great character, was, was the colonel.

And that, and the sailing and that on the Broad with old Elf, which was a very fast sort of sailing dinghy, um …..

ALK: *Was that the make, the Elf, or was that….. ?*

MF: **No, that was its name. Yes.**

ALK: *What was it?*

MF **Well, nobody quite knows what it was – but it was built in Kent, by a firm which diversified from, building, um, sailing barges and, er, it was just a very fast boat – International, 14 foot International would almost describe it.**

Enormous mast with a spinnaker and in a good wind you could almost get the bloody thing planing which for a dinghy in those days was quite remarkable – until you hit a clump of reed which brought it into the water very quickly.

ALK: *Were you part of the sailing club or ….?*

MF: **No, no, no. No, I've always, always been a loner really.**

ALK: *Where did you keep her?*

MF: **At Hickling.**

ALK: *Where?*

MF: **In a little creek behind Whisp, what is now Whispering Reeds and one day we went to it and some idiot had thrown some large flints into the bottom of the boat and broke 3 or 4 of the planks, which you can still see were repaired.**

But that made me very annoyed.

ALK: *Absolutely, yeah. So, did you go to the Pleasure Boat there and that kind of thing? Did you go to the pub or any of those things?*

MF: **Eeeer. No.**

ALK: *Not really. Go down, get in the boat and sail it.*

MF: **Yes, yes, yes.**

ALK: *Did you sail out of the Broad? Did you sail into surrounding areas with the boat?*

MF: **We sometimes sailed down to, er, Potter Heigham bridge, Acle bridge I mean.**

ALK: *Yeah.*

MF: **But, er, that's another story.**

And that's what really took Peter Boardman and us to Hickling, when it froze up in '72, '73 – or '62,'63 wasn't it? And the ice, it was a bloody cold winter, I mean God knows what would happen now if it happened again. But, er, the Broad froze pretty quickly.

In the end it just ended up with a fairly large pool which was packed with swans. Coots by the hundred and sundry other birds, geese, greylags, whatnot and, er, they were swimming around, no food so Peter and I used to meet and, er, I'd bring some corn, wheat from the farm and we'd split it.

We used to have half a hundredweight each on our backs and we'd go up, up to the birds and we'd scatter as near as we could to the water and, er, I hope we saved several.

Other people were doing it too. I think it was a pity.

One of the sights that nature can always manufacture, you know, very extreme weather.

ALK: *Mmm.*

MF: **Never quite know what's going to happen.**

ALK: *Mmm.*

MF: **But that was interesting.**

ALK: *How long did you feed them for?*

MF: **I can't remember. It was a matter of weeks I think, rather than, not all that, probably about 3 weeks I should guess but it's a long, long time ago.**

But, after we'd done it one day we decided we'd skate off down the river and further on down there had been a bit of snow and I suddenly, when we were skating along, I saw somebody had set up and there was a couple of half crowns lying on the snow. So I stopped to pick them up…

Yes, skating. Of course thereafter every time we found where someone else had fallen over we'd stop and have a look and I think by the time we got to, well as near as we could get to Acle Bridge 'cos it wasn't frozen there and we had to turn back, I think we made about £5 between us in half crowns, two shilling bits and the odd shilling.

Of course people would laugh, it's hardly worth stopping nowadays for that but, of course, a fiver in the early sixties was worth a hell of a lot more than it is now. So it was a prosperous trip!

ALK: And do you have any other stories of wildlife, um, particularly on Hickling Broad, and things that delighted or surprised you over the years?

MF: Um, yes. One thing which surprised me was the annual coot shoot we used to have. When there were far, far more coots than there are now.

And, er, that was good – it was still very primitive, it was a nature reserve, but, er, not a lot had been done to it in those days, you know, and, er, you were still treated as a bit of an oddball if you were interested in birds.

You know it was certainly not the done thing, er, by the, by most people. And if you'd point out a bog standard whatever, "Oh! That's interesting, haven't seen one of those before."

And, er, very different to nowadays when people travel miles to see a, you know, a pink footed whatnot.

And, of course, in those days there were no geese back. They'd been quite common here before the war they tell me but, of course with the gunnery range up at Weybourn and God knows what going on elsewhere with guns, the gun emplacement up at Happisburgh, which occasionally fired out to sea and, er, the geese stopped coming totally, full stop they tell me. And I can't say I blame them but, um, they were a long, long time coming back.

Um, I was certainly around 20, 25 years without even dreaming of seeing a pink foot. Now, this year, we've, um, sort of become a stopping place for the birds flying north from the marshes down south. Especially after harvest: they love barley stubbles.

And this year, I can't say the exact number but I, from my West Country days the old shepherd used to tell me how to block count sheep – in a very sort of rough way he could do it down to the last bloody animal which was, infuriated me. But you would count up ten, and then you would count up roughly another ten tens – that block's a hundred, that block is slightly thinner, 80 – boom, boom, boom, boom. Um, and I reckon this year we had about, on this 121 acre field we had between 1800 and 2000 pink footed geese feeding away.

That is, er, very pleasing, they came back, they'd forgotten the war.

And, interestingly enough they remember, they certainly know where they're coming and, of course, they live a long time and, um, never underestimate wild animals – they've got a very good memory for where the grub is. Yeah.

ALK: That's a great story. And what about, ideas about why the coot have gone or why the water has gone murky? Do you get involved in any of that stuff or is Hickling too far away?

MF: Yes, no, I, I helped a bit when they were researching that. Um, the whole thing worries me a bit actually because, er, we've over populated and not just the entire world, and, er, I suspect we know not what we do.

I think all this excitement now about plastic in the sea is waking people up to what is going on in the environment, and by that I mean the whole world.

Certainly there are less insects on this farm than there were when I came.

Um, you only ….. I've had some fairly fast cars in my time and sometimes I'd stop and I'd see what I caught on the number plate or in the radiator and it would be a lot of insects.

Now - I know cars are more aerodynamic than the ones I'm talking about - but I don't care how fast you go down the M11 now, you stop and see how many insects you

caught – it is a huge number less than you would have caught in my day and nobody has a clue what's going, why it's happening, yet.

And, of course, one of my favourite put downs with people saying this (?) I say "The human race is on a knife edge", it's over populated for the world supplies of food.

If you get a really big Mount St Helens going off or, heaven forbid, Yellowstone erupts again, cuts down photosynthesis by a very small percent, 5 percent, it cuts the world's food supply and you're in deep trouble.

And it could happen the day after tomorrow – that's what worries me about my grandchildren.

ALK: More than Brexit?

MF: I'm in favour of Brexit. Sooner the better. Most undemocratic bloody lot there is. MF LAUGHS

ALK: Love it. So, how did you get in, in, er, contact with the Norfolk Wildlife Trust? What, how did? What's the story of you and the Norfolk Wildlife Trust?

MF: Ooooh, it seems a very small affair in those days.

Um, I can't go over, I suspect it's probably meeting Sankey on Hickling when I was sailing one day and I probably hit him in has canoe.

I can't remember – it's a long, it's been a long association and I was chairman of the local group. Gerry, the current chairman said it was 12 years, it seems unbelievable. But, er, I've always been tinkering about the edges, yeah.

ALK: And during that time did you more preside or did you have things that you wanted to see happen?

MF: No, it was a really to keep the local populations.

We had monthly meetings on various, always natural, natural historic, so to speak, as we give a point of contact with the Wildlife Trust which didn't exist – it was just a ------ (?)

And at one stage some whizz kid on the council said we ought, they ought to do away with the, er, local groups because they were, er, not really necessary and, er, it was one of the chairman's meetings this came up and, er, that sort of, I find extremely irritating and I pointed out look - as far as we are, as far as the Norfolk Naturalists are concerned the local groups are the Norfolk Naturalists which was something ….

ALK: It was called that, yeah.

MF: Yeah, it became a Trust much later on and it, and, er, it was quietly dropped, um, so, er, and I think, I think in a way, they are an important link between Head Office and what goes on.

ALK: And, and thinking now that Norfolk Wildlife Trust has bought the whole of, of Hickling Broad, if you were still in that position what advice would you be giving them now? About their strategy going forward.

MF: Oh golly! Um, I think for the time being they have bitten off as much as they can chew and to hold their horses and, er, look after the maintenance of what they've got.

You know it's easy to raise a million pounds to buy this block of marshes. It's much more difficult to raise a hundred thousand pounds to put up a couple of miles of fencing.

It's as simple as that.

ALK: Yeah. I'm sure they'll be delighted to hear it. MF LAUGHS.

And, er, we are coming to a close now. I wondered if there was anything else that you'd hoped I was going to ask you about, which I have sadly omitted to do – or whether that's it?

MF: **Um, no, um, I thought perhaps you might have asked me something about deer.**

ALK: *Yeah, I'm very happy to ask you about deer.*

MF: **Which are a vast number even in this area quite a long way from – well, we've got red deers in Bacton Wood, we've got masses of deer around the Hickling area and, er, this area, which is not really deer country but, um, you see that they've been Red deer have been all over the place.**

We have quite a large, well, we have several Chinese Water Deer which are rather knobby little animals actually. I'm quite fond of them but they've got absolutely no road sense whatever. And,er, it seems inevitable that they will meet their death either on the road or within about 50 yards of it somewhere on the farm.

And Muntjacs, I won't talk about those little buggers.

ALK: *Piggy, little piggy deer.*

MF: **Horrible little things.** MF LAUGHS. **But no, um, no, I think you've asked more than enough.**

ALK: *There are more red deer than there used to be?*

MF: **Oh, there are many. Um yes, I've got a slight name in the local group because I had the temerity to say that, um, I'm not particularly keen on badgers - mainly because there are just too many of them about and, er, this, of course, caused a bit of a gasp and somebody said "Oh, it's because of your cattle."**

It's nothing of the sort. There's no TB in badgers yet in Norfolk.

But, er, I'm interested in general wildlife and I do get pretty narked when I've got a couple or three rather nice bumble bee nests somewhere on the farm, or anywhere in the garden come to that. And along comes Trundles the badger and digs it up.

And, of course, farmers get blamed for lack of skylarks. Well, there's nothing a badger likes better than a nice hors d'ouvre of either a skylark's nest with eggs in it or better still, young skylarks.

And, er, I wish people would stop thinking that all of nature is very cuddly and nice because that is the last thing it is. It is the most ferocious, survival of the fittest, outfit you could possibly imagine.

Dog eats dog, badger eats everything including hedgehogs, may I ask.

ALK: *And they've gone. Good, let's, um, let's stop this.*