

Interviewee: Judith Elliott

Interviewer: Rachel Tapp (WYAS)

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Councillor Elliott, can you tell me, have you always lived in Morley? Were you born here?

Yes I was. I was born at Morley Hall.

Morley Hall, the old maternity home?

Well, yes. I've lived here and my family have lived in Morley from...well, the Gray family lived in Morley from before I would think 1880. But my mother's family live in Tingley, which was part of the old Morley Borough and, of course, where the rhubarb fields are at Tingley. They were in...they lived in Morley for, well, goodness knows how long. I haven't done a family history but well before that. My mother's family were called Blakey.

And your father's side was the Gray family – is that right?

My father's was the Gray family and I believe the Greys came from Bourne in Lincolnshire, looking for work, I would think, here in Morley. Then, because of the agriculture and their connections, they began having goods, produce sent up and it was...it came by train to the top station in Morley, which unfortunately is no more.

Yes because there was the top station and the bottom station.

The bottom station and the top, and we've just now got the bottom station in Morley.

Did you grow up on a rhubarb farm?

Well, I grew up [on] Blackgates Farm. The Gray family had lived there for a number of years and when my father and mother married, they stayed on and my grandpa went to live with my aunt at Rosay(?) and her husband. So, my mother, my father and myself lived at Blackgates Farm. But my father died when I was two. But we did have rhubarb sheds and then, what happened in a lot of instances, especially at that time, the sheds would be turned then into something else, probably mushrooms, growing mushrooms. But, of course, I don't particularly remember too well because I left when I was eight.

Do you mind me asking why you left?

Well, my mother and myself moved to a small property, in Tingley still. But my Uncle Fred also had a small holding off Haigh Moor Road and adjoining the Batley Road, and there he had fields where he grew rhubarb and he also had rhubarb sheds. So, I still had the experience of the growing of rhubarb in the sheds there and outdoor rhubarb.

With the farms, did you ever work on the farms or just go and visit your uncle?

Oh, I went daily. My uncle took me daily, just to go to his farm. It was a small holding not a great, big farm and he didn't live on the premises. Well, he had a big dog there. Well, he had pigs and other things. My father was also a fruit and potato merchant and he had a partner, and their business was in Batley. When my father died, my mother stayed on in that business and my father's business partner – a fellow called Morris Stiplady – they carried on that business, and he was a very talented businessman was Morris Stiplady. I remember...and when I left school, I went to work in our offices in Batley. I remember one day in particular because it stuck with me this – Morris Stiplady sitting there and saying, "Right, I've goodness however many thousand rhubarb roots to sell and somebody, somewhere wants those roots. It's just finding them."

Well, of course these days, with computers and mobile phones and so on, things have rather changed for buying and selling. It's a different world but in those days, it was a matter of ringing up and word-of-mouth, and finding who wanted what you had. We had in Batley I would think we'd about thirteen lorries, big lorries. The main end of the work for those lorries was transporting rhubarb, rhubarb roots round the country.

What sorts of rhubarb did you grow?

Well we grew...You mean the varieties?

Yes.

I don't particularly know the varieties but if you want to know about the transporting of the things, we mainly dealt with people called Cartlidge. Have you come across Cartlidge's?

Yes.

They were farmers. Those brothers – Alec Cartlidge and Douglas – Douglas died, unfortunately, many years ago. But they'd always been in business in Churwell and they also owned Topcliffe Farm and still do I believe, at Tingley. Across what was Tingley Common, that was where their main rhubarb fields were, although they had some at the [inaudible] in Arthington, at the farm in Arthington too. With Arthington, Tingley and Churwell, they grew an awful lot of rhubarb. I would think that at that time they were the main growers, although there were some smaller

farms. But Oldroyd's now have more or less taken the name, haven't they, of rhubarb?

We did work with Oldroyd's as well.

What were the farms like? What was the work like?

Well, what they did for picking the rhubarb, they had people just come in on a daily basis to pick the rhubarb and bundle it and get it ready for taking to the different factories – Smedley's was one that I can remember. Then there were the jam factories. Smedley's canned a lot of fruit at that time and the jam factories...of course there was a jam factory at Hartley's Jam in Leeds, did you know?

No, I didn't know that.

But it was all round the country that rhubarb was used and of course it was used for the pectin as I understand it, in a lot of instances, rather than just pure rhubarb. It was tinned was rhubarb but mainly in the jams, it was used as a pectin.

Did you every go into the sheds?

Oh, yes. Of course, for the forced rhubarb, you had to be very careful not to be letting the light in and people were very precious about what they were doing in those rhubarb sheds because, of course, it was all money. They wanted to be sure that the rhubarb would grow well. Lovely, pink colour and it all looked really fabulous. Of course a lot of that then went down to London to Covent Garden at that particular [time]. I think mainly the forced rhubarb. There was more of that going to Covent Garden than the green top.

You said you did a lot of deliveries. How far did you delivery in the vans, in the lorries that you had?

Oh, they were huge lorries, articulated lorries. Not just flat-back lorries, they were huge things. Oh, they would go to Scotland. I would think, I think as far as Edinburgh and down to London. It was big business. A lot of trade there and of course then delivering the rhubarb roots to around the country too.

So, delivering the rhubarb roots – what was the purpose of that?

Well, people, farmers bought rhubarb roots to plant the fields up and it's the same with good husbandry, they would grow them for so long and change it, input a different crop, put a different crop in. So, people were always wanting and of course when they dug the rhubarb roots up, they split them so one root would become four. That's what happened.

Do you think it was hard for your mother after your father died when she had a two year old daughter and had to carry on the business?

Oh, yes but the business partner took the brunt of that. But it was difficult. I mean...and, of course, I was two in 1942 so it was during the war and after the war, and thing would be quite difficult. But she managed as everybody had to manage in those days. It wasn't easy for her but she coped. She never re-married but she always lived with me, even when I was married and she lived until she was ninety-five, which was fantastic.

Was the farm involved in the war effort with its produce?

Well, I don't particularly remember but it would be because all farms had to be. I mean whatever was grown, we needed food and, of course, difficulties with imports and so on, so every bit of land was used – and of course the Land Army. I don't remember but there again I can't really remember an awful lot from beyond the age of perhaps seven. It was...I remember going to school there. I remember certain aspects but of course we didn't move a long way away, only a mile. So you tend to see the property and see the people who were round about and so on. But the people who came to work in the sheds, pulling rhubarb, packing it were all local people who were wanting to earn money, and so this was ideal. All the fields, I know that cauliflowers were grown, cabbages, peas, potatoes – and more or less the same people turned up to that piece work to earn money for their family.

Would you say it was clear it was such a big trade when you were a child? Just going to school and other people's families were in the agricultural trade?

I think that for me it was...when I left school – I went to Morley Grammar School and my husband did and my mother went to Morley Grammar School – I went to work in our offices at Alan Gray Limited, as it was called, and it there became more obvious when I was working in the office knowing the ins and outs of the buying and the selling and the transportation. That is when, so that would be I would think in 1958 when it became, well, in a way more important to me. My knowledge of it, you know, with dealing with things on a daily basis changed.

Once you were married, did you continue to work for the business?

No. Once I married, I stopped work.

What did your husband do?

My husband's a school teacher. He was and he was at Roundhay School, deputy head.

Would you say it was quite a male-dominated trade, the people who worked on the rhubarb farms?

It wasn't for the piece workers. There were a lot of ladies came to do that, mainly women who did that sort of work and just the odd man. Of course, going back to early days, men were at war and ladies were left at home to try and do the best they

could. But, let me tell you this. We did have some people – I found this really interesting. Yeah, I would say mainly the farmers would have been male but when we had rhubarb growers come to see us from Chile and we were greeting them, I said, “Well, have the farmers arrived?”

Because there were a lot of ladies here. It was the ladies who were the farmers in Chile. The rhubarb farmers in Chile were all ladies! I couldn't believe it! We took those people...We did a reception here to greet them and then they went to the Green's on Lawns Lane at Kirkhamgate to their farm. They were very kind. They showed them what we did and how we grew our rhubarb here and they found it very interesting. I think those rhubarb farmers from Chile hadn't been out of their own tiny village when they came here to England so it was quite an eye-opener for them.

When did they come and visit?

Oh, it's probably about four years ago now. The time goes by so quickly. It may have been four years ago.

How did that come about?

Well, it was a professor working at a college in Ireland. He was looking...He was working about doing things about rhubarb, probably going a paper on it and he's come across these Chilean rhubarb growers. He thought it would be good to compare how people worked and he contact Councillor Joe Tetley, who does the archive group, and it was through Joe that they came here. I don't know the professor's name but it was through Joe that they came here to Morley Town Hall, and all the arrangements were set up with the Greens on Lawns Lane at Kirkhamgate.

So they wanted to come and compare the techniques?

Yes, absolutely and it really was very, very interesting, and everybody benefitted from it.

So is rhubarb quite a trade out there in Chile?

Well, I understand so. I mean, they'd only be small, probably more like small holdings I would think. I don't know but I think, from the ladies, what I would glean – of course they didn't have any English – I would think they were very rural areas where they were trying to make a living and growing rhubarb, and succeeding I might say.

Can you tell me what happened to your mother and father's farm, the Gray's Farm?

Well, eventually, it must have been sold.

Do you know when that was?

No, I don't know. I don't know anything more about that. I think that main part of our business was the produce sales down in Batley. I mean, we did an awful lot of trade down there. We didn't just deal in rhubarb. We dealt in potatoes, as I said – fruit and potato merchants – fruits. You name it; we dealt in it down there.

Nowadays, there's really only a handful of farms left in this area. Why do you think it declined?

Well, things have changed so much, haven't they with the way people buy and sell and supermarkets, who have cut out the middleman, which is what we were? At one time, with Bradford and Leeds, we were out on a limb. We were out on our own as produce merchants. But Bradford had a big market, wholesale market and so did Leeds. But Leeds, on Pontefract Lane, it's still there but it's only a fraction of what it was years ago. But it's because of the supermarkets taking up that...the cutting the middleman out, as far as I can see and, you know, the whole game has changed really.

So you set up The Morley Rhubarb Festival Committee. Can you tell me about that?

Yes, I can. It was Cath Pemberton-Rawnsley who was wanting to have something rather similar to Wakefield. We know Wakefield's next door and whilst I felt we perhaps couldn't encroach on what Wakefield were doing, there was nothing to stop us building something here in Morley where we'd had such a lot of interest in rhubarb and such a lot of trade because Tingley, of course, was in the old Morley Borough and Tingley is still in my ward. But of course those fields have gone now. So, because of wanting to bring rhubarb to the forefront and perhaps encourage people to grow their own rhubarb in their gardens, which people have done for years, I was on board to try and help. So I got a number of people together and we formed a committee with a constitution and a bank account, which is what Catherine wanted to enable her to apply for lottery money if we wanted to do a bigger event, which we're still looking after, looking at. We haven't got there yet but we're looking at a reasonably big event but, more than that, we're looking into promote people growing rhubarb at home, and eating it of course and buying it from the shops too. All out fruiteries in Morley sell rhubarb and it's wonderful stuff to eat. We eat a lot of rhubarb and enjoy it.

So it's still something that's really popular with Morley people, with Morley folk?

Yes. We have found with the events that we have run already – and we've had a number of events, not big ones but, for instance, we've taken a stall and had a street market. We've done events in the Morley St Mary's Church Hall and we've found that people...and, oh, in Morley market, the very first event we did in Morley market...and people were coming to us and wanting to talk about their rhubarb experiences and how they probably go and take a stick from the fields and take sugar in a little paper and sit in the fields and just eat an odd stick of rhubarb. They

probably shouldn't have been but I'm sure the farmers knew and they wouldn't mind. But...so it was a matter of encouraging people to come and give their stories, and then as we were talking about rhubarb, people were coming on board and talking to each other. It was bringing to community together and chatting about days gone by, and hopefully moving that on to them growing their own in the future.

So, you think it's really a part of the Morley identity, how Morley is as a place? That it's steeped in its history?

Yes, I really think so. I think that is the experience that we have had. We did recipes and people wanted the recipes, and they wanted to talk about it. I think that is all-important. If rhubarb can bring communities together, so much the better.

Do you think there's now a revival of younger people wanting to grow their own food and to learn about that? Do you hope that's going to catch on?

Yes, I do. Yes, I do absolutely and we have found – we people were on a number, I will say, of committees – found that it's very difficult to get younger people on board, to commit themselves. They give support but they don't want the commitment of committee meetings and being on committees. So, if we can get the imagination of our younger [people]...We know the problem – both man and woman are having to work. If they don't work, they can't afford a house. It's a great problem for people and they're, really, run out of time and [I have] every sympathy with that. But if we can get people on board in any way, shape or form to do things and be part of the community, and rhubarb helps with that, well so much the better.