

Helen Polom interviewer and transcriber

Teenage years.

Growing up by River Colne going back to 1960's may be early '70s.

My first recollection was of 2 old boys that lived down the bottom of Anglesea Road just below us. Frank and Guy Downing. Guy had been a fisherman all his life and a bit eccentric. In fact when he died when they opened his drawer in his bedroom he still had his pay packets in there with the old type money so this would have been in the '70's. They had to get it all converted but they were lovely lovely old boys. My older brother knew them and we used to go down there and they got this great big outbuilding and he kept all his lines and nets and saws in there. A little Aladdin's cave but they were real nice old boys. They were quite old.

I think Guy had retired from fishing but the tales he used to come up with. He told me one day he was out ... going down Gunfleet and he said we thought we had come fast but when we hauled the net up there were so many skate in there or Roker (*Thornback ray*) they put me over the side on a rope and I had to cut a hole in the net and hand all these fish up to them until they had got enough out so they could lift it up out the side. He was the reason I got this accent nobody else in the family has but he used to catch me when I was walking down the wall with me gun and he would say "Did I tell you about the time" and he'd got this real broad North Essex accent and he'd say "Have I told you about the time when we used to sit in Alresford "Krick"." He never called it creek it was always Alresford Krick cos that's how they used to say it. He'd spin me all these yarns. He used to say "I don't suppose you know what CK stand for on the side of all these boats?", "Colchester Krick" he'd say CK116 registration numbers of their boat. He was convinced it was spelt Krick.

When we was in Alma Street the chap next door Bill Woodward he was the only one down there went shrimping. He had a boat called "Laura Bruce" with a big copper on it and he used to catch all these shrimps and he used to sieve them so he only brought big ones back and he used to knock on the door on a Saturday or a Friday and give me mum a great big bucket full of em they were these huge shrimps.. oo they were lovely. He boiled the shrimps up on the boat itself in salt in sea water. He used to show me. The copper was still going when they got back. He said I slipped and my arm went in their one day he said and it was all burnt and it's still all blistered. It was a fishing smack a blue one with a little wheelhouse and it was only until maybe 10 years ago because he'd been long gone that I was looking on Ancestry or one of those and I came across Woodward and I thought I wonder if that's Bill and when I looked his wife was on there and her name was Laura Bruce so he called his boat after her

Then we had 2 boats in North Sea Canning Company, "The Fisher Girl" and "The Essex Girl" and "The Christine" but they sold "The Christine" and they had the Essex Girl and Fisher Girl, 2 identical boats from Lowestoft. I think they were oak or elm, they were very sturdy. I went on one of them and they used to catch sprats and when we were at primary school cause the sprats only came in November we used to rush down there afterwards out of school if tide was right. They used to give you a big fish box full of sprats to get rid of you because they'd have half a dozen boys down there and if we were too late they used to unload them into wooden boxes and stack 'em on the quay about 4 high

then he'd cover it with a tarpaulin and this little ? Johnny who was a labourer down there he was told his cat was dead and he'd go home and we'd wait till he'd gone and we'd crawl under the canvas and help ourselves and put them in me raincoat pocket. Me pockets were full up with sprats and take them home and me Mum would smack me round the ear and say now I've got to wash your raincoat.

The other boat I went on was the Golden Dawn that was Ken Greens boat because Ken had a big concrete barge called the Cherry down there and they kept all the fishing stores in the hold and the front end had a smoke house and they used to smoke fish on there. I think that was next door to Mrs Skilton's. Skilton's kept the boat next to Worspys dock (*Lewis Worsp*) Because Mr Skilton kept his boat in there next to that concrete barge. That was outside North Sea Cannery at the bottom of Bath Street in the dock there. I forget what it was called I know Lewis Worsps was the "Maid of Wyvern". That was a big old boat. Mr Skilton's boat was something "Wyvern".

I used to go out on "The Golden Dawn". I just got in the way really. I'm sure Ernie Vince was the skipper and Archie Gunn was on the deck. The reason I was there was to make tea and cook the grub for dinner and then one day no the first day I went down. Said "You better go down and make some tea boy it's about time." I said "Have you got a tea time?" He said "No any times tea time." So I went down below. On the cooker was this great big tea pot, big metal one. I lifted the lid up. It was half full of tea leaves. I thought oh gawd so I went up through the hatch leant over the hatch and threw them over the side and washed the teapot out and Archie said "Christ Boy I'll throw you over after them tea ... what you done?" I said "It was half full of old tea" but he said "That's where the flavour come from." He said "Don't ever throw those tea leaves away again." So that was my first mistake. They liked very black tea stewed and stewed for weeks on end. Every time they had a cup of tea they put a half teaspoon of tea in and there weren't much room for the water then. It was godawful stuff it was like molasses when it come out the spout. Then for dinner it was always 3 tins. Tin of new potatoes, tin of mixed veggie, tin of stewing steak. I said don't you ever have something different. No he says that's what we call a one saucepan dinner. Everything go in one saucepan. Heat it all up and put it on these old enamel plates. Tasted lovely out there when you was a sea.

And what fascinated me was old Ernie sitting there looking out the wheelhouse window. We were out there one day on Gunfleet Light and he said "Birds." Then I see Archie run down the deck and get this big old creel full of lines and all that. He said "Come on don't bloody stand there get them over the side." He said "Mackerel boy. Birds. Look." You could see all these gulls dropping into the water and we threw these old lines over the side and they hadn't been over 5... and it was rattle rattle about 6 mackerel every time. We got a great big box of this mackerel and they just disappeared as quick as that. They hadn't got fish finders in them days they just recognized them by the birds. If there were heron he said "Look at that oil on the water, that's slick" and there were so many herons under there. They'd chuck the nets over. So I learnt lots and lots from them old boys. Because I was young I picked up everything they said and ended up talking like they did. That's why nobody else talk like me because they didn't go down on the boats. I can't get rid of it so I don't bother.

The shipyard was open so all the paint we got come from the ship yard and all the tar for the bottom of the boats came from the ship yard. We just went out for the day sometimes 2 days but not very often. Cause you got to feed the fish just small stuff you chuck emm over the side. You only went down there because you liked being on the boats and they'd let you go out with 'em. I was about 16 then I suppose. You had to get a day off work if the tide was right. Made up a lot of excuses.

Favourite one was, won't be in today got a funeral. Old Watsy say you must know a lot of people cos you don't half go to a lot of funerals. I don't think I'll pay you for any more of these days off because I don't believe what you are telling me.

Another thing was we used to go babbing for eels in the river. We used to have a duck punt and we used to nick all Mums heavy wool, whip it up to about the thickness of a Biro and thread these old lug worms on and drop them over the side of the punt. You wind it round your finger and keep babbing it up and down so if you'd feel something on the end you'd pull it up slowly and there. We used to get.. they had hooked teeth and they'd get caught in this wool so we'd pull them up and snapped them and we had this old tin bath in the boat and we would just tap them on the end and they'd drop in the boat and we'd get loads of em. We'd catch them down the Whitehouse. White house beach.

Duck punt is about 18 foot long like ? with a pointy end. I had a couple and I built one at Anglesea Road. It was twenty odd foot long and the first day we went out in it we were going across the point down near Marriages wood and I didn't realise but there was a knot in the bottom of.. in the wood of one of the planks and this knot popped out and me punt sunk with everything in it . All the guns everything. The whole thing filled up with water. We thought we was going to drown... didn't realise we was only in a foot of water but it was cold. That was end of November December. Everything aching with cold. We kept it down the sea wall because we would always go down at low water and because it is quite a steep bank we used to push it then jump on the back and that'd just go down the mud on its own. That was brilliant. We had to find a bit of wood to tap in the hole so's we could get home. We shouldn't have been alive with all the things that happened to us.

Oh my brother.. me and my brother used to go wild fowling down the Geedons till that got messed up but he was crawling across the Geedons one day and he says "I've seen a hare over there just by that..." and crept across the marshes with his gun and he stood up and I saw an even bigger bloke stood up in front of him chased him back across the Geedons. That was a range warden with his dog. The hare he'd thought were the spaniel's ears sticking up above the marsh. So he got a surprise when he saw the range warden stood up just the other side of the fleet shouting at him. I've never seen by brother run that fast before. We got away. Geedons are Fingringhoe Naturalist Trust. Old sandpits.

We used to row down there. Till we got brave and we got an outboard motor. We couldn't work out how you put it on the back of the boat so what I done I built a wooden box and cut a hole in the floor. Nailed the wooden box on, then put the motor through the hole. That worked till the box fell off and the punt sunk the outboard motor and everything. Neither of us could swim I don't know how we survived. Every time we sunk we was only in about a foot of water. Cause these old punts would float in 2 or 3 inches of water.

We had a sail on it once, we had the wind behind us and that was going great guns. The oar fell out the back which we was steering with and it shot round and it actually sailed right over the top of the mud. There was no water there right on this point. Said to my brother "That's pretty smart there aint many boats that can do that." Also don't know how we were going to get home as we only had one oar left. The other one had disappeared. We were using that for a rudder.

At the Geedons we were shooting ducks. Mallard. Most of the time we weren't getting anything at all but it was so nice because you always went just as it was getting light so if you went down by the

Geedons you'd see the sun come up over the sea in the distance. Marvellous beautiful. So we never shot a thing but it was worth going down just to see that. Used to nick the old man's whiskey out the cupboard, brandy, whatever he'd got. Put that in a little flask with a coffee and take what grub we could find get down there for the day. Didn't go out for half an hour.

Then we met... We're on to farmers now. Following all our wild fowling antics there was an old farmer well he was a foreman at Marsh Farm at Alresford and he stopped in the street one day, I'd known him for years. He said "Want to come over for ferreting boy" he said "instead of messing about in that old boat of yours?" so I said "Yea." I said "I haven't got a ferret, I can send away for one, it'll come back in a fortnight." "All right" he said. I sent away to Thetford for this Polecat ferret and when the guy off the railway delivered it he said "I don't know what's in this box" he said "but it's going a bit berserk be careful when you take the lid off." I said "That's all right it's only an old ferret." Anyway I got it home opened the hutch and I undone these screws and took the lid off this box and this damned great polecat ferret latched itself onto my middle finger and there it stayed for most of the morning I couldn't get it off. Gorr it was painful. So I went and saw Peter. "I got a ferret." "That's a beast" he said "that'd be brilliant for rabbiting." So we went over the farm put it down the first hole and it never come out. About half hour later it decided to come out. Then I put it down another one and it never come out and as we was walking along the track I put the ferret back in the box and I looked behind me and so did Peter Ling and the holes the ferret had been down the rabbits had started to come out. "Bloody useless ferret" he said "the only thing that wants is a 12 bore" and then he threatened to shoot it.

Anyway we went round there one morning he said "If you come round about 7 o'clock that'd be pretty good I'll get up in time and we'll go and do a bit more rabbiting." He lived down this old track that went down to the sea wall, big farm big farm house, and it had big couple of window things, a front door and a hall way. We knocked on the door he say "I'm coming" and his wife said "Come in he's in the back having his breakfast. Do you want any breakfast?" "Well can do." So we had egg and bacon and he'd got this great big demi john on the table. He said "Do you want a drink before you go out?" I said "Ooh no not this time of the morning." He said "I'm gonna have one." That's some sloe gin or sloe wine or something and he was knocking this stuff back and he was sitting at the table like this and the window was there and I see this huge rabbit that come trotting along sitting on his lawn. I said "Pete you know we're going rabbiting well we don't have to go very far" I said "there's a huge one sitting on your lawn." "Where where where" and he jumped up and he said "Don't move don't move." He said "Come with me you open the front door when I tell you." So he got this double twelve bore loaded and walked down the hall way. "Right open the door" he said and as I opened the door he fired this twelve bore and all I remember was all the plaster off the ceiling coming down I got covered I was like a snowman anyway his missus went berserk "Don't you ever do that again" and he missed the rabbit. He was a funny bloke. I went rabbiting with him quite a lot. Quite a clever bunch over there escapees bred with the wild ones. Black and white rabbits running round his field. He said "I aint seen nothing like it boy. Not seen wild black and white rabbits." I said "You must have let some tame ones out." "Not me" he said. They were all these funny colours.

Oh yea we ate them. My mum was expert at pigeon pie, rabbit pie. One of the best pie makers I've ever known. Pigeon pie she was brilliant. Me brother shot the pigeons. He used to come home with this great big sack full of pigeons. She had the biggest pie dish you ever did see about 2 foot across massive great... big. She used to come up to the table, we'd all be sat round it. She had this massive great big pie and by the time we'd finished cor it was ever so tasty. She'd make this wonderful gravy tasty gravy but really it was all just full of vegetables that dad grew in the garden and a few pigeon

breast but ooh it was lovely. The pastry, oo it makes me hungry thinking about it. She'd cook anything... whatever we got so we'd have pigeon pie, rabbit pie, or we'd have roast rabbit. We had duck, goose. There weren't so many geese in them days there weren't so many as there is now.

The farmer would say do you want anything so all the straw.... cos we kept everything in the garden. We had ducks, bantams, chickens, everything. It was all for the table. It was my job before I went to school. I had to go out with a big hessian sack every morning and get rabbit food... parsley and stuff like that and then all the straw we got from the farmer up the road. Old Jimmy Dutton used to... well he'd say he would sell you a bale but very often he'd give it to you. There was no way of getting it home so we had to break it in half and put it in our little trolley thing.

We only carried on with the shooting and the fishing till we was about twenty or something. I'd finished by the time I was on my own at Alma Street. Girls were more important. My brother he gave it up and you know we never ever went again. We put the guns in the cupboard and I said I don't think I want to go tomorrow and the guns stayed there. I think there was about a dozen shot guns in the cupboard. You'd get put inside now for that. You used to be able to walk down the road like that. You'd break a gun open but you didn't have to have it in a cover or anything and you'd walk about anywhere with them. They were better times then see, wasn't such violent times.