Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: Trevor Sharpe (no 2)

Date: 10 August 2006

Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox on the 10th August 2006 talking to Trevor Sharpe. This is the second disk.

You were saying about the, actual peat, the actual moors and the peat on the moors.

TS: Yeah, when I say peat doesn't grow, it does in it's own way but very thinly. It takes thousands, upon thousands of years to get the thickness that that peat is and that peat was fifteen foot thick of not only sphagnum moss, shrub life, fallen trees, er, bracken. The roots of bracken never seem to rot. When you were cutting peat it were like butter, when you hit bracken it stopped ya. In other words you were cutting with a knife but it threw the knife back at you, we used to say, because it was that hard. But, in a foot of water, peat 'ill grow, 'cause it's got daylight and moisture. Peat is a plant but over thousands o' years peat's grown that thick, that er, like I said, drain, it's not, the moors haven't drained it, the farmers have. They've as much to blame as anybody else. They've drained their land and took the bit o' water off the moors, 'cause it's, they've drained lower than the moors. So, there'd a been one hell of a mound of peat there, 'cause peat, like a sponge, take the water away, 'ill expand. So looking over a mile you would of seen a big heap of peat and it alters in grade and colour at the age. So you've got light peat that doesn't burn, you've got a medium peat that gets harder and brittlier, and you've got the bottom peat which is next to coal. And that's how we've got us coal because, that's what coal is compressed, compressed vegetation.

It first started we, er, peat usage. Now the peat were used for three, well one or two things, but the main things was, aeroplane wings, to stop bullets penetrating.

How did they do that?

TS: They packed the wings wi' dry peat, and then when the bullets, they dint go through, they dint break the wings off 'em. They used it for cow cakes called molasses, so they mixed black treacle wi' peat. The peat was just to give it er, a bulk. Er, so you bought bulk peat wi' molasses in, er, treacle in and they used to make that I'm sure, in Thorne here. Waterside. Main things we used for bedding, horses, cattle, pigs and all that lot. The logo of British Moss was done here in, er, let me see, 1983, and the logo states 'The Peat Moss Litter Supply Company Limited, London', er 'Best Bedding in the World', which it was, er, for horses and cattle and show jumping and everything else that needed bedding out, chickens. Hence, British Moss Litter, litter as in bedding. In 1959, 1960, Fisons took over and realised that mixed with a body, an holding body such as peat and water, they could put chemicals in, fertilizers, and make a compost, which they did, which I grow with and er, Barry as well. This is when our life started in compost. And hence today, er, compost, tomato bags, grow bags, er, plant pots. So they realised that there were summat in this. So what they did to the greenhouse people, they said 'look, can we', all greenhouses all over country, all these big growers, 'can we put your concrete down instead o' soil? We'll pay?' 'Oh, concrete fantastic'. No soil, they had to buy our peat. So what they spent in concrete doubled in the peat capacity going in, they'd no choice. So all growers today have

greenhouses built on concrete. No soil so they can't turn it over and turn back to soil or, er, it was a good er, gimmick a good sale and everything else.

But today's reputation of peat, er, I think it's a myth, I really do think it's a myth. They'll never compensate peat for what it is. I mean, they're trying very hard. Scotts of America, who owns it now, they trying, trying very hard to different compost mixed, er, peat free and all this lot, coconut matting and coconut this and waste, manure and, but they'll never subsidise peat.

BS: Not only did they use peat for bedding and that they also used in the years gone by they used to use it in their baths, so people used to lie in it.

TS: I used to supply it to Harrogate Baths, I used to load it for Harrogate Baths, for rheumatism.

BS: For rheumatism.

TS: Yeah I did.

BS: Because o' the...

TS: Paraffin.

BS: Paraffin what's in it. They used to extract paraffin out of the peat, at Thorne, at Moorends.

TS: They tried, they tried to extract paraffin out of it, er, and hence a paraffin mill, called, they called I the paraffin mill because they thought there were enough paraffin in it to extract it, but they found out that er, there wasn't. They used to squeeze it out of it. But er, it didn't work. So they've, their old factory is the old paraffin mill. I've photographs of it here somewhere kicking about. But Thorne Moors was er, full of canals, full of canals and that's how they got the peat off in the olden days. There's the barge with the horse pulling the, and these barges, these are canals so you can imagine all canals all over moors, still exist, not full of water but overgrown, but the canals still exist, the er, the markings of 'em.

So then they would take the peat off these horse drawn wagons?

TS: Yeah, they pulled...

Later on loco?

TS: Yeah, but they pulled five wagons wi' them horses, full of dry peat and filled 'em into these barges.

Was there one horse, for..?

TS: No there's two houses, two horses there for five wagons. But these barges they used to come down the er, what's that river Barry? Er, warping drain?

Right, these wagons, these boats used to come down the warping drain to Waterside which is a historic place, Waterside, then get into a little river called the Thorne Dyke, Boating Dyke and come through Thorne to Thorne market place to be sold off, in blocks. So people bought 'em in blocks for the er,

fires. And this were their way of heating in them days, fires. And then it turned round er, that this wasn't viable so they built mills where traffic could get to 'em, horse and carts and all this lot.

Did they just come to Thorne these boats or did they go..?

TS: No, no they just went to Thorne. This were another, a little outlet, er, bearing in mind people were digging by hand, so they hadn't the capacity them days. But it were an outlet to get rid of peat, to sell peat.

And the people that bought them were they just local people?

TS: Just local people, bought it for fire.

So it didn't go outside the area?

TS: Not in them days, it want till later on. All farmers in area bought it for er, they came in for the horse and cart, for the litter, for the bedding, horses and that. 'Cause er, you're looking at years ago, it were all horses weren't it. So everybody had deep litter bedding.

And local people bought it?

TS: For fires, yeah. They had a boat load they took it down into the centre of Thorne, which is a market place and the dyke it er, runs o' back o' me here now. Obviously covered in, but er the Boating Dyke is still there. And er, there is a big history of Thorne Moors, a hell of a history.

'Cause there's a lot of connection with barges going all over the country.

TS: There is but, none of these. These were little boats like, flat bottomed ones, yeah they couldn't go in any deep water they were just flat bottomed.

These are opened boats aren't they?

TS: They're open boats.

Not like what we'd think of as narrow boat barges…

TS: No, no and obviously used to tow these down the er, rivers and the canals and that er, with horse. So you know, that's how they got into Thorne. But…

And then, and then they started sending them to factories?

TS: They, they started then milling the peat up, er, for bedding, like I've said, chicken bedding, horses, pigs, cattle, all that, and erm, chicken, er, horse food, mixing molasses wi' it, which is a treacle, and that were the main substance, they dint know they were eating peat, it were that sweet they thought they were eating a cake, molasses cake, for cows and, it were a cow food.

And then you said that they started taking it to a mill?

TS: They started taking it to mill to, to grade it so that they could grind and make a compost such as fine, medium or coarse, whichever.

So the, did the mills come when they started using it for things other than…?

Yes.

Horses, er, bedding?

TS: No the mills were there then. The mills were a lot earlier, 1800. The first mill on record, that's a paraffin mill which was on edge of Thorne Moors and Moorends. A rough one that one 'cause I can't get any er… I've got the er, picture here of the oldest mill on record.

BS: They used to send peat to London, to Buckingham Palace, for her horses.

TS: Well, yeah, this were in later days and…

BS: When I used to work at Medge Hall, every morning we used to fill two railway, British Railway carriages with wet peat...

[Both talking]

TS: I don't know where it's gone, I had it here.

BS: What's more or less been dug in blocks, we could fill us baths, we used to fill two before we set the mill going every…

TS: Yeah we did yeah. For Harrogate Bath for bathing in, and they used to put it in their baths and, it were slurry, peat slurry. Er, we used to send it in wet blocks but then they broke it down into a slurry and put more water to it and you, you bathed in it up to your neck, but the saying was that it got rid of arthritis and rheumatism.

BS: Same as Romans used to bathe in milk.

TS: Yeah, but my idea of that is that we all finished up we arthritis that worked on moor, so that didn't work did it!

[Laughter]

TS: Right, two different ways of cutting peat. We've talked about all this. That's the old paraffin mill when they tried to get paraffin out of it and it didn't work, they couldn't get enough. There is paraffin in peat, yes, but they couldn't extract enough so they've turned it into a mill for peat. That's the Dutch way. The English, they couldn't get English people er, to do it 'cause they'd no idea, so they brought the Dutch in, and the Dutch way is to do it that way, and that's the English way. Now this chap is still alive and I know him personally.

Tell me about the Dutch methods, describe…

[Both talking]

TS: Well what they do, they clear a big patch, yeah?

Yeah.

TS: You can see a big area, of all the top, all the, all the bracken, as deep as that 'cause of the roughage on top.

What's that about two feet, three feet?

TS: Yeah, and then you dig about another four foot on that one maybe less, three foot.

So you dig it…

TS: You dig it in squares, you lay it...

You'd dig down about another four feet, after you've taken the top soil off?

TS: Yes, you take the top soil off and dig it in the hole. When he's cleared that, the next stretch will be dropped into this hole here.

Oh I see.

TS: That's how you went on.

So you dig this, what you revealed once you'd taken the top soil off, you'd dig that down about four feet?

TS: Then you've got solid peat, yeah.

And is that solid peat?

TS: That's solid peat that.

And that what you're digging into blocks and putting on the side?

TS: Yes.

Right.

TS: Anything that's left here, all your next, next year's cutting will go into that.

So you dig your next year's cutting at the side of it and you'd load all your rubbish in...

Back into this hole.

Back into the hole.

TS: Yeah.

So you're like back filling as you're…

TS: That's right.

Moving down.

TS: Yeah. That's the way o' working the Dutch way, and barrowing it off here. The English way is to dig only three foot wide, but six foot deep, or five foot deep, which is a big difference 'cause they're only digging a narrow, a narrow strip, and carrying it off with fork, instead o' barrow, which the Dutch did. They carried it off with fork and put it into rows the same.

There's your stepping, how they've cut it in steps, so they could cut that top one, drop down onto here, cut that one, drop down onto here, cut that one and you can see the marks as the knives cut it, the graving knife. Leaving that five foot, and they've got to chuck that bottom one on top o' that bank and then carry it off. Blocks o' peat.

This is the piddying. After they'd done, cut it and laid it. Let me see if I've got a better photo. That's laying it look, they lay it in layers. There's two working together. They've cut a chain of top off so they'd got to get that chain out that day to earn any money. There's the piddies, all in, in rows. There's a better example of piddies. And then they have to be put into the stacks, and then the people, they've another crew, filling the wagons from the stacks once they're dry. But in them days any wet peat were left, you couldn't load any wet peat, but today they clear the lot.

What would they do with that, they'd just leave it?

TS: They'd leave it for next year. They'd stack in the same place next year, but leave that to dry out for a further year. What's left here were left and then they'd stack on it. It's a base, like making a pie, you leave that base down and... yeah. But all the photographs are here to er, illustrate of how the Dutch is different to the English. That's a good example look, how the Dutch did it and how the English did it, but this is, this were used up to the last of all. They went off that idea of the Dutch. But they brought the Dutch in, and, there were trouble in Moorends with the Dutch and the English. Of course in them days, again they were foreigners warn't they and in them days foreigners warn't accepted. So they wouldn't, er, they wouldn't let 'em live in Moorends so the British Moss which is that, decided we'll build 'em their own houses, called er…

BS: Vermuyden

TS: No.

BS: It is Dutch Row.

TS: It is Dutch Row now, because of the nickname it's got, the nickname is Dutch Row. Moss Terrace, Moss, Terrace. Over the railway at Moorends, a row of houses. So 'cause British Moss built 'em they were called Moss Terrace, because the Dutch came it was Dutch Row.

TS: So the Dutch were living there and then the, the people of Moorends, er, oh, through ignorance, don't know people, they decided not to sell 'em any food in the shops. So the clever idea they did, the first house, or was it the last house.

BS: The house further away from the…

TS: The last house, on the Dutch Row, they turned into a shop. So they had their own little community, their own shop and their own way of living, all because Moorends people wouldn't, well it were a case o' ignorance, 'oh, they're foreigners'. I mean, how they'd go on today's situation I don't know.

Was it because they thought they were taking their jobs?

TS: What went through their minds is anybody's guess, I mean, maybe so, er, because people in Moorends er, 'ud think 'well we can do that job'. But the management says 'but you can't do that job until shown'. So they brought the Dutch in to er, cut the peat to show the English how to go on and that's, it just turned a circle then. The English took over and the er, management was right. The Dutch were harder people, they spent more time at work 'cause they had nothing to do at home and…

BS: They were outcast because they were foreigners.

TS: Yeah they were outcast same as er, it's not as bad today but it does go off in England today, if you're a foreigner, you're an outcast aren't you?

So the Dutch people gradually trained or… trained the English people?

TS: Yes they did. They followed their footsteps, but just went back to the method I've showed you on photograph, er, the English way.

The deep one?

TS: But, er, the, the methods that the English took over from them they kept.

I was curious when you showed me the Dutch one because it is only like three or four feet…

TS: Yes it is.

Two or three feet deep even, maybe four feet at the most.

TS: Yes it is.

So they'd leave quite a lot of peat behind, would they?

TS: Well that doesn't matter because over the years they've took that three foot of weight off that layer o' peat and then lift, I've explained, a sponge, so that next year they can go and, or the year after, they'd go back to that and dig the same up. Because it's lifted. They've took the weight off it and they've took the water away from it, so like a sponge it's rose.

And does, does the consistency and the quality of the peat stay the same?

TS: No it doesn't. The consistency and the quality, the top peat is the quality, er, it's a branny peat, er, it's a yellow peat. As you get another depth down you get a browner, denser, because it's been squashed longer and then the bottom tier, is black, burning peat. It will burn that, smoulder and gives some heat off, the top peat, which er, is no good for burning I'd say, it burns very, very quickly so it gives you nothing. The bottom peat is next door to coal, 'cause that's the next step to coal, it er, lasts longer.

So when, the next year when they go back and it's expanded, has the top dried out into this, less, less burnable…?

TS: It takes more than a year. I've explained to you that they move across, you see they don't cut that and then next year cut that. They move across so they've covered a lot o' moor. Maybe five er, to ten year. When, by time that's say, that grows, not fully, but half again. This is why, if they didn't cut the peat, over all these years they'd have found there'd have been an heap of peat like that, nobody could have done anything with. A big mound, because of the drainage of the water, the dykes, the weather and everything else. So in my eyes, these people have done the earth a favour, because nothing could have grown on a mound where now, they can flood it, which they have done, and level the ground off, where vegetation can grow.

When it refills the thing and it comes up again, does it, does it reform these three grades?

TS: No.

Is it, is that black stuff always gonna be black?

TS: It's always a different colour. And, it's an advantage to get frost into peat, because it lightens the structure of it. If it's been left for a very severe winter the peat is better to grind, it's lighter, it's, so it's all seasonal. But seasons, they've got greedy. Seasons have gone, so they put machines on, and that's to dig quicker, faster and everything else. There's cutting machines from the early days all here.

And when did they stop cutting by hand?

TS: Er, '68, '69, '70, summat like that, when they brought machines in from Germany. And these machines wah massive cutting machines. Let me er, have a quick look through me records and see if er, well I know I've got some, but where, they're all in there, I know I've got some somewhere. You'll have to bear with me and have a look later on.

BS: Those machines wah Stibas warn't they.

TS: Stibas, yeah but. That's the Dutch way o' piddying, er, pyramiding, in your eyes.

So they were their initial piles...

TS: Oh.

These big ones?

TS: Yeah. The Dutch did it that way. The English…

They did it in little ones?

TS: In little ones.

And it's women I see there.

TS It's women, they brought the women.

BS: They used to fetch the families.

TS: All the families worked on moors, as a family. Not as a workman going to work, all the family, the kids and everything else, when they were at school, on the moors, on their pick, patch, because they've cut it, they've got to pyramid it, they've got to stack it. So if there's any mistake made, if the, if they cheat, and cut little turfs, when it comes to pyramiding they've got to do it, so they're not gonna cheat are they? It were a, it were a good way of working, a good sense.

And was that just the Dutch people who brought their families on or was that everybody?

TS: Oh, no, I used to take my wife, 'cause I did that. I graved for two year, when I found out, any mug can do this I aren't doing it. 'Cause it's like digging your garden. It breaks your back and breaks your heart, 'cause you mark a chain out, and a chain is not, twenty two yards a chain. You buy the days out, twenty two yard of cutting peat is digging an hole and your back's in two, your mind's in two. In fact I have always said any peat cutter took their brain out, put it in a jar before they started work and hoped they got the right one to go home with. That's my saying because it was hard graft. That was the worse job that ever happened. The rest of it, once you've cut it, were okay. Like a seasonal cutting and then the rest o' summer you worked it up and stacked it and everything else, were okay, it's just that cutting.

Have you, the, the er, they moved it in little barrows didn't they?

TS: Yes they moved, they moved the wet peat and er, in little barrows, the Dutch did, but we found it easier wi' a fork, carrying it, carrying off they call it and they stacked it wet, wet blocks in rows and let it dry for a few months.

And how did you move it from the rows to the pyramids?

TS: You hand balled it, 'cause it was light, it'd dried, the sun had been to it, dried out, so it become like a sponge, very light, so you could get a handful and throw it.

BS: Used to have barrows as well.

TS: Yeah, they had barrows to shift all the main, yeah.

BS: 'Cause you get one stack, you couldn't get it from one, one area you had to move and shift it right to it, 'cause some of them stacks were as high as this and as long as this.

TS: Yeah.

BS: So you were walking a good distance like.

So you're talking about sort of, what would you say, seven foot tall and…

BS: Ooh yeah.

Oh yeah.

Got twenty foot long?

BS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, yeah and one man had to do that in the family.

And were the barrows they used the same as that one?

TS: All the same. I've got a wheel out there actually, I kept a wheel from one. But they were all wooden barrows, hand made. A joiner, they had a joiner and he used to make 'em and, er, and he was based at these er, factories and he made so many barrows or they bought 'em in but, they were specially made barrows.

So what other tools did they use?

TS: They used a graving knife, a spade which was, the graving knife was shaped like an, a hay knife, long, narrow, twisted handles, so you cut on a, on a, in front of you. The graving knife was shaped as an heart but flat.

The spade?

TS: The spade sorry, was shaped as an heart and that was, sharpened up. You sharpened your own, not like a shovel dig it down, you put a sharp edge on with a stone. So the first day you went to work, the first morning, you stood sharpening your tools, because peat is er, an acid, and it eats into metal and it blunts blades, and it blunts any steel and eats steel away, so you sharpened up. Er…

So you've your knife and your spade.

TS: And a fork, and a barrow. That were your three tools and at end o' day, when you'd done your day's work, er, depending on how you felt that day there was no set er, measurement that you had to do. If you felt you could do a chain and a half, which some did, but they were better people than me, 'cause I couldn't. You marked a chain out, you took your top off, bearing they called it, then you cut your blocks o' peat then you laid 'em out. By the end of that day you went home on a push bike and had to bike another four mile, five mile to get home. You were history. And that happened everyday. And at end o' shift, you covered your own tools up at end of the dyke where you're working, hoping no kids come and pinch them, chuck 'em away, you know, which, you couldn't work then without 'em. Some took 'em home, some took their own tools home to make sure that they got, because soon as they've got worn the, the tools become better. So the people were saying, nobody's having these tools, I'll take

'em home we me, carry 'em about, and that's how they went.

Were, were they their tools, were they your tools, did you have to buy 'em?

TS: No, the firm supplied 'em, but they was your responsibility. You had no choice but to look after them tools and if you dint look after them tools you couldn't work. You couldn't go next day and, I want another set o' tools, 'cause they had to be specially made. Some they had kicking about, some they had in stores or whatever, they never had stores them days in the mill, but very far and few between if you lost that cutting knife and that fork, well you can't work can you, get off home.

And, where were they made, I know you said they made the barrows at the mill?

TS: They made the barrows at the mill but all the tools I think they were made in Sheffield, specially, specially made.

So they weren't like local blacksmiths?

TS: Oh no, no, not that I know of. But we had us own blacksmiths, er, once over, but they've got very far and few between, I would say they made the tools initially, but then it wore off where they'd sent away for the tools, one factory 'ud make these special tools or whatever.

And how, how did you get paid?

TS: The foreman, you got paid by chain, four and sixpence a chain, or, whatever in them days, in fact less. So all day you worked for a chain for four and six pence.

And if you dint finish your chain?

TS: Oh that's your problem, you dint get that.

Did you get, not get any pay?

TS: No, he, the foreman came and they measured up and you got paid for what you'd done. And if he paid you a chain in them days he says 'I can't pay you half a chain, I'll pay you a chain and then you catch up'. So he paid you by chain but it is your responsibility to get that chain out and if it took you two days to get a chain, four and six for two days, you know, whatever.

And you'd get paid everyday?

TS: Yes, ooh, well no, you get paid a week, but er, you'd get paid, he'd come and measure up to see that you've gone deep enough, 'cause he wanted his turves the right thickness and the distance, so you couldn't write down at end of, as you're leaving moors, I've done a chain and a half, 'cause he'd of gone round with his staff and measured it, and woe betide you if, you're telling lies.

And did he have, so did he have to go to everybody's?

TS: Every man, every day and measure it.

And how many people might that be?

TS: There might o' been fifteen people. No more. In them days, there might have been fifteen. You see, that were only gravers. The rest of the people it didn't matter they got paid per wagon or per day. Same as I finished up, we finished up in gang, filling this peat and you got so much a wagon, but you had to push this wagon out onto a main tram, every wagon onto a gantry, turn it, put it onto the tram. Until the first little loco came, a little Lister. And the management came down and said 'Well, we're making your job easier, we're giving you a loco to go up and down the middle of the tram, we're taking threepence a wagon off you'. So we bought the loco. The people couldn't see that, the workers, er, 'Ooh it's gonna be a lot easier for us, yeah great'. So the management dint buy it, we did. The workforce bought the loco.

BS: They was buying it years after it'd gone.

Yeah.

BS: They were still taking that money, years after it'd gone.

TS: Until they changed the system in er, maybe only '60, '65, '67 and then they went to tractor and trailer on the moors when, that's when machinery were allowed on moors and fetching off by the loco and everything altered then. Obviously people were, in-between that people had rises and given money and. But the whole set changed then to, not graving, but it went to milling as in farming. They rotivated the top layer off, only taking that much, but over a bigger area. So all the shrub life, all the grasses, all the bird life, just cleared over night, 'cause the, tractor and big trailers, or big rotivators cleared the lot. Left a barren, it were like looking at a, a sand.

BS: We're talking o' four thousand acres. There's four thousand acre o' Hatfield Moor, and you were talking of twenty thousand acre per year.

TS: Being cleared, flattened.

BS: And out of that twenty thousand, it went down in one season, four foot, about twenty thousand acre. So they took more volume of peat in one year that they did in twenty year graving.

TS: Graving, yeah.

BS: And this is why the people saw more and this is why the people created more and this is why they've kicked a stink up about it, because they could see what were happening and …

But the original machinery then, when they first brought it in, it didn't, did it do it like that?

TS: No it graved it like the man graved.

BS: It took it out...

TS: In blocks.

BS: Four foot wide, six foot deep, long narrow trenches. And in between them were bushes growing all

the time. So you couldn't see machinery working, unless you were stood on. Well nobody, nobody said owt 'cause all they could see were green trees. When Fisons took over, they swept the lot.

TS: No disrespect to them it was modernisation and that's how I saw it.

BS: But, I say I dint agree wi' everything we did.

TS: No.

BS: It were our...

TS: Livelihood.

Did you work on it…?

BS: Oh yeah.

TS: Oh, yeah, he worked and me other brother.

BS: I've worked on since I left school.

Doing same thing?

BS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah.

BS: But I were, how it ended up last twenty year of me working there. I used to drive the locomotives.

TS: Yeah.

BS: But I ended up on an excavator, a Hy-mac.

TS: That's our big one…

BS: Digging dykes out, filling wagons with the machine, wi' hy-mac bucket instead o' hand filling.

TS: That's the new modernisation of stacking.

And that's from milled?

TS: Yeah.

So it's not in blocks..?

TS: That's in blocks.

Is it in blocks?

TS: This, it were another..

BS: That's what I used to do for last twenty years of me working there.

Clearing ditches and dykes and that kind of thing?

BS: And throwing peat….

[Inaudible]

TS: Yeah. All right. That's the cutting machine when they first came in. I'm gonna see if I can show you how they were milled. I've got all photographs like, it's a matter of getting them all in order.

So er, did you say there were six of you? So how many…?

TS: There were four brother and two daughters.

So…?

TS: Three of us worked on moors.

Three of you worked on moors.

TS: And one didn't. Right that gives you an example. Oh, I've put the date on that, 1969, first new machine. And that gives you an example, cutting the same way. Yeah.

So one man could do how much with this?

BS: Maybe do, what…

TS: Fifteen chains.

BS: Fifty chain in a week, or more.

TS: Fifty, yeah.

Fifty? 5 – 0?

TS: Yeah, at..

BS: More than that, a week.

TS: At….

Four shilling a chain?

TS: Yeah.

Normal time. Six shillings per chain overtime, Saturday pm and Sunday. So was Saturday a normal day then?

TS: Yes, we dint, they dint know in er, so Saturdays and Sundays they dint believe in it.

So you worked seven days a week?

TS: You've no choice, twelve hours, seven days. We did have er, er, a time when it were only eight hours, but when they got going it was seven days, twelve, twelve hours.

But you'd get paid extra for the Saturday?

TS: Not a Sunday, you got paid extra for the Saturday and overtime.

But Sunday was normal rate?

TS: Oh, no, you'd no, you did at your own...

BS: You worked for taxman.

TS: You worked for taxman.

BS: You dint get paid for Sundays.

[Laughter]

But you did get paid?

TS: Yeah, you got paid, but taxman…

And was it normal rate?

TS: Yeah, er Sunday wah, I think, at the time. At the time I do believe it wah. Like I said…

These breaks also include the time for small breakdowns and repairs which the drivers attend to themselves?

TS: Yeah.

Every breakdown in excess of three hours will be paid, at breakdown rate. And so did each graver, if you like then, have the machine then instead of his, instead of his knife and …

TS: No.

..his spade.

TS: No, they did away with the gravers then, the people. They dint have the knowledge for machinery

so they brought machinery people in for, like me brother, eldest brother. He cut peat, er, different people. And then the, they put the gravers on maintenance doing tramway, clearing shrubbery and all that.

So you'd gone back actually to the job that you'd started at?

BS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, yeah.

And so, there wouldn't be like one machine for the whole thing, each person who was digging would have a machine?

TS: Yeah. That's another machine.

BS: Oh they had about five or six machines.

So the three of you who were gravers originally worked on the moors, had to then come off the graving and the one brother who hadn't been a graver went on to be a graver?

TS: He went onto machine, so did Barry 'cause he had the knowledge, he moved forward. I went into the factory. The job situation altered completely, overboard.

And how long did that take to bring in?

TS: Oh, it happened in 1969, er, overnight. They brought the Germans in, they brought the machines in and said that's they way we're going. So it were a matter of alter jobs, er, you, can you alter to suit the job if you can't, gone. They finished a lot o' people in them days, er, because they were only on casual labour and they want permanent staff. So when these machines come in, permanent staff. It were a job over years, a complete change, change of er, peat digging.

And what about the change then to milling?

TS: Milling completely altered. Because then they came and they says, 'We'll want better peat, we'll want better conditions, we'll want better varieties'.

BS: More volume.

TS: More volume.

BS: Per day.

TS: So they…

BS: So they did away with that, sent a leveller in to level it all, scuff it up.

TS: There's the leveller.

BS: And it made it into like a wind row.

A what row?

BS: A wind row.

TS: A row, row o' peat.

BS: Like, like er, balers do in a field, and you bale it into one row. You know, that used to do the same. Clear all the rubbish out, wind row it, and then I used to come in wi' machine, big bucket, so it…

And get rid of it…?

BS: And get it piled.

Top plants and…

BS: Then they fetched like a big hoover in, went over one thing, blowing the wagons, and that's what, all we used to do, all day.

TS: There's...

BS: We used to get more volume of peat per day than they did in three month cleared in the old way, so they were highly satisfied, I think. And that's how it ended up.

And did they, did they, erm, when you said this change to the actually from hand graving to machinery happened overnight then?

TS: Yeah.

Was it the same thing with milling?

TS: In the factory they changed from latted open bales to bags. And they first started on paper bags, then they went onto plastic bags. And this is the baling machines. There's a bloke there sewing top up.

When did they go into bags?

TS: They went into bags in the er, late '60s, into the first compost bags and then they still do it today in bags but…

BS: That's a locomotive that is.

TS: That's a loco.

Let me see that.

TS: Modernisation.

Show me.

BS: I used to drive that.

TS: There you go that's part o' moors cleared. All these are all machines that er, up come and what they used to use. There you go, how about them?

What's that then?

TS: That's er, wind rowing it, after milling peat, after millers gone over it, it's er putting it in pile for it to be picked up, hovered up.

So the milling machine just loosens the top does it?

TS: It grinds it up, it, it, er, like the plough land, rotivates.

Right, and then this machine, which is, what did you call that?

TS: That machine 'ill put it into trailers or put it into rows.

So it like sucks it up?

TS: Yeah.

BS: Yeah.

TS: It sucks it up at the dry level.

And it come up this long arm, which is like a combine harvester?

TS: Yeah, and puts it in rows or….

BS: And we used to shovel it….

TS: There's the shovel…

BS: That's plough.

TS: There's the plough that does it.

BS: And after he'd gone over it, we used to come over wi' that and blow it into wagons, or you'd blow it again to make it dry faster 'cause it were light.

I was going to ask you what the consistency of it was when it was milled.

TS: Very dry.

BS: Very, very dry.

TS: Very dry. We had to mix water with it to, er, get a touch o' moisture. We used to put er, no, I daren't go that far and tell you chemicals, er, we used to put water and chemicals wi' it, to give it its volume.

So is it like powder or dust?

BS: Yeah.

TS: Yeah, dust.

BS: It were just like er, what can I say, chopped up straw blowing all over.

TS: Yeah.

And how long did it take to dry once the milling machine had gone over it?

BS: About two, three hours, because it were that fine.

TS: It wouldn't take long with the wind going through and er, the heat.

Didn't it no blow away?

TS: Yeah.

BS: That what I say, they could take more volume of peat that way in one day.

TS: Over a big area.

BS: Than they'd take in a month the other way.

But I'm surprised you dint lose it all, being blown away.

TS: Well, wind, if it were very windy, yes, you couldn't fill a trailer 'cause it'd blow it off and that's how it er, [pause]

It looks, it looks very hard to handle.

TS: Yeah.

Difficult to manage?

TS: Yeah, you have to be er, there were a lot o' work involved.

And was there a big work force?

BS: There was when all this come out.

[Both talking]

TS: I had about one hundred

BS: There must have been about sixty of us on moors.

TS: Yeah, there were sixty on moors, I had hundred and fifty in mill, bagging off, women and men. That was the first…

And was that one mill?

TS: One mill. No, one mill. That was just one mill. There was another mill at Swinefleet.

And were you at Hatfield?

TS: I worked at Hatfield, mill, but I've done both moors work and, yeah.

And that's the mill that's still there now? That's still working now?

TS: Yes, well Swinefleet shut down now, but Hatfield Mill's still working.

BS: And the one at Medge Hall.

TS: The one at Medge Hall, that closed down.

BS: Closed down about a couple o' years ago.

TS: I've even got the photographs and history of the big fire on, on er, on Hatfield Moors.

When was that?

TS: The big fire when that gas explosion. When they sent for the Americans to blow it up.

BS: Red Adare.

TS: Red Adare.

Oh, what, tell me about this?

TS: Well, I've got the, all the photographs of er, they was drilling for oil and you could...

Over there, where?

TS: On Hatfield Moors. And the, that's a rig melting, wi' the heat of the flames, the, you know the derricks, the big, it melted and there were a gentlemen on top. I spoke to him after he come out of hospital, he were Irish again, all burnt and he wanted to start work again, to put this out and they sent him home.

TS: But all the photographs of the ignition, of er, that moors, there it is, where the gas blew up and ignited.

And they were drilling for oil?

TS: They was drilling for oil and it gassed.

And, but was that something that was common?

TS: No, it wah a one off, and never happened again.

BS: The gas, once they'd tapped into the gas…

[Inaudible both talking]

BS: The gas was piped to er, Whitworth Brickworks, and they used to...

TS: They still do Barry.

BS: They paid Jet Lions who owns the land so much.

TS: They still do.

BS: No, they shut brickworks down now.

So who was it, who wanted to drill for oil, who?

TS: Oh, it's, a, a different company, er, you know a, BP or whatever. And they came drilling and er, one night, I've forgot what er, whether it was Friday or Saturday night, we heard the bang.

BS: Saturday afternoon.

TS: Saturday afternoon when that went.

BS: I were just at the back of it with my machine talking to gaffer but the machine just shook.

TS: It shook me, shook all the factory.

BS: 'Cause we thought it were going to turn over.

And they'd hit natural gas, had they?

TS: Yeah.

And did they actually then continue to use that?

BS: Oh yeah.

TS: Yeah, they'd put it out.

BS: Epworth Brickyards, they piped it straight through fields and across part o' moors, across to Epworth Brickyards and they used it for a number of years.

And is it finished now?

TS: What?

Do you know…?

TS: No they're still taking gas.

Are they?

TS: Oh yeah, it's on the side o' the er, old prison now, the Doncaster, er, what they call it prison?

BS: Lindholme prison.

TS: Lindholme prison.

BS: Still using the gas.

TS: You'll have seen it, you'll have been sneaking round.

BS: And the amount of gas what was burnt off and the length of time, I were talking to one o' chaps and they were saying there is enough gas burnt off to power Doncaster area for twenty years, what had been burnt off.

It was in, December 1981.

TS: Yeah. There, proof.

So this wasn't just a regular fire then?

TS: Oh no, it were a beggar one off. It was a big story, they sent to America for Red Adare.

BS: Red Adare.

TS: Er, Red Adare, but his, co-pilot came dint he.

BS: No, Red Adare did come.

TS: Warh it Red Adare?

BS: Yeah.

TS: And he came, they used er, dynamite to blow it up, make a big song.

BS: Well all they did, they went over top of it wi' the dynamite.

TS: Yeah.

BS: And when it exploded it cut the oxygen from the fire.

TS: That's right and then capped it.

BS: So all what were left coming up were gas. So they re-tapped it, they re-tapped it a few yard away. So when they blew that flame out it came up that way so they could cap that. So they capped it.

TS: We really could go on forever. I mean there's that much information that's not been tapped.

Oh I might come back and talk to you again if that's the case.

Can I just ask you before we finish, 'cause I think, you know, we're probably ready for a break. Just before we leave the matter of fires, fires seem to have been part of the story of the moors.

TS: Fires were the big thing.

BS: Big issue.

TS: A big issue. Fires started, every bad summer, you got a fire.

BS: You got a combustion…

TS: A combustion from bottles, people shoving cigarettes down, kids starting it on purpose. There were that many different ways of causing a fire.

BS: Well if you got damp peat and we stacked it, it used to start to smoulder.

TS: I'm more frightened now…

BS: Like straw stacks. If you stack a bale of straw damp, and cover it, it will heat up 'cause it's rotting down. Well this is what you get, the same effect with peat.

TS: Then you get an ignition underneath.

BS: Then it starts to glow, then the wind hits it and you've lost it.

You said about bottles?

TS: Yeah, bottles. Anybody dropped a drinking bottle, been on moors drinking, they dropped the bottle, the sun penetrates on the bottom, it's a magnifying glass. So I'm not saying an hundred percent it's gonna light, but one out of that hundred's enough. So if, if that bottle lands right way on some dry stuff. Fling it, it land neck first, there's a magnifying glass in the middle.

BS: Not only that, the locomotives we used to drive, they used to set fire to moors, sparks.

TS: Yes they did, sparks.

BS: So we got a sparks guard, what fit on the exhaust. And I remember driving the locomotive and that spark guard was white hot and when I stopped the engine it was flaming inside.

TS: This is...

BS: I had to get a five gallon drum of water, pour it down it to cool it.

TS: I did think this is why in the olden days they wunt allow a motor bike or anything with an engine on moors, because of the combustion and the, er problems they had wi' fires. But I do feel sorry for 'em today, because they had all the workforce, working on moors as firemen. They had Thorne Fire Brigade. Now if Thorne Moors goes up they've Thorne Fire Brigade which is four men. They don't stand a chance, it'll go.

So what role did the workmen play?

TS: The workmen become firemen. They stopped the work they were doing and they started er, fighting fires.

And how would you fight the fire?

TS: A lot o' times you could use a broken broom, er, a broom we call it, were a broken branch wi' bristles on and you patted it out. But if a wind got up, it'd go, faster than you could ever run. But we had pumps, but in dry season, you, you had to dig for water, so any dyke if you dug down water 'ud run into it, trickle into it, but you dint have a lot. The fire brigade used to come on. I think the biggest problem is access, to get onto where the fire is. We used to burn off, er, an hundred yard in front so that when the fire got to it, it'd stop it. We used to, well, work day and night, you never went home.

And so water, water, where did you get the water from to beat the fire?

TS: Well, that's it, the firemen brought it or the main dykes round it.

BS: Ferry it.

TS: Ferry it.

BS: From main drains.

TS: Pumps to pump to...

BS: Round the edge of the moors, ferry it over, stick a pump wi' a pipe on and put another pipe on that wi' another pump, and keep pumping it in stations.

TS: Yeah, it were a, it were a case of pump all time like and if you found a dyke, like I said, if you dug

deep enough you'd get water seeping into it.

[Noise of bird]

[Voice in background]

TS: They're going on holiday…

He's biting your bird int he!

TS: Oh, yeah, they belong together you see.

[Bird noise]

TS: They've been on holiday we've been left we remains.

Pet sitting are you?

Yeah.

TS: It's been quiet all time Simone.

[Voice] It's seen Tony.

TS: Right, yeah.

So fighting the fire would be more a case of…

TS: All hands on.

And moving it, and patting it out.

TS: Yeah you could only pat it out. When it started to er, dig in, we call it dig in. If there were a rabbit hole or a tree root hole the fire would go down and it could burn for weeks. We prayed for heavy rain, because no matter what you cannot get it out.

So it would actually burn the peat.

TS: It'd burn the peat, yeah.

BS: It follows the roots.

TS: Yeah, it follows the roots underground, er, and er, then if you walk on it, you go in, and you're in burning ash. The top's okay, you walk across it and it's eating away underneath, so you've got a big hole of burning ash. Been there, done it.

BS: There's only one way to fight a moors fire and that's water and more water.

TS: Yeah.

BS: Keep pumping water into it.

TS: Yeah, you've got to do, and hope the elements of the earth take effect. Because that's all we relied on.

BS: 'Cause I've known and Trevor known, we've put water into a flame and it's been drying as fast as we're pumping it in.

TS: Yeah.

BS: 'Cause it's been that intense heat.

TS: And it could get up next day, same place, it could get up again. So this is why I'm, I feel sorry for 'em now if it goes. They've no labour, two men's no good on a fire.

BS: And you only need one spark and it can blow that spark three, four hundred yards.

TS: Yeah.

BS: So you could put a fire out here and look up it's blazing again there. So you were running backwards and forwards.

TS: So, you know, I mean, I don't know which is the right way. They've got to let the moors go back to its natural state, that's what they're doing, or that's what they're saying they're doing but it will burn off.

BS: We had more problems we fire when they were milling than we did when they were graving.

You had more problems with fires?

TS: Yeah, yeah.

BS: The milling side, it were drier. Bigger area, so it were smouldering and blowing all the way. Whereas when you was er, graving it used to be damp peat, sparks used to hit it and go out and this is the problem that used to come up, you know.

TS: Yeah.

BS: I've seen me be called out at one, two o'clock in morning.

TS: And not come home for four days. Once you're called out to a fire on moors you don't know when you're getting home. But that's it again the wife's took the bigger part because they understood that. She took as big a part as me as running the factory 'cause she understood that I might not be home this time, or that time or, it's a…

BS: I mean, we've been to fires…

TS: Not everybody will take that.

BS: We've been to fires and our Trevor's gone to each house picking staff up for us.

TS: Yeah.

BS: You know, to keep us there. But later on Fisons did start sending us back to canteen for us snap, paying for it all.

TS: Yeah, they got, they got better dint they.

BS: Bringing crates o' pop and beer out for lads, you know. They was good. I couldn't, I wouldn't knock 'em for anything they did for us.

TS: I was…

BS: Because without, without the workforce they couldn't run. So they used to look after us.

TS: I wouldn't knock the, my work, my pay, my life at all.

BS: When British Moss had it, it was pittance want it.

TS: Oh yeah, I mean everybody else round wah farmers and everything else.

BS: When Fisons took over er, they put the wages that up, that much dint they.

TS: Yeah, people wanted to.

BS: You couldn't believe it, over, like overnight, you know. I used to get twelve pounds ten shilling.

TS: Three pound fifty when I first started.

BS: Then from twelve pound ten shilling to eighty pound a week from Fisons, wow, bloody hell, you know, you, you're living in luxury and it went up each year, dint it?

TS: Yeah it did yeah, inflation.

BS: They looked after us.

TS: Went up with inflation so you, anybody worked on moors wah pretty well off, better than farmers. I mean they, there were a lot o' people on more money but they had a more responsible job.

BS: They give us a bonus an all. So it give you more incentive to work for 'em. And I found biggest majority of it, of 'em, gaffers, they dint come and say 'you do that job', they used to say 'can you do it?'

TS: Yeah.

BS: 'If you can't we'll get somebody else.' We'd say 'No, we'll do it'. They never teld you to do a job, they asked you, and that's er, you looked up to 'em then.

TS: That's how I were Barry, that's just how I worked, I'd never...

BS: You looked up to people. We did get one or two what, 'You'll do that and you...', you know, but you took that outside.

TS: Yeah.

BS: But main gaffers used to 'Do you think you can do this for us?' Well 'yeah we can do it', and you used to do it. You know and it were a pleasure to go.

TS: Different breeds o' foreman.

BS: It were a pleasure to go.

TS: Yeah, and when they come from college. I don't care who hears me, when they came from college they had no idea whatsoever, man management.

BS: They came from college, they were trying to tell you you're job what you'd been doing for some years.

[Laughter]

TS: Yeah.

BS: When they couldn't do it their sens.

TS: I were brought up…

BS: Trying to tell you how to do it their way and you'd think why?

TS: Your mum's still in bed. Right.

BS: I just didn't work.

I think we need to have a break don't we?

TS: I think we do yeah.

[Recording Ends]

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project