

Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots, Exeter's Multi-Coloured History

Interview Transcript

Name of interviewee: Ghee Bowman (Crystal Carter, Technician)
Name of interviewers: Sue Evens
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Location of interview: Sue Evens' house
Transcribed by: Dawn Eldridge

Introduction by Ghee Bowman. Tell us about your mum, what do you know about your mum?

She was born in St Blazey near Cornwall, she was the second youngest of five children, they were the first black family in Cornwall at that time, and her father was a sea captain, but he got killed aboard his boat. Her mum then – we're not quite sure whether she married this guy or he helped with bringing up the children, he was a white guy that come from Cornwall, so she ended up with two white parents but her and her brothers and her sisters were black.

So do you know more, tell us more about her father, your grandfather, who was a sea captain from where?

Jamaica. He came, he used to come over... to and fro on... well as far as we know, he used to tell us he was the captain of the boat. She said that he had an accident on board the boat, it was either a sail or the mast caught him on the head and he was killed, so I presume they were quite relatively young when her mum met her partner. We are not quite sure – my brother is going to go down and dig up a little bit more of it, down in St Blazey. This has brought it all up, we are going to go down and see how far we can go back, 'cause obviously we didn't do it when mum was alive, but now we're hoping we can trace back and see about this captain from Jamaica.

Do you know his name?

No, no, it's all very... that's all she used to say you know, she never said very much at all. Colvin, was her maiden name, but we're still not sure whether that was the name of her father or whether it was the name of the gentleman that she later ended up with. So we've got an idea it was Colvin, but we're not quite sure. So we've got to work on that, my brother likes doing these sort of things, so he says he is going to look into it, we might be able to find a bit more out.

It's not difficult to find things out these days.

No, and back in that time, we know when she was born and we know it was at St. Blazey down in Cornwall, and they were the first black family, so we are hoping it's going to be quite easy to find out more about, her sort of thing.

I'm not sure I know where St Blazey is.

It's near St. Austell.

So is it quite a little place?

Yes.

When was your mum born?

She was born June 12th, 1917.

So in the middle, or not the middle of the First World war? And she said, how many brothers and sisters?

There were five of them 3 girls and 2 boys.

Right, and she was number...?

She was number 4.

And they all had the same dad, this Jamaican sea captain?

Yes they were all black.

And any of them still alive?

No, mum was the last.

And you don't have any idea what he was... was him coming to Cornwall, was that to do with the war or was he bringing things?

Bringing things as far as we could get from mum, he wasn't anything to do with the war like, it was to do with delivering things, sort of cargo, that sort of thing... that's what we got out of her. She was very vague herself, maybe they were very young when he died. I know there was 5 of them, their ages were very close, so they might not have been told a lot by her mum. They never talked very much, did they, in those days, you know what I mean, just sort of kept everything to themselves, sort of thing. But I know she did say they were the first black family down in Cornwall and Cornwall apparently is a very funny place to live, if you don't fit in you don't fit in, you know what I mean, the Cornish. So that's what she used to tell me. But they had a good life down there.

[mobile phone rings.. silence]

So, tell us what you know about your mum's life as a child. She was born in 1917 so growing up in the '20s and then into the '30s with her four brothers and sisters in a small... and they stayed in that same village of St. Blazey?

Yes, as far as we know they stayed in St Blazey. As far as we know, she then came to Exeter because she was a, she learnt, she was a typist, she used to work out at the airport, we know that. She used to work a couple of nights a week down at the pub in Longbrook Street,

The Black Horse

That's it! She used to work a couple of nights down at the Black Horse. She met my father, he introduced her to his mum, no sorry, his Aunty and she stayed, lived with my Aunty which is just across where the new John Lewis car park is, a big estate there of old houses and she lived there. And when she came to Exeter she met my father.

Do you know why she came to Exeter? So she was about 20/21?

Yes, I think as far as we know, she just wanted to do, go somewhere different. There wasn't any reason for it as far as I know. They had a good life, well looked after down in Cornwall, but I think she was very outgoing and just wanted to go somewhere different.

And did her brothers and sisters stay in Cornwall?

Yes, they did for a while, and then one of her sisters moved to Launceston, which was Cornwall anyway, but another sister went up to London. So they were all, nobody really went very far. I know during the war she used to help out when there was bombs, when the bombs had fallen, what do they call those people that used to put a bag on their shoulder and go round...?

ARP warden?

That's right, she used to do that, going round, looking at, checking where everybody, you know, was out, I know she did that as well, because she told us that.

There's a couple of stories in here from the war which are very interesting - one of which is about the time of D-Day when she was working at the airport.

Yes, this is just things that we vaguely remember. I expect if I read that it would bring it all back again, but the only few things that I remember is her saying that the Yanks were here and they didn't like dark people and she only had to walk the pub with fear. And my Aunt's place was over there so she didn't have to go that far, but she said she was followed by these three Americans one night, and she was in fear of her life, because they didn't like black people and of course they'd been into the pub, seen her in the pub, and followed her home afterwards, and she said then, she thought her life was at risk. She managed to just get in the house in time and shut the gate, so we do remember her telling us that.

[phone rings]

That's one of the stories I do remember that she told us. Then it was mostly... she used to do what can I say, with having a lot of brothers and sisters, they didn't have a lot, so she used to have all her underwear made. So there was a shop here she used to go to, and she used to have all her undergarments all made specially for her, which she said she loved.

So she must have had a bit of money then.

Yes, because she was working and doing that as well, I think it was only a couple of evenings a week that she used to work in the pub itself. But she was working full-time at the airport, so yes she treated herself, and then I think she got involved with my dad.

Do you know when they met? And how they met?

I think he did meet her at the pub, because she was getting on for 30 then, she was older.

So that was after the war?

Yes, he was a widower at the time, he lost his wife through [phone rings] he lost his wife through bowel cancer and he had five children so my mum, I don't think to be honest, she liked my dad but the thought of bringing up five children before her own, if you see what I mean, was very hard. She said my dad got funny and he could be like that, and he used to say that he would kill himself if she didn't marry him. This sort of thing, you know what I mean, and I think tugged at mum's heart strings.

What was your dad's name?

Arthur

Arthur Hendy

Arthur Hendy, that's him and that's my mum.

That's a lovely photo. So that's in the 2nd world war – what was he is?

In the desert rats in North Africa.

And in Italy?

Yes, he had several of his fingers missing on one hand where he'd unwittingly, he used to laugh about it. He got into a jeep and gone across and didn't realise it was land mines everywhere and he'd gone across and in the end it caught him, but lucky enough he just escaped with a couple of fingers, but I think it was his thumb, those three there are missing. But other than that, he was quite, he got away with it. He always used to laugh about it, because they would say: do you know where you just drove through? And he

used to think it was very, very funny. But yes, she married him and brought up his five children before she had seven of us altogether.

So there were 12 children, no, five...

Five that grew up and then she had seven of us altogether. She lost one and so she had six of us.

That's a lot of children, that's an enormous amount of children. So you've got 5 brothers and sisters and 5 step brothers and sisters?

Yes.

Wow, that's a big family.

Yes it is a big family. And I think she was 32 before she had me and 42 when she had my youngest sister, that was the last one. So in ten years she'd had 7 children, because she lost one in between.

Wow, that's amazing. So let's just get the dates right, so she married your dad in about forty –when do you think?

Well, she was 32 when she had me, so I would have thought it would have been about the '30s.

So she was 32 when she had you, so it would have been round about '48.

Yeah

Right. So there's you and you're the eldest?

Yes the oldest of the six.

So they were all born in late 40's and throughout the 50's.

Yes, like I said, I was born in '50 and my sister was born, what would that be, she's 9 years younger than me.

So '59 or 60. And what was your mum like as a mother?

Oh very good, yes, lovely mum, couldn't have asked for better.

In what way?

Well, she didn't, she never had nothing for herself, never worried about herself, it was always the children first, always kept us together. She was the one that kept us together really, 'cos as you get older obviously one goes this way one goes that way. And she was the one that sort of kept all the family together. With her mother still being alive, we all used to have, my dad had like the old Volkswagens in they days, we all used to travel down to St Blazey

to see my Nan down there, but all the time when we were younger, we all went together, everybody went together. We went up to the moors and it was all of us all the time, they kept us all together.

So that was 11 children?

No, because the others had more or less grown up then, and she came up on the tail end of them starting to leave home sort of thing. But she was a great help to them as well, they were really grateful that she helped dad and that sort of thing. It's weird really, because I work and I met... we knew where they were sort of thing. I did meet a couple of his sons at work and they did work with me at one point, and they looked so much like my dad, unbelievable, because they were white. And it just seems funny that they were white and we're black, but yeah, it was a very good life she kept us all together. Very strong, very strong-willed woman.

And you lived on Burnthouse Lane?

Yes, we lived in Briar Crescent which was just off of Burnthouse Lane.

And where did you go to school?

We went to Bradley Rowe and then some of us went to the Priory and my two brothers went to Vincent Thompson.

Which is now St Peter's?

Yes. So we went to Priory and they went to Vincent Thompson

Are there any interesting things you remember from your primary and secondary school days? What was it like in Wonford in the '50s and '60s?

Well to be honest, we don't understand, my mum said the same, they always used to say it was a rough place to live and all things like that, but the people we met were really lovely, you know what I mean, you could leave your doors open all things like that. It was lovely, all of us growing up we never had any problems with anybody out there. They'd respect you sort of thing, and we didn't have any trouble with colour either, which was quite unusual. Of course we were a lot lighter than mum, my mum was really dark, but of course as we're getting with whiter people we're getting lighter if you see what I mean. We never had any trouble with anybody at school.

Did you mum ever tell you about experiences of racism or prejudice against her, either in Cornwall or up here in Exeter?

No, she didn't. Apart from the story with the soldiers, or the Americans, everybody seemed to treat her very well, she thought she was very lucky that the people she met and come into contact with sort of accepted her.

So there was no sense of her being an outsider?

No, she used to say that she was very lucky that people accepted her. But then saying that, my daughter was lighter, but she did have, she went to Bradley Rowe as well because I moved just down the road in Burnthouse Lane, I moved in Briar Crescent myself, and she did have racism, quite a bit.

At school?

Going to school. She used to complain of having a lot of tummy aches and that and we couldn't understand what she was going on about. And we decided to just keep an eye on her, and it was a few guys, a few boys from Vincent Thompson that were beating her before she went to school.

Really, attacking her?

Yes

Wow – what in the '70s?

Yes, because she is now 38. So she's 38 now. And because of her colour, she was taken for like Indian as well, and she did have a few jibes, they thought that she was Indian, but she wasn't. So she had a bit of racism growing up. My son didn't, because he's more white I think, and none of my sisters and all that and their families, they don't remember any either.

Any your sisters and brothers all lived, continued to live in Exeter?

Yes. But it skipped us and went to my daughter. But other than that, my mum always said that we were very lucky that we met people and they accepted us for who we are, which was very strange in those days, you know, anything different people would take offence against, things like that. But that is the only case of racism that I can remember from our family.

And do you remember when you were growing up in the '50/'60s in Wonford, do you remember any other children from elsewhere, any other children who looked visibly different? Or adults?

There was a couple of coloured people there, they lived a little bit further over in, like, Rifford Road, but they were coloured as well, they were the same colouring as us, they were Caribbean. Other than that, no, they were mostly white. [laughs]

And do you feel, how do you feel, or your mother, do you think she felt any connection with Jamaica even though she knew very little about her father?

Yes, I think this is what my brother wants to look into now, because she really wanted us to find out more about her dad, because obviously she didn't really know a lot and she was really interested that if any of us did any travelling, we could go there and maybe look up and see if we could find out anything.

She didn't ever go to Jamaica?

No, never. They never.. I suppose.. she was bringing up at least 7, 8 or 9 of us most probably, money was scarce, wasn't it, she didn't do, she was home looking after the children and I suppose there wasn't a lot of money to do any travelling. She never really went anywhere, to be honest, except for like down to see her mum and that sort of thing, go out week-ends and that, travel about. My father used to take the old primus stove and cook and that for us all. So we basically all stayed together all around Exeter and Devon, really.

Sounds like a very happy family life?

Yes, yeah.. they were both very good parents and they both believed in keeping everybody together, and we didn't really know anything different, just thought that's how it was. T'int till you start getting older and see how other families grow up, and you think cor, we were lucky, we were lucky that we had good parents that wanted to keep us all together, keep us sheltered I guess. Yes, we all had a brilliant time, and my father always used to keep all things, birds, chickens all sorts he used to keep. So we were brought up with animal sort of life as well as the life that we had. So yes, it was a very good life.

What did your father do?

He was a lorry driver and in his later years, he used to work for Akro, which used to be lawnmowers, doing repairing and delivering lawnmowers that sort of thing.

And he had no problem with his lack of fingers then?

No, no it was his thumb and his fingers, but he coped very well, didn't have no problems with that at all. Kept a job right up till he retired sort of thing. No, he was good.

And what do you remember, after you left home and your parents were without children, do you remember anything about your mum's life in those days, as she kind of grew older?

As she grew older... my dad developed emphysema so she more or less looked after him a lot. She did go, she used to go about three days a week to a disabled centre where they would make baskets and all things like that. They used to pick her up outside because arthritis, severely bad arthritis – it was behind the market, there used to be a disabled centre.

St Loyes?

No, I can't remember...

St Georges Market, you mean?

Remember around there, there used to be a place there, and disabled people would go there. And she'd go there about three times a week and make baskets, make all sorts, just to get her out the house really basically. And she did that for quite a while really. Looking after my dad, that basically was, they didn't do much, didn't go very far. If they wanted to go anywhere obviously, we would take them. I was the oldest and my dad didn't want anybody else but me to do it – I don't know why, he was just like that. And then mum was exactly the same, so I did most of the ferrying to and fro, I don't know why, I've got brothers and sisters, do you know what I mean? So basically that was about it.

So the main, it sounds like most of her life was put into the family, that was after she met your dad and married, so really her life was about family?

Yes it was family, finishing off helping the last ones leaving of his lot and then having her own, she had 7 of us altogether, we were all premature, we were all 7 months babies, and she had us all at home, and they used to say to her, are you sure you don't smoke? But she never smoked or drank, because we were all 7 months babies. She had us all at home. But everything was around the home basically, she never had the urge to go anywhere. You know, I said to her: do you ever want to go anywhere, and she said: no I'm happy as I am. We often used to say to her "do you want to go on holiday" "no, no" she was happiest when she was home. And basically that was her life, finishing off the end of seeing my father's first family going off and then having seven of her own.

Do you think – I don't want to pry at all – do you think your family and your brothers and sisters, do you think you got an influence from that, in terms of what sounds like a very stable, loving family for you? Do you think that has gone through to your brothers and your nephews and nieces?

Yes, I think with us having a, that sort of family life, we are a lot closer, than a lot of families. We only know that because we've been out into the world now and we know what other families done, this sort of thing. But I think with the core being my mum like that, it has spread to all of us sort of thing. All family orientated sort of thing. Yes definitely.

What do you think your mum would say about families, what do you think was her secret in terms of bringing up a family.

I'm not saying she was strict, but if she said something, that something went, sort of thing. My father, he was... yeah if he said something – they didn't have to shout, we sort of knew our place, if they said something, then we knew that was it. So they were firm in one way, but not strict strict, a little bit firm, keep us in our place sort of thing, and they were both like that. So I presume that's what helped us as well because we didn't, because they were quite firm, that's sort of come with us into our lives as well, being firm – not strict, just firm, if something's said, then that's it. I think that's what is was with mum, because she was very outgoing, out into the world, and she seemed to have that when she was younger and then all of a sudden she seemed to

want, she had the family life, and then she wasn't interested in going out anymore, she was happy, happiest being at home.

She must have been so busy from the time she married your dad up until the youngest one left home which would have been, what, 1980 or something like that? Thirty years of...

Yes, because we had - the houses out in Burnthouse Lane, they just had a small kitchen and a front room, so my dad would be in the front room in his chair, nobody sat in that chair, that was my dad's chair, and he would sit there with the television, and then we'd have a table with stools out in the kitchen, and we'd all be forced on to these great long stools, we'd all be sat all close together, but that was our life, that's all we knew.

And that was the lives of the people next door to you, everyone was like that?

Yes, because there were quite a few big families in they days, so everybody, you all mucked in, sort of slept top and tail, so that's what it was in they days, because they didn't have the rooms, and.

How many bedrooms were there?

Three, so we girls used to sleep in one and the boys in the other one. You know like I said, we'd be top and tails. If the older ones, they were there at any point, that's how we managed, I remember that like yesterday, things that stick in your head.

And that was a Council house, owned by the Council?

Yes.

And it was comfortable enough, good enough?

Oh goodness gracious me yes, and the gardens were always large with council houses, you always got a lovely large garden, and that's where my dad used to have birds and he used to encourage us to keep mice and rabbits, everything, in that one garden. I know my mum used to get annoyed with us sometimes, because it used to be a nine minute wonder, we'd like 'em for a bit and then, you know, we couldn't be bothered. And she used to say: I'll get rid of them, and then we started toeing the line, we've got to do this because mum's going to get rid of them and we knew she would.

And you didn't have any problems with foxes?

No, no we didn't and there was a large field just behind the estate, it's a great big park and that now where they play football and things like that, and it goes up to the bypass and hills and everything. But no, never did have any trouble with foxes – strange, isn't it? Because we do now, we have 'em walking around here now, so yes very strange. But yeah, I'm trying to think what else. We just thought we were just a normal family, mum and dad there all the time

– never on our own, mum and dad never left us on our own, they were there the whole time. And basically yes I believe it was a very good upbringing we all had, we were grateful for that. When we listen to other stories how people are brought up, we are quite lucky, we deem ourselves as being quite lucky.

Absolutely.

So I can't think of...

So generally just thinking about Exeter, you were born in Exeter, grown in Exeter, lived here all your life - what do you think of Exeter as a place?

I love Exeter. I can't see me ever moving anywhere else. My brother lives in Chudleigh, just outside of Exeter, but the rest of us all live in Exeter.

And why do you love Exeter, Sue?

I don't know, I just like, I just love the place. I've been around a few places you know, when you travel you look around at a few places, but I just love it, everything's close on hand, everything is here that you could possibly want. It's getting better all the time, they're introducing more things, coming all the time. And just everything basically is here. I just love, I'm a bit of a townie, I suppose, I do like the town side of it. I think that's why my brother moved to Chudleigh, he's more country, but me I'm a townie and the rest of us are townies. But I do love Exeter for that, I suppose I've been born here, I've lived here all my life, I work here. One of my sons lives here, but my daughter emigrated to Canada

Where?

Calgary. But she wouldn't go until my mum had passed. She didn't want to be that far away if anything happened to my mum. So she's been gone five years now, so it took her a while to get around to it because she's very family orientated as well. That's' what my Mum put into us, we put into them, hopefully. But yeh, I just love Exeter, can't see myself living anywhere else.

Anything you dislike about Exeter?

No, not really, I can't think of anything I don't like. I presume living, everywhere got it's downside I suppose and if I asked somebody else who lives somewhere else: what's the disadvantage of living here? There isn't any, because there'd be disadvantages anywhere wouldn't there, but no I can't think of anything that would put me off, no.

Is there anything else you want to tell us? About your family, your mum, your dad anything?

I'm just trying to think... what would you like to know. Would you want to know when she died?

Oh yes please.

She died on June 16th 2002, and she was 85 years old. She died four days after her birthday. She was 85 on the 12th and she died on the 16th. We don't really know, they think it was something to do with her kidneys, she was in hospital.

RD&E?

No, good grief, the one over... Whipton Hospital. They didn't really know, they thought it could have been cancer of the liver that she had, she was just fine one minute and she went downhill the next. They were doing tests obviously and all this sort of thing, and all of a sudden she just went really. They put a stent in to help her because she was in pain and she just sort of basically went downhill. They did want to do a post-mortem, and I said to them, would it bring her back and they said no. So I said leave it, it's not going to make any difference to us what she died of really, so I said no, she's been mucked around enough, I didn't want her mucked around any more and basically that was it really. I was on holiday in... where was I on holiday to? Fuerteventura with my daughter and my little grandson then, and they had to fly me back because she took a turn for the worse. We saw her... the thing was we booked the holiday and I said to her: mum I don't want to go, and she said I'd rather you went, so we did go and my sister rung me and told me she'd took a turn for the worst. So my daughter's husband and me came back, my daughter had to stay because my grandson had caught chicken-pox when he was over there so he couldn't fly, so my daughter couldn't come back and my brother also was in France so he didn't make it back in time either as well, the ferry was so booked. He didn't make it back. So it was a little bit of sadness around it because they couldn't make it for different reasons really. Because when we left she was fine, just [snaps fingers] like that. So basically that was it really, to be honest.

I'm trying to think if there was anything else. She lost my brother in 1990 he was only 36, 38, he had never been ill in his life, he'd been in apprenticeship since he was 15 at Vanborn and Radford, a garage up near the Exeter City football field. And he just couldn't breathe, they just didn't understand it because he was such a fit guy he had this apprenticeship at 15 and he just sort of went downhill. They took him into hospital, still didn't know what was wrong with him. They took him up to London and they think it was a sort of Leukaemia he had. We travelled up, mum wasn't very well, it hit her for six, he was her blue-eyed boy really, her son, her first son, and we travelled up there but by the time we got up there he'd had a blood clot, in his heart, they were lifting him out of bed, and so he was gone. So she was obviously, it knocked her for six, because he was – I know you're not supposed to have this in families, but he was, he was her favourite, yeh we all know that. And that did knock her for six, really knocked her for six. But other than that, I'm trying to think whether there was anything else.

He'd had a very sad life my brother, I haven't actually got the dates here but he was married to a young girl from the vicinity and he had a daughter, he had

two daughters, she went up to Grantham up in Lincolnshire to stay with her mum and that. I don't know they were sort of apart at the time and he had a.. she met this religious freak, he picked her up, picked the two children up from school, went the wrong way up the motorway and killed them all, killed the guy coming the other way as well. He was on his way home, this guy, and he just drove like that. So my brother'd had a very sad life, so maybe that's why my mum had a little bit more for him, but then he was the eldest boy, you know what I mean? So that rocked us all, but we were a very strong family, we all stuck together, I presume that's what kept us all going really, that we've all been there for each other. But I know that did knock my mum because he'd had that bad before and then he had this, and he'd just married again and the baby was about six weeks old when he died. I know... he'd managed to see his son, but that was about it.

She's had a hard life, you know what I mean, a very hard life, but she was a very happy woman, she was never miserable. Because one of the pictures that was in the paper was her standing by her front gate, and one of my little nephews is there with her and she was always smiling, you know, people used to go past, wave to her, they knew her, that's Mrs Hendy over there, you know what I mean, but yes she was always smiling. She had all this in her life and she was always smiling.

Must have been a lot of people at her funeral, I imagine.

Oh, my goodness me, it was packed. We had the biggest part they had down at the crematorium, because some of them are a little smaller and we had the biggest one, they were all outside and everything. She had all her neighbours and everything come, she was very well liked.

And respected, by the sound of it.

Very well liked and respected, yes. I expect Olwyn would have told you that. Everybody used to think the world of her yes. Very good woman. She had a very hard life, but she seemed to enjoy what she had, and she said, you know, 85, get to 85, that was very good. I told her I wanted her to hang on to 100 so we could get the telegram from the Queen, because we've never seen one, would like to see one, but she said I wish I could. Basically that was it. But on top of this she had this arthritis, they wouldn't operate because she wasn't, never seemed to be well enough. But she was happy really, a very happy soul. She was always worrying about other people, because when she moved from that house they gave her a bungalow, near Arthur Roberts Home in Burnhouse Lane and there's some little bungalows there and they give her the end bungalow. There were people next to her that were in their '90s and she used to be running in and out. I mean I had a phone call from a lady across the road, this was about half past eleven at night and she said: I can see your mum outside, is she alright? And I said I think so and I drove over there, she was alright but the lady next door hadn't been very well and she wanted to have some air, so mum was sat out there with her. Never mind about her, she was sat outside with this lady whilst she weren't feeling very

well. So she cared more about others than she did herself. She said I'm alright, sort of thing. Couple of neighbours crossed the road, she said I'm ok.

She sounds like an extraordinary woman.

She was, That's what they said: very extraordinary woman. Very strong, I think she had to be for lot of the things she had to put up with. Very strong woman, very strong. And like you said, very well liked and respected, by a lot of people.

Thank you Sue.

End of interview