

# Telling Our Stories Finding Our Roots

DEVON'S MULTICULTURAL HISTORY  
ILFRACOMBE

## INTERVIEW WITH KAREN WRIGHT

INTERVIEWER: ABI OBENE

24 JUNE 2024

**Abi Obene:** Okay, so we are here on the 24th of June 2024. I'm here with Karen Wright. Hello, my name is Abi Obene. and this is a recorded conversation, recorded interview, for the *Telling our Stories, Finding our Roots* project, which is a project organised by Devon Development Education and funded by the National Lottery. And we're just here in the Ilfracombe Centre in Ilfracombe along the High Street, just to have a chat. So thank you very much for agreeing to have a talk to us.

**0.38 Abi:**

**And yeah, I suppose we'll sort of starts at the beginning. With a very broad question. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself, perhaps about your childhood and your experiences as a young woman?**

0.56. Karen

I grew up in South Africa in a very, very special part of the world across the road from a very beautiful beach. The Cape, where I came from, has a Mediterranean climate. It absolutely was a beautiful place to live and grow up. There weren't many plants that were green or gardens or anything around, particularly my area. And so the beach was my, my place. I did my studying on the beach, I did my reading on the beach. When I got my driver's license, you could drive along the beach. And it was just being at the beach, in the sea was very special.

**0.5. Abi**

**Was that a social thing as well? Or was that mostly by yourself?**

1.5 Karen

You couldn't help it, it was where you met your friends, where everybody, the beach was considered, to play, it was everybody's meeting place. Different beaches had different connotations. It was very much a beach culture, in that you had, there was a lot of body beautiful stuff, and I didn't have particularly good shape growing up [laughs] so it wasn't always absolutely blissful. But it was, you know, different beaches were for different activities - there were sort of more rocky ones, then maybe sort of Sandy show off your body ones - there were all sorts of different places.

**2.34. Abi**

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**So were there any official events that also happened at the beach? Or was it kind of this is social?**

2.55. Karen

Absolutely not. Yeah, it was just a very, very social place.

**3.01. Abi**

**Fantastic, lovely. So is there anything else you could tell us about your schooling growing up? I mean, what are the differences between schooling in South Africa and schooling here ...?**

3.13

Karen

Well, it was... I should also say I was growing up in apartheid South Africa. Which was fine for me because I was white. We had a coloured nanny who looked after us and helped my mother in the house. And she was an incredibly special, special woman, who was my playmate when I was a very, young child. And she was with me for I think the first 12 years of my life, so she was very much, very much a part of it and made sure that I behaved myself and did things right and didn't swear and didn't do anything naughty.

Schooling was, I don't think there was, I can only think really, of one person in our primary class who had difficulties reading. We all learned to read, the classes were quite big. There were about 35 children to a class, 30 to 35 children to a class. And you did what you were told. You had one teacher in the class and you did it, so you weren't, it wasn't encouraged that you were taught how to think, you were taught how to obey. And in secondary school, you still sort of did what you were told. I remember, a couple of the girls started thinking for themselves and they found life a little bit more interesting and challenging. But if you didn't think too much, and you just obeyed what you were supposed to do, then life was just fine.

**5.13. Abi**

**So, at school, were you, were schools segregated.**

5.21 Karen

Girls and boys. In the first three years in primary school there were girls and boys. But after that it was all girls.

**5.28. Abi**

**All girls.**

5.29. Karen

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And there was a boy's school, down the road, a sort of brother school, but it was very carefully arranged that we didn't come out at the same time [laughs]. You know, it was not encouraged that the girls met up with the boys. Yeah, yeah, it was quite, quite a happy time. [There were] various official roles that I had in school - because I became what my parents called "head of vice", which was deputy head girl. So vice head girl. At one time I was editor of the school magazine, that was in secondary school, but otherwise, yeah.

## 6.19. Abi

**Do you have any particular recollection of any particular teachers or anything?**

6.23 Karen

We had an amazing maths teacher who was interested in maths and numbers. And she fostered and encouraged sort of extra maths groups and things. And she was incredibly special in that her class never was out of control, even when she wasn't in it. The class never rioted, never did anything that they shouldn't do. And I just marvel at that sort of ability. Not everybody loved it, because not everybody loved maths. So...

## 7.05 Abi

**Was she quite intimidating? Was that how she did it? Or was it just...**

7.09 Karen

No, she just did it extremely quietly. And there was just never any disruption. And it's a gift. It really is a gift.

## 7.24. Abi

**So putting aside school just for the moment, but still staying in kind of the era of you being in South Africa and your childhood and growing up? Are there any traditions or events or holidays that sort of don't happen in the UK, perhaps, or that you have fond memories of?**

7.47. Karen

Well, I grew up in, I suppose here it's called a liberal Jewish home. And we had lots of cousins. And my mother was the youngest one of five. And the, for the Jewish holidays, we would get to go, for a few of the special Jewish holidays, we would get together and celebrate them, which mainly meant a big family meal, and all the cousins went off and played with each other or whatever, as you got older. Because there were about, I think, 13 of us cousins, and there was, sort of one or two years difference in between each age group. And so you had your friend in your age group, although there might have been only been 10 years between the oldest and the youngest. You had your friend, you know, in the next next age. So there were a lot of those sorts of things. But in our home, we didn't really, there weren't, there were

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lots of parties in our home. Our parents were terribly sociable. And it was just a lovely home you know. Another person would come for lunch because one lived across the road from the beach - you had a lot of people dropping in and visiting and so it was very social time, but not particularly celebratory in that sense. We didn't do Christmas at all because it's steaming hot. We were Jewish, and so... [laughs]

## 9.41. Abi

**So two very good reasons not to do it...**

9.43. Karen

Yes Christmas just didn't come into it.

## 9.49. Abi

**And so you grew up with several siblings or...**

9.53. Karen

Just a sister. Slightly older than me.

## 9.55. Abi

**Okay, yeah, so I suppose, as well with you and your cousins, at that age, 10 years is a big...**

10.02 Karen

It's a big difference, yeah.

## 10.03. Abi

**Even a year makes a huge difference.**

10.04. Karen

It even surprises me now, in adulthood, to find out it was only 10 years difference between the oldest and the youngest. Which feels nothing now.

## 10.14. Abi

**Yes. Feels massive at the time. Yeah, yeah.**

10.18. Karen

One or two years, you know, they were the youngest ones, they were together, and then I was the next batch, the next youngest.

## 10.27. Abi

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**Okay, so then as you sort of grew up in South Africa, you then went off to, was it you started...**

10.37. Karen

I started training as an architect at University of Cape Town. And I did three years there, with a bit of, you do practical training in your holidays a little bit as well. And then, halfway through after your third year, you're supposed to have a practical experience here. And my practical experience here coincided with my sister getting married in England, to a South African, but she got married in England, and I came over for her wedding and I thought I would get a job and do my practical experience over here. And so I did that.

And in the architect's office where I got a job, I met Laurence, and we got, we got married, sort of several years later. But I found that I could continue my course over here. And get credit for what I'd done - although here with the architecture course you get a degree after, you get a bachelor's degree after, three years. You do a practical and then at the end of it, you get a master's degree or a diploma depending on which college you go to, or which university... but in South Africa, you only got a bachelor's degree after six years. And so my first three years, although it was accepted by the school I went to, I didn't get a qualification for those. And at the end of it, I ended up with a diploma for doing the same thing that my husband got two master's degrees for. Anyway, he went to a better school than I did.

**12.43. Abi**

**Did you find that that affected anything going forward at all? Was it, was it sort of fine or...**

12.48. Karen

Absolutely fine. It didn't matter. Yeah. Yeah. You just, you know, you've qualified as an architect and that was it.

**13.03 Abi**

**Yeah. Yeah. And I suppose especially once you get to the point of talking to people, yeah. As soon as you hit that point, it all smooths over anyway, even if there were any queries. Yeah, perfect.**

**13.15. Abi**

**So was that in the 1970s that you first came to the UK?**

13.19. Karen

It was in 70, 72.

**13.22. Abi**

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**Seventy two. And then, so 72 was for your sister's wedding?**

13.28. Karen

Yeah. In July.

**13.30. Abi**

**And then there was sort of a few months and years of kind of, between...**

13.34. Karen

And then I've got a job and started working. And then I think I found I could get into college. I think it was the following... this where I'm a bit hazy... I think it was the following September. So I think it was September 73, that was when I got into what was the Central Poly in Baker Street. And completed the course over there.

**14.04. Abi**

**Fantastic. And so you move then to London.**

14.08. Karen

Yes.

14.09. Abi

**So what was the experience like going from Cape Town to London? I mean it feels, I mean having grown up on beaches to the middle of a very large, very busy city.**

14.22. Karen

Very different. I always wondered how people recognized where they lived, because all the houses looked the same, you know. But you soon find that you walk along the street and you stop outside your house and turn in. And so that sort of became understandable. Bedsit land was quite, quite interesting... having your bedsit, which I rented from a lady in West Hampstead. It was quite nice, quite a nice sized room. Then, when you open the cupboard, you had two gas rings and a grill. You could do anything on two gas rings and a grill. Yeah, you can make a kettle there. You can make chicken, apple pie sort of things. It's quite wonderful - it took me years to learn how to use more than two pots.

**15.20. Abi**

**[Laughs] A well ingrained habit. Yeah.**

15.23. Karen

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I still have it now. But that was the sort of interesting, a very, very interesting difference to what I had had. This awful gas boiler that shot out hot water, well hot water perhaps? Yeah. What else was different? Well, yeah, the post was different. You could have the most extraordinary thing, you could have almost a conversation by post. You know, send out a letter in the morning and get a reply in the afternoon, first class post, because there were about three deliveries a day in London. Yeah. To perhaps nothing. Three, three a week, if we're lucky down on the farm.

**16.18. Abi**

**Oh, gosh.**

It's a big difference. Was there anything sort of, culturally speaking, that was either maybe a surprise when you sort of moved to the UK or moved to London in particular? Anything that sort of was an adjustment in terms of with people maybe?

16.44. Karen

No, I tend to be the sort of person who just goes forward. See what you come across and just keep on, keep on going. You know you've just got to cope with what you've got, and what you've got in front of you. It's just all different, all new. So give it a go.

**17.06. Abi**

**So and then, did you also have any? I mean, it sounds like you had sort of moving on and moving forward. went straight into, you know, having a bedsit and sort of living, working, studying here. So did you notice anything about perhaps your reception here? Or was it quite a smooth transition for you, do you think, to move to the UK.**

17.34. Karen

I didn't have any particular problems. People found that my accent was, they couldn't place anything about me because you could have no preconceptions, because I sounded different. Which was something that I noticed in myself. When you go on the tube, I didn't realize that I assumed people would sound in a particular way until that person would open their mouth and I'd sort of think, "Wow, I didn't think they'd sound like that." And it was just, it was learning something about oneself as much as it was - it was the same thing happening to everybody around you really with me, I suppose.

**18.21. Abi**

**Do you find that in the UK they often say that an accent changes every 10 miles? Is it similar in South Africa? Or is it...**

18.33. Karen

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Possibly, but I never noticed it. I never noticed that there were different accents in South Africa until I heard one of the South African comedians take off some of the South African accents. And I could see the people that he was imitating. And I could see that there was a difference, but I haven't ever tuned into it. Yes, there were a lot of strange differences. My husband noticed the differences when when he came back to South Africa with me. He noticed the differences in pronunciation which I never heard. Which, yeah, had some amusing moments.

**19.24. Abi**

**So did he come back at some point while you two were still in London?**

19.28. Karen

After we were married, yeah, he came back with me.

**19.32. Abi**

**And that's just a sort of visit...**

19.34. Karen

Just to visit my parents at the time, yeah

**19.37. Abi**

**Lovely.**

19.37. Karen

To visit my mother, yeah.

**19.50. Abi**

**So you've got your, you said your sister got married in the UK? Is she also, does she also sort of stay in the UK along with her husband?**

19.50. Karen

Yes, she came over also when she was about 21 and her husband was South African but his parents were um, political objectors of the system. So they weren't very popular in South Africa, and they, they had left South Africa for that reason. So he couldn't go back. So it was easier to have the family here. After they got married, they had, he was a what do you call it? He would be a project, project manager. And he did a lot of work in the oil, for the oil fields, and various things. So he went to Scotland. And then they went to Malaysia, and I don't know where else - India, all sorts of places, they spent long sort of months or years in those countries. Still keeping the house in London, so that they would come back to



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London every now and again, to see their children or grandchildren, and now they spend half their time in Cape Town and half their time in London.

## 21.18. Abi

**I suppose that's a lot easier now for them to be there. Now that everything is sort of...**

21.25. Karen

No. Yes, now they're going to the beach over there!

## 21.29. Abi

**So, say, moving I suppose back a little you mentioned, you know, obviously, as a child, you experience things differently than you do as an adult. And that you grew up sort of, in and under apartheid. Was there a point where you kind of started to notice things suddenly?**

21.52. Karen

You couldn't help notice things on some levels. Besides the fact there was one, the provision of public toilets, the post offices had two doors, two places. And there was always whites and non-whites in all these particular areas. So that was, that was what life was about. How it was. And as a child, as a small child, you were very often with your nanny carer and you would just sort of go along with wherever you went to. I was particularly fortunate because she was such a special person. And I think some children grew up with not such special people. So they might have had a completely different experience. But yeah, she was a really, really good person.

## 23.03. Abi

**And 12 years is a long time to be...**

23.06. Karen

I kept in touch with her for, I mean she came and worked sort of one day a week for us for many years after that. So yeah. I do think now, she also had a daughter who was a bit older than I was and I've sort of thought in coming here that I was fortunate enough to have her mother whereas the daughters of the grandmother didn't have the care of being with her, which never occurred to me then, but did when I came over here.

## 23.54. Abi

**Did you ever have? Was it the sort of thing that you would talk about, about apartheid, with her at any point or was it just something that just didn't really get discussed.**

24.06. Karen

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In my household it might have been discussed, but probably not with the children because there were various flare ups and rioting every now and again, and one didn't have it discussed at home. But there might have been, when there had been things in the street where some people perhaps weren't behaving quite as nicely as others, you were kept closer. But that's par for the course anyway, really? Yeah.

## **24.52. Abi**

**I believe you also mentioned that your grandparents originated from Latvia, Lithuania.**

24.59. Karen

Lithuania

## **25.01. Abi**

**And then moved to South Africa?**

25.03. Karen

South Africa, yes. I don't know when my father's parents moved to South Africa - because he was born in South Africa. But his father definitely was born in Lithuania. My grandfather, I think, was born in Lithuania. And my grandmother was from Latvia. And they went out in the late 1920s, 1929, they went to South Africa. And I think they went for a better economic future. And they, I think there was sort of pogrom or activity against the Jews, in a lot of these places that was getting them migrating and moving from where they were.

## **25.49. Abi**

**Do you know, roughly when it was they were moving?**

26.00. Karen

My mother's family, my grandfather must have moved before 1929. But I know my mother and her siblings, and her mother, came out on the boat in 1929. I don't know when my paternal grandfather moved there.

## **26.24. Abi**

**Yeah. And so you said, you know, mix of economic reasons, but also, the sort of feeling, perhaps that mounting pressure, you know, and wanting to get away...**

26.40. Karen

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I know, one of my mother's cousins. She visited England when she was about 21. So when that had been, probably, yeah, probably just before the outbreak of the War, Second World War. And she was just told, "Do not come home." And she never saw her family again. She stayed in England.

## 27.10. Abi

**And did you? To your knowledge, did you find that being Jewish in South Africa, was something that just wasn't an issue you didn't sort of seem to come across very....**

27.24. Karen

It was a very Jewish area that I grew up in although the school had both Jewish and non-Jewish girls in it. And it was quite a Jewish area. And for some reason, we had the choice of French or Latin as an extra at school. And the Jewish girls usually took French and the non-Jewish girls took Latin, for which reason I know not, but... Not exclusively, but pretty much it went that way.

## 28.10. Abi

**I do often wish I did French at school. Fortunately, I did Spanish so...**

28.14 Karen

I think a lot of the world speak Spanish. Yeah,

## 28.16. Abi

**Absolutely. It's more unfortunate because I'm just so terrible at Spanish that it seems to have not made a dot of difference [laughs]**

**So. going forward in time again, to you being in London, sort of studying, living working in London. What was it like? Starting up a career as a as an architect. Your husband also was an architect.**

28.52 Karen

At first we didn't work together. And I was fortunate enough to get a job with a firm that was converting and renovating terraced housing into flats for a housing association. And what was so fantastic about this particular job was that everybody in the office did the same work. If you went and worked for a fancy architect, as a young architect or in a holiday job, you might get designing cupboard details or door jamb details or something for months or years, but in this particular job, they had a really good system of standard specification for the sort of work that we were doing. And every single person, if you were told to go and look at a house, or whatever it was, you would go in, you would measure it up, work out what needed doing, cost it up, work out how to get the finance for it, which was all on a system that you sort of pulled down and accessed. And then you helped select the builder, put it out for pricing, you then took it

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on site. You also had, if there were any defects after the six months, we went along to check on that as well. And so you saw the job right through from the beginning to the end, and the partners were doing that just as well as any of the underlings. So it was really a very, very good, good training ground, a very good system.

## **31.06 Abi**

**Yes, you got a very complete overview of the process.**

31.12. Karen

When the children came along and I did that job sort of part time and you have one child and it seems to go ok, you go in part time and that child plays happily under the desk, you take it to meetings and it stills plays happily under the desk and you think that when the next child comes along it will be the same. But it wasn't. The next child decided that it had to speak through every single meeting and make a noise and life had to change. And Laurence and I started working together with another chap and we were doing refurbishment of local authority blocks of flats in London. So it wasn't the glamorous side of things but you were doing something useful. It did come out quite effectively – sometimes more so than others.

## **32.26. Abi**

**So was all of your career focused on this (I'm not sure if this is the right way to say it) practical side.**

32.34. Karen

Yes, rehabilitation work. I really like doing site work, working with the builders. Being on site. Watching the job and seeing how it's coming on. Checking on that. And Laurence preferred the drawing side and the writing side, which was great with me.

## **33.01 Abi**

**A really great balance. I think there's a lot of people who don't really fully grasp the entire scope of what being an architect is, perhaps think that it's just the drawing, that it's making out a detailed sketch or design, and then its handed off to someone else.**

33.23. Karen

For some people it's a very pretentious thing, which is a load of rubbish! You can take any facet you want to. You've got to solve a problem.

## **33.46. Abi**

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**I think at one point you mentioned that you had lived on a street with eight other architects at the time.**

34.03. Karen

Yes. It was a housing action area and so it was an up and coming part of North London and there were meetings in this housing action area – how you could improve it – I can't remember what sort of things were going on. Myself and Laurence shared a house with Laurence's brother and his wife who were architects. Then we would go to a meeting and someone would say, "Well I'm an architect," and we would say, "We are too!" Some architects feel that they are god's invention on earth... but not so.

**34.52. Abi**

**Interesting local meetings then as a result!. A very well-designed street in London!**

35.04. Karen

No, no. It was all Victorian architecture that everyone was playing around with.

**35.09. Abi**

**So the two of you were architects for 20-30 years perhaps?**

35.21. Karen

Laurence did longer than I did. He did around 25 years. I did about 20 years I suppose until we moved here.

**35.32. Abi**

**So then you moved down to Devon, which was another massive change.**

35.35 Karen

Just a different problem to solve. The same idea but you've just got to take a problem and work out how you solve and approach it.

**35.47. Abi**

**So you moved down to the Ilfracombe area and you started a farm?**

35.57 Karen

Yes, we started a farm. At the time you don't know what sort of farm you are going to do until you find the property you settle on. Whether you will do holiday lets or doing arable or whatever you are doing. So the land we had was very good grazing land and couldn't really be used for much else. There were a lot of rules at the time about milk quotas and sheep quotas and all sorts of dairy quotas, and we thought that

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we wouldn't do anything like cow dairying because that is very specialist and there were a lot of people around us doing it. And cows are pretty big. At the time there were lots of popular diversifications like alpacas and angora goats.

Anyway, we settled on sheep dairying, which was a really good one I think. We thought we would grow into it. You know, the first year we would settle in and buy a few sheep and a few cattle because we wanted some beef cattle, and the next year we would go a little bit further and they would have their babies and that sort of thing.

But anyway, we got going and set up. We bought our first 10 or 12 ewe lambs for next year's thing. Then we got a phone call from the person that we bought the ewe lambs from and he said, "You're taking the ewe lambs. We want to retire, we've sold the lambs, do you want to have the sheep? They need milking now!" So we bought his sheep. And they said that the sheep are parlour trained, you know it's the selling point of various sheep that they train to milk in parlour. Anyway we were starting to set up a milking parlour and his sheep were trained to a left hand milking parlour and our's was a right hand milking parlour, so it become irrelevant which parlour, you know it become one of those irrelevancies. They learned after a while which way things go and I think we had to milk, at the time we only had one platform to milk them from, it was with the mobile milker, you know slow stuff. I think we went to bed at about 3 o'clock that night after three trips to Somerset to collect the sheep and bring them back, milk them and, yeah, that was an interesting introduction.

And then we milked the sheep, we had an almost walk-in freezer to keep the milk and we set it in plastic bags, so we had these slabs of milk, and we sold them to a yoghurt maker for the first year. Meanwhile I was busy putelling around trying to make various cheese to see what it was like, and sheep milk is seasonal so we said we won't be milking over winter and she said fine lovely contact me when you start up again. So when we had a freezer full of milk again and we phoned her up and said, "We've got some milk," she said, "oh no, I don't want any, I've found somebody else!" So we said right, we will never be dependent on anyone else for anything. So we carried on milking and I had to start learning seriously how to make cheese and see what cheese we could make.

#### 40.47. Abi

**And as part of that extraordinary process of jumping in with farming and raising sheep you said there were kind of farming training projects...**

#### 41.04. Karen

It was a wonderful system at the time, I don't know whether there's anything like it now, but there was an agricultural training board, I think it was called that. And this woman went around from farm to farm and she asked if there was anything we wanted to learn. And she had a long list, and so we ticked first aid and cheese making and lamb care and lambing, sheep dog trials, absolutely everything, tractor driving. We didn't manage to do them all, but we did quite a few and they were extremely good, because having

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come from London where you have your, they called it continuing professional development, where you learned about ridge tiles or roof tiles and you had to pay to go on a course and pay for your coffee at break time, these courses were like £15, £25 and you took your own lunch if it was an all-day course and she would arrange a course that was accessible to you and arrange a few other people to do it with you.

And so we did lambing up at the local vets and they have their way of teaching lambing. Then I checked the cheese making course as well. And that was a terrific woman who I think had been an agricultural lecturer from agricultural school on cheesemaking and she, there were four of us, one of was the training board woman who wanted to learn about cheese, and that really had a defining moment in the cheesemaking process for me, because you suddenly realise you are going to be all day in your dairy.

And we had thought about setting up the dairy in a portacabin in one of the barns, it would be dry and controlled, sounds good, and I said, "No, if I'm going to be there all day, I want daylight, I want to be in a decent room." So that was how we chose which building to set the dairy up in. The only mistake we made was that we had single glazing instead of triple glazing. Because the amount of condensation when you cheese make means you can't actually see out anyway. There was this beautiful view and I couldn't see it, but never mind.

And she also said to me, well with what you're going to make, use vegetarian rennet because you'll increase your customer-base and I didn't understand what she was talking about. But I understood fairly soon, after starting to do this because sheep milk was something very weird for people and sheep cheese was also weird for English people, but you found the people with allergies and vegetarians and all sort of quirky reasons people had for eating sheep cheese before they got used to it.

#### 44.49 Abi

**So these days there is significantly more cow's cheese than sheep or goat cheeses, but it is much more of a standard thing. So when was it when you were making sheep cheese?**

45.06. Karen

So that was several years after moving down here, so about 95.

#### 45.09. Abi

**Ninety five. So between then and now it has become more normal?**

45.16 Karen

Well, we started in the markets probably about 96. Maybe 95. We started at Bideford Panier Market, and I always offered people tasters of cheese, and they would have a taste and some people would not come near it if it was sheep cheese, some people if you told them it was sheep cheese afterwards they would

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want to spit it out! And it had some very interesting, interesting effects, yes sometimes I wouldn't tell them til they tried and a lot of people would walk away and say na, we can't possibly have that.

## 46.12. Abi

**So you often sold your cheeses in, you said in Bideford Market? Did you move on to Barnstaple?**

46.14. Karen

We started at Bideford and we went to Barnstaple a few years later. Barnstaple had a waiting list, it was a phenomenal market. It used to be phenomenal but it's nothing like it now. Yes, I sold the cheese in Barnstaple. We stopped in Bideford at the time of foot and mouth because we couldn't go in anyway. And then with Barnstaple I was there for about 28 years, 11 months a year, twice a week. Offering cheese to people.

## 47.03. Abi

**So did you find the move from London, you said it's all about problem solving, it's all a mindset, but did you find the move from being an architect in the city to being a farmer in the countryside, was that more or less jarring than moving from South Africa to the UK? Or do you think they all fed into each other?**

47.35. Karen

I think it's just the way I approach things. That's what you're doing this morning, that's what you get up and do. You just carry on, you've chosen something to do and you just carry on doing it. If you think about the problems I think it becomes more difficult but if you just move forward and just do what 's there....

## 48.07 Abi

**So is there anything that you have noticed since you've been here that has changed over the years in terms of your work on the farm, anything that has progressed I suppose, over time, any cultural things? Certainly people's attitude to cheese has changed!**

48.41. Karen

So we're getting older, so when Covid came we were, well quite a few years ago we did the technique of milking once a day instead of twice a day, which gives a little bit of life back in the summer, because otherwise you live in this beautiful place but wouldn't be able to get out all summer because you'd be milking twice a day.

We had this system of raising the lambs with their mothers, taking the lambs off at night and feeding them in a barn and then milking the mothers in the morning. So once a day and then they would be out



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with the lambs for the rest of the day, so it gave the lambs better growing time and gave us more time. And then when Covid came and the markets stopped. I had stopped the markets just before Covid. But it's obviously harder to sell your produce if you're not going to market every week. And so we decided we'd stop milking, which we did. I missed the milk very, very much. I missed the cheese very much as well. But you can't do it halfway. But it makes for a much easier life as we are getting on a bit.

## 50.23. Abi

**When you're farming in this area do you build up relationships with other farmers? Is it a more solitary thing? Is there a community?**

50.30. Karen

Farming is very solitary. The village Leigh where we are is a very active village, so although we are outside of the village there are a lot of activities that we join in on.

But, yes, farming by its nature is very solitary. One of the things that I've found most different with the people. When you meet people, first of all you find that coming down to Devon you're meeting people who are, you know you're going to the supermarket and the woman at the checkout looks at what you've got and you've got to chat about that. Whereas in London, it would be, keep moving, pack your own stuff, move on. And here in the architectural profession there's also a lot of specialness shall we say, but meeting people down here, particularly in North Devon, you've got people who aren't hot on absolutely earning the most that they can earn in their lives for ever and ever but are more keen on a way of life and a nicer way of life and a more, you know, slower pace, which is infinitely more preferable to any of the more competitive stuff we had in London. Really I suppose that is the main difference.

## 52.40. Abi

**Do you think that slower pace and people just sort of enjoying things as they come, does that feel a bit more of how it was for you back in South Africa as a child, being on the beaches perhaps?**

52.54. Karen

I didn't think much when I was in South Africa! It was hot. I really didn't think and didn't analyse. It just wasn't part of me. I just didn't do that. Whether you read a book, you learnt all the subjects you were supposed to learn, the information just came out of the end of the pen, and then at the end you would have to learn it all over again.

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## 53.31. Abi

**So with the project, you know you've been having this chance, but have you ever had an approach from anything like this before?**

## 53.53. Karen

I don't think so. I don't think I would have, having seen this project on the notice board I don't think I would've been involved with it. But perhaps knowing you and being introduced to it that way has made a difference. Probably seeing the project on a notice board I probably wouldn't have come near it.

## 54.21. Abi

**I suppose it's a bit like the difference between down here where there's a more personal side to things. It helps...**

## 54.35 Karen

Maybe, when down in London you know a few people, that side of you on the terrace, maybe across the road, and that was also different parts of London. As when we lived for a while in Hampstead, you only knew two or three people. Nobody spoke to anyone else. In the park we moved to, Tuffnell Park, people were more friendly but you still didn't know terribly many people, you know outside your street. And the children were told you can ride your bike maybe five houses that way, and four houses that way. And then you come down and you say, "See you later!" They had all the fields to roam around in and could just do what they like.

## 55.38 Abi

**I think free-reign kids is quite rare these days. It's really difficult.**

## 55.45. Karen

It is, we still have the thing, well when they were kids, tell us where you're going to. There's all that space to move around, yeah.

## 55.59. Abi

**I know we talked a little bit about the impact of Covid on farming and I suppose thankfully if it was going to happen, that it happened at a time you were starting to wind down anyway.**

## 56.14 Karen

The markets were not as good as they had been at all. And I thought it's really not worth knocking myself out, so I said Christmas 2019, no more markets. And then Covid came along and that also, not having an

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anchor twice a week, as well as not being able to go out anyway, it exacerbated the Covid effect that everyone had.

## 56.49. Abi

**Were there any other events or occurrences that you can remember that caused such a big shift or change, either to you and your husband on a more personal level or if there is anything else that impacted your work in quite such a way as the pandemic?**

57.15

Karen

Not really. I had a brain abscess at the end of 2015, which had the effect of stroke on me. So for the whole of 2016 I wasn't functioning properly, which means that Laurence had to do double shifts with everything, but yes 2016 was just spent recovering. But it was fortunate that I was farming, and that I could actually spend some time doing it. A lot of other places you would just end up sitting in an armchair for a year, watching the world go by.

## 58.02 Abi

**At least it was a lovely place to be, you could maybe get to enjoy that lovely view without being fogged up with the condensation.**

58.16 Karen

I tried not to go into the dairy at the time! Mind you I had to go in and supervise the various other people making the cheese.

## 58.21 Abi

**Did you have to bring in, or have you ever, brought in other people...**

58.24 Karen

We've always, well not always, since 1998, we've been taking volunteers to the farm and they come from, they have come from all over the world. I think we've probably had someone from most countries and definitely from most continents. So that has been a very, very good experience. I think over the years we must have had over 560 go through our household. And they live with us as part of the family, which some people find a better experience than others. And we get a bit of their culture and they perhaps get a bit of ours. And we've had some really wonderful, wonderful people that we've met who've become

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friends and who we see again, and who come back every now and again, first with their husband and then with their children, first child, second child and so on. It's good.

## 59.37 Abi

**You said that volunteers come from all over. Is that something that you find more often in Leigh, there's the Grampus [Inn] that often has, you know people coming from...**

59.56 Karen

Yes, it's the same system as the Grampus has.

## 59.57 Abi

**Is it an official system? Do you just put feelers out?**

1.00.10 Karen

Well originally, there was an organisation called , well there still is, called [WWOOF], which in its very early form, which we knew about in London, was I think Weekend Workers on Organic Farms, I think that was it's very first form. Because some people in London had developed this thing where they could go out to a farm at the weekend and work on a farm. Then it became Willing Workers on Organic Farms, and we joined that at first and that was all done by telephone and letters as there was no internet. Someone would phone you and say can you take someone for a couple of weeks. And I think we were one of the few hosts who were willing to take people who couldn't speak English or broken English. And that started them coming along. They then changed it over to being on the internet and they did some interesting things about how they put out their information which meant that we had a volunteer who had come via WWOOF and she said , "It's different – you say you take smokers in the house and you don't, you say you don't drink but you have wine at every meal and it says that you're vegetarian and you're not." I said "We're an animal farm, who's vegetarian?" We said she must have read the wrong blurb. Anyway, she showed us the blurb and it was correct and so we tried to contact them and anyway, there was a complete mash-up of how they had gone on to the internet and put the information out. And to cut a long story short we stopped using WWOOF. I think they also, with the employment laws, they were called then Willing Workers on Organic Farms and they had to change the workers bit I think because of those things. So they become Worldwide Opportunities. On Organic Farms.

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Anyway, so we phoned up, at the time we were getting out of WWOOF, we phoned up one of the contacts we had and said, "What's happened". She said she no longer had anything to do with WWOOF, she used Helpex. So that's how we got involved with Helpex, and from Helpex we also went to Workaway and Workaway was very good for us to find particular kinds of volunteers and also with Workaway I think they then relatively recently fell foul of the same thing, because we got a message from them saying as of tomorrow, literally it was, we are no longer having English hosts, British hosts, until, you know except [unclear], so it was very much suddenly. So we now get volunteers from Helpex and volunteers from another website called Backpackers or something. And, yes, it's been a big change. Brexit has also been a big change.

## 1.04.20 Abi

**Yes, I was going to say. You mention laws, was there any interaction with Brexit and that becoming a bit more difficult.**

1.04.40 Karen

Very much so because whereas people could move and shift around, come and visit, suddenly it became a big deal. So a lot of the European contacts stopped coming. We used to get, well when we were sheep milking it was more of an interesting enterprise for students to come to, and we used to get agricultural students from Germany, France, a couple of colleges in France and Germany, but that has sort of more or less stopped. Plus as we've stopped milking it's a very small farm for an agricultural student to come to, so that doesn't really happen very much any more.

## 01.05.43 Abi

**Thank you ever so much. We could ask one of our summing up questions at the end if you like! So I suppose you've had this life moving between various different, quite different places and quiet different careers. All this variety. And you've met all these people, you've had so many volunteers down at your farm. Just really connected with a lot of people, you've helped change the attitude of North Devon towards sheep's cheese.... So I suppose the question would be....**

01.06.45 Karen

I think Ilfracombe is still a hard place to crack.

## 01.06.47 Abi

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**You'll get there. I myself enjoy a sheep cheese! But I suppose just to finish off, what is one thing that you'd like people to remember you by?**

01.07.06 Karen

Hopefully that I was kind! That was hardest question at the bottom! Just if one can be kind and un hurtful to people as much as possible.

**01.07.37 Abi**

**Again thank you so much.**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPTION - 67 MINS]**

**Transcription: J Smith**