

INTERVIEW OF SHARYN HEDGE

INTERVIEWERS: ABI OBENE and MARK LANGWORTHY
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0:00:01.9 Abi Obene: We are here in the Ilfracombe Centre, along the Ilfracombe High Street for another of the *Telling Our Stories Finding Our Roots* interviews. We're here to talk to Sharyn Hedge, who's very kindly agreed to have a chat with us today. The two people interviewing her today will be Mark Langworthy and myself, Abi Obene, the project coordinator for the Ilfracombe branch of this project. *Telling Our Stories Finding Our Roots* is a project run by Devon Development Education, and funded by the National Lottery. We also have Hilda, Sue, and Sandhya here in the room today, just listening in. So, without further ado, I guess we'll get started. Thanks very much for agreeing to this.

0:00:49.8 Sharyn Hedge: My pleasure.

0:00:51.4 Abi Obene: I suppose we'll start at the beginning. Could you tell us just a little bit about your early days, your childhood, and your experiences in Australia?

0:01:02.1 Sharyn Hedge: Right, well I was born in Sydney, and my childhood wasn't actually very much different from a childhood in this country at the same time. It was the same kind of food, meat and two veg. The same kind of freedom that I know from friends, children over here had then. You could go out and about and just do things, disappear for the whole day and your parents didn't worry about you, which is quite different from childhood now. So we could do that, too. We went into the bush, so we had the added interest of snakes and spiders, but apart from that it was very much like here in many ways. In some ways it was more like here than here was, in that Australia was back then still very much not just Anglophile but Britophile. My whole upbringing was as being a subject of the crown, of part of the British empire. There were two Australias, actually. There was the official Australia, the people who led the country who were very British-oriented, and very proud of being part of what was in the British commonwealth, which had been the British empire, and regarded Britain as the gold standard for absolutely everything.

0:02:47.6 There was the other Australia which was the working class Australia, which was very proud of identifying as Australian, as against this British heritage. They were the people who regarded Australia as much more egalitarian, much freer, and in a way it was more egalitarian. There was a class structure there. The class structure in Australia was and always will be based on money, just like America. But people did pride themselves on being egalitarian, and to a certain extent Australia was. My parents' generation for example were the first generation where ordinary working class people could own their own homes. It wasn't until a bit later that that happened over here. However, the reason these ordinary working class people could own their own homes sooner there than they could over here was because of Australia being part of the British empire. Because Australia was taken over, was stolen from the indigenous population, all of the land was supposedly owned by the crown. So when land was released for housing, there weren't intermediaries involved, there weren't developers involved who bought the land - the land was cheap because it was owned by the government.

0:04:30.1 It was sold, but it was cheap because it was owned by the government, also there were cheaper building materials. There was a material called fibre cement which the very cheapest homes were built of, and that wasn't used here at all. Down the line the consequences of the cheap building materials were, fibre cement contained asbestos, and as a result Australia has the second-highest incidence of mesothelioma, which is lung cancer caused by asbestos in the world, the country with the highest is here, but it's hidden here. Sorry, I'm going to say something personal [unclear words 0:05:18.3]. The result of that is, because when we were adolescents our father built a garage of asbestos because it was cheaper, down the line, about six years ago - because it's a long lead-in from the exposure to when you actually get the mesothelioma, my brother now has mesothelioma. So there was this good side where people could own their own homes, a lot of people had these homes made out of asbestos, hence 60 years down the line, 70, 80 years down the line, there are a lot of people in Australia suffering from mesothelioma.

0:06:02.4 However, working-class people generally were better off than working class people here. We had the sunshine and the beaches, of course. I don't know if this is another question, but the reason my family was in Australia, I'm descended from nine families who went to Australia driven by dire poverty. If they'd stayed here, they would be dead. If they'd stayed here, I wouldn't exist, which wouldn't be much loss for the world, but it would be a shame for my brother and his children to not exist.

0:06:44.7 Abi Obene: I think there would be a loss!

0:06:47.5 Sharyn Hedge: People of my generation, lots and lots of people in Australia wouldn't exist if it weren't for the empire and the countries that we stole from other people, we just wouldn't exist. So my roots are in Cornwall, they were the first people to go, they were in 1848. The next people to go were the people from Exmoor, they went in 1854, and then throughout the rest of the 19th century my family from Brighton, from Bedford, from Aldershot, from the top and the bottom of Ireland, and from Scotland, they all went. So, that was nine families, driven by poverty, to Australia, these were people dispossessed by poverty of their own country, their own land they came from. But, blow me down, what do they go and do? They went and dispossessed someone else of their country. So that's, for me, I do feel not personal guilt, maybe ancestral guilt, but it's kind of two-edged. Those nine families only survived because Australia was there having been colonised. But unintentionally, and probably they weren't even aware of what they were doing, they were dispossessing indigenous Australians of their country.

0:08:22.0 By the time the first lot arrived, there were one or two very sad indigenous people on Sydney's north shore, where we lived. But apart from that, they wouldn't, as I didn't throughout my childhood, have ever seen an aboriginal person. During my childhood, I remember one lesson in social studies, this was when I was about nine or ten, one lesson, and one lesson only about indigenous Australians, and never then for the rest of my school life hearing another thing. That lesson was this picture of indigenous people in Australia living their happy traditional lives out in the outback, as if the rest of the country hadn't been taken over, but they weren't actually living there I found later. We all found later they weren't living their happy traditional lives in the outback. They were either in very small inner-city ghettos, or they were on ghettos on the edge of country towns. We were given a totally false picture basically of who we were and what we had done. We weren't told anything about the genocides. We weren't told anything about the stolen generation of indigenous children who were paler in skin so were taken away from their families and given to white Australian families.

0:09:51.0 We didn't know about any of that. It was only later. It didn't come out in the whole time that I was living in Australia, it was only later I learnt about that when I was over here. I feel very ambivalent about being Australian. Australia enabled my family to survive, but that was at the expense of the people who were there first. As I said, we weren't told anything about that at all. They were just tidied away. Indigenous Australians didn't get the

vote until sometime in the 1960s. They weren't in the census until 1971. If you're not in the census basically you don't exist. They weren't in the census until 1971. That's one part of my heritage. Australia when I was growing up looked very white, because it was. Basically was Anglo-Celtic. The reason for that is that there was a policy which started - there were smaller bits of legislation before the states were amalgamated into the federal commonwealth of Australia, but when the commonwealth was created in 1901, there was a piece of legislation called the White Australia Policy, which deliberately excluded people who weren't white, and even a lot of Europeans, from the country.

0:11:31.3 That legislation was designed to keep out Chinese people, but it also served to keep out everyone else. When I was growing up, there were people like me, English, Scottish, Welsh, Irish heritage. There were some Italian people, and there were some Greek people. There were some post-war refugees from Europe, but not many. Even with just such a small proportion of people who weren't Anglo-Celtic, there was still racism directed against them. Italian people in particular. Italian people came over mostly from the south of Italy and from Sicily, they worked very hard, they did very well for themselves. And Australians who quite frankly didn't work very hard, it was an easy life. What was said about Italians, the reason that they did well and Australians didn't was because, this was openly said, they lived on the smell of an oily rag. That's how they... That's the kind of country it was. Even English immigrants, there was prejudice against new English immigrants. English people were said to be dirty. So that's the kind of country it was.

0:13:03.4 It was a very racist country, overtly racist, in a way it isn't now. But that was the country - it was also quite a philistine country. It was also sports absolutely obsessed. There was this other country, over here, the mother country, which for a proportion of Australia was the centre of civilisation, and that's what I was coming to. I was coming to somewhere where there was centuries and centuries of history of my people, white people, there wasn't anyone else's history obliterated. There was all the fabulous architecture, there was theatres, there were museums, there were decent newspapers. It wasn't until I think about ten years ago there was a decent newspaper in Australia, and that was when The Guardian edition started in Australia. It felt like the end of the earth back then. It's different now. It is now I think one of the most multicultural countries on the planet, and it's a much more interesting place for that. I could possibly live there. If it had been like that when I was growing up I could have stayed, but it wasn't. So it is very multicultural, but the racism isn't so overt now, but it's still under the surface.

0:14:35.6 Abi Obene: When you were growing up, you said when you came to the UK that's when you found out about what is now referred to as black armband history and the treatment of indigenous Australians, and how the wool pulled away from your eyes. Was that something you sought out, was that something that was just passive knowledge you picked up while you were in the UK?

0:15:02.5 Sharyn Hedge: No, that didn't happen for quite a while. The reason it happened was when I accidentally started doing more degrees, I didn't intend to, it just happened, and I would emphasise that I was working at the time and I paid for them all myself, there's no taxpayer's money spent on... Even the PhD I didn't finish, there was no taxpayer's money spent on that. The only taxpayer's money that was ever spent on my education in this country is I did a PGC at one step. When I started doing, my first degree was in English, that was part of the reason I came over here, but the subsequent ones that I did for fun were in historical geography, in landscape history. The stuff I did, I was looking at Sussex, we did Southern Sussex, it was quite imperially-focused. It was all those years later when I learnt - I was here when I learnt about what happened over there, because all the research had been done by then, all the genocide had been uncovered, the true stories about what happened, the children being taken away from their families. That all had been coming out during the time I was here, but it wasn't drawn to my attention until I was actually doing the academic work. So that's how that happened.

0:16:40.0 Abi Obene: So even then it was behind almost this education barrier, would you say?

0:16:45.3 Sharyn Hedge: Yes. The education thing, doing those degrees, that is what really anchored me to this country. I'd worked, I'd done lots of voluntary work, but the thing that actually anchored me to the land was doing the historical geography. We had always, my field partner and I had always walked a lot when we were living in London. Every Sunday we went to - you can go, it astonished me to learn, a whole arc around London, especially in the summer, you can go out on the train to go to tiny little places, that was a revelation to me. So I had walked I would think more inches of this country than most people who were born here have. But it was when I started doing historical geography academically and started researching about the actual land, and how it came to be as it is, and about the people who lived on it, that's when I really felt as if I really, really did belong here. It was an accident I did

more degrees, just for fun I was doing, I think it was supposed to be a diploma thing, and they then gave us the choice to turn it into a degree and I didn't want to stop, so I did the degree and then I didn't want to stop, so I did a master's then I didn't want to stop still, I did another master's.

0:18:20.9 Then I started doing the PhD, which I never finished, because I've got a bit of a butterfly mind. But my PhD, that was another thing whereby I learnt about Australian history, because I was comparing two liberal, free trade, Irish - whatever the Irish freedom thing was - MPs. One over here, and one over there, and how they fitted into both concepts of land ownership, and that's when I started collecting stuff as well, collecting in museums, too. One of the reasons I stopped was I came to hate my protagonist. Most people haven't heard of a family called Brassey. The father, he created railways all over the world, something really useful, and he made a fortune by doing something really useful. In fact, the beginning part of the train from [unclear words 0:19:31.3] part of the house that was built by his firm, and he built stuff in Australia, he built stuff all over the place. He had a son who became an MP simply on the basis of who his father was. He and his wife swanned all over the world in their yacht collecting stuff. Not collecting in a sense that the museum founder collected; actually trudging through jungles and putting his life at stake and having one of his fingers - having a worm growing in one of his fingers, stuff like that.

0:20:11.8 They just splashed out money, and people sold them stuff. That's when I started to get really angry about imperialism, because they acted as if they owned the world. Brought the stuff back to Hastings, created a museum, and that was when - when I read the catalogue of their museum, that was when I really started to learn about how collecting reflected imperial attitudes. Then much later when I moved down here and I volunteered at RAMM, and saw how quite delicately treating the sensibilities of some of their audience, IE the old people, RAMM has decolonised, and that's what I want to happen here. But the sensitivity is about other people. So it was through accidentally doing more degrees that I became more embedded in the country, because I understood more about the landscape, and I also because of the imperial angle understood more about who I was as an Australian, as a creature of empire.

0:21:37.6 Abi Obene: Going back just a little bit and then we'll go forward again, when you were growing up in Australia, I believe you told us that at 16 you made the two most important decisions of your life and you stuck with them. First of all tell us about those, but also was there anything that you had perhaps started to realise up until

that point regarding your feelings towards Australian culture and Australian history that perhaps led into that, or was it just you hit 16 and you made those choices?

0:22:13.9 Sharyn Hedge: I think that's the kind of age, maybe it was 15, I became aware of what Australia actually... Because by then we were becoming more aware. In fact, the indigenous Australians weren't living this idyllic life out in the outback as they'd lived for aeons, they were actually in these little ghettos in the inner city, and in the ghettos on the edge of country towns. I realised what Australia was, and wasn't. So, it probably started a bit before, but I do remember the definite decision at 16 that I would come over here, and I was going to come over here because I could legally have done so then, but it was pointed out to me that that meant that I would have to wait, I would have to somehow do A-Levels over here supporting myself as a 16-year-old, and then have to wait until I'd been here three years before I could go to university, so I stayed to go to university in Australia. That was all part of developing my vision of this country, because I did English, and my whole view of this country was mediated through novels and poetry.

0:23:39.7 Abi Obene: Some romanticism, perhaps?

0:23:41.2 Sharyn Hedge: Yes.

0:23:42.9 Abi Obene: So then at 16 when you made - what were those two important decisions, do you want to tell us?

0:23:46.9 Sharyn Hedge: Yes, the other decision was not to have children, because I was really concerned about the planet's overpopulation and how we were destroying the habitats of other animals, other creatures. My not having children didn't make one bit of difference to that. But what I did do, is I think I did make a more than my fair share contribution to the global climate crisis, because from the point at which my brother started his family, which was simultaneously when my mother started her long slide into dementia, I was going home every... That's another thing I'll talk about. I was going home every Christmas for four weeks. That was right up until my mother died just a few years ago. So I have actually done a great deal of long-haul flights, which I think more than cancelled out, climate-wise, any benefit to the planet I did by not having children! I may as well have stayed in Australia and had children. I have a friend who keeps making me feel guilty about that. I will talk about

later how I come to have dual citizenship, because at one point I didn't. I actually am proud of being a citizen of two hemispheres, as I say, and I think it's great that there's all this mixing up of people, and people experiencing other countries.

0:25:35.8 It makes everyone more aware of everyone else. But the thing is that those people who have moved to other countries basically to save their lives, then they're not going to go back. People like me, I'd regard myself as a cultural immigrant, and also lots of economic immigrants, are actually going back and forward quite a lot. That's the one downside of this whole very positive thing of people experiencing other countries, it is the long-haul flights. They are supposed to be one of the worst things as far as global warming's concerned. But I did it, and to be honest, if I had my time again, I would do it again, because otherwise I wouldn't see my family.

0:26:27.5 Abi Obene: Was that something that you found difficult when it came to - so you moved to the UK in the mid '70s?

0:26:34.8 Sharyn Hedge: I arrived here on the 4th of December 1974.

0:26:38.7 Abi Obene: You moved here, what you refer to as the centre of the world...

0:26:45.3 Sharyn Hedge: Yes, I landed in Gatwick actually rather than Heathrow... I left Australia the day after my final university exams, that was how eager I was to get here, and it was a student charter flight, so it was a big plane to Bangkok, and a smaller plane to Zurich, then this tiny little bus to Gatwick, and it was the winter. I know young people might find it difficult to believe, but before the internet we still managed to do things. I had arranged my accommodation in this little bedsit thing in this lady's house in Wandsworth. The very first thing I did, I had to, I arrived there, I went down to the post office in Wandsworth because I had to send my parents a telegram - you've probably never experienced a telegram. I had to send my mother a telegram saying I've arrived safely. I had to get some stamps to post my on spec letters I'd already done, because I wanted to go to library school and you had to have a year's experience as a library assistant first, to local authorities in central London, because you could do that then. It's so different now. Getting a job in a local authority, back then, you could land in this country one day, send in your on spec letter, have an interview like two days later, and then you have a job.

0:28:13.0 It's different now. Anyway, the first shock to me was then I went into the Arndale Centre in Wandsworth, it's their sort of grotty shopping centres, and I thought, crikey, I came for the glamour and I've come to this grotty shopping centre. The next day however I went into London, and that was the first time I encountered - there were bobbies on the beat then. When I walked from Wandsworth to Clapham Junction Station - where was Clapham Junction Station? There was a bobby there and I said to him, excuse me, can you tell me where Clapham Junction Station is? He said, not at all sarcastically, where it says that sign 'Clapham Junction Station' is Clapham Junction Station. In many ways it was a better place then, because there were bobbies on the beat, just to answer dumb questions from dumb Australians. So that was one of my first encounters. I got the train to Victoria and then I was in paradise, I really was. The funniest and sweetest thing was, I hadn't realised that men would still be walking around wearing bowler hats, and they were walking around wearing bowler hats. That was so cute. Anyway, then it all started, and it's been pretty wonderful ever since.

0:29:40.2 So I did get a job, I got a job with Westminster City libraries and Victoria Library in Buckingham Palace, and then you only had to do that for a year then you went to library school to do the post-grad diploma in librarianship. Then unbeknownst to me I had my first connection, not just with Ilfracombe, but with the museum. With, in fact, [?Mervyn]. Because it turned out I realised when I started volunteering there, that [?Stephen] went to the same library school: the radical library school at North London Poly. So, I had a connection with Ilfracombe before even you did.

0:30:24.3 Abi Obene: Before I existed! What was library school like? You've worked in a number of libraries.

0:30:33.9 Sharyn Hedge: I don't know why they call them postgraduate - the PGC is the same thing, they're like, first year undergraduate. I worked in London for a bit, and then Peter, my former partner, he'd started, normal time, a degree in composition at the Vienna Academy of Music - was it Vienna? I think it was Vienna, and he decided he wasn't going to be the next [?Missia or Berria 0:31:08.4] so he gave that up and was doing other things. He was going to uni as a mature student, and that's why we went - we went to Cardiff, because he could do philosophy and French at Cardiff, and he really wanted to do philosophy but he wasn't sure about how that would go, so he would then continue with the French. In fact that

was fine, and he did his degree, and I did PGC there and then I worked in Cardiff, and then we came back to England.

0:31:40.7 Abi Obene: Did you find being in the UK, did you have any uncomfortable experiences or anything along those lines? Or was it quite a smooth transition into...?

0:31:50.7 Sharyn Hedge: When I first came over here, Australia was regarded as a bit of a joke. So people thought it was funny for you to be Australian. In a nice way. Later on, when all the backpacking started, people fell in love with Australia and said, why are you here not over there? But it was, it was regarded as this funny little place. Australians were welcomed with open arms. My only experience of any - it wasn't funny, it was not nice, but my only experience of any kind of prejudice was, and it wasn't directly to me, it was when Peter was ringing up about a flat, and the woman was asking for background information, and he said that I was a librarian, and she said to him, 'No, I'm not having Liberians.' He said, 'No, I said librarian.' 'I'm not having any Liberians.' At that point he said goodbye and put the phone down, because he thought A) he'd never get through to her that I was a librarian not a Liberian, and B) we don't want such a person as our landlady. But London was like that then. Racism in London was much more - and the whole country - even though London was massively more multicultural than I was used to in Australia, for example we had a flat in Notting Hill at one stage, rented, and this was before Notting Hill was gentrified of course, it was when you shared the flat with mice and things.

0:33:30.9 We lived on a street, and looked out the window, and the Notting Hill Carnival came down the street, it was that kind of thing. So it wasn't just the museums, and the galleries, and the theatre, etc., it was that kind of really vibrant life of London that was so wonderful. But yet racism was actually much more overt over here than it is now, as we know too well it is still here but it's much less overt now.

0:34:04.9 Abi Obene: Did you find that the sort of racism you witnessed, experienced, saw in Australia and London was similar?

0:34:15.9 Sharyn Hedge: It was different in that it was against - because Australia had the White Australia Policy, so black people weren't allowed in, and the indigenous population were in effect invisible to us, it was different. It was different, yes. I think still then or maybe it had disappeared by the time I came over, the thing about no blacks, no Irish, no dogs. Do

you know about that? That's what landladies would put up in their windows. Did you not know about that?

0:34:46.4 Abi Obene: I did. Never experienced it thankfully, but yes.

0:34:51.4 Sharyn Hedge: I don't recall ever seeing that, but it's not just an urban myth. This woman wouldn't have a Liberian, so.

0:35:05.4 Abi Obene: Was there anything else that you found particularly - outside of your shock of seeing the perhaps not so appealing shopping mall, was there anything you found particularly surprising?

0:35:16.4 Sharyn Hedge: Yes, the bowler hats.

0:35:18.0 Abi Obene: The bowler hats, yes.

0:35:20.4 Sharyn Hedge: No, the thing that surprised me, it wasn't just that, it wasn't quite then - the thing that surprised me most, I'm going to read my poem in a minute. I had expected, from reading this poem by Philip Larkin, that the whole of the southeast was concreted over. The huge surprise to me was that it wasn't. The reason I'm going to read this poem by misogynist Philip Larkin is that... I was absolutely steeped, because my first degree was in English, steeped in English literature, so that's where he comes from. This is what gave me the impression that the whole of the southeast was covered over in concrete. Also the positive things in it are the things he thinks are going to be lost are all the things that brought me here and that I've so valued here and which I really love here, and which I got so much more connected with when I did those degrees in historical geography. But he was prophetic, because the things he thought would be gone by the time he died haven't. They're on their way out now. It's the concreting over, and it's particularly poignant at the moment, because a lot of people are frightened by... We need more housing. 0:37:01.0 No one would deny that we need more housing. We also need fewer Airbnbs, but we need more housing. A lot of people like me, sort of green socialists. Yes, we need more housing, but we also don't want the country.... I just am worried that... Sorry I'm talking about political things here. You can probably take this out. I am worried that, I'm a member of Labour party. My party will actually try to meet all the housing needs without paying sufficient recognition to

the fact that we need our green spaces as well. Because that's one of the things I value most about this country. Up until I moved to Barnstaple, from the point at which we moved to Lewes, right until, and I moved to Barns as well. I'd always made sure that we lived either in or right next to a national park or an AONB, so that we weren't at risk of having our hearts broken by the countryside we loved so much being built on but I think it's going to happen now. Can I say, it's just like eight [unclear words 0:38:11.4] or something. I thought that it would last my time, the sense that beyond the town, there would always be fields and farms where the village louts would climb.

0:38:21.0 He's actually classist as well as misogynist, where the village louts could climb such trees as were not cut down. I knew there would be false alarms in the papers about old streets and split-level shopping, but some have always been left so far, and when the old part retreats as the bleak high rises come, we can always escape in the car. Things are tougher than we are, just as Earth will always respond, however we mess it about. Chuck filth in the sea, if you must. The tides will be clean beyond, but what do I feel now? Doubt or age simply, the crowd is young in the M1 cafe. The kids are screaming for more. More houses, more parking allowed more caravan sites, more pay. On the business page a score of respectable [unclear word 0:39:06.1] approved some takeover bid that entails five per cent profit and ten per cent more in the estuaries. Move your works to the unspoilt dales, grey area grants and when you try to get near the sea in summer, it seems just now to be happening so very fast. Despite all the land left free for the first time, I feel somehow that it isn't going to last, but before I snuff it, the whole bowling will be bricked in except for the tourist parts.

0:39:30.0 First slum of Europe, a role it won't be so hard to win with a cast of crooks and tarts and that will be England gone. The shadows, the meadows, the lanes, the guild halls, the carved choirs. There'll be books that will linger on in galleries but all that remains to us will be concrete entire. Most things are never meant. This won't be most likely, but greeds and garbage are too thick strewn to be swept up now, or invent excuses that make them all needs. I just think it will happen soon. Sorry, I'm going to cry. I mean, this was 1974. So it's a bit dated, but things have just got worse. The things he talks about as the valuable things he sees going. They're the things, some of the key things that attach me to this country. I just think he might be right now, and I'm glad that I'm 71, because I think it might not all go in my lifetime, but Abi, I think it might go in yours.

0:40:34.3 Abi Obene: Ominous, but yes, we'll have to see.

0:40:36.0 Sharyn Hedge: This is why I think actually the safe thing now, I wouldn't go back to living in London now. London's a young person's city now. The safest thing is to live in a big city. Then you can't see what's happening outside.

0:40:48.7 Abi Obene: Don't get to experience it directly. So throughout this, obviously you spoke about how you gained numerous degrees in English, geography and also at the same time you've worked in a whole range of sectors. So you were Librarian?

0:41:11.6 Sharyn Hedge: That's the butterfly mind.

0:41:12.9 Abi Obene: Yes, librarian and then you were a librarian in a in a boys school?

0:41:18.4 Sharyn Hedge: Yes, when we came back to London after Peter had finished the new first degree and he was doing his PhD in London, his PhD that he didn't finish because he became an alcoholic instead, though he doesn't drink now. The reason I did the PGC when we first went to [unclear name 0:41:43.8] because I wanted to become a school librarian, and that's what I wanted to do. I became a school librarian in a boys school called the Central Foundation School, which is near Old Street, and it was a school which had been a direct grant school. It had been very, very good for the boys who were in it. These were boys from a wide variety of ethnic backgrounds, all working class [unclear word 0:42:11.7] and it actually got them their [?residency 0:42:13.4]. So they went on to lead lives of professionals, including the famous DJ that you'd never heard of.

0:42:24.2 Abi Obene: What was the DJ, DJ Trevor...?

0:42:27.6 Sharyn Hedge: Trevor Nelson. He is quite famous.

0:42:32.6 Mark Langworthy: Trevor Nelson, I've heard of him.

0:42:33.7 Sharyn Hegde: Yes, he was one of the [over speaking 0:42:33.6].

0:42:33.8 Abi Obene: Yes, we've got some nods around the room.

0:42:36.6 Sharyn Hedge: He was a lovely boy. They were all lovely boys, but he and the year below him were the last of the... Direct grant schools were kind of like grammar schools, except they got their money directly from the government, not from the local authority. Some of them, when comprehensive schools came in.... I'm telling you this in case you don't know, because you're so young. Some of them became grammar schools and some of them did go to being... This one went to being comprehensive. Some of them became grammar schools. The problem with being comprehensive is that the entire teaching staff was used to teaching these very motivated, highly intelligent boys, and the staff couldn't adapt to teaching boys who wouldn't have got into the school before, and they just didn't know how to teach them. The school was chaos, and really the final straw for me, was when... they weren't perfectly nice boys, all of them, they just, the school wasn't giving them what they needed. It wasn't starting from where they are. It was starting from a point that they weren't even at. The final straw for me was when they started really nasty things behind me and so on. [Unclear words 0:43:58.9] and lies. I wasn't having that.

0:44:01.1 So that's when I then did the thing with the government paid you to train as a computer programmer... That's the thing people don't believe, and I had this [over speaking 0:44:11.9].

0:44:11.9 Abi Obene: Yes, you being a computer programmer.

0:44:11.3 Sharyn Hedge: ...but programming is just, you don't need to know anything about computers. It's just language and logic, anyone can do it. So we did that, and I had my brief foray into the private sector as a computer programmer. Which I enjoyed it at first, but the novelty wore off because there wasn't really any human interest in it. So I moved into training people, so I actually got to talk to people, but it still wasn't interesting enough. So that's when I moved into the voluntary, the campaigning end of the voluntary sector. I first worked for what was called then the National Council for One Parent Families. Then I worked for what was then called the British Refugee Council, and then I worked for, two joint voluntary organisations called Youth Aid and the Unemployment Unit. So that was kind of, there was a politicised end, the left wing, politicised end of the voluntary sector. That were always the most interesting years of my life. I felt we were really making a difference where a difference really needed to be made, and helping voice people's voices being heard and we were under a Tory government for that whole time.

0:45:41.9 Especially with the unemployment unit and youth aid, we did have Labour MPs coming to us for information, statistical information. That was when I was blessed by Tony Benn. Tony Benn said to me on the other end of the phone, bless you. I also spoke to Tony Blair and Tony Blair's a bit of a... So it wasn't really so [over speaking 0:46:06.8]. [Laughter]

0:46:08.3 Abi Obene: So what exactly was your work during this time? It sounds like you did a number of different roles.

0:46:14.4 Sharyn Hedge: I did all kinds of different things. It was mainly, with the National Council for one Parent families. A lot of it was doing funding applications, in fact, to charitable trusts and to local authorities. With the British refugee, it's just called the Refugee Council, as you well know. It was actually advising and helping refugee community groups get funding, mostly, with the Unemployment Unit and Youth Aid, there was a bit of funding that was basically a lot of everything. It was called coordinator and I did all sorts of stuff. I really enjoyed being in places where I was actually helping to try to achieve the things I believed in. Places where the work was politically attuned to my own values. However, the Unemployment Unit and Youth Aid, being the kind of organisations they were, it was really difficult to get funding. In the end, it couldn't sustain the number of staff. So I took, and one of the other staff, took voluntary redundancy. That part of that was self-interest, because by then we'd moved to Lewes in Sussex, and I was sick of the commuting. It was glamorous at first, commuting, but the glam wore off. This is when we still had all the bomb alerts, the IRA bomb alerts.

0:47:50.4 So you'd waited hours to get home because Victoria Station was closed and sometimes took hours to get in because there'd been bomb alerts. That's after we moved to, after I left that job, that's when I started working for East Sussex County Council in the Social Services Department, which was only supposed to be temporary, but it was interesting enough and paid enough, and it was five minutes' walk from home so I could just fall out of bed into my desk for me to do it. So it was engaging, and I did work hard, but it also gave me the time and headspace for them to start doing more academic stuff. What I did there was firstly, I was working with, it was called, it's not receivership in the sense of people going bankrupt. It's when the Court of Protection looks after people. So people going into East Sussex County Council residential care and nursing homes, looking after their

finances. Then when we took on, the whole thing was changed so that the private sector, we dealt with them as well.

0:49:07.2 I just managed people who did financial assessments and help people get their benefits and trained social workers in that kind of thing. I did some policy work. I dealt with relatives who weren't happy about the whole funding thing. I learnt how some children just care about what they're going to get out of their parents, rather than what they can give their parents. So it was a big learning experience, and it was reasonably interesting, especially the policy work and dealing with legal matters. So I wouldn't say I got as much out of it as I did when I was working in the voluntary sector, but it was fine. I was there for 14 years. Then I was able to take voluntary redundancy from there, from that. I was coming up to the point where I was getting worried that I would develop dementia when my mother did in her early 60s. So I thought, if we're going to do my PhD, I'd better do it now before I reach 63. I'm now 71 and still haven't got it, but you know, any minute now.

0:50:25.9 So I took the voluntary redundancy so I could do my PhD, which I never finished. I did work part-time in the university library, supervising people, not as a librarian anymore, supervising the people who did the shelving. The highlight of my entire working life was that I could walk around the university library carrying a hammer, which I never needed. I did need a spanner sometimes. I never needed a hammer. I moved to Hastings after a while because that's where my thesis was concerned with. Then I moved, I had my last four-and-a-half years of working life were part-time in the NHS dealing with people's medical records. That was interesting, it was an eye-opener. Then I succeeded in not finishing my PhD, and then I thought, well, 63 is now getting close. I want to repat... That's what I called coming over here, repatriating my genes. I was going to go to Cornwall to repatriate my Cornish genes. Then I thought, it's so far away, no one's going to come and visit me. So that's why I ended up in Devon.

0:51:55.4 Abi Obene: So you moved to, was it West Devon first?

0:51:58.2 Sharyn Hedge: I moved to West Devon first because I was just over the border from Cornwall. This strange place called [unclear place 0:52:04.5] very strange. It made me glad that my genes were a bit mixed up from all these different, coming from all different parts of the country, because things can be very odd when you've gone in the same gene pool for centuries. I could just get the train, get on a train, go over the viaduct, and I was in Cornwall, so I was nearly in Cornwall. Well, the volunteering I did there was with the National

Trust at Cotehill. Don't put that bit about the genes in. I also volunteered with the AONB there and then it was good living there because there was - I don't like Plymouth, but there was the Royal Theatre, Plymouth, which is good. They have a lot of touring stuff the same touring stuff that goes to Bristol, so they have Matthew Bourne dancing, so they have a good things there but it was too far away. I couldn't do day trips to London.

0:53:07.3 So then I moved to Weston and theoretically I could, but it would mean hanging about in Plymouth waiting for a bus back up at 11 o'clock at night. So I decided to move somewhere where it was easier to do a day trip to London. So the volunteering I've done here, whilst I was living in North Devon, I started volunteering at [?RAM 0:53:29.2] and that's when I thought I was using all this knowledge I'd gained succeeding in not completing my PhD. The whole thing about going around the empire, collecting stuff and setting up the museums there, because what I did there, I did general stuff as well, but I was in the world cultures and we talked to people. Then it was masks it wasn't stuff that was that was valuable, it was tourist kind of stuff that we introduced the tourist market, masks and fabric stuff, which doesn't sound very interesting, but people were really, really interested. So that's what I did at RAM, and that's where I experienced how you can do decolonising your collection without offending your traditional audiences.

0:54:22.2 I think that they didn't go far enough, and I think if they did it now, they would go further but I think that RAMs is a model of how it can be done here.

0:54:33.4 Abi Obene: So you were volunteering at RAM and then when you were moved to North Devon at some point during that.

0:54:39.1 Sharyn Hedge: Yes, I move to Barnstaple and I continued volunteering at RAM for a while, but I also started volunteering at Barnstaple museum. Then I started volunteering here and I'm also still volunteering at Barnstaple Museum.

0:54:50.2 Abi Obene: Here being Ilfracombe Museum. So yes, just down the hill.

0:54:56.2 Sharyn Hedge: Soon to be in [unclear words - whispering 0:54:58.2].

0:55:02.0 Abi Obene: You spent a huge amount of your time volunteering over the course of your career. What is it that drew you to Ilfracombe then? Was that because of the RAM thing, or was that something else?

0:55:16.1 Sharyn Hedge: Before I moved to Barnstaple, I hadn't even visited Ilfracombe. I had this funny thing with both Devon and Cornwall, about the south coast. I don't know why, but I just had this thing about the south coast. The minute I moved here, in fact, the first place I went, was Lynton and Lynmouth. I thought crikey, why didn't anyone tell me about this. Then I visited Ilfracombe and I thought, yes... When I lived in Hastings, Ilfracombe was like Hastings little sister because it's got the same dramatic topography and the fabulous architecture and the whole history of all the, anyone who's everyone, has been here. More so in Hastings because it's closer to London, but everyone... So there's all these, when you go around the cemetery, a lot of people come here as invalids for the sea, there and here for the sea air and die. So you've got all these interesting people buried in the churchyard and all these stories you've got. So it's a bit larger in Hastings, but it's also here, because anyone who's everyone has come here.

0:56:29.5 Boring people like George Eliot, but also Ruskin has been here and he was really ill, and he kind of got religion while he was here. He's in [unclear word 0:56:37.3] exhibition a quote about Ruskin. So it was like Hastings, which I missed, but I had to repatriate my West Country genes, but better because it's more dramatic. The architecture is better because there's William Morgan Robbins, Ilfracombe's most gifted and most tragic architect. Which, if you'd come to my talk at the museum you would know. So that's one of the things I get to do here, I get the little museum. You get to a whole lot more stuff than you have and it [unclear word 0:57:16.8] just in my niche here. I gave that talk, I've given a talk about heroes and villains of the Victorian fern craze in North Devon. You have to be a bit careful here, who and what you talk about, because there are people here who are descended from the people you're talking about. There are lots of people here whose families have been here forever and you, you have to be a bit careful because you never know who you who you're talking to.

0:57:46.5 So here, I love this museum. It's my favourite museum. My favourite small museum. My favourite museum is the V&A. That has been one way of actually embedding myself, even though I didn't succeed in moving here in Ilfracombe, the research, yes, but also all the different roles that all the volunteers can play, from being on the desk to doing research to crawling underneath beams across the soggy carpet. You can do anything there that you want, and everyone's so friendly. I love that museum. It's the heart of everything. Just as every museum is the heart of the town, like the [unclear words 0:58:39.8] museum is the heart.

0:58:41.1 Abi Obene: So you've lived in Australia and then when you moved to the UK, it was London. At one point it was in Wales, Hastings, various parts of Devon. When it comes to how you see yourself, do you sort of see yourself as having numerous different homes in numerous different places that you kind of live and can be?

0:59:12.7 Sharyn Hedge: There are two things. It's about my dual nationality, and it's about what I call home when I'm here, in fact, when I'm there as well, when I'm here, I just automatically call, say about going home, home, home, home, because it is where I was born. It is where I was brought up. It is where those five/six generations before me, it rescued them. So I do call, I do refer to that as home. Certainly whenever my mother was alive, I made absolutely sure that while I was there, whenever I was home, I never referred to here as home because I think that would be very hurtful. Well, I would do the whole thing all over again, but I still feel guilty about I was the only daughter and there's just my brother as well. I was 21 and I came over here and never went back. It's not a good thing for a child to do to a mother, you know, don't do it to your mum.

1:00:26.1 Abi Obene: I'll do my best not to.

1:00:28.8 Sharyn Hedge: So I just do, I do call it home, but this is, on the other hand, this is where I belong. And as I've told you, the ways in which I have embedded myself in this country. As for nationality, obviously, I was born with Australian citizenship. The reason I was allowed just to walk into this country is because I'm grand patriotic, because my maternal grandfather, his family went over to Australia when he was really tiny, but on the basis of his being a British citizenship, by virtue of his birth, I'm a grand patron. The ironic thing is that grandpa was always absolutely adamant I'm an Aussie not a Pomme, but it's because he actually was a Pomme, that I was allowed to come over here and I have had all the rights of citizen. Absolutely all the rights of citizen. I couldn't have got a grant to go to uni, but anyone, even a British citizen who hadn't lived here for three years could have done. So basically, I had all rights.

1:01:35.7 We could vote, everything. Absolutely, all the rights. Just on the basis of having a grandparent who was born here and on the basis... I can't remember it was being a British subject or an Australian citizen, but one of those two, that was [unclear words 1:01:52.9]. However, as soon as I could, I did take up British citizenship because, I didn't

need to, but it was kind of symbolic. This is where I belong. Australia, at that point, being such an immature country, in taking out British citizenship, I lost my Australian citizenship, which was, I think that hurt my parents. I was annoyed about it because I didn't want to give up my Australian citizenship. However, Australia grew up eventually and you could get back your citizenship. So I got back my Australian citizenship and I did that, I think just with having those nine families that Australia actually rescued. I did that for them. Really, I didn't need to do it. So that's what, I got back my dual, I have dual nationality. I refer to Australia as home, but this is where I belong. So it's a bit more complicated than just what [unclear phrase 1:02:59.0]. The end. Are there any more questions?

1:03:07.8 Abi Obene: Well, I think we've gone through, I think pretty much... Unless you have any...

1:03:13.7 Mark Langworthy: I mean, I'm just interested in what was your fascination to come back to England?

1:03:20.5 Sharyn Hedge: Because England is civilisation. Australia was really philistine country. Honestly, all people, this this is stereotyping but I lived it. It was sport, it was all about sport. That's the worst, there weren't even any decent newspapers. Melbourne considers Sydney. I mean, if you have to live in Australia, you have to live in Sydney. Melbourne considers itself as civilisation and Sydney is hedonism. What's wrong with hedonism, I say. Yes, it's the mindset. The mindset was smaller, even though there was, in a certain dominant sector, economically and politically dominant sector of Australia. The idea this is the home country and Britain is bad, etc.. There was also, there was a thing called the cultural cringe, which meant that Australia, that kind of Australian felt inferior by contrast with Britain, which was civilisation. There was also the thing that my grandpa saying, I'm not a Pomme, I'm an Aussie, you know, disrespect.

1:04:39.2 We are the egalitarian society, mate ship, etc., etc. Which was part of it, but wasn't [?that clear a change 1:04:47.1] there was a class system and it was based on money. Also, the egalitarianism didn't extend to the indigenous population and as I've said, there was a lot of prejudice against Italians and Greeks.

1:04:59.5 Mark Langworthy: Did you not find that when you were doing your research, uncovering all this, because obviously the rule England had over Australia, a lot of

those rules possibly would have come back from us, was sanctioned by us to a degree. Did you not have any...

1:05:15.7 Sharyn Hedge: When Australia federated all the individual states which were individual colonies came together. Australia was then self-governing. Yes, but for a long time, yes. There did have to be that, and in fact there was a referendum - this was in my lifetime. This was a referendum... I can't remember when it was 1990s. A referendum about whether Australia should become a republic, is voted against. The current government, which is a Labour government, was going to hold a referendum this year but they decided they had other priorities. So that's been pushed back. I think it would have been very interesting if there'd been a referendum this year, because I think now that the point would be where Australia would say, yes, we want to be a republic, but that they've not had the opportunity

1:06:11.2 Abi Obene: Do you think that's just a general progression of sort of general public opinion, or I mean, would it even be down to something just like the Queen died, and that's a bit of a change and people are making...

1:06:23.2 Sharyn Hedge: I don't know, I think it's because Australia has grown up, also because it has become so much more multicultural. There are massive, I think there's a huge proportion of the population of Australia now, who weren't actually born in Australia, and they were born in countries which have no connection whatsoever to this country. So I think a tipping point has probably been reached where there just isn't the same feeling. The generation after mine, my brother's children, when they started going abroad, they didn't come here. My generation, you came here first, you went to Europe, but this is the first place you came. They go to America, they go to Southeast Asia. They go to all... It's not the first port of call when you go overseas anymore. In fact, for my nieces have come over here, my two nephews never have and never will. They just think of this as a sort of grey, rainy place. The other thing about multiculturalism is my niece, who's the oldest of the three. Well, she's got a partner, who's her husband, he is just like us, Anglo-Celtic. However, all of the partners of my two nephews, and there have been quite a lot of them, none of them are Anglo-Celtic. They're all from all these different backgrounds.

1:08:01.5 So it's the whole mixing up of people from all over, basically all over the world. It's a different country now and visually it's different. You go from the inner cities and you could be anywhere really, and then you can go to the Blue Mountains, where my brother

and his family lived for a while, which is, it is part of Greater Sydney, but you go there and it's as if you're back in my childhood in Sydney suburbia. So there is that old Anglo-Celtic Australia still there, but it's sort of pushed aside by the much more exciting, more multicultural place. My brother's children are very much part of that.

1:08:52.5 Abi Obene: Do you think that there's some mirrored aspect, perhaps, of that general change in the UK as well? Have you seen over the years that you've been here, things trending in the same direction as they have in Australia, socially and culturally speaking?

1:09:05.6 Sharyn Hedge: Well, when I first came, the country was already, but it's more multicultural than it was, but the big change is that there was a lot of overt racism back then. That Liberia, that wasn't, and the whole thing, that no dogs, no Irish, no blacks, it really was a thing. I never saw it myself, but it was a thing. So this country has become more of what it actually should have been back then. The racism, it's still there.

1:09:43.6 Abi Obene: It's covert.

1:09:45.9 Sharyn Hedge: Yes, it is still there.

1:09:45.2 Abi Obene: Should probably move that bit actually from the interview.

1:09:50.9 Sharyn Hedge: I tell you what, when I first moved to Barnstaple, this was before people from Eastern Europe, before Brexit. Well, I think when I was still in Sussex, when we Brexited. When I first moved here to Barnstaple and the hospital especially, as it turns out I spend a lot of time, well, in the streets as well. There was still a lot of people working in the hospital, Eastern European, and now it is people from the Indian subcontinent and from Africa - and that is a shaking pulse from her. Barnstaple looks completely different. It's and I just suspect that there are Barnstaple people who aren't very happy about that, though there's absolutely no overt racism whatsoever. So that's, I think Brexit in itself has actually changed. I mean, it's much more noticeable in a small place because of the proportion of people now.

1:11:09.3 Abi Obene: Well, I think we'll go to one of the very fun questions at the end to tie this all up. So I suppose we'd just liked to finish by asking, what is the one thing you most want people to remember about you or to remember you by? Nice easy question to finish us off.

1:11:32.7 Sharyn Hedge: I make people laugh. I'm very good at playing the idiot because I'm not actually acting. The thing about, there was one question about in your working life, what are you most proud of? I wouldn't say proud of, but the thing actually, what I was most useful was when I was at Sussex County Council, it was two things. Firstly, for almost the entire time I there was a trade union rep and so fighting for workers' rights. That's one of the things I was most proud of. The other thing was, I think I was actually an effective mentor to all the younger people that I managed. Mostly I just thought of it, [?and move the mannequin 1:12:15.0]. This was back when people could just go to London, go to London, 'You don't want to be stuck in this.' Go to London and other people who didn't want to move out and onward into the big wide world actually encouraged them to move from admin roles to trainers, social workers, which the county council would pay for.

1:12:31.8 So I think I was a good mentor to young people. Also, because we were so nice, people for whom working in other departments didn't work out so well, were kind of shunted into our department, and I think I was quite effective at finding the niche where they belonged, so if things didn't work out for them. So it was the actual work, but it was the people.

1:13:06.1 Abi Obene: Well, thank you ever so much for coming to talk to us and for agreeing to us and for reading a poem.

1:13:11.8 Sharyn Hedge: I think I was the only one who was made to cry. It was like when I gave that talk about William Morgan Robbins and at the end, you know, when it was the suicide bit leaping into the Hudson to his death, I was there, all the other eyes in the house were dry expect mine.

1:13:33.3 Abi Obene: Well, I think being I think being in tune and sensitive to these things is a good thing, isn't it? I mean, yes, fantastic at working with people and it's been really lovely to talk to you. I feel like we should almost do another one of these because there's so much we want to dive into.

1:13:49.9 Sharyn Hedge: I've got more poems if you want.

1:13:51.5 Abi Obene: We could do a poetry reading later.

1:13:54.6 Sharyn Hedge: I can give you my presentation on William Morgan Robbins.

1:13:56.6 Abi Obene: I'd love to see it. Thank you. So yes, we'll end it there. Thank you very much.

1:14:02.8 Sharyn Hedge: Well, thank you all for listening to me.

1:14:06.6 Abi Obene: Just to cover our backs a little. If you heard another voice on the recording there, that was Lawrence typing up at the back. He popped in a little way into the interview. Who's also another volunteer for the project. So we'll end it there. Thank you very much.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT - 74 MINS]