

**MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

‘TIME TO REMEMBER’

Interviewee(s): Mr Walter Callister and Mrs Alice Callister

Date of birth: Mr Walter Callister: 24th April 1922
Mrs Alice Callister: 16th September 1924

Place of birth:

Interviewer(s): Vi Ritchie

Recorded by: Vi Ritchie

Date recorded: No recording date

Topics: Early school days
WWII
Entertainment
Jam making at Rushen Abbey
Rationing
Internment camps
Dunkirk evacuation
‘Make Do and Mend’ Drive
RAF at Jurby
Radar stations
Cunningham’s Camp
Career in meteorology
The Home Guard
Holiday camps post war

Walter Callister - Mr C
Alice Callister - Mrs C
Vi Richie - VR

VR My name is Vi Ritchie and I am recording the memories of Mr and Mrs ... umm ...

Mrs C Callister

VR Callister.

Mrs C Callister.

VR Ok.

Mrs C My name is Alice Callister. I was born in Douglas.

VR When?

Mrs C 16th September 1924.

VR Right. And what was your father's occupation?

Mrs C My father was a clerk in the education office.

VR Right. And which school did you go to?

Mrs C I attended Murray's Road primary school and then the Girls' High School.

VR Right. So can we go onto you, Walter?

Mr C Yes. My name is Walter Callister, born 24th April 1922. Born in Douglas and my father died when I was seven.

VR Yes, oh dear.

Mr C My mother and I came back from Stretford to the Isle of ... to Douglas and she was a dressmaker by trade, and took in dressmaking.

VR Was she Manx?

Mr C Oh yes, but we're all ... yes.

VR Your father Manx?

Mr C Yes.

VR Yes.

Mr C My father ... in fact, I can go back to great grandfathers. *(laughter)*

VR Oh really?

Mr C Yes.

VR Yes. So what did he do before he ...

Mr C My father was a pattern maker ...

VR Oh, right.

Mr C ... and because of the lack of work on the Island, he had to go to Stretford, Trafford Park ...

VR Oh!

Mr C ... and err ... well, that's it, really.

Mrs C Right, yes.

VR Which school did you go to?

Mr C Oh, sorry! Went, first of all, to Murray's Road school, Douglas, and then followed on at the Boys' High School – St Ninian's, now.

VR Oh right, okay. So we'll now go onto your memories of the war.

Mrs C Oh, right. Well, I think one of the early memories were the identity cards and the gas masks.

VR Yes.

Mrs C I can remember going down to Victoria Street Sunday School, a large Sunday School in Victoria Street, Douglas, and we were given these gas masks, in a cardboard box, with a piece of string round it, which we put round our necks and walked home. I remember the blackouts, which came that very first weekend when war was declared. A lot of black material was sold at the time, and people used any thick material they could for curtains, 'cos no light had to be seen outside the house. There were wardens and police check from time to time and let you know if they could see a chink of light. Bicycle headlights were covered in some way with ... cocoa tins, I think?

Mr C Hmm, hmm.

Mrs C Car headlights also had to be half covered, but there weren't a lot of cars because petrol was rationed. Church services in the evening were held in the Sunday Schools, again, probably, because of the blackout – you couldn't blackout a church easily.

VR Do you want to add a bit to that?

Mr C Well, talking about the gas masks; I was horrified at the little babies being fitted into an enclosed mask, with, I think, a ventilator.

VR Yes.

Mr C It had to be ... it looked horrible. And, fortunately, as time went on, we even ceased to carry them.

VR Hmm.

Mr C With regard to the blackout on the bicycles, you were not allowed to have a light which would shine up into air, so you had to fit either a piece of ... a metal mask, or make one, as I did, out of an old cocoa tin, with two slits cut into it, so that the light was reflected downwards. In effect, they were useless for showing you were you were going, but, no doubt, they weren't seen from above.

VR Yes.

Mrs C I was at school when war broke out, at the Girls' High School. We were lucky

from the teachers' point of view because women teachers were not called up. We had careful use of paper. I can remember having to draw lines at the top and bottom of each page, right through the margin, fold pages in half for mathematics and use them in two sections. New books had very, very poor paper. Before the war we had lots of joint gatherings with the boys from the Boys' High School, but during the war, these were stopped ...

VR Oh!

Mrs C ... and the prize givings, which we used to hold in *The Villa Marina*, for the two schools together.

VR Yes.

Mrs C They were stopped and we had separate prize-givings in the separate schools.

VR Oh, I wonder why that would be, then?

Mrs C Well I assumed that it must have been, maybe, they didn't want to have too many gatherings with a lot of people altogether, perhaps ...

VR Could be.

Mrs C ... although dances were held in *The Villa Marina* and the cinemas were kept open.

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mrs C After school we had – I can remember having stirrup pump training. (*laughter*) There was a group of us – it wasn't the whole school – a group of fifth and sixth forms who lived in Douglas, stayed after school, and the Chief Inspector from the police came up and trained us how to use a stirrup pump, should it be necessary.

VR This was in case of fire?

Mrs C This was in case of incendiary bombs, yes. The other thing I remember was, we had half-day holidays, about four, in September. We went to school in the

morning, and if it was a nice day, we were given the afternoon to go and pick blackberries.

VR Oh yes.

Mrs C The blackberries were then sent to Rushen Abbey ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mrs C ... for them to make jam.

VR So I heard – somebody else has told me that!

Mrs C Yes.

VR Yes.

Mrs C Do you want to add any school things before ...

Mr C Yes, regard to the ... this business about the school meetings; being 16 at the time war broke out, we were horrified to find that the Christmas parties were going to be cancelled. (*laughter*)

VR Indeed, yes!

Mr C And we were horrified because our Christmas party, at that time, would have been a mixed one, and the girls came up from the girls school and had a rehearsal, and were taught the basic one, two, three steps of the waltz, (*laughter*) and this wasn't to be. It was quite a big disappointment.

VR Oh, yes.

Mr C Also, we saw our younger teachers being called up and going off to service ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C ... and back would come some of the oldies; some of the retired teachers came in ...

VR Yes, of course.

Mr C ... to take their place.

VR Yes.

Mr C I don't ... I'll pass back to you, Alice, if I may?

Mrs C Well, if I go onto food, now, and ration books ...

VR Yes.

Mrs C The rationing was almost the same as you had in England ...

VR Yes.

Mrs C ... butter, margarine, sugar, tea were all in pretty short supply. Meat was also rationed, but I think we did a little better than they did in England. And we did – oh, sweets, also ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mrs C ... the same as in England. But I think, on the Island, we did very well for eggs. And most of the cafes would serve egg and chips and egg on toast all the time, there were never any shortage.

VR Ah, I see.

Mrs C Food was not allowed to be sent out of the Island ...

VR Right.

Mrs C ... but if you were travelling, you could take with you what you could eat on the journey (*laughter*) and I remember when we were going back ...

VR It would depend if they checked ...

Mrs C Yes, there was a Customs ...

- VR** Oh, they did?!
- Mrs C** Yes, there were Customs Officers; I think they were, at the end of the pier. And they could ask to open your suitcase ...
- VR** Oh, really?
- Mrs C** ... and when we were going back to college and universities, they sometimes did. But they were always very kind, and they used to say, ‘cos we would sometimes have a pot of jam, hidden in our suitcase ...
- VR** Yes.
- Mrs C** ... and a cake that our mother had made ...
- VR** Yes.
- Mrs C** ... and they used to say, ‘Oh, you’re feeling hungry, are you, you’re going to be eating a lot on your way?’ (*laughter*) They were very kind, because it was our mother’s ration that had been used to make it, and they realised that, so ...
- VR** Yes, so you were allowed to keep it?
- Mrs C** We were allowed, we were let off, I think.
- Mr C** Following on from your collecting blackberries; when I was in the sixth form, and Head Boy at the time, I had to take a group of lads, six of us, cycling out to a farm at the Cooil, Braddan, at harvest time. And we would go out during the holiday – at the end of the holidays and help the farmer bring the harvest in ...
- VR** Oh!
- Mr C** ... and we got a shilling a day, and an extremely good lunch ...
- VR** Yes.
- Mr C** ... not to mention the breaks and I’ve never tasted better raspberry jam; and tea out of a tea mug in the field. (*laughter*)

VR Yes.

Mr C The most startling thing, I think, to happen on the Island was when they built the internment camps ...

VR Oh, yes.

Mr C ... in Douglas, mainly, but also at Port Erin and Ramsey. And at first they were mainly ... I think they were called 14 B ...

Mrs C 18 B.

Mr C ... 18 B, sorry. 18 B. And they were people who would, shall say 'had contacts' with Germans; either by name or by association ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mrs C ... and they were temporarily interned until their backgrounds had been checked out and then they were allowed to go free, eventually.

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C Later on we got German forces, German forces – German soldiers who had been captured.

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C They were also interned on the Island.

VR Oh, right.

Mr C And suddenly you realise, right, there's a war on somewhere.

VR Yes.

Mr C Because, in many ways, we were very fortunate on the Island, by our isolation ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C ... of being in the middle of the Irish Sea.

VR Hmm, hmm ... did you have any problems crossing ... you know, by boat? I mean, I presume ...

Mrs C The boats were every other day ...

VR Oh, I see.

Mrs C ... I think it was Monday, Wednesday, Friday, from the Island to ... they were using Fleetwood, then, because Liverpool had been bombed, and there were mines in the Mersey, and we used Fleetwood for our port.

VR Oh, right!

Mrs C And then they came from Fleetwood to Douglas, Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday.

VR Yes.

Mrs C And there was no boat on a Sunday.

VR Yes.

Mrs C And so, when we were away at universities, we were there for the term.

VR Yes.

Mrs C There were no half terms – you couldn't get back for a half term or a weekend – no planes, of course.

VR No, right.

Mrs C So that was the travelling.

VR Been quite scary journeys, weren't they?

- Mrs C** Yes, that's right.
- VR** If that was the case ...
- Mrs C** Yes, yes.
- VR** Hmm.
- Mr C** Well, you see, the big fleets of the Steam Packet Company, most of the boats were taken – requisitioned by the English Government ...
- VR** Hmm.
- Mr C** ... and they, as it were, rented the service, ferrying people backwards and forwards, that sort of thing.
- VR** Hmm.
- Mr C** Shifting forces. And, of course, a tremendous ...
- Mrs C** Many went to Dunkirk.
- Mr C** A tremendous evacuation of Dunkirk, and therefore we only had one boat ...
- VR** Yes.
- Mr C** ... and therefore it could only go on alternate days.
- VR** Yes, yes ... I see.
- Mr C** It did have the advantage, though, that later, when I was in the forces, you've got an extra travelling day, because you had to go home to the Isle of Man (*laughter*) because of the alternate days.
- VR** Yes, yes. (*laughter*)
- Mr C** And you mentioned the stirrup pumps; well, what they did was, they had groups, stirrup pump groups – fire-watching groups they were called – in each

particular area of Douglas. In my case, I was in the team looking after Selborne Drive, and round there.

VR Yes.

Mr C It was a really, apart from having a ... sort of a trial run with your two buckets of water and the stirrup pump (*laughter*) nothing really happened. But one night three bombs, I think it was, were jettisoned onto the Abbeylands, and we heard them, we could see the results, and after the first shock of realising that somebody had bombed our Island.

VR Hmm.

Mr C I dashed home to see how my mother and grandma were, only to find the two of them crouched under the wooden dining room table, (*laughter*) and all well. (*laughter*)

VR What an experience, though.

Mr C Hmm.

Mrs C To go back to the rationing; we had clothes coupons, as well ...

VR Oh yes, yes.

Mrs C ... the same as we had in England. And I know there was a utility symbol that we had, but I can't – I know it was a mark of standard and quality.

VR Yes, it was like three-quarters of a circle, I think.

Mrs C That's right, yes, there was, yes, yes ... and there was a lot of 'Make do and mend' went on.

VR Hmm.

Mrs C Sometimes coats were unpicked ...

VR Yes.

- Mrs C** ... and turned and made into a different style.
- VR** Yes.
- Mrs C** And I remember good quality soap, and toiletries and make-up being in rather short supply.
- VR** Yes.
- Mrs C** You tended to go to the same shop ...
- VR** Yes.
- Mrs C** ... and they knew what you liked and would try and keep you a bit ...
- Mr C** Pond's Cream was quite a favourite. (*laughter*)
- Mrs C** That's right, that's right, yes, yes ... well, during the war we had forces stationed here as well as the internment camps.
- VR** Oh, right.
- Mrs C** There were ... the RAF had Jurby and Andreas ...
- VR** Of course.
- Mrs C** ... Ronaldsway; there was Fleet Air Arm in Castletown where Castle Rushen High School has been built.
- VR** Oh, right.
- Mrs C** You would remember – or at least, you would know about that.
- VR** Hmm, hmm.
- Mrs C** The early buildings at the school used were ...
- Mr C** Yes. 1941 saw me taking High School Certificate, or A levels as they call them

now ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C ... and unfortunately for me, on the Sunday before my physics exam, I was stung by a wasp in the garden.

VR Oh dear.

Mr C Not a big sort of accident, you might say, but my right hand swelled up, so that by ... later on the Sunday I couldn't write at all.

VR Oh!

Mr C Panic stations! Went to the doctor who gave me an injection, went to the Head Master who said, 'Don't worry.' He phoned up the Examination Board, and I was allowed to take the exam with an amanuensis ...

VR Oh!

Mr C ... which I had no idea what that was at the time ...

VR No.

Mr C ... but it proved to be a Chemistry Master who was allowed ... I was allowed to dictate the answers to the exam to him.

VR Yes.

Mr C Unfortunately for me, on the school notice boards the next day in every form-room, there was a cutting out of, I think it was, the *Daily Mirror*, 'Stung by wasp, but still he sat.' (*laughter*) Now I'd like to emphasise here, I was stung on the finger on my right hand, so I was able to sit in any case!

VR (*laughter*) Yes, it didn't affect that!

Mr C At the same time that we saw the internment camps on the Island, there were also were serious masts appearing round the Island, in the South round Scarlett,

up at err ...

VR Dalby way?

Mr C Yes, Dalby at South of Peel. On the West coast generally, and overlooking Port St Mary. And these were radar establishments we found later.

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C And there are still remnants of them visible on the Island at the moment. Although I think farmers took over most of the old buildings and used them for their own purposes.

VR Hmm, hmm. Hmm, hmm.

Mr C A good friend of mine was in the RAF and he was sent on ...

Mrs C Embarkation?

Mr C ... Embarkation leave. So he came home to the Island, enjoyed his leave in Douglas, went back to the station to be posted to Cregneash radar station. And, fortunately for him, Ballabeg was the, shall we say, family grounding for him, and he had wonderful Sunday lunches all through his war service!

VR (*laughter*) Yes, wonderful!

Mrs C I can remember, in Douglas, there was a training ship – a land training ship – based at what was Cunningham's Camp ...

VR Oh yes.

Mrs C ... and it was called the *St George* ...

VR Right.

Mrs C ... and the lads from there marched, every day, to Ballakermeen School ...

VR Oh!

Mrs C ... which they used for their training ...

VR Training, yes.

Mrs C ... and then back each evening to Cunningham's Camp.

VR Would that be local lads?

Mrs C No, no, this was the Navy.

VR Oh.

Mrs C It was a Navy establishment, so they were young trainees, I suppose they would be eighteen ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mrs C ... and there was another establishment known as the HMS *Valkyrie*, which used some of the hotels on the Loch Promenade ...

VR Oh yes.

Mrs C ... alongside where the internment camps started ...

VR Oh.

Mrs C ... so there was the Navy there as well.

VR I've heard that name mentioned ...

Mrs C Yes, yes.

Mr C I mentioned about the examination of 1941. That took me, then, to Manchester University ...

VR Oh, right.

Mr C ... to study chemistry ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C ... but, disappointment again; there was no long holiday, because the universities were working four terms to the year ...

VR Goodness!

Mr C ... and, in that way, they got us through our three year course, as it were ...

VR Yes.

MR C ... namely, nine terms ...

VR Yes.

Mr C ... but we were able to complete that in two and a quarter years. We also had to do a half day a week on army training ...

VR Oh, did you?!

Mr C ... as part of the Home Guard in the area.

VR Oh!

Mr C And then, when we got our degrees – and by the way, this only applied to the science students. The arts students were allowed one year at university and then they were called up for the forces.

VR Oh, were they?

Mr C In our case, when we finished our degrees, we received letters from the government, offering us a commission in the army, in the Royal Corp of Signals, on the bomb disposal side, or in the Royal Engineers; or you could join the RAF as a meteorologist. And also, get involved with the servicing of bombs and so forth ...

VR Hmm.

Mr C ... or finally, you had a choice of joining on the civilian side, the food manufacturing businesses, like margarine works that – being chemists, as it were ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C You were ... this was sort of in your ...

VR In your line ...

Mr C ... in your experience.

VR Yes.

Mr C In my case, because I wanted to go in for teaching, I opted for meteorology.

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C Although I must confess, not even thinking about bomb disposal. *(laughter)*

VR *(laughter)* I don't blame you!

Mrs C I think that's mainly ...

VR So you've both got good memories, then.

Mrs C Well, I wish they were better, but ...

VR Oh, I mean, you remember ...

Mrs C We do remember quite a bit, yes.

VR Yes.

Mrs C Yes.

Mr C Looking back in general, we were extremely lucky in the Island.

VR Yes.

Mr C We were hardly involved – well, I say, ‘hardly involved,’ – many of our young people, at that time, were into the forces and err ...

Mrs C Some didn’t come back.

Mr C Some didn’t come back of course. And others served in prisoner of war camps ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C ... Crete – out to Crete and so forth.

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C But the general way of life was not a great inconvenience.

VR No.

Mr C Thinking about it ...

VR Hmm, hmm.

Mr C ... and we were being rationed for food – I believe that the experts tell us we were healthier then than we’ve been since! (*laughter*)

VR I’ve heard that sentence before, as well – ‘cos we ate less.

Mrs C Quite – yes!

Mr C Quite.

Mrs C Yes.

VR Right.

Mr C And I think we tramped round a lot, hiking and bicycles as well.

VR Hmm, hmm ... there was a lot of people came over – young men, especially, after the war, to the holiday camps on the Island. Do you know anything about them?

Mr C Not really, no.

Mrs C No.

Mr C I can remember the Cunningham's Holiday Camp lads, they thoroughly enjoyed themselves, and, on a Sunday they'd be roaming the promenade in Douglas, arm-in-arm ...

VR Hmm.

Mr C ... picking up young ladies if they were willing.

VR Of course! (*laughter*)

Mr C And they'd be wandering the promenade, singing their heads off.

VR Oh, really!

Mr C It was quite an occasion.

Mrs C But it was fairly ... fairly strict camp. Anybody that came in with any drink on them, or if they'd been drinking, was given their fare to go back home the next morning.

VR Oh, really?!

Mrs C The Cunningham family were very strict about that.

VR Were they?

Mrs C Yes.

VR So they were still on ... they were still involved?

- Mrs C** Oh yes, oh yes. I suppose it was at its peak between the two wars, really ...
- VR** I see.
- Mrs C** ... in the sort of late twenties and thirties.
- VR** Yes, hmm. What about the leisure on the Island after the war, did it all take off again? Because it was very popular previous to that, wasn't it?
- Mrs C** For a short time, but then when the ... I think tourism started to go downhill here, when the cheaper Spanish package deals came about ...
- VR** Yes.
- Mrs C** ... because of course we couldn't rely on the kind of weather we've had this summer, (*laughter*) and, if people wanted to sunbath, they didn't want to sit on a beach with an east wind blowing.
- VR** Hmm, that's true, yes.
- Mr C** I would say that's it, I think.
- Mrs C** Hmm, hmm.
- VR** Yes, well, thank you very much indeed, both of you.
- Mr C** (*laughter*) I bet I'll think of a lot of other things ...
- Mrs C** Yes, yes.
- Mr C** ... after you've gone.
- VR** Yes.
- Mrs C** Yes.
- VR** But what you have said will be much appreciated, anyhow, and it's going into the archives, so that any future student, who wants to reclaim them ...

Mr C Yes, yes.

VR ... and especially the memories, so thank you very much once again on behalf of Manx Heritage.

END OF INTERVIEW