MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

'TIME TO REMEMBER'

Interviewee: **Mrs Vera Craine nee Jennings [wife of the late Dick Craine]**

Date of birth: **31st December 1912**

Place of birth:

Interviewer: **David Callister**

Recorded by: **David Callister**

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Topic(s):
Theatre in the Isle of Man
The Service Players
The Bluebell Kelly School of Dancing
Family history
Holidays in the Isle of Man
Moving to the Isle of Man
Father's wholesale fruit business
Dancing lessons and winning medals
Pantomimes at *The Gaiety Theatre*
Teaching dance at *The Palais* studio
Actor Jon Pertwee
Manx Amateur Dramatic Society
Competing in the Blackpool Festival
The Royal Navy and *HMS Valkyrie*
Starting a family
Death of Colonel Jeavons during a live performance

Vera Craine - Mrs C
David Callister - DC

DC Right, now this is Vera Craine, tape number 1. For the purposes of future record, born on 31st December 1912 and here we are in Ballasalla with some memories of theatre in the Isle of Man in particular, especially the Service Players. And I suppose I ought to start with when you were a child because as you did so many theatrical things you must have been a bit of showy child, were you?

Mrs C I think I was, yes. I'm sure I was because nothing gave me more pleasure than to get my mother and father to sit down and watch me make up some sort of a dance. I think they could see what was in my blood and I was sent to music, I learned the piano, which I hated, and I went to dancing, which I loved. When I was five I can remember, through the dancing school, going to Aintree Institute and appearing on the stage there in a concert and I did a little number called, 'Little Mr Baggy Breeches, I love you.' I was dressed as a Dutch girl, with clogs, and clunked my way round the stage in these clogs and sang this little song. Well, I think that gave me the impetus to go on from there, because I went on to dancing and, if you can stop there for a minute David, because a great thing happened to me at the dancing school I went to, it was a lady named – I've got all the facts to show – went to Miss Cummings' school of dancing. Oh, I went – I did toe dancing in Blackpool Ballroom Tower when I was eight.

DC Toe dancing?

Mrs C Toe – ballet …

DC Oh, ballet.

Mrs C … when I was eight, and the Tower is no longer there but I've got my certificate. And also at this school I went to – Bluebell, Bluebell Kelly. Years and years afterwards, living in the Isle of Man, looking through this magazine, two pages all about this girl who had gone from being a child – she was left alone by her parents, her parents went to America, left this little girl with a lady who, more or less, adopted her. They never came back again so this lady brought her to Liverpool, from Ireland to Liverpool, and looked after her, because she was very delicate. So delicate that she had to get the doctor and the doctor said, 'You know, the best thing to do with this little girl is to send her to dancing and get her lungs developed and her limbs developed and,' he said, 'if I had a little girl like that I would call her Bluebell; she's got the most gorgeous

blue eyes,' which this lady did, this lady's name was Margaret Kelly. So this little girl grew up called Bluebell. This little girl grew up to be the famous Bluebell girl that had the famous *Bluebell Troupe* in Paris. So when I read this I thought, 'Oh, good gracious.' And when I looked at my strip of paper, I've got my certificate and I've got my strip of paper with all the competitors down, Bluebell Kelly is there and Vera Jennings …

DC Oh, right.

Mrs C … so that was a wonderful thing to happen all those years ago. I wrote – I tried to contact her because I'd seen her on television, I'd seen the film, which was renamed, of course, but they couldn't – they didn't know where she was. But she, during the war, was in Paris, married a German, had to keep him up in the attic, go out at night and get food and come back and feed him, and that poor man was hidden for four years.

DC Really?

Mrs C She managed to keep him from the Nazis.

DC It would have been nice to be able to meet up with her, wouldn't it?

Mrs C I would have loved that, yes, I would have loved to have seen her again. She would probably be older than me so I very much doubt if she's still about, but you never know.

DC So you were born as Vera Jennings, how is it you came to the Isle of Man, then, tell me that?

Mrs C Are you recording this?

DC Yes, oh, yes.

Mrs C My mother's Manx, all her – was a Creer and her mother and father came from Port St. Mary. My mother's name was Martha Harrison and my grandmother's name was Martha Harrison – my grandfather's name was James Creer and he had the loom up at Colby …

DC Oh, yes.

Mrs C … I believe. They eloped, they left the Island, went to Liverpool very young and got married there, and this is in Kirkdale in Liverpool, and had ten children. Nine girls and one boy, and the boy was dreadful, I believe.

DC I'm not surprised.

Mrs C That's right. But the nine girls, you know, they seemed to die and be born again and re-named – they kept on giving the children the same names, didn't they, in those days.

DC Yes, that's right, yes.

Mrs C But my mother always loved the Island and the only holidays we ever had, as children – Isle of Man – every year. And Dad used to – my father was a wholesale fruit merchant in Liverpool, he used to order a taxi, the taxi used to take us down to the boat. We always had a cabin because my mother was always ill. And there were three of us, three, my brother and sister and I, and the maid, Amy McIntyre, and the bulldog, all in the cabin, which was a bit of a squash. When we got to the Isle of Man we walked from the boat along the pier, up to the railway station, on the train, through to Port Erin and we had two or three weeks in Port Erin.

DC So you'd have to carry your luggage as well, did you?

Mrs C Well, there was a porter.

DC Or did you have a porter in those days?

Mrs C Sent in advance, you could do – send it on in advance, in those days.

DC Oh, right, ah, yes.

Mrs C But I would love one of those old pictures of the old porter –

DC The porters, yes.

Mrs C I think that's a wonderful …

DC And their carriage, yes.

Mrs C … beautiful. So, two or three weeks down on the shore, getting shells and things …

DC Port Erin?

Mrs C … it was gorgeous. And then back again. And that was – until I was about nine, nine I think, and we stayed at *The Perwick* – not *The Perwick*, *The Peveril*, up by Collinsons – is it *The Peveril* up there? Yes, it must be *The Peveril.*

DC Yes, I think so.

Mrs C Just before Collinsons.

DC I don't know if it's there now, is it? Anyway, not to worry.

Mrs C No. And then finally mother and father thought we were old enough and could behave ourselves enough to come and have a holiday on the promenade in Douglas. And then they decided that – mother wanted to come and live here – so my father bought – you know *Greystones* on Quarterbridge Road?

DC Yes.

Mrs C My father bought that for £2,500.

DC Ah, yes, but that's a fair bit of money in those days, though.

Mrs C I suppose so. He came over to retire and I don't think he had very much more than £2,500, you know, apart from buying the house. He bought it off Hodson, who hadn't enough money to finish building it …

DC Ah, right.

Mrs C … so this is what happened and ... but very shortly after that Dad had to start up again in business because my mother was so ill. She died when she was 49, and

in those days you paid the doctor every time they came, so his money that he'd …

DC So did he stay in the wholesale business, was he then?

Mrs C Oh, yes, he opened – you know where Tesco's …

DC Ridgeway Street.

Mrs C … Tesco's – that's where Dad opened first of all, down where Tesco's is …

DC Oh, really.

Mrs C … and then he moved to Ridgeway Street, and he was there until he gave up, you know, Ridgeway Street.

DC So shortly after you came to the Isle of Man, then, I mean when you got – I suppose into your late teens, you were really into dancing then, were you?

Mrs C Well, when I came to the Isle of Man I continued with the dancing and there was Miss Rose – two quite elderly ladies, they were really too old, and they used to have classes at the Villa Marina. But that didn't last very long and the Miss Rose seemed to disappear, I think they must have died off. Then Olga Cowell and Wyn Brown had a dance school, Olga, that I mentioned over the Service Players, and went there, and all the well-known young girls went to Olga. And I don't know whether anybody would remember – well, Jean Davy, as far as I know, Jean Davy is still alive. There's Clare and Eileen Midgeley, there's Nicky Murphy, there was a boy, Nicky Murphy, Eva Kane, all sorts of young people, all the young people went there.

DC What sort of dancing was being taught then?

Mrs C Everything, in those days, you learnt tap, you learnt a little bit of ballet, a little bit of ballroom, but it was mainly, sort of character and tap and that sort of thing. And again we had competitions, and daggers drawn as to who was going to get the best dance and who'd win the most medals. I've got my medals tucked away. And then at the same time, I think my mother thought I should be more serious about the dancing if I was going to go in for it, so I was sent to the

St. Aubyn School in Selborne Drive, and that was run by Mrs Rushworth and her daughter, Doris. Doris Rushworth married Bert Kenna of the Nunnery, who was the – whatever he was there. And so I was there, and during the time there Mrs Rushworth was dead keen on making or doing pantomimes. So with the pupils she had and importing some friends, we did two or three pantomimes at *The Gaiety Theatre*. And I think I must have been one of the first people to come up in the trap. I was a fairy and I know I was terrified and I stood on this trap under the stage and all of a sudden I was shot up – and how to get off this, you know, feeling all light-headed and funny, but I did manage to stand on two feet, but it was a horrible experience. And from then I went to London – I can go on for hours telling you all these stories – I went to London to take an exam. Mrs Rushworth came with me, and I went to a school run by Kelland-Espinosa, who was one of the top ballet teachers. And then came the day of the exam, but in front of me I had a girl who must have been an acrobat because when we were doing the *grande battement*, she was hitting her ear at the side, her leg was swinging up and down – she was much taller than me anyhow – and her bar work, she could do everything to perfection. And I was only mediocre, you know. Anyway I didn't pass, but I didn't expect to having this girl in front of me. But when I got back to the – we were in a boarding house, there were students there and one German student asked Mrs Rushworth could he take me to the university dance that was on that night. And she said, 'Yes of course, that would be lovely.' I didn't want to go. So I was sent off with this German to this dance, and he was all right and we had a good time. But when we came back I remember getting this bentwood chair, getting it under the handle of the door of the bedroom and sitting on it all night.

DC Oh dear, to keep him away.

Mrs C So that was – I don't think I went again to London, I think I packed in, but I kept it up – I think I got married then – this is over the years – and had Shirl, my daughter, who hated dancing, I took her along with me when I was teaching for Doris Lowthian, and had to give it up because she didn't like it at all.

DC But you taught dancing though, didn't you?

Mrs C Oh, yes, oh, yes.

DC How different is that then, going from learning dancing to teaching other

people?

Mrs C Well, I loved it, I loved it – I loved teaching. If you could get on a Saturday at Doris Lowthian's, down in *The Palais* studio, I'd get all the farmers coming in, who wanted to learn, bless them, and it was really the waltz and the foxtrot. They didn't go on to the tango and cha cha and all those things. But they were very keen to learn, but they had the most hideous big boots on and they used to walk all over me, you know. It was heavy going. But always the little – there was always a little bell boy at *The Palais*. After they'd gone there was a little bell boy came up with a box of chocolates, which …

DC Oh, that's nice.

Mrs C … I didn't get the money, Doris did, but there was always a little box of chocolates, so that was nice, that was compensation.

DC So is that what you were teaching mainly then, ballroom work, was it?

Mrs C On a Saturday. But during the week and evenings, of course, it was ballet and tap and Greek. I mean the Greek is barefoot, dancing barefoot.

DC Oh, right. Which is the most difficult to learn then?

Mrs C Oh, ballet.

DC Is it?

Mrs C Yes, with blocks, you know, because your toes bleed, it's very painful.

DC Tap dancing can't be all that easy either, can it?

Mrs C It is, it's a bit – tap is a bit like Irish, you know, you see the Irish, it's rhythm, you know, keeping the rhythm going.

DC Right. So were you training people to go in to shows as well, *The Gaiety* and so on?

Mrs C Well, I trained for nine years for the Choral Union, I did that, you know. Each

show they did they said, you know, can you be available. And yes, yes, I enjoyed that, and that's why I've got those photographs there of people I had, you know, they're very good.

DC Apart from the dancing then, I mean you – I associate you probably more with acting, don't I and theatre, don't I, in the Isle of Man.

Mrs C Yes, probably, yes, I think so.

DC When did you get into that?

Mrs C The Service Players didn't really come into being until 1942 when Jon Pertwee came. But years before that, and I can't remember the year, we became a concert party. We used to go round church halls, doing a one act play and take along well known singers, Lillian Pickard, people like that, and perform a one act play and they would sing songs and we'd have supper and it was really lovely. And we did that for many years. Then our Manx Amateur Dramatic Society, which we were known as, grew larger and we did two or three plays on *The Gaiety* stage. I can remember 'Fresh Fields' very well. And then the Dramatic Federation decided that we should send a team away to compete in Blackpool Festival. I remember the first play we did was, 'Budge, Budge Not' and there were, I think, six of us, or eight of us, in the cast and we went over and did this play – and we won, we got first prize. And one of the adjudicators was a man named John Bourne, and on his remarks at the end he said he would like one each of the frivolities in his stocking at Christmas – that was Nina Hunt and myself – because we were very cleverly dressed, nipping round the stage. And that was that time. And we came home – oh, we were asked would we bring the trophy back on the boat, because everybody had flown home, so Dick and I volunteered to come on the boat. It was a terrible crossing. My husband always put a handkerchief over his face and lay down and went to sleep. So I was in charge of this huge trophy at my feet, and I felt dreadfully ill. We landed at the docks at Douglas, only to find that all of the team were there, that had been away to Blackpool, plus the press photographers, everybody, and the press were shouting, 'Hold the trophy up.' So Dick is pictured in the picture in the paper, when it came out, holding the trophy in one hand. I must have looked so awful they just cut me off it altogether.

DC So that was a journey to forget then.

Mrs C That's right, it was. It was called the Eli Percival Trophy, I've got photographs of it. And then, I think a year or two later, we went away again with another play, 'Here we come gathering' and won first prize in that. I haven't got a picture of the trophy or – I think I've got – yes I have, got a certificate of that but not a picture of the trophy. After I stopped going with the Service Players they went on again to Harrogate, but I don't think they ever won, no, I'm sure they didn't.

DC We're talking really – we're talking about, like before the war here aren't we, in the '30s really?

Mrs C Yes, yes, that's right. But we were always busy, we were – we did one act plays in the Guild and in those days there weren't so many – way, way back – there weren't so many teams entering but there was the Students which comprised of the very eminent lawyers and Attorney Generals that are on the Island nowadays, and St. Mary's Players, who had a marvellous producer called Johnny Wrangham, and Johnny Wrangham did everything in his sets on *The Gaiety* stage. He had running water and steaming kettles if necessary, he went to no end – length of trouble, but of course he got a lot of marks for doing this. We – I think we won several times – I know we did in the Guild plays. And then came 1942, of course the war was on its way then and all the whole of Douglas promenade was all barricaded off. The Navy were down there and it was called *Valkyrie*. And Jon Pertwee was one of the men who was in charge there, Sub-Lieutenant. He'd been invalided out – I think he had an injury. He was stationed there and he knew he would be there for the rest of the war, so he wanted something to do. He had met Olga Cowell, who was the President of the Red Cross, a very well-known lady, married to Bob Cowell, the lawyer.

DC Actress and musician as well, wasn't she?

Mrs C Exactly, yes, she was a wonderful musician. And they met at a dinner somewhere and got talking about what Jon was going to do, apart from looking after all these sailor boys, and he said to Olga could he get a drama society going. And she said, 'Oh, we've already got one.' 'Oh,' he said, 'good, but we'll change the name to the Service Players, because I can get the OCTU, the Navy, the Air Force, all these people, to join,' and at that time we didn't know we had a lot of very famous people on the Island in the forces. So that's what happened, the Manx Amateur Dramatic Society's name was scrubbed out and

the Service Players name put in. That's how the Service Players came about.

DC I remember once talking to Jon Pertwee who said that he remembered the first play he was in was 'Night Must Fall.'

Mrs C That was the one, yes, and that was really lovely. And Jon – the original was written in Welsh, and Emlyn Williams, whose play it was, he played it in Welsh – but Jon played it in Cockney, and by jove, he was terrifying. The part where he suffocates Mrs Brampson with this pillow, was absolutely – oh – you couldn't watch it, but it was a great success. And it was a pity that he wasn't here longer to have done more plays, actually.

DC How many will he have done then?

Mrs C I was in a one act play with him, they relaxed the rules at the One Act Festival which came into the Guild period, and Jon was allowed, being a professional, he was allowed to compete.

DC What sort of part did you have in that?

Mrs C I was a prostitute.

DC Oh.

Mrs C It was a brother and sister thing. It took place in the docks, American docks I think, or could have been Liverpool docks, but the whole stage was just curtained, in dark, very dark blue curtains. We had a bar on the stage and a spittoon, that's all the props we had. Jon was coming in to this pub. Three horrible men, never visible, had bribed me to bribe this young man coming in, who was going home with a lot of money. He'd made his money and he was going home and I was to bribe him, get his money off him and send him on his way. All mime, we have a drink, we have a cigarette, it was all mimed, and then we sit and talk. And during the course of the conversation he tells me where he's come from, his name, and I realise that this is my brother. So no way, no way can I do what these three thugs have asked me to do. So I talk him into going away sooner than he would have done and I push him out through the door. All during the play the old fog horns are wailing; wailing and wailing and wailing, and Morris Kewley, who was a very eminent man in the Operatic

Society, had a big long tube there, and he was doing the old fog horn …

DC Really!

Mrs C … blowing. And next morning I went to church, Trinity Church, and not knowing, the minister was preaching – he'd been to *The Gaiety Theatre* the night before and seen the very play that I'd been in – and he said it was so moving, it was so wonderful, and there was really a story to be told. So after the service I went and I said, 'Would you like me to copy out that last speech I made, for you.' 'Oh,' he said, 'I'd love that because,' he said, 'I'm going to use this again.' So I did that and he was very pleased about it.

DC Right. So therefore, just looking at Jon Pertwee's career in the Service Players, two major plays and then this one act and that was it, really.

Mrs C That's right, yes. So then I had my third child, my young son, Tim. I thought it was time – well, I knew that it was time that I dropped out because I had nobody to babysit or anything, so I dropped out. But I made Dick carry on and he got into producing with Doctor Pyecraft, the two of them used to go off together, and I knew Dick was happy doing that. But I did come back in to do a play called 'The Paragon,' which was all about a man who was blind and we did this play at *The Gaiety Theatre*, the usual three nights. And then the Three Act Drama Festival was on, following, and for that the teams come from across the water, from all different parts of England to compete. We got word that the Wednesday night team couldn't compete, I think one of their cast had to go into hospital for an operation, was very ill anyhow, couldn't come. Their play was cancelled. Would we, the Service Players, stand in for them rather than leave a blank night, because people had booked for the whole week. So we agreed we would do that and we rehearsed all afternoon at *The Gaiety*, went into the Arcade and had a cup of tea and a sandwich and came back in; and we had my sister's three piece suite on the stage and the cast comprised of Olga Cowell, Jean Valentine, my husband, Dick, a man called Colonel Jeavons and myself. Colonel Jeavons and I were sat on the settee, I noticed that Colonel Jeavons was fidgeting a little bit, so I looked at him, but he wasn't fidgeting, he was actually shaking and his whole body was stiffening up. So I called across to Olga Cowell in as loud a voice as I could, 'Colonel Jeavons isn't well, Olga.' She didn't hear me because she was speaking. So I got up and went across to her and I said, 'Colonel Jeavons isn't very well, Olga.' And Olga shot up and said, 'Oh,

curtains, curtains.' But the people off stage, the stage hands, thought it was part of the script because in the book she was talking about curtains. But she knew what was happening, she came over, she was President of the Red Cross, she loosened his collar and tie, and the top of his trousers. I think she sent me off for water, which I obediently went and got, but in the meantime his wife, who was in the audience, could see what was happening. She came up on stage, felt in his pocket, got out a little tablet, and put it in his mouth – but the poor man had died.

DC What did the audience think – would they think it was part of the play or would they …

Mrs C I don't know, at that time, I don't honestly know, the curtains of course were drawn down then. André Van Geisingham [sp ???], who was the adjudicator, came down from his – the front of the balcony and he was really upset, he said he was so sorry. He said during his years of being an adjudicator people had died in the dressing room, various things had happened, but he'd never, ever known anybody to die on stage. We all ended up in the manager's office, the police were called. They asked me to give an account of what had happened to Colonel Jeavons, which I did. It was very, very upsetting for everybody. His wife, who had seen everything and had come up on stage, she said that we shouldn't regret anything and we shouldn't feel guilty because she knew that he'd gone that way so happily. He'd been stopped from doing so many of his hobbies, he'd been stopped from playing golf, and fishing, even walking, so she said he was so happy doing that play, and she was glad that he'd gone that way.

END OF INTERVIEW