

**East Prawle History Group**  
**11 May 2011**  
**Talk with Michael and Richard Partridge**  
**transcribed by Kate Jennings**  
**(Edited version)**

- Michael      My first memory of the camp is the camp site before the camp was there and one Sunday I was over at Town Farm at Granny Tucker's. Who lives there now?
- Vicky        Nora and Peter.
- Michael      Yes, Peter lives there now. I was down there one Sunday and John's father, Jack Tucker, was going up to the camp field to look at the bullocks and he took me with him as a little boy in me short trousers. What I remember most about it was going in and he was driving the bullocks through to have a look what sort of order they were in and there were great bunches of stinging nettles and they knocked me in the sting nettles and I was lying in the stinging nettles, screeching and hollering. They took me down to Town Farm. Well you all know what they rubbed on in those days? Goose fat. When they killed a goose they'd save the fat and that was your ointment for all ills. So that was the first thing.
- About the camp*, the wall that's there now is the original wall. It's a cement mortar wall there. I've drawn what I can remember *of the camp* . So that wall was like it is now and then you had hedges along Stuggy Lane. That's a boundary there and then the field below called Town Park. So the camp wasn't in Town Park but it was in that little hedged piece that comes down with the gateway into Woodcombe Road. And that hedged piece was the cook yard.
- Vicky        And there was a sewer somewhere?
- Michael      Yes the sewer was down across where they had the football field and then you could see it from Shepherds Farm. And we, Gerald Jarvis, Elwin and Ashly Ford, Bob and John Login, Christopher Trinick and Nick Sanders used to go down and we used to ride around on the *sewer rotor*. We had a roundabout down there! And then when they were building it they did the tarmac roads, which were the remains of the big brick walls and iron gates, tarmac straight in through to the far side where the MT sheds were.
- Vicky        What's the MT?
- Michael      Motor Transport. And then there were underground petrol tanks, which I have written on the map. The gypsies went down to the Retreat to see Uncle Jack to get all the scrap iron off him, buy the scrap iron. And he went over one day to see what they were doing and they'd opened up the petrol tanks and ripped off the covers and chucked in some burnables, straw or whatever, and set fire to them to burn them out with the thoughts of cutting them out. But they were buried so he ordered them away.
- Did you ever go up there Margaret (Mitchelmore) riding on the trolley? The builders up there had a trolley about the size of this table, perhaps a bit wider, with rubber tyres with a handle to push it up to the cookhouse area and one boy would sit up the front and do the steering, all the girls and children would clamber on and then two boys behind would push as hard as they could and then jump up backwards and we'd sail down this road, along the main road and down into the coal yard -there wasn't any coal there then -and have to swing around . They'd all jump off and we'd have to pull it back up again.
- And then we used to go up the water tower. That was something else to climb up the ladder of the water tower and stand on top. I used to go up there with Uncle Billy to get

the swill, because over Town they used to have all the swill in swill bins outside the cookhouse. Also if you had any ailments you'd go up to the medical centre. I cut my finger once, you can still see the scar there, with a bread knife making one of those cotton reel tractors, and they took me up there and they took me down to Dr ???

Michael I'll pass this *drawing* around. There was two half round huts with asbestos. What was the galvanised hut called with an inner lining?

Mark Nissan huts?

Michael Nissan hut. There was a Nissan hut and an asbestos one and I've got some of the asbestos one. ... We took it up to East Allington.

Vicky How many people were up there?

Michael I don't really know. Obviously there was the officers' mess and all the quarters and everything which I haven't drawn in. All I've drawn in is the cookhouse, and the cookhouse yard and the NAAFI – Mrs Relle used to be manageress of the NAAFI. She lived down at Ash Park first and then when she sold it she went out to Prawle Point. That was her garage that Sally's got. Jack Rendle's garage was Mrs Relle's originally.

Michael You usually had three or four steps *into the huts* because of the lie of the land, they came out of the ground and up steps to the front of them. Like this would have been, I've drawn the side steps going up to get in.

Michael The water tank there for fire, and then a big like an air raid shelter with reinforced concrete here, and I think that was a standby generator.

Mark So the people who lived here were working the radar, were they? On the site up there and the one at Prawle Point?

Michael Yes.

Mark And was it RAF or was it army?

Michael RAF.

Michael And you know there was an ack-ack unit on the aerodrome?

Mark Yes, that was army presumably?

Michael That was army. That was the actual gun, the banks around the gun were made of those concrete blocks with two holes in – do you know the ones I mean? You used them for your corn wall up at Higher House. No those blocks but the same sort of blocks. Those blocks you used for the corn wall with two holes, two square holes, well that's what the banks around the gun emplacement on the aerodrome was built of, because we had a lot of those, you know kicking about.

Vicky Richard did you say there were 180 people in the camp.

Michael 180 yes.

Richard There were 64 WRAFs and the rest *men and* a couple of RAF officers.

Michael I think when they first built it they didn't have those steps up to the guard room. There was a little gate and steps to get into the guard room from opposite Sea View cottages, but when they first built it I am sure they had to go in the main gate. There was only one gate – see it was all fenced off, and you'd have to go in the main gate and come back around the wall to book in, and leave your push bike. Then after some years, probably after the danger had died down, the builders came and cut the wall down and then they built steps outside, and when they were booking in you always used to see the bikes parked outside the wall, mostly ladies bikes. Well they booked in and then they'd come and pick their bike up over the steps and away they'd go. All the walkways were tarmacked throughout the camp, you know with small curbstones I think.

Vicky So there was electric there and there was water.

Michael Yes, that's another thing. You see the electric they dug underground, and the mains water. Prawle never had the mains electricity till they brought it overground after the war, but we did have the water and we had standpipes.

Vicky Where were the standpipes?

*There follows a discussion about wells and standpipes The conclusion being that the first standpipe was at Duck's lane with a second one added after the war at the top of Prove Hill. Otherwise there were wells with pumps at Sea View, Round Castle*

- Vicky These people that were in the camp, what were they doing?
- Michael They would set off either with their bikes or walking and they'd go up to Higher House, by the school, in through the kissing gate and across aerodrome, to go on guard and operate the radar station and then also the one out at Prawle Point they'd go out by vehicle
- Vicky So this was the RAF?
- Kate Derek said the army were down at Prawle Point. Again I am quoting Derek who I talk to a lot about these things and he says it was army down at Prawle Point not RAF.
- Richard No, no, it was the RAF.
- Michael The Americans did take it over later on, but it was the RAF that used to go out because the West Prawle unit was for high level aircraft and there is a tale that once they went over they relied on the visual reports, what do they call it?
- Mark I found on the internet that the Germans learnt they could get in underneath the West Prawle radar, so they had to put a lower one.
- Michael That's right
- Mark That came after the main one.
- Michael That's right. And that was all camouflaged, and we used to go down there as boys running across the camouflage and the wire rods were about that square running both ways and with camouflaged wires right over the top, and when we ran across you had to make sure you landed on each of those wires! Else you'd go through! It used to bounce so it was quite easy to run across, bounce, bounce! ... Well some places it was as high as this chapel. And near the edges it was lower, you know as it went into the banks. Then up on the headland above they had camouflaged rocks that they put in on top to camouflage it, even there by the camouflaged radar station you had a job to make out it wasn't proper rocks. There were wooden masts down there for the aerals. Elwin and Ashley – you know who I am talking about? Mrs Ford's two sons, and Elwin especially was a bit of a risk taker and I am sure, I can't believe it myself, we used to climb up the masts. I was only allowed to go up two or three sections, but they used to go up to the top. Eventually I went up, but Elwin got on the top section and there was a two inch galvanised pipe that went right up through the centre and stuck up I don't know, a metre above. Not quite sure but Elwin got up there and stood on this blinking pipe on one leg.
- Richard West Prawle radar station opened in 1940. It was opened for the Battle of Britain. They got praised a bit for their good work, and the camp in Prawle for people to live in, that wasn't opened until June 1941, so I don't know where they were living before they occupied the domestic site.
- Richard They had telephone cables overhead from West Prawle across Moor ground and across Moorgate, you know where Moorgate (or is it Fore Gate?) and then down to Prawle Point station there and some of the guy ropes, bits of it are still left out there.
- Brenda One of the prisoners of war used to work up at Higher Farm. He was called Hermann he was a German.
- Sarah T He wanted to come back.
- Benda I can remember Dad bringing him over home when we lived down at Town Cottage and he was a real friendly.
- Sarah T And they wouldn't let him bring his wife and children.
- Michael What was he doing Brenda?

Brenda He worked up at Higher Farm.

Michael A prisoner of war you mean? From Puckle Pits?

Michael Radar *could detect enemy aircraft and send out signals to our aircraft to direct them onto the enemy*. You know about Cats Eyes Cunningham? He was a night fighter pilot. Shot down so many German planes using the new radar, the after dark radar, that they was worried the Germans would cotton on to what the reason was so they sent around a bit of a tale that he had a lot of carrots and that's why he could see so well in the dark.

Michael Somebody said that in the early days there was *giros (gyrocopters)* there, but I think they got it mixed up with the first world war. The aerodrome that we call the aerodrome was the area of land up above Welle House that's got no hedges, and that was the first world war aerodrome for submarine spotting. Other places apparently had balloons but we had planes.

Richard Sopwiths.

Michael They had a lot of crashes with them didn't they? Propellers and they withdrew them.

Mark But that was after the war virtually. And then reopened as an RAF station? I found that the village complained so much about the problems and the fact that they had to close that road that, got compensation of about £72.4.6. I have forgotten the absolute amount.

Vicky Which road was this?

Mark The Welle House road, because if you think the aerodrome went straight across it, so they had to close that.

Michael And the works lanes that went into service these fields, there are so many little ones that you couldn't get to. For instance if you go out towards Fairfield, in Derek's field on the right, Derek's aerodrome. Well there was a lane running through there, because there were a lot of little fields.

#### *Back to the WWII*

Michael Two spitfires crashed and your father was down there (Marilyn) and he pulled the first Polish pilot out. He came in one Sunday. I was over with Ashley and Elwin –I often was – they were a lot older than me and I was their main test pilot. Anything that I did I was the test pilot. Their grandfather was a carpenter, Phil Putt, and he used to make gates and repair stuff. Their father came down to the aerodrome. He must not have been in the naval air service but he was a radio specialist. He used to build radios, build his own radios – Harry Ford. He lived next door. Ashley and Elwin decided to build a boat. So they built a square sort of punt out of lightwood frame, square bow, sloping square bow, easy to make and they covered it with table oil cloths and they took it over to Moor Farm and said "right jump in". Jamey had paddled, pushed me out in the middle of Moorwell Pond and it worked, it was lovely. So then they wanted a ride, but I was reluctant to come ashore then.

Vicky So has anybody else got any questions about anything in particular? Richard have you got any more to tell us?

Richard I might be able to get the bit about the pantomimes. You've got photographs haven't you. *(Brenda and Joan)*

Richard What was the pantomime?

Brenda Cinderella. ... There were four programmes with all our names in it.

Michael Another little thing that happened was. After the war the radar still went on. What time did it finish?

Richard Early 60s I think it was.

Michael I bought a 250 BSA- OD 684-you don't want to know the number. I bought it off Harry Ford. This bike which Harry Ford had, Father had given him which actually belonged to my brother and when he went away in the RAF he tied them both up to the bullock racks to keep the tyres off the ground. He had a Triumph as well, and Father whilst he was away in the RAF he gave both of them to Harry Ford. Bob wasn't very pleased when he came home but I was at the point of buying this bike from Harry for £25 – I think it was 50 quid he wanted. He had it painted up a bit. And Bob went in and said you're charging this boy too much for this bike. Father already given it to you, tis my bike anyway. So I got it, but it broke down. There was a Dartmoor scramble– I'd been going to a few local scrambles watching the scrambling- and there was Dartmoor scramble on this particular Sunday and my bike had broken down. So I couldn't go, and I was desperate to go and I knew one of the RAF blokes had one a bit newer, very similar. So I went up Sunday morning and found this RAF bloke, went over to the MT area he was and found him and since I think it was Ruth Mabin's.

Brenda She married Brian Butler.

Michael Yes it was Brian Butler's bike. So I bought this bike fairly cheaply, and we pushed it off, Nick Sanders and Rich. I promised Rich if I got it going he would go with me. He was only a little tacker. So we got them down to Freddys and started swapping over parts and we realised it was easier to disguise the bike rather than change over too much from the new bike to the old bike, so it was really the new bike that we went with and some of the numbers on the front number plate were the same but in the wrong position, but we didn't worry about that so it was Nick Sanders' job to scrape off the paint where it wasn't the right number and with his finger and some white paint he painted the appropriate numbers and we had the numbers and they were a bit one sided because some of them weren't in the right position. And the gear box was broken from its mountings but the RAF boys had repaired that. They'd filled it with grease instead of oil and they'd put a bit of motorbike chain and a nut and bolt and lasched it all up together, so eventually we got this ready to go. Rich sat with a cushion on the mudguard. He jumped on – Ern Stone was going with us and we ran off down Round Castle because the clutch wouldn't work. I had to keep my heel on the clutch lever to try and get in gear, so decided to run it off, got over round Prawle, Locks Farm, and Ern wasn't there, so I had to go back. I said Ern "isn't you comin'" like a bit agitated. "Come on then". So we ran off again because we couldn't go up over Town Hill and round and up past Mrs Cranch and Lower Road.

And away we went. So we roared on and everything went ok. I could change gear without any clutch, hand change obviously and it was a four speed whereas mine was a three speed. So we made good time but we got up to Wrangaton, bit further on and we stopped at the filling station, Marley Head, so we stopped down the road a little bit and I walked back and said "Dartmoor scramblers?", they said "keep straight on it's signposted down the briar", so got back up and said "Right Rich I've got to push this bike off, you run along behind with this cushion and when I get it started I'll slow down, you dump the cushion on, and "oh I can't I can't!" Bloody hell, so I said "Get on the back". So he put this cushion and he sat on the back and I had to push off and jump up in front of him. Anyway we found the turning and went up over the moors to the scramble park, with all the motorbikes, watched the scramble, came to come home and everyone was rushing to get out off the moor, blooming thing wouldn't start. Course it wasn't the right bike, and I was worried about the police around there directing traffic. So we pushed all over the moor until we got it going, and then the same thing, I held him with my heel, clutch lever and revving and smoke coming out everywhere and Rich jumped up with his cushion and on we went. We were following the cars and motorbikes down over the moors towards Dene Prior and all of a sudden Rich "oh wow,

I've lost me hat!" So we had to pull and let all the cars go by and Rich run back and dived for his beret in between the cars – t'wasn't crash helmets then, t'was berets. Got his beret on and came down and got on and I pushed off again and jumped up in front and we had an uneventful journey home.

Michael The aeroplanes, right. I was over again with Elwin and Ashley and we heard these planes circulating, circling – same thing going round and round, and it was a very foggy Sunday, very foggy. We listened to these planes (there was a lot of aircraft activity during the war -flying boats came up doing coastal patrols – they were often going over.) And we listened to these planes and all of a sudden we said "Hey he's coming down". Stopped all of a sudden ... then the other came to a standstill not very many minutes after. So we jumped up on the pushbike, on the cross bar. Off we went down round castle, up over the green, out for Prawle Point, and when we got to Geoffrey's gate where he goes down with his combine. Rich can you tell us the name of the field?

Richard Higher Holloway.

Michael Higher Holloway gate, looked in over and there he was down Shallowpool. A lot of people down there, including your father. And we ran, left our bikes there, ran down over – what's the field called?

Richard Great Sharpers.

Michael And down to Shallowpool, and Auntie Winnie was down there I think?. Anyway a lot of people there. It was all in bits, the Spitfire, all over the field and the two Polish pilots with their jackets on, laughing and joking and a couple of cigarettes. They wasn't worried, they got down ok. And I touched a bit of this with my foot and they said "keep back Michael, it might blow up". So they told me off. Apparently what happened is her father, who was a RAF boy, was down with his prospective father-in-law was ferreting in the hedge, when the first plane came down. And he ran over and got the cockpit open, well the cockpit might have been open, but he managed to get the Polish boy out before the other crashed right into on the top. It was a ploughed field and they were trying to find Bolt Head. Five of them crashed.

Richard Ten altogether.

Michael Ten altogether. Two were Portlemouth, two were here, one up by the show field. Don't know where the rest were.

Vicky When was this?

Michael Well we've got a date.

Richard 15<sup>th</sup> March 1941 I think, but it could have been 42.

Michael The thing was they'd only taken delivery of those Spitfires, brand new in February and they'd been on an attack over France and I think they were based at Exeter. Some were based at Yelveton, which they called Harrowvere. Do you know why they called it Harrowvere? The radio call sign up at Honiton was Yolveton. So they couldn't call it Yelveton because in radio language they'd mistake one for the other, so they called it Harrowvere which is the nearest village . So that was their forward station from Exeter and then the forward forward station is Bolt Head, so if they were going on attack they would come off to Bolt Head , arm and re-fuel and fly from there, and come back to there. That meant they had an half an hour's extra time, because you know it is quarter of an hour up and quarter of an hour back, so it made all the difference, but these boys came back in fog. They were going into Cornwall somewhere weren't they?

So if they were low on fuel they'd have somewhere to come in to, and these boys couldn't find it, and the first bit of ground they saw, earth they saw, was down Shallowpool through the fog and that's where they tried to come in.

The one that crashed up Sandy Lane; Tom's Marriage is getting in his cows for his father and he heard this plane sputter and cut out, and then he glided around and he came up Sandy Lane fields. You know where Sandy Lane fields is. It runs from Bolton up to Tor

level, but that level bit, that last bit up the top from ???, and when he came in he saw earth fly up when he hit the first time up above the hedge, he was down in the valley a bit, and then not quite so much earth and then very little earth and he asked his father to go up, and he ran up. The plane had dug three pits, one massive pit where he came in first, and then the second pit and then the one where he come to a standstill with everything, propeller all bent up, the pilot wasn't there, he'd gone down to Goveton to get help.

I don't know whether it was that same day or later day, a high ranking RAF officer came from Bolt Head and looked at it, and Tom said he could never understand he said he made a perfect landing. And the plane was all in bits.

Bobby had a job with a tractor, standard Fordson, and an old trailer used for corn drill to go down and bring the bits back, from Shallowpool to Prawle Green. The two spitfires on this slide, and they brought all the bits up to Prawle Green and then one day two Queen Mary's came in, RAF trailers. Queen Mary's – anybody know what that is? No. They're 60 ft trailers for carrying aircraft with a Bedford tractor, with a square nose, don't know whether you know what they're like. They used them for all sorts of lorries. Two of these tractor units and Queen Mary's with the trailers, and they were built like a bridge section either side. They didn't have a chassis. They had sides built like a bridge, and then a flat floor and a crane, four wheeled drive Bedford crane lorry and he lifted the fuselages in one and in the other, then the wings dropped in beside standing vertical, and then they took them away. ... So everybody was there to see them off. And we didn't know it was Spitfires, Bobby didn't know it was Spitfires, thought it was hurricanes.

Michael Rich thinks that the photographs he's got is probably of the Portlemouth crew. .. And we've got a photograph that we thought was Bob, but we don't think it is, we think it's a Portlemouth tractor and slide because the field isn't down Shallowpool, but we can't find who was driving it. It looks very much like Derek Wotton and we're thinking that it's his uncle Arthur that was you know, dealt with that, but we don't know.

Vicky The whole village must have changed enormously when the RAF came.

Michael Oh yes.

Vicky And changed again when they went.

Michael Oh yes, the young boys, you know teenage boys, were just getting friendly with the girls and then all these bloody RAF blokes came.

Vicky Who knows any of the people that lived here that married people?

Brenda Cora Trout married Peter Mann and Mary Toms married Brian Hutton, Sheila Baskervill Johnnie Muirhead.

Vicky Are they still living?

Brenda No. Sheila and John – they got married but they weren't married very long. So she married somebody else, but I don't know who that was.

Michael Ruth Mabin's husband lived down opposite the bakers.

Brenda They lived at Frogmore. They owned the post office years ago.

Vicky And this chap you were talking about – Ron Bates?

Warwick H Ron Bates, he came after the war. ....

Brenda One or two Kingsbridge girls married but I don't know.

Vicky We ought to put down – perhaps be a bit careful putting names in it the paper, but we really need to find people who have been there and worked there.

Brenda I think Mary Toms' husband is still with us.

Vicky If we can get any more details.

Michael How I know the RAF manned the Prawle Point station is that one day they were coming up, a WRAF driving one of their vans, with a glass roof, one of the small ones. Sid Baskervill used to operate one. Hillman it was, Hillman van coming up with the crew

that was coming off duty. They came up around, up by Bowes ? Garden, just above Ash Park House, just up around the corner, coming up that little rise, and coming down the other way was Charlie Partridge, no relation, driving uncle Jack's Higher Farm Massey that didn't have very good brakes, and they met there. Charlie was shouting "go back, go back, I can't stop". I think he had a load of dung up and apparently the RAF bloke whacked into reverse, and the van went back and the tractor hit him and he drove him up into the hedge, there was a great big knotch out of the hedge. I reckon there's still earth gone from there now, just above Bowes ? Garden. Another time Charlie, I was riding with him with a load of dung, and we came down to that gateway that I told you that we went in to see the Spitfire, Higher Holloway, and they were tarmacking the road at the time, when they first tarmacked the road really good and proper, because it was really rocky all the way out until that time, and they were there for several weeks tarmacking, and we came down around in sight of Holloway Gate with a load of dung with this Massey, and in the middle of the road was one of the workmen with his wheelbarrow. Stood in the middle of the road just lighting up his pipe. Charlie come round the corner "Get out the way I can't stop" made him drop his pipe and baccy and rushed into the gateway .

Vicky I think we've probably just about come to a conclusion unless Richard has got anything else to say!

Michael Rich and I went to the cinema one night at Kingsbridge and it was raining and I fell off three times. First of all down Chivelstone Hill as we came down round the corner, it was greasy and off I came, we slid down the road and Rich hurt his ankle, his leg was in under the bike. Picked him up, remounted, on we went, got to Kingsbridge all right. I thought it was three times, the last time was round Ford corner, fell off again at Ford corner, so he didn't stay on all the time and I think Rich refused to ride with me after that.

Vicky I wouldn't be surprised. Well I think we've had a very good evening.

Vicky I think the pub, if you think about it, and everywhere was probably was pretty different and there were lots of people living here at the time anyway, lots of families, so no doubt it was a very different village wasn't it? And if we can find out more at any time we will try to, but it's not easy to get information now from people.

Brenda All the Americans used to go in the Provi.

Jane S Didn't they have dances there on Saturday nights?

Brenda In the Assembly Room. ...

Vicky Yes, they used to have dances, pantomimes, film shows up there every week