

Transcript of Sonya Teale's interview with Mr Robin Hall 25<sup>th</sup> April 2005.

Words in *blue italics* are those of the interviewer.

Robin Hall

*This is a recording of Robin Hall of Hall's garage, 8 The Green Rowlands Castle, made on the 25<sup>th</sup> of April 2005.*

My name is Robin Hall. I was born on the 20<sup>th</sup> of June 1940 in Rowlands Castle.

The Hall family have been here for several generations. My Grandfather's grandfather came here as a shoemaker in about 1805/1810. He picked Rowlands Castle because he had received a bursary from the Goodyear Trust in Buriton of £10 to become a premium apprentice shoemaker. He did his 7 year apprenticeship starting in 1795 and then early in the 1800's went off as a journeyman and found Rowlands Castle which didn't have an established shoemaker. Other villages in the area already had an established shoemaker and he couldn't trade in those villages. So he picked Rowlands Castle as being an up and coming place. Here we are several generations later still here.

We were shoemakers father and son until about 1910 when my grandfather died of appendicitis. My father at the time was only 7 years old. He had no interest in the shoemaking business but in fact we did live in Finchdean Road in those days, No 11 Finchdean Road. He had a shop there as a shoemaker's shop, which still existed when I was a small boy. It had been used for other things. The house I was born into in 1940, I lived until 1985 when I moved out and went to Westbourne. (Correction I in fact moved to Forestside) Bought a cottage that we'd wanted to buy for many years, restored it and I live there now. *Where was it that you moved to Forestside?* Into Warren Down. Warren Down Cottage where I live at the moment was my mother's house. The house that she came to.

My mother was born in Portsmouth. Came as a girl with her father who was a First World War Naval Petty Officer and due to his naval time he had contracted TB and they had to move out of the smoky atmosphere of Portsmouth and move out into the countryside so they came and rented the house in Forestside. I stayed there a few times during the war as a Child because although my grandfather had died and my grandmother had moved away an aunt had taken the house over and I used to go up and stay with them from time to time and always liked it. They still rented it from Stansted. Eventually after several times of trying to buy it I bought the house in 1985. We restored it and I moved back in there. We've now been there for 20 years or so. My mother, named Jean Bullingham, married my father who was a widower. His first wife had died of Leukaemia and they married in the late 30's and she remained in Rowlands Castle looking after me during the war until she died this year at 88.

I first went to school in Redhill. On my first day at school, I'll never forget it, Miss Baker, formidable lady, called out the names of the new people. "Robin Hall, you'll sit there. Graham Martin you can sit there. Graham Bowles you can sit at the back." And then when we all sat there "Your fathers were trouble. I expect you'll be" My father was 38 years older than me but he was still, Miss Baker was his infants teacher as she was mine. Then it came to being issued with our first reader, The Beacon Reader. She fished them all out, gave them all out very carefully, and my father's name was in the book. Needless to say, having been prejudged like that, I didn't get on very well at school. And my father who also didn't like Miss Baker took me out of Redhill after a year and I went to Idsworth school.

Mrs Streek headmistress of Idsworth school was an even older lady. She'd actually taught my mother's mother, my grandmother. But being wartime and just after the war of course these people went on teaching until quite a late age. Mrs Streek was very good and a much more even handed person. She didn't prejudge me and I did very well there. Perhaps it was the fact that there were only 32 children in the school anyway. And it was rather like an extended family. But unfortunately in 1948 the school closed. I then got sent with all the rest to Horndean school.

That lasted for about a month or 6 weeks when the Attendance Officer came round and said "You're not supposed to be here this isn't your area." Sent me home. "You'll have to go back to Redhill." Well my father refused. And the argument raged for several months while I stayed at home. Eventually I went for a short while to Sussex. Heinous crime. You should never go across the county border to school. Until they found out about me and sent me home again. So I had another period at home. Eventually the telephone rang and a lady said "I hear you're having trouble with your son's education" So my father said "Yes. Who are you?" "I'm Mrs Dyer, the headmistress of the Catholic school in Havant. Send him here." "But we're not Catholic." said my father."I'd take the devil himself if I get to keep my school open!" she said. So I went there. It was a very rude awakening for a poor country lad to go to Havant to school where there were only about four or five families in the school, they numbered some hundreds.

*How did you go to school? How did you travel?* I went initially on the bus and then rode, from the time I was about 9 I rode my bike. *Where was the Catholic school?* It was then St Joseph's which was in West Street near Crossway. And as I say it was a rough old school. I still see the people today, some of them, and they're the salt of the earth, lovely people. One small story about that school was that one of my special pals, I'll not mention his name because it would be unfair; he was a skinny tall blond lad with matchsticks for legs, behind hanging out of his trousers, and the most magnificent pair of army boots you've ever seen. They shone! With hobnails, you could always hear him coming. Years later I saw him. He came to work for me and I said "I remember you. Skinny legs, behind hanging out of your trousers and those wonderful boots you must have loved those boots. " "I hated them mate" he said. I said "But you polished them." He said "Yes. Mrs Dyer the headmistress gave them to me and if they weren't polished she'd give me the stick"

And then I went on to, in the education system when that school closed in the middle, early 50's, I was about 11 or 12, I went to the secondary school in Havant. And carried on lazing through life until one day one of the masters said "You lazy great lump" He was rather ruder than that, "You always come somewhere in the top few in the top class when it suits you but if you really knuckled down you could do something. Why don't you go in for the GCE?" I didn't even know what it was. So we soon found out that he would sponsor me for the first class of secondary pupils to take the O levels. It was being held at Cowplain. So my father agreed and I went off to Cowplain to school. Still riding my bike. And we were a bit of an experiment I think. We were all 14 years old come 15 years old. Never done a stroke of work in our lives. And we were given 7 GCE subjects at O level to pass or to take. No teachers, we just had to work ourselves, work for ourselves, sit in on such classes that took those subjects and staff there would help us. And they did. They worked very hard on us.

Apart from 3 or 4 of the 24, 5 of the 24 who fell out very early on, couldn't stand the self discipline, the rest of us stuck the course, 2 years and nobody got less than 5 subjects. Most of us got 6 or 7. So at late 16 I had to go on to A levels. But A levels weren't held in secondary school so I was given a place in Purbrook Grammar School. I hated it. Back into sitting in class and working at other's speed and threw it all in very shortly after that.

I left school of my own accord at 17. And armed with my few O levels managed to get myself a Min of Ag veterinary course. *Where was that?* We started off in Sparsholt agricultural college. We were filtered out, we then were doing a year, we did a year in practical work around the farms. And then back to Reading University to continue our course. So I would have become a vet if I were lucky but not the sort of things we accept a vet today. I would have been, I was a heavy vet, working for the ministry of agriculture, that was the idea. But half way through that my father fell ill. And as he was subsidising me fairly heavily to do so, the course was free but the rest wasn't, I had to come back in and run the business.

So at, coming 19 I suppose, I got chucked back into the motor trade, with no qualifications. So I was thrown back into the motor trade, 1959. My father had started the garage in 1928. He in fact was one of the very early motor apprentices. His father, my grandfather, having died when he was 7, got himself an apprenticeship during the first world war with Barratts, the garage on the hill. And became their, I think probably other than Bill Barratt, who wasn't a true motor apprentice he was an engineering apprentice, he was their first motor apprentice and he worked for them until the early 20's when he went off to be Cannings' mechanic, Cannings being the iron foundry in Finchdean, after that a foreman at a garage in Havant, Horace Carver and then came here and started his own business in 1928.

He had a few open fronted bits behind the Castle Inn and a workshop down in the old bootmaking shop where he did repairs to all sorts of steam engines, cars, rewired houses, mended gramophones, anything. And then came to our premises here on The Green in 1947. He'd had the garage built, they bought the land from Mr Wiggington. Percy Wiggington of Wiggington and Hern had decided to sell the property and my mother's mother was working there and said "My son in law would like that, Harry, for a garage." And Percy Wiggington agreed to sell it to him. It was a field. This originally was the holding field for the slaughterhouse behind Wiggington and Hern. And we had the garage built and they moved in in 1947. So he'd run it really from '47 to '59, a relatively short time, then I came back in here. He had already had some health problems and developed heart disease and in fact died in 1964. So I took over totally in 1964. I had to get myself a few quick qualifications. Such was the way of things in those days that they weren't too difficult for a lad who had been studying veterinary training and what have you, and also had had a great deal of experience in here as a boy.

To show how experienced one had to be, we were MOT testers. Not the earliest but pretty early. And in 1960, I was 20 still, and my father was ill, and the MOT testing chief engineer came round to vet me to see if I was good enough to be an MOT tester. Now, think of this, I've had a year's experience back in the garage he walked in, said to my father "Is he any good Harry?" So My father said "Yes, he'll make it, he's all right" "O.K son you can start" That was my interview. And I've just given it up now. I've been an MOT tester for over 40 years. It's about time I gave it up.

I've slowly expanded the business. There was just myself and one other here at the time and he wasn't experienced either. He was a retired farmer. We're gradually expanding and now there about 8 of us around. About 10 I think in total now, including ourselves, though I do very little these days. Hopefully we keep up with the times. We seem to have a reasonable name having stuck 40 years in the same place. We've managed to tread the thin line of making a profit and pleasing the customer. So we've, from the business side, we've been part of the expansion of Rowlands Castle.

My time in the garage has been one of general expansion as I say. I've grown with the village. And in the late 60's early 70's, in order to expand, I managed to buy the then Rowlands Castle telephone exchange which was behind this garage here and now the land is just a corner of the workshop. But it enabled to expand backwards and do a little more work that way.

And then in the late 70's, the International Store, which had been Wiggington and Hern, had been B&H Rooke before Wiggington and Hern. Bert and Harry Rooke developed the business into quite a wide and thriving general store as one would have in those days. They had their own bakehouse, their own butchery department and their own slaughterhouse. As well as the general groceries and wine merchants. And probably employed some 20 or 30 people. They had wide ranging rounds, 2 vans on the road. When we bought this establishment which was a series of brick sheds and the houses next door to the garage, we bought it from the Wiggington family. Dorothy Wiggington was looking to sell it because it was becoming a burden to her.

She was at present leasing it to the International Tea Company, the International Stores. And so I bought it, they had closed it, and became their landlord because they still had a very long lease. They paid rent for it. So I wrote to them and said would they like to be released from their obligations on this empty store? And they said, not really they would like to continue it, but would get out for a consideration of Ten thousand pounds. I said no, stay there then, you're quite welcome to stay and by the way you're on a full repairing lease and it needs painting. A few minutes later Robert Winnicott came over to me and said "I thought you'd bought that." I said "I have." "The International want it painting". So I said "Yes." And I explained to him. So it was totally painted at a cost of about two thousand pounds and I remade the offer of, would they like to be released from their obligation and they said "Yes please." So, I had it freshly painted.

We then developed it. I needed the land behind for car parking. That was my basic need. Because the village was getting busier and we were getting busier. So I bought it basically for the parking in the rear, which we still use. An interesting sideline was that, we were looking to let some of this property to recoup some of the overheads and some of the outgoings. We got much interest from a strange section of society. We weren't sure what they wanted to rent it for. But, on quizzing the third person to want a particular part of this business they told us that we still had a licence for a slaughterhouse. The licence had never been rescinded and they would keep it a slaughterhouse and butcher's shop. Not really wanting a slaughterhouse on my property I declined the offer. And one assumes that the slaughterhouse licence has now gone but it was a very strange time.

We've developed that corner alongside the garage and we now let some of it. Parts of the family have lived in some of it. My mother lived in a flat in there for a long time. But we still have it. My father's sister Frances married Bill Barrett. Barrett owned the other garage in the village. In fact the senior garage in the village. They came here into Rowlands Castle from Portsmouth about 1890. Run by grandfather Barrett, an ex steam engineer from the Navy. And he worked the garage right the way through until 1940 ish. During the war at the age of 90 odd he did give up more or less but he died at the age of 100 in 1946 or 7.

His son carried on working the business. He was never a practical garage man. He had got a club foot, was not particularly fit. He did all the business side of it. So much of the work was handed on to his grandson, my uncle by marriage Bill Barrett. And Bill ran the business right the way through till the 80's. Died at the age of 94 or 5 and his son Bernard has suffered from ill health but is still alive but in fact retired as most people should around their 60's. So the garage no longer exists so we've now become the senior garage in the village.

*Did either garage have petrol pumps?* We both had petrol pumps yes. We were Esso, they were Shell and like all small garages we sold petrol, never made any money out of it but it was all part of the system in those days. When they closed they had ceased to sell petrol because they had to serve on the road with swing over pumps. We struggled on until the middle 90's selling petrol. And the day I gave it up we all breathed a great sigh of relief. My wife gave a great cheer. Because it was several hours a day work that never made any money. But we were always afraid that we might not be able to survive by not selling petrol but in fact it made almost no difference. I'm very pleased not to do it and feel very sorry for those garages that still do.

1962 I married Susan Green. Spinster of the next parish in fact although she lived only a few hundred yards away. We lived first in Finchdean, in a bungalow in Finchdean, until 66/67 something like that, when our second child, our first being Kathryn, Kate, Kate arrived in 65 and in 67 Peter came and the small place in Finchdean was getting rather small. My mother, a widow by that time was getting fed up of living in the family house in Rowlands Castle, so I bought the family house from her and she moved to Forestside to another house and we lived from 67 until 85 in Finchdean Road in the old family house when I sold it. The children, Kate went to the local schools and prospered very well. The education system suited her. Peter, more academic went to Portsmouth Grammar school and in fact we have now one very brainy but not necessarily full of common sense son and an exceedingly common sense daughter. Not particularly academic.

*And where do they live?* Peter now lives in Lancaster. That was his total choice. He's his grandfather's grandson. That's Sue my wife's father. An academic, A free thinker. He's now a consulting engineer. He went university. Got his masters degree and has become a consulting engineer. When I spoke to him not too long ago, I speak to him regularly but I spoke to him not too long ago when, "What have you been doing this week? " "Monday I was working for United Cocoa doing an explosive check, of cocoa powder. Tuesday I was on an oil rig in the Irish Sea doing some mud recovery equipment. Wednesday I was in the office. Thursday I was on Heysham nuclear power station, checking the outfall of the nuclear fall out, the equipment for it, and Friday I was working on Thomas the tank engine" So he has a varied life. He's a keen potholer this is his reason for living in the North. And in fact his entire life revolves around his hobbies and his family, I must admit he works very hard for them. My daughter is now living in Shepperton in South London. She's married to a policeman and is in fact teaching in Feltham young offenders institute. A job that she loves. So they've both settled very well. They have 3 children between them. I have a grandson with Peter and a grandson and daughter with Kate.

I can't remember specifically when the village fair started but in about its third year of operation they were short of a chairman to chair the show if you like and I was given the job. I in fact ran it for several years. That would be wrong to say, I think it was run very ably by amongst others Becky Sealey, and good heavens I can't even remember the lady's name now. They worked exceedingly hard. I sat on the fence rather and presided over the arguments that reigned. It was originally started as the Rowlands Castle Children's village fair. And it was started and sponsored in the initial instance by Eddie Reaves who kindly gave us a large sum of money to get it off the ground and continued to support it for several years. It has now become the Rowlands Castle fair I believe, I don't think the children's name is still in it. But it still goes on with people working extremely hard and it has become quite a success.

The nearest I can think of it in the old days was the Rowlands Castle Flower show, which was sponsored by the Tory party which was a big event in our days. It was held variously in odd large houses. Originally I believe in Deerleap but that was before my time. Latterly in Colonel Farmer's house in Bowes Hill. A large house, much of the land has now been built on. And also I think once or twice at Oaklands, Stubbington's house. It was a well looked for event. We thoroughly enjoyed that.

Other than that the only village events I can think of were the celebrations to end the hostilities of the war in VE day and VJ day. VE day was very much a spontaneous explosion of joy and relief I'm sure. I can't really remember it in detail being only 5 years old at the time. But I can remember being bewildered by the fact of , well what is peace? Because I'd never known anything but war. It was a very bewildering but pleasurable time. I remember dancing around a large bonfire in the middle of the road here which was being fed by all the bunds from Charlie Royal the bakers. Bakehouse bunds. So much so that I think Charlie probably had a few too many to drink aswell because he was helping to throw them on. The next morning my father and a few others had to go up into the woods and get something to light the, to get the baker's oven alight to be able to bake the bread. But I don't think that mattered too much in those days.

Little story about bakers. There were 2 bakers in the village, Charlie Royal's the major baker, and the baker belonging to Wiggington and Hern. George Farr was the baker for Wiggington and Hern. The bakehouse was in the back of the large shop and they baked bread in a brick oven with wood using again wooden bunts, (bundles of hazel ) tied up . Tradition said that at the end of baking you chucked a couple of bunts in the bake oven to dry out ready to flash up in the morning and light up so they burned well, they were totally dry. What happened was, they finished baking and sometime the following night poor old George Farr had a brain tumour, and had a stroke and was taken into hospital so there was no baking, And in fact Wiggingtons baked no bread thereafter. Bricked the oven up and turned the bakehouse into part of the shop when extending it. When I bought the shop in the 80's we demolished some of these old buildings including the brick oven. And when we broke into it from the top there was a bunt still in there waiting to be lit. Above the bread oven was a salt cellar. Being the warmest place in there they stored the salt in there simply to keep it dry. It had a very small doorway, probably 18" wide and 3 feet high and as such it was only the baker's boy or the errand boy who could get up there and collect the salt which was also a good place to hide away from the management. We found dozens of lemonade bottles up there. Where somebody had pinched a bottle of lemonade and taken it up to drink, going back many years, in fact we've still got some of them at home. Several lemonade bottles.

To go back, the other celebration was VJ day. Rather more organised affair and that was a large bonfire. I don't think there were fireworks, there was certainly dancing. It was held in the field beside The Drift where the bungalows are built now, on Stubbington's land. And a very large bonfire which we all danced around and I fell in the pond and slit my arm and I've still got a scar there to prove it. So I've been carrying that for about 60 years.

Next celebration was the coronation 1952. That was again very well organised and a highlight of the day was a fancy dress parade. A highlight of the day for us children, the fancy dress parade. My father had decided that our entry was to be a sedan chair with myself, at 12 years of age and my next door neighbour Mike May, at 13 years of age, and my sister as the first Queen Elizabeth in the sedan chair. So they built this and we were to walk from Stansted park gate to the rec. So we tried it. Yes this was alright no problem. Until we got into the swing and the poor old sedan chair started bouncing and my sister wailing "I feel sick" and what have you. But being a trooper she stuck it out. Unbeknown to us we had to do a complete tour of the village. And my arms haven't really got back into their sockets yet. Anyway we were rewarded. Having got there we got 3rd place which was 2 shillings between the 3 of us. My father sported the other shilling so that we each had a bob.

My earliest memories were of Stansted park. Living close to and right beside Stansted park. Of course there were thousands of soldiers waiting for 'D' day and we were allowed to crawl through the wire. It must have been about 1943 late '43, we crawled through the wire taking apples into the soldiers who, one assumes weren't allowed out. We were rewarded with dried fruit for our mums. We could bring this back which was a good idea.

They all more or less left just before 'D' day and I can remember trails of enormous lorries, dozens of them. Tanks were end to end on the village green. Soldiers living in them, under them, all around them waiting to go out. And all the soldiers on Finchdean Road, my own patch, were given one Fry's milkbar. One milk chocolate bar each. Of course never having seen chocolate before, or very little, being 4 years old, coming by. I was sort of a bit of a patsy, I was sent along looking hungry, and gathered up quite a lot of this chocolate. I had 6 or 7 bars of chocolate. I thought I was doing very well here until I came away and a bigger boy, I'll tell you now it was Robin Barnes, took it all away from me. I assume he ate it. I've just heard that Robin Barnes has had to retire early through ill health he's had heart trouble so I don't know whether it was the chocolate that started it.

But having vacated Stansted park, of course Stansted park was an army camp waiting to be occupied and apart from a few prisoners coming back and occupying it, displaced persons, it was empty. It was our happy hunting ground as children. And right up until quite a long time after the war we used to go through digging the coal out from the coal heap bringing it back to burn. Selling it round the village for 6d a box, a soapbox. On wheels and we made our money that way.

The entire, I think the entire forest was taken up with somebody in Stansted, certainly as a 5 and 6 year old just after the war when it was deserted, we used to roam a couple of miles, a mile and a half up into the woods, and there were all the huts still there. *Did the game keeper mind you going into the huts?* Well he would have done if he'd have caught us. But we roughly knew where he was and I'm sure he probably knew where we were but didn't bother. There's always been this, it still exists, this I wouldn't say neutrality but this acceptance of certain people to walk through the woods. Simply because they also extended the knowledge and the policing of the woods. It still happens today. We live close to a pheasant run. I don't shoot pheasants I have nothing to do with them but we can wander at will.