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Lord Phillips of Ellesmere, KBE FRS in interview with Dr Max Blythe
Oxford, 29th January 1996, Interview I

MB Lord Phillips, you were born in 1924 in Ellesmere in Shropshire to - I've read something of this story, and you've talked over your early days - to parents who I find absolutely fascinating to think about. Perhaps you could put them on the record for me now.

DP Well, my father Charles Harry Phillips was born in Ellesmere and came from the family of a master tailor, had lots of brothers and sisters and spent all his life in Ellesmere, apart from two occasions. He came up to London to learn the tailoring business as a master tailor and cutter and he served in the First World War from 1915 to 1919 in the Kings Shropshire Light Infantry.

MB He won a military medal, I believe?

DP He won a military medal at the Battle of Arras in 1917, but that's as much as he would ever say about it.

MB He wouldn't talk about it, would he?

DP No

MB He didn't want to go back to that.

DP Well, a little bit came out in dribs and drabs. I mean, very occasionally he would let slip something. For example I remember him talking once about sitting round with his comrades in the company drinking rum before an attack and of course not drinking rum himself because he was a confirmed Methodist and teetotaller. I also remember him describing how they went over the top next in line to a battalion of the guards and how impressed he was by the way the guards went over the top as though they were on parade. So that sort of thing would come out, but no personal details of the things that he'd done.

MB He wanted to be a farmer I think?

DP Well, he was mixed up about it. His third priority probably was to be a tailor like his father. He wanted to be a missionary and he wanted to be a farmer as you say. And he tried to pursue these two things, first of all by becoming a Methodist local preacher in the Whitchurch circuit, which is a town ten or twelve miles away from Ellesmere, and he was a lay preacher all his life as I knew him. And also his father, in an attempt to I suppose show him what was involved in being a farmer, rented a couple of fields just outside Ellesmere where he raised a few cattle and milked them and sold milk in the neighbourhood for a year or two, I don't know how long. But on Sunday afternoon walks we would occasionally walk past these fields

and they clearly held a lot of nostalgic memories for him. But again I don't know much detail about it.

MB Was there a lot of Methodist background in the family?

DP Oh, a great deal, yes. My father was the most active Methodist on his side of the family. His two brothers for example were not local preachers and his sisters were not that much involved with the church, or perhaps I should say the chapel, since that's what we called it in those days. But on my mother's side her father and numerous uncles, that's to say my great-uncles, were all in this case Primitive Methodist local preachers. And the chapel was a very important part of my early life.

MB Thinking of your father and his ideas of a career and his ambitions, he really did try to become quite scholarly and didn't quite make it into the church on a full-time basis. But I think you suggested that his sermons were always best composed in a very simple fashion while he was sitting sewing?

DP Well, I think that's right. There's something of a tradition I think of tailors being thoughtful people, because while you're sitting sewing a seam you don't really have to concentrate your mind fully on what's happening to the needle, so you can think about other things. One of the leaders of the Chartist movement, for example, I remember learning as a child was a tailor - Francis Place. And my father certainly thought about his sermons when he was sitting sewing and very rarely wrote them down. He did make an attempt to become a minister in the Wesleyan Methodist ministry and got as far as going away for a residential trial on this, and always said that he failed on the written sermon. He did perfectly well on the sermon itself, but not the written sermon because he simply wasn't accustomed to writing it down.

MB That's what I was meaning, a rather sad time for him I guess. But what of the business that he created? Was it a prosperous business or was it just meandering along?

DP His father came to Ellesmere from Whitchurch in about 1865 and shortly after set up on his own as a master tailor. I think my father's mother was the dominant figure in the family. She kept the accounts and looked after the customers and so on. And for a time they did very well. They had a number of employed tailors, about whom my father used to talk occasionally.

MB This grandmother of yours came from a lively line called the Woods?

DP Yes, but my father knew really very little about them and gave the impression that there was some mysterious thing in the background that he didn't really want brought out. When they left Whitchurch in fact they didn't break away from my Phillips grandmother's family because she always went back to her mother's for the birth of her children, that's the first four, until her own mother died, and then she started having her children in Ellesmere. But my father would never talk about his grandmother Wood, and his grandfather Wood had died fairly early on leaving the grandmother making... If you look back in the census returns which I have looked at a little, she first of all was never very secure in how old she was, so it's difficult to

determine when she was born and she described herself variously as a washer-woman or a brewer. It's not at all clear how she supported the family, but support it she did.

MB She did.

DP Yes.

MB Keeping with your father in this tailoring business, was he successful?

DP Well, when his father died in 1915, my father and not his eldest brother but the next one in line, William, who was older than my father, they inherited the business and ran it together and for a time they still employed staff. I mean, the colourful character my father used to talk about was an Irish jobbing tailor named Jimmy O'Brien whom he employed for many years. But in the depression of the late twenties and thirties with my Uncle William, my father's ailing partner in the company, business fell off and my father went over to the system which is becoming increasingly common in the 1990s of employing people on piece-rates. There were jobbing tailors in the town, and when they got a lot of business he would do the cutting out and say 'Would you like to make up a pair of breeches?' or whatever.

MB Perhaps we could take in the place where they worked which is by the Wharf.

DP Well, they moved in 1865 into a newly-built terrace of houses built by the Bridgewater Estate in Ellesmere, into number 10 in this row. And they operated the business from number 10 Wharf Road from that time, though when they were in their prosperous patch, probably in the 1890s, they moved up to a larger house in the centre of the town. This was Wharf Road because it's the road that leads down to the wharf of the Shropshire Union Canal, which was important in my father's younger days. It went through a patch of not being important and is now becoming important as a part of the leisure industry.

MB Now, moving on to mother. Can we just take her in? A formidable lady, coming from a fascinating family.

DP Well, that's an interesting description of her. I didn't find her formidable. She was not actually born in Ellesmere, but her mother whose maiden name was Bagnall was born in Ellesmere of a long-standing Ellesmere family, the Bagnalls. And her mother aged twenty or so married a man, Samuel Finney, from the Staffordshire Coalfield and went to live near Stoke-on-Trent in a place called Talke Hill, and my mother was actually born there. But for a reason that was never much discussed and certainly never explained, though resented by me as a child, my mother's parents decided when she was two years old or so when I think another child was on the way that they would leave her in Ellesmere with her grandparents. So she was in fact brought up by her Bagnall grandparents on Swan Hill, number 3 Swan Hill, from I suppose 1888 onwards. In effect she was brought up in Ellesmere and was an Ellesmere person, and knew and, I fancy, admired my father in the distance from her earliest childhood. My mother's father, who when she was born was working in the colliery at Talke, moved up in the trade union movement from being a colliery check weighman, which is an elected post of course, to being a trade union official and eventually to being the secretary of the Midlands Miners' Federation and

member of Parliament for Burslem or North-West Staffordshire, I forget quite what, between 1916 and 1922. He again was a Primitive Methodist, as I've said, and a very committed lay preacher.

MB And a very successful early Labour MP?

DP Yes, he was actually the first person to stand as a Labour candidate against a Liberal candidate in a Liberal seat. You'll remember that at the beginnings of the rise of the Labour Party they had a sort of alliance with the Liberals and didn't compete in seats which the Liberals traditionally held, but he was the first person to break that mould. He didn't win of course, but he succeeded in a Labour seat in North-West Staffordshire following a chap named Enoch Edwards, who became a connection because one of my mother's sisters married Enoch Edwards' son. So there was a sort of family connection in this early Labour movement. Paradoxically none of the children were committed Labour supporters. They all became Liberals.

MB Thinking back to mother and her early admiration of father, I think they had a rather long and not altogether easy courtship before he went to the war in 1915.

DP Well, again that wasn't something that was a great deal discussed. My father was certainly at one time engaged to a local farmer's daughter. Maybe this was a route into farming. But although there was an engagement ring involved which I still possess nothing came of this and I have the impression that when he went off to the Army they had by then arrived at some sort of arrangement. And when he came back, they rather quickly got married.

MB Fairly quickly in 1919.

DP That's right.

MB And went to live at Swan Hill.

DP They went to live at 3, Swan Hill, that's absolutely right. My grandmother Bagnall, whom I thought of as a living figure really throughout my childhood because my mother used to talk about Gran Bagnall as the person who brought her up, she very conveniently died in early 1919. Ao the cottage on Swan Hill was available for my parents to take over.

MB Your father came back from the war with a war wound, a British shell, I think?

DP Well, he was captured on the 21st March 1918 in the last great German offensive which was quite a dramatic event. He talked about that very little. There was a fantastic bombardment before the attack and then the German soldiers appeared out of the mist and smoke, and he once described the colonel of his battalion sort of standing up to these people but I think escaping with his life. They were in the front line or front collection of outposts as it was by then I think, and he was captured and marched off to the rear and the English gunners busy harassing the Germans succeeded in severely wounding his left foot. So he was in the end carted off to a

German prisoner-of-war camp hospital, and he used to speak with admiration of the way in which he was treated there really.

MB But he came out with this limp that you remember?

DP When he came out he always wore a surgical boot provided as part of his war pension. His war pension because of his wound was 12 shillings a week, I might tell you, together with provision of a surgical boot, and he walked with a walking stick in his left hand.

MB David, they marry, they're in Swan Hill and they have a daughter in 1920?

DP 1920, that's right, July 1920. Edith Barbara, my sister.

MB Edith Barbara, who you knew as Barbara largely.

DP I knew as Barbara, that's right, yes.

MB Then, four years later?

DP That's right, in March 1924 I was born, also in Swan Hill.

MB A son of now fairly senior parents.

DP Oh yes, my father who was born in 1877 was 47 when I was born and my mother would have been 39. So, yes, senior parents.

MB You talk of those early years at Swan Hill. I've read some of your writing about Swan Hill, memories that are not all in order, but perhaps you'd talk about those early years.

DP Well, Swan Hill is on the outskirts of Ellesmere. I once contemplated writing a serious autobiography and the opening sentence was going to be 'I was born on 3, Swan Hill between the cemetery and the workhouse' and that's actually how it was. The cemetery was on the way down the hill into town and the workhouse was a little bit down the other side of the hill going out of town. And the row of houses on Swan Hill stood on a little plateau not quite overlooking the Mere because it was separated from the Mere by quite a lot of trees and so on, but quite close to the Mere.

MB The Mere is quite wonderful. I've never seen it. Perhaps you...

DP Well we were half a mile away from the end of the Mere. The Mere is about half a mile wide and a mile or so long with an artificial island at one end of it and it was a major feature of the town. The church overlooks the Mere and the town has a hill overlooking it on which ... way back in early Norman days there was a castle so we called it the Castle Hill Fields and there's now a bowling green on the top of what was the castle mound.

MB David, you've talked of being between not the devil and the deep blue sea, but between the cemetery and the workhouse. Did they figure in that early pattern of thought at all? Did they register?

DP Oh yes. Well, to start with the workhouse, it was the days when there were still quite a number of tramps. Maybe it's a pity that there aren't workhouses nowadays, but these chaps would come walking up Swan Hill in the late evening on their way to the workhouse where they would break stones or chop sticks or do some digging or something and then get keep for the night and then walk off again in the morning. In addition to that, there was a resident population of the indigent poor, and my mother who, I mean it was a town of a little more than 2,000 inhabitants, had lived there all her life quite literally knew everybody in the town. And she would take me along occasionally to visit old friends who by this time were in the workhouse lying on truckle-beds in these cavernous wards waiting to die. I don't know that they made a great deal of it, but people in the town had a sort of slight nightmare that that's what would happen to them if they were not careful.

MB And you went to the cemetery to look at graves occasionally. You had your regular pilgrimage to family graves? I did that as a child.

DP Well, yes. I mean, Sunday afternoon walks were a ritual feature of the week really, except when my father was away preaching, which he often was on Sunday afternoons. Then I suppose we walked with my mother. And we often walked through the gardens which lie around the shore of the Mere at the Swan Hill end, Cremorne Gardens, no doubt named after the gardens in London of an earlier period. And then you come out near the church and walk back through the town along streets with names which conjure up a picture of the medieval village around the castle, Watergate Street, Sparbridge, places like that, and then turn right up Swan Hill and there's the cemetery. So, we used to walk into the cemetery and look at family graves and then walk around. It sounds a somewhat morbid, gruesome sort of experience, but it wasn't at all really. It was like visiting old friends in a way, you know, 'There's old Mrs So-and-so' and we would read the inscriptions on the gravestones. I remember one which said 'Peace Gertrude', and since my parents knew the lady involved this always produced a sort of chuckle. So, it wasn't gloomy at all, it was just the natural end of the walk.

MB Yes, I had something like that. Keeping with Sundays and father going off, he often went off in a pony and trap I believe and one of his colleagues would take him on the Methodist circuit. He was a...

DP He was a Wesleyan. At this time, when we were on Swan Hill, the Wesleyan circuit was based on Whitchurch and was up-market, let's put it that way, and there was a Primitive Methodist circuit based on Ellesmere to which my mother belonged. She was the organist at the Primitive Methodist chapel. So, my father was a Wesleyan Methodist and he used to go off to chapels on a Sunday, mostly in the Wesleyan circuit, but there was a good deal of collaboration between the two and he would also preach from time to time in the Primitive Methodist circuit and in circuits elsewhere in the neighbourhood.

MB Yes, you said he went as far as Llangollen and places like that.

DP Well yes, that's right. It was organised, there was a plan and a great event was 'the plan' would appear every quarter, which showed my father's preaching engagements for the next three months. And the minister in Whitchurch who made this up had to think about how the people were going to get to these chapels. It was quite important that the local preachers in Ellesmere should all go, should have transport to the chapels at which they were engaged to preach. So, it had to be. There were three of them - Joe Price, Billy Read and my father. And Joe Price in the early days was a grocer, he had the pony and trap and he would take the three of them and he would drop off my father at Hollinwood and go on to Whixhall himself and drop off Billy Read at Bettisfield and then collect them on the way back, that sort of thing. Later on he had a little car and they did it by car.

MB Your father, did you see him preach?

DP Oh yes, I heard him preach often.

MB Was it impressive? Was it in the grand manner?

DP Well, as the name Phillips suggests he had some Welsh blood, but he was a bit unclear about how far back that went. His father I think was born in Whitchurch and his father's father was also born in Whitchurch and married a girl from near Oswestry, so they were north Shropshire people. But going back a generation my father had a vague belief, let's put it that way, that it then went back to Ruthin in North Wales and certainly when he preached my father had a touch of the Welsh hwl about it. His voice would rise in pitch and he would get rather more emotional and I found it terribly embarrassing. I would sit there in a state of confusion when he began to get carried away...

MB It wasn't the man you knew at home?

DP Other people found him a very impressive preacher, so he was much in demand as a guest preacher at harvest festivals and chapel anniversaries and things in neighbouring circuits and so on. I just found it embarrassing as a child.

MB Talking of the Methodist circuit - your mother's role as an organist in the chapel in the town and father's wanderings and preaching and dedication, he was a very dedicated preacher - Sundays in the Methodist life were very much a part of your life for quite a long time, Sunday Schools and the full range of...

DP Oh, absolutely. Obviously as a one year old I didn't do this, but as soon as it was possible my sister and I went with my father to the rather small Wesleyan Methodist chapel in Watergate Street and my mother went off to the rather larger Primitive Methodist chapel in Trimpley. When my father was away preaching no doubt we went with my mother, but my sister and I were brought up as Wesleyan Methodists and that ended when the churches came together later on.

MB Keeping to those early years at Swan Hill, the first of five years of your life, are there any other impressions? You were a sickly child.

DP Yes. I don't know what the problem was, but I have a distinct recollection - it was a two up-two down cottage, No 3 Swan Hill - of lying on a sofa in the front room very often doing jigsaw puzzles. I had a favourite jigsaw puzzle of a Great Western Railway engine at speed along the Cornish coast, no doubt it was on its way to Penzance or somewhere. But lying there doing jigsaw puzzles and of the doctor coming to see me rather often, you know, to the extent that I knew him rather well and became irritated by his recurrent visits. Because of course there wasn't a great deal the doctors could do in those days except make reassuring noises.

MB David, what was wrong? You don't remember?

DP I don't really know. I mean, looking at my own grandchildren now and the way in which they acquire all sorts of viral infections that they pass on to me, I suppose it must have been much the same in those days, that there were lots of infections about. And when my sister started to go to school, no doubt she brought them home. That's what children do, yes.

MB Were you close to your sister? I never, from your writings and talking, thought that there was...

DP She was four years older than I. The earliest photograph of me is of me lying on a Windsor chair on an appropriate cushion or something at two months, three months, with a very disgruntled-looking sister standing by me, and I fancy she was rather put out when I appeared. And we were certainly never very close, which was very sad.

MB It was, yes, but the family seemed to have a basic harmony and everything seemed to work reasonably well at Swan Hill. Father would walk from the Wharf home for lunch and you'd go and watch him work at the tailor's trade.

DP Not very much while I was very young. I knew where he worked and what the arrangements were there, but I didn't go down into town by myself at that age. I used to go down with my mother shopping at the Co-op. Her Gran Bagnall and her husband had been founder members of the Ellesmere Co-op and my mother was an assiduous supporter of the Co-operative movement. It didn't really please my father, I discovered later, because he thought she should be supporting the trades people who were his customers, but that didn't suit my mother particularly. So I went with her to do the shopping at the Co-op. But that was always for necessities that couldn't be grown in the garden because my father had a large allotment, also in Wharf Road, and literally grew all the vegetables and fruit that we needed.

MB He used to like quiet periods in the garden. That was one of his joys.

DP Oh yes, it was certainly his garden, that's right. That was another place for solitary contemplation.

MB David, he was going to have plenty to contemplate by about 1929. I think your grandfather Finney was thinking of the future for his daughter and you were going to move from Swan Hill?

DP Well, that's right. My grandfather Finney, having been much involved I suppose in the general strike of '26 and things like that, and there were stories about the not very effective miners leaders of those days... Anyway he came up to retirement and is said to have said to my grandmother 'Well, we never did very much for Edie' - that's my mother - 'it's time we did something for her.' What they had done for her in fact was to send her off to London sometime before the First World War to be trained as a midwife. She was trained as a midwife mostly at the hospital in Plaistow, if that's how you pronounce it, and she used to have stories of delivering children in the East End of London on beds where the sheets were newspapers and bugs were crawling up the walls and so on. But never mind, they were all rather vivid pictures she could paint of life in depressed areas in the 1900s. Anyway, my grandfather thought it's time we did something for Edie, and made the proposition that on retirement my grandparents should move from Burslem where they lived in the Miners' Hall, to Ellesmere and buy a large enough house for them to share with my parents and their family. My mother, who was I suppose in her way quite an ambitious lady, saw all sorts of possibilities in this, thought it a splendid idea. She very much enjoyed entertaining family. That was the attraction to her, I think. My father, who saw all sorts of possibilities of money dribbling away entertaining the Finney and Bagnall families, didn't think it a very good idea. But nevertheless it was agreed that they would do this and in 1928, when I was four, they bought the house at 9 Willow Street in Ellesmere, quite a large house. And in 1929 there was much toing and froing, moving from Swan Hill to Willow Street. We moved first, and later on in 1930 my grandparents moved from Burslem and there we all were, all set up.

MB In a six-bedroomed house.

DP In a largish house, yes.

MB With a billiard room and...

DP That's right. It had a cellar and a ground floor and two floors above that. The billiard room, strangely, was on the top floor with a large skylight.

MB Lots of room for entertaining.

DP That's right.

MB For relations that your father might have preferred to see more occasionally?

DP Well, I don't know about that. It wasn't that he didn't get on reasonably well with them, but it was the cost that was the problem.

MB I think the grandparents were going to provide the general running of the house costs, but he had got to provide food and things?

DP They provided the house and the coal and the heating and the electric bill, I think, and we provided the food and looked after the garden. I don't know how the decorating was organised. My grandparents probably paid for the decorating.

MB David, at that point, before you actually get really installed in this new mansion, it would be nice to take just one or two pictures from those early years that we haven't managed to siphon in at present. I think one seminal time must have been when you actually went to Burslem to stay with those grandparents when mother was quite ill. She had a mystery illness I think, when you were about three?

DP Well, I would say it would have been in '27. It was long before the days of the National Health Service of course, and people belonged to various health schemes. The Shropshire Provident which was a localised forerunner of BUPA ran such a scheme, and my father, one of his outside activities was being a member of the Shropshire committee of the Shropshire Provident Society or Association, whatever it was called. Getting taken on the doctor's panel involved passing a medical examination. My mother never succeeded in being taken on because she had, as it was said in those days 'a weak heart.' Exactly what this condition was I don't know, but if you look at photographs of her shortly after I was born and after that she looks a very sickly lady. And in 1927 there was obviously a crisis and the doctor said 'She needs absolute quiet.'. And my sister was sent off to stay with my father's sister in Birmingham, at Northfield and I was sent off to stay with my mother's parents in Burslem at the Miners' Hall. As you say, that was a bit traumatic.

MB Quite a culture shock for you, living in the Miners' Hall?

DP Well, it was a combined residence and offices of the Miners' Federation and it was just across the road from the Snead Colliery.

MB And a great slag-heap that was growing?

DP A great slag-heap, that's right. I mean, it was the days when the spoil from the colliery was dragged up the slag-heap by a little steam engine which chugged up. And I was taught to say 'I think I can', 'I think I can', 'I think I can', as it chugged up the hill and then as it rolled down 'I knew I could', 'I knew I could', 'I knew I could.' Anyway, that was part of the background. The other thing I remember vividly was on one side of the Miners' Hall, which is a large red-brick building actually built in my grandfather's early days as a union official, because the foundation stones include a stone with Enoch Edwards' name on it and another one with Samuel Finney's name on it. So it was a red-brick Edwardian/late Victorian building, I suppose, quite large, with on one side of it a park. The great feature in the park was that they had peacocks who looked splendid and made terrible noises. As you know, they squawk like mad, peacocks. I just remember feeling lonely and wondering what it was all about and whether I would see my mother again.

MB It was a fairly stark existence there, but that was the family that was to introduce you to the academic world in a way.

DP Well, my mother's mother, as I said, came from a family called Bagnall. And she had four brothers, all of them lay preachers, and they'd all grown up as schoolchildren in Ellesmere. But another feature that I don't really know the ins and outs of is that for some reason the family was befriended by one of the local county families, the Jebbs. Now, the Jebb family who lived at The Lythe and still lives at The Lythe on the outskirts of Ellesmere, is well-known popularly because the famous

Eglantyne Jebb, the founder of the Save the Children Fund, was one of the Jebbs. And her aunt, a Miss Jebb who originally lived in the main family house at The Lythe subsequently moved to an old half-timbered house in a little village called Lee, The Old Hall, Lee. And in the very early days that we're talking about my mother used to visit her there. I have a picture of my mother and one of these Bagnall families visiting with Miss Jebb at The Old Hall at Lee. Well, somehow Miss Jebb encouraged my Bagnall great-uncles that Ellesmere was a splendid place but there was a world out there, so they should contemplate going out and doing things in the world out there. So, one way and another she encouraged them all to leave Ellesmere and they went off and...

MB ...achieved quite interesting things.

DP Well, in the end, three of them. One of them went off to Birmingham where he remained an employee of the Shropshire Canal Company or whatever was the parent body of the Shropshire Canal Company. Two of the others became Liberal election agents, one of them in Dorset and the other near Stroud in Gloucester. And the fourth, and he was by a long chalk my favourite, was a post office clerk in Ellesmere. And in addition to the Jebb influence he married a lady from Staffordshire who was no doubt introduced to the family by my Finney grandfather, and they lived in another house on Swan Hill for a time. But this lady, my aunt Harriet Bagnall, after she'd produced a son quite soon decided that there was no future for her children in Ellesmere, and her husband Joe thought he'd better get a job somewhere else. So, he got a job, still as a post office clerk, in Manchester and they moved off to Manchester where eventually they had three sons, all of whom went to Manchester Grammar School. The eldest of them, Jack, went on to what was then called Manchester Tech and is now called UMIST and became an engineer and had a career in India for a long time. The second went to the grammar school and won a scholarship to Teddy Hall in Oxford where he did Greats and became a Classics schoolmaster. And the third rebelled. After a reasonably successful school-time, Eric I think became a commercial traveller. So, he was one of the first to roll up to Ellesmere in a motor car and take us on little trips and so on and was a very colourful, non-academic character. But the other two were big heroes.

MB Jack was a big hero, wasn't he?

DP Yes, he used to come home on leave from India and hire a Buick motor-car and drive us round the countryside. He was a great expansive figure.

MB When we talked before, David, I think you said 'He showed me that anything was possible.'

DP Absolutely so, that's right.

MB A great early influence.

DP That's right. Yes, a charismatic figure beyond doubt.

MB So, we've got these figures in, I wanted the Bagnall mother's cousins into your life at that point and we've got them figuring and Jack having this influence.

You also had trips on the Great Western Railway to Northfield, Birmingham to see Sarah and her husband?

DP That's right. Frank Hands had married one of my father's sisters who had died before I was born, so I never knew her. Her name was Eliza, always known in the family as Lyle. And another of my father's sisters, Sarah, who was always known to me as Auntie Tom went to keep house for uncle Frank Hands who was a grocer in Northfield, quite close to what was shortly the Austin Motor Works and now Longbridge, that part of Birmingham. So once or twice a year we would have a family expedition to Northfield for my father to see his sister 'Tom', his favourite sister, and the rest of us to have a day out, I suppose. Ellesmere was on the Cambrian Railway. In the great days of expansion of the railway system somebody had thought we must have a railway line from Crewe to Aberystwyth and it went through Ellesmere, which for a time was thought of as being the headquarters of the Cambrian Railway. So although it was really only a stop on the line from Whitchurch to Oswestry, it had a very large station building because they'd contemplated it would be the headquarters of the Cambrian Railway, which eventually however was located in Oswestry. So there was a frequent railway service to Oswestry and then there was a little link... It wasn't terribly well co-ordinated because the main Great Western line from Birkenhead to Paddington didn't go through Oswestry, but it went quite close to Oswestry and another little town called Gobowen which was a stop on the Birkenhead to Paddington line. So naturally there had to be a little railway line from Oswestry to Gobowen. So, we would go to Birmingham by taking the train to Oswestry and then a little shuttle train - all steam engines of course, masses of steam puffing into the air - and then change onto the main line at Gobowen and get on the express on its way to Paddington and get off at Snow Hill Station in Birmingham, and then totter out of the station onto the tram which went down the Bristol Road. It must have been two, maybe even three, miles worth of tram ride from central Birmingham down to Northfield where we got off. And there was Uncle Frank and Auntie Tom in this traditional grocer's shop where the customers sat at the counter and the grocer made up little packets of sugar or salt or butter or cheese or whatever.

MB David, I wanted that, because we're tracing the beginnings of your travels really. We mentioned the Bagnalls who went to Stroud and I think you went to Stroud with mother at quite an early time?

DP It would have been but I don't remember ever going there before the Willow Street days. We did go during the Willow Street days. They lived in a house overlooking Stroud Cricket Ground, which was occasionally the site of a county cricket match between Gloucestershire and one of the other counties. My uncle Will Bagnall was a great cricket enthusiast and he used to take us off to Cheltenham and Gloucester and...

MB But so was your mother. She was an enormous enthusiast.

DP Oh, that's right. We used to go to watch Gloucestershire playing against various teams.

MB You saw Hammond play?

DP Hammond of course, and Barnett and Tom Goddard and people of that sort were great early heroes.

MB And great early heroes were players from Blackburn Rovers?

DP Well, I wouldn't claim that my father was a sportsman. I don't know how good he'd been at football in his schooldays, probably like me not very. But when he was six or seven... It was the sort of foundation period of English soccer association football and the FA Cup was invented and the Football League. And in the early days of the cup, when my father was seven or so, in '85 and '86, Blackburn Rovers won the cup each year and from that period my father was a devoted supporter of Blackburn Rovers. So far as I know he never visited the town but he used to occasionally meet a commercial traveller from Blackburn who came selling him cloth. And he would get first-hand news of the team from this person and would come home and tell me about what was happening at Blackburn Rovers.

MB But the Sentinel, 'The Staffordshire Sentinel' was the Saturday night way into the latest story.

DP Oh, of course, of course. Long before the days of football commentaries on the wireless or even football results we had to wait for my father to come home on a Saturday evening bearing with him the pink coloured 'Staffordshire Sentinel' with the football results. And of cours, the first question as he came through the door, by the time I was up and talking, was 'What happened to Blackburn Rovers?' And in 1928, I have to tell you, they won the cup. So I was hooked too. I used to in Willow Street, at the beginning of the involvement of the major clubs in the FA Cup, hoist a little blue and white flag in the kitchen where we spent most of our time. And I left it fluttering near the ceiling until they were eliminated from the cup, which quite often was, as in this season, at the first time of asking. But never mind, it was very important.

MB And you stayed with this devotion. David, we get you to Willow Street at last. You had a more comfortable life there and you started to go to school?

DP Well, the house was partitioned between my grandparents and my parents. In the main my grandparents lived in what we knew as the dining room because the man who'd built the house was one of the local doctors. It was again an Edwardian house, I suppose. He had a large room overlooking the back garden which was quite large and another room across the corridor overlooking Willow Street which was the drawing room. And my grandparents operated in that part of the house, except that we all ate in the kitchen. The Phillips family lived in the kitchen most of the time, but we had what had been the library, a not inconsiderable room where my mother's piano was installed, as our sitting room. My grandparents had a large bedroom immediately above the dining room and we had the billiards room on the very top floor, which was a large double width sort of room with a skylight. And my parents had a double bed at one end of the room and I had a single one at the other end of the room, and my sister slept in one of two small rooms next to this up on the top floor. The other bedrooms were for visitors of whom there were many.

MB There were many. You said in your recollections, it's hard to remember a time when there were no visitors.

DP That's right, yes. I mean, I was quite fond of lots of them, but I remember one terrible occasion when my Uncle Will and Aunt Jessie from Stroud for some reason which I can't understand rang the front door bell having arrived by train, and I went to answer the front door and there they were. And they'd only been there just a week or two before, I thought. And I went back into the kitchen and said to my mother 'I think it's Uncle Will and Auntie Jessie, but what are they doing here?' She said 'Yes, I was expecting them', and they came in.

MB David, can we get you to school now. You went to a primary school?

DP I was four when we moved to Willow Street, on the point of going to what we knew as the infant school, the Church of England infant school at age five, and I suppose I started there in – I don't actually remember. I was five in 1929, so it must have been somewhere in 1929 when I started at the infant school in Ellesmere which was a galvanised iron construction of one large classroom and one small classroom and it was divided. The intake went into the small classroom where the lady who taught us was named Miss Nunnelly and she lived in the cottage next door in Victoria Street. It had been called Chapel Street because the congregational chapel was there, but it was renamed Victoria Street at the time of Queen Victoria's Jubilee.

MB And you were in this school for two years?

DP I was there for, I suppose, two years. Yes, two years.

MB Was it a useful time? I mean, did you pick up useful things? I think you were sickly again.

DP Well, I remained sickly. And as I've said already, children when they first go to school, there's no doubt that schools for young children are excellent culture media for all sorts of bugs and children spend time at home getting over them, so I had that. I learned to tell the time. I suppose I began to learn to read. I don't actually remember when I could read, but it happened at about that time I suppose. The dentist, the school dentist, came. He pursued me through my school life, Mr Catchpole, the school dentist. He was probably a very run-of-the-mill, ordinary sort of dentist, but he was an ogre figure that taught me to dislike going to the dentist but never mind. As you can see I don't remember a great deal about it. It was the only co-educational school that I went to and I got to know the local children of my own age, some of whom I still know.

MB And then you went to the Church of England elementary boys school.

DP Then at age seven … I mean, boys and girls were then segregated and I went to the boys' elementary school, Church of England school, which was coincidentally in Wharf Road. And the girls school was at the top of St Johns Hill near the bowling green up on the hill where the castle once stood.

MB But your sister didn't go there? She went to a prep school for a time?

DP My sister initially went to a little prep school in Oswestry, going on the train. But after a while, I suspect partly because of the recession, probably more of the recession than because of the expense of keeping up Willow Street, she was taken away and sent to the girls elementary school in Ellesmere where her mother and grandmother had been before her. They were Church of England schools so a major feature of the school week was the weekly visit of the vicar, the Reverend Merrid J Rush, I remember, a not to me endearing figure. The problem was or one of the problems was that I was of course a Methodist. And at the time the town partitioned socially between the church people and the chapel people and collaboration between the two was not particularly good. Well a major part of the curriculum was learning the church catechism. You know, what is your name, N or M, all of that. Well my parents objected to this. Why should I have to learn the catechism? And they made a big fuss about it and eventually it was arranged that I would sit at the back of the class while all the rest of the children were chanting the responses to the catechism. It didn't mean, since I was able at that point to absorb learning like blotting paper, that I didn't learn the responses. But I wasn't tested on them. It did mean however that when the vicar came I was clearly identified as the Methodist who didn't take part in these activities. So, however much I waved my hand vigorously because I knew the answers to the questions I was left out.

MB Can I sense a rejection in that?

DP Well, it left me with a dislike of the Church of England and its officials that stayed with me for rather a long time, but I don't know that I consciously felt rejected.

MB I think you had other worries. I think it was a tough school, wasn't it?

DP Well, I don't have any great recollection of bullying, in fact quite the reverse. But the ethos of the school left something to be desired. The headmaster's name was Griffiths and he ruled by fear, there's no doubt about that. And the junior teachers, of whom there were two – Miss Lightwood, who was really a married lady with a daughter who'd been a friend of mine at the infant school, she ran the junior class and a chap named Mr Hooson ran the intermediate class… Well it gets more complicated than that. We were divided into four standards. Standard one and standard two together, ages six and seven, made up class one under Miss Lightwood and standards three and four made up class two under Mr Hooson. And it all took place in one room which was partitioned into two by moveable screens when we were having separate lessons. So we tended not to make a great noise even when we were chanting poetry or reciting our multiplication tables and so on. But as you suggest, if one stepped out of line the cane was the answer. The episode I remember most was in Mr Hooson's class. He was the church organist and a pleasant mild man who suffered terribly from hay-fever, I remember, so he would sit with his head on his hands at the desk in front of the class while we read our books or drew our maps or whatever we were doing. But even so, I mean, the authoritarian ethos of the school had been imposed upon him. So when we'd done an exercise and he'd gone through our essays and so on, we always had to write a section at the foot of essays with the heading 'corrections', and then had to spell all the words we'd spelt incorrectly correctly, under this heading 'corrections.' Well I achieved the feat of misspelling 'corrections' on one occasion. This of course didn't mean another heading 'correction of corrections', it meant three

strokes of the cane. So it was a tough school, especially in the class above this. Standards five, six and seven which were run by MrGriffiths included rather a lot of large, how do I describe them, large boys from the surrounding village schools who'd proved to be out of control by the village schoolmistresses. There were quite a lot of small schools in the neighbouring villages generally run by village schoolmistresses, and when individual boys became unmanageable they were sent to be looked after by MrGriffiths. Well one of the favourite games in the playground was pretending to be knights on horseback or something. And when I was a small boy I would be carried around the playground on the shoulders of one of these large boys, and we would tussle with one another to pull off the opposing champions and the large boys were always very friendly and helpful. I think I was considered a little odd. I mean, I was studious and sickly and a Methodist and all that sort of thing.

MB You'd even started to play the violin, that must have...

DP But they were indulgent. I think I would say the children were indulgent. I'd started the play the violin, yes.

MB That wasn't a help to you.

DP Not very well, not very well, no.

MB But, you got going. By standard three when we talked before, you said that you began to recognise that you stacked up quite well and were looking for a high school place in Oswestry by then. You were doing quite well at school.

DP Well I had become accustomed to being, what does one call it, top of the class or something, actually as it turned out, a minnow in a pond of tiddlers, but never mind. Given that and the somewhat academic background at home. I mean, by this time I began to know something about my father's interests. For example he was passionately devoted to poetry. And he entered into a deal with me that I would learn Grays' Elegy 'Written in a Country Churchyard', one verse at a time, and if I succeeded in reciting the next verse immaculately on the Saturday he would pay me a penny. I don't know how many pennies I made out of that. You can simply count them. I did that without too much trouble. But that sort of interest existed at home. The house was actually full of books. I mean, at Willow Street my grandfather's and my father's books added up to quite a total.

MB Perhaps this is a good time to take in that period when you got diphtheria and were read to rather a lot. I think that was a seminal time.

DP Yes, well I got diphtheria...

MB Quite early in that school life.

DP That's right. It was when I was first at the Wharf Road boys' school, at the end of the first term, just before Christmas. I woke up one Sunday morning with a raging sore throat and my mother with her nurse's training saw that it wasn't simply red, it had the beginnings of white ulcerous spots on it.

MB You'd been doing a lot of collecting, hadn't you, for charity?

DP That's right, I'd been out collecting for the Methodist Missionary Society. That was a regular event over the Christmas period.

MB And you went down with this thing.

DP So my mother whisked me off up the road to the cottage hospital hoping to find a doctor looking at his patients, which indeed she did. So Dr Rogers, my long-standing acquaintance, looked at my throat and tut-tutted and took a swab and sent me home to get to bed and be kept warm until the result of the swab came. So when that came – I think on the Monday, although that sounds a rather rapid turn-round – well, I think on the Monday he came round and said 'I'm afraid it's diphtheria' and at this point gave me an injection of the Wellcome anti-diphtheria toxin. And at that instant, as I remember it, and it sounds miraculous, the sore throat went away and I thought 'Well, that was rather good, some doctor this, now I can get out of bed.' And he spoke to me rather fiercely. 'Put your hands under the covers and stay there', he said and I was kept in bed for some time because they didn't know what...

MB You were quarantined though, weren't you? There were kind of sheets up with disinfectant.

DP I was still kept in the billiards room bedroom, and my parents kept on sleeping there. But no children were allowed in and the door was covered by a sheet soaked in disinfectant from time to time. I was kept there for rather a long time.

MB And in this isolation you were read to by Grandma Finney.

DP Grandma Finney came into her own at this point, came up trumps.

MB Yes, you became her great favourite.

DP Well, I was already, I suppose, her favourite. It turned out in subsequent observation that she did like her younger grandchildren as they came along in turn.

MB And at that stage you were it.

DP I was it, yes. So she came up and read books to me. Actually, identifying books to read because although there were masses of books in the house they were not generally children's books, and my father and grandfather and mother were not great experts on what are the children's books that ought to be read. I remember it was the doctor who suggested that maybe RN Ballantyne is an appropriate author, so *The Coral Island* and *Martin Rattler* were books that featured quite largely at the beginning, mixed up with more religious books of which there were many which were suitable to be read to a child, I suppose. So I became acquainted with *The Pilgrims Progress* quite early on, much of which didn't make very much sense, but I remember rather clearly.

MB Didn't that have a link with your second name?

DP My second name?

MB Pilgrim fathers!

DP Well, yes, yes, that's clever. My second name, Chilton, is a family name. My – this will be hard to register, won't it? – my grandmother Finney's mother, the famous Gran Bagnall, well her mother's maiden name was Sandles. And her mother's maiden name – this is a great female line this – her mother's maiden name was Chilton. And the family myth I think in the strict sense, a fable that has a very strong influence, was that through this Chilton connection we were related to, in those days it was even put as descended from, one of the pilgrim fathers. He was always referred to in my young days as Roger Chilton, but later on I discovered that there was no Roger Chilton on the Mayflower so that had to be wrong. But there actually was a James Chilton on the Mayflower so the myth persisted. Anyway, that was the myth.

MB It's a nice story, isn't it?

DP And my mother insisted that one of my names should be Chilton. My father didn't like the idea at all. He wanted me called Oliver because one of his great heroes was Oliver Cromwell, but nevertheless David Chilton I was called.

MB And by Miss Jebb you had the grand title of Master Chilton.

DP No, no, wait a minute, we haven't quite got there! My mother insisted that I should actually be called Chilton, which was a great source of embarrassment. Here I was, a somewhat shy, easily embarrassed small boy and whenever people said 'What's your name?' and I had to say 'Chilton', and they said 'What? How do you spell it?' and so on. It was a great source of embarrassment to me. The Miss Jebb connection you mentioned is that she had a housekeeper whose name was Miss Goldsmith. After Miss Jebb's death, Miss Goldsmith came to live at a house provided by the Jebb family at the bottom of Swan Hill and she was a great friend of the family.

MB Goldsmith was close to mum?

DP And we stopped in there on our Sunday afternoon walks very often and she came to tea both at Swan Hill and in Willow Street quite often. She always referred to me as Master Chilton, which no doubt was an affectation she'd learned while working with the Jebb family. And this no doubt gave me ideas above my station. Master Chilton and Miss Barbara we were. Very peculiar.

MB David, that period of lying in bed went on for about six months.

DP Yes.

MB At the end of which you had a tonsillectomy that was fascinating to me.

DP Well, as time went by the doctor became more and more relaxed and began to talk about me being a carrier of diphtheria who wasn't going to develop the major

symptoms, which could easily have carried me off in those days. I wasn't actually aware of the seriousness of it and the anxiety it must be causing my parents and everybody else. So, as time went by I was allowed out of bed and into clothes, but I still wasn't allowed out of the room. So, I would occasionally shout down to friends in the street outside and they would say 'When are you coming back to school?' and I would say 'I don't know' because monthly swabs revealed that it was still there. And in the end Dr Rogers, in consultation with another of the local doctors Dr Caspar, decided well, maybe what they ought to do was take out my tonsils. But of course there was no isolation hospital nearby that I could be got to and the Ellesmere cottage hospital didn't want a diphtheria carrier suddenly brought into the environment. So the decision was made that I should have to have my tonsils removed in the bedroom. So they brought up the kitchen table and put it under the skylight in my billiard room bedroom and brought in gas cylinders and appropriate impedimenta, hired a nurse for the day – me sitting around watching all this being prepared. [I] was got out of bed earlyish one morning, given gas which I didn't enjoy very much and woke up to the sight of a nurse brandishing a sealed bottle 'Well, here are your tonsils. What would you like me to do with them?' So I said 'Throw them away, for goodness sake' or something and 'What am I going to do about this terrible throat, you've given me?' To which the doctor said 'Well' – this was very sensible of him – he said 'You should give him ice cream and ginger beer.'

MB Sounds a good deal to me!

DP So I thought that that sounded alright and my mother went out and got some ice cream from somewhere – none of your pre-packaged stuff, of course, home-made ice cream. And my father called at the Black Lion Hotel to collect some ginger beer, much to the consternation of the habitués who sat in the bar in speechless amazement when this Methodist local preacher came in and said 'Six bottles of Stone's ginger beer, please.' Anyway, I drank this stuff and my sore throat subsided. And a swab was taken and it was clear and another swab was taken and that was clear, and that was the end of the diphtheria.

MB And you went back to school.

DP And I went back to school for the last few weeks of the summer term.

MB David, just while we're in those school years, you started to make friends in an interesting way, to build real friendships in that school, and to develop various brave practices, although you'd been a weakly lad. I think you began to climb roofs and do things.

DP Well, the one thing that I learned to do at that school, and it was probably around standard three or four I suppose, was to learn to swim. There were no organised sports at school, which was peculiar. We didn't play football or cricket from school, we had to organise games of that sort ourselves, but we were taken down to the Mere once a week to learn to swim. There was a little wooden platform erection down the Mere side enclosing an area about, I don't know what, five feet wide by fifteen feet long or something, with a walkway around it. And Mr Hall who looked after the boat-house would suspend us on the end of a pole with a rope and a thing that went round our chests, and guide us along this little enclosure telling us

how to do the breast-stroke. And when it came to this point he said to me one day 'Well, I wasn't actually holding you up, so you must swim a length by yourself.' So in great fear and trembling I let him take off the support and got into the water and swam a length by myself, and from that point I could do the breast-stroke. The sad fact is that's all I can do still, but never mind, I'm perfectly competent doing the breast-stroke. Well, I did as you say form, naturally enough, numbers of friends at school and two of them stand out in my memory most. One of them, Ken Biggs, was my age and also a fairly sickly sort of boy. He came round to Willow Street a great deal to play. And one of my mother's sisters, aunt Elsie, who lived in Weston-super-Mare and who had me and my sister to stay with her once or twice, took pity on Ken and had him to stay one summer in the hope of building him up. So he became almost a family figure, I suppose, and I played with him games in which I was clearly the dominant figure. I mean, I would imagine all sorts of things and he had no idea what was going on in my mind. I mean I would be for example a Norseman based on the Rider Haggard story *Eric Brighteyes*, jumping from one long-ship into another and shouting at Ken to follow me to strike down these. And he hadn't the slightest idea about what he was supposed to be doing but, never mind, he followed my lead.

MB And you were the hero.

DP The other one, Jack Ralphs, was a toughie and quite different, but he came to play a lot and he led me into rather more adventurous things. The house at Willow Street had a mansard roof, the top part of which was relatively flat. And together we found a way to climb up onto this roof and spent a happy afternoon wandering around and waving to Jack's friends and relations who lived in a row of cottages just below Willow Street. And they all came out into their yards and gardens to look at this peculiar phenomenon of these two small boys being allowed to walk around on the roof, and my mother was quite unconcerned. She'd been brought up as a tomboy with her Bagnall - younger Bagnall - uncles on Swan Hill and climbed trees and goodness knows what.

MB She thought this progress.

DP She thought this was progress, that's right.

MB David, when you get into standard four, you begin to think of Oswestry High School and in 1934 you go for a scholarship exam.

DP Well, the system in those days was sort of 11-plusish, I suppose. One could get to the high school in two ways: by getting entrance and then paying the fees and all the other expenses connected with it, or by getting a scholarship, in which case the county education authority paid the fees and other expenses. So in 1934 Jack and I – Jack was academically rather good too – entered for the scholarship examination. And one day we got in the train at Ellesmere and went off to Oswestry – I don't know who guided us there, probably an older boy who was already at the school – and went up to the school in Oswestry and sat down and did the examination, which involved doing sums as we called them, writing essays and answering questions of various kinds. And the outcome, much to my disappointment, was that I was offered a place provided my parents paid but not a scholarship. That's the result of being a minnow in a pool of tiddlers I suppose. My parents went into anxious deliberation about this

and decided no, they couldn't really afford to pay for a season ticket on the train and whatever fees were involved. So since I had another opportunity to take the exam next year, I must...

MB Go round again.

DP ...take it next year, go round again.

MB Not to your satisfaction going back to Griffiths?

DP Well, that was an experience, no doubt. One of his great obsessions was gardening. That was quite a useful bit of vocational training no doubt for a good many of the boys that he was responsible for. Gardening and mental arithmetic were his strong points. If one hesitated over a simple bit of mental arithmetic he would be very scornful, and if we got it wrong or picked up the carrots rather than weeds he would immediately reach for the cane. But it was experience.

MB A great spur.

DP Well, I wouldn't recommend it as a spur really, but it had some effect I suppose. Anyway, the second time round it turned out differently.

MB You got a schol. I was just going to say that in those last years you proved rather effective. I mean you were coming out top of the class and it was a surprise not to get that schol the first time round.

DP Well, it was different I suppose, and I don't know what let me down. I mean I never had that analysed really.

MB Thinking of the teaching there, Hooson and people, was that good teaching that really helped? I know there was no science at this stage.

DP The only science lesson that I can ever remember – and it happens coincidentally to be the only biology lesson at any level of education that I've ever formally had – was a nature walk, during which the teacher said 'Now, that's an oak tree', which I knew and 'that's an elm tree', and 'that's an apple tree', which I certainly knew, and so on. But, there were no other science lessons. Geography, and to a degree history I suppose, was as I remember it dominated by a large map of the world, a great proportion of which was coloured pink and stories about how it became coloured pink. So, the Battle of Plassey in 17-something or other, won of course by a Shropshire man from Market Drayton named Robert Clive, was a part of the history story-telling. And history and geography were mixed up in my mind, I suppose. All connected with the Empire.

MB You had an early attraction to history though, I think.

DP Well it was my father's great ... another of my father's great things. His books included Carlyle's letters and speeches of Oliver Cromwell, so I knew about the Civil War and Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans and all that from quite an early age. And I suppose it was all about long-forgotten, far-off things.

MB Did you upstage them at that school on occasions with your knowledge?

DP Oh yes, I mean I knew a good deal more than a lot of the other children who didn't have that sort of background. Though I don't remember a great deal about the teaching in fact and how much of it was home-based and how much of it was school-based.

MB You get the scholarship and go on to Oswestry. A big adventure is about to unfold with train journeys mornings and evenings.

DP Well, that was in the autumn of 1935 and my mother walked me down to this large station in Ellesmere where there was waiting a group of boys in their green uniforms ready to go to the boys' high school and another group of girls, not mixing with the boys I have to say, waiting to go to the Oswestry girls' high school. And the train came in at twenty minutes to nine and we clambered aboard. I'd been put in to the charge of one of the senior boys who was also a Methodist whom I knew from Sunday School. And off we went to Oswestry, a journey which took about twenty minutes, so we got there at nine o'clock and then there was a walk of between five and ten minutes from Oswestry Station up to the school. So we never got there before ten past nine or thereabouts, by which time assembly was all over and the boys were dispersing to classes, so I was always late. The Ellesmere boys were always late.

MB And that was the accepted routine?

DP That was accepted, yes.

MB But you got away late in the afternoon because the train wasn't ready, so you stayed on.

DP Well, the train home was at twenty minutes past five and school finished at five past four. So obviously we couldn't be let loose in Oswestry at five past four, so we were put into a classroom known as the 'train room'. And there we did our homework under the eye of a master or one mistress who occasionally watched us, and we did our homework until five o'clock. And then we were turned out and walked down to the station and went home, arriving literally at twenty to six or so I suppose in time for tea.

MB You and Jack were obviously in some kind of concert with all this travelling together and developing this friendship?

DP Travelling together, along with the other Ellesmere chaps.

MB But he comes out as a major friend at that time?

DP Oh, Jack remained a friend, well a friend up to the fifth form I suppose and a bit beyond that. I mean, I still see him, he still lives in Ellesmere and I see him occasionally when I go there, but there isn't a continuing friendship I'm afraid. But yes, he was close. And the Ellesmere boys, partly because of arriving late and leaving late and staying at school for school dinner, which was either provided by the school

or taken in the form of sandwiches provided by mum, I mean, that sort of distinguished us from the local boys.

MB You learnt to call that dinner 'lunch', didn't you, as well?

DP I did, yes.

MB Posh.

DP Posh, that's right. I began to get posh.

MB When you got to the school, was it the minnow in the large pool now or did you stack up right away?

DP It was difficult to tell to begin with. I mean we began to have lessons in Latin and French, and the Latin I didn't find particularly difficult. The French – there was a sort of family tradition that French was difficult. My mother's youngest sister, Kathleen, who was the one most like my mother and much younger, had been to Manchester University where she did French as a subsidiary subject and failed the exam, which was a well-known family story. And it gave me the impression that French must be very difficult. My father would occasionally produce smatterings of First World War soldiers' French. He would occasionally describe something, for example, as 'trez beans', which you can translate for yourself! So French was a slightly mysterious language and I thought it was difficult. That wasn't helped by the fact that the French teacher Mr Newman, who turned out to be a very amiable civilised chap when I really got to know him, began as a terrifying figure. He believed in what he called the 'direct method', so he walked into the classroom making ridiculous noises which eventually we were to understand were particular noises that the French made in speaking their language which were not known in English. And then he would never actually tell us 'This is the basket and the French for that is *la corbeille.*' He would in this particular up-end some small boy, namely me, in the wastepaper basket saying '*la corbeille*' at the same time. So the direct method didn't actually appeal to me particularly, and I looked forward to French with trepidation. But arithmetic as it was to begin with, and physics and the beginnings of chemistry and so on were fun really, and engaging, and history was alright.

MB And the Latin you enjoyed?

DP Yes, that was all the '*Amo, Amas, Amat*' business. All that was easy and easy enough to assimilate. And by the end of the term – I have a vivid memory of this but I don't remember it going on through every year that I was at the Oswestry school – at the end of the first term my recollection is that we were all assembled in the hall. And the headmaster read out the class lists of each class beginning with whoever was thirtieth or whatever the number in the class was, and ending with who was first. So when he got down to our introductory form which was called 'Remove A'... There was a 'Remove B' but they were mostly fee-paying children and they learned German instead of Latin and did biology instead of physics now what the reason for that was nobody ever explained to me, but that's the way it was. Anyway when he got to 'Remove A' we all stood there, you know, wondering what the pecking order was, because I suppose we must have formed an impression about who was bright and who

wasn't particularly, but we didn't actually know. All this was based on weekly work which was entered in a weekly journal that we all had to keep – you know, ten out of ten for Latin or two out of ten for French or whatever it – and these marks were added up at the end of term. Anyway, the headmaster went through the class list and when he got to third he said 'Third – DC Phillips' and I thought oh well, not bad. 'Second – JHP Ralphs' - that was Jack Ralphs, and 'First – AG Hewitt'. And he was a boy who also came to school on the train, but got on the train at a neighbouring village called Frankton. So the boys who did their homework in the train room made good, and the Oswestry boys were disgruntled!

MB David, talking of that train room, you paid it a tribute in your writings. You said it often, in those early days, was a means of avoiding distraction. You could really work there. It was a help.

DP Well, there was a curiosity about the train room. At half-term in the autumn when the nights drew in, and I think it was dark by twenty past five for the train, there was a ruling that boys in the junior classes – I think it was Remove A, 1A and B, 2A and 2B – were allowed to miss the last lesson of the day and went home on an earlier train which was at twenty to four or something of that sort. So at that point one didn't have the hour in the train room and one had to do all the homework at home. And that was noticeably more difficult because by then we had a wireless set and there were things to listen to and chat to be had at home and early tea and maybe some event at the chapel to go to, and things of that sort.

MB This is the land of the high tea.

DP Oh it was the land of the high tea; brains and bread and butter for tea.

MB Wow.

DP Delicious!

MB Was grandfather still a force back at Willow Street?

DP He was long past his best. He was a grey-haired, grey-bearded figure who sat mostly in the sitting room study surrounded by all his books reading and thinking and not saying a great deal. I'm sorry to say I can't actually remember a single coherent conversation with him. But my aunt Kathleen who grew up with him in his hey-day as a major trades union Labour politician figure, I mean, remembers him with great affection and admiration as a great charismatic figure.

MB And a great self-made man.

DP To my mind, he was much dominated by his wife who was the strong, forceful character, my grandmother. The thing I remember about my grandfather is his religious obsession really. Of course he came to chapel with us and I remember jumping out of my skin on one occasion during a sermon when he suddenly shouted 'Hallelujah!.' I thought this was over the top by a considerable amount. And occasionally, when we were out walking, he would stop innocent passers-by and say earnestly to them 'Are you saved?' which they didn't understand and I didn't

understand either, really. But apart from that, which you could say were the residual embers, he'd lost the fire that he must have had.

MB But, he was the man who'd taught himself Greek at one time?

DP That's right. He decided New Testament Greek was an important thing to know.

MB David, as this school career unfolded and you moved through the years, you really did begin to stack up at Oswestry High School and began to feel an academic career was on.

DP Well, the system at the school was that everybody took examinations in the middle of the year, that was at half-term in the second term, and at the end of the year. And in my very first year I missed the examinations because I was at home having chicken-pox, but at the end of the year I was back in the examinations and third in the class again at the end of that term. Having missed the exams I was nowhere in the class in the second term. But in the second year for a variety of reasons I began to work harder, I suppose, to concentrate more, to feel that... I suppose, I knew my cousin Jack and my cousin Hubert rather more, and another of my Bagnall cousins who by this time was a city analyst in Birmingham, and I began to feel that maybe the academic route was one to follow. So yes, at the end of the second year or beginning of the second year I was first in the class and a minnow in another pool of slightly larger tiddlers.

MB When did the actual Willow Street residence come to an end?

DP Well, my grandfather died in the spring of '36.

MB So, that was around this kind of time that you'd still be going to high school?

DP Yes, and we stayed on at Willow Street through that Christmas and there were great discussions of what should be done because my grandmother thought the premises were now too large for her to maintain. My father thought it was high time he managed to get out of the Willow Street financial trap, the depression still being rather bad.

MB It wasn't an easy time financially?

DP No it wasn't. So there were great family discussions. My grandmother in the spring of '37 eventually came up with the suggestion that she would give the house to my mother for us to stay there. She would also give my mother the rents from the cottages on Swan Hill which she still owned – she was a great acquirer of houses that she'd got for her various daughters, my grandmother – and maybe it would be sensible if my father moved his business from Swan Hill into what used to be the consulting rooms at Willow Street when it was run by a doctor. My father thought that was a terribly bad idea because he couldn't be sure that his customers would follow him from Swan Hill where they'd been for getting on for a hundred years by this time, and he didn't really want the cost of keeping up Willow Street. He was sure that we should always have large numbers of Finneys and Bagnalls to stay because he

knew that my mother enjoyed that a great deal. So he turned down this offer, much to my mother's distress. My grandmother in a great fit of pique said 'Well, in that case I shall sell the house and the cottages on Swan Hill and you will have to do what you can.' And my father said 'Fine, we'll go and live in Wharf Road', which was rented accommodation.

MB And that's what you did?

DP And that's what we did. So during the summer of '37, the furniture which belonged to my grandmother was partitioned between the rest of the daughters – I don't think my mother got any of it – and the house was slowly cleared. My grandmother went round saying goodbye to her friends like Mary Goldsmith and eventually went off to stay with her other daughters in turn, leading a peripatetic life. She and my grandfather had usually spent their summers going round the rest of the family, so she was accustomed to that sort of life. And we moved down to Wharf Road, helped by a Bagnall uncle and aunt, Uncle Will and Auntie Jessie from Stroud, with my mother in a state of semi-collapse.

MB Yes, she was very disturbed by that.

DP Yes, that's right. Looking back I suppose, mostly psychological really.

MB But they were depressing circumstances, compared to the house in Willow Street?

DP Oh yes, it was another two up and two down with offices across the back-yard.

MB David, we're coming to the end of this particular session. I just wanted to end with two things that would help us probably towards the next session. In this rather poor time, you suggested that back in Wharf Road when you actually got there you began to, in some ways, whilst at Oswestry High School, to think of your career in terms of getting away from the rather constrained circumstances. Education was seen as a way forward, not just a step towards academic life.

DP Well, I was clear that I didn't want to be a tailor. Although I have in my day made a pair of trousers and in my turn I taught my daughter to sew, let's put it that way. But I was clear that I didn't see that as my future life. At the same time the environment at Wharf Road with no visitors to speak of and so a relatively quieter life with fewer distractions and the immediacy of the tailoring business going on around me, I found settling down to school work easier, or maybe more compelling. Anyway, that was the period in which I did move up to being top of the form and stayed there. So yes, that environment did I think have an effect, yes.

MB David, at that point we'll close this interview and return to the later years on a second occasion.