

# Interview with Mrs Olive Norris

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**Interviewers: Terry and Margaret Pankhurst**

The following is a direct transcript from a tape recording and, as such, contains memories and statements that may require verification and correction. Memories are wonderful but very fallible.

**Can you tell me where you were born?**

The Folly

**Can you give me an address?**

Well, we called it 1 Folly, Lower Luton Road

**So you were on the main road?**

Yeah

**Tell me who your parents were**

Donald Milnthorp and Violet Milnthorp, well her maiden name was Caine

**So you were a Milnthorp?**

Yeah, yeah

**Can you describe the cottage that you lived in?**

Yeah, two up and two down

**How many people lived two up and two down?**

Seven of us, Mum and Dad and five children

**Can you describe the two downstairs rooms?**

Oh, yeah. We had a small kitchen but it had a big table in the centre of the kitchen with chairs round it and then we had the sitting room that just had a settee but that had another table in and, what was it, a radiogram we had in there and a sideboard. There wasn't an awful lot.

**A coal fire?**

Yeah, a lovely coal fire, and the radio had an accumulator [laughs].

**What about your second room, was it one you used regularly?**

Oh yes, we had to with so many of us there. You know, I mean Mum and Dad, and I had twin brothers, and then an elder brother and then a sister.

**Can you go all through their names?**

Yes, my sister is Betty, the first brother Robin and the twins were David and Philip.

**Describe upstairs and the sleeping arrangements**

Well, when you went upstairs you went through a door from the kitchen up the stairs. As you turned right Mum and Dad's bedroom was on the right-hand side, but all you could get in that bedroom was a double bed and a dressing table and like a big box to keep the clothes in because you couldn't get a wardrobe in there. In our bedroom, there was a double bed one side of the room and a three-quarter bed the other side of the room. My sister and myself slept in the three-quarter bed and the three boys slept in the double bed. That was upstairs but they had a curtain in a corner. Dad put up this shelf thing and fixed a curtain round it for us to keep the clothes behind it, because we hadn't got money and that for wardrobes and that in them days.

**What did your father do for a living?**

He worked for Smith's Builders for a while, and then he worked at the Elm again at Batford and it was, um, work doing all sorts of cutting out stuff and that, you know, on big machines, I don't know actually what it was all about that firm but the majority of his time he was a builder on the building.

**I guess your Mum never went to work?**

Yes, she did. My Mum worked at Helmets and she was doing miners' hats my Mum, riveting things into them, and my twin brothers – they actually had a little nursery there for the children and my twin brothers went to the nursery so Mum could go to work.

**I didn't ask you the obvious question that I should have started with? When were you born?**

When was I born? The 7 7 1934.

**Right, now we've established your age, what do you remember of your childhood at the Folly?**

A lot, because as I was the eldest of five and we had Dineens next door, was Eileen and Ernie, brother and sister and Hunts on the end, there was George, Sheila and Pauline but there were loads of other children all up the Folly Field and everything. So there was an archway, a little archway, along the road, the Lower Luton Road, that's where we all used to congregate, in the archway. But our parents were really good because most of the fathers of the children with boys, they used to play football with 'em, cricket with 'em, you know everybody was so friendly then in them days because there was nothing else to do was there? No cinemas to go to and all that lot, you know, other places to go to, so we used to make our own sort of entertainment, yeah.

**When you met as a group, what did you do? Did you used to walk across fields?**

Oh no, we were naughty we were.

We used to go up the fields, the farmers, you know their haystacks, we used to pull a lot of it apart and make a big hole in the middle and put boughs and stuff across, sprinkle the hay over the big hole and then call the kids up so they all fell in this big hole, we did, it was funny, we used to love it. Didn't you do anything like that? Oh God, yeah we did we used to make huts and everything up there up in the fields.

There were so many of us though, you know, we'd play rounders and we used to skip in the middle of the road, with a big rope you know. Eileen used to hold one end over the road (Eileen over the road) and a girl, Lorna Parsons (because they were the oldest girls) they used to turn the rope and we others used to all jump in the middle of it, you know. But that was across the road, you know there was hardly any cars, you didn't see a car, you know, I mean you couldn't do it today. We had swings and playing fields in front of the cottage there were four large swings, two baby swings, a seesaw and a sandpit – just opposite the house – it was good.

**Where did you go to school?**

Wheathampstead, St Helen's secondary modern. The first school was the old church, there was an old church building opposite the big church isn't there, down there and that was our first school I went to.

**At the Folly?**

There was no school at the Folly. We had to come to Wheathampstead, we got on the bus at the Folly and it cost us a penny to Wheathampstead.

**So you went by bus you didn't walk?**

Sometimes we went by bus, sometimes we walked, because there's a little bridge, Leasey Bridge, and we used to go across the bridge, and over the railway through the gates, through the farm then up Bury Hill, over the hill to the school.

**Did you stay to school dinners? Or did you not have school dinners?**

No we had school dinners, they were lovely, yeah, they were good meals then to what they are today. You'd think they'd be better considering what today is like. But, I mean we used to have beautiful meals, roast dinners, stews everything when we were kids, puddings.

**What do you remember of your time at school? Do you remember the teachers, what you did?**

I remember a lot of the teachers, Miss Young ...

**Tell me about Miss Young.**

Oh, she was lovely. She was a dear old lady, she was quite an elderly person but she was very nice, very kind and gentle. She was really lovely. And then there was Miss Collins, she was nice as well. The headmaster was Mr Halesdon, um, who else? There was quite a few of them though I can't remember them all. Miss Collins, Miss Young, Mr Halesdon the headmaster, I can't think of

any more. [*pause – thinking back*]

**So how do you look upon your school days? Very enjoyable or something you didn't like?**

No, I did like school because it was a way of not having to look after my sister and my brothers. When I went home from school, if I'd say to my Mum and Dad, can I go out to play, "yes, if you take Betty and Robin". You know, and I had to take two of them out to play.

**Did you have other things to do at home, that were sort of more adult jobs?**

Oh definitely, as I was the oldest (Mum had seven children altogether but she lost two) and as I was the oldest one, then I was made to wash up, make beds, do things which the others didn't have to do.

**To carry on with your school days. You remember the teachers, do you remember much about the school activities, what you did at school?**

Yes, because we had cookery lessons, and the boys used to have gardening and also woodwork. I do remember that, and we used to make jam and stuff. Actually in the school kitchen we used to make plum jam and all that, at school.

And we had singing lessons, I used to like that because most of us were all in the hall together in singing lessons and that. Yeah I used to really like it.

**How long were you at that school? How old were you when you left?**

Well, my Mum told me that I was four when I started school and I left when I was 16.

**At the same school?**

Yeah, we had to because there was only the secondary modern school opposite the old church school, so you started at the church school and finished at the secondary modern. In fact, I think I've got the dates – making a noise aren't I, I wrote it down. I started school on the 17th of the 4th '39.

**You left at 16?**

Mmm.

**That was older than most people wasn't it?**

Well, I just missed it. They brought it out, didn't they? That you had to stay on until you were 16, so I missed that. I could have probably left at 15, 14 but this came out that you had to stay at school 'til you were 16.

**What about your social life at the Folly, were there dances or ...**

Yes, at the school. It wasn't every week but occasionally they'd have a dance or something at the school. Once in every two or three weeks, you know. It was quite good really.

**Did you belong to any youth organisations? Were there such things as Girl Guides or things like that?**

Not actually at the Folly. At Harpenden, under the Salvation Army. I was a life-saving guard at the Salvation Army in Harpenden.

**What about things like holidays? Did you go on holidays?**

No. My parents couldn't afford it.

**Did you go on the train at all anywhere? Did you use the railway?**

Oh, definitely, yeah because you could go anywhere on the train - Luton, Welwyn Garden City - anywhere on the train.

**You caught the train at Wheathampstead?**

Wheathampstead, yeah. I used to work at the Shredded Wheat factory, and I used to catch the train every day to go to the Shredded Wheat factory to start with and then they put on a coach when they used to pick us up and then bring us home.

**Was that your first job? At 16?**

No, my first job was at Helmets, making hats down there.

**Can you describe Helmets, we hear a lot of Helmets but don't know much about what went on there really.**

Well they made so many hats then, they made firemen helmets where they made them out of cork and everything and there was jockey hats, there were cyclists hats, there was policemen's hats, there was airmen's, yes there was no end of stuff there. Even dog coats they used to make, you

know greyhound racing, they used to make the coats for greyhounds.

**Were these made using machinery?**

Yes, all machinery. I was a machinist, that's where I learned all my machining.

**When you say machine, what sort of machine?**

Singer sewing machines, small ones and then they used to have the big industrial machines where they used to put the binding round the police hats and firemen hats and that, so they were the big industrial ones.

**So how long did you stay at Helmets? You started there at 16 ...**

Ooh, 16 ... I must have been coming up for 20 something I think when I left to go to the Shredded Wheat factory, must have been that, yes I was because I left there when I got married. So when I got married, I was 24 when I got married. I'm just trying to think where I went after I left the Shredded Wheat factory just before I got married. No I think I stayed there.

**Going back to the Folly, do you remember any stories of the people at the Folly?**

Stories?

**Can you tell me about the people at the Folly generally?**

Well, we had, as I say, the grocery shop, Wards Grocery Shop. There was Mr and Mrs Ward and their son, Clifford. There was Mr White had a little butcher shop at the side, then there was Arnold's the public house down the yard, Royal Oak and the Rose and Crown. But there was nothing else really, only the Sunday School and the Robin Hood Club, they used the Robin Hood Club for wedding receptions and things.

**What was the Robin Hood Club?**

It was just like a little hut, you used to go up three or four steps in this corrugated hut and it was painted red. I think that was why they called it the Robin Hood.

**Now you had the small chapel at the Folly as well?**

Yes.

**Did you use the chapel?**

Yes, it was the Sunday school, we had a Sunday School. Oh, and Mr Cobb, Bert Cobb from Wheathampstead used to have concerts. He was very clever he was, Bert Cobb. Yes, we used to have a lot of concerts and that there and the Sunday School, as I say, we used to go every Sunday and sit on the little chairs in a circle singing.

**The concerts that you had, were they put on by local people?**

Yeah, Mr Cobb, and he had his own daughters and friends that used to help out, yeah, I can remember them because he used to draw faces on peoples' backs, like the eyes and head and nose and mouth and they used to sort of dance and the faces and everything used to move, you know. He was good. I remember a lot about that [laughs].

**Did you ever have any visits from people that you would think of as the upper class in Wheathampstead?**

Not really. No, the problem with that is everybody knew everybody, you know what I mean? And, although you didn't need to lock your door, you know. Neighbours used to come in because my parents had more children than the others, if Mrs Hunt or Mrs Dineen had anything left or over, they used to come and open the door and say "Vi, would your children like to use this up?" you know. Everybody used to help everybody else out you know. It was wonderful it was.

**They weren't offended that it might have been seen as charity?**

No, no. I mean when you've got no money. I mean, poor Dad, he only earned £9 a week Terry to keep seven of us on and that was to pay the rent, buy the food you know, so you were glad of a little help really. Although he was naughty, he was a poacher - we had plenty of meat [laughs].

**Tell us about his poaching?**

Oh, it was lovely. I used to love going with him, he used to wake me up early in the morning and say "Olive, do you want to come up the field with me to get some rabbits or something." We'd go up the field at, say, five o'clock in the morning before I even went to work and we used to go up there and he used to have a ferret in his pocket and some nets. He used to go up there and he used to lay the nets over the rabbit holes, then put the ferret down and the old rabbits used to jump into the nets and he used to knock them on the head, he used to come home sometimes with three or four rabbits, so we lived on rabbit stew and roast rabbit, pheasants - he used to shoot pheasants and

partridges, oh yeah.

**Did you have to keep this very quiet?**

No because he used to sell them [laughs].

**It was clearly illegal, did you go furtively, making sure people didn't see you?**

Not really, no. We were never like that because, I mean, we used to go across the river and if we caught anything like rabbits or anything, he used to thread the rabbits' legs on a pole and we used to bring them home, I was in front he was behind and we used to bring them home, yeah.

**Did he ever get caught?**

No. The only thing he did get caught out is, because he worked at Batford, and there were these two chickens were running around on the pavement, well not on the pavement – on the bank – so he picked them up and put them in his bicycle bag and brought them home. And we'd got a chicken run up the garden and he put them up there. And the policeman came up the path with another bloke, this man, and he said "Have you got this gentleman's chickens Mr Milnthorp?" and my Dad said "would I take anybody's chickens? course I wouldn't", and the man called them by name and the chickens went running to him. And he had to go to Court and was fined £5 at St Albans [laughs].

**So you're a criminal family?**

Oh! I tell you what though, we laughed, we were so happy. There was always something going on. I mean, what vegetables he wasn't able to grow himself, he used to pinch out the fields, out the farmers' - brussels sprouts, cabbage, you know whatever we needed, Dad'd get. No, and it didn't matter how he got it, as long as he got it [laughs].

**You grew a lot of vegetables?**

Oh we did, because we had a garden in the garden fields and a garden at the back of the house. But, because he worked for - what's his name - he worked for this gentleman and he used to breed pigs and because Dad used to help him and clean the pigs out and that he always used to give my Dad the 'Harry pig', well it was called the Harry pig, the smallest of the litter and we had what we called a grease pole in the pen up the garden and we used to rub the pigs with this lard and they used to rub themselves up against this pole, up and down, and it used to enable them to grow a bit bigger and then, when they were big enough, Dad used to take them to slaughter, yeah, he really put himself out you know, so that we did live well.

**Was this a way of life that everybody did, or was your father fairly unique in that respect?**

No, Dad ... No Mr Dineen and Mr Hunt never used to go poaching with him or anything but they used to go up the farmers' fields for potatoes and cabbages.

**Pick them up?**

Yeah, come home with sacks, you know, with potatoes in them and swede and cabbage. Yeah, Dad used to help them out, you know, he used to sell them a rabbit for 3/6d, then they got the veg from the farmers' field, you know. We never went hungry, never.

**So, er, did you stop working when you got married?**

Yes, because I had Debbie and we moved to Luton - we lived up Dallow Road in Luton when I had Debbie. My mother had died a long time before that, my Mum didn't see me get married but my Dad was with me when I got married.

**So you grew up as a young girl during the war years, what do you remember of the war years in Wheathampstead?**

I do remember an awful lot to be honest, because when the war was on, you'd get the search lights come up and you'd hear the doodlebugs and then the guns go off. We used to have to have black outs up at the windows and Dad built an air raid shelter up the garden, dug this great big hole, corrugated inside and we used to have benches in there to sit on and once you heard the sirens go, you used to run up the garden to get into this air raid shelter. I can remember doing that, or if they thought we weren't going to get up the garden quick enough, we had a cupboard under the stairs so we used to get in the cupboard under the stairs.

**What else do you remember of the war years?**

I remember the prisoner of war camp at Batford. There was a prisoner of war camp at Batford and they used to come down the road and they'd give you sweets.

**Marching down the road?**

Yeah, or in groups. Sometimes, if they were allowed out, you'd get about five or six of them altogether and they'd come along and if we used to be in the archway, they used talk to you. I mean, I can't remember an awful lot because I think I was about 12 years of age, but I can remember them giving us sweets and that. But the older girls, there was a couple of girls I know, well they're married and have been married for years now but two of them had children by two of the Germans.

**Were they Germans or Italians?**

I don't know whether they were Germans or Ities - we called the Italians Ities and I think it could have been them really. But yeah, but they were really friendly. They used to give us..., I suppose they gave the girls stockings and that you know. They used to bribe them with stockings and things.

**Now, as prisoners, where would they have got these sort of things from?**

I couldn't tell you to be honest Terry because, I mean there were shops down Batford. I don't know whether they were able to go out and buy stuff or anything or where they ever got them from but I know they did. I couldn't tell you that because I mean I wasn't old enough to accept anything from them, you know, except sweets, like. So I wouldn't know really.

**Was it a big camp?**

It was quite a big camp because after the war was over, my aunty and uncle lived in one of the Nissan huts and they had a living room and a couple of bedrooms in there. People used to live in those after the war. There was two in Wheathampstead where the Post Office is now, there was two there. And Chivers had one and Walshes had the other one of the two Nissan huts.

**These were Nissen huts?**

Nissan huts, yeah, where the Post Office is now there was two and Mrs Walsh that used to live over in that bungalow, her and her husband John had one and Chivers, Pat Chivers' nan, had the other one.

**What were these Nissen huts built for in the middle of the village?**

I couldn't tell you to be honest unless it was for people to take shelter or anything. You know, I mean because they didn't live in them until after the war.

**Going back to your war years, what else do you remember about the war and the problems it may have given you?**

Not a lot really. Because, as I say, Dad looked after us where food and everything was concerned and we didn't have to bother about anything like that.

**Your Dad was too old to go to war, presumably?**

No, he had a duodenal ulcer, he wasn't allowed to go to war. He joined the Home Guards - he was in the Home Guards but he couldn't go to war because he had his duodenal ulcer.

**Do you know much about the Home Guard that he was in?**

Not really, I just remember him in a uniform but apart from that I couldn't say.

**Anything else about the Folly that comes to mind?**

The Folly?

**It had a reputation, at least years ago, of being a rough area but you don't describe it as that at all.**

Well, no not a rough area. I mean there were so many of us, you know. I suppose the boys would have a little fight and that, but apart from that I can't remember to be quite honest and we all seemed to really get on well together.

**But you were a community at the Folly? So would any outsiders from Wheathampstead have been sort of, well, not encouraged?**

No, honestly, Margaret, I couldn't say that, I never saw any unpleasantness. You know, because I mean there used to be so many families like the Bennetts, there were about three or four boys in one family and like myself and my sister and then there was Sheila XXX and Eileen over the road and if you went anywhere and the boys were there, they would protect you, they would walk us home, to make sure that we got home safely, you know what I mean but I can't remember any fights or anything not between them from Wheathampstead and the Folly. No, whether they did or not, I couldn't honestly tell you because my father was so strict we had to be in, you know, by 10

o'clock and earlier than that if we weren't going out anywhere. No we were never allowed to walk the streets, be in the street. I mean there were quite a few girls and boys in the Folly. It's funny you should say that because Edna Howe, I saw her at the Oxford on Tuesday, and she said then when we were at the Oxford on Tuesday 'can you remember what it was like Ollie when we were young?' She's about a couple of years older than me. I said, yeah we used to have some fun, she said yeah, it's nothing like that now she said, you can't even trust your children to go out anywhere now, you know.

**Well, thank you Olive, for telling us a little bit about your life in the Folly.**

That's all right, I mean I could name quite a few people for you. There's loads up the Folly Field.

**Can you give us a list of the families?**

Well, as I say there was George, Sheila and Corinne Hunt at the beginning, there was Eileen and Ernie over the road - Dineens. There was us Milnthorps, then there was Cicely Odell, then there was the ???, there was Hayeses, there was Carters, Hills, Howes, Mangans, Parsons - they had a little sweet shop, Rose Parsons, ???, Rosses, Archers, Arnolds.

**Do you remember anything about any of the lads from Folly who didn't come back from the war?**

No, I can't ...

**Phillip Odell?**

I can remember the Odells, but they weren't actually at the Folly were they? They were at Wheathampstead - Odells. They lived up Brewhouse Hill. There were quite a few up Brewhouse Hill and Gustard Wood. I honestly couldn't think of anybody, you know, getting killed in wartime, because most of us were more or less similar ages - I was the oldest of ours, Eileen over the road was the oldest of theirs, and then George Hunt was a similar age as well so, you know what I mean, that's how we all grew up together and, as my sister was younger, she'd go with like Pauline Hunt and their ages would drop and then down below again you know.

**Who owned the houses in the Folly, who did they belong to, who did you pay rent to?**

I couldn't tell you. Well I think there was all sorts, they had different owners because our three Dad used to pay the rent and it was only 3/6d a week or something like that and we had penny meters for gas and electric. But I think the majority of them all had different - I think Smiths Builders could have had quite a few of them, because they were quite good builders. When Dad worked for Smiths, because they built these houses up here, these here as well, Smiths. They was two or three brothers, they were all builders.

**I wondered if the owners of Lea House?**

I couldn't tell you. That's that big house over the river isn't it, over the bridge.

**Where the old vet used to be, the old vets - that's Lea House. Next to the Folly - the big house**

That's the one as you go up towards Cherry Trees up on the bank, yeah I remember that one there, yeah that used to be Lea House.

**Did somebody live there or was it rented to lots of different people?**

I couldn't tell you Terry, but I mean there were always people there but I couldn't tell you who lived there. I really couldn't tell you who lived there. No, I'm just trying to think - there's another big house there at the Folly that you go over a bridge, that's who my Dad worked for that bred pigs. I remember that and then there's the white council houses along there, there the Folly, just as you come towards the Folly, they were all council houses but I knew most of them there as well.

**Well, thank you Olive for doing that**

That's all right.

**Thank you for helping the History Society**

Well, I don't know who I could ask to help you out more, you know like Eileen or you know, who used to live at the Folly, I'll have to see who else is around that used to live there and see if someone else can help you out a bit more, because if they're older than me, they probably know a bit more than what I know.

**It's interesting to hear peoples' stories – well thank you very much**

That's okay.