

**MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT**

**‘TIME TO REMEMBER’**

**Interviewee(s):** Mr John William McGowan

**Date of birth:** 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1933

**Place of birth:** Castletown Isle of Man

**Interviewer(s):** Elizabeth Ardern-Corris

**Recorded by:** Elizabeth Ardern-Corris

**Date recorded:** 17<sup>th</sup> July 2012

**Topic(s):** Parents and grandparents  
Growing up in Castletown  
Shops and local characters  
Early schooldays  
Living with grandmother  
Childhood mischief and friends  
Nicknames  
Rescuing man from drowning and other accidents  
Joinery apprenticeship  
Poverty in Castletown  
Religion and Church going  
Ballroom dancing and entertainment  
Working at the Nautical Museum  
*The Peggy* boat and the Quayle family  
Meeting future wife and getting married  
Anticipating birth of first grandchild

John McGowan - Mr C  
Elizabeth Ardern-Corris - EA-C

**EA-C** I'm Elizabeth Arden Corris, it's the 17<sup>th</sup> July 2012 and I'm at the home of Mr John McGowan in Castletown. Mr McGowan, can you tell me your full name please?

**Mr M** My name is John William McGowan.

**EA-C** Do you know where your names came from?

**Mr M** My name came from one of the names of my grandfather, William.

**EA-C** And where were you born?

**Mr M** I was born in Castletown, in Malew Street – number 69 Malew Street, born there the 2<sup>nd</sup> of the fifth, 1933.

**EA-C** And have you lived in Castletown all your life?

**Mr M** Apart from ten years where we went to Port Erin to live – I married a Port Erin girl so we went to Port Erin to live, and we couldn't get back to Castletown quick enough, and here we are, back in Castletown.

**EA-C** Can you tell me a little bit about your parents and what their names were?

**Mr M** Well, starting with my grandmother and my grandfather, my grandfather was a boot-maker in Castletown, but he was very fond of the port wine, and an old lady that used to live in Castletown here, many, many years ago, I met her in the street and she said, 'You're a McGowan aren't you?' and I said, 'yes.' She said, 'Well, I remember your grandfather sitting in Corlett's shoemakers shop here, sitting in the corner making shoes, repairing shoes, and he used to have a little bottle of port wine at the side of him, so he used to have a little snifter of port wine.' And the reason for that was is because he used to put the brass tacks in his mouth while he was shoeing – the brass rivets in his mouth – and it started a gangrene in his tongue, so the port wine was taken as a relief from it, but anyway he eventually died. He died of bronchial pneumonia and part of his tongue of course had this disease in it as well. Grandfather's name was John Bartell McGowan, died in 1925. And then of course my grandmother was Isabella McGowan. Now Isabella came from Devon – Cornwall and Devon, because they were involved in the tin mining down there. And the tin mining

went out – went off – finished, and they came to the Isle of Man to live. And they shifted into number 18 North Quay where they used to keep visitors; and one of the visitors, one of the famous visitors that was kept in that house was Bill Cody. Bill Cody who used to bring his circus there and he used to stay with me grandmother. And I remember I had two aunties, two uncles and they used to get free passes to go into see Bill Cody's Circus. So that was 18 North Quay which is now pulled down and gone, but I've got a picture of it there. So that was me grandmother. Then me uncle was a builder all his life, in Castletown here – there was seventy of us at one time. Me father was a stone mason, me other uncle was an electrician, and me other uncle was a general jobber – general jobber type of fellow. So that's more or less all my relations of me father. But me mother came from Birkenhead, she came from Birkenhead. Never done much in her lifetime, she was just a maid here and there and eventually ended up in *Southlands*. Hated the sight of me father – that's one of the reasons she went into *Southlands* – to get away from him. (*laughter*)

**EA-C** Tell me about your father.

**Mr M** Well, me father was a 'Jack-of-all-trades' really. He loved to go in helping in the butcher's shop – Cubbon the butchers – he used to go in there and make the sausages of a Friday night, and on Saturday afternoon he used to go and help in Ramsey Quayle's confectioner's shop. And he used to like making the sponge cakes covered in chocolate and he always used to get one and we used to have it on Sunday teatime. Now the strange thing about Ramsey Quayle was, the confectioner, when it come to Christmas time he had a number of friends; and me father went in this night to help him and he had all these mince pies all set out on a big tray – there'd be about two hundred of them. And at the side of the tray there was a pile of cardboard milk tops, right. What on earth is he going to do with milk tops? And what he did, he put the milk tops inside the mince pies, put the lids on and cooked them. Now when he invited his friends round the next day, or whenever they came round, they were offered a glass of sherry and a mince pie. But they were in for a shock because when they went to bite into the mince pie there wasn't mincemeat in it, it was a milk top – a cardboard milk top in it! Now why he did that I don't know, just a practical joke, that's all it was. (*laughter*)

**EA-C** What were your earliest memories of growing up in Castletown?

**Mr M** Swimming, football, mischief – stealing apples, stealing pears – being a general nuisance – [unclear] in Castletown like we all were. Now, another thing that’s just sprung into me mind – there was a fish and chip shop in Arbory Street called Arthur Vanwell’s fish and chip shop, right, and me friend, Billy Kinvig and meself, we used to go to Port Erin pictures and come home and back and forwards on our bicycles; and we used to come back down the street after we’d been to the first house at *The Strand Cinema* at Port Erin, we used to come down the street and we’d stop outside Arthur Vanwell’s chip shop and get chips. Now we used to get what we’d call a nine-penny split. Now a nine-penny split was half chips and half peas. Now very conveniently for us Arthur Vanwell used to keep the till money in a biscuit tin underneath the counter, right. Now we got wise to this and when we went in and ordered our fish and chips he disappeared half down the passage way, we put our hands over the top of the counter, took 2/6d out, and paid for the chips with his own money! (*laughter*) And we did this for two years before he caught on, so we had two years of free chips! (*laughter*) Arthur Vanwell’s fish and chip shop, yea.

**EA-C** What would happen if you were caught?

**Mr M** If we were caught, we’d probably have had to go to court or we’d have got canned by the schoolmaster, Percy Qualtrough, who loved using the cane, and Leighton Stowell, he was another ‘canematic.’ (*laughter*)

**EA-C** What school did you attend?

**Mr M** Victoria Road School, yea. It was more like a prison than a school really. (*laughter*) Yea – you had to get your shoes inspected in the morning, but we never had much shoes. Sometimes they had laces in them, sometimes they didn’t – depend who got up first.

**EA-C** Were you an only child, Mr McGowan?

**Mr M** No, no, I was ... no, no, I was one of five – one brother and three sisters. I was the first born – I was the lucky fellow, I got everything that was going. (*laughter*) But I can remember when we shifted down to Milner Terrace, number thirteen, it was in the wartime, and one of me uncles, who as an electrician, he got the job of being a manager over in one of the hotels in Port Erin, where they kept the aliens – the aliens were in there. And during the war

we never wanted for nothing in Milner Terrace – we had plenty of everything because things was pillaged from the hotel in Port Erin because they had plenty, so we had plenty. And one of the things we did have was, we had plenty of rice. And every Sunday lunchtime – every Sunday – low and behold, rice pudding was on the menu. And after the war was over and I got married, I never ever wanted to see rice pudding ever again. And the other thing that happened was, down on Castletown beach one day there was a whole lot of wooden boxes came in. Everybody went down to have a look at these boxes and when they were broken open there was no labels on the tins so nobody knew what was in them. So down came the handcarts, these boxes were put on the handcarts, and there was eight or nine boxes dropped off at our house at Milner Terrace in the back yard. And on the Sunday it was decided to open a tin, and inside the tin was beautiful pineapple chunks, and every Sunday tea-time we had pineapple chunks. So when I came home living with me grandma I'd say, 'What's for tea tonight, gran?' 'Pineapple chunks.' 'Oh no, not pineapple chunks again!' So for six years during the war, every Sunday night, we had pineapple chunks for tea.

**EA-C** Why were you living with your grandmother?

**Mr M** Well, what happened was, when I was born, when me sister was born roughly a year after me, she wasn't very well, so I was put with me grandmother to live while she got well. And of course, that's where I stayed the rest of me life.

**EA-C** And do you think you had a different upbringing living with your grandmother?

**Mr M** Different altogether, different altogether.

**EA-C** In what way?

**Mr M** Well, me father was ... me father would lash ... me father would hit out with punishment, you know, but that never reached to me down at me grandmother's. I'd be told off rather than hit off. But I can remember me sister used to get some real beltings from me father, you know, he was a bit heavy handed – as was a lot of fathers in them days, you know. Did it do us any harm? Don't think so. Did it do us any good? Don't think so, either. You know, so it was a no-win, but that's how I came to live with me grandmother, 'cos me sister, when she was born she wasn't very well, so it took me mother all her time to look after her, so I was pushed down to me grandmother and that's

where I stayed.

**EA-C** Was your grandmother on her own at that time?

**Mr M** Yes, yes – me grandfather had died, so she was living on her own, but me uncle was living there – one of me uncles, he was living there. And then they used to go from Scotland – all me relations used to come from Scotland – where we all slept in a two-bedroom house I do not know, but we all slept there, about twelve of us, all slept in different rooms, different beds, you know. Now in the war, in 19 ... just before the Second World War broke out, we shifted from that house to a house down in Milner Terrace, which had four bedrooms and an attic, and I was put ... I used to sleep up in the attic, and when the war was over they strung flags all down the street to celebrate the end of the war and just below my window there was a telephone ... telephone clip and one of the flags was all tied to this clip. And I used to take the greatest delight in cutting the flags down and watching them coming repairing them. But anyway, one day they came and they put the flags lower down, and I couldn't reach them, so I tied a beer bottle with a piece of string to the top and I threw it out of the window, so that it went round the flags, and I could pull the flags up and I could cut them. But it missed the flag and it went right through our dining room window! (*laughter*) And many, many years after, many, many years after, me grandmother, I said to her, 'Do you remember that pane of glass that broke in the window when I was lassoing the flags?' She said, 'Yes.' She said, 'It was that drunken sailor,' she said, 'there was a drunken sailor on the other side of the road,' she said, 'I thought it was him.' And I said, 'It wasn't – it was me.' So I confessed in the end that it was me that broke the window and cut the flags down. But that's the kind of things we did, you know.

**EA-C** Who was your best friend when you were a child?

**Mr M** Me best friend was a fellow by the name of Billy Kinvig. Billy – very clever fellow. Now there's another thing that sprung to me mind here; when I was at Victoria Road School, there was a fellow sitting in the next row to me and his name was Jimmy Caren. Now Jimmy was one of the cleverest fellows that ever came out of Castletown. Jimmy ended up in being Rear Admiral ... Rear Admiral in the British Navy, and I've got the paper on him there. But they call them *Careans* in the Isle of Man – in Peel they call them *Carreens* for some reason, but he ended up in being Rear Admiral in the British Navy – very, very

clever fellow – nothing he couldn't do.

**EA-C** Was it tough at school when you were a child?

**Mr M** Yes, it was tough, because it was ... we weren't ... there was only a few that was educated. There was a lot of uneducated ... we didn't care about education, all we wanted to do was get rid of school and start work. That's all we wanted to do – not that work was any better than going to school, but you thought it was better, you know. (*laughter*) Another thing that's sprung to me mind; Hackney Collister the grocers, it used to belong to a fellow by the name of Jimmy Thompson. Now Jimmy Thompson was fond of the old bottle and he used to have six message boys working for him which included me uncle when he was a lad. And I remember me uncle telling me they used to get paid on a Saturday night, and they always got paid in halfpennies. So one of them sprung up enough courage this night to ask Mr Thompson why he paid them in halfpennies. He said, 'Well, I pay you in halfpennies son,' he said, 'because it looks more!' (*laughter*) So you see, these are the kind of answers you got in them days, you know.

**EA-C** What kind of responsibilities did you have at your grandmother's house?

**Mr M** Responsibility – I don't know what responsibility meant in them days, because there was no such thing as responsibility – we just got on with life and that was it, you know. It wasn't 'til I started earning, 'til I went to Dibb's the grocers to work and got five shillings a week and I had to give four shillings of that in, so half of it ... two pence went on *The Beano* on a Friday night, and the rest of it was just spent on sweets. But the responsibility – there wasn't any responsibility – it didn't enter into it – not that I can remember, not in them days. You just existed and that was it, you know, yea.

**EA-C** What would happen if somebody took ill – who would look after a sick person?

**Mr M** Well, you just got on with it, you know. When I was living with me ... I can remember when I was living with me grandmother, the blinking dog bit me lip, and I was lying on the settee and I had an old cousin that came up from Douglas called Auntie Nellie, and Auntie Nellie used to come up on the train and she always used to have sweets, and you couldn't wait for her to come. And she used to live with an old fellow called Harold Godwin, and his mother and father

owned *The Wheatsheaf Hotel* in Ridgeway Street, right. Well, Auntie Nellie used to come up and this day, because me sister wasn't well at that time, she brought a black doll up with her. Now I'd never seen a black person in me life 'til I'd seen this black doll, and this black doll was given to me, right, and I've still got it today, and she said, 'What'll we call it?' Well, when she came up that day, it was blowing a holy gale, so she said, 'Well, what about calling the doll 'Windy Blow'?' So that's how it was named 'Windy Blow,' so this is it here. And of course it all fell to pieces a couple of years ago, so I sent it away to get re-done, so there it is. I remember me aunt telling me not to put it in the bath, because if you put it in the bath it'll all melt away, see, so I had to be careful not to put it in the bath. So we had it all re-done by a doll company across about six months ago, didn't I? Yea, 'Windy Blow' (*laughter*) – crazy, isn't it?

**EA-C** Did anybody have nicknames around Castletown?

**Mr M** Castletown fellow here called 'Buttons' Kelly. He was a joiner, he worked with us down at the Nautical Museum when we were repairing *The Peggy* [boat] in 1950; and it took me many, many years to find out why they called him 'Buttons' Kelly, and it happened by accident one day in the Nautical; a gentleman come in and he said, 'Well, I know 'Buttons' well,' he said, 'and the reason he was called 'Buttons' is, because his mother used to send him to school with a dirty old coat on with big posh brass buttons on it, and,' he said, 'he got christened 'Buttons' Kelly.' (*laughter*) And the other old fellow whose name was Billy 'Dinghy' Bridson, they christened Bill 'Dinghy' Bridson because he used to build ... he was a boat-builder in Qualtrough's timber yard and he used to build dinghies, little dinghies, and of course they christened him Billy 'Dinghy' Bridson.

[Break in recording]

Got a list here of Castletown people – they aren't all nicknames, but they are people that I could remember in my lifetime who worked in different shops and places like that, and the first fellow on me list here is Charlie Callow the tailor, and he had a little shop down by where the church is. Then we come to Tommy Kevin [sp ???] the bin-man, and Charlie Flynn. Now Charlie Flynn lived in a house right next door to the grammar school and Mrs Casement, her house was the only one with a gas-lamp outside. Then there was Walter Paddy, who was a general labourer; Fisherman Hudson's Stores; Bella Pollard's; school toilets;

Lifeboat House for the Royal Naval Lifeboat until 1923, then the warehouse for Corlett Sons and Cowley until 1937 when it was sold to J D Qualtrough, now a private dwelling. Now the fellow that lives in that house now, was the Director of the Manx – not the Manx Museum – the British Museum ... oh, what's his name ... I'll think about it. Bill is Henron, Alfie Bill at Henron; No.11 Key Lane was St Nicholas's nurse, Carton's Victoria Road School – she was the nurse at Victoria Road School; Alma's House, Lizzy Christian – 'Lizzy the Flitter' – she was known as. *The Alms House* – Ellie Wipe's; Stables; 20 Parliament Square – G H Freestone was born in this house and the family lived there until 1929. The Big House – Mr Biggerstaff, Registrar of Castletown; Milligan – Coachman at Great Meadow. These are just names and jobs that they done. The coal yard – Birdie Cooil's – 'Hot news' was his favourite saying – 'Hot news'. This was originally a boat house and held the lifeboat at some stage. *The Rocket House* – the coastguard's boathouse and stores – now a private dwelling. Dicky Duke the fisherman, once *The Crown* pub. Now I'll tell a little story about *The Crown* pub: *The Crown* pub was right opposite to where the Nautical Museum is in the harbour – it's now a private dwelling – and that used to be *The Crown Hotel*. And one of the hazards about *The Crown Hotel* was that if you had one too many and you came out, you had to be very careful you didn't fall into the harbour. Now there was one fellow that fell over in the harbour and badly injured, and with him being partly drunk of course he survived, and his name was Mr Quilliam, and he fell over in the harbour – the only one that I can remember that ever fell over in the harbour, yea. Tommy Woodworth the plumber; Mr Watterson the lamplighter – he used to go round lighting the lamps; Miss Myers, infants teacher at Victoria Road school; Jenny Bell sweetshop – now sweetshop ... now one of the sweetshops in Castletown here was Emily Comish's and it's roughly next door to where the art store is now, where those pictures of the arts are, it's next door to there. And Emily used to play the organ in the Primitive Chapel, and she used to have a Pekinese dog, and the Pekinese dog looked like Emily and Emily looked like the Pekinese dog – you couldn't tell them apart. One of the things she did was, she had a sweetshop and she had a lovely big black cat, and the sweets were all laid out on the counter, some in cardboard boxes, some in jars, but the marshmallows were always kept in the box. And the cat seemed to like to lie on them 'cos it was nice and warm, so if you wanted marshmallows she'd say, 'Scoot out of here cat, get off them marshmallows!' The cat would jump off the marshmallows; so you'd have warm marshmallows! (*laughter*)

**EA-C** What were your favourite sweets to buy?

**Mr M** *Nippets*.

**EA-C** And what were they?

**Mr M** They were little black sweets, little tiny black sweets like cough sweets, and they were the only sweets you could get without coupons in them days, 'cos you remember we were rationed during the war and for three or four years after the war, and *Nippets* and crisps were the two things you didn't need coupons for. And the crisps was made in Port Erin by *Ricardo Crisps* and they were cooked in fat but they were really tasty. So *Nippets* were me favourites and they had a picture of a penguin on the front of them and they don't do them now like, they're finished and gone. But they were me favourite sweet. There was one summer's afternoon – one Saturday afternoon during the war and there was a fellow cycling around the quay, around the pier head on a bicycle. And I was sitting on the lifeboat slip with me swimming costume on waiting for the tide to come in to have a swim. So the tide was in about ... it would be about four feet deep – about half way down the pier. And this fellow Quayle from Colby was riding this bike and he went over the edge – him and the bike went over. He hit one of the yachts on the side of the harbour and he fell into the tideway. Why I did it I don't know – I ran out and I swam out to him and he was just doing his last underneath the harbour. So I picked him up and I put him on the ... he was a big, big fellow, I was only a little fellow ... I picked him up and put him on the deck of the yacht. Anyway, he survived and of course he ... I still see him today, his face is all scarred where he was, so he's ... that's one of the things that happened during the ... during the end of the war. Now here's a story about a fatality that happened in 1938; it included Dodd's the grocers van, and the driver of that van was a fellow by the name of Mr Cowin – lived in Athol Terrace in Castletown here – and he drove this van. Anyway, the Christmas Eve of 1938 he was coming along the harbour in the van and he stopped to pick a young girl up and her mother, Mrs Mylchreest, and the young girl. And at that time at the main bridge as you go over now, called Thirkel Bridge, didn't have any railings round it, and it was snowing so hard that he missed the bridge, and the whole van and they all went over the harbour into the tideway. As luck would have it, Mrs Mylchreest and the driver, they got out of the van, but the young girl – the daughter – didn't, and she was found next day down on the rocks, down underneath where the Nautical Museum is, she was lying on the

rocks down there. Now me father, at that time, used to play the bugle, and they asked him to see would he play the 'Last Post' over the grave, which he did – a tragedy which happened in Castletown in 1938.

**EA-C** Over the years, Mr McGowan, has Castletown changed very much?

**Mr M** Castletown hasn't changed very much, but the people have. The people have changed. And I've noticed that people are a lot different today than they were in them days they were. In my day, when I was a young fellow, right up until National Service, you always got on with your next door neighbour, and that seems to have fizzled out now. Next door neighbours are a thing of the past. They don't seem to want to bother with next door neighbours now, so it's taken that away.

**EA-C** Why do you think that has happened?

**Mr M** I don't honestly know why that's happened, it's just the way people have changed, I think, it's just the way ... we've changed and people have changed and ... so what's the answer to it, I don't know.

**EA-C** When you were growing up, did mothers stay at home or did they go out to work?

**Mr M** No, mothers stayed at home. Fathers only went out to work, mothers stayed at home. But having said that, when me mother reached the age of about 55 to 60, she did go out to work and she worked for two doctors in Ballasalla – Dr Burnett and his wife – they were both .... and she worked for them for many, many, many years until she was fed-up with me father and she went into *Southlands* to live. Now me father was a great swimmer – this is going back to the old regatta days, before the Second World War started, during the 30s. And me father was christened 'The Duck,' and the reason he was christened the duck is because on regatta day they used to ... there used to be about forty of them assembled – swimmers assembled – and the prize was that they had to catch me father and touch him. Now me father was such a good swimmer that he used to hide among the seaweed under the pier head where all the seaweed hung on the side; and he used to pop up for a breath of fresh air – for a breath of air, and he would shout, 'I'm here!' and they would all swim towards him and by the time they got to him of course he'd gone somewhere else. And of course there's no

record that he ever told me that nobody ever did catch him – all the years that they had the regatta, they never caught him – hence the name ‘The Duck,’ so that’s me father was called ‘The Duck.’

**EA-C** When you finished working for a year in Dibb’s grocery shop, what did you go on to do after that workwise?

**Mr M** Nothing. Just potted about, just scrubbed about doing nothing. Scrounging about just doing nothing until it was time to start serving me time – ‘cos I started serving me time when I was fifteen, you know, and I mean, there was seventy of us, so it was quite a big firm to work with, you know. I got fifteen shillings a week for the first year, of which I got four shillings a week pocket money. Two shillings of that went on the dance – to get into the dance in *The Pavilion* on the Saturday night, and the other two shillings ... 1/6d went ... 1/9d went on the pictures for Port Erin and the other 9d went on Arthur Vanwell’s chip shop, coming home, but we didn’t have to pay for that ‘cos we paid with his own money, so we didn’t have to worry about paying for it.

**EA-C** What kind of an apprenticeship was it and how long did it last?

**Mr M** Five year apprenticeship, joiners’ apprenticeship, working with some of the oldest, cussedest old beggars you could ever work with. They would tell you nothing ... they would tell you nothing and they were really hard to work with. So every time you had something to do you had to go and get the joinery book out and find out, out of the book, because the old fellows wouldn’t tell you – they would not tell you.

**EA-C** Would you have had to go and fetch cigarettes and things for them?

**Mr M** Yes, yes, you used to have to follow the Harbater & Docherty van round the town, picking up chewing tobacco, cigarettes, pipe tobacco – anything that they had which they could, because it was so...things were so scarce. Now the old ... one of the old joiners I worked with, he not only chewed tobacco, but he smoked cigarettes and he smoked the pipe. Now chewing tobacco, when it’s chewed, all the tobacco essence goes out of it, and he used to dry that on the window sill where we were working, and he used to smoke that in his pipe. And believe you me, it used to smell something chronic! And he used to carry a gallon tin spittoon round with him and it was the apprentice’s job to empty this

spittoon, (*laughter*) so you can imagine ... that was what life was like as an apprentice, you know.

**EA-C** How long did you work as a joiner?

**Mr M** I started when I was fifteen and I finished when I was ... sixty four I think it was, so it'd be about ... fifteen, twenty five, thirty five, forty five ... about forty years – forty years a joiner.

**EA-C** When you walk around Castletown today, are there still properties that you used to work on in existence?

**Mr M** Well, if you look at The Southern Hundred, at the end of the bypass, you'll see the big ... the huge thing on the top where the weather vane is, I built that, I made all the windows for that; all the ... most of the buildings that Blackburn built at the top end of Castletown – I done all the staircases and all the windows for that. So I've had quite a ... quite a number of things I can look back on and say, 'Well, I done that.' But wood only lasts so long you see, it's all getting replaced with UVPC now, which sticks, you know.

**EA-C** Do you think a lot of the old joinery skills are being lost?

**Mr M** Well, basically they're still the same except, you see, the apprentice doesn't have to serve his time, he just goes to the technical school for three years and he's supposed to know enough in three years that sets him up as a joiner – or a plasterer or electrician. I think it's better because as you get older you do get complacent a bit. I've had apprentices with me and I find I was losing me temper with them because they couldn't ... they couldn't catch on quick enough, you know. And I mean, so it's hard for them really, you know. But they're better off now because they just get taught how to do it. They just come out and they can do it, you know. Well, when we got married we went to Port Erin to live and Port Erin people are known to Castletown people as 'Squareheads.' Now I don't know why they call them 'Squareheads,' but they call them 'Squareheads' anyway. So we took on a boarding house and instead of making it into a boarding house I made it into three flats, so we had three flats going. Now one day there was a hole blew in the roof, and I went up in the roof and I went up with a bucket of cement to stick the slates back on and the bucket fell over the roof and crashed down in the yard and I thought, 'Blimey, that could

have been me!’ So I fixed the roof, pulled the ladder down and we put the place up for sale and sold it – the next day. So we sold it, we then bought a plot up in Tom Qualtrough’s farm, up at Ballafesson, we paid ten shillings a square yard for it, we built the bungalow before we even bought the plot, so when the lawyer came to see me – Howard Simcocks – he was a friend of the family – he said, Howard was blind – blinded in the war – he had a law firm in Castletown here, and he said, ‘Johnny,’ he said, ‘you done the worst thing,’ he said, ‘cos if anything happened to the old farmer’ he said, ‘anybody who took over would say thank you very much for building me a bungalow – off you go!’ ‘So,’ he said, ‘we want to get things going.’ So we got it all legally done and finished built it. We stayed there, then we took a little shop on at Ballafesson – there’s a little shop up at Ballafesson, so we took the shop on as well, so we took ... we sold *Ballamac* and we took Crook’s shop over. It was only a small general store – we took that over. We lasted there ‘til VAT started and it was getting a bit complicated and we decided we’d sell up. So we sold up and we went up to Surby to live – right up at the top of the hill. We eventually got fed-up up there, we sold up, up there and we bought this plot in Castletown and that’s where we’ve stayed ever since.

**EA-C** Can you remember a lot of poverty in Castletown?

**Mr M** Lot of poverty – very, very poor people in Castletown, yea – especially down Queen Street here. Now when I worked for Dibb’s the grocers as a lad – I’d be about twelve or thirteen – and the first morning I started was the Saturday morning; and old Charlie Maddrell had a whole lot of packets made up of dried egg because eggs were very scarce in the war and you could only get them on coupons. So they decided to have dried egg, which is egg powder. So me first job was, Mr Maddrell said, ‘Now Johnny, I want you to take this box of dried egg,’ he said, ‘they’re all packets of a pound tied with string,’ he said, ‘and I want you to deliver them down to the houses of the poor people down in Queen Street. All the numbers is on them,’ he said, ‘so if you see number 31, 31,’ he said, you know. So off I set. I put the box in the carrier bike and off I set. I went down Malew Street, I went across the square, and when I went to enter Queen Street I fell off the bike. The bike fell over, all the egg powder scattered in the road and of course the people got the egg powder but it was all in a big cloud. And all the egg powder went in a big cloud, all the way down, all the way down Queen Street, and I thought, ‘Now what’s Charlie – what’s Mr Maddrell going to say when I get back and tell him of this?!’ And do you know he was lovely

about it. He said, 'Never mind, Johnny,' he said, 'These things happen.' And he made up another thirty or forty parcels of powdered egg and we delivered them. But he wouldn't let me deliver them this time, he said, 'I'll deliver them this time.' he said. You deliver newspapers, you went out caddying out the golf links, caddying for golf clubs, and that used to be ... that used to be good work – by gum, you used to get well paid for that, so you had to be well in with the pro at the golf out there, Derbyhaven to get a job doing that. But everybody seemed to have little jobs, you know, delivering papers or whatever – anything at all that they could do to have a few bob.

**EA-C** Do you ever remember anybody going to secondary school, or King William's College?

**Mr M** Yes, yes. I've got two nephews that won scholarships to King William's College. They're both very, very well in Douglas now, they're top accountants in Douglas – Mac Financial – they're well into that. But you only went – you had to pass an exam to go to Douglas High School, and you went on the train, and I can remember they put me in for the exam and I couldn't understand the paper – it might have been upside down for me – I just didn't know, so that was the end of that so I never went to no such school. But they used to go on the train, used to get the train in Castletown, was full of the ones coming from Port Erin, and of course the same at night, they'd be coming home on the train as well, all the Douglas High School lot ... yea, but not us.

**EA-C** At one time they used to use the train to transport beer from the Castletown Brewery and also livestock.

**Mr M** Yes.

**EA-C** Do you remember that?

**Mr M** Yes, I can remember, yea. Now what I can remember is, that when I was working for Dibb's the grocer, where the Co-op shop is now, Dibb's the grocer had to buy half a bacon off the Co-op, so he had to go down on a Saturday morning and wait for the fellow, the manager of the Co-op ... they'd come off the first train in the morning, be brought up to the Co-op and they'd be hung up in the yard and there'd be sacking over it. Now Dibb's the grocer, they were allocated half a bacon, and when they cut the sack off the whole carcass was

alive with maggots, so he had ... you had to hose the maggots ... all the message boys had to hose their own particular piece of bacon – maggots off them. And all the maggots fell off onto the floor and down the drain and then the half of bacon was given to you and you put it on the handcart and you took it up to Dibb's the grocers where it was cut up into bacon slices.

**EA-C** How many grocery shops were there in Castletown?

**Mr M** Five, there were five grocery shops. There was Tom Evans the grocers down at the bottom end of Malew Street, then further up there was Dicky Widdle's. Now I haven't said anything about Dicky Widdle's because Dicky Widdle's shop, he used to bring the *Brook Bond* tea van over, and the *Brook Bond* tea van was a *Trogon* van driven by chains, and little Dicky Widdle was a spritely little fellow and he used to wear a dicky bow which was quite unusual for Castletown, and he got quite friendly with Nessie Leece who had the little grocers shop, right. So they eventually married, and of course Dicky Widdle the grocers, but he was the *Brook Bond* boy who brought the *Brook Bond* tea in, in a *Trogon* van. And right opposite to that shop was Lillian Quine's vegetable shop. Now her married name was Craine, and her husband eventually ended up being skipper of the Manx Steam Packet boat – Johnny Craine, hmm ... so we go then ... we go then from Dicky Widdle's, we go up the street to where I worked – Dibb's the grocers, then you went further up, you went a little bit further up the street to Dodd's the grocers – the big Dodd's; then you went further up the street to where Dibby Jones was, then you – right up on the corner where it's now Maley's Chemist, was Hackney Collister's the grocers – and that was one of the best grocers shops on the Isle of Man, and on a Friday and a Saturday night they used to be open 'til nine o'clock – ten o'clock at night – still putting out orders to the farmers who used to come into Castletown to get their groceries, you know. Then further up, when you turn round the corner and up to Arbory Street, the last grocers shop up on the right hand side was Corlett the grocers and they were agents for the *Guinness* and they used to bottle the *Guinness* on a Saturday afternoon up there and you could smell it all over Castletown when they were bottling the *Guinness*, yea.

**EA-C** When did you have your first alcoholic drink?

**Mr M** Me first alcoholic drink was when I went in the army and stationed down in Dover and all the Manx lads went out one night and they said, 'Right, we're

going into the pub, tonight.’ So we went into the pub and I can remember the first alcoholic drink – I had was a *Carlsberg* larger and lime – that was the first alcoholic drink I’d ever had – in the army in Dover.

**EA-C** Did you smoke?

**Mr M** No, I’ve never smoked – never smoked in me lifetime, no.

**EA-C** Anybody in your family smoke?

**Mr M** Yes, they all smoked, yea, they all smoked.

**EA-C** Which grocery shop would you have favoured?

**Mr M** Hackney Collister’s – it was a wonderful, wonderful shop, yea it was, really was.

**EA-C** Did they all stock similar produce?

**Mr M** All stocked the same things, all stocked the same things. Like today, if you take a liking to the person behind the counter you’ll go back there, but you don’t if you take a dislike to the person you don’t go back – it’s as simple as that. On a Friday or a Saturday morning you were given a list by me grandmother, ‘cos you’ll remember I lived with me grandmother – lived with her, and you were given a list of things that you had to get for the week. And the orders were, you weren’t to go into Tom Evans the grocers to get anything there because he ... a woman lived ... he lived ‘in tow’ – what they called ‘in tow’ with a woman and living – what they called, ‘living over the brush’ at the time, so we weren’t allowed to go there. And the other grocers shop that you weren’t allowed to go to was Dibby Jones the grocers because he ... he lived with a woman called Mrs Servane, and she had bright, brilliant ginger hair and when ... (*laughter*) and when the baby was born – Alan was born – he was born with raging red hair as well, so ... (*laughter*) so that was two shops you weren’t allowed to go into.

**EA-C** Were people very religious in Castletown?

**Mr M** Err ... the religious people were the upper-crust people, because the poor people didn’t have the clothes to go to church, but the ... not the rich people, but the

better off people did. I mean, I couldn't go out on a Sunday – I couldn't go to Sunday school because I had no clothes to go to Sunday school, we were too poor, you know, too poor. And of course if you went ... if you went to Sunday school in the same clothes as you went to school in, well, you'd be looked down upon – you know, 'What's he doing in our church wearing an old pair of trousers like that?' you know – all sewn up and patched, you know.

**EA-C** What did you do for clothes and shoes, where did you get them from?

**Mr M** Well, there was two or three clothes shops in Castletown. One was Arthur Austin's, which is now Dean & Wood's Estate Agents, and the other one was Eddie Moore the drapers which was where the art shop is now, at the top of the bank, and the other clothes come ... err ... a furniture shop was Taggett's – Mr Taggett's – they sold furniture and clothes as well. And then there was another famous one just at the top of Malew Street called Edie Milligan's, and she used to sell women's clothes, but she only sold clothes to the more profitable ... to the more elite people, you know. So that's where we get ... but Eddie Moore the drapers is where we got our clothes and they were such – you got your overalls in there, you got your shoes at Oscar Holmes's if you could manage to get the right pair of shoes to match you were alright! (*laughter*)

**EA-C** Why do you say that?

**Mr M** Well, Oscar Holmes ... Oscar, you see, in them days, there was quite a number of people in Castletown with afflictions, and one of the afflictions seemed to be club feet – club foot, and poor Oscar Holmes, he was so self-conscious about this that he used to keep himself hidden away repairing shoes behind the counter, hidden away, well away from the counter, hidden behind, you could hear him cobbling away at the shoes, but his wife, Mrs Holmes, she used to get very confused at times and if there were three or four people in the shop at once, she'd have three or four boxes on the counter, and sometimes she wouldn't put the same shoes to match in the same box, and when you opened the lid up she'd say, 'Oh my goodness, I'll have to look for the other shoe!' because she'd put a woman's shoe in with a high heel on it and a man's boot in the same box! (*laughter*) So you had to wait 'til she'd sorted all through the boxes to find the other shoe that matched! (*laughter*) That was Mrs Holmes, but really they were lovely, lovely people, you know, they were really lovely. When I look back on them they were all great people – fantastic people. They wouldn't harm

anybody, they wouldn't do anybody a bad turn, you know. They were lovely people and you could rely on them. Now you remember me saying a while ago there, about the woman that went over the harbour – Mylchreest? Now her husband was a part-time shoemaker as well, Mr Alfie Mylchreest, and they used to have a chip shop at the top of the bank – Mylchreest chip shop – and every Friday night I was sent down with a tin bowl to get chips in the tin bowl for tea. And you had to sit in there in the back kitchen – was only a back kitchen made into a chip thing – there was a chip machine there and a chip fryer and you used to put your bowl along the counter and you'd say, 'Well, I want two shillings' worth of chips,' and that, and they'd pile the whole chips up, pile the whole chips up, and you took them home, and that was Mylchreest's chip shop. Now I can remember Quayle's – Ramsey Quayle's, the same fellow that done the milk tops instead of the mincemeat pie – mince pies – used to put, as I said, cork in them – err, cardboard, now next door ... next door to where Holmes' the bakers was there was Ramsey Quayle's, and he'd taken over the business from two sisters called the Miss Duggans, and they used to run a cafe, and they used to have a number of waitresses in there at the weekend, and one of those waitresses was Bertha McGratten, a lovely old lady, but sadly she had a cleft palette in her mouth, and she couldn't say the word, 'chips.' And she used to say it ... when people came in to book in for the cafe, she used to have a little blackboard written on it and it said, 'We don't serve chips on a Saturday,' because she could not say the word 'chips,' so she used to keep this little blackboard hidden away, and if people were ordering their food, she'd bring out this blackboard to say, 'No chips on a Saturday.' (*laughter*)

**EA-C** What did you do for entertainment when you were growing up?

**Mr M** Well, well, everybody loved to dance in Castletown. All my family were all dancers, we all loved to ballroom dance – I still do today. And it came up that *The Pavilion* at Janet's Corner was taken over by a company called The Ramsey Amusement Company, and they owned *The Cosy Cinema* in Castletown as well, and all the girls that came from Colby, they came from Ballasalla – they came from all around and it was a really good night. Every Saturday, Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, all lovely dances – and this went on for about three years. Now me father used to go out hunting rabbits, and one particular night, when I got ... after the dancing was over, quarter to twelve, you walked home, and me father was waiting for me, and he said, 'How would you like to take the dog and the light out and hunt for two rabbits,' he said, 'for Sunday's dinner?' I said,

‘Right ho, okay.’ And away we go. We got changed and off we set off. Now what you did was, you went into field and you had a battery pack on your back and a huge big light that you switched on and you had the dog on the lead – the greyhound. And when you switched the light on it shone out across the field and if there was a rabbit in the field its pink eyes shone up. The dog was let go, the rabbit was mesmerised by the light and all the dog had to do was pick the rabbit up in its teeth but it wouldn’t kill it – the dog would not kill the rabbit. So he brought it back to me father and me father said, ‘Right, John,’ he said, ‘here’s your chance to kill your first rabbit.’ He said. I said, ‘How do you do that?’ He said, ‘Well, hold it up by the back legs,’ he said, ‘and give it a chop with your hand at the back of the head.’ So I done that, carried it ... I was carrying the rabbit along, and we got into the next field, off went the dog, he brings another rabbit back, and he said, ‘We only want two rabbits, that’s plenty for Sunday dinner, plenty for us. Now,’ he said, ‘we’ll head back.’ So we went back through the gate, we went to climb over the hedge and I threw the two rabbits up on the hedge and when I got up on the hedge there was no rabbits! He said, ‘Where’s the rabbits?’ I said, ‘I ... where’s the rabbits gone?’ I hadn’t killed them at all, I’d only stunned them, and they’d ran away – he never talked to me for two years after! (*laughter*)

**EA-C** Can you remember the first film you ever saw at *The Cosy Cinema*?

**Mr M** Yea, it was called ... the first film I ever saw was called ‘The Green ...’ The Green ...’ Green ...’ something. It was all about a mining family ... ‘The Green ...’ no, I forget – it was ‘Green’ something. It was one of the most famous films, it went on for two and a half hours – it was quite a long film. But *The Cosy Cinema*, when it come to the end, I can remember sitting down in the front – in the flea pit as we called them – we sat down there, and it was about the last week of *The Cosy Cinema*, because nobody went, television had come in and cinemas were closing down. And all of a sudden (*laughter*) something flew past my head and went right through the screen, and somebody at the back had pinched ... they’d pinched a birthday cake from the Holmes Bakers, they’d had enough of it, eating it up at the back, you could hear all the bits dropping on the floor, all the icing and stuff, and they’d flung it and it made a big hole in the screen, you know – a terrible thing to do. But, having said that, before that, if you went in the back way into the cinema to save paying, if you didn’t have any money, you went in the back of the cinema and you sat behind the screen where all the electric cables were, and you watched the film back to front. (*laughter*)

And you sat in there like pigeons, you know. And we sat in there watching this film, and of course instead of moving from right to left it moved from left to right, so you had to work out what was happening – what was happening from left to right or right to left! (*laughter*) But you got used to it after you'd been in a couple of dozen times it was surprising how your eyes got used to it – your brain got used to it, looking at things back to front.

**EA-C** Where they the days when somebody would have played an organ or piano?

**Mr M** No, no, I never remember ... the only time I remember that was in Douglas. We couldn't afford to go to Douglas, you know. We went – sometimes we went on a Saturday with me grandmother on the train, and the only reason we went for was to go to Bateson's to get the sausages – black puddings, saveloys and savoury ducks, these were the things – these were the cheap things that you got, you know. We always went to Douglas to get them for some reason, because you'd get the same thing in the shops in Castletown here, but we went off to Douglas, and the train would be packed – absolutely packed! I can remember the castle; we used to go in and play in the castle, and there was ... the curator in there was a fellow by the name of Mr Braid, and he was a retired joiner, and he was a bit of a character, and I can remember sitting there watching him starting taking a crowd of people round, and he used to start off by saying, 'Now, ladies and gentlemen,' he used to say, 'you see this huge brass tap,' he said, 'that's here,' he said, 'all polished up – this big brass tap,' he said, 'and it's got a big pipe coming from it?' 'Now,' he said, 'that pipe,' he said, 'is linked,' he said, 'right into the brewery for my convenience,' he said. (*laughter*) And that's how he used to start the tour off, so that got them into a good mood, you see, to get them started. But when you went in there was a model of the castle in there. Now I don't know what's happened to that model, but it was a huge model and it was built by Henry Mylchreest's father who only had one arm. And it was in the castle for donkey's years, it was a complete working model of the castle – the drawbridge and everything worked – and whatever happened to that I don't know what happened to it.

**EA-C** Do you know how Mr Mylchreest lost his arm?

**Mr M** No idea, never know, I don't know how he lost his arm – no idea. Now here in Castletown me father, as I said before, he loved to go hunting rabbits. And this particular Saturday afternoon him and his friend Jackie decided to up along the

Sloc and not to get out of the car but to shoot rabbits on the road, because there wasn't much traffic about in them days. Rabbits would be plenty thick along the road. So off they set, anyway, and they had the two guns, one in the passenger seat and one in the driver's seat. Now Jackie was driving a little *MG* and the gun went off under his arm and blew his arm completely off. He was bleeding like fury and me father couldn't drive, he couldn't ... didn't know what to do ... he didn't know one gear lever from the clutch – he didn't know anything about it. Anyway, they struggled home and anyway Jack got patched up and he survived, funny enough, but one of the other things that did happen to Jack was he had a little boat in the harbour here with an outboard engine on it, and he decided this Saturday afternoon that he would go out fishing, like many of us did in Castletown. And when he got out towards where the buoy is, which is exactly a mile from the harbour, the whole stern fell out of the little boat – complete with the outboard engine. Now Jack didn't drown because the strength in his arm had taken in the strength of the other arm so he had the strength of two arms in one arm. And he swam all the way back a mile from the buoy right back into Castletown harbour. What a fantastic fellow Jack was. He was a fantastic artist, he used to go away to London to paint the scenery for some of the big shows in London, and he used to paint all the coaches here, Rushen coaches, he used to do the sign-writing on all them, and it was wonderful to watch him. And yet his two sons that are here, they haven't inherited any part of it, no part of it at all.

**EA-C** Your early working career, you were a messenger boy ...

**Mr M** Yes.

**EA-C** ... in one of the grocery shops in Castletown.

**Mr M** Hmm.

**EA-C** How long did you stay there?

**Mr M** About a year.

**EA-C** And what did you do after that?

**Mr M** Well, after that I was coming up to the end of school, which I've got a

photograph of there, and of course I had to start to find a job. So luckily enough me uncle had a building firm so I started me apprenticeship as a joiner, but I also had an interest in boatbuilding as well, and that's where *The Peggy* came into it, because in 1950, at the age of fifteen, the whole story started about the Quayle family and *The Peggy*, and I've never stopped for me for the next sixty – still hasn't stopped for me, because it was such a fantastic place when we broke into it, it was so fantastic, what we found was unbelievable.

**EA-C** What is *The Peggy* – can you tell me more about that?

**Mr M** Well, *The Peggy* had two names, she had ... she was called *The Peggy* and she was also called *The George Quayle*, Castletown. Now there was two reasons for that which I'll get to just now. *The Peggy* was a schooner-rigged yacht, 27 feet long and 9 feet wide – very, very narrow. So they multiplied the width by 3, which is 27, that gives the length of her. So she was built by George Quayle as a racing yacht, and where he loved to race *The Peggy* was, he loved to take her up to Lake Windermere. Now in 1796, 7 years after *The Peggy* was built, he decided to take *The Peggy* up to Lake Windermere and one of the reasons he loved to go there was because he had a great rival who had a boat almost identical to *The Peggy* called Captain Bacon, and they were great friends but great rivals and they used to race together. Now one of the things that George Quayle had that no other boat in the world had at that time was a system called 'sliding keel' system. Now this 'sliding keel' system is known today as 'dagger boards' which protrude up inside of the boat and before you put the sails up and get going you drop these down under the keel and it stabilises the boat. Now nobody else had these keels, only George Quayle. He had two of them, one aft and one fore'd of the boat, and when they set of for Windermere; now people used to ask me in the Nautical [Museum], how on earth did he get the boat to Lake Windermere? But he sailed across the bay – six of them – he sailed across the bay up to Morecombe Bay, he took her up the ... errr ... what was the name of the Loch? Anyway, he took her up the loch – sailed her up the loch, he took her out of the loch, he dragged her the remaining miles on a horse and cart into Lake Windermere and raced her for almost two weeks, and the whole system was reversed to bring her back again. Now just before he died in 1935 – we don't know the exact date – it was the last five years of his life, he entombed *The Peggy* in the boathouse and he simply left her for posterity. Now one of the strangest things I ever noticed about the boathouse was, in the last two weeks of October when the nights were drawing in and there was an east wind blowing

and the tide was lashing up over the top of the wall, when you went down to lock up, you felt as if there was somebody watching you all the time – only for those two weeks – I don't know why, but it did. And it quite frightened you really, 'cos you could feel these eyes on you. Now you remember earlier on I told you that *The Peggy* had two names; one, *The Peggy*, and one, *The George Quayle*. Now George Quayle was a bachelor all his life, he was never married was George, but he had five brothers. Very, very clever man, very inventive man, but he did think the world of his mother, Margaret Quayle. Now one of the reasons that *The Peggy* was named *Peggy* was after his mother whose name was Margaret Quayle. Now when she died he decided to leave his mother's soul in the boat house, so he took the name, he covered the name *Peggy* over, and he re-named it with his own name, *George Quayle*, Castletown. And that I believe was one of the reasons why, at the end of October, the last two weeks, you get this funny feeling down there of somebody watching you all the time that you're down there.

**EA-C** Why do you have such an intimate knowledge of *The Peggy* and the Quayle family?

**Mr M** Well, it's something ... it's something that hit me when I was seventeen years of age because it was such a wonderful place. The whole place had been sealed up like a tomb, and I wondered why, what was this Quayle fellow, who was he? And of course, with reading about him and reading about the boat and finding out why, how the boat was built, the exquisite things that he did with the boat, you know. It never left me and still hasn't today. In 1987 we went off to Australia, and at four o'clock in the morning the phone rang and me cousin answered the phone in Australia and she said, she come into the bedroom and she said, 'George,' she said, 'there's somebody on the phone for you.' And I ... so the first thing you think is, 'What's wrong?' So anyway, they said, 'Is that you Mr McGowan?' and I said, 'Yes.' He said, 'Would you be interested in a job in the castle?' I said, 'No, not really,' I said, 'that's not my history, the castle.' 'Oh, right, okay, leave it with us.' So the next day the phone rang again and it was the museum people – or Heritage, it was. And they said, 'How would you like a job in the Nautical Museum?' Well, to come from getting £5 an hour down to £2.80 an hour, was a bit of a thing, but I thought, 'Well, I've only got about five or six years to go to retire, I can get dressed up instead of getting sawdust, I can get dressed up, but how am I going to talk to people, what am I going to talk about?' And it frightened the life out of me, you know. And it

ended up, although I was only there six years, it ended up in being the happiest, best years of my life down there, because I met such wonderful people. Now one of the best gentlemen ever I met down there was the last week of October – now whether this is a coincidence or not I don't know, but in the last week of October at quarter past four when we were getting ready for shutting, the door opened and an elderly gentleman came in. And he said to me, he said, 'I believe,' he said, 'there might be an old boat,' he said, 'hidden away here?' I said, 'Yes,' I said, '*The Peggy*,' I said. 'Come on down and have a look at it,' I said, 'but we're getting to close.' So he went down. 'Yes, that's the boat.' I said, 'What do you know about it?' 'Well,' he said, 'In 1941,' he said, 'I was posted to the Isle of Man,' he said, 'to Castletown, and,' he said, 'I was one of the RAF [Royal Air Force] crews,' he said, 'that were going to operate the radar stations out at Scarlett, but,' he said, 'although they'd finished the radar, they hadn't done our accommodation, wasn't finished, so we were accommodated in *Bridge House*, and,' he said, 'it was so blimmin' cold,' he said, 'in *Bridge House*,' he said, 'we used to go round the harbour at night and out along Scarlett collecting up wood to light a fire, 'cos,' he said, 'there was six of us all in the one room, and,' he said, 'the only way we could keep warm...' Anyway, 'He said, 'one Sunday,' he said, 'one Sunday afternoon, we walked along Bridge Street,' he said, 'and we come to these two old doors, and so,' he said, 'the doors were open, so,' he said, 'we opened the doors up,' he said, 'looked in,' he said, 'we walked across the rotten floor and we went into a room,' he said, 'it looks like a cabin.' He said, 'We went down from the cabin room,' he said, 'down below, and,' he said, 'there was an old boat lying down there,' he said, 'lying against the wall, and' he said, 'scattered against the wall,' he said, 'were what looked like flooring boards,' he said, 'all coated in tar.' Now just to go back a few years, one of the things we were told was that when ... why *The Peggy* didn't have any floorboards in it because they thought that when George Quayle was dragging *The Peggy* up from the harbour the last time, in order to lighten her he stripped out all the flooring boards and they were carefully packed in the boathouse. Now the boathouse floods four times a year, so ... the whole place floods up with water four times a year, so they thought, 'Oh well, they must have either floated away or they'd rotted away.' Wrong! Because this gentleman had taken all the floorboards, taken them into *Bridge House* and chopped them up for firewood. And he said to me, 'John,' he said, 'had we not been shifted down to Scarlett,' he said, 'believe you me,' he said, 'you wouldn't have had any boat either, cos' he said, 'we would have chopped it for firewood.' So that's how *The Peggy* was saved. Now that happened in the last week of October, the

same time that you get the strange feeling as well. Now one of the things that we did do, when we broke into *The Peggy* in 1950, when we broke the big stone wall down and got into her, there was about six inches of mud underneath *The Peggy*, and we had to clear all the mud out and there was only one fellow that got the job of clearing the mud out, and I'll give you two guesses who that was – the apprentice! So we had to fill the buckets up with mud, climb up on the harbour end where the end of the dock is and tip it back over the wall. And that's what we did for nearly a month 'til all the mud was cleared out. Then *The Peggy* was lifted down – six ton she weighs – *The Peggy* was lifted down, she was jacked up, we put a new keel into her – brand new keel – two ... four garbet [garboard] plank, which is the planks which sit on the keel; she was painted, and simply left for posterity. But starting off from the start of *The Peggy*, how it all come about was; that in 1940, the last of the Quayles died – Miss Emily Quayle died in number 10 Bridge Street, which is now the Coroner's Office, right next door to the Nautical Museum itself. Now she died, and of course, that's when the Manx government took over and put the RAF fellows in during the wartime, right. Now after the war was over, the trustees of the Quayle family decided not just to sell *Bridge House*, but to keep the Nautical Museum as it is in its entirety now, for the nation. So the trustees gave it to the Manx Museum. Now it wasn't Manx National Trust then, it was the Manx Museum; because there was two, for the want of a better word, two companies – one was the Manx National Trust and the other, the Manx National Museum. Now the Trust ran the castle and the museum ran the Nautical Museum so they were like opposition to one another. So in 1950, Mr McGow, who was then the director of the Manx Museum, he wrote a letter to our firm asking would he send some fellows down and meet him down at this museum – or down at 11 Bridge Street – whatever the number is, meet us down there to do some work. So we went down eight o'clock in the morning and we waited in a little lane at the side to wait for him to come up from the museum; Mr McGow, Mr Cubbon, Cilla Sayle, who was the secretary – she's still alive today, Cilla Sayle, but her head has gone – she's up in *Abbott's Wood*. So what the devil are we doing here? So when we got there, they said, 'Have you brought sledge hammers and stuff, because we're going to break in?' And we broke in through the lane, the door in the lane, and when we got down into the dock we'd seen this big wall, so Mr McGow said, 'Righty oh boys, take that wall down,' he said, 'we want to see what's behind it.' So we knocked the wall down. And when we knocked the wall down, here this boat was, lying in the boathouse. And she was lying up on her keel, up on the right hand side. So there wasn't much money about, timber

was still rationed – you still had to have a certificate for timber. So *The Peggy* was taken down, it took us weeks to do, she was jacked up carefully, and when we jacked her up the keel fell out – all rotten, fell out – so did the garbet [garboard] planks, that's the two planks that sit each side of the keel, they fell out. We were going to have ... where the devil are we going to get 27 feet of timber to put a new keel in? Well, as luck would have it, J D Qualtrough, who owned Qualtrough's Timber Yard, had three big blocks of timber that he'd saved up from beginning of the war, and they were thirty foot lengths, thirty foot. So we were given one. So the new keel was threaded through it, and this took months to do because the money kept running out. And you only got money in lots of forty pounds at a time from the Manx Museum, or from the government – they wouldn't give you any more because they hadn't to money to give you. So we done a few weeks until the forty pounds was spent, then we went somewhere else, then we came back again, which took almost a year to do. We finally got the keel done; we finally put the new garbet [garboard] planks into her. She was gently lowered down onto her new cradles, she was given a fresh coat of paint, and that's where she's remained ever since. The armaments that *The Peggy* was found, there was little canons found on board her, 'cos she was a fully armed schooner-rigged yacht, they were taken off and they're on display now up in the cabin room – just above the cabin room, so they're still there. What happened now? Down at the stern of *The Peggy* there's six hooks, there were six hooks on the wall – big wooden hooks sticking out like horns. And hanging on them in 1950 was the remains of some leather jackets. And when you went to touch them, they just crumbled away – they were just there because they were there. And what there were, the conclusion of Mr McGow come to, he said, 'There were six of the crew on *The Peggy* and each of them had a lifebelt, a leather lifebelt, and when they'd finished with *The Peggy* and drawn her up for the final time and sealed her up and the orders of George Quayle, they'd hung their lifejackets on those hooks and they were still there in 1950.' And up at the far end where the bow of *The Peggy* is, there's one big hatchway now where the staircase goes up through, there were six hatches on the floor there. Now when *The Peggy* got into the smuggling like she was doing a bit of smuggling as well, like many did in Castletown here, they did the smuggling, in order for those crew fellows to get away, they were given their own hatch to get through – never used as that – never caught. One of the unique things about it is that down underneath the harbour there's a huge cavern, the same size as our dining room – brick archway and a big granite grinding wheel on the floor with a hole in the middle. And when you go down through the

hatch in the garden in *Bridge House*, you go down sixteen steps down into the harbour, nice and dry 'til the tide comes in. Now when the tide comes in, it comes up through a hole from the outside where you can see a big piece of stone missing, it enters the channel and it squirts the water up through the hole, goes up through the ... like a fountain, hits the ceiling, sprays the whole place out. Now what they thought was, that when Quayle was doing a bit of smuggling himself, when they were transferring the alcohol from barrel to bottle, because the barrel was the tax point and the bottle – you'd already technically paid the tax – but one thing you had to be very careful of and the customs men is, the smell, or any spillage on the floor, so all the transformation was done while the tide was out, everything was put through ... the barrels were put up through ... they were destroyed because he should have been paying tax on them, the bottles now didn't matter, technically he'd paid the tax on it, right. But to get rid of the smell and any spillage on the floor, in comes the tide, washes the whole place out automatically, and all filters out through the hole back into the harbour again – and that's still doing it today, as good as it did all them years ago – two hundred years ago. Ingenious –absolutely ingenious! And one of the most complicated things is, when Quayle opened the bank in 1805 – Battle of Trafalgar year – and the bank lasted 'til 1816, it was the only bank, and the first bank ever to open in the Isle of Man – Quayle Bank, right. Now where the strong room was, there's a very complicated locking system in there. And for many, many years, nobody knew how it worked. So years and years went by and I thought, 'I've got to find out how this worked.' And as luck would have it, I was up on the third floor of *Bridge House* one day because we were working in there; and I looked down by the skirting board, and there was a two-inch hole in the floor, and shoved down that hole was a piece of timber very similar to a billiard cue – stuffed down the hole. So we took it out and we spilled some marbles down it, and these marbles rattled all the way down the pipework 'til they finished up in a bucket at the bottom of where the strong room was. And when these marbles entered the bucket, the bucket went down and it released a huge arm from the back of the door, like that, so he could unlock it and go in. Now when you'll have finished working in there, counting your money and storing it away, right. To get back out again, you had to empty the marbles out of the bucket, that reversed the wheel so the huge arm came up again after he'd hopped out quick, locked the door, and the huge arm settled behind it like that – it was locked. A fantastic man, absolutely fantastic! It is one of the best museums, I think, in Europe, that little museum, because it's still got its track history. Now then, people have said to me down there, 'Oh, we've

seen *The Peggy*.' I said, 'Well, what did you see when you'd seen ...?' 'Oh, well ...' I said, 'What was it like?' 'Oh, it was alright.' They didn't know because the mud was there, you see. I'm going to go back now to 1941, when I told you that we knocked ... 1950 when we knocked the wall down and got into *The Peggy*. Now that's when we jacked her up and that's when we were putting the new keel in – collar and tie and all [unclear]. Now there was four of us; there was four joiners, there was Harry Harrison – got a picture of Harry – Harry Harrison, John 'Buttons' Kelly – did I tell you about the buttons? (*laughter*) Billy 'Dingy' Bridson, and Harry Harrison – four of us – four of them, and I was the apprentice. But I wasn't allowed to go in any of the pictures – I had to take the photographs with me Brownie camera. 'No apprentices, no bloody apprentice on these photographs, no, no, only us!' (*laughter*) So anyway, John Gawne, now John, when we made the new reception area where it is now, right. That wasn't done 'til 1967, because it was only virtually a ruin in there, right. Now in 1967, when it was all finished, John Gawne asked to see could he come down and give us the model of *The Peggy* that's in the window, right. So he gave down, we had a little ... what do you call it ... like a little buffet type of thing it was, a little buffet, and all the ones that had worked on her were all there. And when almost everybody was gone, John come up to me and he said, 'Do you know, John,' he said, 'I'm going to tell you something now,' he said, 'I've never told a living soul,' he said. And he said, 'This is what happened,' he said. 'In 1935,' he said, 'I'd heard rumours in Port St Mary,' he said, 'where I lived up Fistard,' he said, 'there was an old boat hidden away in a boat cellar in Castletown.' He said, 'I didn't know exactly where, but' he said, 'I knew it was somewhere around *Bridge House*. Now still alive in 1935 was Miss Emily Quayle, George Quayle's great, great aunt.' John said, 'I wrote her a letter,' he said, 'and I asked her to see would she be good enough to let me come down and have a look in the boathouse to see was there a boat in there. So she wrote,' he said, 'it took weeks for the letter to come back. She said you're quite welcome to come down, Mr Gawne, she said, but you'll be totally wasting your time, she said, because there's nothing over there whatsoever; the place is derelict, there's nothing. So,' he said, 'I wasn't going to done,' he said, 'so I got on a train,' he said, 'and I came down, knocked on the door, and I was invited in for tea.' He said, 'I went in with Miss Emily, had tea with her, and,' he said, she said, 'you don't need any keys, Mr Gawne, the whole place is just left open.' 'Right.' So he said, 'I went in,' he said, 'I crept along the floor,' he said, 'I went into the Quayle room,' he said, 'and just when I went to step into the cabin room,' he said, 'I fell down through the rotten floorboards with one leg.' And he said,

‘When I picked meself up and looked down the hole that I’d made in the floor, and me eyes got used to the dark,’ he’d seen an outline of this huge boat in the cellar. So he went back and he said to Miss Emily, he told her the whole story of what he’d seen, and she swore him to secrecy. She said, ‘You must not tell anybody ever again about what you’ve seen over there.’ Because, you see, she had an inkling that the Quayle family had been into the smuggling, and they didn’t want to get involved in anything like that. So John kept that secret ‘til 1967 when it was alright to tell it. And he told me that down in the boathouse.

**EA-C** Who looks after the boat today and does the maintenance on it?

**Mr M** Well, the museum do, but I keep measuring it. You see, it’s sitting on a cradle. Now with the tide coming in, and the salt water coming in, salt water is one of the best preservatives you can have, and it preserves *The Peggy*. Now she’s built clinker-built with pitch pine planks, clinched together with wrought iron clinches – 1,527 clinches in it altogether, ‘cos I’ve counted them, every one, one by one. I put a chalk mark on each of them, counted them all. So I measure ... I keep ... I occasionally I have been on occasion, just measured the length, with it being nine feet. Now I’ve noticed it’s nine feet one now, so the boat is spreading. Now it’ll only spread so much ‘til the whole thing falls apart. And what I have heard is that they’re going to try and put an aluminium casing round it to keep the whole thing together. But you see, the way the money is now, it might never be done for years and years. Aluminium – that would cost a fortune, you know. But if I had the money me self, I would donate some money towards them doing that, because to lose a boat like that, in the original shape that she was built in, would be a tragedy, an absolute tragedy, you know. And of course, fire hazard. There used to be a light above *The Peggy* that shone down, one of these spotlights. By the time four o’clock came in the afternoon, that light used to get so hot, it got red hot, and it was in amongst the beams, it could have set light to the beams, you know.

**EA-C** Is the adjoining building, the *Bridge House*, occupied at the moment?

**Mr M** Yes it is – it’s the Coroner’s Office, which was the Quayle house, number twelve. You get *Bridge House* with all its slate facade on it, then you get number ten, which was where the Quayles lived, right. That’s the Coroner’s Office now. And right next to it is the Nautical Museum. But the yard is there as well. It’s the yard first. Now when you go into the reception area now, you go

down what they call the fishing gallery; there's a *Nicky's* punt there, there's a net knitting machine, there's a biscuit machine there that used to make biscuits – ship's biscuits. And hanging on the wall, still there, is loads of pegs. Now it was never a fishing gallery, it was a saddler where they used to ... where the Quayles used to keep their horse stuff – all their saddles and bridles and all that kind of stuff was kept there. Because over in the castle, all my life, from when I was a young fellow going in, there was a lovely big black *Landor* there in the castle. Now when the National Trust went over to the Manx National Heritage, that *Landor* disappeared. I enquired about that three or four years ago and they said it had been totally destroyed. Now that was the original *Landor* that the Quayles used – that Mrs Quayle used ... because outside on the pavement, there used to be cobblestones along there, and they took the cobblestones off and they Roman cemented it, and she wouldn't walk on it. She had to be lifted from the carriage onto the step because she would not walk on the new Roman cement.

**EA-C** Do you think nowadays there's a better understanding of preserving cultural history?

**Mr M** Oh yes, absolutely. Only one thing that I hope never happens down there, that they never replace anything that doesn't need replacing. Because one of the cupboards in there was a Quayle ... what you call a Quayle ... like a joke kind of cupboard. In the cabin room itself, when you walk into the cabin room, all around the right-hand side there's a passageway that leads you down the back, and there's a little cupboard there. It's about three feet by about a foot. And when that was prized open, because they were opening all kinds of things in 1950, they were opening up, they found two bottles of wine in there, but the wine had evaporated away. And just round the corner there was a wire system, right. Now when you pulled the wire, it made a noise on the opposite wall, over there – 'What the Dickens is this?' And sticking out of the wall there is a little plug. Now when you pull the plug out, where the chart lockers are, there was a wire running past it, and in that cupboard with the wine bottles he'd left a needle very similar to a crocheting hook. Now in order to open this cupboard, right, you went up on top of the chart lockers, you pulled the plug out, you put the little hook in, you pulled the wire and it pulled along these little rollers and it lifted the latch up on the cupboard door, the little cupboard door opened up like that. Now that's all still partly there. The only thing that's missing is the little brass rollers that went on the ceiling – they're gone, sadly, but the wire's still there.

**EA-C** Do you think that the Nautical Museum has yielded all its secrets?

**Mr M** I think so, I think so, yea. I don't think there's anything more down there. Because there's not a lot ... now when you look ... when you look in the Quayle Room where the picture of George Quayle is, you'll see that the fireplace is in the window. Now how can you operate a fireplace in a window? George Quayle did. Because he had the fireplace fitted in, and he had a huge big piece of wrought iron across the top, and the flue was built into it, and right above there is where the chimney is. Now you can actually light the fire in there – you couldn't today, it's too dangerous – but you could light the fire in there as a novelty act, and the smoke and the fumes would go up through the chimney at the side.

**EA-C** Just reflecting back over your life; do you think you had a good time?

**Mr M** Absolutely. I've been more than well looked after all my life – all my married life, well looked after. And how I come to meet Dot was – I wasn't long out of the army and I decided ... me and me friend decided to go to the dance, the regatta dance over in Port St Mary Town Hall. And we were in the Town Hall and these two girls came down the stairs, these two ... one was her friend and one was Dot, and that's how we met and that's how we ... and that's how it all happened.

**EA-C** How long have you been married?

**Mr M** Fifty-four years.

**EA-C** Is there anything left in your life that you really want to do?

**Mr M** Nothing now. The only thing that I did want, I wanted some grandchildren. And I've never had any grandchildren up until three weeks ago, 'til me son, he met a girl on the Internet and they packed ... her sister's husband's the new doctor in Port ... in Ballasalla, and they've all come over to live here, and she's expecting a baby. Now she's 44 years old and of course I'm keeping me fingers crossed that everything's going go 'tickety-boo,' you know. But that's the last thing that ever I want. I don't care if it's a girl or a boy, but that's I ... I was taken aback when they told me a few weeks ago – it kind of shook me – but since then I've thought about it, and I thought it was bloody wonderful, you know. 'Cos that's

the last thing in my life that I hope it's going to work out, and I hope I stay alive to see it born, I hope so, yea.

**EA-C** I'm sure you will. Thank you so much, Mr McGowan, for that wonderful and fascinating interview.

**Mr M** That's alright.

**END OF INTERVIEW**