

Disclaimer: This interview was conducted in 1996 and concerns memories of 1930s life; as such there may be opinions expressed or words used that do not meet today's norms and expectations.

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* Westhoughton, Greater Manchester, 30 May 1995: Valentina Bold interviews Ada Bellis

* Transcribed by Joan Simpson / Standardised by Annette Kuhn

* AB=Ada Bellis, VB=Valentina Bold

* Notes: Solo interview with Ada Bellis; Ada Bellis was interviewed with Bert Partington, Lois Basnett and other members of Westhoughton History Society on 9 May 1995; Sound Quality: Poor; this interview was originally transcribed in a phonetic manner; the original phonetic version can be accessed through our physical collection - please contact Lancaster University Library for details.

VB: [audio starts mid-conversation] If I put it up here between us.

AB: Would that be okay?

VB: Yes.

AB: Move it nearer if you like.

VB: Erm, yeah.

AB: Yeah. Just move it 'cause it's pretty heavy.

VB: Right.

AB: I was just busy doing a crossword.

VB: Ah I see.

AB: Do you want this up?

VB: That would be great. Thanks a lot.

AB: That's better.

VB: Right. That's lovely. I've just been given a copy of the questionnaire that you--

AB: Oh yes.

VB: Were given by Lois. So, I haven't had a chance to look at that yet.

AB: No. [laughs]

VB: It's very kind of you to do that. I mean, just before we start talking about cinema, I was wondering if I could ask you one or two questions about your own background just to--

AB: Oh yes.

VB: Get a better idea.

AB: Yes.

VB: One of the things I'd like to ask is what your parents did for a living. What did your father work at?

AB: When I was working?

VB: Well, when you were a child. What sort of work did your father do?

AB: Oh! He was a coal miner, well! He wasn't a miner. He was what they call a dataller. He was too tall to... You see, he came from Wales. And he was too tall to go to the coal face.

VB: Oh, I see.

AB: So, he used to help to sink the shafts. And erm, you'll see from this he was pretty tall. [pause 3 seconds] That was taken when he was at the miners' home in Blackpool.

VB: Oh, yes.

AB: The miners you see. I would be about eighteen then I think.

VB: Yes.

AB: And erm, he went twice and he had to come home. It was too hot for him, you know.

VB: Yes.

AB: Yes. [pause 2 seconds] I don't know that it was pneumoconiosis or silicosis but it was one of those diseases.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And of course, when he died, didn't get a penny compensation.

VB: Yes.

AB: No.

VB: So, was he quite young when he died then?

AB: Erm, no he was sixty-nine.

VB: Sixty-nine.

AB: Yes. He died in 1937 but he was ill for a long, long time.

VB: Terrible thing that.

AB: Oh! It's a terrible thing. Terrible.

VB: Yes.

AB: It is.

VB: Yeah. And did your mother work at all?

AB: Pardon?

VB: Did your mother work at all?

AB: No, my mother didn't work. No. No.

VB: Yeah.

AB: No. You might as well see her as well. [pause 2 seconds] They both came from North Wales.

VB: Ah, I see. [gasps]

AB: [laughs]

VB: Oh she's tiny! [laughs]

AB: Yes! She is tiny.

VB: Ah.

AB: Tiny and plump!

VB: Yes.

AB: Very plump.

VB: Yes. She looks a very strong willed woman. Was she--

AB: Ye-es, she was.

VB: A bit of a [inaudible; overtalking].

AB: Yes. Yeah.

VB: These are lovely.

AB: [laughs]

VB: It's nice to see that. Erm, were you an only child? Or did you have brothers and sisters?

AB: I had two sisters and a brother.

VB: Right.

AB: And erm, my brother worked, he worked at the same colliery. Opposite the station there used to be a colliery there. [pause 2 seconds] And he was an electrician. And 'course he spent a lot of time underground repairing machines. [coughs]

VB: Yes.

AB: And eventually he married the under-manager's daughter and lived in the pit yard for a time. There was the house and an office. I don't know if they're still, I don't think they're still there. But erm, that's where [name?] worked. My eldest sister was a weaver. And hated every minute of it. And May, the next, the middle one, well she did all sorts. Because she was poorly for years. We never thought she would work, really. Anyway, in the end, she finished up, there was a, as you go up Church Street, on the left-hand side you see a funny-shaped, I don't know whether you noticed it, as you were coming down. Erm, [pause 2 seconds] I don't know what you call it. People call it Diddy Bottle Park. And I think it was put there because whether there was subsidence--

VB: Mhm.

AB: In the road. I fancy it was put there for that. And erm, [pause 3 seconds] there used to be erm chemical works. There was a lot of new houses built there now. And erm they ended up as erm [typeset?], you know.

VB: Mhm.

AB: There. [laughs]

VB: Ah, I see.

AB: And I worked in the library.

VB: Yes. I remember you saying.

AB: Oh yes. Yes. [laughs]

VB: Yes. So is it always Westhoughton you've lived in then?

AB: Pardon?

VB: Have you always lived round here?

AB: Aw, always. Yes. Just in this, well, we went erm on the new, what we call the new houses. Down Wigan Road--

VB: Yes.

AB: For a time. But I got, I got back, I got back up here as soon as I could. 'Cause you see, my father, with him being poorly. Was bad with his breathing. He couldn't climb any steep road. And eh, his only pleasure was going to the Conservative Club. And eh... [pause 2 seconds] So, when we lived in a house across there. On the main road. And erm, we swapped with this tenant who lived here, you

see. During the war. After the father died. It was only my mother and I. So we came here. Left the [parlour?] type house.

VB: Ah, I see.

AB: And came in this one you see.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And erm, [pause 2 seconds] and that's how we got it. Luckily, we hadn't got a housing manager then. The surveyor used to let the houses. So I thought, oh, well. I'm not afraid of the stairs. I'll go and ask him you see. And of course, he knew my dad. He knew him, that he was poorly. So he said, "Don't worry." Well in those days, they used to send the sanitary inspector round to inspect the house. To see if you were clean. [laughs]

VB: Oh dear.

AB: They don't do now you know. Anyway, I went home one lunch time. [coughs] I said to me mother, "Has Mr Arkenshaw been?" She said, "Oh, yes. He's had a good look round downstairs." And she'd been washing you see. So she said, "Would you like to go upstairs?" "Oh no," he said. "I've seen enough." He said, "As far as I'm concerned, the house is yours." So we weren't long before we were up here.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And we came up, oh! Before the war. Before 1937.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And during the war we exchanged houses, and came in this street. Yes.

VB: Yes.

AB: Is that what you want?

VB: Yes. That's great. Erm, the only other thing I wanted to ask about your own, you know your personal background, was if you were brought up in a particular religious erm, you know, Church of England or?

AB: Well, I was baptised in the Church of England.

VB: Yes.

AB: But erm, my sister, my eldest sister was very interested in Christian Science.

VB: Ah, I see.

AB: And I went there for a time.

VB: Yes.

AB: Yes. Mhm.

VB: That's interesting. 'Cause I've just been hearing about erm Lois's--

AB: Yes.

VB: Mother, was it?

AB: Lois's mother--

VB: Yes.

AB: Was a Christian Scientist.

VB: Yes.

AB: She was a practitioner.

VB: Yes.

AB: Yes.

VB: That's interesting.

AB: So erm, but anyway it cooled down 'cause we had no young people coming up you see.

VB: Yeah.

AB: So erm, I'm afraid I don't go anywhere now.

VB: Yeah. [laughs]

AB: Anyway, you don't need to go to church to be good, do you?

VB: Absolutely not.

AB: No.

VB: No.

AB: Is all this going on tape?

VB: Yes.

AB: [gasps]. Oh-h-h! Oh dear!

VB: [laughs]

AB: I'd better be careful, hadn't I?

VB: Eh, the other thing, I mean obviously I'd like to ask you most about your memories of going to the cinema. Erm, I mean what were the main cinemas round here? I know we mentioned--

AB: Well, we'd only the two.

VB: Yeah.

AB: We'd only the two. [pause 2 seconds]. And if I went to one in Bolton it was a, a treat.

VB: Yes.

AB: Yes. Mhm. Either the rink [referring to the Palace] or the Empire I went to.

VB: Yeah. Did you have a preference between these two?

AB: Well, the Empire was, shall we say, more up-to-date.

VB: Ah I see.

AB: But I used to like going to the eh, the erm, the Palace.

VB: Yes.

AB: Shouldn't call it the rink. It's called the rink because there was a skating rink there at one time you see. And erm, but I used to like going there. Mhm.

VB: So the, yes. That's interesting. And you say that, I mean, going to the cinema in Bolton was quite an event.

AB: It was. My brother used to take me. [laughs] So erm, now, we had a next-door neighbour, a Mrs Greenhalgh. And eh, when the talkies first came in, my father was at home of course. And she used to pay his tram fare. And he used to go and book seats for her and her husband, for the talkies you see. 'Cause they had to queue hadn't they?

VB: Right.

AB: They had to queue a long time. So he used to do that for her. But, I think she bought him tickets once for erm one of the talkies. But he wasn't happy.

VB: Mhm.

AB: No. [pause 2 seconds] No. He'd rather be at home. [laughs] Yeah.

VB: How about your mother? Did she ever go to the cinema?

AB: Oh, she liked the pictures. Yes. Yes. My brother used to take her sometimes. And eh, after they went to live in North Wales they would come over for a weekend and he would usually take her to the County. Erm in Wigan. I think it was the County. It was a playhouse at one time and then it turned over to a cinema. There were two or three cinemas in Wigan.

VB: Ah I see.

AB: But Billy used to take my mother there. [laughs]

VB: Ah. What sort of films did she like?

AB: Pardon?

VB: What sort of films did she like?

AB: Anything really.

VB: Anything. [laughs]

AB: Yes. I remember one of the last times he was over he took her to see Shirley Temple in something.

VB: [gasps]

AB: And she thought it was lovely. [laughs]

VB: So did you go with your mother at all when you were a child?

AB: Pardon?

VB: Did you go to the cinema with your mother when you were a child?

AB: No. Not much. But when erm, we used to go to what they call the Penny Rush. Saturday afternoon. Yes.

VB: Ah. So what sort of films were you seeing? What sort of films? Do you remember particular films you saw there?

AB: 'Snow White', and things like that. You know, the old serials. [laughs]

VB: Yeah.

AB: And eh... [pause 5 seconds] [laughs] I'm afraid I can't remember much, love.

VB: I mean I brought along erm, a film annual from the thirties I thought you might like to have a look at.

AB: Oh yes.

VB: Erm, I don't know if any of your favourite stars [laughs] will be in there.

AB: [laughs]. Might eh... [pause 6 seconds] Need to have my glasses on. [pause 5 seconds] [fault on tape; voices speed up] This takes you back a long time.

VB: I know. I was really pleased to find that 'cause it's eh, [pause 2 seconds] I think it's 19--

[recording cuts out] [recording restarts]

AB: And do you know, we had a friend. He was a miner. You'd have taken him for Charles Boyer.

VB: Really!

AB: Any time.

VB: Ah.

AB: Same height. Same shape of face. Mhm.

VB: It's interesting. 'Cause he's quite eh--

AB: Yeah.

VB: You know he's not the sort of type you would imagine. [voice speeds up]

AB: No. [laughs] [pause 9 seconds]

VB: Was Robert Taylor someone that you liked particularly?

AB: Oh I liked him. Yes. [pause 2 seconds] Gracie. [tape cuts out]

[silence on tape until 01:12:28]

AB: There's Deanna Durbin. Used to like her. [pause 2 seconds]

VB: Did you like the musicals? Particularly or--

AB: Not particularly. No. No. [pause 5 seconds] Used to like him too.

VB: Tyrone Power. Yeah.

AB: Tyrone Power.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yes. [pause 3 seconds] Now, do you want to keep on asking questions do you?

VB: Erm, well. I mean one thing that I wanted to ask which you may well have answered on that questionnaire is how often you went to the pictures.

AB: Oh! Only once a week dear!

VB: Only once.

AB: Only once a week! [pause 2 seconds] And I wasn't a, think I told you, I wouldn't have, I wouldn't have been allowed to go on second house, on Saturday evening. But I worked till half past eight in the library you see, so.

VB: Yeah.

AB: That was the only reason I was allowed to go to the second house.

VB: I see.

AB: No. If erm, if I went during, other than Saturday night, it would be my brother who took me.

VB: Right.

AB: When he had no girlfriend in tow! [laughs]

VB: [laughs]

AB: We always knew when he hadn't a girlfriend.

VB: [laughs]

AB: He'd take me [laughs] to the pictures! [pause 4 seconds. Ooh, don't remember her. Marla Shelton.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Don't remember her at all. [pause 4 seconds]

VB: I'm sure some of them never became stars. I think it's eh--

AB: She's got red Indian blood in her, hasn't she?

VB: Mhm!

AB: Mhm. [pause 6 seconds] Was she Clark Gable's wife? Carole Lombard.

VB: I think she might've been.

AB: I think she was. Yes.

VB: Yes.

AB: Pretty. [pause 6 seconds]

VB: Did you have any particular favourites among the stars?

AB: [pause 2 seconds] No. Not particularly. No. [laughs]

VB: Was there any kind of film you liked, more than another?

AB: I can't say. I'm like I am with reading. I like a mystery. I'm not keen on novels. As such.

VB: Yeah.

AB: You know. Love stories, no. Mysteries. But they must be good ones. And I always go, if there's a mystery film, I'll choose that.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yes.

VB: Did you like the, [voice speeds up] 'cause we were just talking just now about the Sherlock Holmes ones with Basil Rathbone?

AB: Yes! Oh I liked those. Yeah. Yes. Yes. Yes.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And I think he was very good. I'd rather have him than any of the Sherlock Holmes.

VB: Yeah.

AB: So--

VB: What about the gangster films? Did you like them?

AB: The what, love?

VB: The gangster films. Edward G. Robinson and Cagney and people like that.

AB: Sometimes. It just depended. You know. Mhm. Not always.

VB: Yeah.

AB: [laughs] [pause 4 seconds]

VB: What about the, I mean you mentioned eh, Gracie Fields there. Did you like her films?

AB: Oh, I liked her films. Yes.

VB: Yeah.

AB: 'Course, she's very popular. 'Course she would be, being a Lancashire girl, wasn't she?

VB: Yeah.

AB: I mean, I can remember rushing home from work to hear her on the radio.

VB: Really!

AB: Oh, definitely. And there were no television or anything you know.

VB: Yeah.

AB: [pause 4 seconds]

VB: The other star that immediately comes to mind, the Lancashire stars, someone like George Formby. Was he someone you liked?

AB: Yes. Some of his were funny you know.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yes. [pause 3 seconds]

VB: I think, Robert Donat was from Manchester.

AB: Manchester.

VB: Did you like--

AB: Now. As a young, well! Not a young man. He's younger than I am. Comes to me every fortnight. For his lunch. And his wife was a relative of my sister's. Well, her husband's niece.

VB: Uhuh.

AB: And his wife died. And he lives near Lee now. Between Lee and Warrington. And eh, his name is Pashley.

VB: Mhm!

AB: It's a rather unusual name.

VB: It is. Yeah.

AB: And his father and mother were both connected with the Halle orchestra and choir. And he was telling me, oh, not long ago. His father, I don't know that he went to school with Robert Donat, when they were young.

VB: Ah.

AB: Very friendly with him. Yes.

VB: Was he quite popular round here then?

AB: Oh, yes. Yes. Beautiful speaking voice hadn't he?

VB: Yeah.

AB: Beautiful. [pause 2 seconds] 'Course he had asthma wasn't it? That killed him.

VB: Yeah, I heard something about that.

AB: You know, when he was in *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness* you could see he was, well, he was dying then.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Mhm. [pause 4 seconds] Fredric March.

VB: Mhm. Did you like the dramatic films? You know films--

AB: Yes. Yes.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yes. I didn't mind a musical but Lois [Basnett] was very fond of those. The Ginger Rogers, Astaire films but--

VB: Yeah.

AB: [pause 3 seconds] William Powell was always good too. [pause 7 seconds] Do you do a lot of this then? [voices speed up]

VB: Erm, I do, yes at the moment. It's a two-year project we're running at Glasgow University.

AB: Uhuh, I see.

VB: Erm, so we're talking with people, erm, the last six months I was talking with people in Glasgow. And eh, Manchester, Bolton, Westhoughton.

AB: Yes.

VB: And then the idea's to move down south a bit.

AB: [coughs]

VB: And talk to some people in London.

AB: Yeah.

VB: Just build up a general idea.

AB: Yes. Yes. They're out of, I suppose different areas aren't they? Now, my nephew was a, used to work in a cinema in Flint--

VB: Uhuh.

AB: In the Plaza. He was the projectionist. And when he was young, he used to come and stay with my mother and I. Used to bring him over for his holidays. And he used to go up to the Palace Cinema a lot.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And they used to let him go in the projection room.

VB: Ah!

AB: He used to go up in the daytime.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And they'd have him in in the evening you know.

VB: Yeah.

AB: He was very very interested. Anyway, he worked in the Plaza. And I don't know what happened. And then he got a job erm at Shotton steel works.

VB: Mhm.

AB: As a photographer. He's always been interested in photography.

VB: Yeah. Was it your brother that you went with mainly yourself though? You're saying your brother used to take you.

AB: Pardon?

VB: Did you ever go to the pictures with friends?

AB: Well, usually on a Saturday evening my mother, brother and I would go together you see.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yes. 'Course you know parents were pretty strict in those days. You hadn't to have boyfriends!

VB: Ah I see.

AB: You weren't encouraged to speak about them never go out with them, dear!

VB: [laughs]

AB: Which is wrong. Yes. Then you get to my age and you've got nobody. It's wrong. When you look back.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Anyway. [pause 6 seconds] [looks through book]

VB: Did you have any favourites in the women stars?

AB: Erm, well, Merle Oberon for one.

VB: Ah.

[tape degraded; audio unavailable from this point in the interview]

AB: Yes. Myrna Loy. When you see them, you remember how you enjoyed them. [pause 8 seconds]

VB: I think when I was here the last time [inaudible] Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy.

AB: Yeah, oh yes! I like those.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yes.

VB: What was it about them that--

AB: I don't know. [laughs] I enjoyed them anyway.

VB: Yeah.

AB: I always remember, lot long before my father died [inaudible]. And I remember going to see, I think it was *Naughty Marietta*.

VB: Mhm.

AB: At the Palace. And coming home after the second house, when we got outside [inaudible]. And I always associate them with that night.

VB: Ah. Certainly a lovely memory.

AB: Yes! Yes. [pause 5 seconds] [Says something about Barbara Stanwyck; inaudible]. [pause 4 seconds] [some mention of Joan Fontaine; inaudible].

VB: [inaudible]. [pause 5 seconds] It's hard to remember sometimes when it's that long ago.

AB: Yeah. It's too long to try and remember.

VB: Yeah.

[pause 5 seconds]

AB: [Barbara's different there?]. Barbara Stanwyck. [pause 8 seconds]

VB: [mention of colour films; inaudible]. Do you remember seeing the first colour films?
[inaudible].

AB: Yeah. [pause 4 seconds] Claudette Colbert was always good. [laughs] [inaudible] [pause 7 seconds]

VB: [inaudible].

[pause 6 seconds]

AB: Jack Buchanan. Now we had some friends, in the hill, on the way to Bolton. And one of their daughters [inaudible]. Now she worked in the erm, the [goods?] office on the railway. And eh, Jack Buchanan. And I don't know who the other man was [who] were appearing in one of the shows. The Grand, I think it was. The Grand Theatre Bolton. And the other man was very friendly with the girl that worked [inaudible]. [Beginning inaudible]. "Would you come with me to the registry office. I'm being married there." So, [name?] was the witness, Jack Buchanan was the other.

VB: Oh, how lovely! [laughs]

AB: Yeah. And that family, the [C?] family, were associated with [Wendy Hiller's?] family.

VB: Ah!

AB: Yes. There erm, their father's cousin, another [AC?] married [name?]. I don't know if he was a cousin or an uncle of Wendy. [problem with tape; audio unavailable for number of seconds]

VB: Did you go to the theatre?

AB: Not very often. Not very often.

VB: Yes.

AB: Used to like going to see the ballet.

VB: Aw.

AB: I used to like the ballet.

VB: Was there a lot of entertainment available when you were growing up?

AB: Erm, not a great lot. Not within my [area?] anyway. There wasn't much money. [pause 7 seconds]

VB: Did you used to play outdoors when you were a youngster?

AB: Oh, when we were children? Oh yes. We'd play a lot. The kids round about, you know.

VB: Yes. [mention of Saturday matinees; inaudible]

AB: The Penny Rush they used to call that. The Penny Rush. [laughs]

VB: Yeah. I brought some stills with me as well. [mention of Laurel and Hardy; inaudible]

AB: Oh yes.

VB: Yeah.

AB: [pause 3 seconds] Abbott and Costello I used to like.

VB: Ah. [inaudible] George Formby one I think.

AB: Mhm.

VB: I think it's Joan Crawford actually.

AB: I was going to say, it looks like Joan Crawford.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yeah.

[pause 12 seconds]

VB: How did you feel when you went to the cinema on a Saturday night at the weekend? How did it make you feel to go to the cinema?

AB: Well, it was a treat. [inaudible].

VB: Yes.

AB: 'Cause as I say, there wasn't much money. My father wasn't working.

VB: Yeah.

AB: May wasn't working. They were both ill at the same time. And erm, [inaudible]. Well, when I first started working, 12 shilling a week. [inaudible] Mind you, I enjoyed it. I wouldn't have swapped with anybody.

VB: Yeah. [pause 5 seconds]

AB: There's Joan.

VB: Did you like Joan Crawford?

AB: Yes. Yes. I liked her. [pause 2 seconds] Warner Baxter.

VB: Ah.

[pause 5 seconds]

AB: And I liked anything with, you know the [inaudible] films. Anything with [children?] I used to go to.

VB: Ah.

AB: 'Course I'd read all the books.

VB: I was going to ask, did you read a lot as a child?

AB: Oh yes. Yes. I was encouraged to read.

VB: Yes.

AB: Yes. [pause 6 seconds] Do you read much?

VB: I do. Yes.

AB: Yeah. Now I've got a friend [problem with tape; audio unavailable] No, she doesn't mind a magazine but not a book. Couldn't live without a book. I'm not saying I've got very good taste but [inaudible].

VB: [inaudible].

AB: Oh yes, yes. Ye do, yes. [pause 4 seconds] Now, anything else you want to ask?

VB: [inaudible].

AB: [beginning inaudible]. And especially nowadays when go down the street, you see so many incomers.

VB: Did you ever go dancing?

AB: No. No. I've never [enjoyed?] dancing.

VB: Yeah.

AB: I would have liked to have gone but [inaudible]. Can I ask where you live dear?

VB: I live in Glasgow.

AB: Glasgow?

VB: Yes.

[End of interview]