

Disclaimer: This interview was conducted in 1995 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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* Ruislip, Hillingdon, 12 July 1995: Valentina Bold interviews Ashley Bird

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*AB=Ashley Bird, VB=Valentina Bold

* Notes: First interview of two with Ashley Bird; Sound Quality: Fair

[Start of Tape One]

[Start of Side A]

[VB tape introduction]

VB: They're kind of awkward.

AB: That's right, [laughs] that's right.

VB: That's great. That should be us. They're good these. I've done, I've talked to some people in quite out of the way places and that thing just picks up the voices.

AB: Good, good. Aa-ah. Have you specific questions, or?

VB: Erm, yes, well. I suppose the first thing I should ask is, you said you started going to the cinema in the late twenties.

AB: Mhm.

VB: So was that with your parents? Did they take you, or?

AB: Erm. Do you know I don't know whether they did. I think I went with an uncle the first time. I was a stepchild. My father got killed in the First World War so I was a stepchild. And, I very much spent a lot of my time with my grandmother. So I, no I didn't go to the cinema much with my family. I remember going as a, erm... My uncle took me once. And I think that was the time I saw Lon Chaney in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Erm, but erm, after that, [pause 2 seconds] mostly as kids, you know, sixpence Saturday afternoon.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And it started like that. The little cinema that we used in Harrow erm, was right on top of Harrow Hill where the Harrow school is. Erm, that's the, the posh part.

VB: Right. Was that the Cosy?

AB: That's right.

VB: Yes, I've heard about this one.

AB: Yeah. The Cosy. Before that it was the Elite.

VB: Right.

AB: But now, I think it's part of the Harrow school. Some hall for the Harrow school, I think. But it was not a bad little place. The last time my wife and I went there, before we were married, it was beginning to get very run down. And we went up into the balcony and, [laughs] had a brainstorm and we were getting breakfast. But erm, yes. And I don't know whether anybody told you, erm, when they changed it to the Cosy, they used to have a bus that served it only.

VB: Really?

AB: It used to come down from the cinema, down Roxeth Hill, into what they call Roxeth Corner. Erm, and it used to pick up people there, come on down into Harrow in, [pause 2 seconds] College Road now, pick up people there. And, [pause 2 seconds] then go round, and stop outside the posh cinema, [laughs] in Harrow, the Coliseum, which is now a Gateway. And as kids we always, that was always very posh. You didn't go there unless you were rich. [laughs]

VB: [laughs]

AB: This little bus used to stop outside, pinch customers, [laughs] from there, take them up the Hill.

VB: Really? So a door-to-door service?

AB: That's right.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Of course, people used to come out of work erm, Friday evenings, and do it, you know.

VB: So was that all included in the price of your ticket?

AB: Eh, it was a free bus, yes. Eh, what did we pay for our tickets? Ninepence. One and three, I suppose. Was the ones we used before the war. Yeah. The Coliseum, as I say. Funny these, erm, feelings you get as a child or a youngster. You know, you didn't go to the Coliseum. A little bit further down from where the Coliseum was, was the usual fleapits, you see. You'd go in there for tuppence. That was, [laughs] the most peculiar place. The foyer was on the main Station Road here and you used to walk through a long foyer, into the cinema. But you had, to get to your seats, you had to walk across the front of the screen! [pause 2 seconds] So, of course, if you didn't know and you walked across, you'd throw your shadow on the screen. And of course, you can imagine the cat-calls. So everybody used to go down there and soon as they knew it they used to bend their heads. Yeah tuppence.

VB: Did you go with your friends then when you were going to the matinees?

AB: Yeah. They hadn't started the erm, [pause 3 seconds] you know, Saturday morning for children at that time. It wasn't until I came back, '46, that my son first started to go to. He was a bit older than that. He was only seven then, to the children's Saturday morning.

VB: So what sort of films were you seeing then when you were going as a boy?

AB: Well, I can say, I remember Lon Chaney, *Notre Dame*. Of course, the Harold Lloyd films. Charlie Chaplin, *The Gold Rush*. And most of his early ones, you know. 'Course we used to have the lady, I presume, sitting at the front, providing the music. And I was rather disappointed when talkies

started. We didn't like it. You had to attune your ears. Whereas you didn't have to listen, you see, to [inaudible].

VB: That's interesting. Do you think it was, you experienced the film differently without sound?

AB: I think so. You, you-- It's like the radio, to some extent. You get involved in your head more. You've got to, you're anticipating what they were going to do. And what they said, really was, only extra to it, [laughs] you know. You would enjoy it. 'Cause most of them weren't sophisticated. It was all visual. It had to be, in those days. I mean, Charlie was the ultimate act. Absolutely. And Buster Keaton. Erm, Harold Lloyd exactly the same. It's what they did, how they looked and that. The words didn't matter so much. You could put the words in yourself. You didn't have to read 'em. In fact, I don't know whether I could. [laughs]

VB: It's interesting that. I mean, sounds like there's more of an imaginative--

AB: That's right.

VB: Engagement, or something.

AB: Yes, yes. Once you knew the plots of the west-- so many westerns, you see. You knew what was going to come up, you see. Like the stagecoach and all this carry on. Or a rodeo, somebody going to get thrown off. But erm, yes, it was erm. No, the talkies. Of course it became much more expensive. [pause 3 seconds] Didn't take long to get used to them, of course. I don't know whether the first one. I think the first one my mother and father saw at the new erm, Odeon. That was 1929. In South Harrow. It was *Ben Hur*, I think.

VB: Mhm.

AB: *Ben Hur* film. [pause 3 seconds] But erm, we used to get about a bit, 'cause there were a number of fleapit type ones, you know. There was one in Wembley. A real dive. But of course, at fourpence a time or thruppence a time, eh, you know, you could just about squeeze that out.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And of course you used to get the lot a bit later on. You got everything, you know. From turns on the stage to the organ coming up, you see. There was always a B film. There was always the news. There was always a cartoon. You don't get that today, do you? I don't think.

VB: No. Certainly not.

AB: No. You get the big film.

VB: Yeah. That's about it.

AB: That's it. No, it was real entertainment, you know. Not in the very early ones. Not for the silents, no. You got a B film, or something, and you got the Pathe news.

VB: Did you enjoy the news when you were a child?

AB: Yes. Because that, erm, [pause 3 seconds] was all we got really, you see. I mean in the late twenties and early thirties erm, the old crystal set was knocking about. My people, we had a relation that was building erm, radios in Brixton. So, we got one of the early ones of that, with a big old speaker. So, yes, that was our first [inaudible] of getting the news, especially things overseas, you know.

VB: Mhm.

AB: No, it's erm. You missed it greatly when it all sort of altered. Eh, you got sort of... [pause 2 seconds] Then as you went into the thirties, the films, they were so prolific. I mean, every week we went to the cinema. I mean you queued up Saturday evening for the one and threes, you know. That was it. Till the war came along and that clobbered everything.

VB: I got some erm, from the Civic Centre Library, clippings of cinema adverts that you might... I don't know if I have any for the South Harrow cinemas. I might do, actually. [pause 4 seconds] Well, that's actually one of the photos I found of the Dominion.

AB: That's right, yes. That was built. I don't know when that was built. Quite late.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And the same as the Granada. They were... [pause 3 seconds] After the war, I believe. Yes, I don't think these were built before. No, they weren't, no. The Odeon's for the. Oh, yes. I remember that being built.

VB: The Odeon.

AB: No that's the Grosvenor-- Grosvenor, Rayners Lane.

VB: I mean, did you travel a bit to go to the cinema or was it just the ones that were, you know, accessible?

AB: Erm, we didn't go very far.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Erm. You see, the buses came this way from South Harrow.

VB: Uhuh.

AB: And the train... [pause 2 seconds] We'd go to Rayners Lane.

VB: I see.

AB: Or the other way to erm, Sudbury Town.

VB: Uhuh.

AB: Ultimately to go to the Majestic. And erm, [pause 3 seconds]-- first they had-- Of course the, [pause 3 seconds] the Ace? I don't ever remember it being called that.

VB: Mhm.

AB: It's funny, isn't it? No. [pause 3 seconds] But the one at erm, South Harrow, the Odeon at South Harrow.

VB: Yes, I've got an advert from that actually.

AB: A-ah. [pause 2 seconds] Kenton. Yeah. Was quite an art deco sort of place. That erm, stone that they used. Erm, [pause 2 seconds]. Shame, you know, that they eh.... [pause 3 seconds] 'Course the cinema nearly died, didn't it? More or less.

VB: So was that quite a sort of up-market one?

AB: Oh, yes. It was built in 1929. I'm sure that's right. Either '28 or '29. And it was beautiful as far as we were concerned. All plush seats and nice, air-conditioned, and that sort of thing.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And as a teenager I belonged to a youth club, church youth club. Often in the summer we were either hiking, as we called it, or playing tennis in the aft-, Saturday afternoon. Or a bank holiday. And, course, Saturday evening was always, erm, a shilling's worth at the cinema.

VB: Right, right.

AB: Every Saturday. [pause 3 seconds] Charles Boyer. [looking at clippings]

VB: So was that the same people you'd been out in the afternoon with that you went to the cinema with?

AB: Erm. Yes. Well I was courting my wife. An old fashioned saying. We were kids together, you see. We joined this club. They allowed me to join. I knew the people that started to run it. They used to lodge with my grandma.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And they allowed me. I was fourteen-and-a-half. They didn't really want kids of that age. But they allowed me to go. It was a Monday evening club and you used to do bits for the church, you know. Hiking on Saturday. And my wife joined, I think, the following October. I was fifteen, she was sixteen I think. And it was a friendship just developed from there onwards.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Erm, much to my parents'... [pause 3 seconds] Well, at fourteen or fifteen they didn't--

VB: Yes, it's young. Yeah. [laughs]

AB: [laughs] I don't know whether this is relevant but they, they got quite upset, you see. But they'd focussed on the wrong girl. [laughs] Very funny. I thought it was very funny. I never let them in. [laughs] Her name just come back to me. It was that Eileen [surname redacted]. What are you doing going out with her? That was, that was the girlfriend's friend, you see.

VB: Ah, I see.

AB: But it went on for about six or eight months that way. And anyway. But erm, when I... [pause 3 seconds] I was a bit of an outsider on the family, as I said, because I was a stepchild. But erm. And I got married when I was just twenty-one.

VB: Right.

AB: I told them in 1937, I said I was going to get married next year. Erm, they thought I was mad. But then they encouraged it. And I was getting married on the 16th of July. And, two days time, isn't it? This was 1938. And erm, they said, why the 16th of July? I said, well I'll be twenty-one on the 28th of June, so you can't stop me! [laughs]

VB: Mhm.

AB: Because you had to get--

VB: Permission.

AB: You couldn't get married at eighteen in those days.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yeah. [laughs]

VB: It's erm, amazing that when you met so young it must've been a very, erm-- [pause 2 seconds] You know a lot of people who meet at that sort of age, it's quite unusual to then--

AB: Yes.

VB: Make it through to twenty-one. And then get married and. It's lovely.

AB: I couldn't wait. In fact, at sixteen, waiting, I remember [inaudible]. You got to wait five years. That seemed interminable! So, there you go. But erm, the cinema was definitely a part of our life in those days. You know that... [pause 3 seconds] Erm, we used to go to the theatre a lot as a group.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Because you could go up there and go in the pit. You used to have to save up for that. [pause 2 seconds] 'Cause you used to get to London for about erm, a shilling return. In those days. And you could get in the pit for erm, three and six.

VB: Mhm.

AB: You didn't go up in the gods. You were a little bit better than that, you see. But that was only twice a year, I suppose.

VB: Mhm.

AB: But. [pause 2 seconds] Ahh, you know, the evenings if you... [pause 2 seconds] Cinema was just the thing to do.

VB: Mhm. Was your wife, your then girlfriend, fond of the cinema?

AB: Oh, yes. Ohh! All these people erm. [pause 3 seconds] Fairbanks.

VB: Mhm. Did you--

AB: This is a bit later, I should think. Valerie Hobson.

VB: Yeah. There's some other ones I've got here from--

AB: Oh, the Belmont. Yeah. Herga. Now, of course that's the old Worcester. Well I was trying to think of that. Erm, that was, [laughs] a fairly low dive.

VB: Was it? [laughs]

AB: Well, you know. We considered as kids that was a fairly low dive. I don't suppose it was. [laughs]

VB: Mhm.

AB: Did you pick these up from the--

VB: They actually they had a box of erm, clippings of cinema material.

AB: Oh really? Have you found this anywhere else? Are you going round the country?

VB: Yes. Erm, not to that extent. I mean, I guess there must have been a librarian in the '30s that was interested in the cinema.

AB: Yeah.

VB: Which is very lucky. [laughs]

AB: Yes, yes.

VB: Erm--

AB: And they have the prices.

VB: There's the Coliseum, actually, as well, that you mentioned.

AB: Ah, yes. That's the posh one. [laughs] [pause 4 seconds; looking at clippings] That's erm, they didn't put the price on there.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Embassy, North Harrow. Yes, that was.... [pause 2 seconds] Was that another Odeon, I don't know. I only went there once.

VB: Mhm.

AB: But if you went here, you know, it was, you were taken... [laughs] silly, isn't it? But erm, yes, you see, at the Belmont, very likely at different times, wait till you see the prices, oh! You got the sixpenny one there!

VB: Mhm.

AB: Yeah. [laughs] Sixpence all parts. [laughs] Well, I suppose that's about a pound today, you see.

VB: Yes.

AB: About five pence halfpenny, I think, is about a pound value today in the old money.

VB: Yeah.

AB: So roughly about a pound. But you can't get in the cinema for a pound today.

VB: Certainly not, no.

AB: But erm, before 4 p.m., all seats sixpence. [laughs] Must seem silly to people like you, I should think. That, you know, the, yes, yes, lovely days! Life was so much slower. Erm, there wasn't much traffic. There was nothing. I mean, my stepfather had a car. Erm, [pause 3 seconds] from very early on. An old Phoenix, and things like that. So my mother and the other two brothers used to get out quite a lot in the, [pause 3 seconds] middle and late thirties. I didn't go with them. Erm, but I mean, people didn't have cars. A few of the boys had got motorbikes.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Erm, so, it was always buses and trains.

VB: Mhm.

AB: 'Course they were. I don't know whether relatively they were cheaper. I guess they were. I mean you could get a special ticket from Sudbury Hill--

VB: Mhm.

AB: Which is the next station up the line from South Harrow. My young lady used to work. She was in the laundry office in Harrow here, where the big place is now, that used to be the Greenhill Laundry. And it wasn't known as Harrow. Harrow was on the Hill. That part was known as Greenhill. And, she used to be able to get a train from Sudbury Hill to get to work at three ha'pence return. That was a train--

VB: Mhm.

AB: And a bus into Harrow and back again, [laughs] for three ha'pence. Which would be, [pause 2 seconds] I suppose about five bob today.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Twenty-five pence? I don't know. But erm, yeah, you can't do that on twenty-five pence.

VB: No.

AB: And when the organs first started coming, eh, most of the cinemas, the new cinemas in the early twenties had an organ, you know. And erm, they just about made your day, you know. You'd go in there at about, [pause 2 seconds] quarter past six.

VB: Mhm.

AB: You wouldn't come out till half past nine. You'd had a real good day, a very good night for one and thruppence. And then they started to do, not only ice creams; in some of them they started to bring round coffee and things like that, you know. You could have coffee.

VB: Oh, really?

AB: Yeah. In the interlude, you know.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Didn't last for long that. 'Cause it got too messy I think.

VB: I can imagine, yes. Did some of the cinemas have cafes as well?

AB: Erm. I don't know whether-- I think that did.

VB: Yeah. The Embassy.

AB: Coliseum. I don't think the Coliseum. 'Cause opposite the Coliseum was Lyons. Joe Lyons, the cafes in those days.

VB: Oh, I see.

AB: [London-wide]. That was the, once again, you went to Joe Lyons for your tea with the Nippies girls. [laughs] You know, you were going up. But erm, the Odeon didn't erm--

VB: The other one I've got here is the Granada in Station Road.

AB: Yes. That did. That did. Up on the balcony, yeah.

[pause 6 seconds]

AB: Cafe open, yes, 2 o'clock.

VB: Yeah.

AB: I wonder. They don't give you the, a pity they didn't have the dates. On the paper there.

VB: Yeah. I've a feeling that. I mean it's definitely the thirties, isn't it? '36 or something, the Granada opened?

AB: I would think so, yes, yes. It was before the war. Yes.

VB: Yes.

AB: '36. Yes, I would think that would be about right.

VB: Did you ever see any of these openings yourself?

AB: No. Erm, Oscar Deutsch, I think his name was, was the Odeon man.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And I don't know whether it was him or one of his family came down and opened the South Harrow one. Erm, I think my mother and step-father went. Erm, that's about as much as I remember on that.

VB: Yeah. 'Cause I was thinking, I mean, that must have been quite something with Jessie Matthews as a big star--

AB: She was, she was a fairly local person. Don't know where she lived. Whether it was out this way. Erm, yeah, no I never got erm, once again they don't put the year on, do they? Mhm. Harry Palmer. [laughs]

VB: Did you have any favourite stars yourself?

AB: I don't know whether I did. Erm, mostly the girls did, of course. Given the... you know. Erm, I don't think the... Perhaps I was too young, I suppose, to make noises about the girls. No, it's funny that. I can't reme-, you know.

VB: Yeah. Were there any types of films that you particularly liked?

AB: I suppose the westerns mostly, as far as I was concerned. Erm, my girlfriend at that time, of course, was all the erm, I suppose the early Ginger Rogers films and erm, the Fred Astaire ones that I can remember.

VB: Mhm.

AB: But there was so much, erm. [pause 3 seconds] I mean, we'd get the two. See, if you could afford it, to go one day in the week, they used to change erm, Mondays and Thursdays. So if you could get, you know. If there was a film you wanted to see. So the number of films we were seeing, you know, were terrific. Erm, I don't remember having any... [pause 3 seconds] The street singer, what was his name? That I used to enjoy. And of course, all the westerns. It's a bit now to remember that. That was before, really, the big names came into--

VB: Yes.

AB: The light. Cary Grant and erm, Cooper. All those people. They really. It was the end of the thirties, the beginning of the forties when they came into it, I believe. If I remember. But erm--

VB: Did you like people like Tom Mix?

AB: That's right. Who was the other one? With his horse. Erm, he had his white horse. [pause 5 seconds] Quite frankly, now, your memory, you can remember, but you can't remember names.

VB: Yeah.

AB: I mean, I've got a friend now. We sit and look at erm, TV with the old films. Not to say, we don't look at too many old films. But we're always looking at one another and saying, can't get, [laughs] the name doesn't come.

VB: Yeah.

AB: It's terrible when you get old. Names--

VB: Well, I suppose if you saw so many films as well they,

AB: That's right.

VB: Must sort of run into each other. [laughs]

AB: That's right. They did, you know. You couldn't eh, separate them. You just went for entertainment. 'Course they weren't sophisticated. I mean, my son and my grandchildren now look at those old films and of course, they laugh so much. The script is bad. The, erm, you didn't realise, it was beautiful because it was the last word. You didn't. You can see it now, how rough it was. The way it was directed. But eh, not as far as we were concerned, you know. It's very difficult, I would have thought, for people like yourself. You can see these old films but you can't put yourself back in our position and see them. And, you could put it, we were living another life, you know. You were out into America, where most of it came from, of course. Erm, don't remember many British films in the early days. I suppose there were but, it was all American. Eh, [pause 2 seconds] am I making sense?

VB: Yes, very much so. I was wondering as well, did you feel that the stars were sort of, up on the screen and a world apart or were they people that you got to know?

AB: Oh, no. World apart, world apart. No, no. Erm, I suppose with the big premieres in London there was more screaming by the girls and the fellas... [tape cuts out]

[End of Side B]

[End of Tape One]

[Start of Tape Two]

[Start of Side A]

AB: I mean, eh, most of it, you know, came over from America. Eh, of course you would go mad about them. All the girls would, but erm, can't remember myself ever going up there but... [pause 2 seconds] Oh, no definitely, yeah. A thing apart, you know. Wonderful. You never really got. [pause 5 seconds] Today, I suppose, you can get closer to them in some ways. Erm, because of the television and all the news. Erm, and, I mean, as youngsters you couldn't afford papers. So you didn't read the paper.

VB: Right. I was going to ask if you ever read any of the film magazines, like 'Picturegoer' or 'Film Weekly'?

AB: Erm, I didn't.

VB: Right.

AB: But my girlfriend did. And whether she had 'Picturegoer' every week. I don't know.

VB: Mhm.

AB: I suppose boys were more gung-ho. You left that to the, [laughs] girls in those days.

VB: Yeah.

AB: But erm, I can remember seeing them laying about. [pause 4 seconds] Yeah.

VB: Did you ever collect cigarette cards or anything like that?

AB: Erm.

VB: 'Cause I suppose that's sort of the boys' equivalent with the--

AB: That's right, yes.

VB: Information of the stars.

AB: Erm. I, I knew boys that did, but I never did. Not, erm, I was a bit more interested in football maybe, and erm, I used to collect the erm, cigarette cards of the cricketers.

VB: Oh, I see.

AB: And the, eh, football people. [pause 6 seconds]

VB: Did you... What team did you support in those days?

AB: Eh, I suppose it was Arsenal.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Arsenal in those days. I remember Harrow-on-the-Hill, it used to be the Kings Head Hotel used to be used, which was right opposite the Cosy or the Elite, as we know. Used to be used for one of the erm, Wembley finalists, cup finalists. They used to bring the team, one team there and one at Hendon, I think. And I can remember going on Saturday morning to see players from Newcastle. Erm, looking for their autograph. And then going to the cinema in the evening. Erm. [pause 4 seconds] No, I didn't collect cards.

VB: Yeah.

[pause 4 seconds]

VB: I think we got a bit side-tracked there, actually. [laughs]

AB: Yeah.

VB: I was wondering as well. When you were going to a film with your girlfriend, who decided what film to go to? How did you decide where to go?

AB: Oh, I think she decided.

VB: Ah! [laughs]

AB: I think she always decided. Yes. I went along with erm. [pause 3 seconds] Very much in love in those days. And you know, wherever you want to go. [laughs]

VB: Yeah. Did you pay for this?

AB: Eh, no. We went Dutch.

VB: Right.

AB: 'Cause we were both, erm. [pause 3 seconds] As far as earnings were concerned, erm. [pause 2 seconds] Before I was erm, I was a messenger boy, first of all in Westminster, then in Fulham.

VB: Right.

AB: Then I got promotion to inspector and came to Harrods. Before I got, I was only earning twelve shillings a week.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Before, just before I got promotion, I think it was about fifteen shillings. About thirty quid, I suppose, today.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Erm, once I got this new job and I went up, I thought I was a millionaire. And one week I earned fifteen, sixteen shillings. The following week I earned two pound five. Just like we are now.

VB: Yes.

AB: And from that point on, I was eighteen and a half, from that point on, we decided we were going to get married and we cut down our... Whatever we did, once a week, once a fortnight, we started to save.

VB: Yeah.

AB: But erm, we went Dutch. Couldn't afford really, in those days, to pay for somebody else. I mean, if you took half a crown out of your money, and I used to have to go to London to work in those days. I mean, I know it was cheap. Sevenpence ha'penny return, workman's. [laughs] We don't have those today. In South Harrow the station is on the main road now, but it used to be further back. You used to queue up, half past seven in the morning, for the last workman's train. And the queue was two hundred yards long. And the porters used to come and stand on the end of the queue at half past seven. After half past seven you had to pay full fare. I don't know what that was but. I lived just opposite. My stepfather used to say to me, "Come on. You won't get on the back of that queue!" [laughs] Sevenpence ha'penny. But you see, I had to go six days a week. Erm, I started before I was sixteen. When I became sixteen, they took off my national insurance. I got less money. But erm, there wasn't much left for entertainment at all.

VB: No.

AB: By the time you bought yourself something to eat for lunch. And what not that, I couldn't give anything to my mother.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And then, when I became eighteen, I earned two pound five. I was putting it all away to get married-- [laughs]

VB: Yes.

AB: So, poor old mum never did very well out of it. But erm, we always managed the cinema. Even after then. Once a week or, you know, once a fortnight. Sometimes twice.

VB: Mhm.

AB: But you didn't, you don't see today the placards advertising these, erm, the big pictures. All your hoardings. The local cinema used to parade what was on, you know, in great big, eh. You knew exactly what you was, there was. I mean there was the Cosy one, the South Harrow one, erm. So, you knew exactly where you wanted to go, you know. They don't, don't do it today.

VB: No. I mean, I'm just trying to visualise that. It must have been quite striking when you were walking down a street.

AB: Yeah. Well I used to live right opposite where the station is today, on the main road.

VB: Yes.

AB: And, it's, the railway goes over the road. I don't know whether you've been down to South Harrow, have you?

VB: No.

AB: So, on either side of that bridge were big hoardings. And as a young child, well, you used to climb behind the hoardings and drop things on people's heads! [laughs]

VB: [laughs]

AB: In fact there was a little man ran a bus service and he used to wear, Mr Grundle, he used to wear a pork pie hat. You'd drop things. Anyway, those hoardings, I can see the *Ben Hur* now, possibly now. It sort of started with the large size, erm, chariot with, now I wouldn't know who was the star in those days of that. You'd very likely know more that ...

VB: Mhm.

AB: The big chariot and him with the horses and going down smaller. But it was, I mean, huge great things. And always you had that, every week. Sometimes it was changed twice a week.

VB: Right.

AB: And of course, the hoardings are not used so much today, really, I don't think, you know, I. But eh. [laughs] Where you could, and then of course, the small ones are about half the size of the fridge. And 'course that's the other thing. The shops and my people were in a builders yard. My stepfather was the son of a builder.

VB: Oh, I see.

AB: And he used to put up, he used to have these boards. And they'd get free, not erm, a free pass. And so, if you were one of the lucky num-. I don't think he ever did the cinema. My people did the Wembley, erm, Wembley arena today.

VB: Mhm.

AB: But it was the Empire Pool. We used to get free tickets or a free pass. Go to the ice rink, and that sort of thing.

VB: Ah, I see.

AB: But most of the shops had a double-sided board. On one side you'd get the Odeon, South Harrow, and perhaps the one at Rayners Lane. And you got free passes. So if you only knew anybody there, of course, very nice, you didn't get a cheap seat. You got one of the middle ones.

VB: Ah, I see.

AB: You didn't get the posh ones at half a crown. [laughs] I only remember going in the balcony seats twice. That was once in the Cosy when we got wet. And we spread out, I don't know how. Perhaps it was after the war, I don't know. We paid three and six and went in the balcony at the Odeon. But, I mean, that was for people... [pause 3 seconds] Things went on of course, erm, and they built the big ones like the Hammersmith [probably referring to the *Gaumont Palace*]. Erm. Can't remember the name of that cinema.

VB: Mhm.

AB: One of the very, very large ones with a very big screen. And if you went there, you, I mean, you had everything. You had the organ, you had two or three turns on the stage. [pause 3 seconds] Plus the two films and everything else. You know, you paid your two bob in those days for a middle seat. Oh! Smashing night out, you know.

VB: Yeah. [pause 5 seconds]

AB: Well, I only hope that this makes sense to you.

VB: Yeah, it does. It does very much. Very much.

AB: Have you had words with the other lady that we suggested? Mrs Curnick. Miss Curnick.

VB: Miss?

AB: Curnick. In South Harrow.

VB: Yes, I have. Yes. And her brother as well.

AB: Well, that's right. Yes. I knew her brother. I went to school with her brother.

VB: A-ah!

AB: Yeah. He ran a [inaudible] erm, greengrocery round after the war. He used to come on, hang on I lived in Sudbury Hill in those days. But erm, I haven't seem him. You met him as well, did you?

VB: Yes, I did, yes.

AB: I haven't seen him for a good age. I met erm, she is a Miss Curnick, I think, isn't she?

VB: That's right, yes.

AB: They lived right opposite the old station. Did you go to their place?

VB: Is that eh, yes. In fact it was the house they were brought up in.

AB: That's right, yes. Right opposite that old station.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Yeah. Yeah. But eh--

VB: It was interesting because I don't think they went so much together. Because being brother and sister it's not so--

AB: I didn't know her. Didn't know her. I only knew him.

VB: Yeah.

AB: But erm... [pause 8 seconds]

VB: Would you like another cup of coffee?

AB: Eh, no, I think I've had enough.

VB: Is that OK?

AB: Yeah. [pause 5 seconds] Ah. It's bringing back memories, you know. But erm...

VB: You might like. I mean, I've got some stills with me as well from erm, thirties films. There's another one from the Rayners Lane one, too.

AB: Oh, James Cagney. [pause 6 seconds]

VB: Did they have, erm, Sunday cinema then?

AB: No.

VB: No.

AB: No, they didn't. D'you know, I've no idea when the Sunday cinema came out. I would have thought it was after the war.

VB: After the war, yeah.

AB: I'm pretty certain it was. A lot of opposition, too.

VB: That's what I was thinking. Yes.

AB: Yeah. A lot of opposition.

VB: Right.

AB: People were. [pause 3 seconds] More people went to church in those days in the smaller communities, you know. And erm, South Harrow was quite a large Baptist, and they were much more strict in those days.

VB: I see. Yeah. Were you Church of England or something?

AB: I'm Church of England, yes. Roxeth Church.

VB: Right.

AB: Which was up Roxeth Hill.

VB: Yeah.

AB: We were quite a tight community, in some ways. We thought so as kids. We knew everybody.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Everybody knew everybody. Eh, I mean, I moved down to Hampshire and eh, just along the road a lady, she came and saw... She said, "You're..." 'Cause my name's Bird, so I've been known as Dick, Dickie for a long time.

VB: Oh, I'm sure. Yeah.

AB: And of course, my proper name was Ashley. So she said, "You're Ashley Bird." I thought, oh, somebody knows my name, you know. And erm, she lived down the road opposite erm, the Odeon cinema in those days. It was a very tight community. Your mums and fathers knew everybody.

VB: Right.

AB: It was like a village. But it was pretty, I mean I look at South Harrow today and the suburbs.

VB: 'Cause the Curnicks were telling me it was quite rural around there, with farms.

AB: Oh, yes. Well, the, yeah, the farms just below.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And of course, on Saturday afternoons in the summer erm, all the London schoolchildren and churches used to come on their outings. At South Harrow station they would put up their big banners like the unions do, you know.

VB: Yeah.

AB: And march from the station down through to a park down the road.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Well, it's Alexandra Park now. He used to let out these, put up marquees for these kids. And we would stand on the opposite side and shout at them, "Cockney kids!" [laughs] Oh, and coming down. And it was very rural. I mean the first bus service from South Harrow, still runs through here, 114. Erm, I mean the camber on the road was very noticeable in those days. And erm, [pause 3 seconds] the buses during the winter had a difficulty getting up onto the camber, to give it full. And they all had solid wheels, they all had solid wheels. And the open tops. Very [inaudible]--

VB: Yeah.

AB: But of course, as kids we loved travelling on them to go to the Coliseum or anything. It was only a penny, you see, to go to Harrow. And you could always scrounge a penny off someone. And we'd sit up there and if it was raining we'd pull these mac things over us. Eh, travelling, you know, you

could always, your grandma would always give you a penny. So if you cadge thruppence off your mother, you'd go to the cinema and a penny to get the bus. And you'd walk home.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Seems so ridiculous these days.

VB: Did you spend a lot of time outdoors then, as a child?

AB: Yes. Yes. Once I joined this. I had a gang across the road and we had our usual trappings. We had old buses, that's right, old buses. That's where the pub is there at the bottom of where the Curnicks are. There's a pub in there. Well that used to belong to the local butcher.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And he was rich. And he bought these old buses. No wheels, just, 'cause they were old. And then when I joined the church club, we spent most of our time. Ah, Saturday afternoons we always used to go out to Ruislip.

VB: Uhuh.

AB: To the reservoir, as we called it. And that was open in those days. You didn't have to pay. And you walked round there.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Erm. Hire a rowing boat. Did that one day and we couldn't get back. [laughs]

VB: [laughs]

AB: [inaudible]. But erm. [pause 5 seconds] As I say, the cinema really was our only, because there were no music halls round here. The provinces were a lot better off, I think, in a provincial town. They had their, well if you go further north, not for much for the south.

VB: Uhuh.

AB: Go further north. They had their, their music halls which were popular.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And the small cinemas. You didn't have that down here. You had to go to London for any of your entertainment. And we really couldn't afford that. Used to go regular to the theatre. Saw a lot of good stuff, I suppose. I can't remember. You'd save up three and six. That would be about seven or eight pound today. But it was a lot of money in those days. Three and six.

VB: Yes.

AB: Three and six. You'd scrounge it together somehow. The pictures were always, as we'd call it, the pictures were always, "Mum, have you got thruppence?" And you'd, and there were quite a few old ladies round, you know. You could go and their [odd jobs?] and they'd give you a penny and you'd finish up with about sevenpence and you were, you know. You were onto a good thing.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Ah. Well as I say, I hope this will make sense.

VB: Oh, absolutely. I mean it's a--

AB: Good. I haven't wasted your time.

VB: No, not at all. Far from it.

AB: No, no.

VB: It's really interesting.

AB: What do you finish up doing with this material? Putting it into erm--

VB: Erm, well what we're going to do is. They're building up a sort of archive of these tapes.

AB: Yes.

VB: Which will probably be kept in Glasgow University, ideally. And we'll probably end up doing a book about cinema in the thirties. And we're also thinking about using this new technology in CD ROMs, which I didn't know anything about--

AB: No.

VB: Until quite recently. I still don't know. [laughs] But eh, apparently you can erm, put all sorts of material onto these computer discs. So, you can have, they could have, say, clips from films of the thirties. Erm, and people talking about the cinema. And get it all onto this computer disc and--

AB: It goes on the Internet, type of thing.

VB: That sort of thing, yeah.

AB: And you'd be able to plug into that. Yeah.

VB: It's completely baffling to me at the moment. [laughs] I'm hoping to find out about it.

AB: Yeah. My granddaughter was working yesterday and her computer went up the wall. And we went down and her father tried, but erm, but she was lost. I said, what are you going to do? Well, she said, till I get it repaired, she said, I got to do it all, erm, freehand, you know. She said, oh, dear. You know. You can't do this research. I suppose you have to use a computer, do you? Yes, yeah.

VB: Yes. But I mean, I've, my computer skills are fairly basic. I mean, it's just typing in and I can file away things in it and that sort of thing, but. Apparently you can get, erm, quite easy packages that guide you through the CD ROM stuff so--

AB: Yeah, yeah.

VB: Hoping we can do that.

AB: You begin to feel left behind. I've got a few investments. Not very much.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And the investment people sent me a video, [laughs] on Monday, yesterday. Was it? Yeah, yesterday, that's right. This thing came through the post. I haven't got a video player! [laughs] I said to my son, I said, "I've got a dirty film to show you."

VB: [laughs]

AB: He said, "What're you talking about, Dad?" I said, "Well, is your video working?" He said, "No." Because he's rebuilding his place. He put it all away because of the dust.

VB: Oh.

AB: So, I've no idea what's on this video. [laughs] When you get old you feel completely left, oh!

VB: I don't know. I mean, it's when you see children of this sort of age probably know more about it.

AB: Yeah. That's right. You know. I mean, I can't even use a video. But all the kids can, can't they?

VB: Yeah.

AB: But erm. [pause 4 seconds] It's a very strange feeling because, I mean I'm telling you about the thirties.

VB: Mhm.

AB: When I was very young. But you seem to lose track in your mind of the middle bits. Coming back from the war, you can, I can remember so much about the war. Spent all my time abroad. Erm, but after that, it seems that one moment you were sort of thirty and there seemed to be, now, there seems to be to me, only in the last, [pause 2 seconds] twenty years or fifteen years of my working life. I mean, I retired in '81 at sixty-four. I can remember most of that bit. But the bit before and how we lived, you really got to dig your memory.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Because it. You were so involved in the living. You, just getting your money and scraping through, I don't know. All of a sudden you went from when you were thirty-five, forty. Next thing

you know you're sixty- odd. And then since I've retired, I mean, fourteen years this year, fourteen years last month, yeah, erm, it's just gone, just gone. It's disappeared.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And my wife's been dead eight years this year. It's just disappeared the time. Erm, the time element now, erm, to me... [pause 3 seconds] And my friend. I've got a lady friend who lives in the next block to me.

VB: Mhm.

AB: And I have her over to lunch on a Sunday. And it seems that forever I'm saying on Thursday, "Right. What are we going to have for lunch on Sunday?" And she says, "What, Thursday again?"

VB: [laughs]

AB: You know. As we don't do anything, we really don't do anything now. She's pretty bad in her health. I get out to do the shopping. I do my shopping. I don't do anything else. Last year I was getting up to London a lot more but I don't like leaving her, 'cause her health is so bad at the moment.

VB: Mhm.

AB: But erm, we don't look at a bit of television. Not a lot. Life is sort of whiff! I mean, I went up to London yesterday and I liked it, I liked it, because there were things I moved back here for is these free passes. You see, I can get on and off buses.

VB: Yeah.

AB: I mean, they're just fantastic, as far as I'm concerned.

VB: Mhm.

AB: Down in the provinces, you can't... I don't know about your part of the world. How the old people get around up there.

VB: They have the same system. The passes.

AB: Yeah. These are completely free. Whereas down in Hampshire, we used to get £14 a year. I used to get a token.

VB: Yeah.

AB: Well the bus fare into erm, Winchester, now is, I think, down there, about £2.86. Something like that, return. Ahh, a bit strange. Once I got up here and got this, I can go anywhere. And even on British Rail, right in the London area, I understand I can.

VB: That's great.

AB: You know. It gives you such a sense of freedom. I mean, I don't care where the bus goes. I just think, "Oh yeah. That'll do." And I know I can get another one going somewhere else. I mean, sometimes I go on six buses, you know, and don't even think about it.

VB: Yeah.

AB: That's the entertainment to me now. But my friend is, [pause 2 seconds] got beyond that, I'm afraid.

VB: Mhm.

AB: It's sad. There you go. That's life, isn't it? [pause 4 seconds] Well. How're we doing?

VB: Very well, I think.

AB: Quarter past twelve. Not bad. Yeah. Have you got anything else to suggest to me?

VB: Erm. Well actually, one thing I was thinking was erm. I'm one of these people that, I know the minute I go home I'll be thinking, I wish I'd asked him this or I wish I'd asked him more about that. You know. I was wondering if maybe we could meet up again.

AB: Yes, yes. What erm--

VB: Whenever you--

AB: Yes. What's your timetable?

VB: Well, next week I'm pretty much booked up. But the week after that, I think I'm fairly flexible again. Erm.

AB: Where are we? Eh, days and dates.

VB: I've got a sort of master plan here, erm, which I fill in as I go along. It started off very neat. But, [laughs] over the last few weeks it's got a little less so. So this is the 12th.

AB: Oh, yes. The 12th. So there's the 19th. Or the 18th is the next week.

VB: Yeah.

AB: The following week after, that's 20 odd.

VB: That's the, starting the 24th.

AB: Yeah, yeah. I should think so. Well, you've got my telephone number.

VB: Yes, I do.

AB: If you'd like to, you know.

VB: Is there any day that suits you best?

AB: Erm, not really. I can usually work around it. I normally go. I don't know wha-- Well, I get my pension on Thursday so I usually go shopping. [laughs] That's it.

VB: Yeah.

AB: But other than that, erm, you know.

VB: I mean, we could make it the Wednesday again if that suits you.

AB: Yes, that's okay. Yes, yeah.

VB: Erm, that would be--

AB: How are you getting about down here?

VB: Public transport.

AB: Public, yeah.

VB: Which I find very good. It's, I haven't had any problems so far.

AB: No. In fact, now, public transport to me down here is very good. There's so many buses. You can get so many places, you know.

VB: Yes. It's been quite good as well, the place that I'm staying. Some of the... [pause 2 seconds]
I've been visiting people in their homes and quite a few people have been within walking distance as well.

AB: Yeah, yeah.

VB: So that's been nice. I'm getting to see a bit of the area.

AB: You're at the back of that part.

VB: Chandos Avenue. It's off the new [inaudible].

AB: Ah, I know. Yes, yes.

VB: Not far from the North Harrow station, actually.

AB: Ah, yes, yes. Well the 183 bus comes through.

[End of Interview]