

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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* Fakenham, Norfolk, 21 November 1995: Valentina Bold interviews Hilda Bennett

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* HB= Hilda Bennett, VB=Valentina Bold

* Notes: Solo interview with Hilda Bennett at Cranmer House; Mrs Bennett was previously interviewed with two other clients of Cranmer House on 24 October 1995; Sound Quality: Fair; 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.

[Start of Tape One]

[Start of Side A]

[recording starts; voices in background]

VB: I took a note of some of the stars that you mentioned. That I was wanting to ask a bit more about. Actually the first thing I should maybe ask is, could I ask what your second name is, because I--

HB: Mary.

VB: Thanks very much.

[someone brings in refreshments]

OP: There you are my dear.

VB: Nice to see you again.

OP: Pardon?

VB: Nice to see you again. Keeping well?

OP: [laughs] I recognised you when I saw you.

VB: Ah.

OP: They said you were Irish.

VB: Scottish.

OP: A Scot.

VB: That's right. [laughs]

HB: [laughs]

VB: Close enough. [laughs] Erm, so it's erm Hilda Mary?

HB: Hilda Mary.

VB: Yeah. And is that your last name?

HB: Bennett.

VB: That's great. That's great. Thanks very much. Erm so, as I say. you mentioned quite a number of film stars when we were talking before.

HB: Yes. [laughs]

VB: And I wondered if there were particular things that you liked about a film star. Were there particular qualities that erm--

HB: We-ell erm, I don't know about that. I used to go for the dresses. And their hairstyles.

VB: Yeah.

HB: You know. Shoes and--

VB: I brought along erm a book that we had in Glasgow of stars and films from 1938--

HB: Oh a-ah.

VB: I thought you might like to have a look at that.

HB: Oh. [pause 4 seconds] 'Course it's a long time ago now you see.

VB: It sure is.

HB: There's Gable you see.

[pause 2 seconds]

VB: Was Gable someone that you particularly liked or?

**HB: Well, to be truthful, I never went for the men. That used to be the women and their dresses.
[laughs]**

VB: A-ah. That's interesting.

HB: [laughs] Yes.

VB: So was it the way the films looked? Was that something that--

HB: Well that was, I suppose something that coloured, I suppose, that used to attract you. Yeah. All these beautiful clothes. I used to go and get carried away. Really and truly. I thought that was me in there, you know. [laughs]

VB: Really!

HB: And I used to like cowboys and all that business.

VB: Ah. Any favourite stars in the cowboy films?

HB: No, I can't think really, to be honest. [pause 5 seconds; voices in background] Tom Mix and oh, Gracie Fields. There's another one you see.

VB: Was Gracie Fields someone you particularly liked?

HB: No, I suppose, [pause 1 second] well you never really seen her much on the pictures. I didn't go much for her because she was more in the past. You know, she weren't so modern. You know, her version of like, singing or anything, you know.

VB: That's interesting.

HB: That never kind of appealed to me, that kind of thing. That was eh... [pause 2 seconds] Bing Crosby and that. He was another one wasn't he? [pause 3 seconds]

VB: Do you think then there were certain stars that might have appealed more to say your parents' generation or? 'Cause that's an interesting--

HB: Well Gracie Fields were--

VB: Yeah.

HB: More my mother's time I should think.

VB: Yeah.

HB: You know. But eh, no, not for me, I couldn't. [pause 1 second] I liked the crooning you know. Where that used to... [laughs] A nice foxtrot or something like that.

VB: Yeah. 'Cause you mentioned Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.

HB: Yes! Oh yes. We used to go to queue up for that.

VB: Ah.

HB: You see, and Joan Blondell, she was another one you see.

VB: What was it about her do you think that--

HB: Well I think that's just 'cause they used to wear lovely clothes and [pause 2 seconds] you know, something nice about it. Really you would think to yourself, oh, wouldn't that be lovely, to wear something like that. [laughs]

VB: Mhm. I mean did you model the way you dressed yourself on the stars then?

HB: Oh yes. You used to copy the hairdos and everything like that. Us girls did you know. I mean you used to go there, you know. Yeah. [pause 2 seconds]

VB: Certainly looking at a page like that, I see exactly what you mean.

HB: Mhm.

VB: The beautiful hairstyles.

HB: Yes. And you used to go for the makeup, you see, as well. How they used to make up. [pause 5 seconds]

VB: Did your parents go much to the cinema?

HB: No. No they didn't. In their time they didn't believe in that really, you know.

VB: I see.

HB: No. That was mostly when I was about, what? Well I used to go and see all cowboys and that when we was children, you know. Youngsters.

VB: Mhm.

HB: But as we got older, you know, about sixteen and that, well, we used to go for the Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire and all them.

VB: So your tastes changed quite a bit.

HB: Yeah. But the parents, you see, they didn't believe in that.

VB: What was it, can I ask, what was it that your father worked at?

HB: Well they didn't, yeah. They was more religious in them times.

VB: Ah I see. Yeah.

HB: You see. I mean, see, I used to go to church, well chapel, like eh, three times a day--

VB: Yeah.

HB: On a Sunday. And eh, well they tried to stop the pictures in Wells [referring to Wells next the Sea]. Where we were.

VB: Did they?

HB: Yes. Because eh, they thought that wasn't [loud voice in background], you know, that was a [weakness?] and all like that business.

VB: That's interesting.

HB: Yeah.

VB: So there was quite a lot of hostility to the pictures.

HB: Oh yes. Yes. Oh yeah, they didn't believe in that.

VB: Mhm.

HB: Yeah.

VB: How did that make you feel when you went? Did you... [pause 2 seconds]

HB: Well we didn't, I didn't eh I never used to take much notice of it to be honest.

VB: Yeah. [laughs]

HB: I used to, I'd still want to go. And I used to get my own way and I used to go. [pause 4 seconds]

VB: Did you have any favourites out of the stars? I mean favourite film stars or?

HB: No, I couldn't say that. [pause 2 seconds] It's a long time ago now.

VB: Of course.

HB: Yeah.

VB: Did you ever get any of the film magazines? 'Picturegoer' or--

HB: No. No, they weren't eh. Well we never had the money for it in any case.

VB: Yeah.

HB: Money was short in them days when we was young you see.

VB: Yeah.

HB: Wasn't like it is today.

VB: Mhm. Were you living far from the centre of Wells or was it quite easy for you to get to the pictures?

HB: Oh yes. 'Bout eh... [pause 2 seconds] Well from here, what, over them buildings over there.

VB: Oh.

HB: Not far.

VB: Not far at all.

HB: No. That's right in Wells you see.

VB: 'Cause I don't know the town myself so I was eh--

HB: No. Have you ever been there?

VB: I haven't, no.

HB: Oh it's a nice place. That's a seaside resort really.

VB: What sort of size was it in the thirties? Was it--

HB: Well there wasn't as many as there is now--

VB: Mhm.

HB: People. And there was no amusements. No arcades or anything like that on the quay. And when Sunday come, well, all the shops were shut. You know. And if you wanted anything well you had to go without 'cause there was nothing there but... [pause 2 seconds]

VB: Mhm.

HB: There was just the paper shops. And they was open for two hours and then they'd shut.

VB: Yeah.

HB: You see.

VB: Yeah. But there were a couple of cinemas in the town I think you were saying.

HB: Yes. There was. Yes. But eh [pause 2 seconds] most of the people, well the older generation, they used to well, go for a walk evening times in the summer. Then they used to come home and go to bed! 'Bout nine o'clock. And I had to be in at nine.

VB: Ah! [laughs]

HB: [laughs]

VB: So, were you quite good about that? Or did you ever eh...

HB: Oh, many a time I used to try to creep in but no! No way.

VB: What about dancing? Were there places to go?

HB: Oh yes. Now when the war come we went to Stiffkey camp. They had a camp there with [airforce?]. Americans, all sorts. And that's where, well, most of my friends all married or married somebody from Stiffkey camp you see.

VB: Ah. I see.

HB: They all come down. And my husband, he come from, from abroad and he was then coming out, at the end of the war and eh I met him there, you see. 'Cause he was a... [pause 2 seconds] He was one of the Desert Rats [referring to the North Africa campaign in World War Two].

VB: Ah I see.

HB: And erm, he was out there for four-and-a-half years. And eh this was just a holiday really from all the, before they got to, you know, before they come out. So erm we all met and then we all got married.

VB: That was a nice holiday for you. [laughs]

HB: [laughs]

VB: That's lovely.

HB: Yes. Yeah.

VB: So it was quite different though before the war, was it?

HB: Oh yes.

VB: Ah I see.

HB: That was very quiet. Very small.

VB: Yeah.

HB: [You know, around here?]. I don't think really, if there hadn't have been the war, half of us wouldn't have got married because there weren't the men--

VB: Mhm.

HB: You know. About then. Not in Wells anyhow.

VB: Mhm.

HB: Yeah. [pause 5 seconds]

VB: I mean, how did it make you feel then, going to the, the pictures before the war? Was it...

HB: Well you used to always stand in the queue you know. And eh, well get very excited to go in there and, you know, see all this on the pictures. Thought that was a wonderful thing 'cause there was no television in them days, you know. So we thought, that's wonderful, you know.

VB: I mean it must've been quite different watching a film like some of these Hollywood pictures compared to what your life was like at the time.

HB: Oh yes. It was. Very glamorous.

VB: Yeah.

HB: As you say. Yes. Yes, sometimes all of us we used to go in there in the afternoons and didn't come out for, when that closed, about ten.

VB: Really! [laughs]

HB: [laughs] Used to sit in there for threepence! [laughs]

VB: Good day out!

HB: [laughs] Yeah.

VB: So was it a continuous programme then?

HB: Yes. On the Saturday.

VB: Ah. Yeah.

HB: Yeah. Used to go in there. Oh we used to think that was wonderful you know.

VB: Did you get dressed up to go to the pictures?

HB: Well in them days, you see, with the erm [pause 2 seconds] with the boys about we used to put a little lipstick on. And I used to wear high heels. I could, I could wear the shoes. If I ran in high-heeled shoes like this I used to borrow my sister's you know. [laughs]

VB: Aw.

HB: If I walked with them on they nearly killed me. [laughs]

VB: [laughs] Ah. [pause 2 seconds] 'Cause it must have--

HB: Good times they were really. We didn't have a lot but they, they were enjoyable you know.

VB: Mhm.

HB: Different for children today. I mean to say all the computers, television, videos and that.

VB: Yeah.

HB: It's not the same.

VB: 'Cause I was thinking when you were saying about the sort of size of Wells then. You must've seen most of the people you knew when you went to the pictures.

HB: Oh yes. 'Cause that was a small community, you see.

VB: Was it a bit of a sort of meeting place then for you?

HB: Well for the younger generation, yeah. We used to all turn up there sometime or other, you see. I mean there was no tea places or anything like that then you see.

VB: Mhm.

HB: No, as I say, we all had a good time. We all enjoyed ourselves. But that was when the war came and then the, all the... We did have a good time. In school we had a good time. You know. [pause 2 seconds] Yeah. [pause 3 seconds] That's all a thing of the past now isn't it?

VB: Mhm.

[pause 3 seconds]

VB: Was it the sort of glamorous films? Were these the ones that you really enjoyed or did you--

HB: Oh yes. I used to enjoy, well, I used to enjoy all of them really and truly. But I did used to enjoy the, you know, all the beautiful clothes and that.

VB: Mhm.

HB: But you see, we couldn't afford anything like that in any case. Tried to copy their hairstyles and how they're made up you know. But I used to love the dancing. [pause 2 seconds]

VB: I mean what was it about the films of someone like erm Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire, that made them so good, do you think?

HB: Well they were good weren't they? But I couldn't tell you anything else about them but eh I used, well we all used to sit there and sigh. You know, when we see them come on. Well you'd hear a pin drop. [laughs]

VB: Aw.

HB: Yeah. So quiet. [pause 4 seconds] That's all I can tell you my woman, anyhow.

VB: Right [laughs] As I say it's good of you to agree to talk to me some more. It sounds from what you're saying as if it was something that you very much enjoyed.

HB: Oh yes. 'Cause there was nowhere else to go in Wells.

VB: Yeah.

HB: There was nothing else to do. Not when we was all young you know--

VB: Yeah.

HB: And left school and went out to work. There was nothing else to do.

VB: Did you go much after you were married?

HB: Well all depends if I had a babysitter or something like that--

VB: Yeah.

HB: You see.

VB: How many children do you have?

HB: Three.

VB: Three.

HB: Got one son, he's a doctor, a heart specialist in Australia in Canberra.

VB: Ah!

HB: Yeah. They come home about every, every year. They come up home. And eh their children, they've got two, Andrew and Mandy. And Mandy's twenty-three and Andrew's twenty-one.

VB: Mhm.

HB: And they're both at university still.

VB: Ah I see.

HB: Yeah.

VB: Yeah.

HB: And eh, Colin, he's in Cheshire. He's doing well for himself. He's with the Anglian Windows. He's the director of it. He's doing, he's done well and I've got one living in Wells. Raymond. He's a painter and decorator. Yeah. So they're all...

VB: Scattered about by the sound of it.

HB: Yes. Yeah. Yes I've got eh, then I've got Colin. Colin, he's got two grand-, eh I've got two grandchildren with him. Boy and a girl. And two little boys with Raymond so... [pause 2 seconds]

VB: Did your husband stay in the Forces then?

HB: Pardon?

VB: Did your husband stay in the Forces then? Or did he move into other work? And just...

HB: Yes. When he got to, when he come out of the Army he went to [be a] stoker, the gasworks--

VB: Mhm.

HB: For ten years. Yes and he went up to Sculthorpe base. And served up there. 'Cause he was a cook, in the Army.

VB: Ah I see.

HB: Yeah. And eh, oh yeah, he got certificates for all his cooking so of course he's learned me about that you see.

VB: Yeah.

HB: [laughs]

VB: Oh well! [laughs] That's someone to keep in with!

HB: Yeah. Yes. I can make mince look like chicken, or taste like chicken.

VB: That's a useful--

HB: Yes.

VB: A useful thing to be able to do.

HB: Yeah.

[pause 5 seconds]

VB: Well as I say, I thought I would bring that along and erm let you have a chance to see that.

HB: Yes. I mean that's all I can tell you my woman. It's all gone now. [pause 2 seconds] Bette Davis. She's another one you see.

VB: Was she someone that you particularly liked?

HB: Well they seem to be all the same really you know. They was, she was more or less in these 'Murder Mystery' affairs.

VB: Mhm.

[pause 4 seconds; voices in background]

HB: But eh... [pause 2 seconds] Deanna Durbin, she was another. Now she was a lovely singer. You see you used to sit there and watch her, you know, act and she was a good singer. She had a lovely voice.

VB: **Mhm. She's got a lovely smile as well hasn't she?**

HB: Yes. And Shirley Temple when she was a little girl.

VB: **Yeah.**

HB: [laughs]

[pause 3 seconds]

HB: Marlene Dietrich.

VB: **Did you like her?**

HB: Yes. In fact I liked all of them you know. All these younger, all these people what was in the acting trade.

VB: **Mhm. No one that you didn't take to?**

HB: No, I never thought. Just used to go. You know. [pause 2 seconds] Barbara Stanwyck. If you, remember all them lovely dresses you see.

VB: **Ah. Yes.**

HB: Lovely.

VB: **And the furs. It's so... [laughs]**

HB: Yes. All the furs.

VB: Yeah.

HB: Wishing that was us. [laughs]

VB: Yeah. I'll bet. [laughs]

HB: Lovely.

VB: Were you interested in the sort of lifestyle in the American films as well?

HB: No. I wasn't.

VB: No.

HB: I never did, you know, think anything about that. You knew you couldn't have anything like that.

VB: Ah.

HB: Not in them days. Too hard up. [pause 2 seconds] I mean to say, when I started work I was only, I only earned eh, well that'd be erm fifty pee now. But that was a half a crown then.

VB: Yeah.

HB: [laughs] Give your mother half and you have the rest.

VB: I suppose that's right. 'Cause when people talk about how much the pictures cost then, it sounds a little but I suppose out of a wage of that size it was--

HB: That was a lot.

VB: A lot of money, yeah.

HB: I mean to say erm threepence, we used to go in for a seat. There was four rows of that. Threepence. Used to be a nice seat for threepence.

VB: Mhm.

[loud voices in background]

HB: Well then there was a shilling, ninepence.

VB: Mhm.

HB: Shilling. One-and-six--

VB: Mhm.

HB: You see. Two-and-three, and three shillings for the back. [laughs]

VB: Aw.

[pause 5 seconds; voices in background]

VB: Don't know what's going on there.

[voices in background]

HB: They've been down the garden I think, to get the apples.

VB: Ah. It's very cold today actually, isn't it?

HB: It isn't very nice. Wasn't that lovely Saturday?

VB: Ah, it was gorgeous.

HB: Great one.

VB: Really was. Lovely.

HB: After Friday when we had all that snow.

VB: Yeah.

HB: Yeah. That was great.

[voices in background; pause 8 seconds]

HB: Yeah. That's how I... [pause 1 second] I can't tell you anything else now.

VB: Well thanks very much.

HB: Ain't been much of a help, have I?

VB: Well, you've been a lot of help to me. Thanks very much for talking to me.

HB: I thought you'd have been gone back to Scotland by now.

VB: Well I have. I've been gone and I've come back! [laughs]

HB: Aw I see.

VB: I was home for a week or so.

HB: Where you going now?

VB: I'm actually, I'm off to London erm, tomorrow. And I'll be talking to people there about their cinema memories as well.

HB: They'll have more to tell you than what I did. [laughs]

VB: Oh no. Not at all. Not at all. It'll be interesting to see if they, you know, like the same sort of stars and that.

HB: Yes.

VB: Well thanks very much for talking to me just now. It's very kind of you.

HB: S'all right. As I say I wasn't much of a help.

[End of Side A]

[End of Interview]