

Brian Cousins_1Key:

I: Interviewer
R: Respondent

I: **So can we start, Brian? But if you could just tell me your full name and your date of birth.**

R: Yeah. It's Brian Jeffrey Cousins, and I was born on 18th August 1947.

I: **And so you were born on the Lower High Street itself?**

R: Yes. I was born... It's 341 High Street now, but in those days it was 191 High Street. The numbers changed in '56/'57, something like that. But I was born upstairs in the back of the shop.

I: **Okay. And your family owned a business?**

R: Yeah. They ran a business. They didn't own the property, but they ran the business from there. It was my grandfather at the time. I've forgotten his name now. Oh, Joseph Cousins. And then my dad took it over after him.

I: **And the business was?**

R: Shoe repairs, mainly, but they sold lots of leather goods, and they used to supply, err, leather to other smaller shoe repairers throughout the Cotswolds. And people used to come and buy leather, come down from, you know, Stow-on-the-Wold, places like that, buy half a bend of leather and take it home, and stuff like that.

I: **And so given that your family, your extended family ran this business, would you say your family was comfortable, well off?**

R: Yes, fairly. Not well off, but comfortable. I can remember Bertie who used to work for us, Bert Russell who lived down St Paul's, he worked for us and I remember him telling me that... He said he was always grateful to the grandfather for keeping him on over the depression in the 30s. We must have had quite a decent business. Because when my dad was old enough, my dad used to drive my gramp's car in the evenings, and I think that was something, to own a car in those days.

I: **Yeah. So what was the name of the business?**

R: Cousins.

I: **It was called Cousins.**

R: Yeah.

I: **Right, okay. And that's still going today, isn't it, in another part of town?**

R: Yeah. My younger brother runs a business called Cousins of Cheltenham in Montpellier, with his wife.

I: **So what are your memories from your childhood of living in that area? What do you remember? What springs to mind?**

R: It was quite a close community down there when I was a child. I knew everybody around. They obviously knew us. I used to do errands for Mrs Pritchard, who was the widow of a hairdresser who lived a few doors down. I used to deliver papers from the paper shop opposite, Grays, the paper shop. But from... Well, I knew the Mudways. I went to school with one of the Mudways from down by the...

I: **That's the butchers, right?**

R: No, the Mudways, tent hire and removals, that sort of thing.

I: **Oh, right, okay.**

R: Graham used to run the business after his father, but that was down towards the railway bridge. I knew the Hiddlesees and obviously knew the Stanleys because I married one of the daughters. But everybody... In those days, there was no supermarkets. If you wanted a loaf of bread, you went across the road to Gardners; if you wanted a pound of sausages, you went out to the butchers, either the one opposite or the one down the road. And that's the thing... and everybody knew me, and everybody knew each other.

I: **And we've been told about the fact that there was... Like you said, you had everything you needed around you: greengrocers, butchers, fishmongers.**

R: Yeah, there was four greengrocers: Dimmer's, Davis', Stanley's... I just said I'm married to one of those. There was some other... I can't remember offhand. Butchers, there was Cyril Collins at the time, (unclear 00:04:14), Stafford's... There was the pork butcher down the road. There was Jerry Tutt's just up the High Street next to the bakery. The laundrette... I can remember that used to be a competitor of ours, Hewlin's, shoe repairman's, and we helped him move out, because when they moved out and the laundrette took over, we had some of the machinery off him. There used to be another shoe repairers just a few doors up next to (unclear 00:04:47), which was the wool shop and tweed shop.

I: **So Hewlin's, was it...? Even though they were a competitor there was no animosity there?**

R: Oh, no, no. They were good friends. And the other guy, Hinch, that was it. Hinch's. He often used to come in and... "Got any 2.5 inch rubber heels? I've run out." That sort of thing. My grandfather and dad used to supply a lot of other people, and some of the machinery my dad had, other smaller shoe repairers throughout the town didn't have, and they used to put them all in a sack and bring them to our dad. He used to do the stitching for them and things like that. It's unfortunate. I have seen the photograph, but I don't know where it's gone. There was a photograph of... Bert who used to work for us, my grandfather and great grandfather with a pile of army boots that high on our back lawn, from the... It must've been the First World War. They also

used to make leather straps in those days, from the early part of the century, for the biplanes. Because all the wings... It looks like string, but they were tied together with leather belts, and my grandfather used to... well, their business used to make a lot of those.

I: So your childhood, then... the first thing you remembered was that it was a quite nice community?

R: Yeah. I think partly what helped, if that's the right word, was my mother dying when I was young, and everybody gathered round her sort of thing. Because everybody knew each other, they knew what had happened, and...

I: They helped out.

R: Sort of, yeah.

I: Or they were there if you needed them.

R: I can remember Mrs Pritchard, who I mentioned earlier, who lived a few doors away. Of course, when I was younger, rationing was still on, and there was a lot of scarcity of lots of things. I can remember Mrs Pritchard making me an overcoat out of somebody's jacket, an adult jacket, and things like that. But yeah, it's funny, I can't remember the people's names now.

I: Well, yes. It's a long time ago.

R: Some of the people later became friends, like Arthur Hiddles, from Hiddles' fishmongers. He was what I would class a good friend, you know, years later and with the age difference. But in the 60s, things started to change, and people slowly disappeared.

I: Why do you think that was?

R: Well, more money. There was a lot more money around.

I: People moved out of the area?

R: Oh yeah, definitely. People started to move out... Well, before the... My grandpa, see, used to live over the shop, but before the war he brought one of the brand new houses down the (p.h. Arle 00:08:13) Road and later moved to Brooklyn Road, and all that was brand new then. They had already started. Of course, the war came along and put everything on hold for... not just five years, but more like 15 years. By the time the 60s came along, things were picking up again and people...

I: People moved out to bigger houses, gardens, driveways.

R: Yeah. I didn't see it, but by the end of the 60s, I think, that was when the High Street, the Lower High Street, went into decline. It was partly because of the loss of community and different things took over, that you wouldn't recognise it if you'd seen it now, compared to what it was when I was even a teenager in the 60s.

I: Yeah. So for instance, you said that before you came here, you walked down the High Street. Did you go down there very often?

R: Not a lot, no.

I: What did you think when you walked past?

R: Well, our particular shop is disgraceful.

I: Run down?

R: It's awful, the front. But you see, it's all private dwellings now. I would be interested to see it all again, but... strangely enough, I've seen... I was on some property website a year or two ago, and I saw a place and I thought, "I recognise that building," and it was what we used to call in the family the warehouse. It was an old brick building at the top of the garden that's been made into a small cottage, and it was up for sale. I emailed a picture of it to my brother in Exeter and I said, "Guess where that is," and he emailed me back straight away, "That's the old warehouse rebuilt." But I'd love to see what it's like. A bit of the history I can tell you of our building... I mentioned earlier when I was renovating the lounge above the shop, I took the old cast iron fireplace out, and a postcard dropped out from Mrs Robinson. But a lot of the brickwork and plaster fell down the chimney breast, and I investigated more, and there was a gap behind the chimney breast that I could put my hand through into. I thought, "Well, this chimney breast is an afterthought." On further investigation, I pulled some more plaster back and I could see a wooden frame. It was built over a doorway. There was a doorway through to next door. I could see... the plaster was all daub and wattle. I put a bradawl through and I could see the people in the office upstairs next door. The wall was only four inches thick, just a timber frame building. I spoke to dad about it, and he said, "Oh yes, at the top of our stairs was a big arched doorway." Stained glass, he said, when he was a child. It was a stained glass doorway that was blocked up. Apparently our building was the living quarters of next door, which was a hospital. And it's where the aerial people are now, but that used to be a hospital many years ago.

I: Oh god, that must've been way back.

R: So my dad says. And where our place was, was the living quarters for the nurses. But the back end of our shop, I think was later than the front. The front is all timber frame. I've been up in the loft and there's beams like that just holding it together.

I: Really old beams, yeah?

R: Every time... They've stopped it now, but when I was a kid, huge lorries used to go straight up through Cheltenham, from the gasworks end straight up to Charlton Kings, and if you had a big heavy lorry go by, all the windows in the building would crackle, because the whole place used to kind of rock. Yeah, I think the front part of the shop is part of the original High Street.

I: I wanted to ask you a bit more about what you said about when you were growing up, and there was a nice sense of community, everyone knew each other. What do you remember? One of the interesting things about the area is that even now it has the reputation for being one of the poorer parts of town, and back then it did as well, didn't it? So what do

you remember about what the people in the area lived like? Was it that poor, from what you can remember?

R: Well, we considered... Because of the business, we had a car even when I was a little kid. We had a car. It was still quite something then. But you didn't consider yourself you were better than the rest. We appreciated the advantage. But we did live somewhat hand to mouth. My father used to run the thrift club, (unclear 00:13:45) [coughs]. He started that just after he got demobbed, after the war. At its peak, he had 350+ members of all the local people, used to go in the pub and give him half a crown a week or whatever it was in those days, and our dad used to... We used to dread it actually as children, because him and my uncle who worked at Cheltenham and Gloucester Building Society, they used to have to sort - he was a trustee of it - they used to have to sort out all the money, and it used to take them a week. You'd all have to be quiet, because he'd be counting money all the time. But without that, people's Christmases wouldn't have existed, because of the saving. But it was a lot of...

I: So what was the club called?

R: It was the Royal Oak thrift club.

I: The thrift club?

R: Yeah.

I: And so all the locals used to put their savings into it for Christmas?

R: Yeah, just for Christmas, yeah. It was the Christmas club or thrift club. They used to have little raffles to build it up, and any dividend would be shared out equally. Like, if you put £5 a week in and I put £1 a week in, we'd both get the same dividend. The idea was the better off would help the less well off. But without those kind of things in those days, I don't think people would've had any money, because it was always hand to mouth. Even... I can remember a friend of mine lived further down. We were apprentices together. And he said, "I've got to get home to give my wage packet, otherwise we won't have any tea." It was still like that. There was no credit, you walk into Sainsbury's with a credit card. The main one that he used to supply us for our groceries was... There was one just next to Mrs Pritchard for a while, but they closed down and (unclear 00:15:54). The one would've been Green's, Mason and Green's as it later became. You never had (s.l. tick 00:16:05) or anything like that. It was always cash. Yeah, our main Christmas presents used to be our school uniform. You might have one good toy, but everything else was... And you were glad to get it.

I: And one of the things that the other people we've spoken to have talked about a lot is the fact that kids played outside all the time.

R: Oh, yeah. Well, we had a... We didn't play outside in the High Street because it was too dodgy, but we had a large back garden. And other people used to come... They used to be... The butchers across the road, they had three kids; they used to come over and play. In the Royal Oak, they had two kids; they used to come over to us and play in the back garden. There used to be some young people up Normal Terrace as it's called - it was Beckinsale's Alley then. They used to play in our garden and that sort of thing. Plus when I

was... earliest memories I can remember. The big yard at the back... I think it's Ebley Tyres at the bottom, on the Swindon Road, just over there... Well, that used to be Hinton's. It was a wholesaler for vegetables, and they used to go from there straight through into the High Street. We used to roam around there in the yards and everything, hide in the sheds. It was a lot different then; there was no health and safety.

I: So you said that playing down the High Street was dodgy. Was that because of the traffic?

R: Yeah, you wouldn't do that. But having said that, I was still quite young when they said, "Go across to (unclear 00:18:04) - as it was called then - the bakery, or pop down to the butchers." Never anybody to see you across the road. But you wouldn't play on the High Street.

I: So you said that you didn't really have to leave the area very much. Do you remember what the other parts of Cheltenham were like? Or leaving Lower High Street and seeing the Promenade for the first time, for instance?

R: Well, we didn't go up the Prom a lot when I was little because you had everything you wanted in the High Street. You'd go up to Woolworths, which is where... Well, I expect you know where Woolworths used to be. And on the corner where Primark is now, that was Wards. You'd always do Woolworths if you wanted something cheaper, Wards was interesting, and the other one was Cavendish House, but that's all I remember, really.

I: So do you remember...? Because from what I've heard from other people who lived in the area like you, they said you didn't really go to that part of town almost because the people were very different, and they never came to...

R: Oh, yeah. Well, I can remember my father telling me that you weren't allowed to go up the Prom unless you had your Sunday best on, and that was a fact; it wasn't a rumour. Even when I was an apprentice gas fitter in the 60s...

I: That was still the case?

R: It wasn't the case, but a lot of people still thought it was. I used to go to their houses. "What are you knocking on the front door for? Go round the back. Tradesmen go round the back." You couldn't walk through the front of their house. There was a lot of people like that in Cheltenham. What was the saying they said about Cheltenham? Poor, proud and pretty, was like our side, and that was somebody's description of... not the rich Cheltonians; our side.

I: But there were two very different sides of the town then, weren't there?

R: Yes. Well, my gran lived down St Paul's, just down in Larput Place. She was in service when she was younger, until the First World War broke out, and then she worked in the munitions factory, which she was very proud of. She knew her place. She was very... I don't know what they call them. Chambermaid or something like that. But you... I can remember my (p.h. grandmother Elaine 00:20:49) looking up to my dad's side - that was my mother's mum - looking up to my dad's side of the family. "Well, they're doing

well because he's in business." And having said that, just an aside, that's how I got into Dunalley Street School, because my dad was in business. Otherwise I'd have gone to St Paul's School.

I: Right

R: So they were very... They say about people moving house and that nowadays to get into a school, even to infants and junior school, but it still happened in my day.

I: Right, okay. so you went to the school based on the standard of your family.

R: Dunalley could pick and choose who they had. If you didn't make it, you went to St Paul's. So because my father was in business, or the family was in business...

I: It got you in.

R: Yeah. It didn't do me any good [laughs].

I: Did you ever feel like being from that area, or people from that area had any disadvantages in things like finding work? Did they get looked down on?

R: No. Well, I never felt that. Again, I think it's partly because if you grow up around the Lower High Street, a lot of the side streets... I just walked up King Street, and it's changed a bit, but that was really poor... But because we lived in the High Street and had a shop, we had a business, we were sort of... And the name was known in the town to a certain extent. So we had that little advantage. We weren't really any better off, because the conditions in our shop were awful. They hadn't changed since my dad was a boy, when I grew up. We didn't have a bathroom until I was 14. Like a lot of people, we didn't have a fridge until I was 15, but most people didn't then. At school, my contemporaries at school lived in council property... at least they had a bathroom, you know. And yet, because we were in business, there was a slightly unsaid... I don't know, unsaid snobbery. I didn't think it at the time, but looking back I suppose there was.

I: Okay. Because some of the other people I've spoken to have said how they would be careful who they told where they were from, in case that might stop them getting a job... if they're from that part of time.

R: Yeah. Well, some of it was quite poor. We were no different, as I said, but it never stopped me getting a job or anything. I don't know. I was kind of knowing... I started work on British gas and my father knew people on there; he was friends with people. Not that it was him that got me the job, but I didn't have a problem.

I: So one of the other things the area has a reputation for is that perhaps it's... particularly now, you get the impression that people that don't go there very often think it's a bit dodgy, a bit dangerous. Was it...?

R: It could be, because... My wife could tell you. She used to live opposite the Shakespeare, and you'd get the gypsies. There was often fights in the Shakespeare. But because we were just up a little bit.

I: **And you're not really that far, really.**

R: No, it's only 100 yards. But there were more fights the further you got. You often see fights outside... I can remember seeing them outside the bar of the Royal Oak sometimes, but it was never that bad. The worst place you could go to was further up the High Street, actually, the Five Alls. That was the worst place in town. I don't know what it's called now; it was just off the churchyard.

I: **Oh, okay. Is that what's the Two Pigs now?**

R: Two Pigs, yeah; that was the Five Alls. I think it was the... No, it wasn't. I got the name wrong. I can't think of the name. But that pub was really rough.

I: **But there were a lot more pubs back then, weren't there?**

R: Oh my giddy aunt, I was saying some somebody the other day... When I was... I'd finished my apprenticeship, so it was the late 60s, and I missed the train over to Gloucester to go to night school, the... Well, it's part of this now.

I: **Oh, the (unclear 00:25:58) college?**

R: The one in Brunswick Road. I missed the train, and my mate says, "Come on, let's have a drink in the Landsdown across the road." And we walked up to the Royal Oak, but we had a drink in every pub from down the Gloucester Road and up the Lower High Street. By the time we got to the Royal Oak we could barely stand. There was a pub on every street corner. I tried to name them all the other day. I can't. But there was an awful lot of pubs. Even up the side streets there were pubs. There was one up King Street, one up Malvern Street, etc.

I: **I've even heard stories that on King Street, for instance, there was one either end and one in the middle.**

R: There was one in the middle and one on the far end. I can't remember one this end, because it used to be... On the corner of King Street you had what was the Caledonian, just across the road, and that was a lot of Irishmen in there. They were sympathetic to the IRA in the 60s and 70s. But the Caledonian... I can't think of the one halfway down, but on the corner... both corners of the High Street end was Camlyn's the cycle shop on one corner and Old Acres the agricultural feed merchant on the other corner. So there wasn't a pub there. But there was... They might be getting mixed up with what was the King's Head, just down from the Royal Oak.

I: **So do you think...? I mean, a lot of people from other parts of Cheltenham didn't come into that area very much.**

R: No, they wouldn't need to.

I: **But from what I hear, they wouldn't want to either. Is that right?**

- R: Yeah. It was always regarded as the poor end of town, and therefore they wouldn't go. We always regarded the Lower High Street, from what they called Foster's Corner, the corner of St George's Street down. Now it's classed from Primark down. But the (unclear 00:28:02) from there.
- I: **Did people ever refer to it as Lower Dockham?**
- R: Lower Dockham, yeah.
- I: **Your area?**
- R: Yeah, Lower Dockham.
- I: **Because this has been a matter of some debate, you see, because some former residents say, yeah, that area from what they call Dick's Corner as well...**
- R: Dixon's Corner, yeah.
- I: **From there to the bridge, all past there, was Lower Dockham. But some people say Lower Dockham is the area starting at the gasworks.**
- R: Yeah. I think that's the official (unclear 00:28:31). We will always often call it Lower Dockham. You say Dixon's Corner... On St George's Street going up the High Street, the first one you come to is Foster's Corner, and the other side of St George's Street would've been Dixon's Corner. It was quite a big shop when I was a kid.
- I: **So you don't ever remember the area being particularly dangerous?**
- R: Not really dangerous, know.
- I: **Like you said, there were some punch-ups, people drunk...**
- R: You'd always be careful, a bit wary. Grove Street was always dodgy because around the house... Grove Street was dodgy. You never looked twice at the people coming out of the Shakespeare. Having said that...the tape's going.
- I: **That's okay.**
- R: I won't say, then.
- I: **No, go on. Don't worry. We don't have to tape...**
- R: Years later, I went out with... The landlord had two daughters there and I went out with both of them [laughs].
- I: **Well, we won't put that in the exhibition. Okay, because this is one of the things that we're trying to challenge in the work that we're doing that, yeah, the area has always been perhaps the poorer end of town, but that doesn't necessarily mean it was the most dangerous.**
- R: It wasn't dangerous, no. And I think during my day... I didn't realise at the time, and when I was old enough to realise it was pulled down, but the alleyways further down by where my wife grew up, the alleyways there were

proper slums, going back to how it was in the 20s. But a lot of them were derelict, and of course, it's pulled down now anyway. The Post Office sorting office is where some of it was. You wouldn't say it was dangerous, but it did attract the... If people were coming to the town - you used to get gypsies coming - they'd use the pubs down the Lower High Street - that caused a lot of the fights - and a lot of Irish would come over. You'd probably get more in the Lower High Street pubs and that. But basically, you'd see a few drunks. Having said that, the landlords were a lot different to the way they are now. I'll bet anybody under the age of 35 has never been told, "You've had enough to drink. It's time you went home." Because if you've got money in your pocket, you can stay until they've got every penny off you. But in my day, "You've had enough, out."

I: They were a bit more strict?

R: Oh yeah, yeah. I think it boils down to an old law... keeping (unclear 00:31:29). But yeah, of course the pubs didn't open as much either. People used to try and get as much down them as they could. But having said that, you used to get a lot of... the Irish particularly would be over here. I knew a lot of them. They would be over here. They had nothing else to do bar entertain themselves when they're not working.

I: So these obviously were here for work.

R: Yes, yeah.

I: So labourers. Did you work with many?

R: Well, we used to have them... When I worked at British Gas, they'd do digging the trenches to put the mains in and that sort of thing. A lot of them were Irish people. But they settled over here. In fact, my wife's half Irish. My mother-in-law came over here with her brothers after the war looking for work. A lot of them went to Coventry, obviously, to rebuild it, and the Midlands, but some drifted down to Cheltenham.

I: Same as... My grandparents were from Ireland and were in Northampton, so not far from... Okay. So when you think back now to having grown up in that area, how do you feel about it? Do you miss it? Are you nostalgic? What do you think?

R: I used to. I used to, and I used to think of my elder brother. He lives in Exeter now, moved there 12, 15 years ago, and he's a lot more sentimental than I am. I thought, "How can you...?" And he just cut himself off. But I was walking down the Honeybourne line one day, and I stopped on the railway bridge and paused, and I was just looking up the Lower High Street and I thought, "We could be stood on the moon now, looking at it, because it's nothing like it was." I would say there was only two people... there's only one person now, and that's the son in Ron Minett's tool shop. I can remember his father starting up, Ken Minett.

I: Right. That's why... And his other son owns the guitar shop.

R: Yeah, that's right. I don't know him so well, but I know Ron. And I knew Ken quite well, and I remember when he started up there. Ron's the only one I know down there, and Hiddles was probably one of the last old businesses to

close down. Of course, Arthur's died as well, so that will never (unclear 00:34:19).

I: So you say it's changed a lot. Does that make you feel sad that it's changed so much, or...?

R: I'm just aware of progress, I suppose, and things changing. But I walk up there and I'm amazed at the number of fast food shops. That's one of the things that amazes me about it, how they actually survive with so many, so close together.

I: A lot of it has to do with this lot.

R: Yes, I think I can... Yeah, I forgot that. But yeah, it's just life. You know, things change. I can remember when I was younger, because my grandparents lived in Brooklyn Road, I always wanted to live there. But now I could, I chose to live in Prestbury Road, because it's not the same, times move on.

I: So perhaps I can ask you one last question... It's a bit of a strange question. Why do you think that the history or the lives, the experiences of people who lived in that area matter? Do you think it's important for people from other parts of town to know about it?

R: Yes, because a lot of people... You know, if you were a visitor to Cheltenham and you wanted to find out about Cheltenham, all you're going to do is find out about the spa, the retired colonels coming to live here and all that, which even in... I can remember parts of Cheltenham being like that. But the people that made Cheltenham run, if you know what I mean... I worked as a gas fitter, and so I know a lot of people in the building industry. Not the big names, but the people who do the menial work, and my grandmother who was a scullery maid, or I don't know what she'd be called... but people like that made it work. It's the untold stories in a way. My grandmother was in service around Suffolk Square, in the big houses, and some of the stories she used to tell me... But I'll bet the people that lived there didn't even know her name, probably, and things like that. She used to be making the fires in the bedrooms and things like that. Down our end of town, there was... Maybe they were serving just the locals a lot, but my father's business, shoe repairing, he used to repair shoes for Melvilles, the two Melvilles - I think they were brothers - two high class shoe shops, one in the Strand, one in the Prom. (p.h. Charlton Allowances 00:37:25), which was one of the big shops... He did shoe repairs for Cavendish House. Any of these wealthy people used to go into these shops, but it would be my dad repairing their shoes without them knowing it. He used to repair all the shoes for the ladies' college, the gentlemen's college, Dean Close, all the posh private schools, and little did they know that little old Bertie who used to live down St Paul's there and our dad were the ones hammering away doing their work. That's what made Cheltenham tick, people like that. Not just my dad, but...

I: But like you say, a lot of people don't know about that. They just see the Regency side, the spa.

R: And the people with all the (unclear 00:38:19).

I: Right, okay. Well, thanks very much. We'll stop it there for now.

(End of recording)