

**MANX HERITAGE FOUNDATION.**

**ORAL HISTORY.**

**PORT ST. MARY.**

**Interviewees:** Anne and Aimé Kneen.

**Interviewed & recorded by:** Mr. Adrian Cain.  
**(2 tapes).**

**Date recorded:** 18<sup>th</sup> September 2000?

**Topic:** Life in Lime Street

**Anne** I was born in 1922 in 21 Lime Street, Port St. Mary. We moved away when I was, sorry, I've forgotten how old we were – but we came back here in 1950, after Mother's aunt had died and had left her the house.

**AC** What are your first memories of the house in Port St. Mary?

**Anne** One of them is when our grandfather died in an accident at the lifeboat house. It was lifeboat day and they put a maroon off, a new type, he put it off, and unfortunately it didn't work properly and he was injured in his head and died within a few hours. But we were playing on the front, it was a lovely summer's day and the lifeboatmen were round the corner. They used to take the lifeboat up on its trolley up through the Port, I think to the promenade, and put the maroon off and this accident happened. And I can see my father yet there – oh, they had red woolly hats in those days, the crew – he came running over the front and said to Mother, 'will you leave the children here and will you go up and tell my mother what's happened', he told her what had happened, 'and prepare her for them bringing him home'. Well, Mr. Dugdale was the policeman, and we didn't have an ambulance, he had a sort of cane-work stretcher thing with a cover, that they would have taken an injured person on, and they took him up home. And the doctor – I don't know whether the doctor saw him here or at the house, but they said there was no point in taking him to hospital, they could do nothing for him with the head injury he had – and he died. Because I can remember we were taken out the back garden so we wouldn't see this thing going by and we were – there was a low place in the wall then, the wall's not the same now – and we were trying to look over that to see could we see anything at the breakwater. I think I'd be four and Aimé would be six. But we had some very happy times here. That was just a plain field across the road and there was a corncrake in it and we must have spent hours in the summer trying to find this corncrake, causing a ???.

**AC** Were they very loud, the corncrakes then?

**Anne** Well, not too loud, but I mean there wasn't traffic like there is now and – just this row of houses, nothing up on that side, no Point Hotel or anything. And, oh, we must have spent hours looking for it.

**AC** So what was – was something – were there any crops planted there in the field or was it just grass?

**Anne** No, it was just grass.

**AC** Okay.

**Aimé** Lots of wild flowers.

**Anne** What they called the three-cornered field in front of the Point Hotel had iron railings around it in those days and the kids used to climb over it of course and you could count – oh, dozens and dozens of different wild flowers growing there.

**Aimé** And in this field as well.

**Anne** And in this field, yes. But more so over there I think.

**AC** What sort of flowers were there, can you remember particularly?

**Aimé** I'd have to get the flower book out.

**AC** But there were corncrakes here anyway, that's ...

**Anne** There was one that used to come each summer. Oh, there might have been two, or there might have been – it didn't sound a lot, and you could hear a cuckoo in the distance, but I think that was up towards Fistard way more.

**AC** So tell me a bit about your parents then?

**Anne** My father was a fisherman, he fished crabs and lobsters. When we were younger he used to go in a rowing boat, then later they got a motor boat. And in the winter they'd work up at the quarry at Cregneash, because they couldn't fish. So they didn't have an easy life. Mother served her time as a confectioner – as a confectioner in Miss Cooil's, up – just below the Co-op there, it was. She came from Kirk Michael and she stayed with relatives in Victoria Road until she married. So that's how they met. Well, they must have known one another before the war because we've seen cards, you know, the sort they used to send home, the men. He was in Mesopotamia, which is now Iraq. And they wanted them to stay out there – aren't we glad they didn't?

**AC** Yes, yes. So what year were your parents married, can you remember?

**Anne** 1920.

**AC** 1920, yes. And what about working on the quarry then, was that with the Highway Board?

**Anne** Yes, the Highway Board, went to work on winter schemes. They did work, I think, over the Point, making the wall and things round there. I don't know was he there or not.

**Aimé** That came later, didn't it?

**Anne** It came later, yes.

**AC** And what about the crabs, would he just sell those locally then?

**Anne** No, they used – well they sold some locally, but the main part went to Liverpool. They used to go on the first train in the morning, across by boat and up to the market. And they needed to arrive alive or they didn't get so much money for them.

**AC** Were there plenty of crabs then, there must have been, I suppose?

**Anne** There must have been in those days. There wouldn't be so many doing it, I don't suppose.

**Aimé** They caught some lobsters as well.

**Anne** Oh, yes.

**Aimé** And they sold, through the summer, they sold quite a lot to the boarding-house keepers on Port Erin promenade – or this promenade, too.

**Anne** I think the Point used to buy crabs for – every Saturday for Sunday.

**AC** Right.

**Aimé** Things like that, you know.

**AC** So can you remember when you were very young, you know, Port St. Mary as a fishing harbour then?

**Anne** Oh, it was, yes. And the Scottish girls, the gutter girls, would be at the top of the breakwater.

**AC** I've brought some photographs of the gutter girls because I thought you might – I've got a few photographs but I'll show you one of the gutter girls, anyway – I hope I have – there you go.

**Anne** They used to lodge up in the houses on the quay, some of them. And if they walked from work back there they'd have their knitting in their hands, they were never still.

**AC** Did you get to know any of them at all?

**Anne** Well, some married – Jessie Clugson was one.

**Aimé** She only died a few years ago.

**Anne** This is an early one, isn't it, I think, isn't it, of the horse and cart loaded with the herring.

**AC** Would that be similar in your day, would there be a horse and cart there with the herring on it?

**Anne** No, no.

**AC** Yes, that's quite an early one – I've got some others than I can bring to show you as well.

**Anne** No, they used to ...

**Aimé** We've got a picture ...

**Anne** The coopers put the barrels together, the women packed them and they would gut – queued along the breakwater and taken away.

**Aimé** We've got a picture somewhere, early, with the women kneeling on the ground, gutting the herring.

**AC** Okay.

**Aimé** There were no troughs. Those women were working in barrels but those we saw, they were actually kneeling on the ground.

**Anne** Yes, but later there were troughs.

**Aimé** Oh, yes.

**AC** Who were the coopers then? Where did they get the barrels from?

**Aimé** They came ...

**Anne** They were imported.

**Aimé** Some of them from Scotland – I don't know.

**Anne** They were Scottish women and men, weren't they ...

**Aimé** Oh, yes.

**Anne** ... and then the Scottish boats that brought the herring, they didn't work Sundays, and you know there was the centenary at Mount Tabor this last week and the preacher said she'd been told that they used to come to chapel because they never

went to sea on Sunday, the Scots, and the singing was terrific, all these men. They all seemed to sit one side.

**AC** Did they ever have services out on the breakwater there at all?

**Anne** Not as if ...

**Aimé** Later there was – came the lifeboat Sunday and they were over the Point a time or two ...

**Anne** Yes, and they did have a service in ...

**Aimé** ... and especially in Happy Valley.

**Anne** ... for one period.

**Aimé** They used to take the boat up, didn't they, I think?

**Anne** I'm not sure about that.

**AC** So how long would the gutter girls stay for then, when would they arrive and go?

**Anne** I wouldn't be sure.

**Aimé** You probably know that the herring migrate round the coast of the British Isles, so some years it would be a little bit brighter than others and they followed the same routine approximately the same dates. So the people working with them would be working say in one of the Scottish ports, and then as the herring numbers were decreasing they would know that the herring would be in the Irish Sea and they'd come down to Peel or Port St. Mary.

**AC** Did you used to play around the harbour then when the boats were round, or ...

**Anne** Well, we used to go up the Chapel Beach a lot. We have bathed off the lifeboat slip when we were tiny, but when we went to school and later we used to go the Chapel Beach with all the others in the summer holidays. Bathe and come out and play till you were dry and go back in again.

**Aimé** Oh we used to go fishing in the dubs on the flat rocks, round the Point.

**Anne** Oh, yes. Mrs Robertson had a little shop next to what was the kipper shop and she used to sell the nets, you know, the kids have, but she also had lines, if you had a penny, or whatever, and you got a hook with some cat gut and a line and it was wrapped round a piece of cane and then you thought you were the bee's knees fishing buckies over the Point.

**Aimé** And if we hadn't got a penny to spend we went into mother's sewing box and got a reel of thread and a bent pin and just ...

**Anne** Used to knock the flitters off for bait.

**Aimé** And when we're talking about fish, we're talking about bulkies ??? ???. That sort of size, not much bigger than that.

**AC** So, did you have a lot of fish to eat then, when you were young, if your Dad was crabbing and ...

**Anne** Yes, because they used to put a line out occasionally with quite a lot of hooks on, when they wanted bait, and – this is where my head goes on me – we didn't get cod, we got ...

**Aimé** Callag.

**Anne** Callag, that was it.

**AC** So there was a lot of callag and cod locally then which people ate?

**Anne** Yes.

**Aimé** I don't know that there's ever been a lot of cod.

**Anne** No, it was mainly callag.

**Aimé** And there's still a lot of callag.

**Anne** And most of the local people preferred the flavour of it.

**AC** Of callag, yes.

**Aimé** And every year – was it the end of February, or early March – for a matter of a couple of weeks there was an invasion of a shoal of herring and it came every year about the same time.

**AC** Was it, sort of, quite a little community in itself, Lime Street?

**Anne** In the old days it was, there were a lot of people, men who went to sea, and I think they said at one time there were seven sea captains who went deep sea, not just round here.

**AC** And was it one of the – some people have said Lime Street was one of the poorer parts of Port St. Mary?

**Anne** Well, it was reckoned to be, it was called Moscow, as a sort of derogatory curse ???.

**AC** Who called it Moscow?

**Aimé** It was general, we don't know how it started but it was there, we've heard it.

**Anne** Yes, when we were young.

**Aimé** Oh, yes, it was the – I was going to say semi-slum but it wasn't – you know, it didn't show in any way – but it was the poorer working people largely, wasn't it? Fishermen, largely fishermen, and they were never well off.

**AC** Did they have a great sense of identity as being fishermen, do you think, was there a sense of pride or – being a fisherman?

**Aimé** They were – I think it was just taken for granted it was something round the family, but then there was bond between them. Have you read the story of the *Vigilant* that went ashore across the bay?

**AC** I haven't read it.

**Aimé** Well, we've got a copy of the report, so we'll get you one. Briefly this schooner was going northwards up the east coast of the Island, in what was known as the very bad winter, terrific storms, and they went ashore – it says in the paper article, Kentraugh, we don't know just where about. Castletown lifeboat came round and they were able to take off half the crew. The news somehow got to Port St. Mary and there were a lot of fishermen – well, I suppose one time most of the fishermen – most of the people at the other end of Lime Street particularly, were fishermen. And the news came through so they decided they'd go. Now it states in the paper, and we've no reason to disbelieve it, although it's hard to believe that it could happen. There was a boat that they called the harbour boat and they had to break the ice out of the boat before they could put the boat in the water – you just really can't imagine. Anyway they went across and they rescued the others. Well, eventually this came. Oh, and before I show you this, the powers that be, the folks who did some thinking, said, 'well, why did Castletown have a lifeboat when they've got no fishing boats?' and Port St. Mary had the fishing boats and no lifeboat. So Castletown lost their lifeboat and we got one. But there is a newspaper article about the rescue but that was grandfather's award for his part in the rescue.

**AC** So 'For gallantry in rescuing part of the crew of SS *Vigilant*, 7th February 1895'  
...

**AC** can you remember the lifeboat going out a lot, a great deal?

**Anne** I can remember when we lived in Park Road after the pop houses were pulled down, when the rocket would go off you would see the men going running down the road, because they'd no transport unless they had a bike. And the first there were the ones that went out, so if they got up in the middle of the night and they weren't in the first ones – but mind you in those days it was a rowing boat, so it took quite a few.

**Aimé** It was a very stormy night, offhand I can't remember the year, we were living then in Park Road, we were just getting ready to go to bed – having to get up early to catch the first train to Douglas we went to bed early – and mother had just made our bedtime cocoa and cake and there was a noise – a noisy knock at the front door, 'Willy, the lifeboat's going out', and he grabbed a piece of cake and one of the mugs of cocoa before he went. And they went out and they came back about two in the morning, and they hadn't found the boat. And he'd just got into bed when the hammering started again, 'we've got a new direction'. So he went out again, and when we got up to go to school, and we were leaving home at ten minutes past seven, to catch the train to Douglas that went at twenty past, twenty-five past, we'd be leaving about ten past, the boat hadn't come back. And I said to Mother, 'I'm not going to school this morning'. 'Oh, you!' I said, 'No, I'm going to stay with you'. Oh, sorry, I'm mixing up two stories, no, they came back. The one where – it was the one where Jimmy Doran was – no, I think it was all the one story, sorry, it's a long time ago, it's a bit confusing. It started with the Reverend James Doran who lived up at Fistard ...

**Anne** Glen Chass.

**Aimé** ... Glen Chass. He'd been to a meeting in the Port and the lifeboat rocket went off and he went down the breakwater and he was saying prayers for the boat and the crew before they went. Anyway they were back and within the hour, or possibly less, they were called out again, that's it, and then I told Mother that I wasn't going to school, and we didn't argue too much, I thought well, I can win, because we'd got to walk up to the station. Once we got up to the Bay Hotel we'd see whether the lifeboat had got into the breakwater or not. And if the lifeboat wasn't at the breakwater I wasn't going to school because, for the length of time it was out overall, it must have been nearly twelve hours. It was getting serious. So I went to school – but that was it – the only time I would have played truant.

**Aimé** The first motor boat came, I think, 1935, it might have been '34, '34 or '35, and it was called *Sir Keith Harrison*, and his wife, or widow, performed the naming ceremony. And I was chosen, because of the family links, to present her with a bouquet, so I had a day off school, and that was great. Day off school, new frock and new hat!