

*Transcript of article from the Kent & Sussex Courier – March 7 1980
(the photos are copied from the original newspaper article – now 40 years old!)*

Story of a village in 35 minutes flat! By John McCready

People living in the picturesque village of Robertsbridge went about their business as usual on Friday, unaware that the sleek white car cruising around their streets carried famous radio interviewer, Brian Johnson, who was making a recording of his equally famous Down Your Way radio programme.

Producer Tony Smith insisted that the programme, which has had a regular weekly slot on what is now Radio 4 since 1946, is not a documentary, but a friendly chat show in which local residents talk about their town or village and select a piece of their favourite music.

The programme will be broadcast on Sunday, March 30, at 5.15 pm and repeated on April 1 at 12.20 pm.

Tony Smith spent Tuesday with members of the parish council who suggested worthy interviewees. The team also made a recording in Cranbrook which will go out a week before the Robertsbridge programme.

“We always find in a place like this that there are so many characters who could feature on the programme,” he said. “It’s a shame we only have 35 minutes of airtime. We could go on for hours.”

Brian Johnson has made nearly 400 Down Your Way programmes since he started in 1972. Although he has interviewing off to a tee and can chat amiably on a wide range of subjects, Brian Johnson said he still felt extremely nervous before each interview.

He only uses a script when introducing the programme, getting his information from local guidebooks, and checking facts with knowledgeable residents. The rest is all ad lib. “People can always tell if you are reading from a script” he said. “It just doesn’t sound natural. This is why we encourage people we interview not to read from notes. All we want is a picture of them, their interests, and their village. If people get all tensed up or are afraid to upset their county council the programme doesn’t work” added Tony Smith.

In the 34 years the show has been broadcast, they have only failed to broadcast four interviews – two because of poor sound quality and the other two because the subject matter did not fit in with the rest of the programme.

The teams first call was to the Gray-Nicolls cricket bat factory on the edge of the village**, where they spoke to ex-Northamptonshire county player, Jock Livingstone, who is now the firm’s sales and promotion director. Gray-Nicolls have been in business for more than a century and are now a world-wide supplier of bats to international stars like Clive Lloyd.

Stan Weston had trouble with the sound in the factory because of the over-head electricity cables and the interview had to be done outside. “It doesn’t matter” said Tony Smith, “I like the sound of birds twittering. It proves that we are really here and haven’t invited everyone down to a studio in Bristol.”

Jock Livingstone explained that the cricket bat factory – which is a collection of wooden huts in a wood – had been on its present site since 1943 and could now produce about 1200 bats per week. Each bat is made by a craftsman whose only aid is a width gauge, so the bats are all of regulation size. The join of the handle to the bat is so perfect that it could be played with for several months without being glued in place. “The balance of the bat, the shape and the quality, is all done by the craftsman’s eyesight”, said Jock Livingstone. He said he would like to hear Sussex by the Sea for his musical choice.



When broadcast the Down You Way interviews last between five and 10 minutes. But the actual recording can last longer and is then cut to get rid of the “um-ing and ah-ing,” and to make everyone sound confident. The teamwork by chatting to their “victims” for about half an hour before the tape recorder is switched on. They work out roughly what is going to be said and make sure the questions Brian Johnson is going to ask lead in the right direction. “Don’t worry, I will not ask you anything you do not know the answer to”, said Brian Johnson to one rather nervous interviewee. Tony Smith later secretly admitted: “I couldn’t do it. I dry up every time speak into a microphone.”

The next call for the men in the sleek white car was to singer Eira Heath – probably best known for her regular appearances in the BBC tv series the Good Old Days – who lives in the Abbots House, Robertsbridge, which is all that is left of St Mary the Virgin’s Abbey, founded in 1176. She was interviewed in the crypt which now forms a cellar where she and her mother have held Christmas carol services.



The Abbey fell foul of Henry VIII in 1539 and much of its stonework was used to build roads. Later an iron works was founded on the site. Legend has it that it was the Robertsbridge iron works which supplied Drake with guns. Eira said she rarely did any weeding in the garden because every time she started, she dug up more pieces of medieval stonework. In the summer, when sheep have cropped the grass in the garden the outline of the Abbey can clearly be seen and there is an original archway still standing close to the front door. Eira chose a song of her recent Instant Love album to play on the show.

Legends abound concerning the Abbey and Eira told one about the Abbot of Battle who visited his brother Abbot in Robertsbridge on a day of fasting. On passing the refectory he saw the monks tucking into a big feast and cryptically commented: "Which Saint do these bones belong to?"

Fruit farmer and founder of the 82-member Robertsbridge and District Aviation Society, Dennis Woodgate, was the third to face the microphone. The team visited him at the society's museum, currently housed in farm sheds on the Hurst Green side of the village. The Aviation Society, which was formed in 1964, is currently looking for a permanent site for its museum, where three World War Two US fighter aircraft, promised by the American Airforce, will be stationed. Already in the Society's possession are 15 engines recovered from downed aeroplanes, along with two sheds full of mementoes marking the history of flying. "The Ministry of Defence has stopped all digging now", said Mr Woodgate. "They are afraid of unexploded bombs and people are edgy about human remains sometimes found in these wrecks." Mr Woodgate who spent 20 years in the Royal Observer Corps., chose the RAF march to be played on the programme. "I think it is appropriate as this year marks the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Britain.

After leaving Dennis Woodgate the men from the BBC went to Salehurst to meet the vicar, the Rev John Lambourne. Robertsbridge does not have a parish church and comes under Salehurst parish – although today the hub of the community is Robertsbridge which has grown since the opening of the London to Hastings road. Previously, Salehurst – a mile east of the main village – was the centre and stagecoaches forded the River Rother, which flows to Rye, 100 yards south of St Mary's church on their way to the coast.

John Lambourne is a sporting vicar, running the Robertsbridge junior rugby team on Saturdays and playing cricket during the summer months. He is a qualified rugby referee and has played the game at county level.

The present church dates to 1200 although the records show a Saxon church on the site. It was built by the monks of the Abbey and is the largest rural parish church in Sussex. The font is of historical importance. Legend says it has a connection with Richard the Lionheart. When Richard was imprisoned in Europe and held for ransom while returning from a crusade, Parliament it is said sent the Abbott of Robertsbridge to find him. The Abbott travelled the Continent whistling King Richard's favourite hymn. He eventually unearthed Richard and was able to mastermind the Royal escape.



VICAR. The Rev John Lambourne, who shared Brian Johnston's love of cricket.

In gratitude, Richard gave the church a font which is engraved with his royal motive. Mr Lambourne chose a piece by Mozart as his favourite music.



RETIRED miller, Tom Dadswell, spoke of village hopes for a by-pass.

The last local resident to be interviewed was retired miller, Tom Dadswell, who is also a local magistrate and a member of the Parish Council. Mr Dadswell spoke about the village's fight for a by-pass to relieve traffic on the A21 and of local industry which included a sawmill, gypsum mine and an animal feed, as well as agriculture. He used to be the owner of what is now the SCATS agricultural feed mill and told of the steam engine which the company bought to run on a mill link line after British Rail closed theirs. When they first had it, nobody could drive it and it was up to the local bobby – ex-fireman with British Rail – to show them the ropes. "When we saw him coming, we thought he was going to ban us using the engine" said Mr Dadswell. "The route crossed the A21 twice. It was quite a surprise when he ended up giving our lads a lesson on how it worked" Mr Dadswell chose a piece of Strauss for the programme.

The recording of the programme took five and a half hours. After that it was back to London for Stan Weston and Brian Johnson, and along drive to Bristol for producer Tony Smith. “The programme looks as if it is going to be good” he said. “We have a good reputation and I know that in Robertsbridge, we are going to keep it.”

*** At the time of the programme the Gray-Nicolls factory occupied a site at the Brightling end of the village on what is now Oakland Drive*