

Transcript of oral history interview with Hellen Martin

Interviewer (NL): Natasha Luck, Heritage Officer, Archives, Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives (THLHLA)

Interviewee (HM): Hellen Martin, grand-daughter of William Whiffin

NL: My name is Natasha Luck and we're here today at Thorn Apartments, Geoff Cade Way to - and the date is Friday 31st July 2015. I'm here today with the grand-daughter of photographer William Whiffin and the interview is really going to focus on William Whiffin, his life and work, and his grand-daughter's relationship with him and also how this relationship has then really led us on to the upcoming William Whiffin photography exhibition at Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives [*Whiffin's East End*, 20 August – 19 November 2015].

Okay, Hellen, just for the record would you mind stating your full name, and date and place of birth please?

HM: Yes, I'm Hellen Elizabeth Martin I was born on the 2nd September 1956, at a place called Bushey, which is in Hertfordshire.

NL: That's great. Perhaps you'd like to begin the interview by telling me a bit more about where you were born, about your early family life and memories about growing up?

HM: Yes, we lived in Stanmore which is in Middlesex, which is just about 5 miles away from Bushey and there was my mother, Ella, who was the daughter of William Whiffin, my father is Sid, and I had a sister called Linda and we had a 3 bedroom semi-detached house in a sort of suburban cul-de-sac. I went to school locally and always walked to school and then later I got a job at the BBC so I used to commute into London for many, many years.

NL: What job did you do at the BBC?

HM: I worked in press and publicity at the BBC so I publicised programmes, radio and television programmes, and I also spent a lot of time in the BBC press office dealing with all the sort of controversies and announcements that the BBC made so it was a fairly hectic job – it wasn't 9-5 – very long hours and quite intense.

NL: Did you enjoy that job?

HM: Yes, very much so. You were sort of at the centre of things and the strange thing is now you thought everything was a massive issue for, you know, in the country, but when you get sort of separated from it you realise actually that it's not really. [laughs]

NL: And what led you into that particular career? Can you point to - maybe was there certain subjects you studied at school or interests that you had?

HM: Not particularly. I suppose it was because – I suppose because, well, I suppose because it was part in the Arts, it was a creative industry and mainly I think there were three of us from the secondary school we went to who all applied for the BBC and got taken on and the BBC at that time did a secretarial training course for about 15 weeks - they taught you typing and teeline shorthand - so we were trained up by the BBC and then placed in jobs. It was much easier, I think, in those days, to get work! And the other two girls eventually moved on but all of us went into the publicity area. I suppose it was interesting, you dealt with quite high, you know, difficult issues but also it was quite nice, you know, you met lots of celebrities and other people like authors and other things like that so it was the best of both worlds. And it's quite interesting dealing with the national press – it can be quite tricky especially people like from the News of the World or The Sun but again, you know, just very, very interesting.

NL: And thinking again a bit about your grand-father

HM: Yes

NL: Would you like to talk a bit about your memories of him and just anything that springs to mind really?

HM: Well I suppose unfortunately I don't have any memories. I was far too young I think I - he died 14 months after I was born. So he knew me and I've seen pictures of him holding me but I don't recall him as a person so all my memories really are from other members of the family, like my mother or my auntie Gladys or my uncle Sid, who were you know, his daughters and son. And the impression I've always had is that he was a mild mannered man, he was very ready and willing to help people out and, one thing my mother always said is that he used to do jobs for no money - just that he did them as favours or he just felt it was useful to people or they couldn't afford things. So whether he was very good on the business side of things I'm never really sure. I don't think they made – from their photography studios and businesses – I don't think they made a lot of money, obviously presumably enough to live on.

And other things I know about him - my uncle Sid recalled going out with him, so apart from - you know to take photographs when he had time off - so apart from work in the studio, from which he ran his commercial business, and obviously he took pictures when they took trips or holidays, one thing that comes across is that he was just passionately interested in old buildings and we have so many pictures of buildings that are not there now and I think some of that he knew, he knew instinctively that time was passing and that these buildings you

know, were falling down, or wouldn't exist anymore so he made a record of them. I think that was one thing he was quite proud of – that he was a photographer of record. Not only in East London but he went round the country, or certain sections of the country, and took pictures of windmills, of stocks, of old barns – anything that sort of took his interest. Again it could be just part of the countryside but a lot of it was buildings and he wanted to record them before, you know, they passed on. Some of that, I think, from correspondence I've seen, he acted as a sort of 'stock photographer' so if publications, books or magazines or papers, that sort of thing, came on and said, you know, 'we're looking to do an article on x' and then he might have pictures of, you know, certain things in Kent or in Sussex or Essex that he'd taken or they might do a series of say, you know, the old windmills or the old stocks and again he could supply that to them. So I think he had, you know, an eye to that as well, that it might be commercially advantageous, you know, to have these pictures.

He took - I assume as well, something I don't really know but I've seen a letter to say 'we went out with the Whiffins in a car' but whether he owned a car I was never sure but considering he may have done, he, you know, they used to then drive to various places outside of London to take pictures of things that had caught his interest. I think he collected lots of books and he probably saw or read articles and then he made notes in little notebooks about things that, you know, might be of interest to photograph and so when he went out to Essex or to somewhere he then managed to take pictures of all these things.

But what my uncle had talked about was that, say on a Sunday, when they weren't working in the studio, they used to take the early buses into parts of London. Sid used to go with him as a boy and help carry his cameras because obviously, the other thing we forget nowadays, is that they were very big cameras with their tripods, with all the plates, the glass plates, they had to carry about and all the other sort of equipment and he used to lug this [laughs] - which is no doubt why he took my uncle Sid to help him carry. They used to go to different parts of London and again, things that he'd read about or he was interested in, or I think he just explored, you know, if he saw things on buildings or plaques then he used to then take pictures of things that interested him. And other things like – houses where writers had lived or artists – again a series of, it could be Thackeray or it could be whatever, or that he'd read about somebody had used to live there, even if it wasn't sort of labelled as such.

So, Sid went out with him. And I've seen, there's a couple - I think one in the Bank of England where Sid is in between the columns - so again, William Whiffin used him as a sort of [laughs] a point of interest in the pictures but I'm not sure that Sid, or any of the family actually, really liked having their photograph taken which people are like today. I know by mother didn't, she wasn't really keen, she didn't like having

her picture taken. But he used, again, as a point of interest to put children in his pictures or people going about their day to day business.

NL: What age would Sid have been and do you know, kind of roughly, what period that would have been?

HM: I think Sid was born in 1917 so he - it was probably early twenties [1920s] which I think William Whiffin was at his height really taking pictures. He was then in his forties because he [William Whiffin] was born in 1878 so he would have been mid-forties and the pictures I've seen of Sid he's sometimes dressed as a school boy as well so presumably he was sort of, you know, eight or about eight or whatever. But he does remember, and you know, I think he used to get on very well with his father and enjoy going out exploring, and there's a record that they turned up at one of these stores for tea and coffee after they'd been out very early in the morning and they heard about - at there obviously people were chatting - and they heard about the 101 Disaster when the airship had crashed. And then he also talks about - Sid talks about - William Whiffin going along to photograph when the, you know, when the bodies had been found or something, I don't know what his connection to that was. And he also, Sid also refers to, that as William was a photographer he went to the Remembrance Day service at the Cenotaph, or near there, and whether he was part of the press, you know, press plan they put you in, press pen, sorry, they put you in, but he had a sort of ringside view of the goings on there, the ceremony.

And one thing I do recall people saying is - I think my auntie Gladys, his daughter, said - he was really quite desperately keen to be a press photographer he would have really liked to have been a press photographer. Why he wasn't, full-time, I don't know. I've seen letters where he did apply to people for jobs and he did do work for the newspapers he worked for The Daily Sketch or The Mirror and other publications like that. He sent off pictures to the national papers but whether he didn't really want to take that step or whether they just purely didn't want him, you know, I don't know that, but he was very interested in doing that. So he ended up doing, you know, local photographers - taking weddings, street parties, he was always being asked - you know he worked for the Council, he worked for the Port of London Authority

NL: So that was Poplar Borough Council that he worked for?

HM: Yes he did. So I have letters where they're asking him to take pictures or paying him for them - so there's a record of that. He also seemed to do photographs for Millwall Football Club and I've also seen that he did pictures for Queens Park Rangers [Football Club] so there's quite a wide variety of photographic work that he did but I suppose in those days you called on the services of a professional because people didn't necessarily have their own cameras or now iPhones can take instant pictures themselves.

NL: Amongst the records of Poplar Methodist Church there's a note that many of the photographs that they used in their publicity materials, their publications and so forth, had been donated by William Whiffin. Do you know much about his relationship with the Methodist Church and his desire to support them in that way?

HM: My understanding is – all my family, myself included, are Methodists, and all attended church, I did as a younger child, I don't go so much today - but his association with the church I think was from quite an early period. I've seen something where - I can't quite remember the date, it must have been the early 1900s – where my grand-mother, his wife, my grand-mother, Minnie Whiffin, was welcomed into the church, seems to have made – I don't know what denomination she was before - but seems to have made a conscious decision to become a member of the Methodist Church. But my understanding is that their association with the Methodist Church goes back a very long way. They also when they were, lived at, East India Dock Road at various addresses and then they moved to Woodstock Terrace round the corner from the Methodist church [Poplar Methodist Church], the modern Methodist church was built on that corner and I remember as a child I used to stay with my auntie Gladys in Woodstock Terrace, what seemed to me quite, you know, a lot – whether my parents wanted a break from me [laughs] I don't know but I seemed to go there quite a lot and we always entered from the side door which was on Woodstock Terrace, never through the front entrance . The side door that went in and there was like the chiropody clinic and to me as a child that was very spooky and very strange, there was sort of curtains across, I remember that and I think they used it for storage.

But my auntie Gladys I think was a member nearly all her life and she and the other Whiffins were very heavily involved in everything that went on in the church. My auntie did the flower arranging, I think was a member of the guild but I think William Whiffin, with his membership of the church, he wanted to give something back so he would have done, you know, whatever they wanted, for him, for them and he documented lots of things for the church because that's why there's so many pictures -inside and outside of the church - and anything - they went on outings quite a lot, so he was called to do pictures of that.

One other thing I know about him is – and I've recently found the sort of document – he took the pledge at a fairly early age. Which, for people who don't know what that is, it means you sign up to abstain from drinking alcohol. And my understanding is, I think he was quite young man, and he never did drink for the rest of his life. And, one thing I also heard was he did find it quite difficult that when they did have did have these events or went off on these trips, you know lots of people like to partake of a drink, but he just didn't so he was the sane, sober one [laughs] during these jolly occasions.

NL: So he was quite a disciplined person by the sounds of it?

HM: Well presumably, but I think, I suppose he'd signed and he kept to that, yes.

NL: And that's quite interesting because a lot of the photographs - I mean we've got many, many photographs by William Whiffin in our collections at Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives – and because we do have photographs arranged by subject we've a lot of photographs of pubs. And I know that some of the best photographs of pubs in the Poplar area are by William Whiffin, so, it wasn't that, you know he didn't have a problem with photographing -

HM: No.

NL: He was actively interested in that.

HM: No I don't think - it was just his, it was what we call now a 'lifestyle decision', I think he, why that happened or who suggested it or whether he wanted it - I don't know the background to it – but I think it wasn't that he didn't go into pubs, or didn't like them, or anything like that he just had taken the decision not to drink so and maybe that was part of being a Methodist. I don't know – we're not meant to gamble either but [laughs] - we do.

So I think again, his overriding interest to document the life of the East End and again, old buildings, and I think when they were in, when they lived in East India Dock Road at one stage they were opposite The Eagle Tavern, which I think got bombed in the war, so he's got pictures from outside his – he used to take pictures from the window of his studios on East India Dock Road because obviously a lot of life was going on and some significant events took place. So when they had the marches about the Poplar rates [Poplar Rates Dispute 1921] and when they had, you know, unemployment and other things, obviously that was a main thoroughfare and people, lots of people gathered there and he took photos of that because the angle they're at you can tell they're from an upper window, so he had a prime position.

But it was also other things caught his eye – when big trucks broke down and children gathered round or something, whatever, like that. Things caught his eye – I was going to say he would 'whip his camera out' but it's not so simple, you set your camera up presumably [laughs] then – it wasn't so portable.

NL: From what I've kind of learnt about William Whiffin, just from our collections, it seems to me that photography was a passion for him as well as a career, a business, and something he took on. What is your kind of understanding from a family perspective, from family members from what they've told you, is that - would you get the same impression?

HM: Yes I would. I think he – I think it's shown by the fact [coughs] that he took photos all the time and as I say, it wasn't just that he could have a camera in his pocket so it was a conscious effort to take these pictures. But he seemed to take them when they went out on family trips – when they, you know, he took family pictures but he also then still took other scenes or buildings and that sort of thing, so he did, you know, instead of just thinking 'oh it's your day job' and then not really wanting to carry on taking pictures, he literally seemed to take pictures all the time. And the amount that we've still got, and I know that the library [Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives] has got, you know, hundreds and hundreds, and knowing that a lot of his material was destroyed bombing during the war it just makes you wonder how much there was to begin with. There must have been thousands and thousands of glass negatives which needed, you know, had to be stored. But, you know, he took pictures of all different sort of life that was going on in the East End and he seemed to just want to document, and be interested in, in anything that was going on.

One other aspect of him, which probably as he was born in Victorian times was quite normal, but he seemed to collect everything – he was not a discerning collector. I think he was fascinated by archaeology, by geology, by natural history, by books, art. Definitely - he had an artistic bent, obviously, but when they started out their studios he - they were very keen to be known as 'photographic artists' in those days and I think, you know, it wasn't seen as just a commercial thing, it was that you were somehow artistic and, as far as I know, he did paint and he did draw but it's difficult to tell from the things that are left because he didn't always sign things but he wrote his name on them so, I think he did have that artistic bent, but he was just fascinated by anything and everything. And I suppose then they learned about things in books – you learnt about far away countries or strange objects or animals – now we can just go on the internet, it's much easier.

But then I remember he had collections when I stayed at Woodstock Terrace there was a room on the first floor at the back of the house - which would have been by the bathroom then, before you went out into the garden – and this room was filled with boxes and files. And I remember then, as a child, I used to spend hours in there, never knowing, just opening things up, never knowing what you were going to find and sometimes it would be glass-cased tarantulas, which were quite frightening, but also just objects, well he did label some of them, but sometimes you weren't really sure what they were or what they were for. He was also – there was an enormous amount of china and somebody once said to me 'it's the best possible china but in the worst possible condition' and I think he again, I think he went round buying things up and thinking he could mend them, as we all do, you know one day you're going to get around to it, and maybe he did for some things but not for everything. So, there was sort of, pot lids or you know, or vases which didn't have handles, and other things like that

[laughs] which would have been pretty if they were in complete condition.

But he stored all this so what he was hoping to do with this we'll never know but I suppose he thought one day, when he retired, he'd have the time, which is what you always think, and then he never did. And there's a record that his wife said 'what's going to happen to all this if anything happens to you before me?' And she died first and I think it was about 10 months before he did but it got passed down, all these collections, got passed down to my auntie Gladys who carried on living at the address in Woodstock Terrace. And then when she moved - she moved out to Leigh-on-Sea later in life - she married sort of when she was in her sixties and she moved to Leigh-on-Sea, and at that stage obviously she didn't need all these things.

So I remember going - my mother, father, my sister and I - as a family we hired a van and we kept going to and from, rescuing as much of this collection as possible. My parents then stored it in various sheds [laughs] and in the garage, and everywhere, for many years, in their house and then my parents died in 2005 and 2006 and it literally took us a year to clear the house and everything in it because there was just so much stuff.

There were hundreds of books just stored but most things weren't in very good condition I'm afraid - they'd been stored in sheds in the bottom of the garden in Woodstock Terrace, they'd had, rats, mice, water damage, I mean, things presumably had been damaged in the war and if they hadn't been destroyed they'd been damaged and then when they came to my parents again some of the stuff wasn't always kept under the best of conditions. And so, we had to make that difficult decision as again we couldn't keep everything, you know, the volume of it, so, you know, lots of stuff had to be skipped I'm afraid - things that I think are 17th century books - but they were in terrible, terrible condition - and I've now kept things and again I'm trying to find the time to go through and see what's important and what isn't. It's you know, that's why I think it's important to have, you know, for the library [Tower Hamlets Local History Library & Archives] to have things, to have his photographs, his negatives, so that more people can use them, they can be accessible, rather than they sit around in boxes, you know locked away somewhere and people don't know that they exist and I'm hoping it will help interest in him but also help people know more about the East End at that sort of particular time - you know, from the turn of the century onwards - when he was taking photographs.

NL: That's really interesting and, as you mentioned before, that William Whiffin was not only photographing and working, carrying on this photography business, concerned with the day to day - he was very much concerned with the future and taking a record and that this would be preserved and made available. He actually donated a lot of

photographs in his own lifetime for free which were given to the local libraries – so, Poplar libraries – and also to - I was about to say the Museum of London but it would probably have been probably Guildhall Library and collections now held by London Metropolitan Archives. It's interesting that your family since then, have, kind of, you know you felt a sense of responsibility to honour his, almost like, his ethos, in that, to keep on - like your instinct wasn't, whenever this material was passed on to you 'oh maybe I should just destroy all of this' it was very much. Do you think that's something which has been carried on – this kind of legacy of -

HM: Yes

NL: - of his work and his belief?

HM: Yes definitely. I think all of this children – Gladys, Sid and Ella – were very, very proud of him and his work. I've read a letter recently from Sid's wife, because Sid went off in the war to Abyssinia, then he lived in Kenya and Australia, or Africa and Australia, and he never did come back – well, he came back to visit several times.

NL: Did he ever undertake photography as a profession himself?

HM: No he didn't. He was very lazy at school, which he admits to [laughs] – he went to George Green School – and he just mucked about, he wasn't really interested in school but what he was interested in was mechanics and tinkering and he went into sort of tinkering with cars, he could sort of take a whole engine apart and put it together again. Which was - I don't think I don't get the sense my grand-father was practical in that way, you know he was more artistic, but Sid went another way but he [Sid] did take lots of photos, maybe that was to do with travelling and being in different, living in different countries but he did make an enormous amount of photos which I've got some copies of but I think, after he died, I don't know where they've gone, they were probably destroyed.

Gladys, she travelled a lot in her lifetime she went everywhere, she was constantly travelling and took slides because she gave talks, you know, to the Women's Institute, the guild, the church, the whatever, you know she came back and she did all these talks. So I've got some of those. My mother never - my mother didn't really take photographs so it hasn't followed on.

The other thing I suppose to say is that William Whiffin's father, who was William Whiffin as well, was a photographer, William's brother, Ernest Whiffin, was also a photographer and they [William and Ernest] had a studio together in Kings Cross. And I think then William had sold that to him [Ernest] when he moved into Poplar, I think they did own several studios at that stage, in the east [of London] and North London.

But Ernest carried on doing that work as a photographer as well so it did show up in other members of the family. And

[pause - interviewee indicates to interviewer that she has lost her train of thought and to move on, ask another question]

NL: I was thinking about that actually... because it's interesting that he came from a family of photographers but they hadn't seemed to have embraced photography maybe in the same way that William Whiffin – will I call him William Whiffin junior? [laughs] did. So his father had joined his uncle [Thomas Wright] in East India Dock Road to work in the photographic studio and then took on the studio himself, William Whiffin senior, but it was only for a short period of time. So he seems to have not really wanted to carry on maybe leading that [the photographic studio], though I do understand that he did – whenever his son - William Whiffin we're talking about - opened his studios that his father was still in the support role but he didn't have this same kind of desire to keep on [run] the business.

HM: That's what I've read that my auntie talked about. She said that William Whiffin senior was not interested which I'm not completely sure what it meant but it could mean that he did it as a job but he didn't have such a passion for it. I think that's the thing that stands out about my grand-father that he did, I think he was interested in people and buildings and, like we said, you know, recording the events and buildings which weren't going to be there.

And I think there was one point when, after the war, when he actually offered to – I'm not sure what, would it have been Tower Hamlets then or Poplar Council? – to go and take photos a) of bomb damage, but b) of the new buildings which were going up so in the fifties [1950s] all the new building taking place after they cleared the bombsites. So that, he was coming then, he died in 1957, so he was coming to the end of his - not that he knew that obviously – the end of his life, but he continued doing that and again, I suppose it was important development.

Which is sometimes difficult isn't it for us nowadays, it is until you look back and see that it was a turning point, it's like the demise of the docks, you probably wouldn't have necessarily have known that until it happened. And he did do, you know, he did do some pictures of the docks, he's got some permits about going in there and taking pictures but and that would then affect, really, you know, it would affect trade for him, if, you know, there weren't so many workers available in the area. But I think obviously he'd retired in the early fifties and that's when he started to give, to catalogue some things and give some things away and I think he did give some things to the Museum of London. There was also collections I think my auntie gave, my auntie Gladys, to the Geffrye Museum because he had dolls, you know, as part of this collection, he had some sort of dolls, or toys –

NL: So that's the Geffrye Museum in Hackney, Dalston?

HM: In Hackney, yes. And I think to other places who would have accepted them if there had been interest, so I think again he was conscious, you know, that they needed to be available to people, if they were relevant for them. And again, I just, I would like to think that I'm doing what he would have done if he'd have carried on, you know, going through all his collections and photographs. And again, you know, if they're stored in boxes in stores, in sheds in attics, you know, people can't have access to them whereas through Tower Hamlets Local History Library, hopefully people can, you know, can see them and they can hopefully help towards other people's sort of research into their families or into life in the East End in a certain point in time.

NL: Thinking about his photography – do you have particular favourites? I know that's very difficult because he's got such an immense kind of body of work to choose from but I know with the exhibition [Whiffin's East End] you definitely had in mind some images that stood out for you.

HM: Hmm.

NL: I don't know if you want to talk a little about those?

HM: Yes, I think a couple of them, if you know his work, or have seen them, are very well known but I still think, you know, they're quite iconic images and I love them.

One of them is the Milverton, which was the ship, I don't know if it's the sprit or the bow? [bowsprit] The front bit of it sticking over Manchester Road, I believe it is - and there is a sort of series I've seen, there's this man sort of high up on the tip of the ship, working, over this sort of road where the carts are going along and - so it's the juxtaposition of that which I think is quite striking. But there's a series of them where the man is at different stages [laughs] - he's sort of half way down or he's right at the end of it – and I particularly love that because it's something you wouldn't ever see today [laughs] with the ships that sort of, those types of ships that came into the docks.

There's also the ones of the boys following the water cart – which I think was in Cotton Street, is it Cotton Street? It may have been in Cotton Street. But I think there may have been speculation whether he set that up but who knows? But it makes a good picture where they're sort laying the dust with the water coming out the back of the cart and all the kids sort of running alongside, you know, getting wet and thoroughly enjoying themselves, having a great time. Entertainment for free in those days!

NL: Even if he did set up the photograph I guess he must have had a certain rapport, and this is something that I definitely think comes

across in his photographs, he definitely had a rapport with the people - when there's people included in this photographs – with those people because I guess it wouldn't necessarily be easy to just say 'right - do this'

HM: Yes

NL: He must have had a way about him.

HM: He may have known them, they were local kids, he may have known them or some of them or whatever. They may have been doing it anyway and he just sort of said 'oh do you mind doing that again you know, for me?' That's what photographers, professional photographers, do now, and press photographers, I know they have to stage things sometimes because you miss the moment and it makes a better photograph.

The other pictures I like are – I think this is in the exhibition – the one of the hay carts – I think was that in Whitechapel, going along Whitechapel?

NL: Whitechapel High Street.

HM: Yes to the hay market, which is something you definitely wouldn't see today even though it is a hive of commercial activity still. And again, it's just you know, a scene from a different time.

And there's a couple of pictures that wouldn't be in the exhibition that he took and I think he was sort of trying out things on the Embankment of an evening, with the Houses of Parliament in the background, and other sort of scenes in the countryside. There's something he took which is of an old carthorse with a man, you know, and I think he's labelled it 'End of the day' and again he probably liked that, liked the thought of this countryside image but also he saw it as something that could be used as an illustration in a publication so he could either offer that or if people were looking for certain pictures, you know, he had those sort of stock images. You know, it's a man on a carthorse coming through a gate at the end of the day, coming home after a hard day's work, and it's quite evocative, I think, you know, of the countryside at that time and the slower pace of life.

NL: You mentioned to me before we started the interview that your mother had a series of diaries. How much would they record aspects of William Whiffin's life or her relationship with him?

HM: I haven't read through them all. She kept diaries from when she was a young girl and most of them seemed to be about her social life, which in London she was just going out it seemed to be every single night she was out going to the theatre or the cinema, dancing and when she went back, when she was living in Woodstock Terrace as a young girl

and she went home she seemed mainly to wash her hair or do her washing. I haven't read a lot about her parents in them.

One thing she does document, which would be quite interesting, is his death, William Whiffin's death. She obviously – I can't recall all the details now – but he obviously presumably had a stroke and he was quite ill, she was not living at home then, she was contacted. And I think he went to Poplar Hospital, where he'd actually been made a Life Governor for his work for Poplar Hospital, he was made a Life Governor of the hospital, so he had close connections with it but I think, you know, it was several days after that he wasn't good but, you know, and then he did pass away so she does document that.

But there's letters she wrote when, in the war, my mother went to, I think she went down to Bournemouth she was a sort of P.T or physical training instructor / instructress and she went to Bournemouth, she served there. But then she was sent to Ceylon, which is now Sri Lanka, so she was there and she used to send my grandfather, William Whiffin, she used to send him packages, some of which I still have, of, you know, of tea, of packages - or - he liked the wrappings of things or the labels. So she used to send him things from there or unusual seeds, which we probably couldn't do nowadays, or various things like that and I think he used to ask people when they went away, you know, to, anything of interest to him and they used to send him parcels back.

So I don't recall a great deal of detail about her writing about them but maybe I haven't found it yet – so I can look through a bit more, because, as I say, most of it as I suppose when you're younger is about you [laughs], more about that.

The other thing to mention about him – going back to his collections and people sending him things – one significant thing happened in the 1920s, it took place in 1924 and 1925, was the Empire, British Empire Exhibition which took place at Wembley and it's on the site where now Wembley Stadium is. And he obviously visited at least a couple of times - I've got the ticket stubs that they went there - and he took photographs of that while he was there. But he then either at the exhibitions, bought objects or posters or like you get brochures or flyers for things now, advertising flyers, or afterwards I think what he did was he wrote to a lot of the stands. And they represented countries across the world and I suppose then it would have been quite exciting and exotic, you know, these things from New Zealand or different parts of Africa or the Caribbean – and he wrote off to – it seemed to be a lot of the exhibitors - to send him posters or booklets or samples of things.

There was one thing I came across once which was all in little files and they had metals or bits of stone or other things and one of them was asbestos in a little file [laughs]. You know it was different bits of, showing different bits of stone or other things like that. So there was a lot of things from there, as I say, a lot of posters. What he was going to

do with them because they were quite large posters, you know, again, I don't know because he didn't exhibit them but I think it was probably having them that was very important to him.

He also went, I think it was '51 [1951], to the exhibition on the South Bank they had after the war

NL: The Festival of Britain?

HM: Yeah, the Festival of Britain exhibition and with the Skylon and all these other things, and again I've got – they were more like little snapshot pictures, so presumably he had a more portable camera at that stage. But he took pictures of when he visited there and again he was fascinated and kept lots of the booklets and brochures and other things about it and again I've got boxes of those! And I think he was just, you know, really interested and whether he'd read them all or was going to read them but he was just interested in everything in the world.

NL: Did your mother tell you many stories about him?

HM: Not really – she didn't speak a great deal – as I say, the one thing she, that stood out, that she did say, you know, that he would never make much money as he would do so many things as a favour for people and he liked doing that. But I think she was very fond of him but I think it was probably, if you think that she left home in her twenties, and went back to Poplar a lot to visit him, her parents, and Gladys who lived there, she did go but I think she then was a young girl, had her own life she worked in the City and was just having a good time and then in 1950 she married. And then she had my sister and I and was obviously very involved in that, you know, her family life, and she was then living sort of 20, 25 miles away.

And as I say, they definitely kept in touch and definitely saw each other but I think, you know, she – I didn't ask her about it – which is something I think happens to most people, when your parents are alive or your grandparents you don't think to ask them a lot of factual information, it's just what you glean as a child isn't it and hear about that you remember and recall and you wished you'd asked more.

NL: And you told me when we first met that now you would often google your grand-father's name just to see what's kind of out there on the internet

HM: [laughs] Yes. I – well one reason was that, obviously with the advent of ebay and that sort of thing, people have started selling pictures of his, like the cabinet pictures they took, which were sort of cardboard-backed with an engraving of his business name and address on it. So that was of sort of interest because obviously there were pictures of children or married couples or people before they, you know, dressed

in uniform, that sort of thing and they turn up from time to time so I was interested to see that.

And then at one stage I had the idea that I'd write to Tower Hamlets Council and ask them, because of all the work that he'd done and the time he'd lived in the borough, whether they would name a road, or consider naming a road, or something, you know, after him. And I put together a sort of biographical sheet for them, to back it up, and copies of some of his pictures and sent that and they said they would consider it, which was very nice and I didn't expect much else to happen. And then sometime after that - it was only when I'd googled his name - and I found that there was a William Whiffin Square and they hadn't actually told me that they were doing it but that didn't matter - so I think it's off Bow Common Lane.

NL: So, quite close to here?

HM: Yes.

NL: You went there today didn't you?

HM: Yes, I went there. I went to try and find it a while ago and I couldn't I think probably mainly because we were driving around but this time I went on foot and I did find it, which, you know, was, you know very exciting really, to see his name up there. But I don't know if people living there [laughs] really know why it's called that but they can find out more, you know, about him.

NL: Maybe with the exhibition we're doing?

HM: With the exhibition yes, yes.

NL: They'll be all like 'oh I live in William Whiffin Way' [Square].

HM: Yes if you can tell them it's happening. So that was very nice because what I'd suggested was somewhere he'd worked and lived, you know, could bear his name. I think he'd be very, very excited about that, very chuffed. So - it's a very nice tribute to him so thank you to the Council.

NL: Is there anything else you, kind of, wanted to talk about in relation to your grand-father?

HM: I think one other thing to say is that his, his father had I think originally come from Bedford and moved into London, presumably for work, you know, there was more chance of working, more people in London and more work. Then his son, this William Whiffin, had helped him in the studio and then obviously had taken over and had got other studios in London - at one point I think they lived in Kensal Green, in north-west London. But then he [Whiffin's father] made the move into Poplar and

it seemed to be the connection was his uncle Thomas Wright had moved to Poplar and he was a photographer. I wasn't – I didn't know of that I think because I knew of him, that he was an outfitters – he ran an outfitters in military uniform, and I think they may have been in East India Dock Road as well. But presumably that might have been the connection – that he [Thomas Wright] was working there and he ran a photographic studio at that time and that's why they moved there.

But I suppose the one thing that stands out is that William Whiffin, junior, always then stayed in Poplar he stayed all his life and as far as I'm aware he never thought about moving out. His father I think he went to Hackney and then he ended up in Westcliff-on-Sea, near Southend, which I'm sure, you know, a lot of East Enders at that time – and I knew that when I visited – they really aspired to moving out and I suppose it was, not that they didn't like Poplar or the area, but I suppose it's a busy, at that stage, dirty city and you wanted to, what they saw, was moving more, you know for your retirement, moving into the countryside and that sort of thing.

So his father had moved out. As I say, my auntie, who had lived in Poplar all her life, she went to Bromley-by-Bow when she married to a flat there and then they were keen to again move out and they ended up in Leigh-on-Sea, near Southend, you know, towards the end of her life she lived in a flat there. But that's one thing I've never heard or read about that he [William Whiffin] would have wanted to move at all, you know, his life was Poplar – once he'd gone there he very much stayed there.

NL: And it's interesting, something that I've found, on Ancestry and the census – I think it was the census or it might have been in birth, marriage and death records – was that William Whiffin's mother, so William Whiffin senior's wife, Ellen Varley, she was born in Shadwell so there was the connection on the maternal side as well as on his father's side.

HM: Yes. Because I'd always wondered – my grand-father's wife, who was called Minnie Duck, I discovered, fairly recently, that she lived in Hammersmith and I went to actually see the house, which is still there, just off of, just by Hammersmith Bridge, the north side of Hammersmith bridge. And I then started thinking 'well how on earth would they have met?' You know, it's like one of these other unanswered questions, if she was in Hammersmith and he was in East London.

But what I think is, they, in the early 1900s, I've got some programmes from, say, 1901-02, he was also – something we haven't talked about – but he was, my grand-father was, very into amateur dramatics and, and the family were. And they set up, in 1912 - because lots of our family members spread around seem to have a folder of these pictures - they put on, in 1912 they put on 'A Dickens Christmas' which was a play, presumably only for the family, but they took photos, as they were

photographers, they took photos of all this or got somebody to do it, but they were all dressed up and I don't know what, you know, whether it was a play or just some scenes or something but they put on this 'Dickens Christmas' and so we've all got different sort of these sets of these photographs - so he was very into amateur dramatics.

But when, so he would've been – what age would have been then? He would have just have been in his early twenties – and they seemed to have been part of a dramatic troupe that gave performances, they did it at Alexandra Palace and various places because I've got the programmes. Now the man that put those shows on was one Percy Vincent and I'm not terribly sure his relationship, but Minnie Duck, his wife, my grand-father's wife, the family changed their name to Vincent because her father, who was Simeon William Duck, who lived in Hammersmith, was an undertaker and I think it was not seen seemly for an undertaker to have the name of 'Duck' so they changed their name to 'Vincent'. Now this Percy Vincent put on the plays and there was a Miss. Vincent and a Mr. Whiffin who did some duets together and I think that's how they must have come together. I like – I don't know how they knew each other but maybe in those sort of circles – that's how I like to think they met and fell in love [laughs] and married.

NL: And they married - I think according to the marriage certificate that was in St. James' Church in Clapton in Hackney?

HM: Yes. I think – was it in 1904 they married?

NL: That's why I've got noted.

HM: I've got the marriage certificate. They married in 1904 and what doesn't seem to be documented is they had a son in 1906 called – I think he was called Edward – who died as an infant. And I've tried – one story my mother did tell me, but I can't substantiate it, is that - but I do know they were living in Kensal Green – and my mother thinks he was buried in Kensal Green Cemetery. But my grandmother, who gave birth to him, had been so ill, I don't know why, whether it was complications or she just was ill, she was so ill but it was said that she watched from the window as his funeral, or his coffin, passed by. But I've been to that cemetery and I can't trace any record of anything. They do say though, as I say it was 1906 and I think he was only a few months old, but they say that he may have been buried, you know when they opened a grave and were going to do an adult burial and he might just have been put in there, so there may be no trace of him but there don't seem to be any records.

So they'd had a son early on then there was another four years because my auntie I think was born in 1908, Gladys, and she was much older because Sid was then [born in]1917 and my mother was [born in] 1921- so there was some gaps. That's why Gladys was much older than the rest of them and she was presumably old enough to help

out in the photography business. One thing I do recall her saying that she used to tint the photos, before the advent of colour photography, and I've got some sort of notes where I think he must have come back from a wedding and he would've then written down that the bridesmaids had, you know, pale green dresses or their headdress was a pink or the flowers were something blue and white, and she used to hand tint some of the pictures. So I have got at least one tinted picture which I would hope she would have done.

NL: Are there any surviving family photographs then? Either that William Whiffin would have taken of his family or that he would have been in as well – I assume that, you know, he would've been able to -

HM: Yeah. He was quite rarely in pictures. I mean a quite funny one I've seen is my uncle Sid, obviously he was in army uniform so it was before he was being sent off somewhere, and this was taken in the living room / drawing room in Woodstock Terrace with a mirror up against, near the fireplace – he was posed by the fireplace. And there's a mirror and reflected in the mirror you can see my grandfather's head with the camera which was quite funny to see that.

He's very rarely in pictures because presumably he was taking most of them but there are some family pictures. He was one of seven children, he was the eldest of seven children; he had three sisters and three brothers and there's a picture of the family with their parents, all seven of them with their parents, which is really nice to see, all of them. And there's also pictures – he celebrated his Golden Wedding and I think that was at, they used, Poplar – you know, a hall at Poplar, they had all their presents laid out and they had all their friends there so again, him and Minnie were in the picture – I don't know who took those pictures - but they're in the pictures of those. And I think his father had celebrated a Golden Wedding as well, previously, so there's those sort of family events.

I think they probably didn't take as many photos as we would do now, you know, only when they gathered together but again, there are some on picnics with my mother as a young girl. My mother, Ella, was incredibly close, best of friends, with her cousin who was called Edna Whiffin. Edna was the daughter of Ernest Whiffin, they were obviously about the same age, and she stayed very, very close to her all her life. They used to go out, played together as children and go out as young women - Edna I think married much earlier than my mother because my cousins were born in the late forties (1940s), so she married and started a family. They, that part of the family from my uncle Ernest, were always more biased towards North London because Edna and her family always lived in North London, so they kept that connection there as I say.

NL: And Ernest was a photographer as well?

- HM: Yes, yeah he was a photographer. I don't know if any of his pictures exist but I've got pictures of him and his wife - I think she was also called Ellen. It's probably a name of the time wasn't it? [pause]
- NL: I was wondering – going back to Thomas Wright, who was the uncle of William Whiffin senior – you thought that there was a connection perhaps between Thomas Wright, who sold his business then to his nephew and then the business ended up being run by William Whiffin junior - William Whiffin that we're focusing on in the exhibition. Because there's photographs that William Whiffin junior took of a 'Wright's' business on East India Dock Road and that was listed as a 'William Wright', I think. Do you think - had you heard stories or just made that connection because of the name perhaps?
- HM: Well I think there's a Thomas and there's a William Wright - I'm not, I haven't really researched what the connection was but I was always told that one of them was his uncle. And he – I always, I can't remember which one – whether that was a father and son as well, because one of them, Thomas Wright was, according to family history, he was a balloonist as well which I some people were in those days, I suppose, if they could do it. He went up several times in a balloon, I don't know where that would have been [laughs] whether it was over the river or somewhere, you know, away but there is a family connection I know. The other story is that through this Wright connection, through a lady called Bessie Wright, and again I don't know how she's related, that we were, the family were, related to the Wright Brothers in America, who did the first flight in North Carolina, and strangely enough I now have relatives, through my partner, who live in North Carolina, so I have been there. [laughs]
- NL: It's a small world.
- HM: It is. But I suppose, you know, if more research is done we can make those other connections but I suppose it would be that you wouldn't just probably turn up somewhere without having some connection in an area. You would have a friend or a relative or you go because you've got an offer of work and I think it was probably that, that if he had an interest in photography he went to, you know, see his uncle and saw that there was, you know, a lot of opportunity in Poplar and the area at that time.
- NL: You mentioned before that your grand-father, he obviously had his interest in photography, he was a photographer, but he also had [an] interest in painting and in amateur dramatics – did you ever hear that he had an interest in the moving image? In making films perhaps himself?
- HM: I think the only thing I know about that is he did actually, and I've still got, he did keep lots of celluloid but again I don't know how he got it. And some of it quite large celluloid from feature films and others are

sort of, single, single shots of – you know, stuff that ends up on the cutting room floor - and I suppose that was sort of sold off and could be bought then. Also, he did collect photos from - I found recently a box from MGM studios and one of the other movie studios of people that wouldn't really be familiar to us now but presumably they were sort of film stars. So I think, you know my understanding would be that he was interested in anything artistic really and not just from the fact that, you know, it was interesting to go and see a film at the cinema but it was, you know, how it was made – it's still the process. Because he did have photographic magazines and other things that he cut out, that I've seen, you know, and again, or it was the latest development in photography or things like that, so you know, I just think he must have been of an artistic sort of nature and liked all those things.

NL: I find the more I learn about William Whiffin the more I'm enamored by his personality, and his career and it's just - he just seems like such an interesting person really. Do you find that, for instance at Tower Hamlets Local History Library there was an exhibition of his work about what would have been about 40 years ago, in the 1970s, and now we're building up to another exhibition – what do you think it is about his work because perhaps he wouldn't have been renowned, like a world-wide known figure during his lifetime but there's a certain kind of characteristic that his work has lasted and has this enduring kind of quality. I don't know if you have any thoughts on that?

HM: Well I suppose I'm biased. One is that I'm incredibly proud of him and I've always thought that his work is really good but I think well is that just because I – rose tinted spectacles, sort of thing. But you know I have read some reviews from other people who say it is good. I suppose I'm not aware that there's a lot of material that's unusable but I suppose in those days you see you – I mean I admire him because in those days you had one chance at getting photos really and, you know, you had these sort of very heavy laborious cameras and all the different equipment and actually to get some of the images he got. And one thing I always think – when he took quite large groups of children or street parties, you know, gatherings of people – sometimes, you know, people obviously haven't hold the position and look away and are a bit blurred but, I mean, out of say fifty people, forty-five are fine or something like that and it must have been quite a challenge.

So, I think, I mean I suppose he did it for a long time and he knew what to expect, but, you know, I think he probably did have the right sort of demeanor to take, you know, to deal with people who may be uncomfortable and might not be used to having photos taken or an unruly bunch of people [laughs] to get together. Maybe that's why he preferred to take buildings [laughs] – they were static!

But no, I'm really, really really proud of him and I hope that his work will endure and more people can see it and be aware of it through the exhibition, and through the publicity about it, and as I say, hopefully it

also helps because I know he did, there's an awful lot of his commercial work and wedding photography that would be very difficult now, if they're not marked, to identify who they are but it would be lovely to know that some families are sort of reunited with their history through photos he's taken.

NL: And we haven't really talked that much about that side of the business but that would have been really the 'bread and butter' – the portrait work, so, weddings – what else – would people just have come in for a photograph of a special family occasion or?

HM: Well my understanding was - he used to keep things on slips of paper and once I found these and put them together but it's only half of, like his price list, which was interesting. But they had this thing called cabinet photos which were, I think were they the larger ones? But were, you know, card-backed, or you got smaller pictures that you could carry about in a wallet or a bag. And they had a club – I'm sure most photographers did this – but you paid into this club a small amount of money and then obviously you could use that to buy certain images. And I think it was – a) people were in uniform, so presumably before they go off to war or they've come home on leave and you want to take an image of your son or whatever, but they were family groups, there were children.

He had – from looking at the pictures – they had these great big backdrops in the studio, presumably, I mean, very theatrical again, painted backdrops or they may have been some sort of wall hangings, like tapestry because I have got some of those still. And they had different scenes put in the back so it could be as if you were on a terrace looking out onto a beautiful garden or some other sort of classical scene and that was used as a backdrop. And then you had props – so you had a sort of tallish stand or table so somebody could sort of lean on that out of interest, otherwise I think people couldn't just sort of stand there, they'd feel very awkward.

And one of the things he used, which is in a lot of photos - I've seen - with my auntie Gladys seated on it and some of his other subjects – and it's known, I've looked it up, as a Savannah Roller Chair. And it's like a cross-over chair, a sort of cross-chair, a low-ish chair and strangely enough I have that chair. It was something – I can't remember where we found it but we've got it – and the bottom bit, the feet things, have rotted but and it's very, very heavy and I don't know what sort of wood but it's wood and painted but it's very solid, I suppose it needed to be, in the studio. But I'm quite pleased that I've still got that and I want to have it restored – I don't know where exactly I'm going to do [laughs] where I'm going to put it and what I'm going to do with it. But that is in several of his photographs.

So they had these sort of chairs or stands, depending on how many people might be in a picture, or how young or old they were, but I think

it was one is, a) to make them more comfortable and b) keep them still, presumably, because I think there were lots of pictures in early stages where you had some contraption at the back of your head, some sort of, holding your head still because the exposure was so long in the early stages of photography that you had to keep very still otherwise the image wouldn't come out sharp enough.

But - so I like to think that his love of the theatre helped him in his photography. But definitely the 'bread and butter' of the commercial business would have been wanting, you know, a photo of their children, or they just got married or they were going, you know, just got engaged or something like that. And I think probably, even in that day and age, you know, even though to us it would have been a small amount of money, it was still quite an outlay then but, you know, that was your option because you didn't have your own camera, you did go along to a photographer. And I, I know he was one of many in the area so, you know, there were a lot of photographers serving that area and people having pictures, which, you know, as I say, they do tend to end up on ebay so they do survive 'til today.

NL: Do you know with the wedding photographs – would they actually have been taken on the day or would they have maybe been taken before or after the actual wedding? They would have come along and put on all their finery?

HM: From what I've seen it looks like they were taken on the day because some of them have got the minister or the priest in them, some of them, you know, they're not just the couple they've got obviously their parents, their – you know, the bridesmaids or whoever around them. But some of them seem to have been taken like, it looks like a back alley by the church and very interesting, they've put a bit of carpet or a rug down [laughs], to make it look a bit better. But I mean they're just very striking you know, of, the dress in those days, the flowers, and you know, what they were wearing and how smart they looked because, you know, presumably some of the people weren't used to wearing suits and dressing up in their finery, so again I like to think that he could put them at their ease.

He did take – there's some lovely sets of my mother's wedding – my mother got married at All Saints' Church in Poplar but she had her photos done at St Matthias' which is now, it's a community centre I think, I did visit some time ago and – I mean it's the church near Poplar Rec, Poplar Recreation Ground, which is opposite where they lived in Woodstock Terrace. Because I remember when I visited there I would always go and play on the swings, I loved playing on those swings – I still love swings today, it must have come from that. But I'm too old and big now to get on them!

NL: Never too old for swings!

HM: [laughs] I do try! But - and I did go and visit there and take some photos myself – but she had, I don't know why they thought it was a better setting but he took my mother's wedding photos and they're beautiful. And I've still got my mother's wedding dress which was a cream crepe number and I've still got her head-dress and her – I don't know if it's a bouquet but it was like waxed flowers, you had these waxed flower things – so I've come across that as well, that I, they kept.

So they were a family what we'd now, modern day, call hoarders! [laughs] They'd call themselves collectors but I think they collected but, as I say, without any sort of view as to what was going to be done with it. But, you know, it's fortunate that it does still exist.

NL: And that's really interesting that she chose St Matthias', that background, because as you say its right beside Poplar Recreation Ground and I can think of some of the most striking photographs that we have, that William Whiffin took, are of the Upper North Street School, the memorial so obviously the

HM: Yes

NL: The death of the school children due to the bombing [in the First World War] – so that whole kind of area then, you've got East India Dock Road, Woodstock Terrace and Poplar Methodist Church used to be on the corner – you can almost build up this picture of this particular kind of plot, this particular area of Poplar that had a lot of significance for William Whiffin and his family.

HM: Yes. I mean he must have known the area like the back of his hand really and I've got letters from - that are posted, which we would find extraordinary today, that would have been posted like in the morning that he got that same day and he replied to. And it may have been from Sister Mary from somewhere saying 'oh we're having our Confirmation this afternoon can you come and do the photographs?' and things like that obviously the communication was, strangely enough, thorough the postal system much better than it might be today.

But I think he'd embrace things like email - I can imagine him embracing digital photography and email and everything like that because I think he was just generally interested in science and the progress of things.

NL: That was something I was going to ask you actually, as one of our final questions – if he was alive today what do you think your grand-father would be working in or what - does any images spring to mind?

HM: I suspect he would still be – he'd probably absolutely fascinated about the change of the docks and the change of the use of the docks and how all of that development took place and I think, you know, a general

wonderment and fascination at it and not thinking 'oh, you know, it should be still be docks and there should still be all this going on' – he would have hopefully seen it as the next stage in the progress and that you know, thank goodness it is being used and has a different use nowadays. I mean I think some sadness for the way of life and how it changed but again I would hope that he would probably be still documenting the changing face of London, and hopefully the East End of London.

NL: That's brilliant, thanks so much. Is there anything, any final comments you'd like to add?

HM: I don't think so I think we've covered most things.

NL: There was something I'm just remembering now, that you said when you came across his images, be that in publications or online – would you find that often they weren't actually referenced as being by your grand-father?

HM: Yes, yes, no that is quite important. I look - and I'm forever in charity shops [laughs] and other bookshops and things - and if I see an old book about London I always look, I stand there looking up at the back in case there is anything, and a lot of times it says Tower Hamlets Local History Library. And I mean some of the photos I do know and they definitely are his or I sort of think they may be his but I think what I would like to know is that in future he will be given a personal credit because I think it's useful to know, not just for my benefit or his benefit, but it would be useful to know that he was, you know, the author of these pictures, specific ones and I think, you know, I want to keep his name alive really that's my main reason.

I mean recently I went into – I now live in Hertfordshire – and I went into an Oxfam bookshop and came across two volumes of Wonderful London which they used a lot of his pictures in them and even now on ebay they sell the pages from that book - I don't know whose doing it and they never seem to get rid of them – but they are the pages cut out of those books with his images. Because I was quite excited as it says William Whiffin photograph but then I realised they're these pages from this books and luckily these books weren't too (about £14) so I was able to just snap them up because I have got a set that my auntie had and I think my uncle in Australia sent back many books with Whiffin pictures or about Poplar, he'd sent them back or they'd got sent back after he'd died, from Australia.

But I'm, I'm forever still searching - and really pleased and happy when they are used. And I think one, the most recent use I know is one of Peter Ackroyd's books on London and he used, this isn't Poplar, but he used, or he referred to William Whiffin - and I was very surprised to see it there - and it was a mural of I think it was the boys following the water cart, on Lambeth Walk. But I then went down there to have a look and

got talking to someone – I couldn't see it at all – I got talking to a man, a very friendly man in a fish and chips shop opposite who said it's all been knocked down and there's flats now. But it was there so that's fine, it was there and people did see it at one point so that was nice.

NL: Have you been back along to East India Dock Road - have you walked back along around that area to look at the sites where his studio would have been based, where his father and his great uncle [worked]?

HM: I have been back but it's obviously changed quite a lot and I've tried to look for the places where they had their studio and they lived. I've been back to Woodstock Terrace and seen how much the property prices are now [laughs]! I think, yeah, they would have been, they rented the places they stayed in, I've still got their rent books and there's one from, when would it have been - 1920s probably - they paid 12 shillings a week and when they...oh one thing we haven't covered I could just talk about briefly.

In the 1930s, obviously there was the Depression, I've come across letters and it was marked 'Southend Letters' and it was when my great grand-father, William Whiffin's father, moved out to Southend and in his retirement he obviously still owned one of the properties in East India Dock Road which my grand-father used as a studio and William Whiffin junior had stopped paying the rent, and presumably - this was the thirties and he had three youngish children - maybe, presumably business wasn't that good.

The rent wasn't that high but there are gaps in the book and he wasn't paying his rent and there's a whole correspondence – and I've only got his father's side of it – but the letters getting increasingly imploring him to pay the rent as they are relying on it for their retirement and they need the money. William Whiffin's sister May appears to have lived with them, she did get married to a policeman, called Hills, I don't know what happened, I haven't looked into that yet and - presumably they may have separated or got divorced - because she was living back with her parents in Westcliff-on-Sea. And it seems to be that she was working to help pay for them and she writes also to my grand-father and I think, you know, there was obviously a problem between them except that his father's letters all say 'your dearest dad' and 'from dad', you know, and not nasty, but it becomes increasingly difficult that he says, you know 'I need this money and if you can't pay it I'm going to have to let it or sell it'.

The next things I come across are some advertisements in the East London Advertiser for the house for sale and it was a large, it was their property but it was a large – they are now but they are shops I suppose - it was a large Georgian property but he put the price down and I think it got sold for about £100, which nowadays we would think incredible. So that was one of the reasons he probably then moved to – whether he moved to Woodstock Terrace then or to another place I haven't

gone into the sort of chronology of it. But his father had to sell the property from under him because he wasn't paying the rent but as I say this was the thirties during the Depression and it must have been a very, very difficult time for him.

NL: So that could have been – because your grand-father was based at 237 East India Dock Road and then he moved to smaller premises at 241 – not a great move, just a couple of doors down – I think that was about 1932 or 1933 - so that would have been the reason why?

HM: Those letters were from then - it was definitely the early 1930s.

NL: Okay that's great. I could really talk to you all day [both laugh] about your grand-father and you've been a really fascinating interviewee so thank you very much for participating and also, obviously, for all your help with making the exhibition happen which hopefully will be a fitting tribute to your grand-father and his legacy.

HM: Yes thank you.

NL: Thanks.