

# Melian Mansfield Transcript

## **Melian Mansfield**

When Jonathan, my eldest, was five, I think, he went to Highgate Primary School, which is just up the road, and there was a play scheme being run by parents in the summer. And I got involved with that fairly quickly with Nick-, I mean Nicky's... Gavron started it, and then that's where we started, really. And I spent 12 years with other parents running, every summer holidays and Easter holidays, we did as well.

## **Marie Horner**

So let's talk- let's talk about that, because that would then go on to inform what happened in Jacksons Lane.

## **Melian Mansfield**

Yes.

## **Marie Horner**

Yes. So tell me- let's talk about the play scheme. Let's learn about that.

## **Melian Mansfield**

Well, the play scheme, it had just started, and they invited parents- school invited parents to go to an evening at the school where they showed a video of the play scheme. And so I went along, and I- it was great. And then they were asking parents to help, to run it. So I offered to do that. Looked exciting, and I spent, as a result, I did spend all my children's summer holidays. Well, we did go away, but, um, running the play scheme, and we had 150 children, frequently. And we- lots of volunteers, local volunteers, and we provided all sorts of activities for them, sports activities. They could play. It was a big playground, and we had one building, not very good, well, and they did art and craft, and... everybody had such a good time. It was a whole community event every year. And then we progressed to do it in the Easter holidays as well. And we were- we made it mainly at Highgate Primary. But then we also moved to St Michael's, which is up the road, for the Easter holidays, usually. And, um, children loved it.

## **Marie Horner**

How old were the children, Melian?

## **Melian Mansfield**

Children were 5 to 11. It was for primary age children. And, um... I think my children, my own children, had reservations about spending all the time there, but their friends were there, and, um... there was always lots to do, and we used to go on a few trips, but it was completely free for everybody.

## **Marie Horner**

How was it funded, Melian?

**Melian Mansfield**

Well, it was funded. We got some funding, bit of funding from Haringey, but not much. It was mainly... grants we got, I can't remember, because we paid play workers to run it, but the vast majority of people there were, were volunteers, parents, um, local people, and we just, we just had a great time.

**Marie Horner**

And that was when you first met Nicky Gavron.

**Melian Mansfield**

Nicky, well, no, because we met a bit before that, because we had two of our children, both our second children went to a play group in Highgate village in the base of the church that stands in Pond Square, and I can't remember what the church is. Anyway. So we- they, children went to play group there. That's where we met. And then that's when we started talking about this play scheme that was happening because our old, my older son was at Highgate Primary already, whereas Nicky's daughter was at St Michael's. And we kind of just, talked through what we could do and how we could get it going. And other parents obviously were involved, and that was a great time, as our children were growing up. And then children didn't want to leave, when they went to secondary schools, they used to keep coming. But it wasn't very good, because older children take up, well one they take up more space, but they also take up... yeah, they wanted to do different things, basically, and so we realised that we needed somewhere different for them. It needed to be separated at 11, and that's when Nicky in particular, started looking around this area to see what we could find, what we could find for all the young people. And this was an empty building that we're sitting in, and nobody was using it. Haringey had bought it, we discovered. And it obviously belonged to the church before that, but the Haringey bought it from the church, and so we thought, this is a great place, big open space, and right in the middle of the area. And anyway, some of the teenagers were climbing up the roof and trying to get in, in any case, so used to get up on the roof behind the back. And, um, so we got from some funding from Haringey. They- they paid for a youth worker, and we opened up the building.

**Marie Horner**

And what year was that?

**Melian Mansfield**

That was 1970 and it was unofficial, really, so that we then had to formally apply to Haringey to let us use the building. And that was '72, I think 1972, when they formally said we could use the building, and they gave us £3000 to repair the roof, mainly because it was leaking, and so that we had a building that was dry [unclear]. That's been the history of Jacksons Lane, the leaks.

**Marie Horner**

[Laughs] I mean, we are sitting in a room [laughs]. Studio 2 is notorious for its leaking.

**Melian Mansfield**

Does this room still leak?

**Marie Horner**

I don't believe it does now, but there's plenty of stories when brown liquid was oozing down the wall.

**Melian Mansfield**

And they used to- we used to have buckets for a long, long time. They had buckets in the, you know, near the foyer, virtually until the refurbishment did because I remember four or five buckets, because the roof that they had, that was replaced two or three times, because it never was completely, um, leak proof. So we always had water in on the ground floor at various points different parts, but, but so the money they gave us solved a few problems, but then we had to apply for more funding to do other things. But again, we used the whole principle of volunteers came along and said, you know, 'What's going on here? What are you doing?'. And so that's how we started to bring people. People came along, and then we started setting up workshops for children, and it kind of drew people. It was like a... can't think of the right word, but people just came from everywhere and offered to do things, and either they do some building work, or they set up a class or a group or, and it built from there. So we had a cafe, we had- space for very young children. We had a, um, puppet group came who'd built giant puppets in the building, and everybody had their space. But there was no divisions at that time. So you had your space in the big open ground floor, and there was a cafe as well. Um...and we used to then provide lunch for older people a whole range of activities in a space, which was not divided, but people were you, we had one kitchen where everything happened, and then we had a bar in this, what's now the cellar, and that used to open. We used to open that every evening, was run by Jan and Paul, and we used to have lots of fun down there, and music.

**Marie Horner**

What sort of fun do you remember, Melian?

**Melian Mansfield**

Well, we just had lots of music and dancing and drinking, of course. I'm getting- getting to know people and meeting people. But in the daytime, we would have people in the building doing all sorts of different things.

**Marie Horner**

And Melian, what was, what was your role during that time? What were you doing?

**Melian Mansfield**

We weren't- we didn't have a role. We were just there. We just decided, Nicky and I, and a few other people decided that we were going to make use of this building for the community, and that anyone could join, anyone could come along, with no restrictions and people could contribute whatever. We also have the, um, what was then, the church hall it was called, but it became the theatre, and because when we started init- initially providing for young people, youth club, um, and people realised we were beginning to use the building. Um, in Highgate there's a... the Highgate theatre. Now, what's it not know what's- what's it called? The, um, what's the pub called?

**Marie Horner**

The Gatehouse.

**Melian Mansfield**

The Gatehouse. Thank you.

**Marie Horner**

That's okay.

**Melian Mansfield**

The Gatehouse theatre... the Gatehouse Pub has a theatre, and there was a theatre group that worked there, and they were asked to leave at one point, and because I think they wanted to refurbish. And so they came here and asked us if they could have the church hall, as it was then. So they fitted it out with all the lighting and seating and so on and used to have their own shows. But then eventually, by negotiation with them, we invited other companies to come and perform here. And so we set up a whole programme of events and theatre productions and other productions. And there's a vast- among the archives, there is a vast number of programmes and showing what we did and who we had, and we had started with some well known people who came and supported us, but also performed. So, Victoria Wood used to come here, George Michael, Juliet Stevenson, who still does, I think. And many people who started their career here basically. Comedians as well. And we had a huge range of different people performing in many different ways, poetry, theatre, concerts. And it grew and grew like Topsy, really [Marie laughs]. People just joined in and offered what they wanted to do. And then we started going out and looking for people and drawing up a more cohesive- and we did a lot of fundraising by running weekend jumble sales and cake stalls and so on to raise money to improve the building, and then eventually, eventually, Haringey gave us a grant, and that grant was given to us and also the permission to use the building through the committee that Jeremy Corbyn chaired. And, um, so eventually Haringey supported us, and then we started, I can't remember which year we started applying to the Arts Council for funding as well, because of all the theatre we were doing and other other art forms, and most of the workshops that we offered for children and adults were art based, musical or dance or... depending on what people wanted. But we had a wide range, and that wide range has continued, really. I think there are 40 or so classes and courses, and we built those up over time... as more and more people came and offered to run things. It was an amazing time, because everything was fluid and free and anybody could walk in the centre, there were always people here doing things, making things, trying painting the building, or trying to improve it, because it was fairly, it was still- we still had quite a lot of, um, church furniture there, the pews and so on. But people made things out and brought their own things, and it was amazingly vibrant place to be. Like a kind of marketplace where people just kind of joined in and helped each other. Was good, brought their own particular skills. So, and then, the whole area was kind of blighted, in a way because the government decided they wanted to widen the Archway Road.

**Marie Horner**

Right so, let's move on- let's move on to that, right? So, so I mean that significant grant, there are different grants weren't there from Haringey Council, but the- the one that, in terms that Jeremy Corbyn-

**Melian Mansfield**

Enabled us to have.

**Marie Horner**

Was 1975.

**Melian Mansfield**

Yeah.

**Marie Horner**

Is that right?

**Melian Mansfield**

Yeah, well, yes, I think that was when, because we- we were here in '73 and '74 because we'd been given permission to use the building by then, in '72, I think. But it became formalised in '75 and that's when we opened officially... very- it was unofficial, really, until then, but we, there were so many people willing to do things, it worked really well.

**Marie Horner**

I mean, we've talked about Jan and Paul and Nicky Gavron. Just before, we kind of move into that 80s time and the widening of Archway Road, supposed to do that. And is there anyone else, specifically, or any people that you remember that stand out?

**Melian Mansfield**

Well, Jan and Paul were very, very important. Paul worked as a social worker for the- for Haringey, and they, they used to run the bar downstairs. They had contacts in Haringey, and the other people who worked for Haringey, like Tom Shea, who was a recent- was a social worker as well, and that the Haringey Community Development Team, somebody called John Knightly, was they had people who were allocated to different parts of the borough, and John Knightly was allocated to Har- to Jacks-well to this area, and they supported us a lot. Tom Shea and John Knightly, were very supportive to us. And, um, there were so many, so many other people who, who got involved in different ways.

**Marie Horner**

Were you here most days, Melian?

**Melian Mansfield**

At that time, yes, almost every day, yeah. Because we were op- once the place was open, it was open all the time, and we did close the building from time to time, yes, but there were people here, and I spent a lot of time here with my children as well. And it was exciting time again. The 60s were in, when I was at university, and 70s, early 70s here... there were just lots of young people and lots of interesting, there were lots of interesting people living around here who were doing different things, who offered their lives really, so much. Many of us spent a lot of our time here.

**Marie Horner**

What were some of those interesting, interesting people, interesting things? What sort of things made them so interesting?

**Melian Mansfield**

Because people brought different skills. So you, you would find- somebody would walk in and say, 'Oh, I could teach. I would like to start a group doing flamenco dancing', or 'I'd like to start a theater group for young people, or a life drawing group' or anything and everything. There were music groups as well, and just it was, and then it would happen. There weren't any restrictions. There were no, no bureaucracy. We just let it happen.

**Marie Horner**

Did you ever say no to any?

**Melian Mansfield**

I don't think we did for a long time. I think we may have said. I don't remember saying no to anybody, but it could have been that there were groups. There may have been groups or people that we hesitated about. But basically, we were open to everyone and anyone who offered to do anything, whether it was raising money or doing some work in the building or running a group or publicising Jacksons Lane and what we did, or we knew somebody who would come and perform in theatre. We just had open arms to everybody and numerous things happened, as you will have discovered, as you discover all the theatre groups and comedians who came involved, um. And it just grew and grew. And we eventually got money from the Arts Council and from- we've had Haringey money, actually, from the virtually the beginning, and we still have an annual amount of money, but we've always had to fundraise. And fundraising became, well, it was quite difficult when in the 80s and 90s, it became much more difficult to get the funding. But we managed to, because we had a full staff. Originally, all the staff were volunteers, and first time we did get any money was in '75 but '75 onwards, we had very few staff until we could, till we got more money.

**Marie Horner**

It feels that it sounds like Jacksons Lane was very supported and contributed by to the local community. From the local community, for the local community, how would you describe the local community at that time, in terms of the different people?

**Melian Mansfield**

Well, very mixed community, because and also Highgate society, it... had a particular group of and they were doing lots of different things as well. They were running events and and actually they had a community group who supported what we were doing at Jacksons lane. But, so there was the Highgate society, mainly for people who lived in Highgate. Then was the Archway Road, and everybody who lived along the Archway Road and a lot of the- the- and then there's the council's estate opposite Summersby Road and the- the houses that were the other side of Highgate Primary. But then there's a part beyond that was a Highgate Golf Course, Hampstead Heath, and some large houses where people with a lot of money live. So there's a whole... but most of the people who got involved with us lived in the Archway Road or either side, both sides. What's-what was been interesting, though, we've over time, we've interviewed people, and had people here who lived, who have lived locally, but didn't

know about Jacksons Lane until they came for a specific reason, for an interview or to see a show or to join a class. And then when you talk to people, they will say, 'Yes, I know Jacksons Lane because I went, I used to go to the drawing class,' or 'My children used to go to the shadow puppets group' or 'I went once to the theatre'. But people tend to, not see Jacksons Lane as a whole, as all the things that is on offer. Well, that's quite interesting, because the people who came to the theatre often didn't join in in anything else, and people who came to classes and courses concentrated on whatever they were coming to, but never came to the theatre. And that was always something that we tried to market, to tell people about. But somehow Jacksons Lane tends to be one particular thing to many people. But it became, I remember being in the Southbank at the Royal Festival Hall once, talking to some people, and there were a group of people there talking about Jacksons Lane and saying how preparing something we were going to do here, and that was extraordinary, because I always thought of Jacksons Lane just being known round here. But then even in Haringey, until the work that's been done more recently, outreach work, I think many people in Haringey didn't really know about it, although people have come from far and wide and still do, to Jacksons Lane for variety of different things.

### **Marie Horner**

Do you- it's interesting how the community groups really led, what would happen. The different groups in the community is probably the better way to put it really led what happened in the space. How would you- and that kind of free flow area of different things happening all the time? How, how did the building look and feel to you at that time?

### **Melian Mansfield**

Well, that was the time before there was a second floor, so it felt very big because we were using, there was no you were just looking up to the ceiling of the church. So the ground floor space was very big because it wasn't divided up as it is now, and it just, but nevertheless, despite that, you'd think it wouldn't be a very friendly space, or it would be quite alienating with a very high roof and a very wide open space, but I never felt it like that at all. It always felt as if it was... a community space. It felt, you know, people just made it into something that was very friendly, very... just trying to think. Yes, it was just a big community space but then, of course, we started to build and then it started being divided up. And it became, felt as if it was coming smaller and smaller, because we then had room- different rooms, divided the place into different rooms, and then we had the cafe.

### **Marie Horner**

What did you think about that at the time, that dividing up?

### **Melian Mansfield**

Well, it became necessary, really. It couldn't carry on because we, you know, we had a... yeah, we just could not mel- everybody couldn't muddle along. Well no, not muddle along, that's wrong. But, you know, we used, we all used to congregate in the kitchen frequently and, and we all had, we all had to respect everybody else, because different groups would come in, or different people would come in, and it wasn't always left there was nobody managing it. So we just kind of, but that's, that was a very good and actually for me, it was very similar to Keele, the early days of Keele, where we were all, you know, joined in and supported and each other and such a good way of living. So many people got some really enjoyed coming here, and got so much out of being here. But, because two things, they could

contribute in any way that they wanted to, but they could also participate in the sense of learning new things or joining groups, or meeting new people, going to a very wide range of different productions, certain productions, and so on. So, there was so much going on that it was, was just exciting, really. And Nicky bought in a lot of- not only did she fund, get the funding to refurbish the theatre, but also to do the mezzanine floor, which made a lot of difference, of course. And she brought lots of people here, too, well known people, so, but everybody brought new and different perspectives and influences.

**Marie Horner**

What did it mean for you at the time? With young kids, you've moved to Crouch End at this point. What would it mean for you in your life at that time?

**Melian Mansfield**

Well, it was my second home, I would say. I used to- even when I went back teaching, I used to come here a lot. And then, when I first went back to teaching in '79 in my teaching '79, I drove past. I really wasn't very involved here. I kind of withdrawn. And then I drove past one day and it said 'Jacksons Lane, AGM, All Welcome' or something. And so, I decided to come- come to it. And it was like, it was strange coming back, because quite a lot had happened. I think it was the late 80s, actually. And so, they were looking for committee members, and I'd originally been on the first committee that we had. And so, hardly, anybody came. And so the inevitable happens. So you kind of said, I got drawn back into it, because I kind of said to myself, I'm not going to go back, because I should just get too involved. But of course, I did go back, and I was on the committee, then I was asked to be chair, and that happened in the early 90s, and I left in 2016.

**Marie Horner**

So the opposite happened.

**Melian Mansfield**

Yeah, the opposite happened. I got completely involved in it, all sorts of- in every way, and I loved it. And my husband wasn't that happy, because he kept saying, he got involved to some extent as well. He was one of the first chairs. But then-

**Marie Horner**

Michael.

**Melian Mansfield**

Michael, he then said 'We only seemed to pass on the stairs' was the one comment he made to me, one because he was working a lot, so he wasn't so involved as- as I was.

**Marie Horner**

He was a barrister at this time?

**Melian Mansfield**

And I spent all my time coming here, bringing the children here, out of school hours, holidays and evenings.

**Marie Horner**

As well as teaching?

**Melian Mansfield**

As well as teaching all day.

**Marie Horner**

So wow, a very busy time. You were dragged back in, in the late 80s, early 90s. Let's just look at that, that time in the- in the early 80s, when that conversation around Archway Road.

**Melian Mansfield**

Oh yes.

**Marie Horner**

The demolition.

**Melian Mansfield**

Yes. Well, we fought that.

**Marie Horner**

Yes, tell me about that time.

**Melian Mansfield**

Well, there were also, there was... the whole inquiry took place at Hornsey Town Hall, and we were literally living behind Hornsey Town Hall in western parts. So, I used to go, a lot to that, because everybody from here and around the whole area were putting their arguments as to why not to widen the Archway Road. And what had happened, sadly was a lot of the houses, bigger houses to the south of Jacksons Lane had virtually been, what's the word... they were going to be bought up and razed to the ground so they were not in. People had to move out of them. And everybody in the area was furious and said that the widening of the road, and there was always a possibility that this, it would go through here. So there was- and we did, uh, a big demonstration with the puppets that were being made here, the giant puppets. And we fought it through the- through the inquiry, and they withdrew the whole thing. And then they did it again. They bought it up again. So we spent an awful lot of time arguing the case for not widening the road.

**Marie Horner**

Where did you- what were the puppets?

**Melian Mansfield**

The puppets were, well, the puppets they made. They made a number of different puppets, which were not- who were not, anybody in particular. But they were just very, they were fantastic. They were beautifully made and we paraded through the streets with them.

**Marie Horner**

Down Archway Road.

**Melian Mansfield**

Down the Archway Road. And so they made a, you know, nobody could ignore them. And- and there was a- when we had the second proposal to widen the Archway Road, it was, I went to one of the presentations from the people who were going to do it, and a lot of us did, and at the Civic Centre in Haringey, and what we re- we asked them where they lived, the people who, the proposers, obviously they were part of a company, and they obviously didn't live around here, but they lived in Sussex or Surrey or something. And people were outraged, and they said, 'It's all very well for you coming along and proposing to widen our road and knock down our houses around here and destroy the community when you live somewhere else'. Of course, that was inevitable. But anyway, they didn't stay very long, and they, they left and gave up. And that is fairly amazing, actually, that the local community, twice saw them off, as it were.

**Marie Horner**

What year was that, that you went?

**Melian Mansfield**

I was involved in all of it, and over the two periods. And I'm just trying to remember... I think the first suggestion was in the 70s proposals, and then they did it again in the 80s or 90s. I can't remember. Well, the thing is that when that sort of thing happens, everybody comes together again, but we already had a community here that were together, and so it was very easy for everyone to...come together and fight the cause.

**Marie Horner**

And it didn't happen. They tried twice.

**Melian Mansfield**

They tried twice. The second one was not as long as the first. And I think they realised that it's not gonna- they were we weren't going to let it happen. And it didn't, and it stayed the same, as a result. It's quite extraordinary, really.