

SS: Now today is the 24 of May 2017 and I'm Sharon Slater and I'm interviewing Tommy Roberts on the life on the Shannon Estuary. So, first question I have is how long have you been living in this area?

TR: Since I was born here, yeah.

SS: And have your family been living here as well.

TR: My father before me, yeah would have been living here as well yeah and grandfather on my father's side back as far as we can trace have been living here and on my mother's side actually their ancestors, her ancestors, would have come from here as well but in the meantime they'd have moved up as far as Patrickswell, the other end of the parish and em but she ended up back down here, yeah so.

SS: What was your mother's maiden name?

TR: O'Brien, yeah.

SS: And what did your family do here?

TR: Farming, farming, fishing that was the life yeah. Small farm, you know, medium, about 40 acres roughly around that and the fishing was the other side of it then.

SS: And you went out fishing yourself?

TR: I did, I suppose I would have been after leaving school it would have been a bit alright. I went out fishing, yeah.

SS: And who did you fish with?

TR: I would have fished with local people, Jimmy Guerin, you've probably spoken to him already, and Michael Jim Roberts my cousin, and I would have to a lesser extent then with, I would have fished a bit with Liam Coughlan and a bit with. Actually quite a bit then Daniel O'Connell, a man from up the road here, I fished with him. Mike Cronin another man, both of those, Daniel O'Connell and Mike Cronin would have been I suppose a few years younger than me whereas all the other men would have been would have been older than me, you know. Apart from Jim we're roughly the same age. Yeah they would have been, and Richard Kiely as well, Richard Kiely I would have fished a good bit with yeah.

SS: What kind of fishing did you do?

TR: It would be all salmon fishing, yeah.

SS: And it was all with the net?

TR: All, yeah, all drift netting yeah, drift net salmon fishing, yeah yeah.

SS: And when ye went out you spent hours on the river?

TR: Roughly when you went out I suppose about two three hours before low water and you'd come in, you'd come back then we'll say after just after high water, you know, the top of the tide. So you'd roughly spend nine hours of a trip out, it would be about nine hours.

SS: And when you were out in the boat, what did you eat and how did you cook?

TR: Most of the time you'd carry sandwiches with you and stuff, you know. Carry out what you'd eat like, you know. Some times, I usen't to do it, I don't think I ever did it pull into one of the islands and boil a kettle and that you know make tea but an awful lot of the lads used to do that, you know, yeah.

SS: And the islands, there were huts on some of the islands?

TR: On some of the islands there were. Now the huts would have been, most of those would have been gone, they would have been before my time, you know. All that would have been, they would have only been a few sticks and stakes is all I would remember of them but some of the older men would remember the huts being on the islands. There was one island there, 'Kay Island' that's was, that used to be used by the pilots. They used to have a base there and the western pilot would bring the boat as far as, up as far as say the Bunratty river and then they'd change out there and there'd be a pilot from there to Limerick and the same coming down a pilot would bring her from Limerick down to there and they'd change over there and the western pilot would take her down the rest of the way to Scatterry. That practice, that ended I don't know the exact year like but it would have been a good bit before my time, you know. Then there were other, some of the other islands as well the fishermen themselves some of the fishermen from let's say, from further in from town and that used to have huts. There again it would have been a little bit before my time I wouldn't quite remember, you know, that being in practice you know.

SS: And when you were fishing can you remember what the biggest fish you caught was?

TR: The biggest I would have seen would have been 12 or 13 pounds would have been the biggest I would have, yeah, caught. Now there would have been, I suppose even in my time there would have been bigger caught but I didn't ever catch them, you know. And then now, having the old people, my father and that, I've heard them tell, talking about salmon being caught like regularly that were over 20 pounds and that you know, but I would have never, I didn't ever see that, yeah yeah.

SS: And when, what kinds of fish? Did you just fish for salmon or were there other kinds of fish?

TR: Well we were mainly, well like we used to be fishing for salmon now sometimes alright after the salmon season, my father used to go out and they'd go for fluke, you know. Now a lot of the time during the salmon season season you'd be catching those and you's be bringing those in the net as well, you know. You'd generally, you'd bring them home to eat them yourself, they wouldn't be. Whereas the salmon you'd be selling them, the fluke you'd just eat them yourself, you know.

SS: And you would you sell the salmon to?

TR: For the most in the earlier years, we'll say, when my father was alive and that, there used be a merchant come, was it Carrs, the docketts are there the old docketts are still there. William Carr I think was his, was the name of the company and one of their driver used to come in a small truck and he's have a wee kind of a gantry that would slide out. It was like I suppose a, probably wasn't a hi-ace pick-up but something similar to one of them, you know, and just a small little gantry that he'd hang a scales on and he's weigh all the fish on that and tot them all up and pack 'em on their backs in boxes. He's have boxes of ice then he's pit ice over 'em and stack them all up and the end of every week he'd come on and he'd have it all and you'd get paid then at the end of the week. But, he stopped, that stopped then I suppose as the years were going on through the, there again I don't remember the exact year that stopped probably coming into the eighties maybe because the fish stocks, there weren't enough of fish kind of really to keep him going. After that then we used take the fish in to Cusacks inside in Limerick on the Dock Road. And then there would always be private

people as well who would buy fish off you know, just ordinary people would come on and they'd buy fish. So that's the way.

SS: And when you were out fishing in the earlier years were there any folklore, tradition that went along with the fishing. Like were the boats blessed or could redheaded people go near them, things like that?

TR: I suppose. Yeah there was now my father would never had any, he wouldn't have you know had much time for any of that. He wouldn't have been a superstitious person so I wouldn't have really heard much of that. The only thing that was there was always a bottle of holy water alright in every boat. That was always was that. Oh other superstitions I would have, not really no no, didn't no. No it didn't. That's not to say other, I would have heard others but never took much notices, never took any notice, like yeah.

SS: And did any of the fishermen have nicknames?

TR: They did yeah, they did, all the older, yes all the older men would have had nicknames, yeah they would have had yeah yeah.

SS: Can you remember any of them?

TR: Yeah there was, Split the Wind. The Little Man, Dave Enright he used to live just up here he was a real hardy character like but he was very small very witty very character like he was always, I remember him as The Little Man; My own father they use to call him Bobble I don't know why, but that was his. Most of them I have them forgotten. There was another man used to call him Magnet was another fella. The General, Jigs, Micky Dip, The Flat, there was a lot, a lot they would come if I was thinking but there was a lot, a lot yeah.

SS: And did you have any interaction with the bailiffs, would the water bailiffs come down?

TR: They used, yeah yeah, well we would have as little interaction with them as possible. Yeah, yeah, they would come down yeah but like I said you wouldn't have, try to have as little interaction with them as possible, yeah yeah. They wouldn't be very popular.

SS: Did you use to do reed cutting as well?

TR: I, my younger, I did cut a bit of reed for a number of years but not too many, I suppose maybe if I spent 4 or 5 years cutting reed. After that then I was, I started thatching and that kinda took up most of my time. And I went away to sea then for a few years as well, so I kind of you know, I went away from the reed cutting completely.

SS: When you did cut the reed where did you cut it?

TR: I used to cut it all cross at the other side of the Shannon up the Bunratty river and down near Saint's Island further down near Shannon town, you know as you go down towards Shannon and at the back of Green's Island, sort of out around the mouth of the Bunratty river and used to bring some of it, some of it across, some of it across the river to my own, across to this side then on the boat. But a lot of the time it was easier to take it up the Bunratty river and unload it there because you could drive, you'd access whereas when I bring it across, brought it home to this side of the river especially in the winter time it was impossible to bring it up through the fields, you know they get very wet in the winter time. So, but I'd bring some of it across you know, depending on the weather like and how easy it was to get in or out behind.

SS: And when you were cutting it, when you were just cutting it, who did you sell it to or did you use it?

TR: I used to use the most of it. The first, I ended up selling a load of reed to, but yeah I used to sell it initially but then I sold a load of it to a cousin of mine, or a man who was married to a cousin of mine and he wanted to thatch a kind of a shed that was onto a house he had bought out in Ballyneety. So he bought the reed off of me but then he couldn't, couldn't locate anyone to do the thatching for him. So he said like would you not, do you know anything about it would you try it yourself, you know and I said sure I will, you know, and so I did and once I kind of got, once I finished that someone else asked me and that was it like I didn't like didn't stop since with it. So, I still cut the reed, I still cut reed after that you know, I'd cut it and I'd use what I cut and when I'd be short I'd buy some more, you know, of the lads who would be cutting around. But eventually I stopped cutting myself altogether because you couldn't do everything, you know.

SS: And when you started thatching, did somebody teach you how to do that?

TR: No, not really. Back then there were a lot of old houses around this area that were fallen down at that stage, time, you know. You could, it was easy to do a bit of investigating as to how they were done and I suppose I read whatever I could find out. There was a lot, there wasn't much Irish literature but actually English there was a lot of literature written in England that, some books that I was able to get my hands on which are very detailed on thatching and between the two of them I able to get a fair idea of the way it went and I just kept at it then until I kind of, you know, got it right like. I suppose by the time I was half was through that first house that I was thatching I kind of had a, it's a, the thing about the thatching is it's not, people think thatching is very difficult and all that. It's not difficult to learn how to do it. It's actually very easy. The difficulty with thatching is the speed at which you do it with. You learn how to thatch in a couple of weeks but you won't build up a proficiency and a speed that will enable you to thatch a house in a reasonable amount of time. It will take you a year, years to get that level of, I don't know what you call it. When you start off initially or when you're learning initially you're measuring everything and you're never, and then you're gone a bit of the way and you have to go back over it and you have to take it because you're after, you know, you're after making, you're after misjudging it like and if you get it wrong at the start you're never going to make it right at the top, you know, you have to have it right coming up at the bottom and it takes a while. But once, as the years go by you just do it. It's a bit like cycling a bike I suppose, you eventually learn, you don't have to think about it but while you're learning and while you're thinking about it you're very slow at it and you're, and obviously you're not making much money while that's happening. But as soon as you, as soon as you get rid of that and you're able to do it without having to think about what you're doing or it starts to come natural, flow naturally to you well then you start to build up a good bit of speed and that's really, you know, that's the big secret to it is having the patience and the tenacity to stick at it for long enough that you kind of crack that end of it, you know.

SS: And can you tell me about the process of thatching, what did you have to do first?

TR: When you'd go we'll say to thatch a roof? To thatch any roof?

SS: Yeah

TR: If you're coming onto a house we'll say an old house, you know, that needs re-thatching we'll say that has been thatched before, it's probably there hundreds of years. The chances are if it's a long ways gone, you know, if it's been neglected to a degree or you know, if it should have been maybe thatched a few years previous. You'll have to have a look at it and see, figure. First thing you want to

figure out how deep down you're going to have to go here. How much of this old roof and I going to have take off until I can get down to a level bed all across it because some parts of the roof will actually be quite good. More parts there'd be very worn and holes will have developed, you know, and if you just went up, you can't just go up on some of it anyway and thatch because some of it would be so rotten that it would sag away underneath it. You need to take that off and get that down to a sound base but then there will be other stuff that is a sound base which is, which would be pretty sound already, which would be a good bit above, you know, above that so you would have to bring it all down, you know, to the same level. But you can't, you're not going to do all that at the same time because you'll thatch, you'll come along in what they call 'strakes', you know. Roughly three foot in width along the roof and it will take you, considering it'll take you two to three weeks to get from one side of the roof to the other you can't strip the whole lot because, unless you want to go spending days spreading tarpaulins over it to stop the rain from going through it in the mean time. So you need to kind of figure out, yeah how am I going, to get the to start take the proper depth off it bearing in mind that all along the roof that you're going to have to take account of the dips and hollows that you're going to encounter all the way across. Once you have that done then you just go up and strip down the, the part, the we'll say your 'strake' the width of your first 'strake', three feet plus the ladder. Did that down to your depth and make up a ridge roll first, will go on a new ridge roll on the top which is about a diameter of about roughly five or six inches.

SS: What is that made of?

TR: It is made out of the reed as well tied every, tied very tightly every foot apart and it forms a solid lengthwise member if you like, just underneath the ridge and it allows you to pin the two sides of the roof, of the ridge together. The scallops from one side will go into it and the scallops from the other side will go into it and and make a single unit to hold the ridge together at the top. If you didn't have that the ridge would tend to, after a few years it would tend to pull apart and separate, you know. So when you have that done then you go down and start off your first lead layer at the bottom. Usually it would take about six bundles of reed to do that for a three foot wide stretch and you'd pin that down then with two rows of scallops.

SS: What are the scallops made of?

TR: The scallops would be either hazel or willow cut about 28 inches or 27 or 28 inches long pointed at each end and you can bend them so they look like staples. So, you'll and then you'll have, you'll use one of 'em or two of them as stretchers which will run horizontal laid on top of the reed and they'd be running horizontal whereas the reed is running vertical and the scallops then are driven down one leg at each side of those stretchers are driven down and they pin'em, they pin the stretchers on top of the layer of reed and you put two of those rows on the first layer and the first layer, the first row of those scallops would be about 20 inches up, 18-20 inches up from the outside of the eave you know from the outside edge and next thing another layers goes on top of that. Roughly say 6 or 7 sheaves again. This time you start dressing up the face work and when that face work is dressed and when that face work is dressed it will have come up say about the 18 to 20 inches almost as far as the first row of stretcher which are pinning down the underneath layer of reed. You wouldn't, you'd be careful never to dress up a past them because you'd be thinning out.

SS: And when you're dressing up it's just making it into that shape?

TR: Making the slope of the roof dressing each independent, each straw of reed takes up it's place then and their all staggered.

SS: Slightly

TR: Yeah, so that causes and when the, when that first layer of face work, I'd say, is on that's pinned down with just one row of scallops then. The same distance up from the edge of the face work about 20, 18 to 20 inches and when that's, when those are driven down tight they should just splay the edge of the face work just a little bit. It should never be, you don't ever want to see it 'squeezed' the face work 'squeezed' tight, like em, really tight together because it causes kind of a capillary action where the water will actually hold and be held by the individual by the straws of reed. Whereas if their splayed ever so slightly splayed apart the drops of water run off each one of them and they dry off very quickly and that, for that reason as well the coarser the reed you have up to a point, you know. The coarser the reed you have the longer it will last because there's more air gaps between it. Very fine reed it will almost form an air tight, you know, a very tight layer and it'll, it actually serves to hold the water rather than shed it, you know, and you continue on then with that process all the way up along until you reach the top. On an average roof that would be about maybe 12 - 13 layers all the way until you get to the top. When you get to the top then on the last layer before the ridge, you'd put two rows of scallops on that as well. One row into the roof, the upper row into the ridge roll. Then on the ridge itself, you'd use probably the same amount of sheaves maybe seven six or seven but upside down with the tops facing down the roof and you'd use, after levelling across the top. You'd use top row scallops and they'd go down through as well to the ridge roll. Then down about 16 to 18 inches down the next row will go and about three inches below that another row again. So you would have three rows of fixings on the ridge and then usually put an X in between the two top rows of scallops that gives just a little bit of a pattern you know and when that's one 'strake' finished then that will be about three feet wide. So you clear off your next section of roof, move your ladder along, start the process again. So until, all the way across the roof.

SS: And how long would it take to do an average bungalow, small cottage roof?

TR: On your own, we'll say, you'll do, well on these days now, we'll say on a fine summers day, a long day, if you were to push yourself hard you could possibly do up to three 'strakes'. That would be nine feet of the roof.

But if you done that for maybe, you might stick that for maybe four days and you'd knock out but then on, you'd start to burn out after that then, you know. But if you were to do two 'strakes' a day that would be about six feet a day that's a comfortable, for me anyway that's a comfortable pace and you'd keep doing, you'd work away with that without kind of you know feeling like that you're killing yourself after a few days, you know.

SS: The roof itself, is there wood down first, is there planks or how's the first layer?

TR: On the roof itself we'll say you'd have rafters much as you have in your, any, house. The only difference on those old houses the rafters would be set up in couples. As in you'd have your two rafters joined at the top and they'd be an average of about a meter apart. Whereas in your modern house like your rafters will be 16 inch centres, you know and then those rafters would in the older houses anyway they'd be just rough poles you know. Some of them would only be roughly shaped, maybe the bark would be hacked off them with a hatchet, like, and the limbs, the smaller limbs hacked off. They'd try and put a flat side you know to the top, where they would be putting the flattest side where they would be putting the batons on and just give them a bit of shape up at the top where they'd be joining, joining up at the apex. They'd have dowel going through, a wooden peg the, they would be joined with a wooden peg. Then about halfway down they'd have a collar coming across between the two of 'em. Wooden pegs, pinned in with wooden pegs as well. On top of those then they'd have the batons which'd be running horizontally. They'd be fairly close together and they'd be made up of just smaller branches really and they'd just be pinned on with potter nails and

you'd meet a lot of the really out houses those'd be not, they'd be disintegrated years ago and all you'd really have is just the weight of the roof keeping the whole thing in position. When they'd have those down, when those batons would be down then the first layer of the reed, in the houses around here the first layer of reed would be sewed on with 'sugan' it would be a rope made up out of hay. In later years they would have had the spun yarn, you know, which is rope made out of jute or hemp, you know. But the real old ones would be the, or I suppose maybe the poor households they would have had, all they would have had like was the 'sugan'. But it landed them the job, you'd have houses there that are hundreds of years old and that's still there, that's still what's holding them up, you know.

SS: How many houses in this area would have had thatched roofs?

TR: How far back do you want to go. In the early, going back I suppose when I was growing up, that is we'll say what 45 years ago there would have been, one, two, three, four, five, six, I'd say around this area there would have been at least 15 just in this small, you know, from coming down over the hill road over to this area there would have been in the region of 15 thatched houses. Now, there's one, two, three, and then well this one wouldn't have been here then and there's another one up the hill road that wouldn't have been there then. There's four now, two that were always there, two real old ones and two that, two new ones that are done in thatch from new yeah.

SS: And is it becoming more popular again?

TR: It is, well it's economics like it's because it's so labour, so costly it's cost prohibitive like so for that reason it's not. Loads of people would like to have it but between the cost of it and I suppose most going back awhile back, not so many years ago, there was no, there wasn't any vat on thatching now there is you know. So that's really even for me, it's going to hammer it completely because the pace of work is so slow and that you can't, no matter how hard you try you're never going to, you know, you're never going to really make a lot of money out of it and if you're going to come into the realms of charging we'll say for, you've to keep vat invoices and all that, you need an accountant to do all that for ya. Doing work like that you're never going to make enough that you can keep that sort of an operation going, where you're going to be able to pay accountants and pay for keeping vat receipts up to date and then it heaps, some of that burden is obviously going to pass onto the person you're doing the work for. It's expensive enough as it is, like, it's so you know. Cost wise it's never going to make a come back, no, no. And then the other thing that is going to hammer it is insurance. It's, the insurance companies cut down on them, so there's yeah.

SS: How long would a thatched roof last?

TR: I suppose that can vary a lot but the biggest variable or the biggest thing that would dependent on is the pitch of the roof. If you have a good slope of off the roof, something, we'll say a slop of 55 degrees which would be something similar to the one here. You would be expecting to get at least 30 years out of it, 30 to 40 years. A roof then if you dropped the pitch back down to about something around 45 degrees or that you'd be looking more in the line of 16 to 20 years. There again depending, if you could keep the birds off of it it would, when it gets after about maybe 15 years when it starts to get a bit vulnerable it would last quite a long time after that but the birds take an awful liking to it then and if they took a shine to it they could tear it asunder in a short number of years, you'd have to do it. Crows especially like if the place is quiet for some reason and if they have reason to be coming around if there's a farmyard near by or something where they're coming for feeding they'll use the roof as a playground you know and they'll dig through it just for the sake of something to do. They can ruin a thatched roof, an old thatched roof that's very soft like, they can

play hell with it yeah. But if you can keep them off of it, you know, a roof of we'll say with a pitch of about 45 degrees, yeah you'd knock out 20 years out of it. Now the ridge would have to be done about every ten years because the scallops along the top of the ridge they'll rot off it and the, obviously the top row of reed because it's not face work, it's a straight length of reed not going to last as long but if you have a row usually when you finish that off you put a row of chicken wire along it you know and that stops the birds and that from pulling it asunder when the scallops rot and you get about ten years out of it then but if you didn't have that wire on, you'd be talking about 4 or 5 years.

SS: And is it just birds that would go up into it or would you, would there be other animal or insects that would?

TR: I suppose you could have insects alright yeah but nothing else really it's all, would be birds yeah. There are people say rats and mice but I've never seen rats or mice any more than you would in any other house in a thatched house, you know. That's not to say that they wouldn't be in there, like they would they could like but it they're not that fond of the reed. Now if a house it thatched with the straw, there can be some element of feeding left on it they'd have greater fondness for the straw but the reed they don't like it that much.

SS: I think that's about it for my questions, if there's anything else you'd like to add?

TR: No, not really, there isn't a whole lot more I can say about it apart from I suppose from the point of view of working at it's a lovely, while you're up there doing it it's a lovely job to be doing because you're out, you know, it's out in the open and it's quite pleasant and you know you get a great old feeling of satisfaction when you have a roof thatched unfortunately with the way things are going with, you know, I suppose, yeah it's hard to see it, yeah it's hard to see into the future like how it's going to survive in, in modern times you know.

SS: Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me there.

TR: No bother.