

**ARUNDEL MUSEUM SOCIETY
ORAL HISTORY GROUP**

PROJECT NAME – TRADERS AND BUSINESSES

Interviewee: John Penfold
Interviewer: Roger Halls /Jan Melling
Date of Interview: 21st March 2018
Location: Living room of John Penfold, Littlehampton

Roger – Right, we are now sitting in the living room of Mr. John Penfold and we are going to ask him some questions about his father's work in the War in the Underground Service. We are in Littlehampton on 21st March 2018, interviewing Mr. John Penfold and some questions over to my colleague, Mrs. Jan Melling, who will start off. Carry on.

Jan .- Thank you John, for the interview. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself? Where you were born? Educated? Place of work? Just before we start.

John – Well, Jan, yea, I was born in Walberton in May 1939. I went to the village school, then on to Shoreham Grammar School and Riker Wood College of Agricultural Engineering, then after this I went into the Army, in the REME. I was attached to the Life Guards and posted to Germany. Then I was apprenticed to an engineering firm in Nottingham. Finally, I went off to Australia, via the Penfold Wine Company, because their ancestor was related to us and so I was invited to go out there and I worked actually for a tractor company in Adelaide and finally after a couple of years came back to Arundel to join my father in the firm.

Jan – And were your parents born in Sussex? Are they Sussex people?

John – Well, my father was. He was born in Arundel, so he's a Mullet, or was. He was born in 1913. My mother was born in Basle, Switzerland. She came over to the UK in the mid-1930s as an au pair for some people in West Burton, near Bury. They met at a dance, I believe, up in Bury and then they married in 1936 at Tortington Church.

Jan – And how many siblings have you got?

John .- Well, I've got a brother and sister.

Jan – A brother and sister.

John – We're three years apart. My sister's three years younger than me and my brother is three years younger than her, so they were pretty good planning!

Jan – And your father owned the agricultural firm? Is that right? Could you describe ...

John – Yes, it's an agricultural engineering firm, but it started in 1833 by my great-great-grandfather, Charles Penfold. He came over from Steyning, which was where the family had been based, on a farm there and he was the first one, actually, in the whole long line of our family, who was not going to be a farmer, so anyway, he came over to Arundel in 1833 and then we closed in 1987, so we were well over 150 years in business in Arundel. Our work actually was with Sussex and Hampshire farmers selling and servicing farm equipment. The founder, Charles, was a blacksmith and carpenter and millwright actually and we were related to a family of millers by the name of Lashmar, who came from the Brighton area. He created the ironmongery business in Arundel in the High Street and he made small implements and later went into contract thrashing and ploughing with steam engines and he started a small foundry in the Crown Yard and then his son, James, moved the business to the Tortington Yard in 1871.

Roger – OK. Well, I believe he trained at Coleshill House. Can you recall any of his experiences there?

John – Well, erm, not an awful lot actually Roger, because he didn't actually tell me much about that. There were odd little snippets, but I think I probably learnt most of what I could tell you through reading the books, but I do remember one day driving with him through Highworth in Wiltshire and he mentioned that he had been there in the War and training, but he made out as though it was the Home Guard, because this was well before the fifty year Official Secrets Act came up and he did tell me that he had to go to the Post Office to get the instructions and I think that was generally what they all had to do. He told me about the man to man combat and the silent killing and so on, target shooting with the pistol and the 303 rifle, handling live hand grenades, that sort of thing.

Jan – He was a member of the Home Guard, am I right in saying, before he became a commando in the Auxiliary Force?

John – Yes, he did join the Home Guard. I think it was in 1940 and I think I remember the Home Guard was used as the cover for the Auxiliaries, later, when they formed the Auxiliary Units and I know that basically that he had been enraged by what Hitler was doing well and Mussolini and Franco for that matter and I know he had strong feelings about Fascism. He was in fact an Internationalist and a Socialist and I know that he would have felt very motivated to do something, so he did join the Home Guard.

Jan – And how did he become ... how was he recruited into this special army – the Auxiliary Army? Did he ...

John – Well, the way it happened with him, was that he Through our contacts with farmers he was very friendly with a Mr. Leslie Drewett, who had a farm at Colworth near Bognor and I know that in 1940 he – ‘cos he told me this – he was there with the thrashing equipment, working on the farm, and it was actually the day that the raid on Tangmere took place, because they were right in a field, right near the edge of airfield and I think that was created a big impression with him and he then spoke with Leslie Drewett, who had already formed his Goodwood Patrol and father joined it because you know, he wanted to get on and do something and I know at the time that he wasn't impressed with the role of the Home Guard. I think he felt it was a bit almost like the Boy Scouts, but anyway, he joined up in Leslie Drewett's Patrol after having some interviews in Brighton – I've got a bit of paperwork on that – and then later he was asked to form his own Patrol for Arundel.

Roger – Well, there was the training at Coleshill House, but sometimes there was training at Tottington Manor and South Stoke. I wonder if your pa took in that?

John – Yea, well, erm. Tottington Manor, as far as I know, was, well I know, it was the headquarters of the West Sussex, or in fact, the whole of Sussex Auxiliaries but I wasn't aware that he'd done any actual training there. If they did do training there for these units, then maybe he did, but it never came up, but I know that he did do training with the West Sussex Scout Patrol, which was the regular Army people, led by Lieutenant Fazan, which was done up at South Stoke, because I think they were based in the Rectory there, but I don't specifically know what they were, but I know that the regular Army were doing the initial training and then of course he had to do training for his men as well.

Roger – I wonder if he had any experience with firearms or explosives or radio transmissions before he joined, or was that afterwards?

John – Well, he didn't have any firearms or explosives experience, other than the fact that he'd got a shotgun and I know it was just for shooting pheasants and rabbits and so on, so anything that he learnt about weapons, it would have been as soon as he got into the Home Guard. The explosives, of course, were a particularly important part of the work that the Auxiliaries were going to have to do and I know that there were a 45 handgun for example he had and other weapons. I know that his favourite was the Tommy Gun – Thompson machine gun – American automatic rapid firing weapon – but they only had one, I think, and so it was a bit of a competition about who was going to have that, because the others all had to have Sten guns, which used to jam, so, you know, that was one thing that was quite amusing. Incidentally, I'll mention now, he did keep his handgun up until the 1960s and according to my sister, he decided to hand it in to the Littlehampton Police Station, so he kept that for nearly twenty years. Why, I don't know, but, and then he did keep his Fairburn-Sykes dagger, fighting knife, which he actually continued to use up until his death as a letter opener. It used to be stuck in a vase by the desk. That is now in the Imperial War Museum and interestingly he instructed his men to wrap the handle with a tape, as they considered it too thin to offer a good enough grip, which is interesting. That was the standard issue dagger knife, killing knife, for the SAS and the special forces, but in his opinion it wasn't good enough.

Roger – Now that was a very secret role. I mean, how did he feel about not telling anybody, even his family? Do you know?

John – Well, Roger, he never told me and I wish I'd asked him, but he did keep this secret for the fifty years, as required by the Official Secrets Act and my sister did know a little. He did show her the base up in Houghton Forest at one point, although not going in it, but he did point it out and he also took her up the radar tower at Poling and said that it was one of his objectives, but I think it was actually hit by the Luftwaffe in 1940. One thing that I'm sure he had covered, was if the invasion came, he would have ensured that my mother and I were to be evacuated to a part of the country well away from the South East, as I'm sure they would have been in great danger from the, you know, from the ruthless retaliation that the Nazis carried out, as we've seen throughout Europe. In fact, Hitler stated that Home Guard soldiers would be executed anyway. But I was evacuated to a Shropshire farm due to the bombing later, but I'm sure this would have been his plan for 1940, if the invasion had taken place, but he certainly kept it secret and he didn't even tell my mother. She died in 1966, never knowing that he'd done it.

Roger – I was wondering at this time, what was his age when he joined the force?

John – Well, when he formed his patrol he was 30. That was in 1943, so he was in his late 20s when he joined the Home Guard.

Roger – OK. So he joins this Patrol, I mean, how many were in it and did he mention the individuals to you?

John – Well in his Patrol there were seven. I think this was the common number. That was including him, but I only knew of two by name. One was George Birch, who was our welder at the works in Arundel and George Cross, who was a forester with the Forestry Commission, who lived outside Arundel near The Swan in one of the Forestry cottages that were on the way out of Arundel and both of them were big, strong men and I know father did tell me - that was one of the things that he did tell me – was how formidable they were. When they were practising combat he said he was always being thrown down by them, but he did single them out as men that he could rely on. Out of the other six, there was another man called Phillips, that he mentioned, but I don't know who that was and he didn't seem to recall any of the other names.

Roger – So did he keep in contact with them after the War?

John – Well, George Birch worked for us anyway into the late '50s, so he was around all the time, but I shouldn't think they spent any time talking about the War, so also because of our business with all the local farmers, father was regularly meeting all these others, who had Patrols – 'cos most of them were farmers – when he was out and about, but as far as I know, they never discussed it between them, because I know when I was in his company and we met these various farmers, I never heard anything mentioned and in fact when I read the books on the Auxiliaries, I was amazed to see how many of our farmer customers across Sussex had actually been Patrol commanders. It was quite amazing. I mean it was almost, probably 90% of them, but father did, I know he went on a skiing holiday with Alan Heaver, who

had the neighbouring – well he was in the neighbouring Goodwood patrol, which was Leslie Drewett's, but Alan Heaver was also a farmer and I should think – well they went in 1946, immediately after the War, so whether they chatted about their wartime experience while they were on the ski slopes I've no idea, but I shouldn't think so.

Jan – Did he have any involvement in the recruitment of his actual group at all?

John – I think he would have done, yes. I think he had to – well first of all, of course, he did know those two chaps, George Birch and George Cross, through our business and the fact that George was working for us. He thought they were obviously the right types and no doubt they agreed to go along with him, but I think it was the job of the commander to appoint his men, because he had to after all work with them, but he never spoke to me about it, but I mean he was used to employing people because, you know, we were running a business, so I should think he would probably be quite good at doing an interview.

Jan – And they had this hideout up near Houghton Woods. Could you tell us a little bit about it? Mention anything you mentioned about the equipment. We've seen some pictures, you've shown us.

John – Right. Well to be honest again, he didn't really tell me much about it at all, but I have been inside it. As we've just said, I've shown you the photographs and so I have had a fair idea of what it was and how they were involved in it, but of course, it wasn't until after he had passed away, so I was never able to talk to him about it, but I can tell you that it was well made. They were all of a fairly standard design. It just changed according to the land around it and which way it had to face and so on. They were built – most of them were built by the Royal Engineers and you know, they were well made, but the bunk beds that they used were still in there, but as far as what they were, when they were in it doing their patrols, I understand that he was in there for several days at a time and I'm sure that a lot of it they found boring, because in fact I had read a few notes that he wrote in a little booklet I found, which I hope he didn't take out with him when he went out, where he said about it being boring until they were actually doing exercises. But he had to spend time educating and training the men on the booby traps and the explosives and things like that, which they had to be absolutely 100% sure of how to put them together and deal with the fuses and all that side of it, so he would have occupied them in that way, if they weren't outside.

Jan – And so what would be their patrols and weekly routines? You know, would it be, would they meet every day or once a week, or?

John – Well I think it was quite regular. Probably at least once a week and it was always at night. They always had to do all their tracking and moving about at night-time, mainly because they didn't want their existence to be known by nosey parkers, you know, members of the public, because it was very serious, this business about keeping it secret and there were cases of where OBs were discovered and in fact I believe they were told that if this happened during the time of an invasion that they might well have had to actually assassinated the person that was involved or they would have been locked away or something. It was very serious, I know.

Jan – And were there any – did he ever mention or were you aware of any amusing or dangerous episodes, with the training?

John – Yes, there were one or two. Just talking about danger, it was interesting that the explosives were actually kept in steel dustbins, which were in a separate room behind the main room I showed you in those photos – the room at the back – so there were these steel dustbins in there, with all the gelignite and the plastic explosive and the fuses and all those things in there and there was a door between the two rooms but quite honestly if anything had gone wrong I don't think they would have had a chance. I think it would have been horrendous. But anyway, that was – yes that was a point. Incidentally, you asked me about the supplies and so on. I forgot to mention that there were two stores in Rewell Wood, which is on the way out of Arundel, going towards Chichester, near the Havenwood caravan site or park. The Rewell Wood is on the opposite side of the road and it runs right up to Whiteways and in there were their supply depots, which were specially built in the ground, underground and camouflaged and they had to go there and re-supply themselves on foot and then carry these supplies up through the forest and of course, anybody that knows the area, there's a really good network of forest tracks that run through from there, right up to Houghton Forest. They didn't move about in vehicles. They were always on foot and of course, they knew the countryside backwards. The other thing was about radio communications – as father's OB was where it was there was no direct sight line from the base to the objectives, which were down by the bridge and the railway in the Arun Valley at Amberley, so they had a second, one-man hollowed out area where they took it in turns in manning that with binoculars and he had a radio and the idea was because he could see direct from there, he was able to relay back to them any movements that were going on around the chalk pits and so on. Actually, I think that was quite common, because there were other look out points in the Arundel area, from Arundel right up through to Pulborough, looking across and linking up with the main auxiliary patrols.

Roger – Did they ever come into contact with other patrols and have mock attacks upon them or the Home Guard or the Canadians or anything like that?

John – Yes, they did carry out joint mock attacks with other Patrols and they also worked with the regular West Sussex Scout Patrols, they were called, but other than, the only ones which I knew about which he did eventually tell me about, was one on Ford Airfield and the Poling radar mast, which they, that was a joint exercise with Jack Lock's Patrol at Warningcamp and I know that it was quite a joke at the time, after it, that when they went down to Ford they had to stick stickers on the tails of the aircraft to show that they had been there and it was very successful. They got in and out, but the officer commanding at Ford was absolutely furious and of course, it went up the line to the top brass and they had to keep it all, a lid on it, but it was actually a bit dangerous, because the picket guard at the airfield were actually using live ammunition, so if they had been caught, it think it would have been a quite difficult situation. But anyway, they got in and out without detection, so and the other little episode that I remember he told me, which was that they had a .22 sniper rifle with a telescopic sight and silencer and that was supposed to be used for shooting at night under cover, but he said that he thought the most useful thing for it would have been killing the tracker dogs, because he felt that they were – he was actually more frightened of the dogs than he was of the soldiers, the Nazi soldiers, because they

would have discovered their base, so, yes, it's an interesting side of it. There was actually another – you asked me about amusing episodes. There was one story that he told me about another OB in East Sussex, where it was near where a lot of Canadians were camped and some of these Canadians had entered – they found the base and they entered it, when it was, when they were not there and they stole the one gallon rum ration, which had been given as part of their stores, you know. I suppose it was to give them Dutch courage or cheer them up a bit. Anyway, they were one gallon. So, that was stolen and then replaced, but that was stolen as well, so it got to the point where they actually had to abandon that OB and build another one in a different place. Quite amazing and he knew the people, he knew the farmer that was involved with that one.

Roger – Did you know his opinions on the Nazi movement and the danger?

John – Well, I had a fairly good idea, talking to him in general and his general attitude. I mean, I know he was well read and he was politically aware and I'm quite sure that the real threat that there was in 1940, after the Dunkirk tragedy and in fact after the, before rather, before the Battle of Britain, when they didn't really know what was going to happen next – I mean this is what they called the "Darkest Hours," don't they? When Churchill was really struggling with what to do next and having to fight off efforts at peacemaking and I think his feeling was that, you know, they had to do something and he was in a reserved occupation, so he couldn't go to fight in Europe, so he did the next best thing and joined and made his own patrol to sort of, look after his own backyard, if you know what I mean. But I think, I think he knew in 1940 that this Operation Sea Lion, which was the invasion, by Hitler, it was very close to happening and we know that there were landing craft and barges already in the French ports and Belgian ports waiting to go and actually it is interesting that he did discuss this with me, that the Arun river mouth and the West Beach would have been a very suitable landing for it, but obviously the initial landings would have been further east, so it's quite possible, I think, that the Arun and Arundel and up through here would have been a later addition or follow up to the main invasion, so they would have known it had happened and that's when they would have been waiting to see whether we were able to fend them off, but I know that he mentioned also how after the Battle of Britain, when we had had that success and that the Germans were then more inclined to go towards Russia, that it was a bit of a relief, with some respite, but it was still thought that it was possible that he could have another go after the following winter.

Roger – Did he have specific targets for his group?

John – Yes, he told me that the targets were the Houghton river bridge or Amberley Bridge – I don't know, some people call it Amberley, some call it Houghton and the road and the railway at Amberley Station – that bridge and to cut the road, river and railway. That would have been after the invasion force, the first invasion force, had gone through and the idea was to cut them off, so that they weren't able to easily have support troops coming behind and giving our Army the chance to deal with the invaders that had come in and got through. So the idea was they let them through and then blow everything up and then try and hold off the following support troops. Those are the only targets that I particularly know about, although I'm sure they would have wanted to sabotage the aerodromes and any other supply dumps and all

sorts of – I mean there was a huge petrol supply complex near Chichester. I'm sure that would have been a target, but, yea, Ford Airfield, Tangmere and all its satellites – 'cos there were airfields all around – Westhampnett, Apuldram, Bognor, Runcton. There were loads of airfields. They all would have had to have been sabotaged.

Roger – So, do you think that led to rivalry between the Patrols or were they each given a certain one to themselves?

John – No, I don't think so, Roger. I don't think there was any rivalry that I know of. I think it was more that they were feeling they were all in it together and as I say, he knew, he certainly knew his immediately neighbouring Patrols, because they were farmer friends and customers and this would go right through to the Hampshire border, I know as far as Stansted, which is just on the Hampshire border. George Huxon had a Patrol over there. He knew him and going east, he even knew the Merricks, who farmed at Rye, right over there. They were friends and farmer customers and of course, Rye would have been absolutely in the thick of it, if they – I'm sure there'd have been landings along there. The first invasions would have been between – from Folkestone or Dungeness and through there to Pevensy, where the beaches were suitable for landing. So I think there was more respect for each other and they were dependent, inter-dependent on each other. That's how I think it would have been. He never said anything about, "Oh we did better than them or anything." They might have joked about some exercise where, you know, one of them had messed up or something, but that's just leg-pulling, isn't it? But no serious rivalry at all, no.

Jan – And when he actually got the written confirmation of that stand down, did he mention how he felt about that?

John – Well, I only know what he told my sister and I don't think other than what I've read and knowing him as I did, I think he would have just been relieved when they knew that the invasion was unlikely. By late 1944, after the Normandy invasion, our Normandy invasion, I think it would have just been relief to think, well, you know, we've done our bit, but we're still here and then of course, after that they were asked if they would like to volunteer to be dropped in Normandy and of course, they volunteered. Most of them did, in many ways perhaps a bit foolishly, but I know he said that it would have been part of the precursor, possibly, to the beach landings. He felt that he had got the countryside tracking and concealment skills and having had all this military and combat training, I think he thought that he would be capable, but actually it was rejected by the top brass in the end and he just said that they thought he was too old – well I say, he was only 30 – and they also felt that as their speciality had been their localised knowledge and training in the area, that that was different to what it would have been in Normandy, even though it was countryside and it was in many ways similar to our countryside, they felt that they would have been pretty exposed and in fact the way it turned out, that the two regular lieutenants in the scout patrols, they both were killed after D Day and they were regular Army, so yes, I think despite having volunteered, I think he would have been relieved to have actually been rejected and felt lucky to be alive. Survived, to be able to survive, after what they had done.

Jan – And did he mention anything about the fact that, you know, there was no recognition, apart from the fact that he was part of the Home Guard and couldn't technically say anything for another fifty years?

John – Well, Jan, I mean, he just didn't say anything for the fifty years and he was, I think he was a bit of a tough nut and I think he would have, sort of kept it inside. I don't – I'm not aware that it bothered him, but he certainly was not one who wanted to be made a fuss of or fuss about and in fact, he was a very modest man. I don't think he wanted to be bothered by it. I mean, he felt that there were many others who did just as much as he did and even the men, you know, he felt that they had done as much. Why should he feel that he would have any recognition? I think he just respected everybody for what they had done, they'd done their bit and when it was all over it was get on with life, you know. It was interesting actually, in terms of his feelings that I heard, and he didn't tell me this, that he'd been nominated for an OBE for his work setting up and running the Sussex Wildlife Trust. He did that for twenty five years from 1961 and he did actually politely decline it, because again, he said he felt that others had done just as much. I think it was a mark of the man, you know, that he just didn't want fame or praise or anything. He just felt that everybody had to get into it together and they all did their bit and of course, also he, you know, when you think about it, the many hundreds and thousands that were killed and wounded and maimed in the War, who had to go over to Europe and fight and many came back completely traumatised by it, I think, you know, he respected what they had done and he felt lucky that he was able to live on and just keep that secret for fifty years. That's all he had to do. Yea, I think that's the nub of it, the fact that he was modest and he had a great respect for what others had done. I think that's – he also admired Churchill, by the way. He was a great admirer of the decisions that Churchill had made and how he had a very tough time of it and stuck with it. He did actually say that to me on a number of occasions. In fact he jokingly said we could do with him now. You know.

Jan – And you've shown us some of the – you have some memorabilia that we can have a look at.

John – Yes, I've got a few things here. Are you happy with the rest of it?

Jan – Yes, I am. Thank you ever so much.

Roger – We've just come to the end then of the recording and we must thank our dear interviewer, Mr., interviewee, Mr. John Penfold, and say thank you very much.

John – Well I very much enjoyed it and speaking with both of you. Thank you very much.

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