

Jack Dennis Slater (“JDS”) born 19th January 1947

Interview with Judy Caine (“JC”), 16th January 2018



JC: Jack, tell me how you came to Corby?

JDS: Mum Scottish, Dad English, and I came to Corby when I was 14.

*[Sings: **The Northern Lights of Aberdeen***

“The Northern Lights of Old Aberdeen

Mean home sweet home to me

The Northern Lights of Old Aberdeen

Is where I long to be

I been a wanderer all of my life and many a sight I’ve seen

But the dearest thing I’ve ever seen”

Is the Lights of Aberdeen]

I’ve forgotten the words.

JC: Is there just the one verse or is there more?

JDS: Oh, I’ve forgotten the last bit.

[remembers and sings]

“God the speed the day, when I’m on my way

To my home in Aberdeen”

That should have been the last bit of the thingy. It’s alright for you. You’re young. I forget things.

I came from further north than Aberdeen. I’m from Peterhead which is 33 miles, more or less, north east of Aberdeen. I think it’s the most north easterly point, probably, in Scotland, and still to this day Peterhead is the largest fishing, white fishing port, in Europe, not the size of the harbour, the intake of the fish, and even though it’s been decimated, cut off, probably more than half the fleet has had to be decommissioned half of the fleet because of what was going on in the North Sea. Europe clamped down on them and the quotas they had and they weren’t wrong, somebody had to stop it because if they’d carried on they’d have fished it out, and it’s beginning to come back. And I’m grateful that Europe was for that, but I’m grateful were coming out of it as well.

[JC and JDS agreed we’d not talk about “Brexit”. JC asks if JDS remembers any work songs or fishing songs from Peterhead before he left at 14.]

JDS: Oh, I don’t, but I used to go to sea when I was a boy. I’d go down to the harbour in the herring time, which was a period of time at the start of summer (maybe a little bit before) till the end of summer, which was when the herring had moved down to the area nearest to Peterhead and Fraserborough (that’s our competitor). I used to go down there and ask any of them if they’d take

me out and they would if it was calm, good weather. And I used to say to my mother eventually, well, if I'm not back, I'll be at sea, and that happened quite often and she understood. I can't remember them actually [*singing*] when they were hauling at night, but it was marvellous, I'm glad I've seen it. The name the fishermen gave them, the herring were called the 'silver darlings'. They didn't go out far, just a few hours 'cause the herring were more in towards us, and I saw them what you call 'shooting the nets', not with a gun. They were pulling them into the central hold, and it was marvellous to see the action of these men who'd been doing it for so long, and all together. They knew what they were doing and in time and then they would lay out there for four or five hours depending on how far out they were. And then at midnight, usually about midnight, they would wake up, and have the proverbial 'cup a tae' and then the haul would start and the herring would come up over the side, and there would be four or five men standing in the hold and when the nets came over they shook them as they came over the gunnels. The nets were hung like a curtain in the sea with corks and two men stood, one on each gunnel, and pulled the nets in with the rest of the crew to get the catch on board. It was teamwork par excellence. We always had a go, us boys, but you had to be careful not to break the net or hurt your hands. But these men had to learn and just grabbed the hang of it. But when you saw them on the deck before they went down into the hold, they shook the nets, and they were in the ponds, as they called them. Before they went into the hold to be packed, someone would be down there boxing them or whatever, there would be this whole spate of silver, flashin', and this was at night, beautiful, I've never seen anything better, I'm glad I've seen that.

JC: How old were you then?

JDS: I started going to see when I was about seven or eight. I think the first boat I went out on was a steam drifter called the "Shepherd Lad". It was a Lowestoft boat - LT7. We got friendly with them and eventually one of the men, Jim, he used to come up for tea on a Sunday night, he was lovely, and Albert, my brother, went to sea with them. I think maybe my cousin, John Craighead, and eventually me when I was seven year old, only once when I went with a steam drifter. In fact, if my mother hadn't abducted me (brought me to Corby), 1961 October, when I was 14, I'd probably have gone to sea. I know the exact date of the week we came because it was my brother's birthday, 28th October, so I know exactly when we came to Corby.

JC: Why did your family come to Corby?

JDS: Well, Peterhead was very poor place for work and there were so many people coming to Corby from all over the place and from our neck of the woods there were quite a lot of people, families. My father came down in November or December in 1960, he rode all the way in one hit on his motorbike, and my cousin, John, said when he came to their door he was like a block of ice, and we came down the next year. My brother got married in June or July or August 1961 and within a while they had moved down here. They got a flat quick. They lived on Greenhill Rise, number 72, and when we came down my mother and father they had to go into digs in this very street [*Counts Farm Road*] but I actually went to stay with my brother and sister-in-law. My father, till we came down, had been staying with my Uncle and Aunt, Jack and Janet Craighead, and my cousins, John, Raymond and Mary Bell. They were knockout people – they looked after people. They had people staying with them. I know my father was a gentleman – he was quiet – but they were so good to us.

JC: Did your Dad work at Stewarts and Lloyds?

JDS: My Dad worked at the CW Tube Works. That where he first went to. He was a burner cleaner, and you don't want me to get into technical 'cause I'd run out of things to say.

JC: Do you think it important to have projects like Changing Corby?

JDS: I will say this that it has its place and not just to Scots. I value the fact that Corby is cosmopolitan and 'cause my Dad was English I've never been racist.

[Further chat on the subject of race and religion]

JDS: But now the songs. There are songs, you know, but about the herring, the fishing, I had a tape (I've don't think I've got it now) and it had some of these songs on but my brother bought it from Lowestoft. We had a connection you know, the Peterhead and Lowestoft/Yarmouth boats. We used to come down, the Scottish, to the East Anglian ports to fish most Octobers and that goes way back in the 1900s. There were more of us than them and there were nearly 2,000 drifters fishing out of that area. Yarmouth was a bigger port, a massive river. But, the songs, the fisherman are a unique kind of folk and there was no animosity there 'cause they all knew what they had to face. Many, many men have been lost in those days and still are. But there were some songs *[tries to think, hums, but can't remember them]*, marvellous songs – I'll see if I've still got the tape. But a man called William George Sutherland, a man who lived in Fraserborough, actually a village between Peterhead and Fraserborough, but nearer Fraserborough. I told him about this tape, and he said, "Did you hear a fellow on the tape talk about the bad times?", 'cause there were some terrible times in the 20s – people were starving, and I said, "Yes I did." and he said, "Well, that's my Dad." He said he'd like a copy of the recording and I sent him the tape.

[JC asks JDS if he can remember what the tape was called. Jack thinks they are National Fishing Songs, not particularly tied to either the Scottish or Lowestoft communities.]