**Ike Gibson – Life Before The War**

Ike tells us about his early life and his family

INT: So the first thing we ask you is what was your name at birth?

IG: Izak Goldberger.

INT: OK.

IG Spelled with a ‘z’ and an ‘ak’

INT: Oh, OK. And when was that?

IG: 1934

INT: Where?

IG: In Hamburg.

INT: In Hamburg, Germany. OK so 1934. So can you tell us anything about your early life? What did your parents do?

IG: I don’t really know. My mother was a seamstress who made all the clothes for all the family, I was the baby, and she also made suits for my father. But he did various jobs; he had a patisserie and bakery; on Kristallnacht and it got smashed up. And then after that he did various jobs, he was forced into various jobs. One of them was to be the kosher cook and kosher supervisor on board a transatlantic ship.

INT: So the patisserie is…Did you get lots of lovely cakes at home?

IG: I have no recollection at all because Kristallnacht was about when I was born.

INT: Right, OK. So it’s…So…And then he went off and did all different types of jobs.

IG: Oh yeah, one of them was labouring and apparently he couldn’t handle that. But I only heard most of this by hearsay.

INT: And who was in your family?

IG: My five…my four brothers and sisters. The oldest one was Deborah, then Abraham, then Esther, then Marcus, then long afterwards, me. I was 7 years younger than Marcus.

INT: Right. So do you remember anything about your life? Did you ever meet other Jewish families or…?

IG: I certainly don’t remember anything like that. I know we lived on Agathenstrasse 3, and I know we had a balcony. We used to go out, when an airplane went overhead we’d all go out quite excited to see it.

But the only thing I can remember there is, I had diphtheria and so did Deborah so we were isolated from the others and when we were recovering from diphtheria I remember causing a bit of a hassle by melting some chocolate drops on top of the little stove. I can remember that caused a bit of a hassle but I can remember very little else.

INT: Were you taken to Synagogue?

IG: Oh I must have been, my father was an ultra-orthodox Jew so I must have been regularly at the Synagogue I would have thought. But I don’t remember it at all. I suppose I can remember them unrolling the 2 rolls.

INT: Torah.

IG: Yeah, yeah, I didn’t know what it was but…

INT: Yeah.

IG: I can remember that very vaguely.

INT: And did you see your grandparents a lot or?

IG: I saw grandparents a little and one of the grandfathers, I don’t know…I only remember grandparents; I don’t have any memory of which was which. My grandmother, one of my grandmothers was bedridden and my, one of my grandfathers was, quote ‘A noted scribe’. But beyond that I have no recollection.

INT: So he was a scribe for…?

IG: I assume for the Jewish religion.

INT: Writing in the Torah?

**Ike Gibson – Immigration**

Ike recounts his journey from Germany as a Kinder. He describes his difficult arrival in England

INT: So what happened, when Kristallnacht happened…

IG: Yeah.

INT: Life changed.

IG: Yeah.

INT: Can you remember any of that?

IG: Not really. I was kept, sort of ticking over.

INT: Yeah.

IG: So I don’t really remember. I’m trying to think if I remember anything else from that time at all.

INT: How about Esther your eldest… or Debra is the eldest one?

IG: Debra is the eldest of the lot.

INT: Yeah.

IG: And she and I had the…

INT: The diphtheria.

IG: The diphtheria together. I can’t really recall much else.

INT: OK.

IG: I was told, again hearsay, that my father’s favourite was Esther, the younger daughter. He was clearly the favourite…She was clearly the favourite.

INT: So what happened after? Things got very tough for your parents obviously, and then what happened?

IG: Well I remember that my father went into hiding and it was a, a cellar with a window at street level, so I’m told, I don’t recall it.

And then the five of us went with my mother in a taxi and I believe I was crying but I have no idea what it was about. We were taken to a train station and got on the train and said goodbye to my mother, I don’t recall that, but then we…

My next memory is that we were in Belgium and the kind ladies there give us all sticky buns and then we went onto the Kindertransport and again I have no recollection of the transport itself at all.

But I remember when we got off we went through the customs and I had a little khaki canvas rucksack on, don’t forget I was only…I was 2 days before my fifth birthday, and some nasty customs man put a big chalk cross on the back of my rucksack and I was mortally offended! I can remember that, how offended I was.

INT: Do you know what was in it?

IG: No idea.

INT: You can’t remember.

IG: No. And eventually we, Esther and I, went to the house of the Kahn family in Finsbury Park and the Kahn family were also ultra-orthodox Jews.

So apparently I was asked, Esther has told me, that I was asked lots of Hebrew-type questions before I was even allowed in the door.

Immigration :Evacuation

IG: But 3 weeks after that all the London kids were evacuated and I ended up with a crowd of other kids in St. Ives in what is now Cambridgeshire and the billeting officer was Miss Kitty Wiles who worked in the local office, the town clerks office. So she was the billeting officer and she put Esther and I in The Lamb Public House. And my one memory of The Lamb was that Esther and I couldn’t speak any English and we went down into the bar and all the men, and it was only men, were apparently joshing and joking with us that… they were all quite kindly.

And Kitty Wiles thought that was unsuitable so she moved us to the house of a Mrs Middleton, Mr and Mrs Middleton and I haven’t the faintest recollection of Mr Middleton, I think he was a total non-entity; she ruled the roost of everything. And she had 2 teenage daughters and hated the idea of having these 2 nasty little Jewish kids lumbered on her and the house, despite the fact that she was a big snob, the house overlooked St. Ives slaughterhouse.

Again, that didn’t last long and then we were transferred, by Kitty Wiles, to a Mrs Saybe.

Mrs Saybe was a kindly widow living in a little terraced half cottage in, I think it was called Park Lane but it was a little drive up to the park in St. Ives and I was there for the first Christmas.

I have very little memory of that but I was there for the first Christmas and she invited her widowed sister and her lodger who lived in one of the other little cottages in for Christmas. And I remember he would give Esther a ride on his back, the lodger, and I used to caterwaul and then he’d give me a ride on his back, I still used to caterwaul so I was obviously a miserable little beggar at the time. And my sister got friendly with a girl at school who invited her to a party at May Wiles, the sister of the billeting officer, and she said she couldn’t go unless I went with her so I got towed along with her and immediately made friends with two evacuated kids, Ronnie and Shirley Kitto.

INT: Right, were they Kindertransport as well?

IG: No they weren’t Kindertransport, they were evacuees from London.

INT: Right.

IG: And I don’t think the girl Esther had made friends with was Kindertransport.

And the upshot of it was I and Esther went to live with May Wiles and theirs was, that was a big house owned by the Baptist Chapel and the widowed, her mother, the widow of the Baptist pastor, that was a strict Baptist chapel, he had died just before the war and so the widow was there and her younger daughter May was looking after her and she ended up with 13 evacuated children.

INT: Wow.

IG: Her cousin just down the road ended up with 21 evacuated children.

INT: It must have been a big house.

IG: Yeah it was but she, the cousin with the 21 evacuated children, was pictured on the full back page photo of The Sunday Pictorial because of the 13 evacuated children. But that was, May Wiles was the sister of the billeting officer Kitty Wiles and of course we were all marched to the strict Baptist chapel every Sunday and later on every Wednesday as well, on most Wednesdays.

May started off by feeding Esther and I only things she thought would not offend the Jewish faith and then realised, she told me later, it was war time and we just had to eat what we could get. So I’m afraid she started feeding us whatever the others had, including roast pork, which I suppose I should feel sorry to say instantly became my favourite roast!

INT: Always things that you’re not supposed to have.

IG: Yeah. I think it was the crackling that attracted me. But I do remember that became my favourite very quickly. And we were well looked after and at the end of the war…

INT: Where did you go to school?

IG: In what was called the St. Ives Council School but it, there was two council schools, one was the local council school and the other was the evacuated council school. And we were upstairs in the Free Church Hall Again

I have very little memory of that except they used to cane you across the hands if you spoke in class.

Everybody who spoke in class got two or three cuts across their hands and the cane was often not in the room you were in so one boy who’d been caned rather a lot was sent to fetch the cane from the another room when the master was going to cane him and when he brought it into the room he put it across his knee…sorry, first he lashed out at the master’s legs and then when he’d had a good cut of the master’s legs he put it across his knee and threw it out of the window.

INT: Wow!

IG: I can’t remember what happened to him but I can remember that incident very well.

INT: So were there other children in this, other Jewish children in this school?

IG: I have no recollection at all.

INT: But you just all got on, all the evacuees?

IG: All got on with each other, yeah.

INT: And what was the education like?

IG: I don’t remember it being particularly good but May Wiles obviously got to like me a lot, and to like Esther.

She sent Esther for four years to two different private schools which she had to pay and she wanted me to get the scholarship to go to the grammar school so she got a whole load of past papers from the school and at ten years old she was drumming me through these papers every night, once or twice even reducing me to tears over the papers. But of course we didn’t, I didn’t realise and she didn’t obviously, scholarship papers are essentially intelligence tests and if you practice with intelligence tests you get better at it, even if you’re not more intelligent.

**Ike Gibson – Life During The War**

Ike helps the war effort by raising pigs.

INT: So you were telling me earlier about life during the war, about how May gave you a job?

IG: Oh yeah with the pigs, the three pigs that we had in the sty across in the allotments. And that’s where she met Ted Gibson who used to come across from the allotment and see her and he was the one who knew me. And…

INT: From the pub?

IG: No from the… May, from the second… the people that came in at Christmas to…

INT: Right.

IG: The little widow lady who came in at Christmas, he was her lodger.

INT: Right.

IG: And he got to know May because I introduced them and a year or two later they married.

INT: What a story!

IG: Well I think it’s quite a story but…quite amazing.

INT: Isn’t that lovely.

IG: And both of them had never married before.

INT: Uh huh.

IG: And he was a farm labourer and for the daughter of a strict Baptist pastor to marry a farm labourer was a bit down market.

But they moved out to Hyam’s Farm in St. Ives which is an Animal Health Trust farm and after a few years…I operated from there in my final years at school and the…sorry Hyam’s Farm… He eventually got moved by the Animal Health Trust because he’d had experience with horses when he’d been in the military horse brigade in India, and he got moved out to Newmarket where they had Balaton Lodge which was a great big lodge house, half of which was laboratories, the other half was stables. And he was the man put in charge of the stables.

And I lived there with them for a while and of course I didn’t tell you last bit of the pig story… Well imagine a good Jewish boy looking after the pigs.

INT: Apparently if you’re Jewish you can keep pigs as long as you don’t eat it.

IG: Is that right? I didn’t know that.

INT: Apparently, I don’t know if it’s true.

IG: Anyway I got the sale price of one of them and I bought a beautiful drop handle barred bike called a ‘Phillips Vox Populi’ and I had that for many, many years and treasured it.

**Ike Gibson – Life After The War**

Ike relates his experiences as a King’s Scout and taking part in the Coronation celebrations. He describes his life during National Service.

IG: I can remember the huge celebrations in the Main Street in St. Ives but beyond that nothing really. And then May absolutely wanted me to go on to the 6th Form and I absolutely wanted to leave and get, earn some money.

INT: So what happened to the evacuees from London?

IG: They all went back.

INT: Was it a sad day when they went back?

IG: I can’t recall that but they all went back and May then got a girl from a nursery who she thought was an orphan, I think she was an orphan, from a nursery who was four years younger than me and she grew up more or less as my sister. Her name was Barbara Wells and we found out later she was the great niece of H.G. Wells who was the author.

INT: Really?

IG: Apparently so.

But May insisted I stay onto the 6th Form and so despite the fact that I’m a renowned chatterbox I didn’t speak to her for a whole term, I was so cross. But she made me go on to 6th Form and, in the grammar school, and it was the first time I’d actually enjoyed school at all.

The only problem was they made me take three subjects and they’d timetabled it so that you couldn’t take maths and biology and chemistry. If you wanted to take biology and chemistry you couldn’t take maths, you had to take physics and, frankly, advanced level physics without advanced level maths, you’d be talking Chinese, it just didn’t make any sense at all.

And after four terms copying my friends homework I got the headmaster to allow me to drop it, so I only took two subjects at A Level and only passed one. I passed biology and failed the chemistry.

INT: But…Did you feel different because you’d left Germany and…?

IG: Not at all. I mean I’d been in May Wiles house for quite a number of years then, gone to the local chapel, gone to the Scouts, I was, I was just a normal lad.

INT: And how was Esther?

IG: She stayed with May Wiles after four years of private schools and then she decided she would go into nursing and chose not to go to the local nursing school. She went to a nursing school in Nuneaton whereas I stayed on.

Scouting

IG: I carried on with the Scouts and eventually became a senior scout. And I had a little group of about eight or nine of us who were senior Scouts and the senior Scout master was a naval man so the senior Scouts all became sea Scouts and he…

INT: What year was this?

IG: I can’t recall.

INT: How old were you?

IG: I was fifteen when I went into the senior Scouts.

INT: Right.

IG: So we could work it out but…

INT: ‘49.

IG: Yeah, something like that. And he was a sea…He got us all to become sea Scouts and then he encouraged us to collect badges, the scout badges, and eventually I, and two or three others, got enough badges to be awarded the King Scout award.

And then the King died so we became the UK’s first Queen Scouts and there was one interesting little thing which until recently I had totally forgotten. The Queen and the whole court went into mourning, black clothes, and she performed one royal function before the coronation because she thought her father would have wanted her to, which was to take the salute of the new, as they were then, Queen’s Scouts.

And I remember camping on Eton College playing fields, given a pep talk by the chief scout who was Lord Rowallan and we made our fires and had our dinner on Eton College playing fields.

And then the next morning we got into a sort of column and marched past the Queen and her royal party, who were in the grounds of Windsor Castle, and we marched into St George’s Chapel to a service of thanksgiving and commemoration.

And I’d totally forgotten that until the Queen’s celebrations and even my daughter hadn’t heard that story.

INT: Yeah. So did you see yourself on TV?

IG: I don’t recall that.

INT: No.

IG: But my daughter, very good with the internet, she immediately sent to the Boy Scouts Association and asked them for any pictures they had of the event and we’ve got four pictures on the computer now and one of them is the front of the parade going past the Queen and I’m pretty sure one of the people you can see is me. My daughter thinks it’s me as well, we’re not quite sure but we think it’s me.

Ike recounts how he changed his name to that of his adopted family and his experiences during National Service

IG: When I wanted to go into an agricultural college, because I’d moved house and because I hadn’t got a foreign language at O-Level, at School Certificate level, that means I couldn’t go for a degree course, goodness knows why. So they put me down to a diploma course at what’s really the second best school of agriculture or dairying in the country. Sutton Bonington School of Agriculture.

And we then moved to Suffolk, to Balaton Lodge, and I applied for a grant and of course grants for diploma courses weren’t obligatory anyway and as I’d just moved counties they weren’t interested.

So I had to give up the idea of agricultural college.

And then I did something very, very strange, I thought, well, all my school friends are going off to National Service, because I’m not ‘British’ I’m not being called up. And if I’d stayed ‘Not British’ until I was twenty-six I wouldn’t have been called up.

But at nineteen I went along and got naturalised so that I was British and changed my name to Gibson. Which was the married man who…

INT: Right.

IG: He’d married May Wiles so I changed my name to their name, Gibson, and I walked into the Labour Exchange, I can remember that clearly, they didn’t call me up so I walked into the Labour Exchange in Newmarket and said ‘Look, I’m a British citizen, you should call me up’.

So I must have been National Services only volunteer!

And I went into the National Service and I wanted to be a pilot on the principal that I could then be a pilot in Civvy Street. So they sent me and fourteen other youngsters to Hornchurch where we had four days of selection for pilot.

INT: They gave you a choice? They actually allowed you to do that?

IG: I couldn’t, I can’t remember why they allowed me to go to Hornchurch. But I went to Hornchurch and we had four days of selection and at the end of it they lined the fifteen of us up and said ‘Well you two have been awarded pilot, National Service, you two have been awarded air signaller if you sign on for eight years without a commission, and the rest of you have been offered nothing. And I was offered the air signaller and I thought without the commission…Air signaller, no civilian job like it, no thanks.

So they sent me back to the square bashing camp and there they put me in the kitchen for three weeks which meant I ate better than anybody else on the camp because you picked the food before it went out. And then they sent me to Middle Wallop to train as a fighter plotter.

And three quarters of the way through the training they said ‘Where would you like to be posted?’ and I thought oh this is good so I said ‘East Anglia or alternatively the Far East because I’ll never be able to afford to go there on my own’. So they, of course, posted me to North Yorkshire!

INT: Oh that sounds like the National Service.

IG: Absolutely. They posted me to North Yorkshire and it was to a little unit called RAF Shipton which was inside RAF Linton-on-Ouse. It was a separate unit but we lived on the camp at RAF Linton-on-Ouse and of course RAF Shipton was supposed to be deadly secret and it was a huge underground complex which you went to by coach, 6 miles from RAF Shipton.

INT: Where was that? Was it near York?

IG: It was near York, about 6 or 7 miles from York and we went to this huge underground complex and the amazing thing was anybody watching the coaches coming out of RAF Linton-on-Ouse could have seen 60 young men get out of the coaches and all walk into a building the size of an ordinary house.

We would frankly have had to stand on each others shoulders and, but even when they got to know you, you would have had to wave your security pass because it was secret for us.

Then you went down some steps and into a long 12 foot wide, or thereabouts, corridor which sloped downwards until you got to the operation centre which was three stories all underground, horseshoe shaped with all the horseshoe… with officers who did the aircraft controlling and in the middle of the horseshoe was this massive picture of the British Isles where you did the plotting to show where the planes were and then the screen in front had the weather, which planes were flying and all such information.

And then amongst the officers rooms there was also a direction finding unit which you went to sometimes, where a plane would call out ‘Fix Fix Fix’ and he be in direct line to one of the 10 people or so sitting around this table and there would be 4 or 5 people who would get this call ‘Fix Fix Fix’ and you would actually pull out a string which showed the direction the plane was in and where the string crossed showed you where this plane was

INT: Right

IG: And this was passed to the officers and they would then tell the plane where he was.

INT: Did you enjoy National Service?

IG: Some of it, but the thing about it is at Shipton, we worked morning one day and afternoon the next and if you were working in the morning and the planes flew in the evenings, which wasn’t that often, then the morning shift would get called on again to man the operations centre.

So we had an enormous amount of spare time. And, I mean, I had been taught more or less from the Baptist folks that playing cards were part of the devil. In that camp we played three card blind brag for pennies, we’d not got much money, five nights a week because we were so bored and then on Saturday nights I fetched my lovely bike up from Newmarket and I’d had it, what, 7/8 years by then, maybe even more whatever…I hadn’t calculated how long I had it but I brought it up on the train then on Saturday night the last bus from York to the camp was about 10 o’clock which was pretty useless to a 19 year old.

So, I used to cycle the 10 miles into York, go to a dance at the De Grey Rooms and then cycle back around midnight and that was OK, I enjoyed that bit.

INT: How long was National Service?

IG: 2 years and when you got out and you were all in your civvies and you were just about to leave the camp you always had to go sit in front of the group captain who was the camp commander and he, well, it was a long table, I suspect it was the officers mess table.

It was a very long table and he would sit at one end and you would sit at the other and he would always ask the same question ‘What did you think of your National Service?’

He asked me the usual question and I said ‘The first few months when we were training that was alright, the rest of it was a complete waste of time’ and instead of being offended the group captain got up from his end of the table, walked the length of the table, shook my hand vigorously and agreed with me completely. So I was very pleased I had actually come out with the right thing.

**Ike Gibson – Settling In**

Ike becomes an academic in bacterial and viral genetics and his eventual early retirement to Ullapool

IG: Then I came out and for a little while had no job and then….

INT: How old were you at this time?

IG: I must have been 20/21.

INT: Yeah.

IG: And then I finally got a job in Ware at a firm called Allen and Hanburys; the oldest pharmaceutical firm in the country and I got a job in the chemical research laboratory as a lab assistant.

The firm eventually, while I was there, got swallowed up by Glaxo but I worked under a guy called Jan Gladicz a Polish guy, and he was the most gentle tolerant guy you could meet and in 7 years working for him we only ever had cross words about once. But he was the most tolerant guy of every nationality in the world.

INT: Where you still conscious you were German and you were Kinder?

IG: Just about.

INT: Did you ever mention it to people?

IG: Oh yeah, Jan Gladicz knew, he knew all about my background

INT: Yeah, and how about in school?

IG: Well they knew, I didn’t, in school I didn’t get naturalised until after school

INT: How did you find learning English?

IG: I don’t know, but I suspect like a small child, if you are amongst people all speaking English you absorb it. It’s not a, I don’t consciously remember learning English but in the end the only language I wanted to know anything about was English and nobody could persuade me there was any point in learning a foreign language which is why after 6 years of taking French I failed it miserably.

Jan was a lovely guy, he really was a nice guy. Just like the fellas here, everybody liked him; he just was a nice guy.

INT: So did he encourage you to take more, have more education?

IG: Oh yes, oh yes, and Allen and Hanburys did too. They sent me off to Hatfield Technical College to do the A levels again because I had only got one This time doing one day a week instead of 5 days a week I passed Chemistry, Biology and Maths the first year I took them very easily.

And then the college ……..

I slogged my guts out and up until Christmas I often spent the evening studying. After Christmas, of course I was married then, after Christmas I used to send my wife out with friends because I would not go out after Christmas at all and I studied every evening and two weeks, or three weeks before the exam I took two weeks off work without pay and spent everyday doing about 12 hours studying a day and then we did the finals and I went up with a very good friend of mine to look at the board.

They put the final results up, just your exam number outside Turner House and we went up there and if you had asked me I would have started looking at the bottom and I was told before I went ‘For God Sake don’t do that, if you go through all the pass degrees and you’re not there and then the lower seconds and you’re not there, you will start thinking you’ve failed so you go from the top’ and I got little way down and I got a 2:1

INT: Wow

INT: So you obviously enjoyed the scientific side of education.

IG: Oh yeah I was altogether going towards science, and with the pass degree, with the 2:1 I immediately got an offer from the college that they had got their first ever science research council grant to do a PHD and they offered it to me. And I was 29, I really didn’t know whether to take it or not. I been married for several years… no I hadn’t, what am I talking about? Yeah I had been married for 5 years.

I really didn’t know whether I should take this offer and I went to see Allen and Hanburys research director. I can only remember he was David somebody, nice guy.

So he led me, grabbed the letter, led me into his office I can still remember him throwing himself back in his chair, putting his feet on his table to read the letter and then he looked at me and said ‘If you don’t take this you must have a hole in your head!’ So I took it and that meant that I was on next to nothing, just a grant from 29 to 32.

Which I wasn’t pleased about but I took it and unfortunately they lined me up with an absolutely truly dreadful research supervisor and an even more dreadful subject. Frankly, if you are going to do a plant type PhD you should pick one where the literature goes back 10 years; to pick one were the literature goes back to the 1500s is frankly crazy.

INT: So what was your degree in?

IG: My degree was in Chemistry and Biology.

INT: Right.

IG: But this PhD that they lined me up for was quote ‘The experimental taxonomy of the Stellaria media group’. The Stellaria media is chickweed and the literature on chickweed goes back to the 1500s and so my head of department and the science department went to the academic board and asked for a grant for me to travel to Israel and Greece and Sicily and a couple of other places, to travel there, and he announced it just like that and the academic board said ‘What’s Stellaria Media?’ and he had to say ‘Chickweed’ at which point the entire academic board fell about laughing and I didn’t get my grant.

INT: Oh!

IG: So I then sent to the universities in all these countries, the guy at Kew Gardens had advised me and I sent just to Israel, Greece and Sicily and Israel and Greece turned me down but Italy who is a very poor country offered me a one month grant, a two month grant or a six month grant. And I said ‘Look, I’m only going for two weeks’ and they said ‘Oh well you’ll have to have a one month grant’

so I accepted I’ll have a one month grant and off I went. When I got to Italy, I hadn’t got the grant money

I went to Sicily and I was told ‘Go to the university and they’ll have your money’ and I found the university in Palermo and there was this lovely old guy as the prof who couldn’t speak English with a very sharply dressed young man who when I said ‘I had come to collect the grant money’ he said ‘No money! No Money!’ etc and just then an Italian priest came round the corner in the building and he said ‘Ah! The grant money’ and he went and fetched the grant voucher and I am still convinced that the sharply dressed young man was the mafia and he was trying to keep the money and it was very difficult to think otherwise.

So you can imagine what happened when I went to the bank to cash this voucher, I was looking nervously over each shoulder in case the mafia was around. They weren’t.

INT: So you, did you specialise in plants?

IG: Well I was…

INT: Biology?

IG: So I applied for the assistant lectureship

I got the job as assistant lecturer and two years later became a lecturer and two years after that a senior lecturer. But by that time I was specialized in bacterial and viral genetics and since I was in the group of people, the microbiology group, and there was quite a number of microbiologists in there, my chance of getting any further than a senior lecturer was zero

They announced that Hatfield was going to be one of the new universities so it was going to be a polytechnic and we were a polytechnic for about 30 odd years and then they decided to abolish the polytechnic and make all the polytechnics university and just two months before I retired Hatfield became the University of Hertfordshire

They leaned on everybody over the age of 55 to retire early

My colleagues in the department said ‘Take the money and run!’ So I took the money and retired at 57 and I had always decided to move to Ullapool.

**Ike Gibson – Reflection On Life**

Ike talks about his family and his B & B in Ullapool. We hear how grateful he is to May Wiles and learn what happened to his parents who were in hiding in Belgium

INT: Right, so you had already had your family?

IG: I had two children and I always joke with people they have the average intelligence between them, unfortunately not evenly shared out. So my son has Downs Syndrome and my daughter is brilliant. She is far more than average… so you know the normal distribution for intelligence that children are expected to be somewhere in the middle of the bow? And the normal..

INT: Yeah.

IG: And 2.5% will be brighter than their parents and 2.5% will be duller, I got one at each end. Kate, I knew Kate was brighter than me by the time she was 12.

I didn’t mind, to me it seemed I should be very pleased that I got a very bright kid and I had. She’s now a consultant in clinical genetics working in Queensland and to me that’s a pretty fierce job. She knows what she’s doing and I joke that years ago she did as I said and we’ve reached a stage now where I do as she says.

INT: That’s old age for you.

IG: Yeah.

INT: So and your son, where is he?

IG: He has Downs Syndrome and we had, he was a very bright Downs and apart from the first 10 years when he had lots of physical and mental, eh, physical illness problems. He had an imperforated anus for a start so they had to operate, he then got a blockage and they had to operate again and he got a thyroid deficiency but once they got it all sorted…

Frankly, he and I particularly, but his mum as well a bit, but he and I particularly had a ball. We had such fun together because he learnt to play snooker and when I played snooker or pool with him I never once made it easy for him. I always played as well as I could, which isn’t brilliant, and that meant he fought to beat me and I did the same with swimming and for years he couldn’t beat me and I would slow down so that I only beat him by a little and in the end he could beat me, no question about it at all and he won 70 or so swimming medals going into swimming competitions with other disabled kids. They had lots of competitions and they had staggered starts and they know the time the kids have swam their distance before and if they gain in a race by more than 3 seconds a length then they disqualify them. Ian never did that but he took all the medals going and he one year won the national trophy.

They put the top kids from each area into the national competition and we went and saw him win the national trophy. He was a superb swimmer. Ullapool pool, he would go in there with me three times a week and like me he would swim 30 lengths, I mean how many Downs kids do that.

INT(2): How many people without Downs Syndrome can do that?

IG: But I mean the Downs people normally can’t concentrate to that extent.

INT: Right.

IG: But he certainly could and unfortunately now he’s got dementia as well and he’s in Fairburn House.

INT: Near here?

IG: Nearer to Inverness, about 12 miles from Inverness. When we had the car we used to go once a month and take him out to lunch. Now we go when we can, when friends are here and so on.

INT: So you were retired and then the decision to come to Ullapool.

IG: That was made easy because we came here on our holidays towing an old caravan for seven, I never remember if it was 17 or 18 years.

We fell in love with Ullapool and said we would retire here and the last year we came before we moved up here our friends, also in the caravan, said ‘Why don’t you…’ It was rotten weather ‘Why don’t you go look at the houses for sale?’

And this was one of them and the couple that ran this one also ran it as a bed and breakfast and they said well they had only put it on the market for one week and they were trying to find somewhere for themselves so we said ‘Well, keep us in mind if we are still looking we could be interested’ and I suppose what happened then was we decided we would travel for 6 months so we travelled for 6 months to Australia and New Zealand and had a wonderful time and then we came back and started seriously looking for a house and this one was still for sale and the price we paid, all the locals said ‘Oh! Too expensive’ but when you actually think what it would sell at now it’s frightening.

Ullapool Bed & Breakfast

INT: Where was Ann from? Was she from…?

IG: St Ives, Not from St Ives, From……Not St Ives

INT: In Huntington?

INT: So you came to Ullapool and you’re running a bed and breakfast, was it easy to start a business in Scotland?

IG: It was pretty easy to start a bed and breakfast.

INT: Is it?

IG: Oh yes, you just put up your sign. If you’ve got less than three rooms, up to three rooms you don’t have to sort of, register it as a business or anything. So we had two rooms that we let out because Ian had the downstairs room and we had one of the upstairs rooms. We let out two rooms and we always made sure our price was in the middle of the price range.

Not at the top or bottom but the middle and then we decided we would do the best breakfast in the village. So I used to bake all the bread, every breakfast they had a freshly baked roll, sometimes out of the freezer but it was a roll that we had baked, with every breakfast we got the best bacon and eggs and things that we could find. In the end I was making the black pudding and the sausages as well. I just liked making things and both the black pudding and the sausages were rather better than you could buy. I’m serious about that. We put slightly more spice in the black pudding and the sausages, we had it coarse ground by Bookers in Inverness and we bought the skins and we loaded the coarsely ground sausages with a bit of savoury stuff like pepper and salt and they were very good.

INT: So you got lots of people coming back?

IG: Quite a few came back but we are so far out that…Well we had one couple, a German couple I think it was, who came 5 years in succession.

INT: Yeah

IG: But we had quite a few people that had come a couple of years but often people don’t come this far north more than once, quite infrequent and we would allow them, I mean some bed and breakfast say ‘minimum of 2 nights’ we never did that. If they wanted to come for one night they came for one night and we enjoyed it we reckon that… oh and all the jam and marmalade was homemade as well. So they really had, and we didn’t put these little silly packet jams out, we used to put a dish of jam and a dish of marmalade and if they went right down the dish we just filled it up again. We did the breakfast very well, it was a superb breakfast and everybody that came here said that too.

INT: And the community of Ullapool, what’s that like?

IG: Well we reckon that they are the nicest and friendliest people you could meet anywhere.

Where Ann is in Lochbroom House the care home, I was in there for 6 or 7 weeks because with my first stroke, I’ve got minor epilepsy and they gave me some drugs which weren’t controlling it entirely so they gave me another drug and between the two they knocked me out and the result was Ann was here and I was largely looking after her.

And one day I went to put something in the freezer, which is in the garage, and I walked down the steps outside and you probably discovered there are two steps and they are quite large and instead of walking down two steps I walked down three which meant I went flat on my face and I couldn’t get up.

So Ann pressed her help button, my neighbour came along, who was a good friend, in fact the man you are staying with, Mike. He came along and because I am a bit of a lump he couldn’t lift me but he called somebody in off the street and I remember them dragging me into the house. I don’t remember anything else until I woke up in Lochbroom House and of course because Ann couldn’t really look after herself she got there too and in Lochbroom House they have lots of staff coming in on shifts and without exception they are fantastic people, without exception.

They are kind, friendly and have the patience of saints. I wouldn’t have half the patience they’ve got. There was one man down there who’s got slight dementia and one night he got incredibly aggressive with the staff and frankly if that had been me, I would have said

‘Well stay where you damn well are until you decide to cooperate’ but they didn’t, they just had the patience to keep working with him and ignore all the aggression. I would have found that very difficult.

INT: So, did you do things with the community? How did you learn to be in, you know, to be accepted by the community, to be in it?

IG: Well, I mean, all most at once I was on the committee of, what was it? The swimming pool? I was on one of the committees for 8 years; they tried to get me on the first year I was here and I wouldn’t accept that but the 2nd year… I’m trying to remember, this shows you my memory. I was on one of the local committees. I think it was the swimming pool but I was on one of the committees for 8 years and met quite a few people that way and just being round.

And when we used to come here on holiday every time we came up and went into one of the shops we would get greeted with ‘Nice to see you back’. Now where else would you find that? I mean, it was just a lovely atmosphere there are two or three people that we probably wouldn’t get on with brilliantly but on the whole they are really nice people.

INT: Well that’s nice.

IG: And the pace of life is much more sensible here than it was down in Hertfordshire and you know we’ve been back a few times because our friends Dennis and Brenda live in North London and when we’ve been back, we just… the hustle and bustle, just terrifying; I like it here much better.

Ike’s identity and his reflection on life.

He talks about his roots and his family and what happened to his parents.

INT: So do you think of yourself as English in Scotland or German/English in Scotland?

IG: Well, I have never thought of myself as German weirdly enough, despite having been born there. I think I have always thought of myself as English in Scotland but as you can see I’m not really English.

INT: And Kate grew up in England?

IG: Yes.

INT: So she’s English?

IG: Oh, Totally.

INT: Yes.

IG: And the interesting thing is my parents, although they were in Germany when I was born, they are both Polish.

INT: Right.

IG: Both my parents were Polish by origin but you know Poland wasn’t very nice to Jews.

INT: No.

IG: And so, they both got out of there and they met in Germany and married in Germany.

INT: We always finish up with sort of reflections on life, you know, we were talking about the Kindertransport yesterday. So what is your reflection on life, of the life you’ve had?

IG: I think I’ve been extraordinary lucky.

I’ve had a good home. May Wiles who married and became Mrs. Gibson, her husband when they were over 80, they went… I mean Esther who only stayed with her for 4 years, Esther had them out to Australia to her eldest daughters wedding, the two of them and they loved that.

But Esther was in Australia fairly soon after nursing training whereas I’ve always been in England and my reflection on my life is that I’ve been extraordinary lucky. May Gibson/ May Wiles… May Gibson gave me a good stable home and later on I had power of attorney and we always used to go see her until she got so that she wouldn’t have recognized us, she was in a nursing home and she finally died at 103.

But, you know, I did have a good stable home and I actually believe that’s probably… The main thing I think, people think it’s the true parents that are the most important, I actually think the people who bring you up are the most important.

INT: What happened to your parents?

IG: We know they got as far as Belgium and were in hiding and there was a young daughter in the house…

and my eldest sister… when they were in the WAAF and she went to the house where they were hiding and she got a very distinct impression that the daughter had given them away and she was spitting tacks at the daughter whereas I had a slightly kinder views.

I thought, this girl at the age of 12 had people staying with her parents that would have endangered all their lives and she tolerated it.

If she did give them away, we don’t know that, but if she did my reaction is she survived three years of what must have been intense pressure and she finally cracked and as a 15 year old, I can’t have a lot of blame for her. Obviously if she did. We don’t know that she gave them away but if she gave them away how can you blame her? The strain she must have lived under for 4 years or 3 years.

INT: And what happened then?

IG: Well I’ve got a document that says they were on the transport to Auschwitz.

INT: Which we have.

INT: So they were sent to Auschwitz?

IG: They were sent there but never arrived. That’s it, that’s the document