

Ryan Leder:

Hi, I'm Ryan Leder and this is 'Hometown'. For the past couple of months I've been delving into the history of Corby, in order to try and answer a question. That question is, what is a Corby person? One of the people I spoke to was James and what you're about to hear is a conversation, James and I had over Zoom in August 2021. Throughout this conversation, James is hearing the same clips of his mother Elspeth and his grandfather also named James as part of the interview. Since most of this story are people's memories of Corby. I have some footnotes at the end, little corrections to some of the things that are said, but for now, I just want to play you the whole conversation uninterrupted. Okay, let's start.

James Jip:

My name is James Jip. I'm 24 years old. So I describe myself as, in terms of my heritage, I'm British-Chinese. My dad, his parents immigrated from China to Australia, which is where he was born. I only lived there for nine months as a baby, then my mum and dad and myself, we moved to Singapore, which is where I lived for nine years. And then when my parents got divorced, I moved with my mother to Corby. But then strangely enough, Corby's always felt to me... Like you say, my kind of hometown, I suppose, because of my family living there.

Ryan Leder:

You did say the first time we spoke, that you didn't feel like you knew a lot about the history of Corby.

James Jip:

Yeah.

Ryan Leder:

Why do you think that is? Have you ever asked your mom about the history and stuff? Cause she really knows her stuff.

James Jip:

It never really seemed important to me to know the history of the town, because the only importance that I ever felt connected to was just purely my family. So both of my grandparents emigrated from Scotland to live in Corby when they were kids and obviously the steelworks played a massive part in that. One of their children's my mother. So she was born and raised in Corby until she was probably about... Probably near to my age I imagine. For some reason growing up, I was never that interested in knowing the context of Corby.

Ryan Leder:

So I find that really interesting to hear you say, because going through this, the thing I've realised is your family is almost present to every point in history in Corby's town history. And so I thought this was a really lovely opportunity, not only to just teach you about the history of Corby, but teach you about the history of your family and its role in Corby.

James Jip:

Yeah.

Ryan Leder:

Before we do that though, I want to remind you of what you said was your favorite memory of Corby.

James Jip:

Yeah. And another big part of Corby for me was going on dog walks with my grandfather. We used to go to Kingswood, which is right by where we used to live. I think maybe the moments of silence as well, the rustling of trees, birds. I remember waking up in the mornings to the sounds of birds in the trees outside, which is something that I miss, living in a big city now.

Ryan Leder:

And the reason I really wanted to play that is because, this is the audio of me arriving to speak to your mum for her interview... Hello, Elspeth.

Elspeth Robb:

God you have a mask on,

Ryan Leder:

I have, I don't know.

Elspeth Robb:

Blimey - I don't know. I haven't got a mask on. Lovely to see you, come in.

Ryan Leder:

I'm the visitor. Thank you very much, shoes on? Shoes off- ?

Elspeth Robb:

Oh no - shoe's on...

Ryan Leder:

So just for our listeners, can you tell us who that is?

James Jip:

That is my mother Elspeth Robb.

Elsbeth Robb:

Well, I was born in Corby. I was born at 10 Huntingdon Gardens, in the house because my mum refused to go into hospital to have her children. At that time and indeed... This is an interesting thing about Corby, which stands today. There is no maternity ward in this town, you cannot have a baby in Corby. My mother refused to go out of this town to have her children. I was the second child, I have an older brother, Malcolm and four years after me came my brother David. So I was actually born in a house here, it had big blocks of flats that we always referred to as the banana flats, they were shaped funnily enough, like a banana. There was a pub up in the extra state, which was called the Lantern. The Lantern was always mentioned with a certain air of notoriety and my father, he would go into the Lantern because he collected insurance on the Exeter estate. And everyone in the Lantern thought my father was an undercover cop, for years. And eventually the landlord of the Lantern asked my father not to go back into the Lantern because everyone that drank in the Lantern had come to the conclusion that Jim Robb was actually an undercover police officer. My father was barred from the Lantern, because of that... very odd. I went to the Rowlett school. My mum got me into school when I was only three years old because she was a teacher. The Rowlett was the school, both my parents went to the Rowlett school, both of my brothers went to the Rowlett. My mum taught there in the school where she'd been educated as a little girl.

James Jip:

I didn't know that my mum and uncles went to the same school, that my grandparents had also been to... I knew that my grandmother taught there, but I didn't that she had actually studied there as well.

Ryan Leder:

Now, if I remember rightly, I don't think there was a whole lot of choice. There might've been more choice when your mum came around, but I'm pretty sure when Corby was becoming a new town, the Rowlett school was the only school for a while. And so the fact

that, everyone ends up in the same place, feels inevitable when you know that, but your whole family is tied into this one institute.

James Jip:

Yeah.

Elsbeth Robb:

My mum remembers vaguely. At one point, when she was very young in the war, my father used to bang the drum for the air raids. It's all these children had to go into the air raid shelters, it was very scary. And they did this almost, I think every day. But my dad was the boy that went around the school, banging on the drum. My mum told me once she remembered Jim Robb banging a drum.

James Robb:

As I said, you'll need to speak up - I'm deaf.

Ryan Leder:

So, can you tell us who that is?

James Jip:

That is James Robb, my grandfather.

James Robb:

My name is James Robb. I'm 90. Well, 91 in three months time. I'm currently living here, Bennett Road, Corby. And originally I'm from Kirkcaldy.

Elsbeth Robb:

So both of my parents came with their parents from... My father, grew up in Kirkcaldy in Fife. And my mother came from Motherwell, but both of their fathers were out of work. I know that my mum's father was out of work for seven years.

James Robb:

Jobs were few and far between. There was a bit of a depression on. Stewarts was the one that closed in Mossend and there was already a Lloyds Ironworks here and they amalgamated.

Elsbeth Robb:

And when Stewart and Lloyds came from Scotland to build that big new steelworks in Corby, they offered all these men who had been out of work for years, jobs. They didn't want to come. That's a thing that people don't talk about a lot.

James Robb:

And my mother's family... Her mother and father and her brothers and sisters all persuaded her and her young family... I was eight and my sister was six. So my mum and dad decided to up roots and to come to Corby.

Elsbeth Robb:

My grandmother cried and cried and was very depressed, when she came to Corby. She left her family, she left her familiarity and this idea again that you just come to England and you're English and you assimilate with English people - not true. Foisted into this new world and this new town, because this was the beginning of Corby. Corby was just a little village.

James Robb:

I think there was about 1,000 population. And they grew from 1,000 to 6,000 within about two or three years.

Elsbeth Robb:

I know a person who lived in that village and grew up there and was born there an original, real Corby person. They were very rural people. They were farm workers. Her family all worked on farms, out towards Weldon Way and what we call in Corby, the valley.

James Jip:

It's just a side of Corby, which I really have no recollection of and to me it feels like a separate universe. And I was about the same age when I moved to Corby as them.

James Robb:

Now these people came... Not only Scott's people, but Irish... Durham lot, from Durham coal mines and so on, they all came because there were good jobs going and the wages were very good. And the housing was good, You could have gotten to your house, come to Corby - you'll get a house.

Elsbeth Robb:

And so, Stewarts and Lloyds came, they built a town. They built purpose-built housing, to encourage their workers, because they were skilled. You know, steel working is skilled. Both my grandfathers were trained electricians, to a very high standard. They were master electricians, whatever we call those nowadays. You couldn't just find these people, they'd been working in the steel mills, in Scotland for all of their working lives. They were highly trained workforce. They came here and they were given... The big incentive was a house, so thus the town expanded suddenly. There was this explosion of building, still referred to in Corby today, I believe as the Stewarts and Lloyds houses. They're all down around the old village area in Corby, they're all still standing. They were very, well-built... Probably a

lot better built than the house we're sitting in here... and lock stock and barrel to Corby, they came.

James Robb:

The powers that be wanted to put a green belt, round the steelworks, but these men didn't want. They didn't want to have to walk to work... There were no bus services or anything.

Elsbeth Robb:

My house in Huntingdon gardens was right on the edge of the actual mining fields, where they mined the clay. And they used this enormous piece of machinery called the dragline. The bucket of the dragline would have been as big as this house, floor and out to that garden. And they used a certain type of technique where basically, you just had a massive, great bucket, this huge tractor thing that dragged it through the soil and collected the clay. I mean, it is pretty basic, but it worked and they use that dragline - I used to be able to see out my mum and dad's bedroom window, dragging itself across the landscape. And my father built the dragline, we used to say that when we were kids, "our dad built that". As if you did it single handedly, I think he probably put one bolt in it or something.

Ryan Leder:

So yeah. James Robb built the dragline.

James Jip:

I didn't know that, no. Yeah. It's pretty cool to hear about how involved my family were in the industry of the town when Corby was still an industrial town.

James Robb:

Well, when you say, what was your first impression of the town... Of course there wasn't a town. There was absolutely nothing. The whole thing has changed, there's no comparison

between the town that I came to... It was just - they were building all over the place. And there was nothing else.

Ryan Leder:

There was no town. That was less than a hundred years ago.

James Jip:

Yeah. It's pretty incredible. Like you said, just creating it out of nothing. It's incredible.

James Robb:

What you had was all family men who came on their own. Of course there was nothing to do, there was nothing, absolutely nothing. I think the main thing was three different pubs, that was it. There were no facilities whatsoever. So these men came and worked hard and I think you would say played hard. There were no wives, no children, nothing, only pubs. And I think the local people didn't like it. So it got a reputation as being a bit of a hard town. I would say the majority of them were just ordinary decent men, young family men who had nothing else to do, but to go out and so on.

James Jip:

It's quite a kind of entertaining idea, just a load of young men with nothing to do other than spend their wages on beer in the pubs.

Ryan Leder:

Yeah. I think it's so interesting as well. Corby has this reputation, some places of being quite a rough town. What else are you going to do?

James Jip:

Yeah. But like you say, it's the first wave. Before they were able to have their own families and of course that's what it had to be.

Ryan Leder:

Well, and I think it's fair to say quite a few Corby men like their drink. And I just wanted to share with you this little thing that happened while I was interviewing your grandfather.

James Robb:

What is that?

Elsbeth Robb:

You know what that is, will make you talk to Ryan.

James Robb:

Elsbeth, you're giving me a bad -

Elsbeth Robb:

I can hear your throats going.

Ryan Leder:

Do you want to guess to what your mum brought your dad halfway through his interview?

James Jip:

I'm going to guess that it was maybe a wee dram. Well, hopefully there was some water in that... Maybe not.

Ryan Leder:

But yeah, as you were saying about like they were the first wave. They didn't even have houses for their families and so I was curious about, well, where did they sleep? Where did they live? If this is all happening around them, what was going on?

Elsbeth Robb:

It was all shift working. Everybody worked shifts, that place was going 24 hours a day, every day of the year, never stopped.

James Robb:

The local people, made a fortune letting out - if they had one room, they let it out because everybody was on shift work. People building the steelworks were on 12 hour days, worked all hours. And with one room, they would have someone on the night shift going out at night, and someone of the day shift would be coming in and then you get the bed. And the bed was always occupied, all 24 hours a day. You slept in it, you went to work and someone else slept in it. When they first came, they were sleeping rough under hedges and all that. The first thing they did... The salvation army built a hostel and it was for single men of course and very that quickly filled up.

James Jip:

I just have this image of almost a revolving door of tired men coming in and then freshmen coming out, just constantly going round and round.

Elsbeth Robb:

I remember my grandfather talking about this to me when I was a child. Incredibly hard work. The furnaces had had to be kept at this temperature, they were not allow it to fall by one degree. These men are shovelling coal into these furnaces, manually shovelling coal into these god damn things. I mean, 24 hours a day, every day. So it's like this horrible labor of Hercules, where one has to keep the furnaces burning and the toil, the actual blood, sweat, and tears it took to do that, is quite scary. The massive amounts of coal in them, just to keep these furnaces going. I mean, the amount of coal they must used in a year, what the hell would that have been? And in the war, the men went off to fight in the war and all the women took over. And my gran was a train driver, she drove the coal trains. She said there with the best five years of her life. And my gran had a picture of that train on

the wall in her house. That was her sort of finest moment when she drove a train and then she just went back to being a housewife.

James Jip:

That's such a beautiful story. It's quite a kind of emotional exercise because I feel like I'm being allowed to connect to family members of mine, which I've never met or really known in my life.

Ryan Leder:

Your mum told this really lovely story about your grandfather. So he was a blacksmith in the works and he was an apprentice for a while. And so he was in charge of making the tea and to boil the kettle for the tea - they would fill the kettle with water and then they'd just put it on top of the furnace. And she said, that was one of the things he remembered most. Just the sweltering heat of being in there.

James Jip:

It sounds hellish. This kind of constant inferno and then all these men is shovelling coal all day long.

Ryan Leder:

I think it's fair to say from what I've gathered that your grandfather wasn't necessarily the biggest fan of being in there either and your mum talks about this a little bit.

Elsbeth Robb:

With my father and that whole generation of men of my father's age, they had to do national service and that was... Well, for my dad it was a saving grace. He went to Hong Kong and spent three years in Hong Kong with the air force and when he came out of service... He did his three years - he came back to Corby and through quirk of fate, met my mum in the old dance hall in Kettering and the rest as they say is history.

Ryan Leder:

Can you tell me about Harriet Robb?

James Jip:

Yeah. Harriet Robb is my grandmother, who was an incredibly important person in my life, in my childhood and adolescence, yeah.

Ryan Leder:

Your mum was saying, there was a chance your dad just wasn't going to come back to Corby, that he was going to stay in Hong Kong and it was essentially meeting your grandmother that kept him in Corby.

James Jip:

Isn't that incredible. I heard that they met in this hall and my grandmother was wearing a long yellow raincoat and smoked cigars or cigarettes outside and they met... I think I've got this one. I think they met in a revolving door or they were crossing paths and fell in love.

Ryan Leder:

So, we'll come back to the steelworks, but there's this other tangential thing happening at the time. The steelworks have been built, the town is now a town and thriving, but people are still migrating to the town. As your grandfather said, it was a small village when it started. Today, Corby is a town of over 70,000 population. So, it's an enormous amount of growth to happen in a short amount of time. Basically how they accomplish that is, Corby was one of the new towns designated in the first round of the New Towns Act and they brought in this external corporation called the Development Corporation to basically build the rest of the town, to make sure there was enough houses for everybody.

Elsbeth Robb:

Stewart's and Lloyds, created Corby, but Development Corporation was established to grow Corby. It was on a mission to make Corby a place to come to. And it was a go-to place, it was actively promoted in films, on the London Underground, there were posters made, sort of, almost with the promise of employment in the works. And many people must've come, I mean, my mum and dad knew people that came from London to live here and to work here. So, it was a very conscious drive to make Corby bigger. They were offering people, what was then, in the late 60s, an aspirational lifestyle. I think part and parcel with this idea of Corby's expansion, that it was going to expand, to be this new town. It was always very much a new town, so the word on the street would be, I think from what people told me that, we can make Corby anything we want it to be. And so it had this sort of idea about itself that it could be something better.

Ryan Leder:

When I listen back to that clip, I hear something like slightly somber in your mum's voice. Do you have any idea why that might be?

James Jip:

I imagine maybe because she feels Corby maybe has not filled its full potential, perhaps. I think my mother feels there's definitely still room for improvement for the town.

Ryan Leder:

And do you know what comes next in the chronology of Corby's history. The thing that meant this town that you know today isn't the town that it was built to be?

James Jip:

No.

Ryan Leder:

So the steelworks close down...

Elsbeth Robb:

I remember passing that big building, Crown House, it was called. And there was a queue of men, a queue of people, all the way down Elizabeth street, right through the town, right past the police station, right down the hill, right down to the parks and into the park. Hundreds and hundreds of people queuing for the dole office. And these men were there day after day. That queue went right down Elizabeth street and that's something that's ingrained on my brain. Hugely contentious, my father was friends with the guy - they had shut the whole steelworks down. So he was right in the epicentre of what was going on, very hard and horrible. There was no immediate way forward. Where was this town going? It had had all this aspiration, it had built itself up, it had expanded, all these new estates had been built. The Exeter to the Kingswood, the Lincoln, all these big housing estates had all been built on the back of everybody working in the steelworks.

Ryan Leder:

So, basically around the time of Margaret Thatcher becoming prime minister, the steelworks were shut down and Corby's lifeblood was basically stripped out of it.

James Jip:

Which I suppose, Yeah. It does make sense as to why Corby... Why it's progression was somewhat stunted.

Elsbeth Robb:

So then we were left with this wasteland and Corby became - they started to dismantle works, which was horrible to see because it was huge, Ryan, huge. If you haven't seen it in those days, it's hard to imagine how big it was. And people talk now and I've been in rooms recently where people have said, "well, all that has to be forgotten because it's the

past. And we must move on from the past. Why do we keep going back, remembering the steelworks?" I think well, there wouldn't be a town, if it hadn't been for the steelworks. My mother's uncle, Andrew, fell into a vat of acid in the works. My grandfather was electrocuted in the works - someone had failed to tell the electrician that they hadn't turned off power and my grandfather cut into some massive great wire. He was clinically dead. A St. John's ambulance man revived him. Someone had already left the works to tell my Nana that her husband had been killed. So, she came to the works believing my grandfather was dead and in fact he miraculously had been revived. But that would have been two brothers from the same family killed in those works. It's a massive thing in Corby and you can't talk about Corby without talking about it. The migrations that have come to Corby in the last say 25 years, they know very little about it, which I find quite shocking. And you say to people, "well, the works" and they say to me, "what's that?" I say, "well, it was the biggest integrated steelworks in Europe," but people don't know about it and I find that very odd. How did it all get forgotten within 20 odd years?

Ryan Leder:

So, this thing that is not only formed the history of the town, but formed the history of your family or at least this side of your family... Your mum feels like it's forgotten.

James Jip:

Yeah. Even speaking to me, my knowledge of the steelworks is limited when it shouldn't be, because it's clearly so embedded into my family's history.

Ryan Leder:

How does that feel, having that realization?

James Jip:

Yeah. I suppose it makes me want to know more about the history of my family and my grandmother's uncle who fell into a vat of acid. I don't think I've heard that before. I knew about my great grandfather being electrocuted then being brought back to life, but there's

just so much, which is unknown to me. But also completely tied into Corby and therefore the steelworks.

Ryan Leder:

So when I first spoke to you, I asked you whether you thought you were a Corby person. Do you remember what you said?

James Jip:

I think I said probably something along the lines of "a bit of both". A bit of yes and probably partially, no, as well.

Ryan Leder:

The phrase I remember you specifically saying is you weren't a "thoroughbred".

James Jip:

That was it. Yeah. Not a thoroughbred's Corby person. Although listening to all of this now, I can't help, but feel that the history of Corby and Corby itself is completely included into myself. And all that history is the reason I'm who I am now. So I suppose if you were to ask me again, I'd probably change my answer slightly... and say, I am a Corby person.

Ryan Leder:

I think absolutely you are. And I think not only are you a Corby person, but you come from Corby people.

James Robb:

I don't really know what a Corby person... a Corby person is just a person. You don't change because you move house. You are the same person. A Corby person is just a normal everyday person like everybody else. Of course, I'm a Corby person because I've lived here all my life.

Elsbeth Robb:

My oldest and dearest friend is a Corby girl too, we grew up in the same street. Our mothers taught at the same school. We talk because we literally grew up together, we were like sisters, more than friends. We say, "well, are we Corby girls then?" And we both go, "yeah, I guess we are" all, although she left and she lived in China for many years. So we've both gone to the far-flung corners of the globe and our careers have been international careers. But when we're back here, we're like two little girls wandering around the town centre, going up to the Paletto Lounge, for a glass of wine and it's like, God... Cause we grew up here! I used to ask my mum and dad, Ryan that question... There was a small discussion, that one day they might move to Kettering. This was the massive thing, were we going to move to Kettering and we didn't. And they were very happy here and they were very committed to Corby. What Corby was, very committed to the idea of the community because the community was incredibly important. That sense of we can build this community to be what we want to be and it can be better, because we're starting from scratch. And this is the thing, the new town thing to me, it's about this idea that we don't have preconceived ideas. We don't have to live within these boundaries and we can foster the community spirit that we want.

Ryan Leder:

There's something your mom said to me that really stuck with me when I was interviewing her. She talks about all the people she knew from Corby and what they'd gone on to achieve. And so, her brother was a senior manager at the BBC. Her younger brother was a senior social worker doing a lot of housing in the London Boroughs. Her best friend, who she mentioned is a linguistics professor in Michigan. She herself was a publishing executive, who lived and worked all over the world. Her cousins, two of them are jazz musicians, one of her cousins owns her own school in Malaga and the kid next door, who she used to babysit is now one of the world's leading jazz musicians. And all these people are from Corby and that is literally just kind of the people within your mum's immediate circle. And I think she talks about Corby breaking boundaries and wanting to foster

something better for itself and better for its community. She just made the point, look at that list, look at these things that the town is already achieving, the kind of people that it's already putting out in less than a century of existence. And people don't really talk about it, that's not really the image of Corby that people have.

James Jip:

No, you're right. I suppose, even though the steelworks has shut down, I get a sense that the spirit of those people has continued to... The spirit and soul of Corby still had to make its way through the people and down the generations, which is pretty incredible to think about.

Ryan Leder:

Do you remember how you described a Corby person to me, last time we chatted?

James Jip:

I think I said a Corby person was someone who's hardworking, gets on with the job and I suppose there's a kind of grit and steel - pardon the pun - to a Corby person. Yeah.

Ryan Leder:

So that's the end, but that was just one more thing I really wanted to share with you. So, obviously at the start we listened to your favorite memory of Corby, which was dog-walking with your grandfather, through the trees, through the bird song and everything. And I asked him the same question and this is what he said.

James Robb:

You must remember, I was eight. So my memory is not... It's a while ago. We came to Corby - and what impressed me about Corby was the amount of trees, every street was tree-lined. There were trees down in every street. There was the pavement, then this lawn with trees in, and then the road. And that impressed me because Kirkcaldy had some

beautiful parks, but there was no trees in the streets. The streets were just... They were houses and the buildings and so on... To an eight year old child I'm going around and I'm thinking... "there's a lot of trees". And these trees were put in as saplings and now they're great, big trees.

James Jip:

Yeah. I kind of understand what my grandfather was saying about how, once you make something from nothing and that something can be enough, even though the something will change and maybe get better and maybe sometimes get worse... the fact that you still have this place, which before there was no place is in itself, a great thing to have done, to created anyway. So a great achievement

Ryan Leder:

Hometown was written and curated by me, Ryan Leder with sound design and production by Suren Seneviratne. Special thanks to James Jip, Elspeth Robb and James Robb for sharing their stories as well as Dennis Taylor, for fact checking. Hometown has been supported by the National Lottery Community Fund and is part of the wider 60 Miles by Road or Rail project exploring Northampton and Corby's new town stories. You can find out more about this project at 60milesbyroadorrail.co.uk. That's six, zero miles by road or rail.co.uk. Thank you. As I mentioned at the start, there were a few footnotes I wanted to address. As you'll have heard at the end there, James Robb arrived in Corby in 1939 when he was just eight years old. Earlier, when he talks about there being no town and the young men arriving to Corby from Scotland for the first time he is telling the story of people he knew from that time, one of whom was his father-in-law. In addition to that, I was told that a welfare club was opened in Corby between 1937 and 1938. It was a place where if you paid a penny, you could become a member and take part in all sorts of recreational activities, bringing an end, to the Corby that James talks about of being only pubs. When Elspeth said Corby has never had a maternity ward, that was true, for when she was born, but a maternity ward did open up a few years later in the late 60s. However, to the best of my knowledge that maternity ward has now closed, meaning Elspeth is right

and that today a child cannot be born in Corby. When I say the Rowlett school was the only school in Corby, there were actually two. In addition to the Rowlett school, there was also Rockingham school. When Elspeth references men shovelling coal into the steelworks, they would actually shovel Magnesium. The coal wasn't used for making steel, instead it was used to make Coke - the fuel, not the soft drink - as its higher carbon content was what was needed for steel-making. I was also told the steelworks were responsible for building a pipeline that would supply fuel to allies overseas, during the second world war. The pipe was nicknamed PLUTO, which stood for pipeline under the ocean. To be absolutely clear as well, the dragline was not used to mine clay. It was used specifically to remove the clay from the Iron ore. The clay was known as the overburden. A fun couple of extra details about the dragline, it was nicknamed the Big Geordie and it was the biggest dragline in the world at that time. Eventually when it was dismantled, it was sold to a dragline collector who was living in the United States. And lastly, Corby people are known as Corbyites.