

HELLO CAMPERS PROJECT
Digital Works June 2023

Interviewee: Chris Luesley

Date of Birth: 1962

Place of Birth: Royal London Hospital, Whitechapel

Parents' Occupations: Parents divorced when Chris was quite young and mum looked after them. His father was a civil Engineer for Wimpey Construction and his mother a stay at home wife.

Interview Location: BFI on 5th June 2023

Interviewer: Paul Irving

Summariser: Margaret Perrin

Every year when he was growing up, Chris and his family (mum & sister) went to Whitecliff Bay Holiday camp in Bembridge, IOW. Before this they went to Southend on day trips. He grew up in Finsbury Park and all the kids in his street would pile into their parents' cars and head down the A13. He went to Butlins or Pontins once or twice but doesn't really remember them. His only real memory is of Whitecliff Bay.

It was always chaotic packing the night before and he and his sister would go up to the loft and move the Christmas tree out of the way to get the cases.

Mum would then drive them down to Portsmouth to get the Fishbourne car ferry. This then changed to going to Southampton to get the Red Funnel Services to Cowes. Chris remembers how fantastic it was to get down there and check in knowing you were on your way. On the car ferry there was a little café where they'd get drinks. He and his sister used to enjoy looking out for the cruise liners of the day – Canberra or Rianna or in, later years, it was the QE2.

His first impressions of the camp were always looking for the other kids. "*Where are they?!*" Three of these boys are still his best friends 50 years on.

Stayed in a static caravan which was very basic. A couple of bedrooms, kitchenette, and a bathroom. In later days they moved to a chalet. They were what they said on the side of the tin.

Always went self catering. Chris still has nightmares when he sees tins of processed peas and new potatoes. On the campsite there was a shop where you could order a ready cooked

chicken before 10am, you'd then pick it up at teatime. Money was tight as mum was on benefits so self-catering was the cheaper option. Every Friday a fish and chip van would come to the campsite. The food he had at home was better quality.

In the day he'd run with the other kids. The campsite was in a lovely setting, on top of a cliff. There was a main field in the middle with a playground. There was also a club where you could do activities, but Chris and friends would just play and go down to the beach where they'd climb the cliffs. Every Friday the campsite would organise 5-a-side football.

His mum and sister would sit in deckchairs sunbathing outside the chalet when he was playing with his mates.

The Culver Club was the entertainment venue. There was a bar and they had a band and different kinds of competitions. Chris's best friend's dad would enter the fancy dress competition. The children would normally play outside in the dark.

He remembers the smell of greasy food and the sound of a lot of happy laughter. In the penny arcade parents would be jokingly telling their kids off. Everyone was happy to be away from the everyday routine.

Sometimes Chris's mum would drive them to a tourist attraction but he would be hankering to get back to the camp to be with his friends. That was the best thing about going to the holiday camp. The worst thing was going home. He hated the last night because he knew he wouldn't see his friends for another year – no social media and his friends were from all over the country.

Sugar Baby Love by the Rubettes is the song that takes him right back to those holidays.

Fondly remembers the people who worked there especially the compere who was a "dwarf" called Bruce and a local guy called Mick who used to organise the football.

One of his memorable experiences was when kids who had climbed up the cliff had to be rescued by the coastguard helicopter. Also remembers his first teenage crush with a girl from Yorkshire. They walked around the campsite holding hands.

The holiday camp experience started to peter out when a lot of the families started to go to Spain. Chris's family couldn't afford it.

He has fantastic memories of what his mum did for them. The most significant thing he's got out of it is the friendship with his best mate who he met in 1972.

He and his friends continued to go back to Whitecliff on their own into their twenties. They then joined in with the entertainment and the fancy dress competitions – dressed as a gorilla one year then other years they had Caribbean or Hawaiian themes with limbo dancing. When the entertainment finished they'd head into the nearest town, Sandown, and go to the local disco which stayed open later.

His recent family holidays have been very different. He's been to America, the Far East, the Caribbean and won a holiday to Australia. He went to the Seychelles for his honeymoon. He acknowledges how lucky he's been, (got some money from his Nan when she died and is in a job with a decent income), but he wouldn't hesitate about taking his kids to the holiday camp.

If he could relive any day at the holiday camp it would be arrival day.