

Interviewee: Grace Brown (GB)	Interviewer: Caroline Milligan(CM); Mark Mulhern (MM) also present
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Neil Armstrong’s visit 02m 05s.

CM: We’re going to talk to you about this momentous event when Neil Armstrong was made the first Freeman of the Burgh of Langholm. I suppose the thing that Mark and I have talked about is that it’s such an audacious act, really, to do that so soon after the moon landing and so I wondered if you would tell us a wee bit, first of all, about who had the idea and how was that then followed through because that’s fascinating.

GB: Right, right. Well, when Neil Armstrong took what he described as his giant leap for mankind, way back in 1969, we in Langholm were terribly excited about it. I dare say the whole world would be excited but the significance of our excitement was the fact that he was an Armstrong, a man who was named Armstrong and, of course, here, we’re in the very heart of Armstrong country, here in Langholm, in Eskdale, this used to be the ancient home of the Armstrongs. So, I think this was what prompted the Town Council to, you know, invite him to come. It was suggested, ah think, to the Town Council that ‘Why don’t you invite Neil Armstrong our’, you know, one of our own, if you like, ‘to come and visit his ancestral home.’ So, the Town Council met and unanimously agreed that it would be a good idea to come along, to write to Neil and invite him to come and, if he came, to accept the Freedom of the Burgh. So, this was duly done but we had to wait quite a long time for his reply and of course we were on tenterhooks because we didn’t know whether, or not, he would reply in the affirmative, you know. We had a connection in the States, actually, in Houston, Texas, a Langholm exile by the name of the Revd Jimmy Beverly was out there and he, I think, had connections with the family and he indicated to our Provost at the time, Provost James Grieve, that he thought that if Neil was asked he would come. So, we were keeping our fingers crossed but we certainly didn’t know for definite. But that was sort of the background to, you know, to him being invited.

CM: And you said at that meeting there was this unanimous decision to invite him and to make him a Freeman but that, in itself, was momentous wasn’t it because there hadn’t been a Freeman of Langholm before then and subsequently-?

05m 30s.

GB: That’s right, we had never made anyone else a Freeman so it was quite unique and ah think that, when he did come, he appreciated that fact, you know, that he was the chosen one, if you like.

CM: And what, you know, was there an object that was commissioned that, or a, was it a certificate that made him the Freeman? What was it?

GB: Oh yes, yes, he had to have what we call a Burgess Ticket, which is what every Freeman gets and it was printed on finest calf vellum and they actually commissioned someone in

Kirkcudbright to make a replica of Gilnockie Tower or Hollows Tower as it's sometimes called and he made this, it was a beautiful thing, he carved it out of wood. It was an exact replica of the Tower and the Burgess Ticket was enclosed in that and that was presented to him, you know, at the Freedom ceremony.

CM: So already you've got, even with just that one object, there's quite a lot of organisation isn't there? So, what was the time-line between you inviting him and the actual event itself?

GB: Well, ah don't think, ah can't remember, at this stage, just exactly when we got the reply, you know, ah think we knew, he was coming to Edinburgh University to deliver the Mountbatten Lecture and we knew this was happening and we were in contact with the University and we had an inkling that this would happen but ah don't think we got the official letter to say he would come until about two years after we wrote, in 1969.

CM: So you were quick off the mark *[laughs]*.

GB: So there wasn't, there wasn't long so it was absolutely hectic, it took a lot of organisation because there were the people to invite, to decide who was going to get an invitation; there was all the printing of the invitations, the menus, that sort of thing to organise. And there was to be a reception afterwards so there was the food to organise, that was undertaken by Colinton's of Edinburgh, actually, the reception side of it, and there were venues, of course, to book, and it really did take a lot of organisation. In fact, I remember distinctly being in the Town Hall, on more than one occasion, in the week leading up to the ceremony and the town clock struck midnight, so it was really quite hectic. All worth it, mind, at the end of the day.

CM: And it must have been a fantastic thing to be involved in.

09m 28s.

GB: Oh it was, undoubtedly, it was the highlight of my career. Ah spent forty years in the Town Hall, ah was Depute Town Clerk at the time of the ceremony and really it was terrific to be involved in, ah wouldn't like to have missed it, but it was very hard work.

CM: Can you, you've sort of hinted at all the different elements but can you maybe just take us through the day of the, and the different groups involve because I imagine there would have been the school children and bands and-.

GB: That's right, oh it was a day for everyone, really. What happened was that the Town Clerk, Eddie Armstrong, he went up to Edinburgh, to the University, the day before and this was to brief Neil on what would happen and, of course, by this time the media had got it, you know, had got the story and they were here like a swarm o bees, Eddie was up in Edinburgh organising Neil up there, ah was left with all this chaotic media and it was, there were newspapers from all over the world. A lot of American, actually, it did us an awful lot of good, publicity-wise, it really did. It was quite amazing, one of the American papers, ah think it was the Chicago Tribune, ah think it was, printed a map of the British Isles and there were two places mentioned, London and Langholm *[laughter]*.

CM: Fantastic.

GB: So it was really, you know, it was really quite amazing. The actual day itself, that was the 11th March 1972, and it dawned bright and sunny, it was a beautiful day, very cold, a really

blue sky, a cloudless blue sky, the sun was shining and it was lovely and what happened was that Neil came down from Edinburgh by car and he was met at the Townhead Toll Bar, at the northern entrance to the town, by the Town Clerk, by Eddie, the Town Clerk, and he was transferred to, now, it was a posh car, ah can't remember whether it was a Daimler or a Jaguar, but it was one of these posh cars he transferred to and he was driven down to the Town Hall, preceded by Langholm Pipe Band, they played him down and of course by this time crowds were gathering, you know, and they were, you know, so many deep, both sides of the High Street and the bunting was out, they had the bunting out and oh, it was a day of celebration, really, it was quite something, for a little town like Langholm because, you know, you've got to remember that we only had a population of about 2500, ah think, at that time. So, it was quite an eventful day. Anyway, he went down to the Town Hall and he met the senior members of the Town Council, down there, and had coffee there and that was when he met Provost and Mrs Grieve, he was the Provost of the town, you know, at that time.

13m 53s.

But it was when he came out of the Town Hall that was where the surprise element came in because not many people knew about this, but when he came out of the Town Hall, awaiting him to take him to the parish church, where the ceremony was to take place because that was the largest building that accommodated the most people at that time. So he was going to the parish church for this ceremony but awaiting him was a landeau pulled by two magnificent grey horses, this had been organised by one of the members of the Town Council who had connections, he knew somebody who had carriages and horses and that sort of thing, and it was kept a secret, not many people knew about it. So, anyway, when Neil came out of the Town Hall, by this time the Town Band were playing in the market place and they struck up the Star-Spangled Banner, ah think it was, and that was followed by Scotland the Brave, and that got the crowds going, of course. So, Neil and his wife, Jan, and Provost and Mrs Grieve drove in the landeau to the parish church and the rest of us followed on foot. And at the parish church the dignitaries from the neighbouring burghs were all lined up to meet him, the Provosts, they were all in their robes, so it was quite a colourful sight, you know, in the grounds of the parish church. So he was introduced to this line-up of dignitaries, the Mayor and Mayoress of Carlisle were there as well and other important persons and then he, as he entered the church, and this was what made the hairs stand out on your neck, the organist at the time, Cecil Carmichael struck up See the Conquering Hero Comes, the congregation rose to their feet, of course the church was full because we had the people who were invited sitting in the centre front of the church and then the public were allowed in at the other parts so they all rose to their feet so he got quite a welcome there. In the church he was welcomed by Provost Grieve, he did a speech of welcome and then the Town Clerk read the Citation, you know, from his Burgess Ticket, afterwards Neil had to take the customary Oath of Allegiance which Burgesses have to take and then he was presented with his Burgess Ticket, in this casket of Gilnockie Tower which we spoke of earlier, and then he did a little speech and it was then he said he felt so much at home in Langholm and he was honoured, he was really honoured to accept the Freedom of the Town and he hoped he might be able to come back some day. Regrettably, though, that never happened so that was the ceremony in the church. Afterwards, he actually walked to Buccleuch Hall where the reception was to be held, again he was preceded, ah think this time it was the Town Band that led the procession. And he spoke to a lot of the public, he was very free and easy, and he spoke to a lot of the public and I remember as we went up Caroline Street, you come out of

the church and turn left into Caroline Street and then turn right into Henry Street to go to the Buccleuch Hall and as we walked up Caroline Street there was a little boy, oh ah don't know how old he would be, six maybe, something like that and he had a placard to say 'My name is Neil Armstrong' [*laughter*] so that was quite something. We tried to track, ah think he came from Lockerbie, it was established, and we've tried to track him down, since, but haven't had much success.

19m 44s.

CM: That's a pity.

GB: But anyway he went, Neil went to the Buccleuch Hall, where the reception was to be held, and we had this wonderful meal, ah can't just remember what it consisted of but I know we had roast beef of Aberdeen Angus, ah remember that, that was the main course, and there were the usual speeches, ah think the Provost spoke again, the Duke of Buccleuch spoke, and Neil himself, of course, and he was presented with quite a few gifts, mostly tweed because this time we were really into tweed and each of the mills, ah think, gave him tweed. One of them had woven a special tartan a lunar tartan which had the, well the colours, if you like, of what you would imagine would be the colours of the moon and so that was presented to him. And his wife, Jan, she got presents as well, and afterwards he came out and spoke to the public, there are photographs of him, they had barriers up and he went over and a bit like royalty I suppose, really, and spoke to them. And afterwards he was, the Duke and Duchess of Buccleuch sort of took over after that because he was staying with them at Drumlanrig Castle, overnight. So, they took him own to Gilnockie Tower, itself, so that he could see this Tower that he'd got the replica off and ah remember there was a picture of him up on the battlements, so he had a good look round there and then he was taken away to Drumlanrig Castle after that. And after he went back to the States, he sent a picture to the townsfolk of Langholm of the actual moon landing of the Eagle, on the moon, and so that hangs in the Town Hall.

CM: Fantastic.

GB: So, ah think that more, or less, was what happened during the day.

CM: That's great because you've given us a very full account of everything that went on. It must have left an impact on the town, thereafter.

GB: Oh, it did, as ah said before, we got a lot of free publicity and oh we had a lot of Americans, particularly American Armstrongs, coming to the town to try to trace their ancestry, and it was, people used to say 'Oh, Langholm, that was where the moon man visited.', you know.' So we were quite famous, ah suppose, really, ah think we were quite the envy of our other border burghs really.

23m 43s.

CM: I can imagine [*laughs*]. What was I going to ask you, ah had one other wee question ah was wondering about? Oh I know that Neil's mother was interested in the family tree, wasn't she? She had done-

GB: That's right, Neil wasn't a bit interested in family history at all, not at all, but she was and she actually traced the family back to the Irish branch of the Irish branch of the Armstrongs, who came across from County Fermanagh and settled here so we did discover in the end that

he was, indeed, of Langholm Armstrong stock, you know. So we were quite pleased about that and his brother, Dean, came over to visit, ah can't remember, it was maybe a couple of years, three years afterwards, you know, and he was quite interested to see the town and it was nice that he was able to. We thought it would be quite nice, as we're having a commemorative service later this year, in June, we thought it would be quite nice if Dean could have managed to come again but ah don't know what his state of health will be now.

CM: Ah think what strikes me about it, one thing is that Mark mentioned htis to me, Neil Armstrong was a very quiet man, who didn't, he didn't

GB: Oh he was.

CM: ... he didn't maintain-.

GB: Oh he was, he was very quiet and he was a really nice fellow, very quiet and unassuming and he shunned publicity, although having said that, he was very easy to talk to and he was quite willing to talk to the people, he wasn't a bit stand-offish, not a bit brash, ah mean he could have boasted ah suppose because this was a tremendous feat, ah mean, the first man to walk on another planet, it was absolutely tremendous and he could have been quite boastful about that but he wasn't. He wasn't keen to talk about the exploit at all, really. He was more keen, ah think, on hearing about the town and what happened and that sort of thing.

MM: Given that he was so very careful about the events that he got involved in, why do you think he came to Langholm, then.

GB: Yes, that's right, he was.

MM: Yes.

26m 48s.

GB: Uh huh.

MM: Do you think it was the Armstrong connection that appealed to him or-.

GB: Ah think maybe it was, ah don't know whether we would have got him here if he hadn't been actually coming to the University.

MM: Right.

GB: And the fact that he didn't come back, rather disappointed us a little, you know.

MM: Yes, aye.

GB: Ah know some of the town's folk said 'Oh, an awful lot of ceremonial and yet he didn't come back.'

MM: Yes.

GB: And he was, we did invite him at the anniversary, the twenty-fifth anniversary, we did invite him, specially to come, but it just didn't happen but then he sort of turned a bit of a recluse, ah think...

MM: Yes, he was a very quiet man.

GB: ...and, as ah say, he shunned publicity at the time, an ah think even more so in latter years, so-.

MM: Ah wonder if he admired the ambition of the Town Council in, you know, a wee place in Scotland writing to the most famous man in the world, ah wonder if he admired the ambition and thought 'Oh that's good, yes, so ah'll go.'

GB: Well, he maybe did.

MM: Aye.

GB: Yes, ah think, because it was quite forward thinking, ah don't know whether the idea was put into the Provost's head by Jimmy Beverly, out in the States, or, you know, where it actually came from, originally, but it was quite forward-thinking ah think...

MM: Yes, yes.

GB: ...to invite him here.

28m 44s.

CM: An ah wonder if that, you know, you say it was sad that he didn't come back but ah wonder if it was such an occasion, that time that he did come here, you know, maybe it was just something that he felt replicate or-.

GB: It couldn't be repeated. He did say at the time, mind you, that he would like to come back but he would like to come incognito.

CM: So, he's maybe been here [*laughter*].

GB: So, he might have been but, you know, we don't know, you just don't know.

CM: The other thing that strikes me that you haven't, having conferred that honour once, you haven't then subsequently made anyone else a Freeman of the Burgh-.

GB: No, well, we can't do that now because with the reorganisation of local government, you know, burghs disappeared, Provosts disappeared, Town Clerks disappeared, much to my disgust I might add, because ah think it was a shame to do away with these titles because, because ah mean, ah was Depute Town Clerk and then, after the reorganisation of local government, ah was local government officer, well everybody in local government was a local government officer.

CM: And maybe that sort of project, if you want to call it the Armstrong Project, couldn't have been realised, you know, not even just practically because it required such a strength of community will. You know, you were saying yourself that you were there until midnight.

GB: That's right, we actually did have a Freedom Ceremony, back in September there, was it September or October, anyway, David Stevenson, who was the boss man of Edinburgh Woollen Mill, he has done a tremendous done a tremendous amount for the town, he's a Langholmite, actually, but he has done a tremendous amount for the town and he was made a Freeman but of Dumfries and Galloway, you know, we couldn't, we couldn't make another Freeman of Langholm, but it was of Dumfries and Galloway.

CM: I'm sure Armstrong appreciated the first man on the moon and the only Freeman you've had.

GB: That's right, it was an amazing thing, though, when he was here, you couldn't imagine this man coming to this 'wee bit toon', as we call it, and having walked on the moon.

31m 40s.

MM: Yes.

GB: It was, it was beyond belief really, it was.

CM: And I hadn't realised, until you mentioned there, that you wrote to him in the year of the moon landing, I hadn't realised that it was, that you were so quick off the mark *[laughs]*.

GB: Yes, it was, it was later on that year that the Town Council met, that, they had a special meeting to decide whether they would invite him or not and so it was, we were very much on the ball, ah think, then.

CM: Fantastic. And did you meet him yourself?

GB: I did, yes, yes, I shook him by the hand and-.

CM: No, Mark and I have been saying 'We're going to meet somebody who's shaken the hand of the first man to walk on the moon.

GB: That's right and as I said in one of the interviews ah did for television radio, at the time he died, ah didn't wash ma hand for a week *[laughter]*. So, no, it was quite an honour to invite, you know, to meet him and talk with him and-.

MM: Who did the, how, did the Town Council send the letter to Mr Neil Armstrong, c/o NASA [National Aeronautics and Space Administration] or-.

GB: Ah think so, ah think it was just sent, as far as, ah can't remember, you know, the exact details, really. But as far as ah know, that was what happened.

MM: Yes, and a similar such thing couldn't happen now, as you were saying, because of the change in local government.

GB: The change, that's right, that's right, ye couldn't...

MM: That's a pity, isn't it?

GB: ...couldn't do it now, which is a bit of a shame really, you know.

Local government and community identity 33m 40s.

MM: Do you feel that's a loss then, Grace, you know the change? It seems like an administrative thing to change local government but then it doesn't allow events such as this to happen.

GB: No, that's right.

MM: It's more than just administration.

GB: No, that's right, it becomes more remote, ah think, ah mean nowadays we're controlled from Dumfries.

MM: Yes.

GB: You know, it's Dumfries and Galloway Council and you lose the local, the local involvement, and in fact it's amazing how many people say, if something's not going right and they're not mending the roads or they're not, so they're 'Oh, bring back the Town Council' [laughter].

CM: And is there a wee bit, you know, because you're quite close to the Scottish Borders here, aren't you...

GB: That's right.

CM: ... near to the boundary, so is there a wee bit of sort of, a sense of sort of sense of belonging, maybe your sense of belonging when it was the Town Council was easier than having that relationship with Dumfries [?].

GB: Yes, we're aware very much akin north, to the Borders, really, our affinity was with the Borders, we had rugby and it wasn't towards the west at all but having said that, mind, we had quite a close affinity with Carlisle, because that was our nearest shopping centre, ah suppose, and ah always remember way back, ah suppose it would be in the sixties, they opened Carlisle Airport, that came into being, they're talking about it again, now, and they asked, because we would be involved inasmuch as businessmen from here might go to Carlisle Airport to fly somewhere they asked for a contribution and we contributed, ah think what was, what would have been brought in by a penny rate in those days...

MM: Right.

GB: ...which was a £140, would you believe, [laughter] that was quite a lot of money, of course.

36m 26s.

MM: Yes.

GB: And so, ever after, we had, we used to be invited to the Mayor's Dinner at Carlisle every year, and the Carlisle Great Fair and they came up to our Common Riding and, incidentally, that was what it as like, the Freedom Ceremony day, was just like the day of the Common Riding, which we hold annually on the last Friday in July, and the population doubles, trebles and goodness knows what, that day, and that was a bit like it was on the Neil Armstrong Day, they came from aw the airts as it were, you know, they wanted to be a part of this.

MM: And the folk in Langholm now, well specifically ah suppose ah'm thinking about school children, are they aware that Neil Armstrong came here and who he was, do you think?

GB: Ah don't know whether, this might jog their memories, well not jog their memory, they weren't even here at the time, they are going to do a schools' competition, an annual schools' competition, something about science and space, probably more scientific for the seniors but

maybe they'll, ah don't know what they'll do with the little ones, make them draw a spacecraft or something like that maybe. But they're going to have an annual competition, in perpetuity, to commemorate his visit so that's, that should bring it to the attention of schoolchildren as well.

MM: That's good. And in this year when you're holding the celebrations and maybe mounting an exhibition, is there any intention to have a plaque, or a memorial to the visit?

GB: Yes, ah think this has been mentioned, that they would like a, you know, something just to...we have a, the monument on the hill, that commemorates, John Malcolm, who was one of the five knights of Eskdale. That was another amazing thing, it was a family who lived up Westerkirk, and five of them, five of the brothers, were all knighted for services to their country and the monument on the hill is to Sir John Malcolm and we have the Hugh MacDiarmid memorial, of course, up on the side of the hill, so ah don't know if, ah don't know that they'll go the length of a memorial, but ah think there'll be a plaque. We do have a plaque to commemorate the Freedom Ceremony in the parish church, there's a plaque there but ah think that somewhere in the town, ah think they would do something about this.

39m 55s.

MM: Ah was wondering as we were driving in, actually, ah wonder if Hugh MacDiarmid, if he was around just now, what sort of poem he would write about that event, you know, it would be interesting.

GB: Ah don't know.

CM: Do you think we've covered mostly everything or is there anything else that you'd like to tell us about?

GB: Ah think we'll have covered most of it, ah can't think of anything else that-.

MM: There was just one last wee question I had, that you were saying on the day, the reception, the catering for the, was done by, was it Colinton's of Edinburgh, why didn't a local company do it, why did you go to Edinburgh?

GB: Ah think it was too big...

MM: Too big.

GB: ...for the locals, uh huh.

MM: Thought so, aye.

GB: Ah don't think they, they couldn't have, ah can't remember how many were actually there at the time but anyway they couldn't have coped with the number.

MM: Yes, yes.

GB: Probably about two hundred or something maybe there.

CM: I imagine the local businesses were busy dealing with some of those extra folk that were in the town.

GB: Uh huh, that's right, that's right.

CM: Fantastic.

GB: It didn't do anybody any harm here, at all. Even the, as ah say, the media were swarming, and even them, themselves they would do a vast of business with them because it wasn't just the day they were here, you know, they were here for about a fortnight before, why ah don't know. We'll never know but they were.

41m 50s.

CM: Fantastic. Well I think that's-.

MM: I think so, the last thing is ah wonder if you would be interested in us coming back to interview separately about your experience in local government.

GB: About the-?

MM: About you work in local government?

MM: Oh ah don't mind doing that, ah have a few talks on that, like the local organisation and that, Forty Years in Local Government ah called it. Because I was also Registrar, ah did the Births, Marriages and ah used to, well I used to enjoy doing the marriages, shall I say, it was, an a met an awful lot of really nice people, still have Christmas cards from some of them.

MM: Really.

CM: Very good.

GB: But ah think the most nerve wracking marriage was the second last one ah did, which was ma nephew, the photo's up there actually, and it's one thing marrying strangers but it's another marrying your own family [*laughter*].

CM: Ah, lovely though.

MM: Well, we'll maybe do that, we'll be in touch.

GB: Yes, ah don't mind, ah wouldnae mind that at all, no.

CM: Because you would have been involved with the Common Riding.

GB: That's right, ah was still, strangely enough, I come out of retirement one day a year to organise the Common Riding breakfast, the Council hosts a civic breakfast in the Eskdale Hotel and when I retired, which is, what is it, coming thirty years now? None of the other members of the staff wanted to take this on because they had families and they were involved and one of them stayed out of the town anyway, they asked me if ah would continue to do it so ah've continued to do it, ah quite enjoy it really so it keeps me involved. And ah didn't have any ties so I was able to do it.

CM: Yes, that's super.

MM: Yes. Well thank you very much.

44m 32s.

GB: Oh, that's quite all right. Am I gonna get a copy of this?

MM: Certainly yes, yes.

CM: You can, of course [*laughter*].

GB: Ah'll maybe want [?].

MM: You can give them all as Christmas presents.

GM: Yea, that's Christmas sorted out now. That's was fascinating.

MM: Thank you very much.

CM: Yea, that's great.

GB: Oh well ah hope it turns out all right.

MM: It will do.

CM: I'm sure it will be.

End of interview.