

## FINAL APPROVED TRANSCRIPT

<b>Oral History Project</b>	<b>Florence Court Kitchen Gardens</b>
<b>Oral Historian</b>	<b>Dr Angela Maye-Banbury</b>
<b>Interviewee</b>	<b>Jim Chestnutt</b>
<b>Track no</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Date and time</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> February 2023 10.05 a.m.</b>
<b>Location of interview</b>	<b>Rose Cottage Florence Court Kitchen Garden</b>
<b>Running time</b>	<b>18 mins 54 secs</b>
<b>Transcriber</b>	<b>Dr Angela Maye-Banbury</b>

1 **AMB:** This is Dr Angela Maye-Banbury, Oral Historian and I'm here with Jim Chestnutt at Florence Court  
2 in Rose Cottage. And today's date is 3<sup>rd</sup> of February 2023 and I have the great pleasure of talking to Jim  
3 about his relationship with The National Trust and Florence Court and the kitchen garden project. So Jim,  
4 thanks very much for finding time to share your oral history, your recollections of your time here with the  
5 National Trust. Can I just begin by asking you...tell me a little but about your relationship with the National  
6 Trust over the years.

7 **JC:** I first got involved with the National Trust when I was at school and I became involved in a property  
8 on the north coast of Northern Ireland called 'Downhill' and I was mentored there by the warden. Her  
9 name was Dr Janet Eccles. And we became very great friends for some years before she retired at the age  
10 of 92 when she left the Trust. But she instilled in me a love of gardening, of the outdoors, a quest for  
11 knowledge about the property and as well, she was a passionate and enthusiastic as I was. She inspired  
12 me to become more interested in the place. So I moved on from there as got involved in the National  
13 Trust Association as the first secretary of the North Coast Association and I was very fortunate to win the

14 first Arkell National Trust Travelling Fellowship”when I was in my early twenties and that took me off to  
15 Canada to carry out research on a project on coastal interpretation. So I then moved to England, I moved  
16 to Bath and I met my wife there and we both became National Trust volunteers in a group called the YNT,  
17 which was the Young National Trust Volunteers. They were the 18 – 30 group, if you like. And we would  
18 go off and do volunteering projects at weekends – different properties. It might have been rhoddy bashing  
19 or anything that needed to be done at a property. And there was a social element to it as well – we were  
20 all young professionals at the time and it was a way of spending weekends and of meeting other people.  
21 I was told when I first met them ‘Don’t get too involved’ because they are a bit of a match making  
22 organisation and I said ‘Not for me.’ But actually, five friends of ours ended up meeting their partners  
23 through the YNT group. So we lived in Bath. And then, I felt that I wanted to do more with the Trust and I  
24 got a job at Claydon in Buckinghamshire. So we moved there. At that stage, our daughter (we had a little  
25 girl) she was just six months old. It was a big step to move to Claydon. And when we moved there, we  
26 lived in. And I loved it. I absolutely loved it. It was everything I hoped it would be and more. And we were  
27 at Claydon for just about two years. And then the job came up at Florence Court. And so I applied for that.  
28 I told my wife’s parents that I would take her – she was from Berkshire. I told them that I would take her  
29 to Northern Ireland for maybe three to five years. And we’re here nearly 30 years.

30 **AMB:** So what year did you leave England to come to Northern Ireland?

31 **JC:** We left Claydon in August 1994 and when we came to Florence Court, there were a lot of property  
32 managers in those days. Every site had what we now call a ‘General Manager’. So my remit was only for  
33 Florence Court. I was appointed as Administrator (General Manager) for Florence Court. And those were  
34 very different days. Resources were extremely limited. Everything was a bit hand to mouth. Technology  
35 as we know it didn’t exist. When I first went to the office, there was just a typewriter. I actually used my  
36 own word processor in the beginning. So yeah, it was very different. There was only the core of the house  
37 which was the visitor attraction and we had the pleasure gardens. And the walled garden, a restoration

38 had begun in the late '80s – and that was the restoration of the rose garden as a feature. And we had an  
39 education service as well which was very active. But in those days, this property would have attracted  
40 about 14,000 visitors in a really good year.

41 **AMB:** And at what point did things begin to change at Florence Court? You were saying that obviously the  
42 property has changed extensively over the years. Were there any particular milestones do you think in  
43 Florence Court's evolution that you think would help people understand how it changed and why it  
44 changed?

45 **JC:** There were a number of big things that happened – and a number of other things that happened as  
46 well. Individual strands but they all added to the consolidation of Florence Court. I suppose my vision and  
47 hope would be that we would recreate that essence of an Irish country estate which, in many ways, was  
48 self-sustaining as it would have been more in Victorian times. But in the mid twentieth century, a number  
49 of things happened which led to the fracture and breakup of all of those key features that made Florence  
50 Court what it was – what it had been. And I'd hoped that we could bring these various things together  
51 again. So as I said, when I first came, the house was the core attraction. And it was only the main block of  
52 the house – many of the outbuildings around it had fallen into dereliction and misuse. So we were only  
53 beginning the journey to get them a new purpose. In 1997, an event happened which was a game changer  
54 for Florence Court. The 6th Earl and Countess of Enniskillen left Florence Court around 1974. The 6th Earl's  
55 cousin Michael, Viscount Cole, had gifted the house to the National Trust in 1953, but not the chattels,  
56 which he offered to the Trust on permanent loan. All of the accumulations of generations of the family  
57 which had given the house its spirit and character had gone. And the Trust tried to represent Florence  
58 Court using loan items and some purchased items as well. But it was never quite the same. And in 1997,  
59 the Dowager Countess of Enniskillen was diagnosed with a terminal illness and she made a gift in her  
60 lifetime of some of the key chattels which had once been at Florence Court. And the key things were the  
61 family portraits, and some items of silver, and the hall chairs, for example, stand out. And some things

62 which had very close connections with Florence Court. After she had made that gift, she passed away six  
63 months later. 6 months. And we managed to secure the funding and the expertise, the resources and the  
64 interest and all of that to go to those auctions and reacquire the principal contents of the public rooms.

65 **AMB:** So tell me how you made that happen, Because that sounds like a very important aspect of the  
66 history of the house, you know, restoring the house to its original sense of identity. Tell me a little bit  
67 about how you managed to get funding, who else was involved, some of the challenges, maybe some of  
68 the opportunities and challenges that happened along the way.

69 **JC:** Well, the first stage was I remember , in July 1997 our Regional Director, Ian McQuiston, came to see  
70 me at Florence Court and he asked some questions about an upcoming exhibition on the Cole family and  
71 the Florence Court chattels. We knew little about the chattels at that time, for example, we didn't even  
72 have an image of Florence Bouchier Wrey who gave the house its name and whose portrait has now been  
73 returned to the house. So he asked a few questions and then he made an announcement which had to be  
74 kept confidential. And that was that he and Professor Ronald Buchanan, the Regional Chairman had met  
75 with Lady Enniskillen and that she wanted to make a gift and she made three conditions with the gift. And  
76 one of the conditions was that the family collection had to be reinstated in Florence Court by the 10<sup>th</sup> of  
77 September. The date was her late husband's birthday. She wanted that to happen within a very tight time  
78 frame. So to do all of that, as she lived in Scotland, this meant that we had to denude the walls of Florence  
79 Court and take items of collection away. Meanwhile, in her home in Scotland, the walls of her home were  
80 being denuded and everything had to be transferred across and be rehung without closing the house in  
81 the main visitor season.

82 **AMB:** That sounds like a big challenge. How long did that process take from its inception to completion?  
83 It may not even be complete now but that phase anyway.

84 **JC:** Well that phase was completed in accordance with her wish for her late husband's birthday. We only  
85 closed the house for one day.

86 **AMB:** Wow.

87 **JC** Apart from the one day of closure, the house remained open to the public whilst the rooms were being  
88 altered, and visitors could get a close up view of history in the making. I remember that they really  
89 appreciated that. So after she passed away, there was an inventory of the items of her estate and in terms  
90 of going to the auctions, we had to prioritise – think and act very, very quickly. And the Trust had some  
91 bidders who bid on the Trust's behalf. I have too many stories about too many individual items about how  
92 we nearly lost them and we got them and all of that. But I think too long for this interview. Maybe that's  
93 a story for another day. But I think enough to say that we did manage to acquire sufficient original items  
94 and hundreds of items were repatriated with about 90 per cent of the historic collection returning to once  
95 again adorn the public rooms.

96 **AMB:** What an incredible achievement from the base line that you were working from to be able to in  
97 just over one day to be able to work and get everything done and open it up so that the vast majority of  
98 items were restored in situ.

99 **JC:** And the last tranche of items was the library. And we had almost run out of money so we could only  
100 afford to buy the books we had money for and lots of books escaped us. And the third earl was a very  
101 notable palaeontologist and he had some very rare books on natural history, some of them very valuable.  
102 And just at the end of 2021, a local donor provides us with a gift to acquire a very significant book which  
103 had ended up in Australia. So I suppose the quest to recover items for Florence Court will always go on  
104 and there will always be books around that have the Earl's bookplate on them and we'll always be keen  
105 to reunite those with their natural home.

106 **AMB:** So that sounded like a real milestone. And what happened next with your relationship with Florence  
107 Court having achieved that? So we're in a situation where the house was here, the house is here, the  
108 original indigenous objects being restored with just a small deficit which I'm sure in time will narrow even  
109 further. Tell me what happened next.

110 **JC:** I think what that did was put the soul and character back into Florence Court. It gave that sense of  
111 family, a sense of home and their interests and their knowledge and what surrounded them in their  
112 lifetimes. And that enabled us to begin to look at these people and these portraits and begin to find out  
113 more about them. And so, I suppose, what that enabled us to do was to reinterpret the story of Florence  
114 Court which had been an architectural story. But that it could become much more than that. And then  
115 than ended up into, looking into, going beyond the house itself, going out into the estate and seeing their  
116 interests and seeing how these people influenced the development of the Florence Court estate. In its  
117 heyday, the Earl of Enniskillen owned 30,000 acres and the Trust ended up in the 1950s with just 14. So  
118 really, I think that was the catalyst for a lot of things which happened beyond it. We had to redecorate all  
119 of the rooms, for example, and it just brought that whole sense of...well, it was a very fresh and new  
120 opportunity for representing the family and the Florence Court story.

121 **Ends 15.46**