

## ANN THOMAS INTERVIEW

INTERVIEWER: ABI OBENE

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### INTRODUCTION

**0:00:00.4 Abi Obene:** Okay, so we'll shortly be stepping into the room to have a chat with Ann Thomas, who has very kindly agreed to talk to us at the *Telling Our Stories: Finding Our Roots* project. This is a project organised by Devon Development Education and funded by the National Lottery. My name is Abi Obene, I'm the project coordinator for the project. Yes, I'll be having a chat with Ann today. Particularly about her father, Thornton Thomas, who was a rather notorious and very, very, good footballer, for the Ilfracombe football team in the early to mid-1900s.

[Interview introduction ends]

### PART 1

**0:00:00.0 Abi Obene:** Here we go. Fantastic. So, yes. So, I mean, we could start wherever you'd like really. Is there anything in particular you wanted to tell us, I suppose, about your father?

**0:00:20.6 Ann Thomas:** Well, I suppose, I don't think I was aware that my father was black until I was a little bit, I was still a child. There was nothing that made me feel he was different than anybody else. So, that was one of the things. Then, I mean, I loved him to bits. I mean, I was an only child. Let me think. Well, quite young, actually. He ran away. He ran away from home and went to sea. My grandfather and he lived in Swansea in South Wales. He, at the time, was at school there and she had a job. I think it wasn't a very high, it was very much having a job which was more of a menial task. You didn't earn an awful lot, for her and her son. There's a history before this bit. He had the rent man saying to her that she would be thrown out if he didn't pay up. So, what he did was, he went to the shipping office because he knew people around the docks in Swansea and that sort of thing. He was about 13, I should say, 13, 14. Asked if there was a job going. It was a ship coming over to Ilfracombe, which they did in those days quite often. So, he said, 'Well, please, could I have what the

pay would be and would you send it to my mother?' So, that she would be all right, she wouldn't lose her home. That's one of the things that he did. So, he ran it.

0:02:46.0 He wasn't very keen on school. He loved football because he played football in the streets and played with other boys. I should say, I mean, he was an intelligent boy. A lot of intelligent boys, they get into trouble quite easily. Nobody had to recognise their ability, that sort of thing. So, as he grew, he would steal things like food simply because they didn't have food. Much food. He used to get into trouble. The police knew him, that sort of thing. He knew Swansea market very well, how to acquire things. So, he took this reputation with him, of course, that he was a bit of a naughty boy. Which he took into school. I don't think he really enjoyed it. As I say, nobody encouraged him and he didn't have the kind of background which would have the encouragement, if you know what I mean. I'm just trying to think where. It's such a lot. I mean, that's awful. So, his life was quite difficult. He'd hung around the docks for most of his life, I think, around there. As I say, he wanted me to see when his mother was threatened by the rent man. I think he was about seven, eight, nine or something like that.

**0:04:44.7 Abi: Oh, gosh. That's very young.**

0:04:47.3 Ann: Yes, he was very young. I mean, in those days, I don't think they took much notice of how old you were and forms and that sort of thing. Yes. He was about that age, 13. He went over and came to Ilfracombe, actually. Then, he went back again and had a course, then, got into trouble and had to go back to school. He never really liked very much. He had lots of, what can I say? He had a group of friends and he was a bit of a leader because he was a bright boy who didn't have the opportunity. Quite a bit of this is in the other books if you get through to look at them. So, he then decided as soon as he could that he would go off to sea, which he did. He went as far, as I can gather, get on ships that went to the Far East. He spent a lot of time. It seemed to be the British ships that went through the Suez Canal, to Arabia. He remembers taking, it was at the time when the British were going to take oil from Arabia. His ship was taking out the pipes and all the sort of things that they were going to need for this work. So, he got his job doing this sort of thing. He came back home and always gave his mother the money, to keep her going, that sort of thing. He got sent back to school.

0:07:31.4 I can't quite remember when that was, whether he'd run off and done a serious trip or something. Then, got back and got sent to school. He did something, I don't know quite what it was. He was sent to Borstal. So, he had about two to three years in Borstal, which he said was very good. He said it was like my grammar school really, he said, because you had to behave and

conform. He said, 'I actually joined.' He said, 'The section.' Some of the subjects, which included seamanship. So, in fact, it was quite good for him. I think it brought him out to be more knowledgeable about seafaring and that kind of thing. Which he enjoyed and did. So, that was one of those things. [Interruption 0:08:48.2] Things happened in between, which come up in the bits that we've written, as I've written. It would be good if you could, you'll be able to read it fairly easily. So, his early life, his background as such, was that his mother was Welsh and had two sisters. Came from the Welsh valley, I think. She went to Swansea to find work.

0:09:54.3 She worked at the Russell Hotel in London. Where she met dad's father. Dad was born out of wedlock. At the time, my mother, my grandmother was supported in the fact that she went to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital and everything was paid for. So, we're not sure whether his father was someone who had money, who came from another place. We think he may have come from the States, we're not sure. So, his history as to his background would have made sense.

**0:10:48.0 Abi: I think in the autobiography he mentioned that, from the clues he got from his mother, over time, he gradually figured out that he thought his father was African American, as opposed to Jamaican, I think. Yes.**

0:11:03.7 Ann: Yes. That's right. Yes. So, that was the situation. He said, 'I didn't ask questions about my father. I think I was afraid to.' He said to me. He didn't know what he would bring up and who it would be and that sort of thing, which I can understand is quite frightening. So, his mother and he were looked after initially during his birth. He was born at, was it the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. So, in a way, I don't know whether his father would have married his mother but she refused anyway. So, I guess that eventually, he went back to the States or somewhere else. I would say he was someone who was fairly well, money-wise. Anyway, grandmother didn't want that. So, that's where they ended up, in Swansea, in the Swansea area. What was I going to say to you? She had brothers and sisters. She came from the Rhondda Valley down to Swansea. I know this is a funny bit to add to it, she also had a relation who lived at Townhill. Which was the equivalent of Chelsea, I suppose you could say. There were other members of the family there but, because Mary Ann, as she was called, had done what she had done, she was turned out or not very well-welcomed by the family.

0:13:46.1 So, she was very much an individual and a loner, I think, who worked most of her life. My memories of her are when I was still quite young. She used to come over from Swansea. She never married. She always lived alone or had a brother who came and stayed sometimes and that sort of thing. So, there was never any money in the place or anything. She was very much an individual. I think sometimes I've been like her, in the sense of independent. That's how she wanted to

be. Dad, I think he used to go and help. There was a boy after school, he'd go on holidays. He'd help the man who took the milk around and the cart and that sort of thing. He was always interested in doing things. Well, I suppose, eventually he enjoyed himself at sea. So, after he left Borstal, he got a job and he used to go to sea. No, wait a minute. Let me get this straight. I suppose it varied very much because obviously, you went to sea for so long and came back. You didn't always stay with the same ship. So, sometimes it wasn't so easy to find a, what do they call it? A post. I remember he said he went to the shipping office and they had a post on a little, what do they call it, go between Swansea and North Devon and that kind of thing.

0:16:21.6 So, he'd always go for what he could get, really, because times were very hard. The time he came, he said, 'I came to Ilfracombe.' He was still a fairly youngish boy. He said, 'I thought what a nice place.' Anyway, so, he came and then I think had the opportunity to travel up and down the Bristol channel with various things. Let me see. Alongside this, during this time, he'd been, as a boy, playing football. He played in the street with the others at first but they saw that he had an ability. So, he then, as he grew, he played for the young team in Swansea. Then, graduated more to eventually playing for Swansea Town. At that same time, you didn't get the kudos in those days because you had to have another job to keep yourself going. That kind of thing. It's very rare, it wouldn't be as they are today.

**0:18:06.9 Abi: Yes. There are training courses and all sorts, aren't there? Yes.**

0:18:11.0 Ann: Yes. He used to enjoy his football. I think he came one day. That's right. Somebody from Ilfracombe who was keen on football or he'd been involved with the club. I'd seen daddy play and had offered him a place in Ilfracombe. Which doesn't sound much but it was interesting. So, he came over and got himself a job and had to get himself some lodgings. He got the job. Which was, at the time, they were bringing electricity into the area, which was interesting. So, he was quite happy with it really because it was outdoors. He liked being out of doors. He was never really somebody who was indoors. Oh, yes. That's right. So, he had to find some lodgings. So, he ended up by lodging with my mother's aunt. I mean, he didn't know her then. I remember her saying, I think it was around Christmas time, it must have been Christmas, a little meal or something. He met my mother because she lived not far away with her mother. I think that was it. They were always both loners. My mother didn't have a very happy time in her family. I think this was something that brought them together because they complemented one another. I think things began, it's almost a separate little piece you could put.

0:20:31.0 It began that, my mother and father decided to get married. That caused a big upheaval because the members of my mother's family were very anti, what was she doing marrying a black man? That was the sort of thing. So, in a way, it caused a big split in the family. My mother was tiny, very determined! [Humorous tone] So, when mum married dad, it was not considered a good thing. In the end, I think what she told me once, she said her aunt, who lived in the same street, came out when she saw my mother in the street and shouted at her and told her. Well, I mean, her words were, 'You're a bitch.' For marrying my father. So, in a way, she wasn't a blood member of the family, she was someone who just joined the family. She said, 'You've brought shame on the family.' Well, she upset my mother no end. My mother was quite stoic, really. She always managed to, this is why I'm going to fight and keep my situation. So, in a way, I didn't get along awfully well with aunts or my cousins. So, I was really brought up alone. I used to wonder why. I suppose, as I grew, I had quite tight curly hair. I was not so dark as dad, dad was, well, you see the photo. Yes. I had this tight, curly hair. I could never quite understand why my hair was so tight and curly.

0:23:20.5 Children weren't always very kind. So, I began to realise that somehow I was different. I think as I grew, especially in a town, a society, where, at that time, so much different now, there weren't many people of other races. I remember at school there was one boy who I think came from Asia. I remember it having an effect on me. Which had quite a marked effect. That was very subtle. I had one teacher who was very anti me, I knew it. He never he never said a word. I knew that he didn't like me. He just didn't like me because of who I was. I did my best. I never complained, really. I tried to do my best. I got on with many people but there was always that sense of there was a difference in me and I didn't know what that was. In my own life, I, in a way, had to go searching for that, to know who I was. Which is another story, of course. Dad, he seemed to get on quite well with the people in Ilfracombe. He joined the merchant Navy during the war. I don't know whether they got that bit. He was on the ships that were going to the States to get the food. So, it was the Atlantic convoys. I remember him when I was a child. I was born just at the beginning of the war. I used to love to see him coming home. It was something very special.

0:25:57.3 He used to throw me over the washing line and all the sort of things they do. They do with children. I loved my dad. He used to take me out for walks and that sort of thing. It was always fun when he came home. He did quite a number of trips. Eventually, his ship was torpedoed in the middle of the Atlantic. In November time. I believe there were only a small number of people who survived, including dad. The ship went down. They lost the captain. They lost a number of other people. Dad was on it. He found wood or something. Anyway, I remember him telling me, he said we were stuck in the middle of the cold Atlantic and you didn't know whether you were going to survive. He managed to find something which made a raft. I know he said it was the cabin boy. I think

someone else, he managed to pull onto this very obviously crude raft they'd made. By chance and my luck, I suppose, they actually got picked up by a, what is it, what kind of ships were there picking them up? I can't remember. One of the English ships picked him up and he said, when he got onto the deck, he couldn't understand why they were so tall and he was so little.

0:28:06.8 Well, what had happened was that he said, 'I was numb from the feet up to in the water.' So, that was an Atlantic night really. How he survived, I don't know. Anyway, they were fortunate enough to survive and he came home for a while. In those days, you had to go back again, even when this thing happened. So, he was very, had adventures then. I always felt that he was a very brave chap, really. He was my dad. I always loved my dad. He would always stand up for those who were hard done by. I mean, after the war, he came back to Ilfracombe and got a job here. He was always very well. Partly, I think, possibly because of football. He was always well-liked, on the whole, in Ilfracombe in one or two people had their say and their prejudices. He was always well thought of, I thought. He always thought of others and tried to do things for other people. The whole of his life, he did that. I think he found that the experiences he had, he could empathise with somebody else who was in a difficult situation. Yes. Of course, he was bright. He never had the education that he could have coped with. I was the first one in the family, really, to go to a grammar school, which was our local school. What else could I say?

**0:30:54.0 Abi: So, he worked with getting electricity into the area?**

0:31:00.0 Ann: Yes.

**0:31:02.8 Abi: Then, did he continue that after the war?**

0:31:05.4 Ann: It would be after the war.

**0:31:07.0 Abi: After the war. It was that something he kept doing?**

0:31:09.0 Ann: Yes. That's right. Yes. They would have done that after. Yes. He lived in a tent in Woolacombe. Look after some of the equipment, remember him telling me that. That's typical him. He would have said, 'I'll do it, I'll do it. I'll stay overnight. I'm used to all that stuff.' Of course, he used to like boxing, too. He learned to box when he was a boy. When I first started, he said, the boys got onto me.' He said, 'I wouldn't make a response, in a way.' He said, after a while, somebody said to me, 'Oh, they're getting on at you.' Of course, when you get in a difficult situation, things such as being a



different colour can often come up, can't they? This is the bit, you're the odd one out, sort of thing. So, he learned to box, took himself off and learned to box when he was a young man. I think he found it useful. He was always kind to other people. I think his experiences of life had taught him that people need to look after one another. That poor lady. It's very sad. What else is there? Of course, the little stories about things that happened to him, which are in the book, from his point of view. Yes. No, I'm always glad I had the father I had.

**0:33:40.1 Abi: Yes, he sounds lovely and like he had a thousand adventures throughout his life.**

0:33:46.7 Ann: Yes.

**0:33:49.3 Abi: Yes. Wow.**

0:33:50.0 Ann: Yes. He got on with people. He had the ability to relate to people very well. know he told me once he would have liked to train to be a barrister. My sense of it was that he wanted to make things better for people. I can understand that, from his point of view. As I say, he played football. He took interest in young people. I think he did some training for youngsters here, that sort of thing. I know, from his Swansea days, when he was older because he was told that he would never be chosen for a first-class team, not because he couldn't play, but because he was black. I think that made him determined, he was going to help as many people as he could. He helped any youngsters sometimes, who got into, what were then quite good teams, that sort of thing. If he could help in any way, he always did.

**0:35:39.7 Abi: Yes, I mean, in the newspaper clippings we have, it's almost all about him, really, throughout the entire thing. He obviously really elevated the Ilfracombe team in particular. He was fantastic. So, yes. So, it's a real shame that was what he was facing.**

0:36:01.2 Ann: Yes. He said he enjoyed his life. Yes. So, he took, in the end, the right attitude, I think. I think he was probably hurt by the things that happened to him. It was always that, I'll try to come out fighting. His ability, I think, to see that others were being not well-treated, was another thing which came out quite clearly. I've got photographs of him. I'm sure I've still got the photographs. I asked Jane, she knows about it. That he had a go at trying to write these books. I said, 'Jane, I don't think I could do this, really. It would be lovely if someone else could come in and help and support it and do

it.' That's how she's taken it on. You see? We are third cousins, I think. Funnily enough, her relation, I think, was a sea captain and that sort of thing. So, it's quite a lot of links, really. I know she's very good, so I thought, I know Jane will be able to put this together, probably better than I could.

**0:38:15.8 Abi: Yes. Well, this will be part of that. Yes, she'll get a copy of this to have a listen to. We're going through the autobiography.**

0:38:22.1 Ann: Yes. Oh, good. I'm glad because I think, I said Jane, 'It'll be like, a cooperative thing, won't it? Shared thing together.' Sort of thing would be nice.

**0:38:33.3 Abi: Yes. Shared community story and account.**

0:38:38.7 Ann: Yes, that would be really good. I'll look out for some more photos if I can.

**0:38:46.8 Abi: That'd be fantastic. Yes.**

0:38:50.6 Ann: The problem is that I moved here not so long ago, so I've had to move from the flat I was in, I've got a big box of photos, I haven't had time yet to go through them to try and fish them out. So, it's been a difficulty.

**0:39:18.7 Abi: Yes. No, that's absolutely fine. I mean, it'd be lovely to, at some point, have a look at those. Obviously, don't feel like you have to rush or anything. It sounds like there's quite a lot.**

0:39:29.3 Ann: No. That's right. Yes. I wasn't quite sure what you wanted, you see.

**0:39:34.9 Abi: Yes. Well, this has been fantastic.**

0:39:38.0 Ann: It's nice when you can put something together as a group or something, isn't it? It makes a difference.

**0:39:47.8 Abi: I do have a couple of perhaps slightly trivial questions, almost. He grew up, as you say, partly in Swansea. One of the things that one of the other volunteers at the museum said was, did he have a Welsh accent?**



0:40:04.2 Ann: Oh, you mean when he?

**0:40:04.9 Abi: Did he have an accent from somewhere else or from here?**

0:40:10.0 Ann: Oh, no. Slightly, I'd say, he was very softly spoken. That, I think, is a Welsh characteristic. It can be very softly spoken. He wasn't big in charity and that sort of thing. Right?

**[Interview part 1 ends]**

## **PART 2**

0:00:02.0 Ann: It was always on cargo ships and things like that. Once they took Lawrence of Arabia to, where was it from? Well, he was going to the Middle East. They didn't know they had him on board. I suppose there were occasions the captain said, 'We're having guests.' You see, so they need to look after them. He said they got to the desert. He said, I always remember, they were sort of Suez Canal way, I think, coming along, he said, we came in, he said, too close, really, to be going anywhere. In terms of the boat, the ship, and stopped. This man who they knew, because he'd been on the trip, was dressed in Arabic clothes. He said, when we got there, a whole lot of people appeared from as if nowhere. He said, afterwards, he said, we learned that his name was Lawrence of Arabia. I said, 'Oh, so you've had some adventures.' I suppose these things happen sometimes. Yes. I don't think those things didn't seem to faze him or anything.

**0:01:53.2 Abi: Lovely. Really lovely.** Well, I will say thank you ever so much.

0:02:02.0 Ann: You're welcome.

**0:02:03.0 Abi: It was really lovely to have a chat with you.**

0:02:07.4 Ann: Yes, well, it's lovely that I've been able to I mean, anything, as I say, when I'm a bit more settled I'll look through the photos, if there's anything else I can find.

**0:02:18.0 Abi: Yes, that would be fantastic. Yes. It might be that we pop back and have another chat if anything else comes up.**

**0:02:26.0 Ann: Yes.**

**0:02:28.9 Abi: Lovely. Fantastic.**

**0:02:27.0 Ann: I'm glad.**

**0:02:27:2 Abi: Yes. Fantastic. Well, I'll just get this off here.**

**[Ann T interview part 2 ends]**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT - 45 MINS]**

**Transcription by: McGowan**