

## Age Exchange

### Interview with Arthur Wellard

2nd May 1985

Q: - a childhood illness that you had, do you -

A: Oh yes, scarlet fever. That's right.

Q: What was that like?

A: Well I can't really - I was about six or seven I believe. I know it was before my mother died. I know that. And I remember lying in the back room on a very beautiful sunny day like this, the doctor calling. I can't really remember that I was ever feeling ill, to be quite honest. I remember I could hear the children playing out on the street and wanting to be out there, but I wasn't allowed to get up. And then sometime I suppose in the afternoon, it seemed a long time to me, an ambulance called and I was taken to the Brook hospital, because the - that was the hospital for scarlet fever and diphtheria in those days. And I remember being put in an isolation ward, a small anteroom off of the main ward, because they - they're huge wards, or they were huge wards to me. And the ceiling seemed miles away. But being isolated, I remember crying. And yeah put that - play it back a bit, see if we've got it properly.

Q: I'll never find the place again actually.

A: Oh all right.

Q: No, don't worry, it'll - it's recording better now because you've got it a bit closer.

A: Where was I up to?

Q: You were saying that you were put in an isolation ward with the scarlet fever in the Brook.

A: Oh yes, that's right. I was - and I cried my eyes out. I - and then I wanted to go to the toilet, you know, to make water really. And I kept banging on the glass panel and no nurse came and I had a fear of wetting the bed. And anyway, a nurse came in and I did the necessary and felt easier. And then maybe, I don't know how many days I was in isolation, they put me out in the big ward. And there were grown-ups as well there. But I never had any visitors, but the visitors that called had to wear the white gowns. But I remember sitting up in bed and this rather big nurse cutting my hair with clippers, which upset me because apparently as a kid I had a nice head of blonde hair. And that upset me and started me off crying and some of the patients got fed up with me and told me to shut up in no uncertain terms. Anyway, I remember getting up, being allowed to get up and it was at the back of the Brook hospital and there were the nine fields, it's a big council housing estate. And I remember the nurse, or two nurses, taking us out for a - a walk. And the grass seemed ever so high to me 'cos I wasn't very big as a child anyway. And coming back, and then one day the nurse walking me round the grounds, and you know the tall water tower they have in the Brook? And she stopped and pointed to the water tower and said "that's where we put naughty boys." I thought that was very unkind, because I was very homesick. And then I was taken from hospital, goodness knows where to, a convalescent home I remember this rather large charabang as we called them then, a coach, taking us somewhere and feeling very unhappy and I remember looking forward to the day when we were going back home and we were sitting in the coach, I know we were coming through a town, it may be somewhere in London, and all the children singing a song. "Mother will you take me home from this convalescent home", I forget the rest of the words, and I was so happy to be home that was my first experience in the hospital.

Q: How long was the whole period from going in to coming home?

A: I don't know, I don't really know, it was a matter of weeks I think. There was a - there was a period of time where you were in the isolation hospital, then you went - either went home or went to convalescent, but in my case I know I went to convalescent somewhere but feeling very unhappy about the whole of the experience.

Q: Why didn't you get any visitors?

A: I don't know. I didn't get any visitors, nobody came to see me. I suppose really it was because well in those days you see my mother she was very hard put and I think it was a question, no disrespect to her or any of my family really, that oh well he's alright, he'll be alright and it's a short time. See it may have been a matter of two or three weeks I don't know really you see because I haven't got any sense of time on that and it's very difficult for me to remember the exact time I spent in hospital, but I do remember my brother Bill, of course most of them are dead now, my brother Bill sending me a big oval box, a white box of chocolates and it had - nearest I can get to the portrait, the Gainsborough lady that they used to have on the films, Gainsborough films, she reminded me of that lady. And I remember opening this parcel and two nurses there and one of them saying well come on aren't you going to give me one? And I think they ate most of them actually. That's true yeah, but it was a sad experience for me really being in hospital and I think that was about it.

Q: Do you remember when other people in the family were ill if a doctor ever came to the house or whether there was any difficulty in affording a doctor?

A: I believe in those days, so I was told in later life by my brothers and sisters that my mother she was very seriously ill and then of course she died with valvular disease of the heart as they called it, she was only 55 and I do remember doctor Hogarth, he was where the Granada cinema is at Blackwall Lane, that used to be a big house standing in its own grounds and that was Doctor Hogarth's. He was the local doctor for mainly people in my street as far as I know and I think if you called him out it was either two shillings to visit him or 2/6d if he was called out and I remember him coming and my eldest sister who was married but she used to come in daily to look after my mother telling me that I'd got to be very quiet, the doctor's coming with his big black bag you know, and I used to not be afraid of the doctor but I used to think he was somebody very very special. 'Cause I didn't realise the seriousness of my mother's condition. He used to come sometimes in the morning, sometimes in the evening. I should imagine that doctors in those days with the poverty, had a hard struggle. I was told by one of my brothers, brother Charlie that sometimes we were so hard up that he used to say I won't charge you for this visit. And I think you know it was a question of how the doctor viewed the situation. This doctor I suppose was probably aware of the conditions and the poverty that did exist in areas such as Greenwich. And I know that he seemed to be looked upon, not only by me as a small child, somebody special but by the family I suppose because he did these little special favours not charging. But eventually of course my mother had a very severe stroke and I remember her, my sister said before she died it was only a matter of two or three days I think before she died, my sister saying mum wants to see you and I remember sitting on the bed and she asked for her purse, she had difficulty in speaking because of the stroke and I didn't really - I wasn't worried about it you know I thought well she's ill, but I didn't know anything about the stroke or anything 'cause I wasn't told and I didn't know, and she insisted that I have a penny to go to school to pay my fare as it was very foggy, well it wasn't. And of course not knowing the situation I was very pleased to be given the penny, but my sister said no, he doesn't need it, the school isn't far away which it wasn't, and I remember being terribly upset because my sister stopped me taking the penny and I remember going off to school feeling very disgruntled and then it may have been a day or two after that I got up one morning and everything was quiet and they said that my mother had died.

Q: How old were you at that point?

A: Eight. And then I remember my brothers and my sister sitting in our kitchen and obviously they were discussing the funeral, my father was there and my brother Alf sitting there and I said has mum gone to heaven, oh yes, she's there now and I remember saying to Alf will she be an angel, oh yes he said and I said can you draw me an angel and as he drew.... and the tears falling down his cheeks and dropping on the paper.

Q: Do you remember when there was a funeral in the family, how it was catered for, did the neighbours come in and help?

A: Oh yes, you see there was a very strong community spirit, not only in my street but in every street, you see this was brought about by a common denominator of being hard up and poor and the community spirit. Directly there was a death announced along my street all the neighbours drew their front room curtains or blinds, we had these Venetian blinds on the cord and they were pulled and they were never pulled back again until the day of the funeral after the funeral had left the street, and that may be for three or four days those blinds were drawn, and I remember as a child one of the neighbours, a Mrs Churchill she died and we was specifically told not to play outside Mrs Churchill's door and not to make a noise in the street. And then of course the neighbours rallied round, there was of course the usual wreath from the neighbours, somebody volunteered to go round and collect the money to buy a wreath and I remember on the day of my mother's funeral the carriage, the horses and carriage with the plumes, you don't see them these days of course only on special occasions and I think it costs a bomb to do that, and I remember - I don't know where they got the money from, I think in those days you belonged to the Prudential or whatever it was and that was a problem buying black, everybody had to buy black and you used to put yourself in debt, families used to put themselves in debt with what was called the Provident Clothing Society. The women bought black dresses and men bought black suits and you put yourself in debt for a funeral because that money you had to pay it back at two bob or half a crown a week and sometimes you had great difficulty in paying the money back, but you had to do it that way you see.

Fortunately or unfortunately I don't know, today all this kind of tradition for my point of view has gone out the window, I'm pleased about that in a sense because it was a drag on the family purse strings which weren't very big anyway, but I remember the cortege drawing up outside the house, my mother laid in the front room and the night before the funeral we were talking in the family and I mentioned - I said where is mum, 'cause the front room, that was where she was laid out and it was in March and my brother said would you like to see her, and I said yes. I know there was some disapproving looks that I didn't recognise at the time but I know that the other members of the family didn't agree with that, but my brother took me in and of course he had to hold me in his arms 'cause the coffin was on the tressels and he stroked her forehead and asked me to do it and I did and she was stone cold, and I remember wriggling out of his arms and running out the room and closing the door. And on her coffin there was a spray of daffodils and on the mantle piece with all the drapes that we used to have in those days were flowers, mainly daffodils and the whole place smelt of the varnish of the coffin and the daffodils and I can still remember that most vivid.

Q: Were those flowers from neighbours and family?

A: Yes. Neighbours and family. I think the procedure was that the neighbours brought in a collective wreath from the neighbourhood, but individuals used to bring in token flowers because you had to decorate the room. It was a terrible tradition as I was concerned, you know, in those times.

Q: What about births, do you remember any births in the family?

A: No.

Q: Were you the youngest then?

A: Yes I was the youngest but I remember the lady next door Mrs Pitts and this is strange because

being a child I was always under the impression and we were told that the doctor brought a child in this big black bag you see, and I remember, cos I was very friendly with the two boys next door Billy and Bertie Pitts, and we used to play football and cricket in the street. And I know this sounds a bit crude but - this is child's talk, their description and they - of course Mrs Pitts she was getting bigger and bigger you see and of course I suppose they made some enquiries off their father or whatever it was and he more or less you know changed the subject and I remember we were talking outside the house and Billy Pitts the eldest boy he said, My mum's on the bump, cos it was a big bump but he didn't know that cos she was pregnant and of course that was all taboo, you weren't allowed to even ask questions about that and then of course said we've got a baby boy, and the doctor's called and - 'course you had the child at home in those days and some of the neighbours used to come in and help and do all this business, but they always rallied round in births, deaths, weddings, funerals, all that. The neighbours were always there, and of course the neighbours used to come in as they did at my mother's funeral and prepare all the food. There was ham I remember, we had a ham salad I think, that was about the cheapest thing you could buy anyway and lettuce and that and all coming back and I for some reason had got a black jersey and a new pair of black trousers all on the Provident Clothing and just before my mother's coffin was carried out to go into the hearse I remember all the neighbours standing round and I went out and quite cheerfully saying my mum's being buried today, and a woman patting me on the head. I didn't really know, I know that I never cried because I simply didn't understand what it was all about. All I knew that she wouldn't be with us any more and that was more or less the end.

Q: How did you find out about the realities of child birth. I wonder why kids were never told?

A: Ah well now this came out with associating mainly with the neighbour's girls, the school girls the same school age as us and you know I remember talking as we did as children, Mrs so and so has had a baby boy or a baby girl and the doctor brought it in a black bag and one of the girls said no, that's all wrong, they don't do that. You go to bed and you do things together and of course in later life you know of course I found out that that was the situation, but we were never told, you learned it the hard way, or the crude way. You see one of the ways you learnt that was the dogs you know in the street and you used to watch the dogs and of course the neighbours would say get away, get away and come out with a bucket of water and throw it over the animals and disperse them and we always wondered what the dogs were up to. Of course it sounds all very crude but that's mainly how....

(End of tape)