FRIENDLY ST

Memories of Where We Grew Up

An Age Exchange Publication

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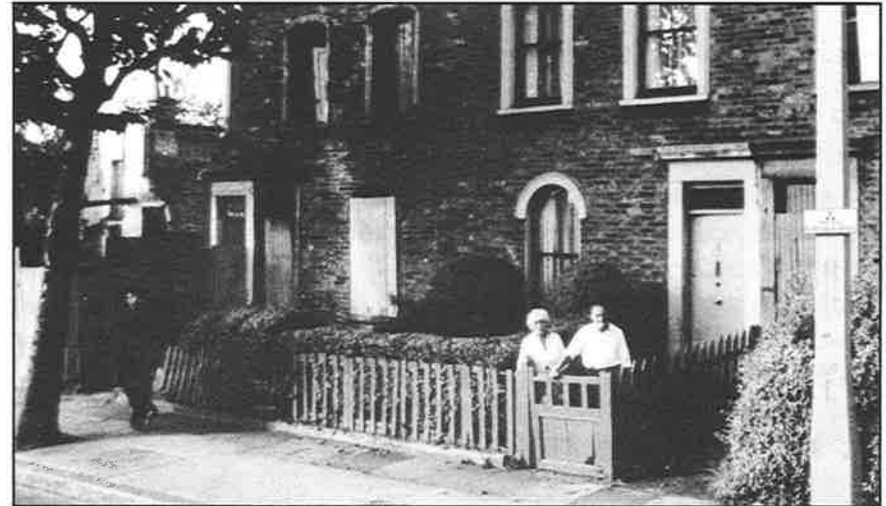

By The Good Companions
Older People's Theatre Group
from Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre
With Pam Schweitzer

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AGE EXCHANGE
The Reminiscence Centre
11 Blackheath Village
London SE3 9LA
Tel 020 8318 9105
Fax 020 8318 0060

administrator@age-exchange.org.uk
www.age-exchange.org.uk
from whom further copies and a full publications list are available.

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Introduction

The stories in this little book give a vivid impression of the life of the streets where the contributors grew up in the 1920s and 30s. The closeness of the people in the neighbourhood comes across vividly, and a whole way of life is recalled which was destroyed by the war and the consequent break-up of long-standing communities. The title comes from a local Deptford Street round the corner from where some of the group grew up, and seemed to them to convey the atmosphere of the time.

A few of the stories are from outside London and tell of life on the waterways in the midlands and of the growth of suburban London in the 1930s.

The stories were collected during interviews with members of the Good Companions older people's theatre group in 2003-4 as part of the process of making a new reminiscence play. The theme of the interviews was "The Place Where I Grew Up" and this was also the title of a festival of reminiscence arts organised by Age Exchange in 2004, at which the play was premiered.

The interviews provided a jumping off point for a series of improvisation sessions with the group, leading gradually towards the formulation of a script. Some members of the group were unable

Pam Schweitzer (far right) in rehearsal with The Good Companions

to take part in the production because of illness and having to care for partners, but they are normally members of the group and their stories have been included.

Our way of developing a script from these stories was for each person to put parts of their story 'on the floor' with the help of other members of the group. Some scenes were group efforts, since many memories were held in common, especially those concerning playing in the street, going to school, and the excitement of playing near the river. As each of the scenes was improvised, members of the group added their own details, stimulated by the process of reliving these childhood memories. Suitable songs of the period, accompanied by our wonderful pianist, Olive Smith, added to the atmosphere and mood of the play.

Olive, The Good Companions pianist

Many scenes were jettisoned on the way through rehearsal because the play was being prepared for a festival where many delegates would not speak English. We decided to focus on stories which lent themselves to strong visual representation, with plenty of action and song to underline the mood and meaning. For this reason, we decided to print all the stories which came out of our interview and improvisation sessions, so they could be enjoyed by visitors to the production and by general readers now and in the future.

Pam Schweitzer
Artistic Director, Age Exchange
March 2004

Kitty Finch

Born Kitty Welch, 1933

We lived very close to the river at 5 Riley Buildings in Deptford, between New King Street and Watergate Street. Riley Buildings is still there. It was a lovely flat on the first floor. I can remember the bedroom where I slept, in the same bed as Florrie and Arthur. I was third in the family. Arthur's two years older than me and Florrie's three years older.

I can remember being out with my aunty and uncle when I was two years old. They were fetching me home and my uncle was carrying me and there was an ambulance at the bottom of the stairs in Riley Buildings, and I heard someone say, 'Oh yes, it's the little boy'. Next thing I knew it was my little brother – I was two, he was one. All I remember of Tommy was the ambulance. It was a white ambulance with all black windows. They'd taken him away and he died. That's my earliest memory. I don't know what he died of. Then my mum had Sheila, who's three years younger than me. There were seven in the end, but Florrie, Arthur and Sheila were the ones I remember most from my early childhood.

My maiden name was Welch. My granny Welch had twelve children – eight daughters and four sons! My father was a docker, a stevedore in the docks, and all of his brothers were stevedores working at Surrey Docks. The whole family worked on the river. My mum didn't go out to work – she had too many children.

There would always be hundreds of people around in the flats to say hello to, and all the children were our friends, like Mary Lineham, Doreen Buckingham and Bety Hutchins, who lived along the balcony. The balcony went past all the flats and then you'd go down the stairs and out through a little pathway to the

street. And just out there were three or four little shops. School was very near, about five minutes walk, and we used to cut through the flats to get there.

Kitty (right) with her friend Doreen Buckingham and her little brother Johnnie Buckingham

The flats were all closed in around a square and we always played in the square. We used to play hopscotch, knocking down Ginger, whip and top, skipping, dancing, singing, yawdelling. That was where you called out to your friends to come and play, like a yodel in the back of your throat, and the other one would reply. We did that instead of knocking on their door! My mum used to say, 'Now I want you in for dinner at five o'clock'. And after we'd had our dinner, we'd say, 'Can we go out for a little longer?', and then we'd get another half hour. When the time came, my mum used to call out to us, 'Yooo Florrie, Yooo Arthie, Yooo Kitteeeee!'.

My mother always used to dress Florrie and me in the same clothes. When we were little, we were always in red hat and coats, with berets, black patent shoes and white socks. We were well off, or at least we weren't poor. Florrie always said we had more than a lot of other people. And we had plenty of food, although our father was only in the docks. We used to say to our dad, 'Can we please have basket shoes?'. They were a shoe all in basket-work, and they were all the fashion then. Eventually my mum got us some basket shoes in Deptford High Street.

On a Saturday, my dad and all the men would go down to the Clyde Pub. Sometimes the women would go, sometimes not.

When they come back they were all jolly. My uncle would do all these tricks with his trilby hat, knock his trilby hat down his back and catch it on his head. It was wonderful! We'd all be merry. Down by the little entrance to the pub, there was a little sweet-shop and a shop that sold food. My mum used to send us up there, even when we were quite small. I can remember going there alone when I was about five or six. We used to go in there for a penn'orth of pickled onions, or two penn'orth of mustard pickle, or two penn'orth of jam in a cup.

She had a beautiful singing voice, my mum. We were always singing and dancing and tapping our feet as we walked up the stairs. My mum'd say, 'Now walk up them stairs!'. I was three when my father taught me to tap dance. He was a fantastic tap and ballroom dancer. I don't think he was ever on stage but he taught us to tap-dance and he taught us ballroom. I think I was about six when I could do the waltz and the quickstep. We had an old-fashioned wind-up gramophone with a big horn on the top. There was one record about an old man, I remember that, and he'd teach us the steps. He would always be tap-dancing. We would dance in the dining room. I don't think we had carpets then anyway, we just had lino, and it sounded much better. The dancing came from him and the singing came from my mum.

At the weekend we'd go to Sunday School at the Central Hall, or we'd go to St. Paul's, up on Deptford High Street. We'd go to different ones so we could go on their outings. And if the dinner wasn't ready by the time we went to Sunday School, my mum used to put it in the oven. And we used to have the cockle and whelk man come round to sell cockles and whelks off the cart on a Sunday. Then there was the muffin man – we used to get thirteen for a shilling.

Mum was always making nice dinners, stews, pies, cakes. The main meal was in the evening, when we came home from school. When my father used to come in we'd take it in turns to sit on his lap, and have a bit of his – he always gave us a bit of his dinner! Off came his cap and his coat, he'd wash his face and hands in

the kitchen, and then he'd have his dinner. He always sat at the head of the table. Sometimes he'd come in with something from the docks – two bananas, or a couple of apples, or some rice. My uncle used to bring back tea. He shouldn't have, but they all did it. They used to break open the bags deliberately with the hooks so they could say, 'Oh this is busted', and the men used to take things home. My dad was called Tommy Welch, but his nickname was Treacle – I don't know why. They all had nicknames on the docks.

We used to play by the river. At the bottom of Watergate Street there was this big opening with lots of stairs. We'd run down there and when you got to the bottom you could smell all this mildew, rotting wood, and stagnant water, all smelly – but we loved it! There were these big barges and there was always some sort of rope hanging from them. We used to climb up them, as young as we were, and we'd play on the barges. Then we'd come back down and find different coloured and shaped pebbles.

Kitty (centre) with Florrie & Arthur

Friday night was bath night. My mum had this huge tin bath, hanging up on the wall in the back garden. It was the biggest bath I've ever seen in my life – ever so wide and long. And she used to fill it with water off the kitchen range. It was polished you could see your face in it. She used to put the big black kettle and buckets of water on the big kitchen range, and she'd put hot and cold in, and bath the youngest baby in the bath. Then as soon as the baby had nightclothes on they'd sit in a chair with a book and the next one or perhaps two went in. And that's how we went along until the last one got in. She kept adding hot water, heating it up, but we all went in the same water. After that was finished, my

brother used to help her out to the scullery, she'd tip some of it away, and then she'd put the rest in a big bucket, scrub the stone scullery floor with it, and take another bucketful and scrub the toilet with that. So the water was never wasted. We had green Fairy soap.

I remember the outbreak of the war. I was coming up to six years old and I can remember my mother running down the road to the reception centre at school, to get us signed in to say we were going away, to be evacuated. Mum bought us new jumpers, a new cardigan, long socks, a beret and shoes. The day came when we had to go away. Saying goodbye when we were on the coach, seeing my mum standing there, it was terrible. We were all crying. Mum said to my sister, 'Look after the little ones'.

Before we left, my mother said to Florrie, who was about eight or nine and could write proper letters, 'If she's a nice lady you're staying with, when you write, put big kisses at the bottom of the letter; if she's not a nice lady, then put lots and lots of small kisses'. So that's how my mum knew that the lady wasn't very nice, but she couldn't come down and pick us up because she had three other children, and the war was bad then. The lady we lived with wasn't nice at all. She used to hit my sister, and if she grabbed hold of me, my sister said to her, 'Don't do that to my sister. I'm going to tell my mum about you'. Then she grabbed hold of my sister, who had long beautiful curly auburn hair, and she just dragged her into the coal cupboard and locked her in. I came down one night and she was crying and when I called her, she said to open the door and we'd run away. I couldn't reach the latch. It was ever such a tall door, one of those long doors under the stairs, and even with a stool I couldn't reach it!

We used to come home and have a lettuce sandwich for our tea. I've got to admit that lettuce was beautiful, but it wasn't much and didn't fill us up. And we had parcels from our mum. She always used to send us crisps and the Dandy comics, and Mars bars. Florrie had written to mum, saying, 'Would you please send Kitty white tap shoes'. And one day the parcel arrived! Unfortunately

they were a size too small, but I squeezed my feet into them, and I danced and danced in the garden with our friends, and taught them all to tap dance. She didn't realise I'd grown while I'd been there.

We were there nearly three years, in Newton Abbot in Devon. It was a lovely place and each day, as I walked through the streets on my way home from school, there were apple trees everywhere. Everybody used to just take one, and we'd rub it and eat it. Newton Abbot Park was a massive park, and the steps were so wide. When I was about seven, I went running down there and I lost my balance and went right into the lake. I was drowning in this lake, and I could see all these swans legs and all their feet, and it was getting darker and darker and darker. I remember thinking, 'I don't want to live down here. I want to go up and home to London to my mum!'. I couldn't swim, but next thing I knew somebody grabbed me by the neck and lifted me up out of the water. I was thick with slime. One of the girls was going home the next day, and I told her, 'Tell my mum Kitty drowned but she's alright'!

I think it was about 1942 when we came back to London, before the end of the war. My mum had had another baby while I'd been away, so I had a new little sister, Olive, who I'd never seen before. That was exciting. I remember getting on the train. We came home and we went into the flat. We were tired after travelling all day, and my mum gave us something to eat – a big stew she'd had on the go. We were all in our nightdresses and put to bed with the other babies. Anyway, we were all in bed when I heard Mrs Dalton, who lived along the balcony from us saying, 'Come on Flo, we've got to go down the shelter. It's going to be a bad one tonight'. She said, 'Oh no they're so tired, I'm going to leave them. They'll be alright'. 'No', said Mrs Dalton, 'it's going to be a bad night.' So she helped my mother take all of us down the shelter, and we'd only been back in London for about four hours. When we got down there everybody had little cubicles – well, they used to hang a blanket around there and everyone had their own little corner. Of course we were all laughing and saying, 'Come on

Kitty (left) with her friend Doreen

we'll have a sing-song!', and we were all singing. And then we must have gone off to sleep. The next morning it was really dusty and dirty inside the shelter, and when we came out and looked up, our house had gone – it had been bombed. There were five houses, all flattened. My mum just stood there and cried. We were all hanging round her knowing we could've been dead. We would've been dead.

Then we were evacuated for the second time and they sent us to Leicester. We had a wonderful time in Leicester. My brother came, so we were all there. First they put us in this great big mansion house, with a big round hall. We were in these little beds all sleeping and the next morning we all woke up, and we could hear cows. We jumped out of bed and looked out these huge low windows. And we said 'Oo look, cows!', and we were looking down at them. It was very cold, and we had to go down the hill to the pump, to fetch water back – me, my sister and brother.

Then they gave us a lovely house in Frinton the Green in Leicester. It was in a small row of houses looking out onto little rivers, and we'd go down and pick out the tadpoles, and watercress. Next to the church there was this big hall, and there was a dance. My dad was down one weekend when there was a big band there. Everybody was there from the village and another couple of villages. I can remember him going up to my sister and saying, 'Would you like this dance?', and in her little short dress she's gone to dance the waltz or the quickstep with my dad. After that they were all going, 'Oooh, she's so young! Isn't she little to do that?'. And then the next one I did with him, and they just couldn't believe that we were ballroom dancing. He was a lovely ballroom dancer!

After I came home from my second evacuation, my mother could not afford to keep us all. She didn't say this, but my Aunties (all her sisters) said, 'We'll take Florrie and the baby', and another said, 'I'll take Arthur, Maureen and Sheila'. All seven of us went to live with different aunties. Anyway, I went to my Aunt Nell's and stayed there until I got married. The war was still on when I went to live with her, and she said to my mum, 'I'll take Kitty. I'll look after her from now on, if you want'. She had one boy of her own, David. She said, 'I don't want her ration book, you can keep that and we'll pay for everything. I don't want you to give her any money'. So everything I had, she paid for – clothes and everything. I loved them and I was very happy there. I got everything I wanted; they was really, really kind.

I had a different life altogether when I went to live with my aunt and uncle. They were better off. We had a lovely front room. They bought me a piano and I had a bike. When my sisters and Arthur used to come round they'd play the piano, and they'd say, 'Can I have a go of your bike?'. My uncle made me a scooter with a box on the back, and I used to sit in the box and I'd hold the reins, and the boys used to push me. They weren't jealous because when they used to come round, my uncle always used to give them sixpence or a shilling. And I'd be sitting there knitting, making little things. I had a tiny doll, which I used to put in a matchbox. Somebody had given it to me. It was all made of china and I used to make little bonnets for it, and little shoes – only about four little stitches!

My mum was always coming round. And every day after school (Creek Road School at the time), I used to come home with my sister to my mum's to have a cup of tea and a chunk of cake. I'd have a chat with them, wait for the rest of the girls to come in, and then I'd say, 'I'm going home now Mum'. I'd kiss them all and go back to my aunt's. It was only about three streets away, Edward Street and Napier Street. We all kept very close.

Ralph Gooding

Born 1929

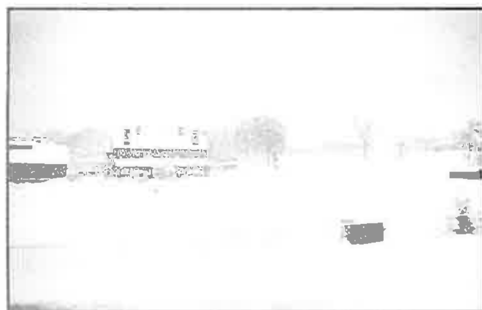
I lived in Mottingham, in the days when it was just a village. It was in the county of Kent actually, near Eltham, and just far enough away from the Greater London boundary to be a village in its own right. The village divided into two halves. In one area, the majority of people were farm workers, farm labourers, and people employed in the agricultural industry. In the other part, where the newer houses were built, were people like my father, who was an accountant. It was mostly professional people working in south-east or south London and who used to commute into London from Mottingham station day. So there were two communities.

There was just a little private estate of houses when my parents moved in – where the Mottingham Estate is now was all woodlands and fields. The houses were only on one side of the road. The other side was a farm, so when we walked out of our front door there were cows! And then as we walked up the road, we'd come to a field that used to have some sort of crop in – wheat or barley, or something like that. Then there was another field that often used to be allowed to run to hay. We'd walk through that and then veer off to the right and we'd come to Elmstead Woods. We often used play in Elmstead Woods – it was quite safe to in those days.

What I liked was the atmosphere of the village – everybody knew everybody. We had two schools which both had quite large halls, and they used to have events in those halls or, on nice sunny days, we'd have a party in one of the fields. And almost for any excuse... I mean the coronation was ideal, and King George's

Jubilee was ideal, but any excuse and we'd have a village party. And everybody would turn out. There were two groups, nick-named the uphillers and the downhillers, because it was on quite a steep hill. The downhillers used to congregate around the Porcupine Pub, and the uphillers congregated at the Prince of Wales Pub. And the uphillers and downhillers used to challenge each other to football matches, tug-of-war and cricket matches. There was terrific rivalry between the uphillers and downhillers, at least until Chiselhurst came into the scene, because then we used to unite and take on the might of Chiselhurst!

There were only about two hundred houses, and although we were quite a big community eventually, the houses were built progressively, not very quickly. We were the last house in the road for a while, and then they started building the next road, and then they did a few more. And as the people moved into their houses, they were sort of absorbed into the community of Mottingham. You could buy things like bread, milk, and general provisions locally; at the end of the road on the right was Katie Ball's sweet and general store. But all the big shopping you did in Eltham. There were two little single-decker buses, the 227 and the 109, which went to Eltham. Later on they built a Co-op in Mottingham, and lots of people were upset about that because they built it on the field where we used to have the tug-of-war.



The view from Ralph's window (ca 1945)

On Sundays the Royal Artillery officers used to come riding with the hounds. They would come up our road, and cross the hay field into the woods with the hounds. That was quite a sight! We used to see all these hounds going along, with their tails wagging! They were stationed in Woolwich, and they used to ride from Woolwich, through Eltham, down Court Road into Mottingham – about four or five miles. They were drag hounds, not foxhounds. The soldiers used to drag sacks that had been soaked in aniseed or something – a scent the hounds could pick up. And they used to get these soldiers to go and run in the woods all over the place, and the idea was to find them with these hounds. It wasn't a blood-sport, it was peaceful and rather nice.

We had two policemen that lived in our road. There was Chief Inspector Skinner, who was quite top brass – he always used to have a chauffeur-driven car come for him. And then there was Police Constable Evans. We used to go roller-skating in the road when Mr Evans wasn't around, because in those days you'd get fined half a crown for roller-skating in the road. And there was a man in our road just a little bit further down who had a dairy. He and his wife used to run this business from their garage. He had a little cart that he used to push around, and we used to hear all the bottles shaking and rattling. It was one of those with the two large wheels, about four feet in diameter, and a little wheel about eighteen inches in diameter at the front. And as he used to push it around, we'd hear all these bottles rattling.

There was also the Express Dairy, and one regular thing, that used to wake me up at six o'clock every morning, was the Express Dairy lorry. It used to come to the farm, the entrance of which was right opposite our house. It used to swing into the entrance, which was a very rough unmade, gravel road, and as it went onto that, all the churns in the back went CLANG, CLANG, CLANG! Six o'clock every morning! CLANG, CLANG, CLANG! And they would deliver the empty churns and pick up the full ones, and take them away. Sometimes Mr and Mrs Cooper, who ran the farm, would let me go in and watch them milk the cows, and I thought that was very interesting.

Our immediate next-door neighbour – the other half of our semi-detached – worked at the power station at Greenwich, he was some sort of an engineer there. Then we had a very important looking, imposing man. I was never quite sure what he did, but he was something in the city. He was also a Justice of the Peace.

And we had a man a bit further up who worked for a firm in the Borough High Street – Selms, Jackson and Cullen. They were hop-experts, hop perfectors, and he used to take me down to the hop fields. We didn't work in the hop fields, but he had a son my age, Richard, who I was very friendly with. And he had a car! He was one of the few people – we only had about four or five cars in the road, and he had a Ford 8, which was the sort of working man's Rolls Royce in those days. He used to have to go down to East Farley, even during the war he used to go down there, and we used to have to get a permit to go. Because during the war, they divided Kent up into areas for security, and if you wanted to go from one area to another, you had to get a permit.

All the houses had very neat little front gardens –they were very proud of their gardens! We had a very nice garden, and when I wasn't at school, that's where I played, with my friend, Peter Castle. He was a very dear friend, closer than a brother, and we did everything together. He lived in the same road. I lived at 46 Beaconsfield Road, and he lived at 76. We joined the Scouts together, and even during the war we did casual work together at the Bricklayer's Arms engine sheds, cleaning railway engines. Anyway, we were always taking our toys into the garden. I had toy soldiers, and we used to lay them out and have mock-battles on the lawn.

I also had a toy train set, which I used to run out on our lawn; it gave a very realistic effect running through the grass! The railway set used to occupy an area of about twelve feet by fifteen feet. It was Hornby stuff that you just clicked together, and the engines were clockwork. We would pretend to be operating the railway, and we'd talk to each other as if we were engine drivers. We'd probably call each other Fred and Bill, or something like that. I'd say, 'Alright Fred, I'm taking the Express out today. Are you going to do the shunting?', 'Yes, right-o, I'll have the I1X, you have the L1', and he said, 'I'll get the shunting sorted!'. I'd got three carriages and about ten or fifteen wagons. He'd be shunting about round here with this one, and then I'd bring it in, and park it down here, and he'd say, 'Okay, I'll take the goods out now!'. And then

perhaps, another day, he'd say, 'Alright if I do the passenger work today, Bill?', 'Yes, alright. I'll take the Express out! I'll do the goods shunting'. And my mum would come out from time to time with a glass of orange and biscuits, or something like that.

I would be wearing a shirt. I always liked to roll my sleeves up. I'd be wearing a shirt and a sleeveless pullover if it wasn't too warm. Rolled up sleeves, and short trousers. And I'd be wearing gym shoes, or something. And no glasses! Peter would be wearing a similar sort of trousers. One little characteristic about Peter... we always used to tease him about it. He always had a quiff of hair that used to keep falling down over his left eye like that, you know. And he was always looking at you with one eye because of this quiff!

Ralph as a boy

All the playing went on in my garden, rather than Peter's garden, I think because his mother was not so open and welcoming as my mother. I could always say, 'Mum, Pete's outside. Is it alright if he comes in?', and she'd say, 'Yes, bring him in!' But if I went home with him, his mum would say, 'No, you can't come in now'. She was very house-proud. In fact it was one of these things where you went in the house, and you'd secretly look at the bottom of your shoes to make sure there wasn't a bit of mud on them. I was always fearful of knocking something over, or breaking a glass or something like that! But his father was a lovely man. He was the absolute opposite, a lovely, gentle, affable man. He had had his leg blown off in the First World War.

Our other pastime was playing adventure games. We used to go up into Elmstead Woods, where we'd become sort of... not exactly Tarzan, but we'd become the woodland people. We'd be hacking through the jungle, and we'd be searching for buried treasure that had been hidden by our parents years ago, and all those sorts of games. We used to look on it as a jungle, and perhaps we'd get two or three of our friends to come along. And by then we'd seen some of the jungle war films and we'd make imitation rifles out of wood and stalk each other in the jungle, and try to creep up and shoot each other in the jungle at Elmstead Woods!

We got very adventurous from an early age, and we started making rocket boats. We used to go up to Chiselhurst Common, where there was a pond, and we used to make various sorts of boats up there. We made them out of balsa wood, or ordinary wood, and then we used to make gunpowder for them, so we'd buy potassium nitrate, and sulphur and so on. If you wanted one with an extra bit of wallop, you'd put potassium chloride in it, and that would give you a good bang! We made a lovely big rocket boat on one occasion and sent it across Chiselhurst Pond, and it went like a rocket! It got halfway across, and when it reached the charge in the nose, it went WHAM!! There was this great big cloud of smoke! We ran like mad, and everybody in Chiselhurst was saying, 'Was that a bomb?'. Oh, we were mad! We could have blown ourselves to bits. And we used to do this all up on Chiselhurst Common, Peter and me.

It was very much a village community. It wasn't until about 1937 or '38 that they started building the new estates... They began by building this enormous estate between Chiselhurst and Mottingham, and practically all the area was built on, although they still left the farm opposite us. I remember some of the children were coming in from Bermondsey and Deptford, and places like that, and they'd never seen animals! I found it most amusing – a group of them came along, and one of them said, 'Here, come and look at these horses!', and the other one said, 'They ain't horses – they've got horns!'

The locals were a little apprehensive of the new council estate. On the estate they had smaller houses with very small gardens, and we had quite large gardens. And there was animosity, because you got groups of people saying, 'Why can't we have houses like that? They've got bigger houses than us!', and all that sort of thing. In fact my father used to have a lot of lupins all along the front, and one day they came and completely vandalized the garden, and destroyed all his lupins. We had quite a lot of vandalism. A neighbour of ours even had a brick thrown through their window. It was all caused by jealousy.

For a year or two this hostility went on quite strongly, but the war united everybody. We experienced quite a lot of action in the war, because we were situated right in the path of the oncoming bombers going to London. And what happened is that a lot of bombs fell on the council estate, I suppose because it was a bigger area. And quite a number of people who lived, like us, in the lower part of Mottingham, took in people that had been bombed out. So they thought, 'Oh, these people aren't so bad after all – they've given us a home!'. We had one family living with us for about three or four months. Quite a number of people did that in our locality. And that was the good side of the war – it broke down those distinctions. The local pub on the council estate had a very large hall, which they turned into a community rest centre, and my mother was a volunteer who went and worked there. And of course she got to know everybody by name, and she was a good, chatty sort of person. And people thought, 'Mrs Gooding isn't so bad after all!', and it broke down all the barriers.

I was an only child. Mum had two miscarriages and a stillbirth. I was the last attempt, if you like! That's why they were a bit older when I was growing up, because I was the only surviving one. Apparently the stillborn one was a daughter, and my mum said she really wept over that because she said she was so beautiful! A really beautiful baby! And in the end they only got me!

My father was a magnificent role model. Everybody said the same about him, all up and down the road, they all praised my

father. And people often used to come and see him for advice. I mean he was an accountant, but I don't mean financial advice – just ordinary advice. I never saw him lose his temper, and to me he was the perfect father. I had one fear – if he was to say to me, 'Ralph, you've disappointed me', that would crush me! My one fear was I mustn't disappoint my dad.

It was quite a secure community to grow up in, but that died in later years. When I was twenty-one I joined the army and, while I was away in Germany, there was a terrific building campaign going on. They built masses of council estates in the fields opposite our house, between us and Eltham – they built on every field. And when I came back from Germany, I had quite a shock. I thought, 'Where has my village gone?' Mottingham had just become a street in London – it was no longer a village. That really unbalanced me, so much so that I went back to Germany. I thought, 'I don't want to go back there'. After being away for just three years, I felt like a stranger in my own village.

Hilda Kennedy

Born Hilda Shingler, 1929

I was born in St Andrew's Hospital in Bromley-by-Bow. We were living on the Isle of Dogs then, before we moved to Stratford. It was a big family – we were five brothers, two sisters, and my mum and dad. I can remember that there was always some sort of row going on – row, row, row! My oldest brother is now eighty-nine, and the youngest is in his sixties. You had the older ones and the younger ones, a bit like two different families. I was child number seven.

The earliest thing I remember was starting school when I was three years old. You had to wear this overall and your hanky was pinned onto the front of your apron with a safety pin. All the girls and boys had this hanky pinned to them. I can't remember my mum ever taking me to school, my brother Len took me. He was a bit of a tearaway and he'd wait at the street door and he'd go, 'Brrrrm, brrrrm'! You had to hold on to the back of his jersey, and he'd run you to school like a pretend car. I always played with him, but I cried for my mum at school. You had a sleep on a campbed in the afternoon, and I wet the bed. They all had wooden floors the schools and there was a big puddle of wee. And they smacked me and called me a dirty girl – they did smack you in those days.

In Stratford, all the kids used to play in the street. It was a big long street, William Street. And you'd say, 'Whose game is it?' and this girl would say 'Mine'. You'd say 'Can I play?', 'You got to give me a sweet'. They wouldn't just let you play – you had to give them something, like a bite of your apple, before you'd be allowed to play. I used to stand up against the wall on one leg, waiting to be allowed to join in! Then a kid would say, 'Your dad's

standing at the door'. Usually all he wanted was a penny paper – the man used to come round selling an evening paper at about five. You'd get sent for that, he wouldn't go and get it himself. Otherwise it was, 'Go and get me five fags', and then my mum would say, 'Go and get me a pound of sugar'. 'Go and get this, go and get that', and of course when you got back you'd lost the thread of the game!

Now if a girl had a skipping rope, this was a great thing, because we never had anything much. She wouldn't take ender, 'I'm not taking ender, I wasn't out', and there would be a big row. But if she took her skipping rope away, that was it – she'd go and sulk and you couldn't play anymore!

Hilda (on left) with a friend

My best friend was Joyce Savill. There was a lamp-post outside her door, and we used to play swings on that. And right opposite there was a waste ground that we called the debris, but it wasn't war debris – it was just a waste ground. We used to have some lovely times on there, and we built houses on it. You found bricks and you built this and you made that. It was all using our imagination really. Then there were cigarette cards, marbles, whip and top. I was a whiz at the whip and top. You'd wind the string round the top and pull – up and down the kerb. We played with boys as well, everybody played together.

We had a dog called Bob, who didn't have a tail. He used to go everywhere with us, Bob the dog – Old Bob we called him. The man in the corner shop where they used to send me was called Mr Kettle, and he wore a straw hat and a brown coat. He always made the same joke, 'I'll tell you the tale of your dog – he ain't got one has he? Hee hee hee!' and it used to get on my nerves. And he'd say, 'Come on I ain't got all day' and he used to blink a lot. He called me Hilda, because he knew all the kids – well, you'd be in there a hundred times a day. Mums never got any shopping then, the kids got all the shopping – a paper, five fags (kids could get fags then, for your dad), a razor blade, any little thing. They wouldn't go and get it. I can't remember my mum doing any shopping when I was little, she'd send the kids. And I was the main one because my sister was at work then. I remember buying potatoes, seven pounds for sixpence, and we'd eat all seven pounds in one go with us lot!

Mondays we used to have stew and I hated it – every Monday, this rotten stew! My job was to go to the butchers to get six pen-n'orth of pieces – God knows what bits of meat! They might have been off the floor or anything, you don't think when you're a kid. And I'd have to ask for a pound of potherbs – that was onion, carrot, turnip, and they'd put it all on the scale and that was the stew. Then she made dumplings and put in pearl barley, lentils and all this business. I really hated it! She was a good cook though – could make a nice stew and a nice bread pudding. She had a kitchen range, and when you came in from school you could smell the bread pudding cooking. It was lovely.

We went to the pictures on Saturday mornings. You had the Rotters and the Goodies. It was a cowboy thing, and when the rotters – that's the wicked men – came on, you booed, and when the goodies came on, you cheered. You couldn't hear a thing because the kids were shouting so much! There were several picture houses in Stratford then. Mum gave us the money – tuppence, I think it was. We never got regular pocket money, just a ha'penny here, a ha'penny there. You worried her, 'Muuum please!', 'Go away', 'Muuuuuum pleeeease!'. And you went on

nagging. It was awful when you think back – she never had any money. I remember once, the house was in darkness because we had no gas. We had gas mantles and she said, 'I haven't even got a penny for the gas until your father comes in'. Would you believe it, a penny! You got paid every Friday, you see, so he'd come in with his wage packet on a Friday.

There was a second hand shop opposite and my mum used to give me tuppence and say, 'Go and ask Mr Nan if he's got anything that fits you'. So in school, sometimes, the other girls would tease me, saying, 'Hey, Hilda, you've got my frock on! My mum gave it to the rag and bone man last week, and it doesn't even fit you!' I used to feel awful.

My dad went to work on the markets, and I used to go with him on the horse and cart. We would go to Tower Bridge Road Market and, if the bridge opened up, I'd get off the cart and stand there just watching the ship go buy. Everybody would watch. And then there'd be loads of noise as the vehicles began moving again. It was about a fifteen minute delay. They'd open the bridge long before the ship had arrived, and close it after the ship had gone through.

My dad would sell in the market all day, and then he'd come back and work in the Theatre Royal, which is still there in Stratford, as a scene-shifter – they had to carry all the scenery. I used to go over to the theatre whenever I liked and watch. So he had two jobs, but if someone said to my mum, 'Your husband works hard', she'd say, 'That's for the beer shop mate, not me'. Because he didn't give her that money – it was for himself. I don't know what he'd give her for housekeeping, but I think the job at the Theatre Royal must have been for his beer, because he liked his drink – he used to go to the pub every night. And he always brought somebody home. He'd be in the pub and when the pubs turned out, about half ten or whatever, he'd bring a mate in – you didn't know who was coming in next. And the bloke would say to my mum, 'Alright Missus' and she'd go, 'Hmmmm!' And when the bloke went, she'd say, 'What d'you wanna bring him home for?'

My dad was a really good talker, and a real wheeler-dealer. He used to go to Woolworth's and buy a shaving set for a pound in a square box, and then he used to raffle that in the pub for his beer money. He'd buy some raffle tickets and a little tin, and he'd make a profit by doing that. Another thing is, he used to buy a big sack of washing powder, and get a cup and buy some bags. Then me and him used to bag it up, and you'd go out and sell it. I used to help him go out on the cart and shout, 'Tuppence a bag, washing powder', and all this lark. And he used to do the schools – remember the rag-man outside the schools? He used to do that. If you took your rags down you got a toy, but they made that against the law later on, if I remember rightly. He did everything possible my father, he used to sell comics round the pub – American comics. He had this job, that job – factory jobs. A lot of the time he was a railway porter, he'd take any work he could get.

If he was out of work, my dad went to the British Legion because, if you had been a soldier in the First World War, you could get a Legion ticket worth a pound, which was a lot of money. You could take that ticket to a grocery shop called Lumley's – my sister used to take me – and you got all this shopping, all this food and you gave over the ticket. But I went there with my dad once (oh, he was a sod!), and the bloke started reckoning it all up – they all had to reckon up in the shops then... you had a big long list of shopping and they'd be doing all this adding, and then he said, 'Now, I've got a Legion ticket'. The bloke serving him said, 'Why didn't you say you had a Legion ticket?', and Dad said, 'What? Do you want everybody to know I've got a Legion ticket and I'm poverty stricken?' Ooh, there was nearly murder over it! In the end the bloke apologised.

My brother I suppose was the closest person in my childhood, Len. There was eighteen months difference between us – we were evacuated together and played together. He'd hit the kids for me. I was evacuated twice. That's a terrible story, my first evacuation. We were evacuated from my school to West Mersea, in Essex. They took us to this woman's house, Mrs Scales, and she said, 'Just for tonight', and she put us in the parlour. They

had a three-piece suite, and she put me on the settee and I wet the bed! I was evacuated with my school. The headmistress, Miss Everett, hated me, and I was always terrified of her. So at assembly the next morning, she said, 'Hilda, come up here'. I was frightened before I went up, and my brother was standing next to me at the time. And she said, 'This child wets the bed', in front of the whole school. 'I've had Mrs Scales come up to me this morning. She doesn't want you there. She's going to throw you out. You wet on her settee'. I cried, and my brother was saying, 'Leave her alone', and trying to hit everybody. My mum wasn't there, and it was awful! What that woman did was disgusting – I was only a little girl of nine.

Then we were moved to Mr and Mrs Johnson, who had grown up children who didn't like us. But the funniest thing was, she laid out a lovely table – beautiful white tablecloth and everything, with all lovely food on it. Me and my brother sat up at the table, and we were frightened really. I thought we were going to have all these nice things, but instead she just gives me and him a slice of bread and jam. She kept all our food. I'd like to come across her as well! But that's how they treated some of the evacuees. I wouldn't have let my children go.

The second evacuation was to Devon in 1940. We went on a coach, and I still cry if I have to say goodbye to anybody on a coach. My brother Ronnie was with us, and he was four. He still won't talk about it. We had an awful time. When we got there we were taken into this hall and given tea and biscuits. And of course me and my brothers were the last ones left. This man said, 'What are we going to do with you?', being nice. He took us to this lady's house. I found out after she was Lady Lazenby, a big name in Tiverton. I'd never known nothing like it. One of her servants was a big fat lady with big rosy cheeks. She said, 'Oh, bless their little hearts! Get to the table', and gave us a bowl of cereal with a lot of milk. It was lovely! Ronnie was a handsome little boy with curly hair, but he was only four and he licked the plate. I smacked him and said, 'Oi! You're not to do that, it's dirty'. Ronnie cried, but she said, 'Oooh, bless her, like a proper little mother!'

I had my own bedroom for the first time – I'd never had my own room in all my life. And she gave me a bath with this big white towel. I had a hot water bottle, so it must have been in the winter. Next morning I woke up, had breakfast and a wash and the servant said, 'You're going to see Lady Lazenby'. I went into the most beautiful room, you know these houses that you walk round – red carpets, dark furniture. She gave us all a card each and said we should write and tell mummy we're all okay. We wrote our cards and I posted them, and then she said, 'I can't keep you, I haven't got any room'. Haven't got any room? You should've seen the place – it was a park! She was an old cow, but there you are.

A man came from the Salvation Army to take us away. He said 'I've got a nice young lady coming for you in a minute'. So my brother Len asked where we were going to live, and he said, 'Well, you're going to live there and Hilda will live three doors up'. And my brother said, 'No, she's not! My mum said we've got to stay together'. Anyway, in walked their woman, Mrs Parry, a tall lady with glasses; she seemed alright. And then in walked mine, Miss Candy, and I could have cried. She was only about that tall, she had a big round hat on and a coat coming down to her ankles and straight hair. I clung to my brother and kept hold of his hand, but he said 'She's a nice lady go on'.

She was very particular and posh – had a china cup and saucer on a tray, a traycloth, and the biscuits were on a plate, all very lovely. Where I lived with nine of us, we didn't have anything like that. But I wouldn't eat and I wouldn't drink. I sat in the corner and I sobbed and sobbed and sobbed. God knows how long I cried for. Anyway I had to sleep with her. I thought, 'I don't want to sleep with her. I don't know her'. She had a jerry under the bed, and she did a wee first and then I had to do one. It was funny because we had a lavatory indoors – she had a bathroom so God knows why we had to do that, but there you are. I was frightened of her, and I got right up against the wall and turned round. I slept in her bed for ages. She had other bedrooms you know but she wouldn't let me in them. In the end, after about a year, I had my own room, but I slept with her all that time. She wouldn't let me

go out and play with my brothers. She didn't like boys, because of their boots. Very house-proud! You couldn't sit on the settee or anything. I could only sit on the one chair. So Ronnie would be out by the front gate going, 'Hilda, Hilda!', but Miss Candy said, 'You're not going out!'.

I used to go to church three times on Sundays, to bible class and it was so boring. We all sat in rows and in the countryside, and they all wore these big hats. And this teacher, Miss Haven, used to wear this tight necklace and the only thing that kept me sane was watching this necklace going up and down. Miss Haven would say, 'Hilda will now sing us a song', and every Sunday I had to go up and stand next to her and sing a hymn. I had a nice voice when I was little. Anyway, me and my friend got fed up with this, and we went to the Salvation Army, and that was much better than church. But Mrs Candy went mad! She was a very religious lady, and she had things hanging up – religious sayings. Church of England I suppose it was. She wanted to get rid of me, so my mum came and got me when I was fourteen, even though the war was still going on for another two years. But Ronnie and Terry stayed there until the end of the war.

I was nine when I got evacuated, and when I came back I was fourteen, and I didn't know anybody. I was a different girl, it was very strange. Not everyone got evacuated and I don't know why, but none of my friends went. My friend Joyce, who I used to play with when I was small, wasn't evacuated, and when I got back, my mum said to me, 'Look, there's Joyce'. I smiled at her but she ignored me, because all those years had gone by. But later her mum come in the shop and she said, 'Would you like to go and get a job with Joyce?'. Her mum was a nice lady, and she brought us back together.

Barbara Mckenzie

Born Barbara Blackaby, 1923

I grew up at 49 Kidbrooke Park Road, Blackheath. It was a tall house with a cellar, ground floor, first floor and attic. There was a box room with no window where we stored different things, including my toys. I loved the box room because it was very spooky and dark. There were four bedrooms – two smaller ones in the attic. As you went up the stairs there was the loo on its own, and then there was the bathroom.

I had two sisters – Beryl and Ray. Ray is the person I remember mostly, as we were near in age and did everything together. Ray and I shared quite a big room at the front of the house, which had a fireplace. We rarely had a fire in it – only if we were ill. But we did love to see a coal fire, so we always hoped to get ill! In fact, if one of us was ill, they would breathe on the other so that the germs would make them ill as well, so we could be together! We had single beds, but we didn't want to go to sleep without each other, so we used to hold hands and swing our arms backwards and forwards saying, 'Kindergarten, transition, first form, second form, third form, fourth form, fifth form, sixth form...', and we repeated this until we fell asleep.

Our neighbours were the McCrearys. The father was a wing commander in the RAF base down Kidbrooke Park Road. One of the sons was called Leslie, and he was a good friend of mine. When I had my tonsils out at ten, my throat was so sore and Leslie's father brought me some bananas from the base. You couldn't get bananas anywhere at that time. I remember the family across the road, the Deans. Mrs Dean had three sons of similar ages to us, and we were three girls. Ray always said the middle son, Tony,

Barbara (centre) with her two sisters

fancied me. I certainly fancied him! One day Mrs Dean came banging loudly at our front door, and when I opened it she said, 'Just you keep away from my sons!' Ray came rushing out saying, 'Don't you dare come knocking on our door again. Barbara can do what she likes!' I wasn't doing anything anyway, as I was only thirteen. I just admired him from afar. Actually I had already got engaged, at the age of seven, to Evan Prentice! He even bought me a ring. I don't know what happened to him, he lived just by Greenwich Park.

There were fields all around us our house. At the back of our house was an allotment and then a tennis club called The Forte Club, which is where I met my husband Keith, later on. If you walked up the road and turned left, where there's a petrol station now, there used to be a farm. That's where we would get our milk, eggs and butter. It was really like being in the country. Walking to school – Oaklands House School in Shooter's Hill Road – it was all fields. I can remember Ray and I had satchels, and one day these girls attacked us with their satchels, and we had a big fight on our way to school!

We had a gorgeous garden. It was very long, with a privet hedge three-quarters of the way down it, and then beyond that was the vegetable garden. We had a big chestnut tree with a little tree-house in it. We could see the neighbours on both sides from the tree, which we loved to play in and we used to look over the wall and see what was going on! The groundsman there on the other side was called Chinnock, and he was mad about our maid. He used to come over the wall and the four of us – Ray and I, with Chinock and the maid, would play Monopoly. My mother said, 'This is not on, she's not getting on with her work', but he was madly in love with her! The maid lived in and she had one of the little attic bedrooms. Sometimes we had two maids. I don't know how we managed it – I think they must have got tuppence-ha'penny. I know I never had any new clothes until I was twelve, they were all passed on by my sisters.

We owned a car. Mother drove since my father couldn't, although she drove very dangerously! All the relatives and friends liked to be taken in our car because they didn't have one. Mother used to say, probably in their hearing, 'They think the car runs on water!'

My father had started off sweeping the floor in the Woolwich branch of the Westminster Bank. It was just called the Westminster Bank before they changed the name to the National Westminster. One day he had a row with the manager there and punched him in the face. My father was a very meek man so he must have been really driven to it. You would have thought that was the end of his career, but he ended up as manager of the Westminster Bank in Lewisham. I used to go in there and feel all cocky because my father was the manager – it was great! My father had four brothers and two sisters. His father was a Baptist minister, and so was one of his brothers. We used to go down to Aston in Oxfordshire and stay at this cottage called Mayville. It was very pretty with lots of roses. The loo was down the garden and you only had newspaper on a hook. Daddy's father's pay was very low and his parishioners would leave offerings of food at the bottom of his garden. On one visit there, I remember watching in amazement as the local blacksmith put a red hot shoe on a

horse's hoof and then drove nails into it. Actually there are no nerves in a horse's hoof but I didn't know that then, and I thought horses were beautiful animals.

We used to have Sunday dinner at our maternal grandparents' house, on Beaconsfield Road. We always had Queen's pudding, which I liked, but I hated going there as Nona, my grandmother, was such a tartar. She was only tiny but very fierce! I remember I once dropped a precious toy – a small farm animal – down behind the windowsill, and Gaga, my grandfather, couldn't get it out. He got very angry, and I was very upset. But Gaga always took us to the fair on the heath, and I was fond of him. He was a very tall distinguished looking man, and was a friend of Charlie Chaplin. He was a JP and became very high up in America. He even got an OBE for services in the war.

We spent all our holidays at Birchington and stayed at the Post Office in Acol. I can remember some awful rows that my parents had there. Ray and I were very frightened. I think the rows were always about money, or rather the lack of it. They had a lot of rows at home as well, and I always vowed that I would never have a row about money when I grew up, and I never did.

I adored my mother, but I hated her for sending me away to school. I can remember she was sitting in a chair and I punched her in the stomach and I said 'You're cruel'. I used to get in my mother's bed every morning and if she wasn't there I'd be really furious. It never struck me as odd that my father had a different bedroom to my mother. We never saw them cuddle or kiss or anything. I don't think they were suited at all actually, because he was a country man – he loved Norfolk, Suffolk and riding around – whereas Mother was a town lady.

My mother had a twin sister called Edith, who was a nurse, and they came from Chester. Aunty Edith's husband Harry was a millionaire. He was a wheeler-dealer and his name was Pinnington. You can even meet people sometimes today who know the Pinningtons, because they were in the book trade and it was very

successful. The twin sisters were very close although they didn't look alike. I loved Aunty Edith – she was really lovely, and my mother absolutely adored her. She didn't come to London very often but she used to come to Birchington. And I went to stay with her in Chester during the war when Keith, my husband, was wounded.

My older sister, Beryl, was very jealous of Ray and I because we were such a pair. She wasn't sent to boarding school. Ray and I took scholarships to boarding school from Oaklands House. Ray was very clever, but I wasn't, so she'd help me with the answers, saying, 'Oh, that's so and so'. With her help, I got the scholarship as well, and we both went to Rosemead at Littlehampton. I wouldn't have been happy there if Ray hadn't been with me, but we were together you see, and she became head girl, so of course I had no worries. I didn't get bullied because there was Ray behind me. She was my minder!

Barbara (right) with sister Ray, and cousin Alan at Birchington

I found when I thought about it, that Ray was actually my childhood. We were terribly close. The happiness of my childhood was my sister. She doesn't know that. I did ring her about facts - I wanted to get it right about the house and she described it all to me. I didn't want to get it wrong, but I didn't want to ask her too much about my childhood, because it was her.

Lil Murrell

Born Lily Fry, 1924

I was born on the Isle of Dogs, in a little turning named Marsh Street. There were ten houses down each side of the street, and I lived in the corner house. I went to school at three, and you actually learnt immediately. You didn't have playgroups and nurseries, and things like that, you went straight into class. In the morning you learnt to write with a slate and pencil, you learnt the alphabet, and how to count, and in the afternoon they'd put you down on a camp bed to go to sleep for two hours. The school was right opposite where I lived, so my mum just took me to the gate. And my older brother started at three as well – he's just thirteen months older than me. There were four of us altogether.

When I was three, my mum went into hospital to have my younger brother, and we were looked after by a couple across the road who were Catholic. We weren't Catholic, and my dad always said, 'Don't ever let me hear of you going into a Catholic Church! You are not Catholic!'. I can remember this lady coming in and getting us up in the morning, getting us dressed and washed. She used to come in and take us to school, and give us our dinner and everything. You came home for dinner in those days – you didn't have any school meals. I remember thinking she was a relative, because as children we called everybody aunt and uncle. And then my mum came home with this baby, and I'd got another little brother!

But with the school being in the street, my whole life was really in that street. The house was on the corner, and you just crossed diagonally to the school. It was called Harbinger Road, and in those days I think the school was called the British Street School. There was no uniform in that school, but I would have worn things like cotton dresses and white socks.

We played out with all the other children in the street. And because there was no traffic, and you could hear a horse and cart coming along, you just played in the road. We were allowed to chalk in the road, hopscotch, and all sorts of things. And we could draw a wicket on somebody's wall to play cricket with. So you just played in the street. There was no danger of traffic, or anything.

In the summer you'd have a bottle of water or lemonade, jam sandwiches, and go off to play in Millwall Park, which was quite close. I don't remember there being swings or anything – it was just one big field. But I used to also play in a different park, which is now called Island Gardens, opposite the Royal Naval College, and that did have a recreation ground. It had swings and a roundabout and things like that, which has all gone now – it's all been landscaped. But we used to go and play in there.

We bought Bridgewater's Wafers. They were like a Kit Kat, but with no chocolate on the outside. They were tuppence each, and inside each one you got a picture of a film star! They were an oval shape, and you swapped the cards. If you had two of something, you'd swap with somebody else. I remember looking for Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall. I've still got the album. There's only one missing!

I spent a lot of time as a child looking at the ships. I used to walk up to Millwall Docks, which had a swing-bridge, and I used to stand there just to watch the swing-bridge go round to let the ships through into the docks, or come out again. I usually went with a girl who lived across the road. We used to just watch what was going along on the river... barges, pilot boats – the river was full of ships.

But my mother always said, 'Don't go near the river!'. You weren't even allowed to go down there. There was a slipway just across

the road. And naturally we'd walk down the slipway and stand as near as we dared while the tide was coming in, without getting our feet wet! Because that was the tell-tale sign that you'd been to the river! To get to the river you had to cross the main road, Westferry Road, but all that you'd see was a bus, and maybe a horse and cart – very few cars. In fact there were so few cars on the road at one time that we would have this notebook, and you could take down every car number as it went by. You couldn't do that today! And you know the Woolworth's little red notebooks? I'd rule them up, and so I'd have three lines on each page. I can remember that I actually filled one of those books up, by taking every car number down as it went by! Of course, they'd just have one or two letters with four numbers in those days. I don't know what happened to that notebook.

Mum used to walk from Marsh Street in the Isle of Dogs, through to Poplar, to do her shopping. It is quite a long way – I wouldn't like to do that now. She'd be pushing the pram, and we'd be walking beside it. And she'd walk to Chrisp Street Market. Chrisp Street Market is still there, although it isn't as big. There were very few shops in Millwall. There was the corner shop, a butcher at the top of the road, and further along there was a paper shop, but mostly it was all factories.

My mum never went to work. She was actually brought up in the Vulcan Public House, as an orphan. I've never been able to find out what happened to mum's parents, but her gran brought her up. Well, I don't know if she was her real gran, but she always called this lady Grandma Jarvis. Mum didn't have much schooling, but she was very good at arithmetic. She did the laundry and worked in the pub. And perhaps that's where my dad met her, because he only lived in the next turning!

My father was a stevedore in Millwall Docks. It was casual labour in those days, so I might not see him for a couple of days, because when I got up for school he'd be gone. And maybe he'd come home if he didn't get picked for a ship, and maybe he wouldn't. If he didn't come home by the time we went to school,

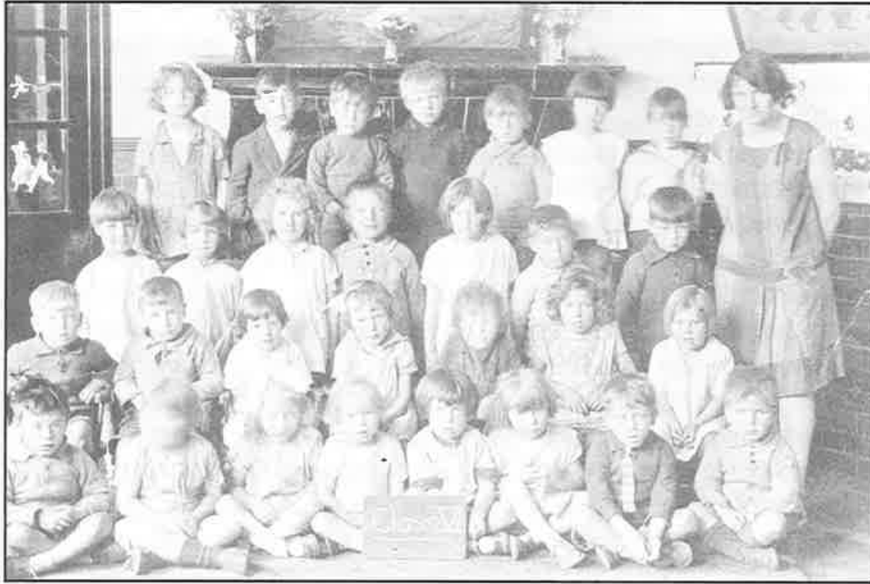
my mum knew that he'd got a job. And then he wouldn't be home until late at night, and we were in bed very early. And I mean very early – probably by six o'clock!

He used to tell us about unloading the ships. My grandfather worked in Millwall Docks as well. I think sugar was one of the things they unloaded, because Tate & Lyle's was just along the road. He used to collect flags off the ships, so he used to have these silk flags of the countries of the world, and he would bring them home and give them to me. He always said, 'If you want to know where the ship has come from, look at the flag at the back'. The funnel of the ship would tell you what line it was, like P&O, or Cunard, or whatever, and the flag at the back of the ship would tell you what country it had come from. I wish I'd kept some of those flags. I must have left them at home when I got married, I suppose.

Marsh Street was about twenty houses and I don't know why, but they decided to pull those houses down. And opposite the school they pulled those down as well, and built flats. They built blocks of flats with shops underneath. We were re-housed in Greenwich. We moved into a fairly modern London County Council house in Tunnel Avenue, which goes down to the Blackwall Tunnel. It was three floors high. My sister and I had the back bedroom, and my brother slept up in the attic. The attic went right across the whole of the house, so there was no door – you went up the stairs and it went straight into the room.

We had an outside toilet then, and no hot water, like the other house. My dad built a lean-to, across from the back door to the toilet, for when it was wet, but I was terrified of the spiders – I still am! There was a little window in the toilet, and he'd put a little night light on the windowsill when it was dark, which would burn during the night.

Living south of the river meant my father had to walk through the foot-tunnel to work. And on the way back, if my dad was going for a pint, there was the Volunteer pub on the Poplar side, and The



Lil Murrell at school (3rd from left, 2nd row)

Star in the East pub on the Greenwich side. If I was with him, and he went to the Volunteer on the other side of the water, I'd say, 'I'm not standing outside the pub on my own!', so he'd give me a penny to get on the bus and come through the tunnel. I'd walk home from the tunnel, and my mum would say, 'Where's your father?' But if I came through the tunnel on the bus with my dad, then he'd go into the Star, and he'd say, 'Do you want a lemonade?' I never used to take the lemonade, but he used to go and get me an arrowroot biscuit. I liked them actually.

I remember my mum had a portmanteau – a massive wooden chest, and it was full of books. I don't know where they came from, but I used to take them out. They were Classics, hardback reading books. I loved reading, and I used to borrow the books and put them back in. When I was fifteen I joined the public library, but I wish I'd kept some of those books. Probably my mum discarded them when they moved out of the house. But when I left to get married, the one thing I remembered to take with me, because I always loved reading it, was the book 'Mill on the Floss'. It's very ancient and it's falling apart, but I still have it.

I've always lived near the Thames. I remember later on when we moved to Greenwich, my brother, who I suppose was about twelve or thirteen, would walk down to Morden Wharf, not far from the tunnel, and collect driftwood off the beach to put on the fire. And the first thing my mum would say was, 'You've been down to the river, haven't you?'. But he was really doing her a favour, because we were very, very poor.

I had a very happy childhood. I was always well fed and well clothed. There were very few restrictions. It wasn't, 'You mustn't do this, and you mustn't do that!'. The only thing was, as my dad said, because you're not Catholic you don't go into a Catholic church.

When you hadn't got any money to spend, you'd go for a walk by the river. We used to stop at the Trinity Hospital, by the power station, and we'd stand there in the evenings during the summer and watch the sun go down on the river. I suppose it's because I grew up by the Thames that it still attracts me. When I go to Tower Bridge, instead of staying on the bus, I get off the bus this side and walk over the bridge. After I retired, I'd go out for the day, and I'd see how many bridges I could go over across the Thames. I'd go to Kingston and Richmond on my bus pass, or to Twickenham even, and I'd walk one way over the first bridge I came to, and back over the next one, seeing how many bridges I could cross!

Eileen O'Sullivan

Born Eileen Hart, 1924

I was born in Bermondsey. My mother and father both lived in Bermondsey all their lives. My father worked on the river, and his father also. I lived on Alexa Street. My mother just had one room to start with, and that's where I was born. I was the only child – they never had more. It was just a rented room, and you had to share the kitchen and the toilet and all the rest of the facilities. Our room was like a front parlour. It wasn't a big house, just two up and two down.

When I was about three or four, we moved from Alexa Street to Storks Road. I can remember them putting all the furniture on a wheelbarrow – the bed, a couple of chairs – and I was put on top on the chair, and wheeled along! The house on Storks Road was one of these big Victorian houses and my mother had three rooms, going from one room to three rooms – she had made it by then! That's where I stayed right up until the war. We were eventually bombed out from that house.

We had a landlady who lived down in the basement. Her name was Mrs Wycher, and her husband slept in a wooden shed in the garden. He had to have fresh air, because he had been gassed in the First World War, and so he had to sleep out of doors. I can remember seeing that wooden shed, but I don't remember him very much, Mr Wycher. They used to say, 'Don't go down there! That's where Mr Wycher lives!'. So Mrs Wycher lived in the house, and Mr Wycher used to sleep in the shed.

They had four children, and as an only child I was included in

their family. Lily was my age. Then there was Violet and Ada, and they had an elder brother who was killed in the Second World War. I used to go down there all the time, and my mother used to call out, 'Eileen, come up! Your dinner's ready!', 'Alright Mum, in a minute!'

I'd play down there with them the whole time! Every penny bar of Cadbury's chocolate would have a card in it, and we would collect the cards, and make up an album. I can see that album now! We would sit and look through it, and Lily would say, 'I've got another one today. I'm going to swap this for another one that I haven't got'. They were cards of all these different things, like plants and places. There was a series – like with football cards, where you'd collect the whole team: it was the same thing. And we'd play Ludo, and snakes and ladders. That was mostly in the winter we used to do that.

In the summer, we'd play out in the street, skipping. All the kids on the street would play. Skipping and marbles, that sort of thing. And we'd go swimming in the summer, down in the park. Southwark Park had an open-air swimming pool. We'd go to the park with a bit of bread and jam, or something. A bottle of water, lemonade – you'd make the lemonade with lemonade powder – and you'd go off for the day.

Outside our house was this big tall lamppost. Next door we had a lamplighter, and he used to go round every night, lighting the lamps. And when he'd gone, we used to put a rope around the bar at the top, and swing round the lamppost. You'd hang a rope and then you'd swing around. And you see, what would happen, with the vibration of the swing, you used to break the mantle. And the gasman would go mad, because then you didn't have a streetlamp, he had to put a new mantle in! He used to knock on the door and tell Mrs Wycher, 'They've been up that lamp!'. And you couldn't say you hadn't!

In Dockhead, where our Parish Church was, you'd find more Irish names than they've got in Ireland! There were always Reillys,

A confirmation breakfast in Bermondsey

Flannaghans, O'Sullivans, Kennedys, and a lot of the families were connected with work on the river and the docks. Each Catholic Church had its own special day when there was a procession through the streets. I think ours was some time in June. Oh yes, that was a big occasion. I've got a photograph where I was all dressed up: white shoes and socks and a white dress, like a bride. The Catholics would have the altars out, the statues and the candles and the flowers. They would go through the streets carrying a statue of Mary, and they would sing. And then the priest would go round and bless the houses with the statue. It was like a festival!

My grandmother lived in a big house overlooking the River Thames, and just to the left was Tower Bridge. My cousin, Connie, and I used to go down onto the shore and see all the boats going along, and if there was a very big one Connie used to say, 'Come on lets go up to the bedroom'. Then we'd cross the road – only a little cobbled narrow road – and go into my grandmother's house and we'd look out the window to see Tower Bridge opening up, and the boats going through. That would happen at least three times a day, and all the horses and carts and a couple of lorries would wait at either side of the bridge. And then we'd say, 'Come on, let's wait till it comes down', and we'd stand there looking out until the bridge came down again. Then they'd ring a bell and all the traffic would start crossing again. At that time the Thames was a very busy place.

But the river was a no-go area for children. It was very dangerous. During the summer there was always a child that got drowned in the river, always. It was like the bush telegraph... somebody would say they'd lost their boy. What the boys would do is swim off the steps that led down into the river and, because of the tide, they'd get trapped round the barges. That's mostly how they drowned.

My father was a lighterman, and later he became a docker. Lightermen worked very stressful hours – they worked with the tide, they had to be out with the tide, however early in the morning. Sometimes I wouldn't see my father for a couple of days. And then later on I think he'd had enough of that type of work, so he became a docker, and that was on a more-or-less regular basis. My dad's father was a ganger. When the boats came over, he arranged where they were going to be unloaded, and he'd also pick out how many men he wanted to work on the ship. It was the strongest, or the men they knew who got picked, and they were the ones who got the day's work. They were importing Holland butter, dairy produce and cheese. Most of the men were working on the river.

My mother did office cleaning. She'd go out at five o'clock in the morning to London Bridge or to the city, and come home in time for me to go back to school at nine o'clock. If she wasn't home, I'd have to get myself off to school. She got fifteen shillings. And she'd go back in the evening to clean the fire grates out, because they didn't have central heating. And she used to bring bags of cinders home to burn. Well, they wouldn't be cinders as such – it would be a piece of coal that hadn't burnt through. It was like a perk – they'd tell her, 'We won't use that tomorrow, take it home!'

They had so many offices to each person, and in each office they'd have a big open fire. That was part of the job, to clean the fire out and light it for the people coming in. She probably had a stick broom, like a yard broom, and dusters, and she used to have to clean the brass on the door, and sweep the office steps.

My father used to come home for 12 o'clock. All the dockers finished and would have an hour for dinner from twelve 'til one. That's why they had to live near the river. And I came home from school for lunch too. My mother knew how to cook. One had to. I mean, the men worked hard and they'd need it. In the winter we'd have oxtail soup, a meat pudding, casseroles, boiled beef. And we always had a pudding. God knows how she did it! I think she probably bought it the day before, on the way back from work, because it was always on the table at 12 o'clock. After lunch I'd go back to school for the afternoon. In the evening, we'd have kippers or haddock, or something like that.

The markets were similar to markets today, like East Street, Walworth. That wouldn't have been our local market, but similar. You'd have the barrow. They sold the vegetables. And Saturday night everything would be sold cheap, because they had no refrigerators of course, and they'd sell the meat off. My mother used to go down on Saturday at about nine o'clock, and they'd have these big naphthalene lamps. I can see those big gas lamps now. Then they'd go in the pub, and that would be their Saturday night. Sometimes they would take me with them to the pub, and I hated it! Children weren't allowed inside the pub, so I'd stand outside with an arrowroot biscuit. Friends who my father worked with would sometimes have their children there, so I was with them, but I hated it! Even now, pubs put me off! You were sitting there doing nothing, and every now and again, someone would come outside and say, 'You alright? Here, have a biscuit!'. And you'd already have a big arrowroot biscuit, like a dog's biscuit! Apart from Saturday night, they didn't really go out very much.

Mrs Wycher didn't go out, because Mr Wycher was a sick man. She'd have a jug of beer indoors, and the girls would go and give

Eileen's parents outside their house in Bermondsey

her that. But Mrs Wycher did like to have a bet. We didn't have a betting shop, but she'd write out a bet for three-pence each way, on a bit of paper. And you'd have to slip it to one of the bookkies runners. He'd be standing in a shop doorway at a certain time, and you'd go up and slip it to him, with the money wrapped in a bit of notepaper with your bet on it. Because it was illegal – you weren't allowed betting, and if they were caught, they were fined. Not a lot, but still. It was three-pence each way, or two-pence each way for a bet. They had the results in the evening paper. There was the Star, The Evening News. There were a couple of evening papers, and you'd have people on bikes coming up the streets saying 'Football results! Racing results!'. And if you'd won, the next day you'd go and collect your winnings. My grandmother actually went to the races. She'd go to Epsom, and she had this hat with a stuffed bird on top, a bird of paradise! Not just a feather, the whole bird! I've still got it. She wore that to the Epsom Derby in the late '20s, or the '30s.

My mother thought that, as long as you had a nice frock on and were dressed up and kept eating your food, it didn't matter about your education! Because she never had any herself, so as far as she was concerned, as long as you always had a new-ish dress,

and some food inside you, it didn't matter about school. She actually used to tell me, 'What you don't know now you'll learn when you leave school!' I was left handed, and in those days you weren't allowed to write with your left hand. My teacher tied my left hand behind me and insisted that I write with my right. Looking back, I think that's why I always hated school, because of being left-handed and them being so against it.

We never had school uniforms. I always wore dresses, with a white trim and a Peter Pan collar. There was a Jewish shop in our market, and they used to sell all this smocking, like Shirley Temple, over the bodice, like that, criss-cross. And my shoes had ankle straps – black patent shoes – quite smart really, with white socks. I was over-dressed, because I went to such a poor school. It was a Catholic school, and they all had big families. Irish people had big families, and they were poorly dressed. And there's me turning up like a fairy! I was so embarrassed!

Mrs Wycher's oldest daughter, Ada, was a court dressmaker. She used to make dresses for Gracie Fields! She had her own machine, and she would take in work at home, but her day job was in Bond Street. She would bring pieces of material home, all these beautiful satins. At Christmas I would go to my grandmother's – Grandmother Hart, the publican. They had a pub, The Albion, near the Rotherhithe Tunnel. There would be lots of presents, and she always bought me a new dress, in red velvet!

When my grandfather died, we were all given new clothes with the money from the insurance. I had a lovely black coat with a fur collar. Oh, it was really nice! I was eight years old, and on the day of the funeral my grandmother said to me, 'Come along Eileen, come and say goodbye to your granddad'. Well, I didn't want to go but I went in. The coffin was on trestles in the front room, and the undertakers came and screwed the coffin lid down and took the trestles away. When I saw him I thought, 'My goodness, he looks better than he did when he was alive!' I never did like him very much anyway!

Joan Pearce

Born Joan Wolfe, 1930

I was born in a house in Charlton, 128 East Street, next door to the Crown pub. Now that Crown pub was really the centre of the community. Everything went on in there – boxing matches, dancing classes… even weddings were held in the same hall. Anything involving the community would be held in the Crown pub. I went to dancing lessons there. It was the time of Shirley Temple and I went to learn tap dancing! Outside the pub was a wooden board where the barrels used to be delivered down into the cellar. And my friends, Jean and June, we used to put our own little shows on, on this wooden platform.

We were in a sort of oasis, because around us were the big tall brick buildings of Siemens factory. It was what you would now call an industrial estate. We were here, the pub was there, and along there was Johnsen's and Jorgensen's factory, and the great big wall of Siemens. We were surrounded by factories. And most of the people were employed there.

Opposite us lived June Downs. Their house was different to ours, and all those in the street because they had a side alley. So we all thought they were quite special and quite posh – I think Mr Downs was somebody big on the river. And there were the Rickwoods; they were a big family, children always coming and going. Mr Rickwood worked on the river as well, always coming back with a sack on his shoulder. Next door to us there were the Ellises. The little boy was like me, he didn't have any brothers or sisters, so I used to go into that house and we used to play draughts and ludo, and his mum always used to give us lemon-

ade. I used to go there to play with him and we were company for each other. Over the road was my nan, and my aunt Rose used to live with her and my two cousins, because it was quite a big house. They had a side gate, and I used to go through there to play with my cousin.

Over the road there was a boy called Patrick Plum, and he put on shows in his house. You went in the front door, and you were facing the stairs, and if you paid him a sweet or something, you sat on the stairs to watch. There was a curtain across the front door, which was the curtain for the show! He was supposed to be a magician, and he was always doing all these tricks, and he also sang. They weren't much good those shows, but he was the most extraordinary looking boy, thinking about it. He was quite plump and he had these big horn-rimmed glasses, but he thought he was a real MC doing the shows. I bet he's a millionaire somewhere, because he was a very, very pushy boy!

Joan aged 13

I was with my mum and dad in 128 East Street, but my mum went back to work about a fortnight after she'd had me. She went straight back to her glass-cutting job at Johnsen's and Jorgensen's and my nan brought me up. My father was in the house, but he was doing night work. He was a cable hand. So my grandmother brought me up from birth, practically.

I was an only child, and I felt as though I was the showpiece. I had the green velvets, I had the little Juliet cap, I had chiffon dresses. I had white socks, black patent strap shoes, doe-skinned shoes – white deer! My mother was at work, and my dad was at work, so we were more or less okay. But I had these gorgeous clothes, dressed up to the nines going to school. There was a

dressmaker around the corner, and I can remember being fitted up with these clothes. My mum would take me round, and say I'd like it like this. You'd look through the pattern books. For school, I can remember wearing gingham, but I had black and white squares, not the red and white. She just dressed me up like a princess! It was incredible.

But it was a strange mixture of rich and poor. Because when I was with my nan, she used to send me round to Mrs Stride to ask if she had sixpence she could let me have. I used to go round, and she would go, 'Tut, tut, tut!'. And out would come her book, and she'd copy it down. She would charge interest too, a ha'penny or a penny on top of that. My gran would send me to the pawn shop too, which was just at the top of the road. It would be small things – a pair of shoes, a set of sheets, anything.

I was my nan's fetcher and carrier. I used to go to the corner shop for her. There was a little sweetshop, the pub, the vegetable shop. The little sweetshop was where you got your papers, and on the corner was where I went to Sunday school. Then if I went to the top of the hill, there was Maryon Park. There was a little cut-through, where I went to school, called Maryon Park School, which is still there.

The pub was at the end of the terrace. And of a Saturday night, my parents liked to go and have a drink. They put me to bed, up in my room, but the lights from the pub coming into my bedroom terrified me – the shadows on the wall. I sometimes crept down and called, 'Mum!' They had a little porch outside the pub, and I went and sat there, chewing on an arrowroot biscuit. I hated it!

The pub pianist had a finger missing, but it was fascinating to watch him play! My grandmother also played the piano, all by ear, and she was quite good actually. It was a thump-thump-thump on the bass, but she certainly got the tune out in the front! She used to play, Does your mother come from Ireland and God Save the King. She actually said to me, 'Would you prefer to go to dancing lessons, or music lessons? You can only go to one or the other'.

And I chose the dancing lessons, which I regret now really, because nothing came of that, but piano would have been forever.

Jean and June and I, we were all only children. But then later – I suppose we must have been six years old – a baby was born in June's family, and that was the first time I'd seen a dead baby. It died, at a year old. And they said, 'Would you like to come and see?' And it was in the parlour, in a little white coffin. And it was a boy, it was a brother. But you did – you went into the parlour and saw. I didn't think it was real. I'm sure I thought it was a doll. But all I knew was that it was no more. That there was no brother.

We didn't have any particular religion. I know we were sort of Protestant, but we didn't go to church, although I was sent to Sunday School on Sunday afternoons. They always sent us out of the house on Sunday afternoons! And I remember that well, because if you didn't go to Sunday School, you didn't get to go out on a Sunday outing, and there was a Christmas party! And then there was the Salvation Army. I loved that Salvation Army! They came round the corner with their band, and played the tambourine, and rattled their boxes. I thought it was fascinating! They used to do it outside the pub because that's where they'd get the money, you know. They used to go round and rattle their boxes and people would put some money in.

We were always going up to look at the boats on the river, but one day there was great excitement in the house and my father said, 'Come on, come on, we're going to go up the bank'. I wondered what was different about today, and when we got to the bank and along the promenade, there were hundreds of people waiting to look. I didn't know what to expect, I was a bit nervous actually. You could see the bow coming round the corner first. Then out of the blue there was this amazing ship, the Mauritania. It was the biggest ship I've ever seen. It was quite exciting but I was very nervous.

We've always lived near the river. Walking up by the bank along the tow bath or promenade was a regular Sunday afternoon walk.

At the end of it all was Anchor and Hope Lane, where there was a pub on the edge of the river, and you used to sit there and have a drink. The pub is still there.

I was nine when I was evacuated so I spent my very young years in that house in East Street. In the war, the house was bombed, but it wasn't flattened. They were able to go in and take the furniture out. The piano was all dotted with glass, but it wasn't flattened. But what happened to all those toys that I had as a young girl? I never saw them again. I had been spoiled with toys every Christmas – I had everything, and I never saw them again after that bombing.

Margaret Phair

Born Margaret Irene Norris, 1927

Some of my earliest memories are of being on my grandfather Smith's canal boat on the Grand Union Canal in Warwickshire. It was a very long boat. At the front of the boat was a point, and at the rear was a beautiful little cabin. In the middle was a big tarpaulin with wood under it, but there was enough space to walk along the edge. They would take the wood from a timber yard and, when they got to Rugby, some men would come from the factory, take the tarpaulin off, and unload the wood to a factory by the canal. My grandfather had dealings with someone there, and we used to return from Rugby with goods as well.

In the cabin there was a small kitchen range, and Grandma would cook the dinner on that stove. There was a tiny wooden Welsh dresser with cupboards underneath with racks for plates, but not many because it was tiny. Right at the back, separated by a curtain, there was a little box bed where you could have a snooze. Underneath the bed there was a cupboard for the pots and pans. Everything spotlessly clean! There were lots of brass buckets that were gaily painted, and large jugs of water.

My grandfather and some of my uncles would be at different parts of the boat with huge barge poles, trying to keep the boat away from the side of the canal, and the lovely big horse would pull you along. The horse would be lead, although he knew the way, so there would always be one person walking along with the horse on the towpath. The horse had a stable along the towpath. It took a long time to get through all the locks to the factory near Rugby.

When you came to a bridge, the horse had to go over it, while the boat went under the bridge. There was a lovely big black chimney that used to go through the roof, operated by a chain. When the canal boat went through the tunnel the chain would be pulled, and the chimney would go down. The horse would be trotting along on the towpath with a big thick rope, and grandfather would go, 'Whoa there!' (that was the horse's name actually) and go up on the bank for a little bit, with me holding onto the rope. We'd go over the bridge and down the other side, back onto the towpath. We would stop while I gave him his nosebag and a drink of water.

Margaret as a girl

In the meantime going through the tunnel, the men would lie down, and push the boat through to the other side with their feet. There would be a smell of stagnant water, and you could hear the plops of water rats and voles! Depending how long the tunnel was, there would be more or less light. Over the other side of the bridge, the chimney would come up again, and the horse was tied to the boat again.

Then it would be time for dinner. Sometimes dinner was made in a bucket – pail dinner it was called. Grandma would bring it down from home, and it would be heated up. In that dinner would be potatoes, carrots, onions, scrag end, rabbit... whatever was available, like a stew. And it was delicious, very nourishing. She would have two pails; one for my cousins who were children, and then she would feed the men folk. She used to ladle out the stew into everyone's enamel bowls. There was always a big bread cutter. Woe betide anyone who dared say that someone else had more than them – they would receive a slap! After dinner, us kids would crowd into the tiny little cabin and start playing cards.

My Grandpa Smith used to go to the fairs. There were several fairs that used to come to Nuneaton at certain times – bank holidays, or whenever. He used to have a lovely wooden gypsy caravan. It was at the back of the house, but I was never allowed to touch it. There was no horse with it, but there were shafts. It had a tent – a fortune-telling tent. He'd have a fold-up table in the middle, and on it would be his crystal ball and some smelly stuff, incense I think, that he use to waft about the place. There was a wooden hand, which indicated that he read palms, and he had a notice outside saying, 'Gypsy Smith, Fortune Stall, Sixpence'. I had the job of going around the fair holding a placard advertising it. It was a big board, saying, 'Gypsy Smith, Fortunes Told, Sixpence', just that!

He had all the girls going in there, and he would dress up for the part. He had a lovely costume – it was dark blue satin trousers, a white shirt, a waistcoat, and a bandana around his head. I don't think he had an earring. He would sit there and a young girl or woman would come in. He would take her hand, but he wouldn't look at her. He would always look at the hand and talk about the hand, and tell them what was going to happen. 'Oh you wouldn't like him dear... do be careful dear... long life... very long life'. He told me I would pick the gift up as I went along, but I didn't know what he was talking about. He said it would just come to me, not all the time, but most importantly when I'd need it. He said, 'Don't worry about anything'. He predicted I'd have a long, useful life, and that I'd be a witch, which I'm not. I didn't give it any thought as I was growing up, until much later, when suddenly things began to fall into place and I started to read the Tarot cards, the hands, and the tea-leaves, like my grandmother. On my grandfather's side, the 'gift' has been going on for generations.

Grandma made homemade remedies, and she had a stall for remedies and herbal cures, not far from my grandfather's, with a deal table covered in paper. She would bring along all the things that she had made. They would be sold in shrimp jars, similar to fish paste jars. I used to have to go and collect the pots. If someone had bought something, which a lot of the neighbours did, she

Margaret with her grandmother

wanted the jars back. It was not much money – tuppence or something. Sometimes it was something very naughty, like an aphrodisiac. There used to be little messages on the mat from our customers who were going to collect something that night. It might have been a medicine or some cream. There was lots of homemade beer, too, and pickled onions – all the old country smells were there. She used to make me laugh, because you never knew what smell would come out of these concoctions she was making. She used to send me out into the fields for dandelion heads, hawthorn, and elderberry flowers.

My grandma also read tealeaves. She would put up a placard saying, 'Tea-leaves Read'. There was a tent that sold teas, and she used to get the teas and read the leaves in the cup. She would turn the cup upside down. The tealeaves move naturally; they don't fall out, they form patterns, something suggesting a letter, something looking like a man. I think it was a bit of psychology.

I was only five, but when I got indoors my gran used to say to me, 'Rake the fire and put the kettle on'. We would always have sausages and mash, with OK sauce – brown sauce. It was an all time favourite of Granddad, so we had it, but there was always more mash than sausage. I used to have to put the sausage in the pan and put it over the kitchen range and make sure it didn't burn. There were no bars on the range.

One evening there was a message to go up to Grandma Norris, my fathers' parents. They lived just up the top, in the posh bit, and I had a message that I had to go up there. I didn't have a

wash, and I never had a change of clothes. I remember I just had plimsolls on, and no socks. I knocked at Grandma Norris' door. She didn't want me to stay, but she had something for me. I didn't know it, but it was my sixth birthday! She had this lovely little notebook. I looked at her in amazement. Then she suddenly said, 'Why have you come to see me like that?', 'I don't know Gran'. 'Well, you should have had a wash before you came, after being out on that boat. Well, come in here and I'll give you a wash'. Then she said, 'I don't know where your father is', so I just looked at her. Nobody used to tell me anything. She washed me, gave me a little present, did not give me a kiss, opened the door and turned me around with her hand on my shoulder.

I was passed around the family, pillar to post. I had no clothes or belongings of my own. I was about eight when I said goodbye to both my grandmas, because my father was going to be married again to a lady from Coventry. There was not much time for them to say goodbye, kiss or cuddle. Grandma Smith said, 'Take some of your clothes'. I thought to myself 'some of my clothes'? She said, 'there's a big briefcase down there, you can have that'. They were someone else's clothes and didn't fit, but beggars can't be choosers, so I packed them in my little suitcase and waved goodbye. When we got to the house near Coventry – where Elsie was, she said, 'What have you got in your case dear?'. I said, 'I've got all my clothes in there'. She opened it up and said, 'Oh my goodness! Well, that goes out and that goes out!'. She bought me a whole lot of new clothes. She was ever so nice.

The stories in this book give a vivid impression of the life of the streets where the contributors grew up in the 1920s and 30s.

The closeness of the people in the neighbourhood comes across vividly, and a whole way of life is recalled which was destroyed by the war and the break-up of long-standing communities.

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