

# 'WORK IN PROGRESS'

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**A COLLECTION OF MEMORIES OF  
LEAVING SCHOOL AND STARTING WORK  
IN THE 1920s - 1940s.**

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Typesetting and Layout by David Schweitzer.  
Many Thanks to Gerry McAuley for  
Desktop-Publishing Tuition.

## AN INTRODUCTION BY PAM SCHWEITZER



In January 1996, the Features Department of BBC Radio 4 approached Age Exchange with the idea of creating a radio programme which would follow our entire process of researching and making a play with older people arising from their memories. We agreed to have every stage of the proceedings recorded and we decided that a good theme was the period of leaving school and starting work back in the 1920s and 30s. We thoroughly enjoyed working closely with the ~~re-~~ researcher, Cheryl Armitage, throughout the various creative stages and we are publishing this booklet of stories generated by the project to mark the radio programme's nationwide broadcast on September 25th, 1996.

All the stories in this booklet have been contributed by Friends and Volunteers at the Age Exchange Reminiscence Centre in south east London. This is a unique community and professional development centre with its own museum devoted to recording and celebrating the life experience of older members of our community. Some of the stories have been edited from tape recorded interviews but the majority were written in response to our general request for information, for detailed memories and for photographs.

The stories formed the basis a new play by The Good Companions, a performing group of older people at the Reminiscence Centre who have been making plays from their memories for the last three years. None of the players have acted before and ages range from 64 to 82. We work through improvisation around the remembered experiences of individuals in the group, gradually shaping the piece so that the stories make a total statement and hang together artistically. We call on the members' memories of songs of the period to set the tone and atmosphere for different scenes. The resulting show then plays to older people and also to younger audiences in Britain and abroad.

The written memories provided us with the perfect starting point for the play and the improvisation process which followed the reading of these stories brought back many sharp and detailed memories which had been long forgotten. The group had a great deal of enjoyment working on their own and each other's stories. They were able to get to know each other really well in the 'here and now' by opening up the past and exploring it together through a range of creative exercises. We had help and support from William Richards on voice and Jeremy Stockwell on mime from RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Art) and this helped to give the group the confidence to play in Germany and Norway to audiences whose first language was not English.

We very much hope that readers will enjoy reading these stories of a very different world when education for most young people stopped at fourteen years old, when mothers found jobs for their daughters, when wages were mostly handed over to parents in exchange for keep and when marriage put an end for many years to a woman's working life.

*Pam Schweitzer,  
Artistic Director.*

## DOROTHY BARTON

When I left school at 14 and a half, I was sent for an interview for a job, so I set off to kept the appointment , and despite my rather feeble protests, my mother came too! We were living at St. Helier at the time so had a long walk before a bus ride to Morden Underground station , then about 15 stations on the Tube to Tottenham Court Road, where we found the office just round the corner. It was over a small cinema opposite the YMCA, and the entrance was by a door next to the cinema, and up a flight of boxed in stairs to the first floor, where the main office took up the whole front of the building. The stairs went on up to a self-contained flat above.

It was a well-known Typewriting Agency run by an elderly lady and although I was supposed to be the one being interviewed, she and my mother made all the arrangements between them. I didn't open my mouth except to say 'Yes' to the very last question put by Miss Russell: 'Would you like to work here Dorothy?'. Apparently it had been arranged that as I lived so far away I would catch the workmen's train from Morden (at a cheaper fare) arriving at 8 a.m. instead of 9 and leaving an hour earlier in the evening, as well as working Saturday mornings. My job was to make the tea, dust the office, collect manuscripts from all over London and return the typed sheets, learn to type, and eventually become a Typist, and for this I was to receive the princely sum of 10/- (50p) a week to start with.

I turned up for work the following Monday, having left home soon after 6 a.m., letting myself into the office with a key I'd been given as no-one else would be there , and wandered about looking at things, especially the typewriters, because I'd never seen one before. I spent a lot of time every morning fiddling about with them to see how they worked, and soon learned how to change ribbons and clean the type with a dough-like substance (a messy job). When the Shorthand Typist realised I could do theses small jobs she paid me 6d week to keep her machine clean, and the other girls gave me a few coppers occasionally as well when I cleaned theirs. In time I became quite good at doing small repairs and adjustments to the machines.

I was sent out most days whatever the weather with packets of manuscripts all over the place, sometimes by bus, but usually walking, so I got to

know London very well indeed. If it looked like rain Miss Russell insisted that I took a large bright red umbrella with me, and also continually warned me about 'speaking to strangers' etc. I took sandwiches from home for lunch, a large proportion of my wages going on fares, and if the weather was fine I ate them sitting on the steps of the British Museum, often going inside to look around afterwards, as it was free of charge. I remember that for some reason the Egyptian room was my favourite then.

My father didn't like me working so far from home and wandering all over London by myself because, he said, anything could happen, and one day it did. I'd been learning to type with a cover over the keyboard so that all fingers were used, and was practising in the office early one Monday morning, when I thought I heard noises upstairs, but as Miss Russell had a flat above the office this wasn't unusual so I took no notice and carried on typing. Some time later Miss Russell came in and called the police. It turned out that while I was in the office alone some men had followed me in through the front door, which I left open for the other girls, then had gone upstairs to break into and ransack the flat, Miss Russell being away for the week-end, which I hadn't known. After she'd been away for the week-end she always came in late on Monday mornings apparently.



*Dorothy Barton*

I was questioned by the police very kindly, everyone assuring me that I was under no suspicion, the thieves having obviously kept a watch on the office (and me!) for some time. But after that I was afraid to go into the building alone every morning, I got into a terrible state about going in early on my own, first peering around to see if anyone was watching me, then rushing up the stairs and locking all doors behind me. I refused to go down again to let in the next arrival and threw the keys out of the window to her, once she'd attracted my attention by yelling up at me. It was obvious that this couldn't go on, so at Dad's suggestion that I got a job nearer home, I gave in my notice a few weeks later, which was a pity in a way because I'd been kindly treated by every one and had been happy there, but I couldn't bear the thought that anyone else might creep up the stairs behind me!

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## MAJORIE BARTON

It was at the age of fifteen during my training at the Halia Conti Academy of Theatrical Arts that I had my first experiences in the world of work. Outstanding is the memory of the 1926 Opera Season at Covent Garden where the knowledge of stage procedure gained from such a reliable source was used to great advantage when later presenting pupils in performances at many local venues including the Blackheath Concert Hall.

I had the full support of my parents who were in complete agreement with the decision I had made and it was with their blessing that I proceeded to take part in such operas as "Mefistotele" in which the great Russian bass Chaliapine appeared and "La Boheme", which featured the famous Australian prima donna Dame Nellie Melba. I was fortunate enough to be chosen to participate in the farewell performance of the latter artiste, which was attended by King George and Queen Mary.

There must have been payment but compared to the professional significance of the employment this was of secondary importance at the time. Whatever the sum was this would have been banked for culture use. With the close of the season this particular engagement ceased but was decidedly fulfilled and subsequently renewed when engaged in the task of tending and then running my own School of Dance in Blackheath.

*The Marjorie Barton School of Dance*



## FRANK BALL

It had never been my desire to be a member of the building trade, my aspirations were much more grandiose, perhaps a bank manager, band leader, speedway rider or even a film extra - even I never considered becoming a star overnight.

Two events, however, were to be the deciding factors in which directions my future lay. First, the winning of a Trade scholarship and second, my fathers insistence I take full advantage of my scholastic prowess.

So it was with mixed feelings I commenced a three-year course at the Brixton School Of Building. I was asked which trade I had a preference for, brickwork, carpentry, plumbing, plastering, stonemasonry or "general", the last named being any form of work carried out in a building contractors office, architect being the main incentive. I knew from early schooldays spent at wood-work classes that carpentry was certainly not my forte, plumbing in those days involved the landing of coils of bad pipe, very heavy work, so something to be avoided. The same could be said of stonemasonry, and plastering, I had been informed, was the most demanding trade of them all labour-wise. So I became a bricklayer.

At the end of the three year course those pupils due to leave were gathered in assembly and told by the school principal that if any lad was still using the tools of his trade after three years at work he must be deemed a failure, as by then he should be halfway up the promotional ladder. What he did not allow for was the fact that three-quarters of the building industry was unemployed, operatives were streaming down from the North, where unemployment was even more rife, to help fill what few vacancies were available.

For the next six weeks, I with other lads, toured the larger building contractors, waving our school diplomas only to be greeted with a "Sorry, come back in a week or two" and shown the door.

By now my pride had been considerably deflated, and I started trying my luck with small local builders, and was eventually given a start as a bricklayer improver by Catford builder who was at that time building a few houses along Bromley Road, and also an extension to Robertson's jam factory almost opposite.

The title "bricklayer improver" seemed something of misnomer, as I was made general dogsbody, which gave me little scope to improve my capabilities as a bricklayer. My rate of pay was 5 pence an hour, which for a forty-four week added up to the princely sum of eighteen shillings and four pence, remembering that in those days a pound was 240 pence, and not a 100 pence as today.

On my first day at work I had to endure the customary initiations, which, though not to painful was decidedly embarrassing, and certainly not a subject of discussion. Building sites in general were very primitive, no messroom, no drying facilities, no washroom, and in many cases no toilet facility. The builder I was now working for did employ a tea-boy, which was something of luxury. He asked me to bring in a tea-can and a "twist". The tea-can was a enamel container with a lid that could be used as a cup, and the "twist", which had to brought in each day, was a mixture of tea, sugar and condensed milk, the whole stirred to a gooey substance and wrapped in newspaper. By the time it reached the tea-boy it was impossible to separate the goo from the paper, so he would throw it all into the bucket of boiling water, destined to be a bucket of tea, each operative on site tendering his own "twist", then wait for the goo to dissolve and retrieve the newspaper when it floated to the surface. Eventually I was allowed to join the bricklayers and, to my delight, was described by the foreman as a natural.

Some time later I was sent to work in the jam factory, which gave more interest, as house building can be very repetitive. One day a lorry arrived, laden with oranges, and I just had to help myself to one, knowing it would not be missed. I peeled the orange and popped a quarter into my mouth, only to spit it out in disgust. It was a Seville orange, used for making marmalade, and tasted like nothing on earth. From then on, whenever a lorry arrived, I would watch for anyone emulating my act of dishonesty and await results with anticipation. After three years I had, following repeated requests for a rise in pay, reached a wage of one shilling per hour, but I thought I was worth more.

At this time the sale of new houses had risen dramatically; fields dotted with wooden crosses showing where houses, already bought, were to be erected gave the appearance of French war games. I decided to take a chance and seek work at full pay with one of the contractors carrying out this mass building of dwellings.

It was a new style of bricklaying, later to be called "jerry-building", but produced a fat pay-packet, which was what I had been seeking, although I was not exactly proud of my endeavours. Houses were selling at around £400; a £5.00 deposit, and ten to eleven shillings a week repayment, so I salved my guilty conscience by telling myself that I was helping the poorer working class people to be able to own their own home.

In the years that followed I became brickwork sub-contractor, site agent and, finally, Clerk-Of-Works, so perhaps those three years at the Brixton School Of Building were not entirely wasted.

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## LILIAN BURNETT

One of my first jobs was at Woolworth's in the Strand. I worked for a printing firm and they hired out machines to large stores. I had a space at the end of a large counter and printed visiting cards and headed notepaper. The customer bought the cards and I had to print them. They cost 6 pence for 25. The headed notepaper the same; that would be about two and a half pence in our money today.

Our store was right opposite the Strand Palace Hotel and in the heart of Theatreland lots of young actors were in musicals, in the chorus and often came in to have cards printed. I don't know how the majority got on but Griffith Jones and John Mills did make it, John Mills going into films later on. He is over 80 years old, and still going strong. He is *Sir* John Mills now.

We had a very exiting time, right in the heart of London. Any procession that passed we were allowed to watch. There was the Jubilee procession for King George and Queen Mary, and the next year the funeral of George - a very silent and sombre affair, all his sons walking behind the coffin all along the Strand. We all stood silent till it passed, and then back to the shop and serve the crowds of people coming in - the street was lined with mourners, so you can imagine the crowds. We closed at 9 o'clock that night - all absolutely tired out, but not too downhearted because we were all given a big bonus as a reward for our hard work.

About this time we had a machine delivered, it was a speak-your-weight machine. First you stood on a platform and then you put your penny in the slot. It spoke your weight and gave you a little card with your weight stamped on it. It was just inside the door and attracted a lot of customers, it was a huge success, so much so that it was decided to deliver one to The Queen Mary, a new luxury liner just going from Southampton to New York, on its maiden voyage. Our manager had to choose a young lady as a kind of hostess, to go on this journey, he chose a lovely girl - long blond hair - very pretty, just right for the job. I did see this girl a couple of years later and she said it just didn't catch on, and it was a once only job for her, but a worthwhile experience. The reason it flopped was that when the machine was in Woolworth's new people were coming and going all the time, but when it was on the Queen Mary, it was a captive audience and of course they didn't want to keep being told their weight by a monotonous voice! Another reason was that food being so plentiful, they were all putting on weight!



*Lilian Burnett*

## KITTY FINCH

I loved my school - I didn't want to leave. I had to though. I would have loved to have stayed on, but I had to help with the family income. And I got a lovely school report from my head-mistress. It said, 'Kathleen is going somewhere' - (I was known as Kathleen then). 'Kathleen is going to be with lots of people. She enjoys people, she loves to be in people's company' - which I do.

I'd have loved to have gone into acting or something like that. Our drama teacher, she used to say, "Are you going to do a show for us?" Me and my friend did a show with singing and acrobats - the splits and all that, back-bend. I remember doing that! You know, I'd have loved to do that, but of course at that time you had to have money, really, to put you through those classes, and we didn't have the money. All my family were into dancing and singing, you know, even my mum had a beautiful voice - she had a lovely voice, my mum. And my sister was always in the shows. She went to all the Empires doing shows, but she was an amateur. She went to work in Deptford High Street, in the opticians, but her three children are all into acting and music.

And my first job was at Peak Freans. I think everybody was going into Peak Freans at the time, you know, everybody wanted to go there. I suppose because you were going to be with lots of your friends and that. My first wages were thirty-two and two-pence.

I went to be a messenger in Peak Freans, so that gave me all the scope to go all of the way round the factory. I went on each floor, to take letters to the other floors. And while I was there, they used to say, "Oh, go and see if you can do that job". So I done creaming, twopenny packets - I used to do the twopenny packets to send to the soldiers; we used to put our name and addresses in them, but we never got any returns from the soldiers! And in the creaming room, I made cakes; iced cakes, wedding cakes. I'd have loved to have done that, but my hands used to sweat a lot then, when I was younger - I was always hot, so I couldn't cream the cakes. And the Christmas pudding room: packing big packets, you know, and boxing them up in tins. I've done everything at Peak Freans!

Sometimes they'd say, you know, "Would you like to try that?", and I'd say to my forelady, "Oh, I'd like to do that!", so she'd say, "Well, why don't you?", and so I'd do everything, you know - try it all out. Most people stayed on one job, but because I was a messenger I got all round the whole of the factory, and you knew everybody, and everybody knew you.

A few months after I started there, I was taken ill with bronchitis. I had it every year in February. You had to send a form in to get any sick pay - half pay or something you got. I was going on fifteen then. I had a letter back to say, that I was forging my name, and if I didn't correct it, I would be prosecuted. Imagine saying that to a fifteen year old! Well, I always thought my name was Kathleen, spelt with a 'K'. I wrote Kathleen on all my school books. Sometimes I put Kitty Kathleen Doreen Welch - because that's my nick-name, Kitty. Even on my school certificate it was always Kathleen with a K. Well, when I got this letter, I had to get hold of my birth certificate, and on it was Catherine, spelt with a 'C'. Mum said, "Oh, I always thought it was Kathleen!", I said, "Mum, you christened me Catherine!"

When our queen was getting married in 1948, we made her wedding cake, and everybody in Peak Freans had a turn to mix the cake. So I had a turn at mixing her cake. That was lovely. And that cake, oh, it stood higher than this room! It was massive! All soldiers and different things all the way round it. Oh it was a lovely cake! I wish I'd taken a photo, but I didn't have a camera then.



## ANNE DURRANT

I was 14 years old in January 1937 so I had to stay on until the Easter holidays before I could leave to take a job of work. I had an uncle and cousins working in the printing trade and I found it interesting listening to them talking about their work, so I thought I would like to find a job working in the print also.

When I left school I went to the local Labour Exchange to see if they had any jobs vacant to work in the printing trade. With the approval of my parents, I was sent for an interview at Hodson and Lewis, New Cross Gate, and I got the job to start work three weeks after I left school. The pay was ten shillings a week for the first six months with an increase of two shillings and sixpence at the end of the year when I was earning twelve shillings and sixpence.

I liked the job and I found it very interesting as there were many different things to learn in the various departments, such as wire-stitching books, collating, numbering, packing and then finally the printing department where I stayed. In the printing department I worked a hand feeding machine which printed leaflets and advertising cards, and I also worked the automatic machines. I found the job interesting and it was as I expected.

I made two special friends there, Peggy and Ethel. We always went to lunch together, and every Friday evening after work we went to the pictures at the New Cross Cinema. I stayed in the job for approximately four years but left when I was called to do war work.

## PENNY CHEESMAN

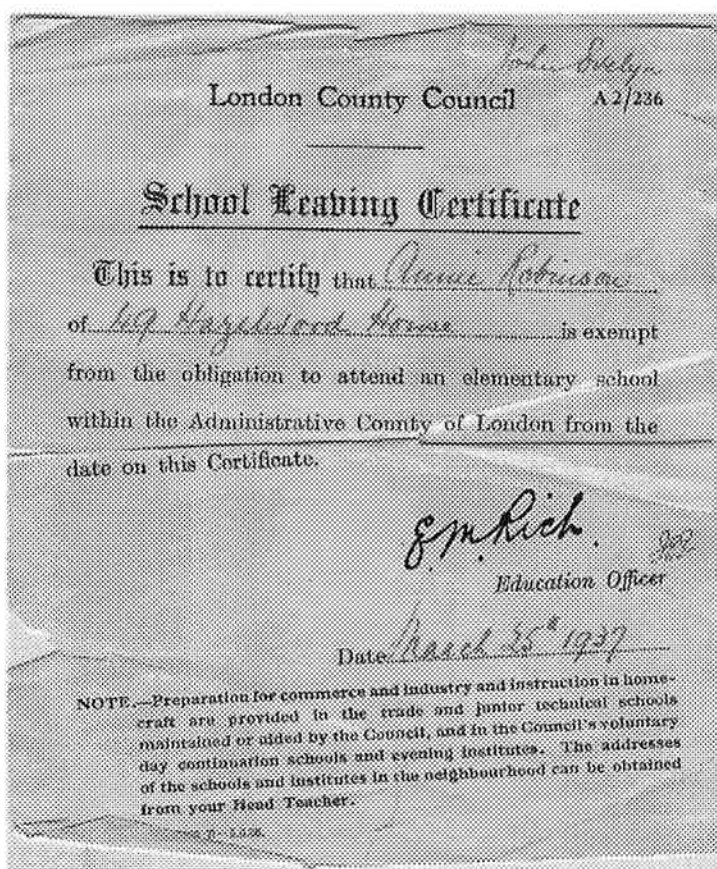
September 1939. England declared war on Germany. The following month, in October, I was 14 years old. My father told me that I was old enough to start work to bring some money into the house.

I managed to get a job in the corner shop at the end of our road. It was a grocery and dairy shop, and my job was to deliver milk on a bicycle - a crate of milk on the front and a crate of milk on the back! When I finished delivering, I worked in the shop. My hours were 7:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. and my wages were eight shilling a week.

I gave six shillings for my keep and kept two shillings which I spent on going to the cinema at every opportunity. I was in another world there! My favourite actress was Margaret Lockwood and I dreamed of being just like her. My love of drama and theatre grew. I joined a Dancing School and Drama class and spent many hours there but, unhappily, I didn't get anywhere because there was always

someone better than I was.

I stayed at the corner shop for two years. Then, one day a friend of mine told me that Woolworth's were taking on assistants at eighteen shillings a week. I applied and got the job where I stayed for two years - until I was called up at eighteen to work in a munitions factory. I was there until I was twenty, when I joined the Forces. There I met my future husband, married, and had a family.



Annie's School Leaving Certificate of 1937

I never did fulfil my dream of becoming an actress. The nearest I have got is by joining the 'Good Companions' at Age Exchange at the age of seventy! I suppose some people's dreams come true, don't they?



*Penny Cheesman*

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## **ELIZABETH HUMBLE**

I left school at 14. We had no GCEs then but a Matriculation Certificate. My standards were not high, but I fortunately managed to pass. My parents wanted me to take a Pitman's Shorthand/typing course, which I found boring. I wanted something thought glamorous, such as a beauty consultant in John Lewis, Oxford Street. However, in those days it meant paying for a course so I joined Elizabeth Arden's training school in Grosvenor Street, W.1. This meant months of facial treatments, not just making up clients but learning how to cover birth marks etc, not the glamorous time in Harrods or John Lewis stores, looking attractive behind a counter.

The interesting part was hearing all the gossip from the Senior Therapists who to me all seemed very beautiful. The stories of Lady Docker who arrived most days in her gold Daimler and who had had three face lifts and was often headlines in the newspapers. Anna Neagle had a daily appointment and her husband, Herbert Wilcox always waited for her in the salon - he adored her. He was so nice and friendly - I though he was a lovely old man (probably then only just over fifty). I remember being so upset that Anna Neagle would brag to the seniors how she had had an affair with Frankie Vaughan and had him put in a film in USA, which first started his career where he then got involved with Marilyn Monroe.

Kay Kendal arrived every morning by chauffeur driven car, having fallen straight out of bed. After 20 minutes in the exercise room she then had her hair shampooed and set, ending in our treatment department to be fully made up - false eyelashes - and looking absolutely fabulous. She had a wonderful personality and everyone loved her. Neither she nor her husband, Rex Harrison, knew she had Leukaemia. When she died I was shattered in the same way as when years later we heard President Kennedy had been shot.

I became very disillusioned giving daily facials to women whose only interest was if another wrinkle had appeared, and how long before they would need a plastic surgeon to have a tuck or face lift! Looking back, although the hours were long with very little pay - mostly tips from clients -, we had lots of fun seeing how the wealthy types lived and behaved. I stayed three years, leaving to marry my husband, who I had only met on six occasions, including one weekend he spent at my home. My parents were against us marrying, convinced I had fallen for his good looks and uniform. Fifty-four year's later we are still together having spent many of my husband's tours overseas after the war.

## ELSIE HOUSE

Once you left school you had to go and get a job. You didn't have no holiday first.

I saw a job advertised on a noticeboard in one of the news-agents for a nurse-maid. It was on a little card in the window. I was only fourteen, and that was the only sort of job I could get. It was all in-service work, or general work. You'd go in the newsagents and ask, and they'd give you the address of the lady. Then you used to go up there and knock on the door and say you'd come in answer to the advert.

It was working for a Jewish lady, a Mrs Slark. She lived in Eden Park. I used to get there about twenty to eight in the morning, I was never late, and I never used to get home until about four. I'd wash up, and do general things, brushing and sweeping.

It was a nice job. I was there about three years. It was like a home from home job; you got a dinner everyday, which was a big help to your mother, you see. And I used to do six days a week for five shillings. And I'd go baby-sitting there on Sunday for a shilling, and I'd have the shilling, and my mum would have the five shillings towards my keep. That's just what you done. Because I was third from the top, and there were five underneath me.

Because they were Jewish, you didn't work after sunset on Friday - not until sunset the next day... not even to take the ashes out of the fire-place. You didn't even do any washing up on that day, not until after sunset. Everything had to be left, because that was her religion. And I used to go to synagogue with them on Saturdays, in Catford, by the Lewisham Hospital. Every Saturday we used to go, because that was their church day, Saturday. I'll always remember it. I used to enjoy that. She used to take me there. It was nice singing there, yes. She had a lovely voice. "We'll gather lilacs in the Spring", and "You are my heart's delight" she used to sing. Beautiful! "You are my heart's delight", oh yes! She was pretty.

Sundays, they used to take me down to Camber Sands. We paddled, and had a picnic. Oh yes. I was one of the family. They had a car, with two seats in the front, and a little dicky seat at the back. I used to sit at the back with the two kids. Oh, one was a baby - he won first prize at the baby show. A beautiful baby, Keith, he was. The other baby was called Roy; he was about three.

They used to eat a lot of fish, because the husband worked in the fish market. He had his own business up in the fish market as a wholesaler. He was a tall man. Quite good looking. He used to go up on a four o'clock in the morning train, up to the fish market. He used to come home about dinner time, with his straw bag - what they used to carry their fish in, in them days, you know. You don't see them bags now, do you? He brought a lot of fish home, and we used to eat a lot of fish. She used to do all the cooking. She was a tailoress and she used to do a lot of tailoring, upstairs in the back bedroom.

I had my work cut out looking after the kids. She had a pram that had pumped up tyres. Beautiful pram. I used to be ever so proud, pushing that pram with the pumped-up tyres all round Eden Park. It was all country then. We used to be out for a long time. Two or three hours. I'd take Roy, the little three-year old as well. Come back dinner time. We'd have dinner. The children ate with the parents and I used to sit in the kitchen and eat mine. Then I'd clear away and wash up. The babies used to have a sleep in the afternoon.

Then the children were growing up, getting bigger and she could manage. You know, it was only while the baby was about that she needed the help, and they couldn't really afford to keep employing somebody, so I got another job at a big house in Kingswood Road at Shortlands. They were real gentry there. He was a wine-merchant I think. They used to have a kitchen maid, inner maid, and a gardener and chauffeur. I got a bit more money there. That was a nice a job at Shortlands. Mrs Evans, her name was. I used to have to call them Madam and Sir, and the children were Miss Winnie, Miss Connie, Master Ronald and Master Oliver. That's how you addressed them.

She was a little stout lady, and her drawing room was all that lovely parquet flooring. Oh it was beautiful. All coal fires. I used to have to do all the coal fires in the morning - get there early. I used to do all the kitchen work, cleaning the silver. Once a week, you cleaned the silver. You had like a parlour, like a butler's pantry and all that. It was a big house. And I'd make the beds, do the fireplaces, and do the steps, about six white steps out the front.

My sister worked there too. She got the job there first. She was above me. She wasn't a kitchen hand, she was a bit higher up. We used to fight. She had a bike, a daisy bike. And I used to walk to work by the side of her bike. She was always on the bike and I used to trot along beside her. It was a long walk and she wouldn't even give me a ride. We used to fight out in the kitchen. Miss Winnie gave her a lovely pair of shoes, and they didn't fit her but they fitted me. They were beautiful shoes, you couldn't buy them today. And do you know, she sold them to me, for five shillings, which was a lot of money and she'd had them given to her. They were black lace-ups, and I can see them now. I've never forgotten it, all them years ago.

You used to have to change in the afternoon, from an apron into an afternoon dress, and a coffee apron, with collars and cuffs. In the morning, you wore a green dress with a white apron. But in the afternoon, you changed into a little black dress with a white apron, like the Nippies used to wear, and a little thing round your head. I had to wait at table one day. She had a beautiful dining room table - very big. There was a lot of people round it, and I used to have to go around holding the vegetable dishes, and the dish was shaking. I was so nervous, I dropped the bloody potatoes! You had to serve from the left and do it with the right or something like that. I was so nervous. I wasn't very old, about seventeen, I suppose. Not very old.

You used to have one afternoon off a week, on a Wednesday, and every other Sunday was a half day. And before you left on a Sunday, you had to lay all the tea and that in a drawing room, all ready for them. And that was your half day. The money was about ten shillings a week.

Mrs Evans always wanted me to be trained as a cook. She said I'd either make a good nurse or a cook. She wanted me to sleep in, because it was better value for her. She'd get somebody to do the fires in the early morning then, wouldn't she? But I said to my mum, "I don't want to sleep in".

I couldn't leave my mum, so I left the job.

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## HILDA KENNEDY

During the war, I was evacuated, and in 1943 I was fourteen so I left school, and returned to London. My Mum had a shop. She sold second hand clothes, shoes, bric-a-brac, furniture, pianos, mangles. The shop had a large front so there was always something outside for sale. One side of the shop was covered in clothes from the floor upwards. Mainly women would come in and sort the clothes out. Clothes were on coupons then, so Mum and I were very busy. She would buy anything to sell. She bought a piano once. My Dad collected it on the horse and cart. A mate got up and played it, and it was sold in 10 minutes.

It was like a social club. They told mum all their troubles. We all had some right laughs. Some people never bought anything but I had to stay in the shop with them. One woman found an odd shoe, she came in every week for the other one, we named her big hoof.

I had the knack of holding up clothes that would fit that person. Customers would come in and say "Find me a dress or jumper" etc. We could see in the shop through the net curtain, and when certain people came in looking around we knew they wouldn't buy anything so out I'd go and stand there until they went. Three days a week I went to the horse and cart. We sold tinware, kettles, saucepans etc. I took a kettle of water, poured it in another one and shouted "One and fourpence ha'penny a four pint kettle. All sound no leakers!" And a crowd would come round. Most times we sold out.

Our horse (called Tom) would stand in the gutter with his nose bag on munching away. One day he walked onto the pavement and ate all the cabbages off a stall there was an awful row. The flying bombs were around but everyone carried on as usual.

## PAT HANMORE

When I was 15 years old and some of my friends were already working and earning wages, I decided that I had had enough of school and wanted to be earning for myself. I first of all had to persuade my parents to allow me to leave and I was overjoyed when I left school at the end of that school year. I applied, and was accepted for a post as junior office girl with a leading electrical company whose offices were in Charing Cross Road, near to Oxford Street. My wages were ten shillings a week, and the hours were 9.00 a.m. until 6.00 p.m. from Monday to Friday and 9.00 a.m. until 1.00 p.m. on Saturdays. I had to check, sort and file invoices in readiness for the girls in the 'machine room'. I was very happy there; I worked hard, got on very well, and after a while I was trained on the accounting machines.

Out of my original wages I was allowed to keep two shillings and sixpence a week but my mother gave me the money for my fares up to town which was 6 and a half during a day for workman's return ticket, which you could buy if you travelled on a train which arrived at Charing Cross station before 8.00 a.m. each day.

After some time and when a vacancy occurred, I was offered a position as an Accounting Machine Operator, this meant an increase in wages which was more than welcome. There were four of us in the 'machine room', we each had our own ledgers and entered the details from the various invoices on to the customers accounts, at the end of each month we had to balance our ledgers. I enjoyed it all. I made one very special friend at the office who I still visit these days. I also introduced a friend to the company, and she eventually became the head of the invoice section.

During the week the men all came to the office wearing pin striped trousers and black jackets and in addition, some wore bowler hats. The girls were suitably smart in mostly plain dresses or jumpers and skirts, all of decent length. On Saturdays the men came in wearing plus fours, tweed jackets, fancy patterned socks and large caps to go straight from work to their various sporting activities. Many to the Company's sports ground at Sutton. The girls would also go there to play Netball; I seem to remember being in the team at one time.



*Pat Hanmore at her first job*

One of the treats my friend and I afforded ourselves was to go each Monday to Woolworth's in Oxford Street at lunchtime to buy a quarter of a pound of loose biscuits for 2d. We made these last the whole week with our cups of tea. We also used to pay into a Dolcis shoe club which was run between twenty girls; we each paid one shilling a week, then drew numbers 1 to 20 and, according to which number you had drawn, you would receive a twenty shilling voucher on that week to spend in a Dolcis shop. You could buy a good pair for 12/9d. and perhaps another for 8/11d. When the 'guinea' shops opened in Oxford Street their dresses were really special and well worth saving for. We also used to frequent Berwick Street, off Oxford Street where there was always a variety of stalls and small shops, we bought material to make our own dresses and occasionally had a hat made in one of the milliners shop: yes, we wore hats in those days!

Once a year we were asked to work overtime, 1 and a half hours on two evenings for two weeks, for this we were paid at the rate of one shilling an hour. 1/6d an evening, out of which we bought a cheese roll and a chocolate cup from a little dairy nearby, which came to three pence. We gladly did this extra work for the extra cash we received.

Our employers were strict on punctuality, we dare not be late in the mornings or back at lunch time. Married women were not employed in offices in those days but a few who kept their 'secrets' from the remainder of the staff would return from their 'exotic' holidays abroad displaying a tell tale white ring on the third finger of their otherwise tanned left hand where they had worn a wedding ring for two weeks.

In those days before the outbreak of the second World War, Armistice Day was observed religiously on each November 11th. and two minutes silence was kept at 11.00 a.m. by everyone wherever possible. It meant that all traffic was stopped and people stood still, all wearing their poppies, in remembrance of the sacrifices made during the 1914 - 1918 War. We were allowed to go out of the office and up the road to St. Gile's Circus to watch the traffic come to a halt and observe the silence after Big Ben had struck the hour.

They were happy carefree days for us, goods seemed plentiful in the shops and if we saved we could buy most of the things we wanted, Woolworth's sold nothing over 6d. and Marks and Spencer's sold nothing over 5/0d. We could buy a dress in there for that amount. There was no television so we went regularly to the cinema, dancing every Saturday night, all over London, never afraid to walk all the way home. We always felt safe.

Then in 1939, there was talk of War and as the days went on, we feared the worst. The Territorial Army was called up, windows were blacked out, lights dimmed and all essential preparations that could be made, were. My firm had just had a new large office building completed, Century House in Shaftesbury Avenue, new desks, machines, fittings and equipment, into which they brought all of their associated companies, we moved in at the beginning of August 1939. When the war became imminent at the end of August, we were told that if War was declared over the week-end then we should stay at home until we heard from the firm.

Before long we learned that a large Country House in Oxted had been prepared as an office with our machinery and equipment installed. Various means were employed to get us all to work on time, buses, trains and coaches, gradually the young men were called up for the armed

forces, then local people came into work with us. We met many problems with the transport arrangements: if you missed a connection anywhere, that was it - you had to return home. Then there was the day when a small bomb dropped right in the front of our train when we were on the way to work. Thankfully it fell just between the rails into chalk, so although the front of the train was slightly damaged and covered in chalk and we were all somewhat shaken and had to leave the train and continue by coach, no one was seriously hurt.

Then in 1940 when the 'blitz' started in earnest and the German bombers came over to bomb London every evening things got rather dangerous. Bus drivers were allowed to take their vehicles into their garages if the siren had sounded to warn of a raid and the passengers were abandoned. As I had found my best route to Oxted to be by bus to East Croydon Station and then on by train, I was often turned off of my bus at Catford garage on the way home at night, maybe I could get a bus or tram running to Lewisham from where I would begin walking to Blackheath Village, and then over the heath to Vanbrugh Hill and my road, which lead off it.

I was often the only person walking on the heath with the search lights from the Ack Ack Regiment searching the skies for the odd plane, so I was usually about the last worker to reach home in my road and my father would be out looking for me. The rest of my family would be already installed in the cellar, which my father had previously concreted out and moved mattresses into. There was also the weather to contend with, as that winter we had quite a lot of snow. It was a fair way to our office from the station as we trudged through the snow, and it always seemed to make our steam train late coming in when we were on the way home.

Eventually, most of the old staff became fed up with the conditions and left for other jobs and more local people came in. I found a similar position for myself with a Gas Stove Company in Terminal House, Grosvenor Gardens at Victoria. Travel became once more a problem when the main road in Greenwich was badly bombed and no buses or trams could use it. The railway from Maze Hill was similarly out of order. We then had to go up to the heath where the few cars that were on the roads, or maybe a lorry would offer lifts into London. We would take any offer regardless

of which part of London we would end up, perhaps we could get a bus if the roads were clear, or possibly a tube; if not we would walk to our offices. Then there would be the same problems to get home, but we took it all in our stride and always saw the funny side of situations. Some of our mates did not go home. They slept in the underground stations for safety.

Again I was very happy in my job, there was not the strictness on time during the War as people had many difficulties to overcome and this was allowed for. Every so often on a Sunday, it would be our turn to go on for the day to 'fire watch', but that would make another story. I stayed with that firm until the end of the War when I had married and my husband was eventually demobbed, and we were expecting our first child. My final wages there in 1945 were £6 a week - the same as a sergeant was paid in the Armed Forces.



*Pat Hanmore*

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## MARGARET KIPPIN

From observation and enquiries made, it does appear that the "Office Junior" is largely a thing of the past. This grade of office worker went under various titles, "Messenger boy (or girl)", "Post-boy (or girl)", or simply Junior Clerk. Unless one had been specifically trained as a shorthand typist or book-keeper, the usual entry into office work was to commence in a junior capacity, with prospects of advancement.

So what was the role of the office junior?

My first initiation into office work was a "Postal Clerk". Our duties were varied, and we were usually at the beck and call of all the other senior staff. The first duty of the day was to sort the mail, and deliver it to the various offices, which entailed going out to sections of the firm which were located in an adjacent Street. We were expected to keep a postal book for out-going letters. Every letter had to be entered under columns relating to the company with which the letter was concerned, plus the cost of postage. We kept a supply of stamps, the postage book had to be balanced weekly and the remaining stamps carefully checked to ensure that there was no discrepancy. We would be expected to keep a petty cash account: the money was used for fares undertaken when we were obliged to make journeys on the firms behalf. This was sometimes to get a second signature on a cheque, or to deliver a contract for signature. A regular task was to pay money into the Bank.

In the fine weather, it was rather nice to get out of the office in this way but it was not so much if it was pouring with rain, and many a time we would return after making a trip to the bank, soaking wet, to find that the Chief Accountant (whom we disliked very much) would discover that there was another trip needed to the same bank. He seemed to take a delight in this.

I remember I used to have to cash a personal cheque for the Assistant Company Secretary weekly (I assumed this was for his weekly household expenses), and it was for twenty pounds. In those days, a lot of money, and I often thought how delighted my mother would be to have amount to spend each week!! We would relieve on the telephone switchboard, and sit at the reception desk, as well as laying up the table for the Board Meetings (they were very fussy how this was done). One of the daily tasks was to take up the letters etc. for the company secretary to sign, usually about 4 p.m. There was a procedure whereby his secretary would tap on the glass partition which divided our room from hers, we would go through her room, collect the letters and take them up to the adjoining room. We stood by while he signed the documents, blotting each one with a wooden curved blotting pad, and then putting them into envelopes. One of the nice parts about this was that in the winter he had coal fire, and it was lovely and warm. He was a very pleasant man, and I often think he knew we liked the fire, as he would frequently stop during signing to make a phone call, or do something else.

The Post Office franking machine was a responsibility of ours. It was only used once a week when 500 or more programmes had to be dispatched. It was a heavy machine, and had to be carted to the Post Office for them to load and reset, in order that the firm could be charged for the postage. On one awful occasion, for some reason the setting had not been altered, and I did not check it, the result being that the 500 envelopes each cost three-halfpence instead of a halfpence (which was the usual cost). I was, naturally called all sorts of a twit, and had to explain to the Post Office. However, the firm were not charged to my error, so all was well.

This was a fairly small office and, in my experience, the advantages in working for a small company outweighed the disadvantages. There was a friendly atmosphere, and on the whole we were happy. Nepotism was practised quite openly; we had three lots of sisters working for the firm, and one could progress from the postal department into various other fields, one went into accounts (where they would be trained), another into the typing pool, another into publicity, etc.

There were demarcation lines, particularly where the director's secretaries were concerned. These were always smart, sophisticated and, too us, rather grand. They expected to be, treated with respect. We did not mind this in the least, it was all part of the order of things. I have since, over the years, had cause to interview girls, and ask them what they did for a living. It amused me how many of them described themselves as secretaries whereas on further question it transpired that they were usually copy-typists, and / or general clerks!

I wonder who now does all the menial tasks the we Juniors used to carry out? I have been told that if machines don't do it, then the staff stick their own stamps on, and make their own tea!

I worked in offices from 1934 - 1941. In 1967 I was employed as a temporary part-time Civil Servant in the Accounts Department of the Telephone Area Office in Oxford Street. The last thirteen years of my working career I worked in a Local Government Department, where we had a back-up administration team. I noticed a great many changes.

The atmosphere is more casual - first names are used, even when in connection with the Head of Department, whereas previously even the very junior staff were referred to as Miss Whatever-it-

Was. Dress is very much more informal: in the earlier days, men wore dark suits, and women were expected to be dressed neatly. I recall the use of celluloid cuffs worn by the female staff to protect their dresses. One occasion I call to mind was when, because I was going out directly after work, I wore a voile blouse. Despite the fact that I wore a slip and brassiere, there were complaints that it was "see-through", and considered to be indecorous. On another occasion I was reprimanded for wearing nail varnish!

Equipment had become more stream-lined, typewriters smaller and easier to use, and, of course, the use of Electric typewriters. Telephones had changed from the stand type with separate hearing and speaking part. No longer are the names of exchanges used. I remember the lovely sounding one called Primrose; and then there was Temple Bar, Museum, and City. Another machine not used in offices now is the Addressograph. These were large monstrosities, with cast iron frames. They were used in conjunction with a hand graphotype machine, which was operated to print the names and addressed on a thin steel plate, which was then inserted into a small frame for use on the addressograph.



*Margaret Kippin*



## BARBARA MCKENZIE

I left school at 16 after taking GCSE's, as War was imminent, and in fact was declared in September 1939.

I wanted to be a Lady Almoner in a hospital and train at the London School of Economics, but it was not possible at this time. My father, who was a Bank Manager, wanted me to go into the Bank of England, but I was too young, and so I had a year to wait.

My first job, which was only temporary, was as a pupil teacher at St. James's School in Kidbrooke Park Road, Blackheath. The salary was ten shillings a week. I taught everything from the three R's to Cricket, Tennis and Swimming. The children were aged 5 - 11 years and of both sexes. Teachers were in short supply, so the Headmaster was grateful for any help he could get. I loved it, and would have liked to train as a teacher, but I had to go into the Bank.

I went into the Bank - you had to wear Navy, Black or Grey, also a hat and gloves, and long sleeves and high necks! - this was so we didn't demoralise the men, who to me were in their dotage, as all the young ones had been called up. The office consisted of 150 women, and I can remember clearly when the news came through on the ticker tape that our forces had landed in France (D-Day) - I was the only one who was affected personally, as my husband, who was in the Royal Engineers, was in that landing, diffusing the land mines. They very kindly sent me home.

They were very good to their staff. My father who was very ill in London, had to be moved to a relation in the North of England to have an operation - and they transferred me to their branch in Manchester. My best friend became pregnant; she was unmarried, and in those days this was very frowned upon, and at the end of one day she said she was going to commit suicide that night - she wasn't joking. I went straight to the head of Establishments and they just took over. Arranged everything; where to have the baby etc. - gave her paid leave and after the birth, they took her back on the staff.

The work was Exchange Control filing, and it was quite a complicated system - cross referencing etc. I became a Qualifier and so had to teach the new girls. When I was in Manchester you had



*Barbara in the Bank of England, Aged 22*

to count bank notes (old dirty ones which were then cancelled) for your first 3 months, and if you found a forgery you were given the day off. As you were counting at great speed this was quite difficult, but I did find one, to my delight, and so got a day off.

At lunch time in the City we would go across to the Bank Club, and the main dish was often pigeon pie - as these birds were victims of shrapnel - and you sometimes found this in your mouth!

We used to have a rota for Night Watching and you stayed the night at the Bank watching out for incendiaries and, of course, bombs. I remember going home one evening and seeing the people going into Bank tube station with their mattresses etc., where they were going to shelter, and when I returned in the morning a bomb had actually gone down the tube station, and there were hundreds of casualties.

I really enjoyed my time in the Bank (about 5 years) - there was great companionship. I had always wanted to work with people, and I seem to have done this.

And fortunately, I am still doing it.

## JOYCE MILAN

From a very early age I had inspirations to go on the stage, my Mother had always taken me to the Music Halls and later to London shows, but it soon became apparent that I would not fit into show business and my Grandmother made very clear her opinion that "No good ever became a woman going on the stage". I also had a longing to go to sea, on a big liner, as a stewardess, on my frequent visits to the nearby River Thames I saw such beautiful white ships with blue or red funnels and I thought it would be wonderful to sail to India or Jamaica. My Father soon dismissed this idea, telling me that a stewardess's job was not glamorous and could mean only menial tasks and clearing up after sea sick-passengers, often not being allowed to go ashore when the boat arrived at its far away destination, if there was cleaning to be done. So he negotiated with my Uncle and on my 14th birthday, I was sent to work with him at a big electrical company at Charlton in an office.

The nearest I got to going near a boat was each day was eating my lunch on the riverside and watching the ships loading giant reels of cable to lay on the ocean bed for telephone communications overseas.



Joyce Milan at school in 1934

I worked in a very small, dark office with a middle aged lady and the boss, a very old man (to my eyes) who sat at a roll-topped oak desk on a raised platform in the corner, he had a light bulb hanging over his desk with a green shade and he wore glasses on the end of his nose. I know I had to sort out factory workers time sheets, often seeing familiar family names I had heard many times mentioned by my grandparents. I did not like the job; I wanted to work in London with my friends, and when one day the factory had a strike and office workers had to be escorted through the chanting throng. I was scared stiff, so was able to put pressure on my Mum and Dad to let me try to get a job in town.

I went to the Biddy Montague Agency in Holborn, where you paid them your first weeks wages as a fee, so usually they had better type of companies on their register. I accepted, and more important, was accepted at a firm making motor car number plates in Bloomsbury, starting at 5/- per week as junior clerk to be trained in all types of office work. I worked 8.30 - 5.30 on weekdays, and 8.30-12.30 on Saturdays. Out of my 5/- wages, my train fare from Eltham to the Embankment was 1/- per week, I walked the rest of the way to the top of Tottenham Court Road and back at night. My mother gave me 2/- back per week and dad always gave me 1/-, therefore Mum had 2/- a week from me.

It was a very smart establishment and my first duties were to dust the desks in the morning, change the flowers in reception and make the tea for the office staff and managers. I could not make tea and this task became a nightmare, I can still feel the panic to this day not knowing how to make the tea!! Our office Manageress was very strict, stalking us juniors at every turn, no lipstick allowed or talking to boys. However she did teach me well, I spoke badly at that age, but a long stint on the switchboard made me speak slower and clearer. I had to learn all the London Postal Codes, SE1 to SE19 for sessions on the post purchase (I remember them all well) and keep up to date insurance stamps on employees cards, typing, filing, and each week I was sent to Bloomsbury County Council to swear affidavits, just 15 years old, I didn't know a thing about what I was swearing on oath, I had to hold a bible and say,

"I swear to Almighty God that this is my name and handwriting, and that that the contents of this affidavit are true!"

## LAURA MURPHY



*Joyce Milan*

However, I had lots of young friends at work, lots of boys to meet outside after work when the Manageress was not around, and often lifts home on motor bikes. I was finally in the order office with two young girls talking to garages all day, giggling and making blind dates. Yet I was a satisfactory worker and left to work in a beauty salon in Bond Street with a good reference and excellent training. One of my young girl friends married the Managing Director eventually, she always laughingly told me she would!!!

I paid 6d a week into a "Perm Club" to have my hair done, 1/- for Saturday night dance, 6d for Friday night dance (the Hop), 2d for Sunday night dance at the Social Club - when my wages increased (you had to apply for a rise) I finally earned 12/6 a week, this gave me 5/- pocket money which enabled me to see a show in town, buy stockings and lipstick and records and go to the pictures.

My extravagance was going dancing. I scrounged money from my parents when mine had run out, to dance nearly every night I could!

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I started my first job just after I was 13 in February 1933. My older sister had started a job as cook in the cook shop in Old Dover Road. One day she came home and told Mum they needed someone to do the washing up in the busiest time and that was lunch time. Mum took me along to see the "Boss" when I came out of school and told him I could do it. The Boss said he would give me my dinner before I went back to school, if I could be along there as soon as I had finished school at lunch time. I don't know how much I was paid because that was discussed between him and my mum.

I used to go to Our Lady of Grace School and I wasn't to tell any one where I was going every day, when I finished school at lunch time. I used to run along to the Cook Shop and put my long course apron on and start doing all the washing up, pots, pans, plates and cutlery. The first day was the worst, when I went into the kitchen and saw my sister I wanted to talk but the "Boss" said hurry up and get started. The sink was a big deep white one, with slats of wood made into a step that I had to stand on to reach the sink above the sink was this big wooden rack and when I washed the plates I had to put them in this so that they would drip dry and then there was all the Cutlery that had to be dried as well, and then my sister kept telling me hurry up because she was waiting for the saucepans. It was very, very busy with all the workmen coming in and out all through the dinner hour.

When at last I had nearly finished my sister helped me and then we both sat down and the "Boss" gave us our dinner, and then I rushed back to school. I often got the cane when I got back to school because I was late and I had dirty hands. I stayed until December when Mum got me my first permanent job in service.

I went into Service in December 1933. Mum was buying bread at a stall in Woolwich Market and the Lady who owned the stall asked Mum if she knew anyone that would look after her little girl, take her and bring her home from school and do the Housework because she had to help her Husband an the stall every day in the Market. She was going to pay 10/- a week. Mum said I could do that, but the Lady didn't think I was old enough. Mum said I was nearly 14 and I had experience as I had looked after my younger

sisters and brothers. Instead of going to school on the Monday Mum took me down to the Lady's House in Woolwich where I had to start work. Mum left me there and told me if any one asked me why I wasn't at school I was to say I wasn't well.

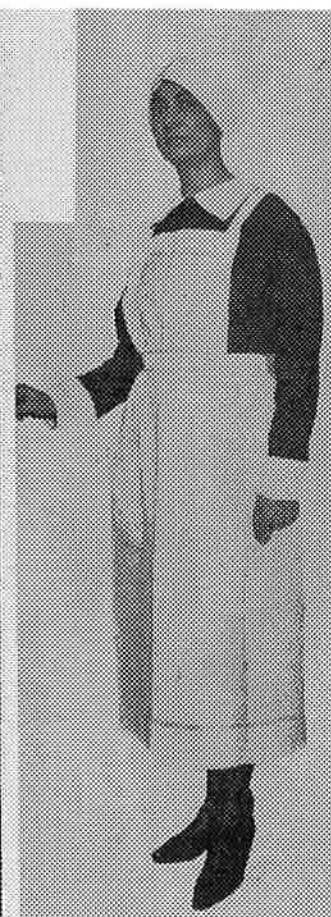
I was so frightened, I did everything the Lady told me, and then she took me to meet her little girl from school and I was to watch where I was going so I would know my way the next day. When we arrived back, the Lady gave us juice and some cake, and I had to play with the little girl until we had our tea. I liked that, and then I washed her and combed her hair and put her to bed. After that I had to wash the tea things up and tidy the kitchen, and then I had to wash myself and go to bed. The Lady opened this door next to the kitchen and told me that was my bedroom. It wasn't very big. I remember feeling terrified I had never slept in a bed of my own there was always four of us in our bed. I was told to shut the door and turn the light off.

I was crying as I was so lonely, so I left the light on. After I had been in bed for a while a big hand came round the door and turned the light off. I was so frightened I didn't sleep all that night and when I had my half day off the following Thursday, I asked Mum if I could stay home and go back to school. Mum said no. She gave me a 1/- for myself out of my 10/- wage, and I went back and stayed there until I was 14 in February. Then Mum took me to Miss Colebrook in Charlton Village to get me another job as housemaid to a Doctor and his wife and little boy in Blackheath. Miss Colebrook ran a Domestic Agency, and I think Mum had to pay a 1/- out of my first weeks wage to her for recommending me. I don't know if the Doctor and his wife had to pay as well. She told Mum I would be paid 12/- a week after a month if I suited. Mum said I could then have 2/- a week if I was a good girl. I must have suited, because I stayed with those people until I was 18. I think I must have been happy because I know I didn't want to go into a factory, and that was all I could have done.



## DOMESTIC SITUATIONS VACANT.

- A** BRIGHT Young House-Parlourmaid Wanted; family two; £52; real homely post.—Apply, 23, East-st, Bromley. C22
- A** CAPABLE Maid Required; general housework; sleep in.—68, Coleraine-rd, Blackheath. 15
- A** CAPABLE Maid, live in; 3 in family; modern house, good home.—Apply, 14, Troutbeck-rd, New Cross. 15
- A** DAILY Maid; no washing, no cooking; references; uniform.—Apply, 48, Hardy-road, Westcombe Park. 15
- A** GOOD General, with reference; not under age 25; wages £1.—Marhaba, Bampton-road, Forest Hill, S.E.23. 15
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- A** STRONG, Willing Girl, as general, daily.—Letters only, Cooper (Mrs.), 124, Old Bromley-rd, Bromley, Kent. 15
- A** WOMAN Required three mornings a week, 8.30—11.30. — 362, Brockley-rd, Crofton Park, S.E.4. 15
- B** BROMLEY —Daily Cook-General Required, age 25-30; good personal references essential.—Apply, 23, East-st, Bromley. C22
- C** CAPABLE Maid, to sleep in; small family; plain cooking.—Apply before 11 or after 7, or by letter, Mrs. Taylor, 40, Beaconsfield-



Many girls, like Laura, went straight from school to domestic service

## LIL MURRELL



*Lil Murrell at the age of 16.*

I'm 14 years of age in four weeks. I'll be leaving school as the Summer Holidays begin. I'm given a School Leaving Certificate. On the Friday I am still a schoolgirl. Three days later, on Monday, I start work in a factory. I don't feel grown up.

Reporting to the gate, I gave my name and was taken to the Personnel Office. After filling up details and showing my school certificate which meant I could start work, I was taken to a large building where I was introduced to the foreman, and shown to a bench where there were trays of biscuits. Each biscuit was exactly one inch square. I was shown how to break off six biscuits at a time and put them in a small carton. The six had to be joined in one piece. Any broken were not used. There were samples for customers.

The Company was the Malassine, they made Dog biscuits and the slogan was "Dogs Love Vims". It's 1938 and in those days slogans were painted on the factory wall in large print. Employers were allowed two minutes after 8 a.m. to clock in. If you were later, the card was moved and you waited at the gate until the fifteen minutes had passed. Then the card was clocked, but you were a quarter of an hour late, which meant money was deducted and your mother deducted it from you. So you lost out, but it did teach you punctuality. The Malassine Building is still near Blackwall tunnel.

I earned 16 shillings a week. My first week's pay I took home to my mum and she gave me 2/6d back. I was rich, I had never had any money of my own before, we did not get pocket money. The first money I spent was on a quarter of Tomeson's Raspberry Ruffles for 2d in Woolworth's; they are still a favourite of mine! I didn't have any fares to pay as it was only 300 yards away from home, and I went home for lunch. A bit different from school, where four times a day I had a twenty minute walk. We were used to walking mainly because we did not have the money for fares.

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## EILEEN O'SULLIVAN

The first job I had was in the stationery department of Hodgsons the printers. I didn't like it very much. I didn't want to go there to start with. I had always wanted to work in a flower shop and be a florist, that was always my ambition. I think it was the thought of working with just a few people, rather than in a big building with lots of other people. And doing something creative. I always loved flowers. My father was a good gardener, and I knew about flowers from an early age. It was only a small back yard, but I knew all the different names of flowers, and different things which you could do with flowers. But my mother said no, there was no future in that. I just did what my mother said. If she said "No", then that was it - you didn't argue with your mother in those days. And she found me this "good job" that I never liked!

One of my mother's friends got me a job in the stationery and printers, and it was considered a very good job. I wasn't interviewed for it. I think they just took me on recommendation because my mother's friend had worked in the factory for a number of years. I was considered lucky to get the job. Most of the girls who left school at fourteen went into Peak Freans biscuit factory or the jam factories. So to get something in the stationery or printers was considered a bit upmarket. It wasn't much more money. It might have been perhaps a shilling a week or so more, but I don't think there was very much in it. I earned twelve and six. That was about the regular wage at that time, for a fourteen year old girl. My mum had the ten shillings, and I had the half a crown.

The firm I worked for was in the middle of Upper Thames Street. There was mostly printers and stationery firms in that area, because it went on to Fleet Street. I started work after Christmas, so it was the cold time of the year, and I had a navy blue winter coat and flat-heeled Brogue shoes. I remember my mum buying me these 'suitable' shoes for four and eleven in the shops. I remember walking to work over London Bridge on winter mornings - and in those days there was always fog in the winter, and you'd look over the bridge, and you could see all the cranes working.

I started off sticking windows on to business envelopes. From windows, I went onto a folding machine, that folded the envelopes, and that was piece-work. I was never any good at it, because I never liked it, you know. I know I made lots of mistakes. I always used to fold the envelopes inside out! Yes, and they would say, "You've done that wrong!", because I'm left-handed, you know. I'd pick them up, and turn them over the wrong way and all sorts of things. You'd look at the clock and think, "There's only another four hours to go!" I hated it.

I had one special friend there, Alice. We were friends for years. We'd meet of a morning and travel to work together, and you'd sit and talk about what you did the night before. After work, we'd go home first, get changed and then you'd go out, maybe meet up later and go to a club, or the cinema, or look in the shops. I mean that was a big thing - even to look in the shops. You didn't have the money, but you would still choose what you'd like to wear if you had the money.



*Eileen O'Sullivan in 1941*

In the dinner hour on a Friday we used to go down to a cafe called 'The Cat', and we used to have pie and mash and then go into the public baths for a bath. It didn't cost very much, I mean you're talking about twopence or threepence - something like that. You'd go and have a bath, come out and go back all in the dinner hour. You only bathed once a week anyway. We never had a bathroom at home. I mean, you had a bath in the kitchen, and by then, at fourteen, you'd be embarrassed, so you'd go to the public baths anyway. So it was far better to do it in the dinner hour and then you were ready for the weekend.

I stuck at that job for four years, working in a dark factory, all dingy down below ground and very noisy, like Victorian days. But when the war came I went on to war work, and that was completely different - I loved every minute of it. I was working in an aircraft hangar, just outside a big airport, and it was light and cheery, and full of young people. You felt as though you were doing something worthwhile.

## JOAN PEARCE

In the 1930's - 40's, if you were of working age (fourteen), you were found - or made to find a job. Once you became fourteen, you could not expect to be 'kept' by your parents. They had done their bit - now you must start out for yourself.

My mother had been at work for many years as a glass cutter in a factory which was a converted warehouse on the rivers edge. There was even a jetty where at one time deliveries from the factory were made on a barge. The name of the factory was Johnsen and Jorgensen, a Norwegian firm that made glass ampoules and vials for medical supplies. I knew the place very well. My mother went back to work as soon as she was able after I was born, my grandmother looked after me. I used to meet her from work and was often shown round the place and met her friends. I found it frightening, very dirty and noisy, and covered in glass dust.

So I was not too pleased when Mum told me she found me a job in the packing section of this firm. I duly arrived fresh from the country. My brown legs had 'tide marks' of white ankles and feet where my white socks had been in the Summer. I was told to 'clock on' and that showed I didn't come in late. I think you were allowed two minutes past official starting time. I rode my bike as I lived quite near and many a time it was either my high heels or bicycle wheel caught in the rails of the trams.

The War was not yet over so the factory was extremely busy - 24 hours the machines were on full production, working night and day. We used to have 'Music while you Work', and very good dinners in the Canteen for a cheap price - I think it was a shilling a dinner. After a while, you progressed from labelling boxes, and the next step was to become a checker, looking for minute cracks in the vials. One character who was working on the moulding machine nearly always had half a tie - leaning over the flames it caught fire and had to be cut off.

I was later called into the office and said if I would continue my education at Evening Classes and do shorthand, typing and English there would be a job for me in the office, which was an amazing promotion. Well, I went for it and managed to get the RSA Certificate and, good as their word, I was in the office as a typist and dictaphonist (no

shorthand) with eight other girls doing various office procedures. I became quite fast and all were pleased with my progress. Money was very good, plus a bonus at Christmas. It was a family firm and treated all workers very well. The office ladies even had a special toilet! Christmas dinners were splendid - all the directors and managers of the company waited on us workers. With your own key, much prized, and a separate room to have our meals in, one did not mix with the workers (how I cringe now!), but I was once 'one of them' and thought it all so weird.

From almost the first day Peggy and I got on - she was very young also but she was a packer and she took particular interest in me because she lived in Wolfe Crescent, the same as my surname. We started going to evening class together, holidays, cinema and ballroom dancing lessons. I might add that she was she was better at all of the classes than I was. We were inseparable until one or the other of us had boyfriends, but even then we managed to gossip about it all at work. She too was transferred into the office so that was a feather in both our caps. We used to have outings. Being all women - to Southend. Men were later included which wasn't so nice as the crates of beer were loaded on to the coach and it took ages - many stops for relief!!!

When Ron was due home from Malaya in 1951 I had already promised Peggy we would have our regular holiday together in the July, so I was in between the two and after that holiday, which was our last, our friendship waned because the following March, Ron and I married, and it



*Joan Pearce*

was never the same. I really missed her. It was such fun - we were all young people, getting quite good money. We all had our different stories. No one left except to get married when the boyfriends started to come back from the War. We all went to each other's weddings - all the office girls came to mine in 1952, and the Company gave me some lovely wedding gifts. I left after seven years, when I became pregnant.

On the Friday before I was married on the Saturday, I was given an errand. I had to find this man who was in the stores to say someone wanted to see him. I looked everywhere for him (later I found out he wasn't even in), but I had stuck on my back a notice saying "Getting Married Tomorrow, ALL INVITED!". I'd walked all round the factory with this on, quite ignorant of the fact!

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## ARTHUR ANDREWS

My first job was as a Greengrocer's assistant working for The Royal Arsenal Co-operative Society. To become an assistant I first had to take their examination. The Co-op was considered to be a good firm to work for.

On my first morning an old sack was tied around my waist. I was led to the back of the shop and given a knife and a sack of cabbages. My job was to trim the cabbages up to make them look nice for the front of the shop. My first week's wages was seven shillings and sixpence - about thirty-seven pence in today's money. The hours were from eight thirty in the morning until six o'clock at night, and that included Saturdays as well. I had half of the day off on Thursdays. I progressed up the ladder until when I left some thirty years later, I was a shop manager: that's what you call a steady job!

One memory that I have of the Co-op, was after a few days of starting, I was sent out to buy some red oil for the red lamp on the rear of the cycle. Also being sent out to buy a rubber hammer. On each trip to the oil shop, the shopkeeper told me not to come again as they were pulling my leg!

My next job was to last eighteen years. With my time in the Forces included, this took me to my retirement. But that's another story!



*The fabric department of a Co-op store*



## BARBARA ROWLAND

I was fortunate enough to have a place at what was considered a rather superior grammar school. The deputy headmistress took Greek and the headmistress, a very formidable lady, took Latin. I just could not get on with Latin. I disliked and feared the Head and was always bottom of the class. Latin was considered so important that I, along with one or two others, had our desks put out in the corridor and we had to do just Latin, missing our other classes, until she decided we had caught up sufficiently to go back to classes.

I was good at and thoroughly enjoyed maths and science and had some vague idea that I would like to have a job in a laboratory when I left school. However, that was not to be. After three years the Head decided I would never make the grade in Latin and with another girl, I started my fourth year on a secretarial course. While other 4th years were taking Geography and Latin or Greek, Betty and I were put with some 5th formers and learned book-keeping, shorthand and typing with school secretary as our teacher. I'm not even sure if she was qualified to teach as she was the only member of staff not wear a gown.

The Head retired next year and the new one, so different, then discovered that I could not take the school certificate as I had dropped Geography. To take the school certificate, I would have to repeat the 4th year. My parents decided I would never be a "blue-stocking", and in any case they could not afford to keep me at school any longer than necessary: I had a bright young brother, and it was more important for him to have education for a career.

I thoroughly enjoined book-keeping and did extremely well, but I wasn't so keen on the shorthand. A few days after my 16th birthday in July I left school with a recommendation from the headmistress that I was of good quality school certificate standard.

For a few weeks I went to a crammer where we did nothing but shorthand and typing. It cost 15 shillings a week, paid weekly. In November I was considered proficient to go job-hunting. My father sent me down the road to our local shops to buy a hat for the interview and when I came home with one costing 8/11d, he was horrified. Apparently my mother's didn't cost that much. I still

preferred figure work and found a job in a small greetings card factory in Goswell Road, I was book-keeper cum typist; in fact the complete office staff. I started my first job in my navy hat, my nap school coat, new shoes and my very first handbag. I still had my school girl hair cut and my face was completely devoid of make-up.

My office was on the ground floor and was really big. There were two high desks, joined back to back with high stools - really Dickensian I can say now, but I accepted it as normal at the time. A couple of spare tables and my table with really ancient Underwood typewriter and chair, and an enormous safe where the ledgers and books were kept. The factory hours were 8.30 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. and when I told my mother the hours, she said I was not to work so long and my boss agreed that I could start at 9.00 a.m.

The factory works were on the fifth floor and so was the toilet so it was long walk up when I wanted to go. The lift was for goods only. The foreman earned ú3.10.0d. per week, the same as my father who had to keep up appearances as he was the proprietor of local shoe shop (but of course I didn't find that out until years later). An old man who was general dog's-body and used to accompany me to the bank with a black Gladstone bag on wages day. I had 30/- a week. On Fridays a scribbled note came down from the forewoman giving the hours that her girls had worked. By the time I taken off the few coppers that national insurance cost, quite a number of them took home less than 10 shilling a week for 47 hours work.

The people at work never spoke to me except to say good morning and I was much too shy to speak to them. I had very little work to do and the business was failing. I think I only saw my Guvnor's office once the whole time I was there. He used to come into mine for whatever little work there was to do. The days were long and, in my ignorance and innocence, I just used to sit there. I used to keep a little job in hand so that I could look as if I was doing something by going to the safe and bringing out a ledger. It did not dawn on me that I might read a book or do some knitting to pass the time!

There was one bright spot in the day, and that was lunchtime!

At school there was a prefect whom I had a crush on. she was hockey captain and when she reached the Upper 6th she put her plaits up into earphones either side of her head. I thought she was wonderful. Soon after I had started work I got into the train, and there was my heroine in the same compartment. She actually spoke to me and wonder of wonders she worked in an office not too far from mine. She showed me the shortest route to walk, told me where to lunch and said she would meet me there. It was Mac's cafe and we had meat and two veg and a cup of tea for one shilling. One day she asked me what my wages were, and when I told her she was completely shattered. So was I. There she was with exemption from matriculation, earning just 5 shillings more a week than me. Of course, she hadn't been considered a dud at Latin and had to do a secretarial course so, three years older than me, she was a clerk.

As I said, I enjoyed figure work and had gone right through to the Balance Sheet at school, so when the Guvnor asked if I would prepare the trial balance for the year it didn't worry me at all. As per text book I showed the one cash transaction that had place and my boss thought this was wrong. When the auditor came he pointed this out and the auditor said "No, the young lady is right."

In the spring the guvnor had collected his year's designs and he went off to show his round the country for a fortnight. He left me two signed blank cheques for the wages. The foreman and I were in charge. I remember the forewoman tried it on. The first Friday she put Ruby down for a full day, whereas I knew quite well that she had not been in. When I pointed out she had made a mistake she was really cross.

According to my brother, my mother now made a fuss of me, and I had another meal when I came home. Now I was contributing quite an extra proportion to the housekeeping. I started having indigestion and my mother took me to the doctor. He told her not to give me another dinner in the evening and suggested I changed my job and had a bit more company.

Strangely enough, when interviewed for another job by two young men and they asked me what I could do, I told them about preparing the Trial Balance. They said, "Little girl, if you have prepared a trial balance at 16 you are much too clever for us"!

I did find another job. In an engineering office where I was very happy. I stayed there until the end of the war as it became a reserved occupation.

Incidentally, my 30/- was split nicely into 6. 5/- was my fare to London, 5/- lunches, 5/- to spend, 5/- to save, 5/- for clothes and the last 5/- made a great deal of difference to my mother's house-keeping allowance. When I had the extra 5/- at my new job my mother had an extra 1/-.

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## LENA RICHARDSON

I left school at sixteen and felt very pleased with myself for obtaining a job as a shorthand typist in London. This entailed commuting to and from an office in the city during the time of the V2 rockets but one accepted this as part of the daily routine. I had chosen this particular job with a large Insurance Brokers because it was in a typing pool and I thought it would be nice to be with a lots of people rather than on my own in a small office. How wrong first impressions can be! The office resembled a school room rather than a conventional office, with desks containing typewriters lined up in an orderly fashion - each containing a typewriter which to-day would be considered an antique.

Every morning each one of us had to sign in, and sharp at 9.30 a.m. the "boss" would draw a red line under the last name. Every person who signed in after this line was later called into the inner sanctum and interrogated as to why she was late. No excuses were permitted, even if the lateness was caused by bombs and roads closed or trains delayed.

Shortly after this the clerks from the claims department would appear with armfuls of letters and dictate the replies to these, which we had to take down in shorthand. Quite often this would entail pages and pages of dictation which we would have to decipher and type out for the rest of the day. As the clerks were not allowed to leave us any of the letters to which we were replying, we had to make sure that we had correctly taken down all the addresses and references etc. Under no circumstances were we allowed to pay a visit to the claims department to verify anything.

## GLADYS PRINCE & OLIVE THOMAS

Once we had finished our typing we had to take it to the boss's office for checking. She always found something wrong and then of course it had to be typed again. On one occasion I had been told to put a new ribbon on my typewriter with the result that the work was extremely black - do you remember those awful spools (not even nylon in those days) and how dirty they made both you and your work - and twice I was made to re-type all the offending letters. At that point I exploded and told her that it was not my fault that the ribbon was messy and no way was I going to miss my train home. There was dead silence in the typing room - nobody had dared to answer back to the boss before! I caught my train with no more fuss and was regarded with something like awe by my fellow young typists. If there was any spare time left after completing our dictation we all had to type out claim forms etc. and were never allowed to leave before the appointed hour of 5.30 p.m. The toilet was two floors up, and I swear the "old bat" used to time us whether we walked or used the ancient creaking lift.

We had to work one Saturday morning in three and these were the most enjoyable times of the whole job. One of the older typists was always put in charge, and she allowed us to go out to have our morning coffee in a small cafe on the corner of Leadenhall market. They sold the most delicious chocolate cake there and we really enjoyed our freedom.

Not long after my rebellion I caught a rather nasty 'flu bug and was off sick for three weeks. This did not please her ladyship at all, and I was warned that sickness was not tolerated. This annoyed me even further especially as I had returned to work before feeling really fit. The result was that I had a relapse within a few days and was once more off sick. This time I made no attempt to hurry back which was noticed by my Father. Despite being a man of few words, he had obviously seen that I was not happy there and asked me if I would like him to send in my "notice". I thought this was an excellent idea as I was sure otherwise "she" would probably sack me. I was never offered a reference, but despite this soon found myself another job in a large London publishing house with a larger salary, every Saturday off, very nice work mates and a very happy atmosphere, where I spent the next seven years until I left to start a family.

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I started work in 1934 at the age of 14. I lived in Greenwich and was sent to Reeves & Gardner, a sweet factory in Deptford. I was on the assembly line packing sweets. The sweets I packed were marshmallow in a crisp, biscuity cup. One day the supervisor asked me to leave this task. I was terrified I had done something wrong, but this was not the reason I was to be moved. Because of my neatness in packing the sweets it had been decided that I should be put to work on a machine which poured the marshmallow into the biscuit-like cups. I had great difficulty managing the machine and the brittle biscuit-like cups kept breaking as I tried to get the marshmallow into them. I was too timid to say I could not manage and to ask to return to the packing, so I left. By this time my sister Olive had also joined the assembly line at the sweet factory but she left when I did. She hated it. The conditions were very bad, standing at benches all day in draughty and damp barn-like rooms.

We both went to the local Labour Exchange and were sent to another Deptford firm (Janerty's?) where we packed medical supplies. For this we each received 10/- a week. We worked from 8 a.m. until 5.30 p.m. We remained there for about a year. By this time I was 16 and my sister was 15. Olive was always very interested in hairdressing and eventually found herself a job as a junior in a local hairdressing salon in Greenwich run by a Mrs Polin. I was employed by Mrs Polin to look after her children in her house in Maze Hill whilst she was at the shop. We continued in this employment very happily until war broke out. We had to attend a makeshift office set up over Greenwich Swimming Baths, where we were told our jobs were not essential. We were then sent to a factory (Stones) in Deptford and worked on an assembly line inspecting machine parts. This continued until the end of the war.

## OLIVE SMITH

At 15 years of age I finally left school with no idea of what I was going to do regarding work. I'd studied the piano seriously from about 10 years of age and just assumed that I would eventually be involved with music teaching as a living, encouraged by my father I may add. I had two younger brothers, and when dad suddenly became unemployed, the financial situation changed and my musical aspirations went out of the window! I felt lost and deeply resentful - even missed the long hours of practice! I went down to the Labour Exchange to register for work but couldn't adapt to anything they had to offer. For many months I helped Mum in the house and looked after my youngest brother when she went out a couple of days a week to do some cleaning for a friend who had a small green grocering business. I also gave an eleven year old girl two half-hour lessons each week, for which I received 2/6d.

Eventually, dad was back at work and Mum gave up the cleaning job. She was now home full-time so I realised that I had to get work and stop feeling sorry for myself. The piano was still home and I could play for my own entertainment.

I was nearly sixteen and started work as a Counter Assistant with Woolworth's at the Woolwich Branch for 15/- a week. Mum gave me back 5/- and also paid my fares. The working hours were awful: Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday 9 a.m. to 7 p.m., Thursday 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. (early closing), Friday 9 a.m. to 8 p.m., and Saturday 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. There was one hour lunch break and 15 minutes tea break. Sunday was always a day of recovery! As I'm thinking back I have a vague recollection of joining the keep-fit class that met every Monday evening (after work) in the Staff Room. Thursday evening I usually went to the pictures with a friend - Tessie Mathewes was a great favourite and starred in many Musicals. For 1/- we had two feature films, the Pathe Newes and a Cartoon or Travel film. In the larger cinemas (very posh) there would be a musical interlude played on a large Cinema Electronic Organ which slowly arose from underneath the stage, while girls attired in white Coat Overalls would sell Chocolates and Ice Cream from their trays. It was all very colourful and exiting - mind you everybody smoked, so I don't suppose the atmosphere was very healthy!

In 1937 we moved from Eltham to Kilburn in North London - the Number 6 Bus from Charing Cross went right past our house. I was so excited to be near the West End and all the other attractions of the Capital. I continued working for Woolworth's - a very large store in Kilburn High Street. Throughout the Summer I was on the Ice Cream Counter on the Ground Floor - it was a very busy store and always people queuing for ices and cold drinks. Mr. Auten the Manager, used to run around on Saturday nights in amongst the crowds, tapping with a coin on the glass Counter partitions and shouting continuously "Service Miss!".

When the summer months came to a close the Ice Cream counter shut down, and I moved upstairs to the first floor on one of the Toy Counters, as everything up there was getting ready for Christmas. I really enjoyed that counter - and soldiers and animals especially - all lined up according to size and price. There were always a few " 'orrible kids" around who delighted knocking them all down and off! On the same floor popular sheet music was sold for 6d per copy. The old 78" records were played throughout the day advertising the various songs and we girls would put in requests for our favourites I never tired of "Stardust" - and I still like it!

I was now earning a few more shillings and was able to treat myself to a piece of music and a pair of artificial-silk stockings - 6d per leg! Two of the shades I can remember were "Red Pepper" and "Cafe au Lait". To make them look finer on the leg I would turn them inside out and cut off the heel fringe with dire results at times! 'Betty Lou' lipstick was favourite at 6d, and Ponds Vanishing Cream, 6d a pot. Every article in the store was 6d or under.

In the spring of 1938, my friend Ray and I left Woolworth's and we went to work at Smith's Clockes at Cricklewood. We'd had enough of the long hours shop workers had to endure.

Looking back, a lot of it was fun, and I did a lot of 'growing up'.

## IRENE SWANTON

Thank goodness my first job only lasted one day not through any misdemeanour of mine but due to the persistence of a very dedicated Headmaster, who frightened my parents into sending me back to school.

The daughter of a friend of the family told them of a vacancy at the local silk mills that made ladies underwear, it was situated in Lewisham. My father welcomed the news, because he held the opinion that you learned more when you went out to work than you ever did in school. This was chiefly due to his own poor schooling also because in the 1930's times were hard, and every penny coming into the home counted. The job was boring in the extreme! What prospects could be gained by bundling elastic and cutting off threads of cotton for use on the waist and legs of Directoire knickers (or Passion Killers as they came to be known for obvious reasons). However, help was at hand.

During the first day at this factory job, mother had to go to the school to tell them that I had left. Such was the haste to make me leave no permission was asked for. The headmaster was furious and threatened to make the parent's pay back all the grant they had received over the two years I had attended school. This was paid into the local Post Office a princely one pound one and eightpence a month supposedly for school uniform upkeep but had been already allocated to buy armchairs on the never never.

It was explained to my mother that it was a Selective Central School also they had signed a document to keep me there for four years and my leaving age would be sixteen not fourteen. The threat worked and so on the next day back to school I went and no questions asked. I cannot remember whether I received any wages from the day at the factory, but at least I was free to gain more educational experience which hopefully might lead to brighter prospects.

My next and only job until I left to start a family was really the basis of a career in the scientific field. A very good friend at school and always my close rival in science examinations left in July for a laboratory assistants post at Birkbeck College. I envied her and felt the loss of her friendship when she described her job especially

the wages (no salaries at that stage); however, during the summer holidays (six weeks in those days), I learnt that another assistant would be required in the near future. The call came early in September, and on the Seventeenth I went for interview taking my character reference with me.

I still have this and reading it over I sound as boring as the knicker elastic job! I also have my first letter of appointment from Birkbeck Collge signed by the then secretary, G.F. Troupe Horne. It reads that my rate of pay would be 17/6 per week rising by increments of 2/6 at the end of six months until such times as my appointment is terminated or a maximum wage of 25/- is reached. It then goes on to say "Normally the appointments of Laboratory Assistants at the College are terminated at the age of 18 years". Even in those far off days employment was shaky and unpredictable for the inexperienced.

I could only think at that time of the tremendous feeling of independence, out of the wage my Mother took 15 shillings gave me 2/6 for fares and clothes it all sounds ridiculous now but a shilling a week for a clothing club paid over twenty weeks helped a great deal.

We also managed dances (Sixpenny Hops) at the local Parish Hall or Baths; The Town Hall was another venue and once a disasterous night for me. I had just taken possession of a Provident Club Card these were used at delegated shops for clothes, on reaching my seat I discovered my purse had gone with it the card that I would have to pay for over the next twenty weeks- so even in those far off days sixty years ago there were still nasty folk around.

Being a working girl (the second eldest of a family of six) did help at meal times. As wage earners we were no longer children to be of no account, but considered and fed as part of the grown up family.

Travelling to London was also a great experience with the Workman trains packed to suffocation, everybody breathing in at each stop as the train got nearer to the metropolis, creating easy targets for those nasty types who used the situation to their advantage. These we managed to dodge if possible but quite often they deliberately left it to the last minute before getting into the carriage.

When I started work at two o'clock I used the Tram to Blackfriars Bridge and walked to the college via Ludgate Circus and Fleet Street, and used the same route to come home often around 9.30 p.m. One evening I remember because of the smell of chemicals clinging to my clothes I sat on top of the tram, hoping the cigarette smoke would mask it. There was great excitement for it was the evening that the Crystal Palace burnt down and every one was on the top getting a better view of the sad event.

My friend Eileen (who was responsible for my getting the job) is still a loyal friend to this day. We weren't always able to go to work together because as juniors we had to do alternate shifts, but we both did every Saturday morning - three hours, from nine to twelve -, polishing benches and filling up the reagent bottles. One Saturday we rushed around to get finished in order to reach Fleet street in time to see the Lord Mayor's Show. It was our first experience of this parade and it was spectacular.

Another special event I shall always remember was the Lying in State of King George V in Westminster Hall, so very moving and attended by thousands of the public filling passed the coffin paying their last respects in a quiet orderly manner. It was after our evening shift and we had to join the queue on the far side of Westminster Bridge, it moved so slowly that our main concern was whether we would be able to use our cheap midday fare tickets to take us home in the early hours of the morning. The trams used to run all night at that time and I think we arrived home well after midnight!

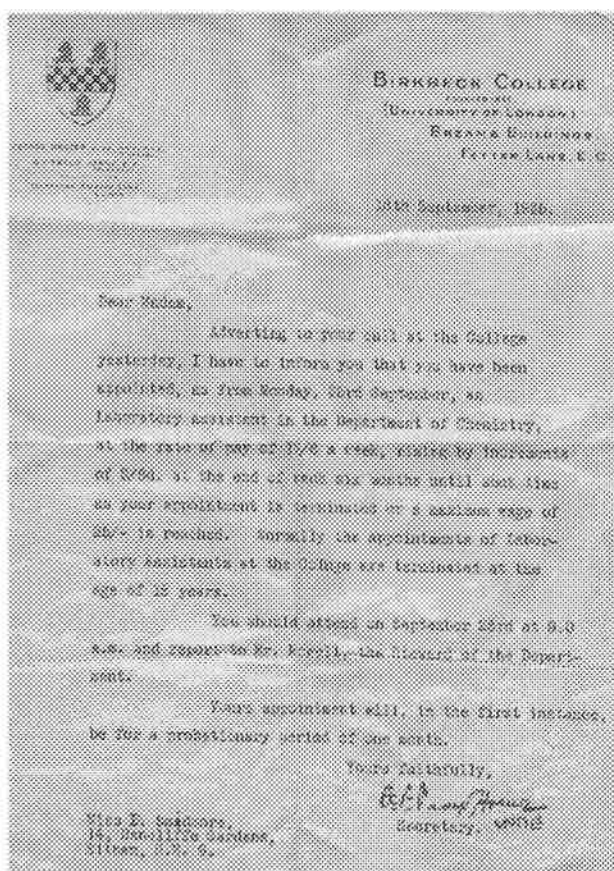
Birkbeck College was part of the London University in the thirties, and still is. Situated in Brems Buildings, Fetter Lane at that time, it was three storeys plus a basement without a lift. Since the main Chemistry Department was on the top

floor for reasons of safety every package, all bottles of Chemicals and Winchsters of concentrated Acids had to be carried up by the Laboratory staff, you had to be fit. There was a second laboratory on the first floor that had a Water Still, and when required we had to fill a Carboy (that held a considerable amount of water) up two flights of stairs. One day Eileen had just reached the top landing when she dropped the lot, after a horrific gasp we could do nothing but giggle while clearing up the mess and hoping it hadn't reached the ears of the Boss.

When we look back on the past we realise that, in our ignorance we were at great risk dealing with dangerous chemicals so casually. In the evening we sat in the smelly chemical store serving the

students with the small items needed for their experiments and issued any special chemicals on receipt of a chit from the lecturer. I remember the large round chunks of Potassium Cyanide in an open jar for anyone to breathe in and handle. The asbestos squares used to protect benches frayed and cracked until they were of no further use then thrown away. But it was the lab staff that cleaned out the drawers at the end of term. At break time the Steward, a grey haired elderly man would send us down to the Refectory to buy a bar of chocolate (we were always hungry around eight o'clock) this would be eaten in the store without any thought of washing our hands!

The Head of the Department was a Dr Barrow an enormous man or so he appeared to me at that time, with a walrus moustache and a bellowing voice that had everyone running at the double. His very first instruction to me was the most important experiment of all to be learnt in detail, - and these were his words, not mine: How to make the Tea for the lecturers!



Irene Swanton's letter of acceptance

First fill the Kettle with fresh cold water, then place it on the Tripod over the Bunsen Burner. Light the gas and as soon as the kettle boils, warm the pot. Throw this water away and put in a spoonful of tea for each person. Take the pot to the kettle and add the boiling water, leaving it to stand for at least two minutes. I think I must have passed that exercise since I can't remember any complaints, and I still make the tea this way, even with tea-bags. I wonder just what he would think of those!

He did advise us to enrol for evening classes at the local Polytechnic which we did, and attended for just over a year, but the War started and made things difficult and so experience had to take priority over examinations.

We were the only Department to have females on the staff, of course the boys in the Physics and Zoology laboratories took advantage of this in being cheeky but helpful in times of need. When going into the Prep Room first thing we had to do was kick the door to make sure the traps set for the rats had worked and not missed them overnight quite often one of the boys would go in first to help us poor females in distress.



*Irene Swanton at the time of her first job*

One more mature assistant used to discuss the music of Louis Armstrong and my favourite Nat Gonella. I remember him buying me a record and inviting me home to his flat, but I wouldn't go alone so I took Eileen with me; just as well since his mother was away, and he was a lot more experienced than me in the working world. At Christmas one year they had a party in the laboratory invited us to join in. At that time I was unused to drinking spirits, and asked for a small gin and tonic, but was unprepared for the Vermouth they had added! Enough to say I had to have an escort to the station, thank goodness the darkened train hid my embarrassment. On reaching home, with my hat all askew I was severely told off and crept up to bed very sheepishly to sleep off my first hangover. I have hated the smell of Vermouth ever since!

The Laboratory staff consisted of a Steward, an Assistant Steward, and two Laboratory assistants. Luckily for me the Assistant Steward married a lecturer; Eileen went off to pastures new into a better paid post with higher prospects, then of course the nasty Hitler did me a favour: due to War being declared there was no more talk of leaving on reaching eighteen years. I took the post of Assistant Steward and at my time of departure to start a family three years later I was earning two pounds or two pounds fifty I cannot remember exactly; but I do know that at the time of my getting married my post office book held the princely sum of thirteen pounds. Not a lot to start married life but it held us together for fifty-five years.

During the War years the pattern of the working week due to blackout restrictions. We were asked to work during the day at week-ends and just one day in the week; when this was put to the staff the Head of Department asked if we would mind. Did we mind? We never had it so good, especially on full pay which was the icing on the cake. Mind you I did hop the wag once to be the Matron of Honour at a friends wedding. I was due at work at two o'clock and had to rush to catch a train which inevitably was late, on reaching Blackfriars station I took the bold decision to hail a Taxi my first ever and arrived an hour late, with many apologies to the younger assistant who held the fort for me. It was well worth the extra cash splashed out for the ride since public transport on a Sunday was hopeless.

## SHELAGH WREN-LLOYD

“Come along now, it’s your first day. It should be exciting for you!”, said my Mother as I ate my breakfast of porridge, toast and tea.

As I entered the shop the proprietor looked round and saw me. “Ah good! Right on time” (it was 8.30 am and a late start for me), “that’s just as it should always be”! My new employer seemed in a jovial mood, so I relaxed.

“What do I do?”, I muttered. This was the first time that I had been behind the counter - I mean really behind the counter in a proper formal capacity, though I wouldn’t have put it in those words then. The shop had been well known to me as an customer for years in my schooldays. “I’ll show you, if you just watch for a while, then after a little you can begin to serve the customers”. There were lots of ‘little’ things to watch and a great deal to learn. When trade seemed slow there was plenty to do for much of the time. It had always looked so simple from the other side of the counter - just ask what the customers wanted, weigh it, pass it across, and take the money.

From behind the counter it all looked different - the skill needed to weigh accurately the large chocolates and heavy toffees. Very few packets of anything - it was all weigh, count and measure. I loved to see the row on row of sparkling glass 4 lb jars - plastic nowadays, as in the Age Exchange shop - in varying stages of fullness or emptiness according to the current tastes of customers. Young and old and colourful sweets and wrappers with enticing smells.

There were two large glass counter cases on top of a glass topped counter, always full of interesting displays and special lines. Shelves behind the counter also displayed goods, such as boxed sweets and chocolates. Behind the shop window - beautifully dressed for the particular season -, was a large, specially constructed three-tier stand to hold small items which would attract children: small bars of chocolate, liquorice sticks and boot-laces, aniseed balls, bubble gum, and many others. That must have been a loss maker with such temptations for light fingers, or perhaps children then were more careful. A huge display case covered almost one wall next to the door: this held very special items such as Christmas stock or Easter eggs, and even china.

In the last corner was the tobacco counter - another glass topped piece - which was always full. Behind were the close packed shelves of cigarettes, cigars and tobacco, all contributing their special smells. In the case were different types of smokers’ pipes - clay for everyday use, Church warden pipes with extremely long stems, wooden pipes with bulbous bowls and short stems and my favourite, the Briar and Amber pipes. These were highly decorated and carved and much prized for Christmas and other special presents. Serving at this counter had its problems too: cigarettes sometimes had to be counted out; tobacco often needed to be weighed and cut. This needed care so as not to end up with a little heap of small pieces. When measuring chewing tobacco the request was for “one piece, if you can be that clever”!

There was a regular customer who came in several times a week; ‘the Shag man’, for ‘two ounces of thick, dark shag please’ until I came to know him and then it was ‘my regular, please lass’. I was so intrigued by his ceaseless chewing, like a cow chewing the cud that, firstly, I wondered, did he chew in his sleep? Then, secondly, what must it taste like? The smell was pretty strong and his teeth were brown. I finally plucked up enough courage to ask him what it tasted like. He said, “Here, taste a bit”, and “Ugh, ugh - no more thank you!”.

The times I liked best were when window dressing time came. After a while I was allowed to help a little, then contribute ideas and later on carry out the ideas. A separate part of the business next door was that of second hand and antique furniture, bric-a-brac or ‘junk’ and books. In fine weather there were always several trays of books on stands outside the doors. My real interest eventually transferred itself to this other business, but that’s another story.





*Anne Durrant's mother making boxes for the army, at Fleetwood Jones Factory, Deptford.*

Cover photo of Joan Pearce (centre) and her work colleagues, in the 1940s.