

Blue's Yarns

Bettie Bicker-Robinson (nee King and nickname Blue) has written up her memories of growing up in Kent and her life during the 20th century. She has kindly shared them with Trevor and Bernice so we can add them to the website. Follow the links below for some good yarns and a fascinating look into how we used to live.

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My Gran and my Mum

Emma Saxby was my mum. She was born on the 5th May in the year 1883 at East Peckham, her mother was Elizabeth Saxby formerly Master. Her father was William Saxby, a sweep. When she was a child she lived in Laddingford, Yalding. She had one brother called Percy. She often spoke of him (although there were about nine of them altogether).

Gran and Percy

Getting back to Percy...one day he took a pellet gun and shot a duck on a pond and took it home for them to eat. Gran said you could have shaved it, it was so thin. The next day the police came and took poor Percy to spend a holiday in Borstal prison for a few weeks. He was always up to pranks. When he was about seven he would go into the Medway River on his way home from school. Gran was really fed up with the worry of this so one day she waited in the bushes, sure enough along came Percy, off with all of his clothes and into the river. So Gran took his clothes, found some stinging nettles and called him out. She then made him run naked all through the village and every time he stopped she touched him with the nettles. This put an end to his trips in the river.

One night they all went singing carols, when they went to the Baker's shop he was very kind and said if you sing well I will give you five shillings, which he did. They came away right pleased with themselves. When they got along the

road Percy said 'look what I've got for us to share' he had pinched a large loaf of bread on his way out. They didn't tell Gran, they had eaten it before they got home.

My gran was a little person but you never spoke out of turn to her. I only ever saw her with a large black hat on at all times. I often wondered if she kept it on at night. She had a long black dress and button up boots. I never saw her arms or legs, bare I mean. Her little cottage was lovely. There was a small hump bridge over the stream to go into her garden. I suppose it was more a large ditch. Her house was covered in passion flowers she used to tell me the story of how it came to be called the 'passion'. The flower with the crown of thorns on Jesus's head, three nails where they put him on the cross and the disciples who were with him when he died. I thought Gran was very clever. She used to take medicine, everyone those days came in a little bottle, it looked like red water. She said to me it tastes like poison. I would be very clever and say 'have you ever tasted poison Gran' she would say 'no my girl but it couldn't taste worse', so once again I was put back in my place.

Her lavatory was right down the bottom of her garden, it was a small tin shed with a large hole under a very old wooden seat, the nail on the wall had newspaper cut into squares for use. When it rained it was so loud on the roof if you didn't need the toilet before you certainly would then.

There were lots of wild kittens, you could never catch them, they would spit at you but they were very pretty. There was one shop in the village that sold everything, it was called Brenchly's. I never went into it I never saw my Gran go in either. Money was short in those days.

Getting back to Percy, when he was about sixteen years old and getting pretty cocky about himself, he went out in the evening and would come home late. Mind you the lanes were very dark and very lonely. He would never be home on time eight o'clock, it was winter so it was cold and dark. One night Gran was so worried and mad he was very late, so Gran went to look for him. She put a white sheet on and thought 'I'll give him the fright of his life, he will be glad to get home on time'. She hid in the hedge until he came along, he would whistle to make out he wasn't afraid of the dark. Just as Gran saw him coming she put the sheet over her head, arms outstretched and did an awful moaning sound. Percy did no more, he pulled a stick from the hedge which was a bit of an old fence and hit Gran over the head and ran home for his life. When he got home the others, who were waiting eagerly to find out what happened, said 'have you seen mum', 'blimey no' he said 'I've just hit someone over the crust' (which he called head). When they all went out poor Gran was knocked out cold. I think they were both sorry but Percy stayed home after that until he was really grown up. Mind you I think he had to change his trousers when he got over the fright of it all.

My Gran had been married twice, her first name was Waghorne and then she married a man called Saxby. We were never allowed to ask anything grown up. Before Gran went to bed every night she lay the table with all the things

for breakfast, cups would be placed upside down on saucers and a white cloth placed on top of it all. She would be up at daylight the next morning. She would never kiss us or even give us a hug. I was mostly afraid of her. We would just have to sit on a chair and be quiet. I cannot remember Granddad at all.

My Mum

On October 14th 1905 my mum was married. She was aged twenty two and called herself Emily, she did this because everyone had always called her Emily. It was later discovered that she had been christened Emma. She married John Norton who was twenty five, his father was Thomas Norton. Mum's father was William Saxby. Richard Norton (Thomas Norton's brother) was Best Man. Charlotte Norton (Richard's wife) was also there. They were married in the church in the parish of Yalding and lived in Collier Street, Yalding for the first part of their married life.

Now I will go back to when my mum was fourteen years old, in those days you did what you were told, there was no asking about anything. So on leaving school mum went into what they called 'Service', which really meant you were a lackey for any job they liked to give you. It didn't matter how far away your work was you had to walk there.

Mum was sent to a very large house, it was a very old rambling place and mum had to sleep very high up in an old attic, one other girl, a bit older than mum slept with her. Very late and very tired that first night up to bed they go. The other girl said to mum whatever you do, DON'T GO TO SLEEP, mum was dead on her feet, what with the long walk to get to this house then the scrubbing and cleaning all day, she said 'but I'm very tired'. 'Well if you do, they will bury you alive'. Mum didn't believe her, but at the same time she wasn't going to chance it, so the girl said I will take you out early in the morning and prove it to you. So sure enough early next morning off they go before anyone was about. They went down the lane into the very old church yard. Mum could not believe her eyes because sure enough on every tombstone was 'so and so fell asleep on such and such date. Not just one but all of them. 'Told you so' the girl said. I think mum thought 'well I can't go home or I will be joining them'. Anyway she stayed there for a few years.

When she left there she worked at the King and Queen pub, which by the way is still there. She did housework or whatever was needed. It has got a big window overlooking the street mum said they used to call out to the boys going by. Then she met John Norton, she would tell me how they walked everywhere, he would catch her when she jumped over the ditches to go across fields. On Sundays she would meet the landlady of the Chequers pub in Laddingford, they would put on very 'posh' hats and go in her horse and buggy to chapel. Her name was Mrs Burton. They wore large hats with tulle netting tied under their chins. Mum really loved it. The pub is still there. I will tell you more about that later.



The Chequers, Laddingford

Now getting back to Collier Street, mum lived there quite a few years. Soon after getting married she had a baby girl named Doris, followed by Gertrude, then Frederick, then Violet, followed by Lillian. Times were very lean. Her husband started to get very bad headaches. There was a very bad epidemic of diphtheria, everyone was losing children, some as many as five in one family. Anyway Doris became very ill and everyone thought it was diphtheria, but after she died they found it was toadstool poisoning, her little friend died on the same day, they must have eaten them on the way to school, but with so many ill with diphtheria they just presumed it was that. I suppose they didn't bother too much in those days, it was nothing when children died. Nearly everyone had lost one or two in the family. When you look in the church yard those that could afford headstones you can see just how bad it was. Poor mum it must have been heart breaking.

Soon after Lil was born mum's dear husband John died. He had meningitis. Now she has those children to bring up with no money and no help. On the day of the funeral Gert and Fred wearing very large armbands had to walk from their house to the church yard, they had to walk very slowly behind mum who wore black 'widows weeds', which was black stockings and shoes a large black hat with a very large veil that covered her face and hung all over her shoulders. Gert was told to hold Fred's hand very tight. The coffin was placed on a cart and the cart had rubber wheels, so the only sound was the black horse's hooves. By the way, before they left the house they had to go to see their Dad in his coffin to say goodbye. There was a big jar of lilies in the room to help with the smell, this was tradition. Curtains were drawn and a lighted lamp left on the table to ward off any evil. Mum must have been very brave.

Poverty and Home Life

Poor people seldom had the doctor, it was far too expensive and if they did call they were never too bothered. We were all vaccinated when we were small they used to prick you three or four times on the arm. I haven't a clue what it was for but we used to wear a red ribbon arm band to let folk know we had been done. Made one feel quite important!

Mum faced very hard times she used to try to keep the smaller ones in bed a long time to keep them warm. She used to take in washing from 'posh' people to help out. Gert and Fred would go out getting wood for fuel and take greens, turnips and potatoes from the farmer's fields. Mind you the farmers were very good they knew how poor the families were, they would turn a blind eye to it all.

After a while mum met a man named George King he said he was willing to marry her and take on her children. I can never recall mum saying she loved him, when I asked her about it she would just say he was very kind to take her and the children on. She moved from Yalding and came to live in Southfleet, a place called Westwood. She had a little boy called Roland. Mum said he had blue eyes and fair hair but he was sick with a dysentery bug she was told. Anyway he was only six months old when he died. Mum always said he was a little angel, God only lent him to her for a while. I could never have seen it that way but I think it helped mum to think like that.

Then along came another blooming girl, Gladys Charlotte, not too exciting, then another girl Ivy. Mum then moved into New Barn where Lena Beatrice was born and next, the best one of the lot 'Betty'... Mrs Bennet our neighbour came to see me, my said the nurse told her it would be her last baby, the wall of her tummy had given up. Mrs Bennet who was born a gypsy said 'you can't tell me this is the scraping of the pot'. Mind you mum was forty three at that time.

By now my sister Gert was in service hoping to become head cook in the household. Violet was in service training for a ladies maid. Lil was in service doing whatever was needed.

I was born in New Barn Cottage, there were two cottages, Mum in one and Mrs Bennet in the other. There were two bungalows opposite us with Roy Morris and family in one and his Gran in the other. We had a tap for water right up at the top of the garden which was for all four dwellings. The lavatory was a long way down the rest of the back garden, ours was joined to the Bennett's one under a big old elderberry tree. The Bennets were not fussy what they said, they helped me grow up a bit. Theirs was a big family, Flo, Jacko, Bumper, Ivy, Appy, Tilly, Queenie, Harry, Bessie, Mary, Fanny and Doffie and their Mum and Dad. Mrs Bennet had her right hand all curled up where as a child (being a gypsy) had crawled too near the fire on the grass outside the caravan and was very badly burned.

They were really dirty, they had a dog with mange and a big cat named Dripping. I used to love to go into their house, the cat would be licking the dripping out of an old chipped cup, and Mrs Bennet would give me a thick slice of bread with this dripping if the cat left any. I used to love it. I never told mum I would get a clout for stepping inside the house. They had a big cauldron, in the week it would be on the coal shed floor but Saturday it came out for her cooking, she would hang it from a big hook up the chimney. When she made meat pudding she would put flour, fat, meat all in a bowl, it looked like spotted dick. Anyhow greens, potatoes and pudding all went into the pot. I wasn't allowed to stay for dinner.

They had a big nanny goat outside tied to a tree on a big long rope. We used to get a cabbage leaf and offer it to her we would then run fast as we could round the tree until at last it couldn't move. It was quite spiteful if it could get to you. Bumper was always with Ivy, Lena and I, we used to play shops. One day we got a load of elderberries, chewed them small and spit them in a jar, we told Bumper it was jam, her being dopey ate quite a lot of them, then it was time to go in for tea. All of a sudden round came Fanny Bennet saying to our mum 'poor Bumper is being sick and bringing up a lot of blood', well no one could understand this, we certainly couldn't, we didn't say a word. Mum said give her a good dose of syrup of figs that will get it through her. We must have been wicked because we laughed ourselves to sleep.

One night Jack and Fanny Bennet, the Mum and Dad of them all went to the pub, right down to Betsham in Southfleet, called the Colliers Arms. It was a hell of a long way, they trudged off in pouring rain with a new baby in a clapped out old pram. They stayed until the last bell, then had to walk or rather stagger back home. Baby was left in the pram outside of the pub while they were inside drinking. When they at last arrived home Fanny had a job to get upstairs. She was very fat as well as being drunk. They left the baby soaking wet in the pram all night downstairs. The next day the poor little mite died. Mum said it had been sick before they ever took it to the pub. It was just another one to them, plenty more where they came from.

They were a real funny family. My brother Fred was digging in the garden one day when this girl, who was cross eyed, came up our path with a large straw hat on elastic in her hand and said to Fred 'I'm Tilly's thister' whilst saying this she swung the hat round and it cut underneath her nose so sharp it made it bleed. Fred told her to go to the Bennet's and went over to do some more digging, with that she just made a grab at him just where he didn't want grabbing, he came indoors until she was well and truly out of sight. Mum said she wasn't all there.

The rag and bone man came one day, we had kept all the old bones we had gathered from different places and he gave us a gold fish, we put it in a two pound jam jar. We used to go and dig ant eggs up from the garden to feed it but it gave up the ghost after three days.

Mind you it had a lovely funeral, we put it in a Swan Vesta match box and put grandfather's beard in it so it was comfy, then we all, Bennet's mob, Morris's mob and us Kings, took it to a place of rest under the thorn hedge. We made a lovely cross with wood and silver paper and a big R.I.P. on it then made a big hole and put lots of earth on top to make a mound, then we put a paste pot on top with wild violets and daisies. We often dug it up to see if it was still there or if it had gone to heaven. We all sang there is a green hill far away. We were very sad.

We had a dog called Dandy who lived in a kennel outside, he never came in the house and was always on a chain. He was only there to keep people away. We had two cats, one was Minnie who was always having kittens and Topper. Minnie had her kittens in one of Mr Bentley's cars, he was Captain Bentley head of the car department, and he invented them. Betty the cook came round to tell mum about the kittens. Mum said 'oh well she will bring them home when they are big enough'. I never quite knew what happened to them we rarely saw them.

Mrs Morris was a nice lady, her husband worked on the siding at Longfield Hill. The trains would come down from the big London hotels and dump all their waste on the spare ground, he used to bring loads of stuff home like posh knives and forks, plates, dishes, cups and saucers etc. We had quite a lot in our house. One morning Jack Morris was getting his boots on for work, he found a knot in one of his laces and got a dinner fork to undo it and it came up very quickly and went straight in his eye. He went completely blind.

Their children were Hazel, Ron, Roy and Jean, they had an awful time. One day my mum heard this awful screaming coming from the Morris house. When mum arrived the baby girl two years old had crawled near the fire and pulled a large saucepan (it was an open cow grate fire) the pan had potatoes and cabbage in it which had stuck on top of the baby, she died almost straight away. Mum said it was something she would never forget. It was the worst thing mum had ever seen or heard the poor little ones cries. I will tell you more later about living in the cottage.

Life at Wilmar

Now for my life living in Wilmar (1930). I can only tell you what I remember. I was very young, most of my family called me 'Blue'.

It was the most gorgeous bungalow, not that I was impressed at my age, if my mum was with me that was all I cared. Where my mum was that was my home. It had lots of rooms, even a bathroom and a wonderful lavatory, you could just pull the chain from a big tank on top of the lav and it sent all this water down the pan, I thought it was magic. There was also a very large kitchen with a huge big stove. Mum would be cooking nearly all day, she would make a big pot of stew from old bones. I often wondered where they came from.

When we were on our own the rest of 'the mob' were at school, it was lovely. I loved having mum to myself. She would say, 'time for one ole, two ole'. She called it this because it would be piping hot, it was two mugs of gravy taken from the stew pot to make room for the dumplings, being so hot I would say 'whoop ole' after each mouthful so mum forever after named it that (lot of nonsense).

We kept ducks, rabbits, pigeons a ferret, cats and one dog. We used to eat pigeons eggs, they were like little golf balls. My greatest pet was a Rhode Island Red cockerel named Longshanks, he was the most beautiful bird you ever saw. I had him from a chick and would carry him in my apron everywhere. If I was sitting on the doorstep he would come and sit on my lap. I can remember his body was always warm and when I stroked him he loved it and would make a funny noise in his throat. I loved him even more because I thought hens laid eggs but he laid the bacon. Anyway he grew really huge and such a handsome guy. One day my gran came to stay with us, I think she was teasing him, she said he just flew for her and pecked her head. She should have kept that stupid hat on. Anyway she came into my mum with blood running down her face (made the most of it). Mum did no more, grabbed Longshanks, took him to a big door in the shed and shut his neck in it and killed him. I hated my mum, my gran and everyone else. I cried and cried until we had him for dinner (he did taste lovely).

Fred my brother used to feed and clean all the animals. We used to breed rabbits to eat, we still gave them all names. We had a huge duck pond in the paddock it was all red tiles. Fred had a big water tank on wheels so he used to clean it out every Sunday morning. He would clean out the hutches and put lime in to keep them sweet. One day a tramp called round, he used to give Fred a penny for wild rabbit skins and four pennies for a tame one. On this particular day Fred used to hang them outside on the shed wall to dry out a bit, some of the tame skins were a pretty colour. When Fred came out of the house the tramp had gathered them and put them all in a sack, he tried to 'do' Fred saying they were mostly wild skins. Fred did no more than grabbed him by the throat and tipped the whole lot out and told him never to come back again 'or I will give you a good hiding'. I thought Fred was ever so brave he used to work so very hard. I didn't see much of my dad.

We had two large tennis courts and a very large round summer house. We had a cob nut walk, asparagus beds and strawberries in the huge kitchen garden. There was a long wide drive up to the bungalow, it had big white stones all the way up, we used to have to whiten them every so often, and mum was very fussy.

Mum always put hens under a sitting hen, it was lovely when they were running round with their mum, and there would be yellow, brown and even black ones. If they were a bit sick mum would put them in a big cardboard box and put them under the stove on the hearth, I thought it odd because she would hard boil eggs and chop them up for them to eat. They were really cute. When mum wasn't around we would take them out of the box to have a

run around and hope the cat didn't come in. Some would get the 'gapes' keep opening their mouths and then mum would give them some salt water to drink.

Good times

We had some really good laughs at times. Ivy used to get out of the bedroom window and bring some cobnuts back. It was a job cracking them with our teeth. Then we had to hide the shells, but Ivy would always find a way.

It was like the good apples, mum would say only have the 'drops' so we used to nick them from the tree and rub the stalk with dirt to show mum how it had all gone brown from being dropped.

Every Christmas mum would make a huge rabbit and sage pie, it was out of this world. We would gather ivy and holly to put over the pictures on the wall. Then get the gramophone with the horn out ready. We would go out singing carols and might get a penny or two sometimes they gave us a Christmas pudding. When we sang 'We Three Kings' we would start to giggle and point to ourselves seeing our surname was King. Mum would take the money from us when we got home, then we would make a wish when we stirred the Christmas pudding, I wished I could have kept the money.

We used to be so excited going to bed, we only ever had a piece of coal, a walnut, one orange and a large pink comic which was out of date and someone in the 'posh' houses had given mum. We still had a wonderful Christmas. Mum would put a piece of holly on top of the pudding then she would set it alight with blue flames, it was sheer magic. We would all hope to get a silver threepenny bit but only one ever went in. Then after tea on went the music, we had five records which we played every year. We, well not me, used to have a drink of mum's homemade orange wine. My brother Fred would sing like Paul Robeson, Gert would sing 'Only a Bird in a gilded cage', Vi would sing like Gracie Fields, Red Sails in the Sunset, Lil used to yodel and her song was 'I Started my Life as a Cobbler, I'm working from day until night with a torili torili addy I'm working with all my might'. The rest of us would jig around and be very silly, until it was snap dragon time. Mum would lay raisins out on a big dish and pour brandy over them and set them alight, they would glow such a pretty colour. Mum would put a sheet around her to bring them in and put the lamp out, we were supposed to make a grab for them on the dish, I would be scared to even look, let alone touch them. But there would be such laughter. You would never believe how poor we really were. Such lovely memories.

Off to school

Then came the time for me to go to school, I was five so off I trot with my sisters. In those days you started school when you were five and stayed there until you were fourteen. When I started my first day they wanted anyone who

knew a poem. I put up my hand as I had seen the other kids do that. So out the front I went, stood on a chair so everyone could see and hear me:

Three men went a hunting

Nothing they could find

But a little dog's turd

And that they left behind

The teacher didn't seem at all pleased with me so they told me to play with the plasticine, which I stuck on top of my head and couldn't get it off. Mum had to cut it off, I had a little brush on top of my head for ages. I also knew another poem my dad had taught me before he left or whatever happened to him. Three men went a hunting was the best one though as I thought it was rude:

Oh Barney oh Barney

No breeches to wear

We'll buy a sheepskin

And make him a pair

Woolly side in, skinny side out

Oh Barney, oh Barney they'll never wear out

Also a song:

God made little Robin in the days of spring

Please said little robin when am I going to sing

When am I to sing ?

God then spoke to robin

You must always sing but your sweetest carols keep for wintery days

Keep on wintery days

We used to sing a lot at school, there was an old wind-up gramophone in the playground, which we used for country dancing, my favourite was call 'rufty tufty' Lena and I were always dancing to it at home.

Whilst were living in Wilmar bungalow the other girls Gert, Vi and Lil still used to sleep in the cottage, so when the time came for us to move back in all was well. Gert got married when I was five years old and I was her bridesmaid , I wore a salmon pink dress and a ring thing on my head. Soon after getting married we moved back into the cottage because Gert and Ack had the chance to move into a little bungalow called Briarash Lodge, it was nice what I can remember of it. That is where Freddie her son was born.

Cottage Life

Now back at the cottage our life with the Bennets and Morriss' went on.

We had a huge walnut tree, it really belonged to Captain Bentley but it was our patch for the tap, which supplied all the water for the four houses, so in a way it was for all of us to share. We used to get in first when they were still in the green husks we would knock them down with old sticks or bricks, whatever we could get hold of but after the first frost they would fall in brown husks (saved our hands from the awful yellow stains). We used to gather them up in our aprons and take off the hairs, we would put some of them in a stone jar then dig a big hole in the ground and dig them up for Christmas. They used to keep really lovely. Mum didn't get them all, we would hide some away in the garden until mum was out of sight. Ivy used to go indoors and get mum's flat iron to break the shells, some were too hard for our teeth. A man used to come to thrash the tree to get the nuts, (the ones we had left) for Captain Bentley, mind you when he was high up in tree we used to run out and pick them up from a big sheet he put on the ground to catch them as they fell. He would shout 'get off you little buggers', but we knew he couldn't reach us. We all used to laugh our heads off.

Betty was the name of Bentley's cook, she would often pop over to see mum and bring leftovers from their meals. So that is how I was named Betty because mum was grateful for all the help she gave her. We used to play in the stables that belonged to them, we would chalk all the walls white and then scrounge some odd bits of nets and curtains and then we would put on a play for our mum's to come and see. We would cadge a halfpenny to go up to Longfield to the shop. He would let us have a small bag of cocktail and lemon crystals. I think it was all the old sugar from the bottom of the sweet jars but it kept us happy. We would put it in the biggest washstand jug we could find and add water so we could give it out at the interval of our play to our audience and to ourselves. Mind you most of our families would come. We would find a large plank of wood and set it on house bricks for them to sit on. Fan Bennet would bring her own chair without a back because she was so fat. We would all have a jolly good sing song and laugh.

In May we would all say 'lets' make Lena May Queen', we would put net curtains all over and a crown of thorns, I mean may, then fill her train up with may and tie some round her wrists and feet. She 'arf' look lovely, we told her. She would keep moaning 'it's prickling me' we used to say 'shut up and start walking' we would make her walk right round the block then sing as loudly as we could 'here we go gathering nuts in May' and stamp our feet, lifting our legs as high as they would go. I never could understand Lena, after all it was an honour to be chosen to be queen. I never even minded! Mind you if it was bath night we had soda in the water so that used to help all her scratches and thorns.

When we bathed it was a long tin bath with handles each end. We would boil the copper, have a hand full of soda and a bar of soap with a lump of old towel for a flannel. The eldest got in first and so on down the line, me being the last. I used to say to Lena 'don't you dare piddle in it, (I am sure she did). We would wash our hair in it with a bar of lifebuoy soap. When we came out our face would be bright red, you would be afraid to smile, it felt like your face would crack, the soda was very strong and dried it out. We used to be right in front of the open fire. Mum used to put a house brick in the oven and wrap it in an old cloth to put in our bed to warm. It nearly broke your toes if you caught them on it. We would have a candle holder to give us light in the bedroom. We were supposed to blow it out and get into bed but we used to leave it on and make shadows on the wall then the others had to guess what they were. We would all get a clout the next day for not blowing it out. Mum knew by the length of it how much we had burned.



Then Lena was very naughty, she pricked 'L.K.' on mum's prize aspidistra plant that had pride of place in the sitting room on a round table and we were never even allowed in there apart from Christmas. Poor Lena she said she didn't do it but WHO ELSE would have done it?

When it was bonfire night we would all make a huge fire, some of our better off friends would come and bring jumping jacks. Mum would let us put large potatoes in the bottom of the fire, it was really great fun. We would make a big old guy and our mums' would be with us. We all used to go to Longfield Hill Sunday School, mum would give us a ha'penny for collection but there was an old lady who used to sell us a sugar bag of red gooseberries for ha'penny so 'sorry god', 'our need is greater than yours'. We had to go to Sunday School because we used to get a text to take home so mum would know. We were never allowed to play on Sundays we had our 'best' clothes on all day, mind you our shoes still had holes in the soles, we used to put cardboard in them. It was lovely when it rained hard! We would turn our stockings round so the holes didn't show. We had navy blue knickers with

fleece lining, nice and warm. We would hang them on the brass knobs of the bed at night to give them an airing. In the morning I would smell them to see which was mine, because mine didn't smell!

Mum used to keep her kilner jars of pickled onions and fruit on a big shelf up the stairs, we would dare Ivy to get a jar down and get us some pickles, which she did. We would push the jar right to the back when we had finished, if mum found out we all had a good clout. Mum didn't go out much she would sit and sew by lamplight. One time when she did go out, Ivy got the hot curling tongs out, they were long handles and two blade things, she would put them in the red hot fire then get them put, try them on a piece of paper (which nearly always caught alight) then she would curl mine and Lena's hair. It would smoke and go all ginger with being burnt, when she finished our hair was so frizzy we couldn't wear a hat. She used to say 'you look just like Princess Margaret and Princess Elizabeth'. We really felt like princesses, we kept touching it but it really did pong! Mum nearly went mad when she saw us – we really did look beautiful! Ivy was so very kind, she didn't even want us to do hers!

We used to pick two sticks from the hedge and take all the skin off to make knitting needles out of them. Mum would give us a ball of twine to knit her some dish cloths. It wasn't half a job, it wasn't half a job you couldn't get the twine over the knots on the sticks but it used to keep our hands busy. Mum would never let us just sit idle, she said the devil made work for idle hands.

Jobs to do

We all had our special jobs to do every day. One of mine was to take a jug of water upstairs and a bucket to empty the 'poes' (that was one of the names for chamber pots of jerries). I hated it they would be so full, I had a job to lift then, you can imagine our room with six girls, three in each bed. I very often spilt them but it was only lino on the floor, so I would wipe it up before mum knew. The water and the cloth was to rinse them out and wipe them dry. Mum would come and see if I had done a good job. Well none of us were ever allowed in my mum's bedroom. After school we were given more jobs to do before we could go outside to play.

Sometimes mum would give us bread and jam sandwiches and a bottle of cold tea to go for a picnic. We used to go down to Broadditch pond, we called it Braddidge. Anyway as soon as we got there we would eat our food and down our tea, then off came our clothes, except for the knickers and in the pond we would go. There were cows in it with us. We had a wonderful time. Mum would have killed us if she knew. She told us there was a big whirlpool in there and once in that one would never come out but all the time the cows were in there we felt safe. After a while it would feel cold so we would put our dresses back on, wring our knickers out and hang them on the fence to dry, then back off home. Mum would say you've had your share of bread today so we didn't get any more for tea. We used to have bread with tea poured over it for breakfast, tea leaves as well. Mum would give Dandy our dog the same

except he didn't get any sugar on his. We just thought everyone lived like we did. Mind you we were not really hungry, just thought we were.



Broadditch Pond, Kent, today

When it was haymaking time we had a huge field just by our house, when the farmer cut it we had a great time in it, they just used to toss it in those days and pick it up loose so he never seemed to mind, or didn't see us playing with it. Roy Morris would help make a house out of it, we would make a big high mound of it and pretend it was our bed. We would lie in the sun, the sky was blue not a cloud to be seen, we would just lay holding hands, listening to the sky larks. He said I will marry you when I'm grown up, I quite believed him.

At night we had the most gorgeous sounding nightingale, it had the most lovely voice never heard anything like it, it would come every night. Did you know that God made all the other birds very pretty but the poor nightingale if very dull and grey to look at, so God said to him I will give you the best voice of all the other birds to make up for not giving you pretty colours and he sure did.

We used to go looking for bird's nests, only to look at them, mum told us if you touch a robin's nest the next day all your hair will drop out. What happens? When I go to school there is a girl there called Dolly Hollands with a woolly hat on which she never took off, so one of the girls pulled it off. WELL, she had most certainly touched a robin's eggs. She was a bald as a bladder of lard. I never spoke to her, ever. If Ivy found a nest all the chicks would be opening their mouths, so Ivy would spit in their mouths, she would say 'the poor things are thirsty'.

We would go into the fields on our way home and pinch a cauliflower and sit and eat it, the taste was just like a walnut.

My brother Fred very often found a nest of chicken eggs. Most people had them running loose those days. He would go where the farmer was cooking potatoes in an old copper for his pigs then he would put the eggs in one of his

socks and put them in the boiling water. They were lovely, best meal of the day. We would peel some spuds to have with them.

He found an old bike so he stuffed the tyres with old hay he thought he looked a right toff riding this rusty old thing. Later in years he had a motor bike, a Norton it was called.

I had a teddy bear, Gert and Ack bought it for me when I was two. When I was old enough I called him 'David Angus'. I kept him and passed him on to my own children. When he was bent over he had a big deep growl, real 'dark brown growl' we used to call it. Lena had a doll it was double jointed she called it Lu Lu silly looking thing, glad it wasn't mine. She did let me play with it sometimes. Ivy wasn't interested she was always getting into bother. She would do anything that we dared her to do she jumped out of the bedroom window and broke her arm three times. She was really good fun.

We used to walk on treacle tins tied with string, with our hands and see who could walk the furthest without falling off.

Our garden was very pretty. Mum made a big archway with laburnum and had lilac and orange blossom, roses and just about everything, it used to smell lovely.

We all seemed to be so happy being poor made no difference. Having no money saved a lot for mum in one way. There was no worry about getting presents, Easter eggs and all that we just didn't think about it.

Well no one can go through life being happy all the time, so it seems. My mum used to say 'life is what you make it'. I said to her one day (thinking I was clever) 'how can you say that when all the awful things have happened to you'. She said it's how you deal with it and that's up to you. So 'life is what you make it'.

Family drama

Well one day something did happen. We came home from school all happy and singing and Gert was at our house. First thing we said to her, 'where is our mum'. She looked us straight in the eye and said 'your mum has run away'. That was the first time we didn't want our bread and jam for tea. We were never allowed to say anything to Gert, so off to bed we go to cry ourselves to sleep. I kept thinking Ivy will think of something. Gert was horrible to us, she hated looking after us, mind you since I have grown up, I suppose she had only been married a short time with a new baby, not many would have taken too kindly to taking us on. One blessing Fred was still living with us. We missed mum giving us a hug and kiss goodnight. Gert most certainly wasn't going to. I used to lie in bed thinking mum would be hiding in a wood. We all thought she didn't love us anymore. We would talk, the three of us in bed, trying to think why and where was she. Gert would never let us talk about

her. We used to kneel by our bed, we always thought God would hear us better if we were kneeling. Gert made us work very hard, not that it hurt us. This went on for about two years but we still said our prayers every night. Gert had another baby boy, she used to say to me put Freddie in the pram and take him outside to get him to sleep. I hated rocking that pram. Then I had a bright idea, if I put him in the sun, he would have to shut his eyes so that's what I did. Gert used to say 'is he asleep'. 'Yes Gert his eyes are shut' and I would hope he would keep his mouth shut as well, poor Freddie.

One day Lena and I heard Gert talking to her husband Ack saying she was fed up with Ivy and thinking of having her put in a 'home'. Well we could not even think about it, so that night we waited for brother Fred to come home. We waited at the corner of our road so that Gert didn't see us. It seemed forever waiting. At last Fred came along, all pleased to see us there to greet him. We both burst into tears and told him what we had heard. We knew Gert would kill us if she found out but Fred told us not to worry he would sort it all out. 'Ivy will NOT go anywhere, you girls must always stay as one family, I will see you do' he said. He told us to stop crying and gave us some biscuits from his lunch box, which was a big treat, we never ever saw biscuits. He went into the house and we stayed down the garden until Fred called us in. When we saw Ivy we told her all about it, she said 'don't worry, I don't care, Gert doesn't love us anyway'. We thought she was very brave. Anyway Gert went back to her own house and Vi came to look after us.

Well as soon as Vi came she was very kind to us, we could talk about our mum. She told us mum did still love us but she had to go away but very soon if we prayed to God he would send mum back to us. Vi would listen to us pray and she would say 'Gentle Jesus' prayer with us, it made life seem much happier. Vi was the first to buy us an Easter egg. I can see mine now, I couldn't bear to eat it for days, I just used to lick it. It had lovely blue violets all iced on it and was so very pretty. I loved Vi to bits for it. Nev, Vi's husband had lived in Ceylon and his mother used to send him parcels. They would have banana leaves all wrapped round them, 'Arf citing'. Not that they had much in for us. Anyway after a while I was nine, Vi called us together and said, wait for it 'how would you like to go and live with your mum'. Well we couldn't sit still. Gert came back on the day of our going. Mum wanted some of the furniture we were packed in the back of this old van. It had a great big tarpaulin over the top, not that we cared, it was such an adventure. We had our hair cut very short because we had 'fleas'. We had coats down to our feet with holes in the bottoms. We must have looked like three waifs and strays but it was so exciting. We seemed to be in the van for ever. I thought it must be the other side of the earth. We did say a big thank you to God, we even blew him some kisses.

New house

As long last we came to mum's house. She came to the van to help us off but she didn't seem to want us as she kept crying. She gave us some food and then she tried to get rid of the 'fleas'. It was so lovely to see her again. I was really

scared she might go off again. Then she said I've got a new dad for you all. Well we didn't want a new dad. We didn't know what happened to our own dad. We just looked after each other. Ivy said he will never be my dad and for sure I will never, never call him dad.

Mum was very cross with her. Now I didn't want to call him dad but I didn't want mum to run away again, so Lena and I didn't say anything. When we went to bed, we said we won't call him anything, so we would just say 'he'. Mum said to me 'when you say God Bless to me at night, you should really say 'God bless to your dad', so after that I never again said God bless mum, it was better than having to say it to him.

Living in Gravesend and Cobham

No. 11 The Overcliffe

We lived at no. 11 The Overcliffe, Gravesend. Old Tom (that's what we called mum's husband). One night he told mum he would take me out with him, I didn't want to go but in those days you had to do as you were told. Well he took me down the water front and he went into this pub, he did bring me a bag of crisps outside. I am left standing in the doorway when an awful storm blew up, thunder and lightning I was scared stiff, much too frightened to move. I could see all the brass inside the pub, mum used to cover all the mirrors and anything else shiny in a storm and take her clips out of her hair also clear any knives and forks from the table so I was sure we would be struck dead with all the lightning. At last he staggered out to take me home. By the way, where we lived was a ground floor flat. When we got home mum was flooded out, there was water everywhere, all the furniture was soaked, so the next day mum went out and got a new flat (it was easy in those days to rent houses).

No. 63 Darnley Road

We moved to no. 63 Darnley Road, Gravesend. It was an upstairs flat this time. Ivy started work at fourteen years. She worked as a housemaid for people at New Barn. She used to catch a bus to and fro. When she was fifteen she had a boyfriend. Tom didn't like this he was always picking on her. Mind you it showed how Ivy really hated him. Lena and I went to St James's school just at the bottom of the road, near Gravesend hospital. It was a funny little school. The teacher gave us lessons on getting babies. She drew a circle on the blackboard and said 'an insect gets into a woman's stomach and forms a baby'. Well I did not believe it but when I went outside to play, the air was full of insects, well I kept my hand tight over my mouth, I certainly wasn't going to chance swallowing any of those blighters.... I did find out at a much later date but that will come later. No good asking Lena...

Anyway getting back to Ivy, she would stay out quite late, mind you that would be about eight or nine in the evening. Old Tom used to hit her (never could understand mum letting him). We asked our friend God to help us again,

please let Ivy get in early but Ivy didn't care she used to say it didn't hurt. She wasn't going to do what he told her to do. We didn't know at the time what was going on.

No. 8 Gordon Place

Eventually we moved to a small house, it was nice, no. 8 Gordon Place down near Gravesend promenade, quite near the Gordon gardens. On Sunday evenings in the summer they would have a big band in the grounds, when they finished they would play the national anthem, I would jump out of bed to stand to attention. Lena used to moan and say 'I will tell mum in the morning' mum only laughed and told me not to keep doing it but it made no difference.

One day I came home from school and mum had gone to the pictures with Lena. I had moved to a new school by now, Saint James had closed and I had to go to Saint Georges right up by Woodlands Park, two miles from our house. I used to come home for dinner, there was only myself and a girl called Marianne Lane who lived in Parrock Street. Everyone else stayed to dinner. Mine was the very first uniform ever made for that school, it cost five shillings and the red sash was one shilling. It was a nice school. Vi gave me the money for the uniform and also bought me a lovely red jumper to wear with it. Lena had just left school at fourteen she was going into Henley's factory to help make gas masks for the war. (hence she was with mum). Anyway as I walked inside the house old Tom was waiting for me, he said 'your mothers not in I'm here on my own with you'. I was really scared. He looked at me oddly. He grabbed me and tried to pull me on his lap, he was shaking, I thought he was having a fit, then he tried to put his hand up my skirt. Well I knew that was really wicked, so I yelled my head off, I was crying and saying I will tell my mum when she gets home. See if I don't.... Well he said I will tell the police of you, they lock kids like you up what tell lies. I said I will tell them about you and he said they won't believe you, when you go up the market you look down near the floor you will see grids on the wall, they whip you every day and keep you in the dark with rats running around. Well I go to the market and sure enough, there are grids so now I am frightened. I just sit and cry. He said there is no need to tell your mother, I only sat you on my lap. I said if you do it again I will tell mum. Oh get out of my sight, so I did. Well I never told anyone. Life carried on for a while. One day I had saved enough money to buy a pint of milk I went up the alley and drank it all. I had promised myself when I grew up I would do this. My god was I sick afterwards, it taught me a lesson not to be greedy!

Poor Ivy

One day Lena and I was playing ball outside our house, when all of a sudden two big policemen came to our house. We were pushed out of the way. When we went indoors mum was crying, she told us that poor sister Ivy had drowned at the place where she worked. She was just sixteen years old. It was awful. She had been such fun to be with. She was buried in Gravesend cemetery, I

wouldn't know where, she didn't have a headstone, in fact she was in a grave with other folk because it was a lot cheaper.

Lena and I used to go to the cemetery to try to find it but we never did. We did do one bit of good though. The posh people used to put glass globes tops with flowers on their graves, well some would have four or five. So we used to share them out and put one on each grave so it was fair! We thought it was our good deed for the day.

Old Tom used to go to sea, he was a stoker on the dredgers, before he married my mum. His name was Tom King (same surname as my dad but supposed not to be related but I often wondered) we were never allowed to ask about anything like that. Mum would say it doesn't concern you madam. So it was best to say nothing.

Moving to Cobham

Time went on then it was time to move to Cobham. Tom had got a job looking as a night watchman over the big guns to be used in the war to shoot the Germans down before they could bomb London town. We had a nice little house, no. 7 The Street, Cobham, right opposite the Old Curiosity Shop. A lady called Mrs Hoppe ran it. Nearby was a café called Little Dorrit that was run by Mr and Doris, Rene and Ken (not married) they were all very nice. We all shared one tap in the back yard and two big wash houses, with two big coppers to do the washing. Lavatories were up the garden but they did have flush away toilets (quite posh).

During the war we had all sorts of troops coming through the village, sometimes they would lean up mum's wall and she would take them out mugs of tea and say 'poor little devils, they are somebody's sons'. They were billeted all over the woods. They lived in Nissan huts. There were three cafes in the street in those days, one in the baker's shop, the Little Dorrit and another old girl Miss Doris Usher opened her house. She used to do eggs and chips, stuff that was cheap and easy, just what the lads wanted, in fact I think they got most things they wanted in the village!

Esme used to be on the switch board some times. One night she spoke to John Mills the actor, he was staying at the Leather Bottle making a film (Great Expectations). Esme had to tell him his time was up on the telephone. She heard his wife say 'how dare they' 'do they know who you are' John Mills said, 'darling they can hear us' so she said 'oh tell her to f... off and you as well'. The next day when he came to the village he looked into the window where Esme was working and tapped on the window, smiled wetly and 'hello'.

About Aunty Esme, she met Richard her husband during the war, he was in the navy and billeted in Laughing Waters grounds in a Nissan hut. She came to stay with me to give birth to her son David. I will never forget, Richard came home on leave, Esme sitting up very proud on my bed, he took one look

at his new son and said 'cor blimey Es he will have to screw his hat on he had so many wrinkles! Poor Es was quite hurt but they were soon all smiles again.

Jen (my daughter) was only five months old, so I had plenty to do. No washing machines then.

A girl in Cobham village

Now to get back to my life as a girl in the village...

I went to Cobham school until I was fourteen, it was a lovely village, everyone knew everyone else and were always willing to help. Mind you everyone knew everybody's little bits of gossip. We had a nurse she lived in the next house up from us, very handy. She would do all sorts of jobs, she was the midwife for everyone but if you had anything the matter with you she could usually fix it. Her name was Nurse Backhouse, she used to plod more than walk. You never saw her hurry. It was too much to pay for a doctor, so she was kept pretty busy. Mr Gander owned the shop which sold everything that people could afford, mind you during the war we all had ration books so you just had all that was due to you. We would hurry into his shop once the word got around that he had golden syrup in. You would have to take your own jar and he would put in the amount you were allowed.

I forgot to tell you that when we moved out to Cobham, Lena and I had to walk out with the dog (another Dandy). He was a nice dog, brown and black not all that big, he was still chained up in the kennel outside, poor thing. When mum wasn't around I would bring him in, he would sit close to the fire, I could nearly smell him burning. I used to have to take him out for all his runs. I was always late for school. I would hear the bell go for us to be in school.

One day mum bought me a brand new pair of plimsoles (9 pence). I ran down the church path chasing Dandy and trod on half a broken bottle and cut right through the plimsole, my foot was bleeding quite badly, the curve of the bottle caught in the soft side of the shoe. When I went home mum was so angry, I had such a hiding. 'I expect you were being silly and not looking where you were going, well you don't get another pair, I can tell you that'. When she wasn't looking I poked my tongue out !

Shelia Sands was one of my friends, so we saved our money and walked over to my sister Gert to go into Longfield village to have our hair permed. It would cost five shillings, took a long time to save it so as we walked out after being made all 'posh' we decided to get a train back to Sole Street, only two stops away. Very exciting. Well when we arrived at Sole Street, we were too far back in the train, we looked out to see only tracks. 'Don't worry' says Shelia they will pull up a bit more in a minute, like hell they did, we went right down to Chatham. We then had to walk all the way home. Mind you we were able to cut across the golf links so that saved a bit of time. We were very tired when we at last got home so we never did that again.

Working at Cobham Hall

The park was full of deer, it used to look lovely. I left school at fourteen and went to work down at Cobham Hall. Mrs Knight who lived near us told mum that Lord Darnley needed people to pick daffodils for him. Mrs Knight to used ride what they called a 'sit up and beg' bike with a basket on the handle bars. So off we go, down the lime trees avenue to the hall. I loved it, money wasn't too good but you never had a big wage whatever you did. We did all different types of work. We were working with Mr Charles Bicker, just the three of us. Even milked the pet cow. One day Lady Darnley came home with this cow, someone had given her. There was a lovely dairy and place to keep her in. We called her Buttercup, she was gorgeous. She used to go for a long walk with Mr Bicker over to a farmer at Thong. He had a bull, when the calf arrived it was so exciting it was a lovely little boy, we called him Billy, he used to suck my belt on my mac. Then he had to go away. I cried to see him go but Buttercup had Daisy next then Tulip. I will tell you more about them later.



Cobham Hall

Then Lady Darnley wanted Buttercup to have an artificial injection so she did and had a boy calf. He was so cute but one day he wasn't well. Lady Darnley said 'don't worry about it Bicker, I am a firm believer in 'faith healing'. He wanted her to call the vet but no she had this woman faith healer, Mrs Gilbert, she looked at the calf, did a few silly hands touching. She said 'I can see rays and powers of healing going right into him' she said 'I am good with animals, because they never resist me like people' (what a load of bunkham). The vet came the next day, the little calf had died in the night. He had swallowed a piece of wire which had got stuck in his tummy, the very said he could have saved him with an operation.

There was a dear old horse in the field, we called him Nobby, no one seemed to own him, he would just roam around with the cows, so he always had hay and water.

Lord Darnley had daffodils named from A to Z they were beautiful. There was a large kitchen garden with eight greenhouses, it had a very high red brick wall all around it. There was a huge potting shed, a big rose garden and a large orange house. We grew white and black grapes, peaches, nectarines, figs,

plums, pears, quinces and russet apples. Flowers grown were out of this world. Such happy days, it was my idea of 'paradise'.

We used to weed and clear all the ground of what was called the 'pleasure gardens'. The old chalet was there that Charles Dickens had done lots of his writing in. It was a very pretty building, you had to come outside to go up the steps into the room at the top. It is now down in Rochester I am told.



Swiss Cottage, Cobham, where Dickens would visit. Photo by Catherine Ward, c.1901. (Kent Archaeological Society collections ref. B04-05)

There was also the coach of Lord Darnley, they used to have the coach and horses to take them up Lime Avenue to the village. The coach can still be seen at Cobham Hall.

Lord Darnley was very tall and most charming. He used to come to see us most days. I was carrying a huge amount of daffodils across the south front lawns, he came across and said 'Betty you could do with a perambulator', he didn't offer to help me though. He married for the third time a lady called Rosemary Potter, a blond bit of stuff, quite nice really. She must have been about the same age as one of his daughters, Lady Marguerite who was a very pretty girl. She was married to a squadron leader Hayward, he was very dashing.

I went to 'Ingamale' flower garden market in London one morning with him driving and my brother in law Neville, on the way home we went to one of the mews in London to see Lady Darnley's mother, Mrs Potter. She gave us breakfast, 'boiled eggs' I felt really ill when I came home so went to the doctor who said I had yellow jaundice. Later on Lady Marguerite had twins a boy Gareth and a girl Lucinda, she used to have very 'posh' clothes on them. Lord Darnley had a son called Adam, he was born on my birthday.

Meeting Ern

One day I was pushing a barrow in the grounds when I saw a dashing looking young man mowing the lawn, he smiled and gave me a wink. I thought my heart was going to stop, it was so exciting. I tried to see him every day after that. Mr Bicker said 'that's my son', well I just couldn't believe it. I kept asking about him, he used to get fed up. After a while we started talking whenever we could. One night, well about five o'clock I was going home from work with Mrs Knight and I stopped to talk to Ern, she dashed off home, went along to my mum and said 'Betty is down the avenue with that boy Bicker'. Mum wasn't very pleased and gave me a right telling off. 'Time enough for you to be with boys when you finish work, just get yourself home my girl, and I mean it'. Mrs Knight used to say to me 'my Ken would make someone a very good husband'. I used to think 'not for me thanks very much'. I did write to him when he went away to war, but he knew about Ern.

After a while, Ern was always mowing I used to walk down the hall after tea and take him some lemonade, I would hold the bottle tight when he gave it back, it was still warm from his hands (so 'citing). I really liked him, it was all I could think of. After a while we started to meet after tea and go for long walks. Even if it was raining hard, we used to stand by the old Forge. My mum used to moan, 'must be mad' she would say, 'I will not have you bring home very Tom, Dick or Harry' I used to think I only want to bring Ern home, but no I couldn't.

Lena was in the land army now, Vi and Lil lived up Manor Road in Sole Street, they had Paddy and Barbara. Lil was expecting another baby. Both of their husbands were in the army.

The Land Army

Mum thought I was too young to take Ern serious, so she packed me off in the land army up in Gloucestershire to be with Lena. We were billeted in a beautiful old place it was called 'The Priory'. It had a big marble staircase and lots of huge rooms, we were six girls to a room in bunk beds. We used to have to cycle ten miles to work every day. We all had tins with our food in, it wasn't wrapped up. The sandwich and cake would all mix together and there was no drink at all.



British Women's Land Army recruitment poster c.1940

We worked with some Irish fellows I think they were nearly all called Michael, they were mostly nice and used to give us tea from their urn and lovely thick slices of bread and bright red jam. Most of them were nice looking, black hair and very blue eyes.

I worked driving Fordson tractors, most times we had one or two guys with us. Anyway I would walk up Cleve Hill, a most beautiful spot (you could see for miles) with one chap, so we met up one Sunday. It was a lovely morning, he met me outside the Priory and off we go, took ages to get right up the top. The view was breath taking, but I think he had other things on his mind. Like a fool he said let's sit down for a while, I was quite glad to. No sooner had we sat down, he came very close to me and started to put his hand up my dress. Well I never thought that was on so I shouted at him, smacked his face and said 'what do you think you are doing?' he just laughed and said in a very strong Irish accent 'to be sure my hand will do ye know harm'. Well you couldn't see my arse for dust. I never spoke to him again.

I knew now I was in love with Ern. I was very home sick. The girls would go out every Saturday night dancing, including Lena. The yanks would 'jitter bug' the night away. I kept writing home saying how home sick I was and missing Ern but mum wasn't concerned, so action had to be taken. When Lena and I came home on leave, I brought my gear home, I knew I would

never go back. It was an awfully long journey, the train was full of troops and we had to stand or sit on our cases all the way home.

Back home

Mum was so mad at me for saying I wouldn't go back. She said it's just a silly crush you have with this boy. Finally, she gave in. I had quite a few ding dongs with my mum. There was a time before I went into the land army. The big guns would make such a noise it felt as if the house would cave in. Well poor Dandy, he would shiver and shake and be wet through with sweat where he was so frightened, so mum decided I was to walk him into Gravesend and take him to the RSPCA to have him put down (they didn't charge any money). I was to wait for his collar and lead to bring home in case we had another dog. Well I cried and cried but I still had to go. So off I trot across the fields, on the way we came across a hay stack so we sat down and cried. I'm sure he knew. I thought 'we will stay here for ever'. Then I got a bit frightened, I thought there might be rats in the hay and they might bite us in the night. So off we go again, it was a long way. He looked round at me when they took him away. I waited for his collar and lead, it was awful. I hated my mum, she had given me some money to go to the baker's shop and get some cream buns, which I did. I finally got home. Lena and mum were sitting in the kitchen, I threw the buns at them and told them I hated them and would never love them again. Mum said 'stop your mouth and get upstairs' I said don't worry that's where I'm going. I couldn't stop crying. I told mum the next day I will NEVER do that again, mind you it didn't get me very far, mum had the upper hand, 'you will do what I tell you' she said. I thought 'right I won't let you know what I'm doing'.

Mind you mum had usually had a cure for everything, she had this way of making you see that what she said was right. Her cure-all cabinet contained soda, salt, blue bag, starch, iodine, Epsom salts, camphorated oil, Vaseline and lint. She used to cut onions up and cover them in dark brown sugar, leave it for a week and that was the cure for colds, we would have a spoonful every day. It tasted quite nice really. If we had a sore throat she would tell us to put the foot of our black stockings on our throat and wrap it round all night. If Lena had an earache mum would pick a large cabbage leaf, warm it in front of the fire and put it against Lena's ear. Lena said it helped (too daft to know different, bless her).

On day my brother Fred had a very large boil on his neck, one of his mates told him to warm a bottle by putting hot water in it then put the neck of the bottle on the boil. Fred did this, well it did bring the boil out but Fred went nearly mad with the pain. We couldn't get the bottle off mum had to smash it to get it off. He had a very bad place on his neck for ages. He didn't get a lot of pity, I think mum thought 'serves you right'. Fred was so lovely. We all loved him to bits. I was bridesmaid to Gert, Vi and Fred.

When I came back from the land army I went back down the hall to work with Mrs Knight and Bicker. Mum had come to terms now about me walking out

with Ern. Ern loved dogs, so he brought a sweet dog whose name was Sandy. Ern was living in the Lodge house which was down the village outside the park (in years gone by, Mrs Knight's parents had lived there). They used to have to open and close the gates for the Darnley's to come through. That is why you mostly see a small lodge house at the entrance to big houses. Cobham Hall is a mansion. Anyway, poor little Sandy caught distemper and we had to have him put down, he used to have the most awful fits. So Ern bought another one and called him Bobby, he was very pretty, brown and white but he was a little bugger. He would chase the cows and sheep, he had hold of one of the sheep one day, when we got hold of him Ern gave him a hiding with his cap and blow me if he didn't go straight over the top of the fence and chase them again.

When we lived up the park we had two little kittens, well one day one of the kittens went missing, we hunted high and low, then down in the wood we hear his crying and found him in an old rotten tree. We brought him back home, his name was Ruffles the other one I used to call Ugly, Barbara used to say 'don't call him that, Aunty, I love him'. But sure Ruffles went missing again, this kept happening so we thought it was very strange. He was always in the same tree, so we kept watch. Along came Bobby, he picked Ruffles up and we followed him and sure enough it was him pushing this kitten into the tree. So we put a stop to his little game.

Before I went to live up the park, we would have Bobby at our house some times. One winter night, snowing hard and bitter cold he went out on his own. Well he didn't come back, we hunted everywhere and told the policeman but he never came home. Then in the early spring Ern and I had to go up in the woods near the keeper's cottage called The Mount. Mr Preston was the keeper. We had to pick early daffodils in bud to sell for 'Lordy', they were named lent lilies (very tiny little flowers with a nice scent). Well you won't believe it..... but lo and behold lying on the ground was our Bobby, the snow had preserved his body and we could see all the shot up one side of him. Well I nearly went crazy 'it's that rotten keeper' I said to Ern because he was always carrying a gun to shoot foxes. So down to the police station I go and said 'it's that rotten keeper' 'you mustn't say that' said the policeman. I was sure it was him, anyway the police had a written statement from Mr Preston saying he didn't shoot our dog but the police said they would find out who owned guns. Well it turned out it was Mr Russel, Mr Pye's foreman, he said he shot what he thought was a fox. Ironically two weeks later he was found shot in the same wood, supposed to have been an accident but I will tell you about that later.

Hop picking



Hop picking

When we were still young, we used to go down to Yalding to go hopping. We had some good fun. We used to stay in an old barn next to the pub in Laddingford, The Chequers, the one I mentioned earlier. All the old Londoners' would come down and stay in the old hop huts. There were loads of them. They would sing all day, filthy dirty most of them and kids galore, I thought they were great fun. They would pinch anything they could lay their hands on, even chickens. When hopping pay day came, what a party, they would bring the piano out of the pub and dance and sing all around the pub green. They all got drunk, even the women! We used to do the Lambeth Walk with them and the noise could be heard miles away. Old Tom would come down at the weekends (worse luck). We only had this one room in the barn. Lena and I slept in a very old bed in a dark corner, mum had another bed right up the other end, well Tom gets drunk as usual and 'dirty old sod' wet mum's bed through. We spent all next day trying to wash the sheets and blankets and get them dry. If I had been mum I would have killed him.

Sunday mornings Uncle Percy would take us over 'Daddy's Bridge' over the river Medway to go in his rowing boat. Lena, myself, Ruby and Gerald, they were Percy's two children. It was lovely, he was very good at rowing the boat. It was so pretty, all the wild flowers, king fishers and dragon flies also lots of different birds. We would go a long way and coming back he would let us have a jam jar on a string to dangle in the water to catch really tiny silver fishes. I loved every minute of it. I could never understand my uncle Percy, he would talk so fast I didn't catch what he said. He and his wife Aunt Lil. He and his wife Aunt Lil would have their dinner on Sundays send the kids out and lock the door then go to bed. He liked his beer, they must have been very tired don't you think!

We also used to go hop picking on Mr Pye's farm at Cobham during the war years, it lasted seven weeks. Whenever the air raid siren went off and the 'planes came over we used to have to run in the woods for shelter so that they didn't see us. Mum would give us 'hop pocks' (big yellow sacks) to put on our

heads, it made one feel safe but I don't really think they were any good...still it was all in the mind.



Children hop picking

Doodle Bugs and plane crashes

When I worked on Mr Lawrence's farm, one day a 'plane (one of ours) tried to limp home to the airdrome but it didn't make it and came down in the potato fields and killed two of the women workers. One was my friend Florrie Vouseden's mum the other was Mrs Redsell's sister. It was awful. Will tell you more later. We had another plane come down at Henhurst and killed Mrs Dine, knocked her house nearly all down.

Mind you it was really frightening, the doodle bugs were even worse. You could hear them buzzing very loud and then suddenly stop. Everyone held their breath until you heard the huge bang. There would be a lot of shrapnel dropping from the big guns which would kill you if they hit you. I was always scared they might drop gas bombs. I wouldn't like to live through that again. We were the lucky ones.

I wish you could have seen how people were in those days, it was so different. People always had time to stop and speak to you and always were very helpful. The good times and the bad I suppose. Old Tom was the worst thing in our lives, he would always manage to be out of work when mum went hop picking, so he would want half of her money.

Mum takes ill

One day mum was taken very ill, the doctor came and said she must go to the hospital at once, he was afraid her appendix would burst. So in she goes. That night Tom sat in the kitchen with Lena and myself. He said to Lena 'Bet will have to sleep with me tonight, look at me. I am shaking like a leaf'. I said no way. Lena said if she does, I'm going as well. Well this shaking bit I had seen before, as you will remember. Anyway he made us get into his bed, first time

I can ever remember being so near to Lena. We kept well over our side. He had been drinking, so we soon heard him snoring. We quick as we could, got out then heard 'where do you think you are going' we just ran in our room and blocked the door so he couldn't get in. The next morning about three am (it was damp and foggy) I woke Lena and said 'come on we are going over to Sole Street to find Vi and Lil', it seemed a long way but we finally got there, we had a job to wake them up. We told them about Old Tom, we were also very worried about our poor mum. They said don't worry we will see about it, they gave us some food to take to school. I thought about it all day. Vi and Lil said don't tell Tom anything. We were hardly indoors (Tom was in his usual place right in front of the fire) when in through the door came my brother Fred, Tom got up 'hello Fred mate' he said going to shake hands with Fred.

Fred got hold of him by the throat and gave him such a bashing his nose was bleeding. He dropped to the floor and begged Fred to forgive him. Fred said 'if mum wasn't so ill I would kill you, if you ever try anything again I will come back and finish you off'. He took us to one side and said 'don't ever tell mum what has happened, but you tell me if he does or says anything to you again, I don't think he will'.

Well we go to the hospital on Sunday to visit mum, who was doing quite well, she said 'poor dad fell over and hurt himself and he's got a very sore throat, he has a job to talk'. Lena and I just looked at one another. It was a lovely feeling to see him look so uneasy. Forever after that he was very wary of what he said and did.

Now it was very clear what had been going on, he had no doubt tried his tricks with all of us, Glad, Ivy, Lena and myself.

It was also clear to me now why Ivy had died. I was not supposed to have seen the newspaper but I did the day after Ivy died, on the front page of the paper the headline read 'Girl Commits Suicide'. I know in my heart that it was what Ivy had done, knowing her as I did, but they brought in the verdict as an accident. I hated Tom even more.

Soon after this Vi came to live next door to mum. Dolly Mrs Knight's sister moved away. Lil came to live opposite the Darnley Arms.

Before I met Ern I had several boy friends like you do. I fancied Roy Morris and Stanley Jackson. Then at different places Teddy Tall, Bobby White, David Ralph, Ken Knight, Len Barden and my Norman Beckham. My Norm was lovely, he had very black curly hair and really blue eyes, he was really nice but he was so shy he would go bright red whenever I spoke to him. He had three brothers, one died at twelve and another was killed in the war. I fancied Ern, I told Norm and he cried, I felt really mean. When he was old enough he joined the army and was sent abroad where he was very badly wounded and sent home for a long stay in hospital in Blackburn. His mum used to live in Battle Street, Cobham. I've only seen him once since then and it was not to speak to.

Now for another yarn...

When we lived in Gravesend we didn't live far from the swimming baths as you know. My mum said you are not allowed in the water until you can swim, so I had an old chair without a back on it so that I could practise. I would put my tummy on the chair and move like a frog, arms and legs going like the clappers. Very good I used to think to myself. So dear Gert knitted Lena and me two swimming suits, 'arf lovely', bright red, mine with a big blue letter B and Lena's was a big L. On Sunday morning you could get into the swimming baths for a penny (that was if you went at seven o'clock). So off we go, put our swim gear on, hat on (mine nearly covered my eyes as well as my hair). It was so exciting, very cold, we put our bands on our legs (we were the only two in there) walked down the steps giggling as well as shivering, got really wet. Well you should have seen the water, all the red dye came out of the wool and when we stood up the crutch of our costumes were around our ankles, we tried to grab it up and tried to wring out the water, the thin little straps looked like string, it was awful. We never wore them again. So I still swim on my chair with all my clothes on...

We could get into the pictures on Saturday mornings for a penny to see Roy Rogers etc. We all used to sing when we got there:

'Oh come along and join the party,

Let's enrol you as a chum with all your pals so gay and hearty,

You can hardly wait for Saturday to come.

So along at every meeting the Majestic takes some beating,

That's why I shout whoopee, I'm glad I am a union chum'.

We would shout as loud as we could. The film used to follow on just when Roy Rogers was caught in a huge fire...will he get out, see next week. We just couldn't wait to see. Mind you Trigger his horse was so clever.

We had to go to church every Sunday. At Easter time most people would have a new outfit. Lena had a new coat and hat in blue, it was 'Deanna Durbin' style. She did look nice in it though, bless her.

In the winter the ice would freeze on the pond at the bottom of Battle Street, it was not all that deep. We, the whole gang of us would go down on a full moon night to slide on it, being moonlight made it more exciting, boys had to hold us up. None of your 'hanky panky' then 'honest'. I still didn't know where babies came from let alone know how to make them, we must have been a bit thick.

Years ago we used to have a big block of salt, like a loaf. We used to grate it to put it in a salt cellar, also the nutmeg would look like an acorn, it was a swine to grate. When mum made the puddings for Christmas we would have to grate the suet which came in a big skin. Thus the saying, 'a bladder of lard'. We would all have to help clean the fruit and take all the seeds out. It took a long time and then we would have to go out the next day to the hop fields and find all the old bits of poles and bring them home. Mum would poke them up the copper hole and put a stick across the copper to boil for about six hours, it took ages and they would be made six months before they were needed.

Mum used to keep the bars of carbolic soap in a big box so it went very hard, it would last longer then.

We would pick sage and wash it then hang it up to dry and then put it in brown paper bags to hang in the pantry.

Wash day was all day. Mum would wash it put all the whites in the copper, take it out, then what she would call 'sudsit'. Put it in clear water, rinse it again then put it through the water that had a 'Reckitts blue bag' in a little muslin cloth. Then starch what was needed and put it all through a big wringer with big wooden rollers and finally peg it on a line and prop it up with a big two pronged pole (just a pole each end to hold it tight). I hated wash day.

Dinner would be mashed potato and swede. Poor mum would be wet through with sweat, but she loved to see it blowing in the breeze. I can never remember seeing it get wet with rain.

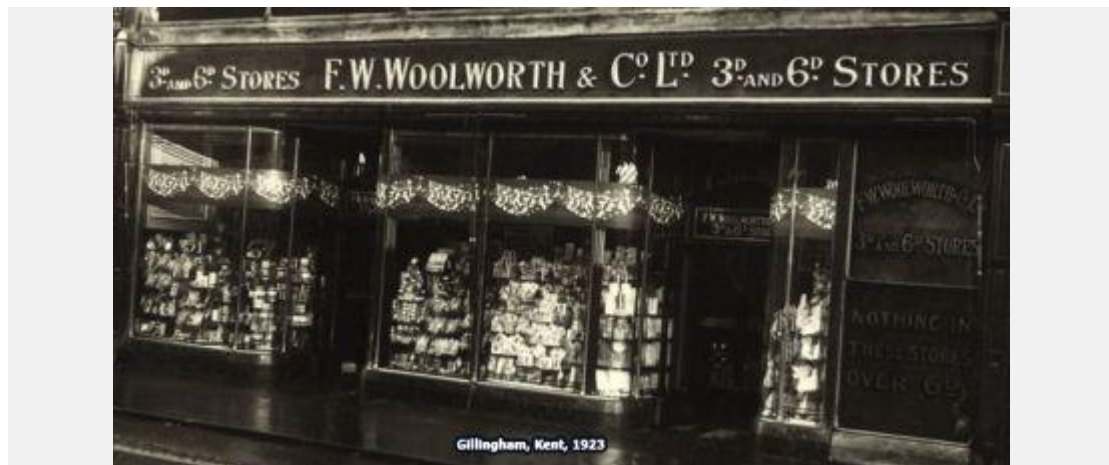
My brother Fred mended our shoes. When he was angry, which wasn't very often, he would only have to look at us and 'dearo dearo dearo' we would be off like a shot. He was really lovely. We were all proud of him. He built a shed for himself which he used to bath in. His mates would come round and he would put on boxing gloves to spar around. He and Lil got on very well, Lil would have a go at most things, ride on the back of his motor bike. They were always singing and Lil would yodel.

Getting back to Mum's Dad, he used to wear 'toe rags'. They could not afford socks, so he would take a strip of old sheeting and before he went out he would bind it round his feet before putting on his boots. Mum said he would do it very neat. They used to wear 'combinations' 'coms' for short in those days. Men and women wore them. They were like vests with long sleeves and long legged knickers, which came down to your knees, all in one piece. They had a big opening front and back which you just pulled apart to use the toilet. They were made of woollen material which must have made one itch like mad (worse than your petticoat Em).

Food and shops

This is a bit about the food and shops we had. The cheese would be in a thick muslin, round in shape and weighed fifty six pounds before being cut. They would take the muslin off and then a thick skin or rind as they called it. The balls of Edam cheese would cost about 2/6d each for a whole one. Dried peas were sold by the pint, they were all in a large hessian sack on the floor of the shop, they used to have a little block of soda to cook in with them. Dates would also be in one big block and they would cut out how many you wanted.

Woolworths was a six penny store nothing was sold over sixpence, they had a rail that went around the stores quite high, the girls would put your money in a little box then put it on this line and pull a lever which would take your money to another assistant who would take it out and put your change into it, then it would run round this bar and bring it back to you. There was always a chair for people to sit on, you needed to sit and wait for your change.



Woolworths, Gillingham, Kent, c.1923

Drapers was another old shop in Gravesend, they sold all really old fashioned gear like fleecy petticoats, long johns, bodices and even fleecy knickers, they used to have three farthings on all of their stock. Then there was Caveys, they used to give you pieces of tin money, after you had collected so many you could get something with it (like reward cards of today). We would get three pen'oth of chips and a big bag of crackling from Maxfield's fish shop. The fish was nine pence a piece. Milk was tuppence for a pint, the well off kids at school could have little 1/3rd pint bottles of milk for a half penny (too dear for us kids).

As school we had a desk with a hole for the inkwell, we had to dip our pens in it for writing.

The used to sell live animals at the market in Gravesend, dogs, cats, birds, rats, mice even monkeys. By the side of them would be a man selling roasted chestnuts on top of an old barrel. They used to smell lovely. You could also take a basin and get it full of ice cream from Papa's ice cream parlour for six pence.

Back to Cobham

Now to get back to my youth in Cobham. As I said Vi lived next door to our mum, she now had Barb and Glenys (Gen Gen always called her). She was very tiny but she was the most stubborn child I have ever come across. Well Vi wanted to move up into the house in the wood, right up in Cobham Park past the Mausoleum, very lonely. It was a lovely house, Neville was away in the army so mum decided that I would have to go and live with her and the children. Well we were both very frightened at night so it was decided that Ern came up there to live with us. It was only three bedrooms, I had to sleep downstairs in the sitting room. I couldn't understand why Ern couldn't sleep downstairs. Vi's bedroom had a small nursery leading straight off from her room. There was a huge cellar under the house which had lots of room and was very cold. The sitting room was big, then a hallway with red brick flooring and a kitchen. There was no electricity and in the summer no water. Ern and I would take a big bath down to the farmer's house to bring water back, the farm was called Knights Place. We were very happy living there. At Christmas Ern would cut the top from an old Yew tree or Holly and Vi and I waited until all the nippers were in bed and then we would titivate it with all the bits of toffee papers and made pom poms out of wool. We took a Dr White's (sanitary towels) to bits for cotton wool and cut silver bits from chocolate wrappers (which we mostly found along the way) and hung holly berries from cotton. We put flour on the earth to look like snow and in the morning Ern would build a nice big log fire then play carols on his mouth organ. We would then call the children to come and see it. On top of the tree we put a star made from cardboard. If you could see their little faces, it made us want to cry. Then we would all sing carols together. For lunch we would have pheasant and rabbit pie for tea. The children would help me making mince pies. After tea we would play I spy or hunt the thimble, saying 'hot' or 'cold'. If we had a balloon we would play for hours until it burst on the holly above the pictures. We would tell those stories and then have a sing song with Ern playing his mouth organ and the rest of us with a comb and paper. If nothing else it tickled your lips and made the kiddies happy. They were really lovely kids.

When I said we lived up the park, it was past the Mausoleum which was built like an Egyptian pyramid it had been built for Lord Darnley's family when they died. It was a lovely building and had an altar up the front steps and when you went round the back and down the deep steps there were all the divisions for coffins. It was really a vault but it was never consecrated so therefore they could not bury anyone there. It had a six foot or more spiked fence around it, shame it has been ruined now by hooligans. I won't tell you what was painted on the walls, some very funny things, it is so sad how these things happen.



The Cobham Mausoleum today

One night I was walking with Pam through the wood, she said 'Aunty what is the moon' it was a very windy night when the clouds raced across the sky, well I said 'God made the sun to give us nice warm days so we could leave our coats off and he gave us the moon so that when it is dark we can see the way'. Just after saying this, the moon popped through the clouds, we were just going by the mausoleum she looked and said 'good old God, thank you'. I am sure he heard her.

Barbara used to walk all the way down to Cobham school on her own, bless her. We would hear her coming home long before she reached the house, she would be singing 'coming home my darling, coming home to you'. I think she heard Vi, her mum, singing this often.

Ern and I would go out every evening setting snares for rabbits and very often a pheasant or two and enough wood for Vi for the fire next day. One night we had been out in the pouring rain and Ern shot a hen pheasant. Now we tried not to let the children know about them, so we would take them straight in the back shed, which was behind the house. Well this night we went into Vi and said we have put the rabbit (and winked to let Vi know what we meant) in the back shed. After a while Pam came down from her bedroom wanting the lavatory, so we said 'well hurry up and get back to bed'. She was only a minute when she came back I hear her say to Barbara 'they told mummy it was a rabbit, but it sure looks like a brown chicken to me'.

Ern kept the garden filled with veg, he grew some lovely little cucumbers but our silly cat used to eat them as they grew. We also had a black Leghorn chicken, her name was Clara Cluck, she would crow very loud every morning but she used to lay lovely brown eggs. The children would hold her, she never used to mind.

After a while they put a barrage balloon up near our house, they were very nice lads. They would chat away to Barb on her way home. That was when the doodlebugs were coming over. The siren was at Singlewell it was called Wailing Winnie, it would give one long blast when the danger was over and wailing ones when the air raid was on. It made ever such a loud noise. We all breathed a sigh of relief when it was over.

Then Vi gave birth to little Nev, Glenys was only about fifteen months old and being so tiny made it look worse. Anyway Vi was getting a bit fed up with being up the park, Neville was hoping to get out of the army soon. Ern and I were hoping to get married. Mind you, I loved living in the wood. We used to watch the bracken peep through in the spring and get to beautiful ferns by summer, then come autumn it was gold, it was so lovely. To this day I never see bracken without re-living those gorgeous years we had. To be in love with the most handsome guy and walk hand in hand through the park stealing a kiss here and there. Also sometimes we would see the deer and their fawns and dad close by with his big antlers, on guard. Rabbits running here and there and listening to the pheasants calling to each other, it made up for everything else that had happened and having no money. We didn't even feel poor, I would lie in bed at night and think how lucky we were. I felt secure now I had Ern by my side. Mind you I had always had a lot of love from my sisters, not Gert so much but I knew Fred loved me 'cos he told me so and I now had my very own man to love me. Sorry I am getting a bit carried away sounds like a Mills and Boon yarn. *Just you remember the most important thing in life is to be loved, you can do without money but to be loved you can deal with anything else.* It always got me through everything in life, sometimes you feel as if no one in the world cares or understands you. You think 'I'm not like other people, I'm sure they don't feel like I do about things' but deep down they do. Anyway sorry I get a bit carried away. We asked Lord Darnley if he could find work for Neville, he said 'yes and you can come and live in the Hall', so we moved down there. By this time Vi was expecting another baby.

Ern and I decided to get married, we still didn't have any money. Our new address was: Chauffeur's Quarters, Cobham Hall, it was where years before Lord Darnley's chauffeur lived. Mrs Knight (who I mentioned before) her husband was the chauffeur.

Another little tale while on the subject, Lord Darnley's mother, the Dowager of Cobham Hall moved to a place called 'Puckle Hill', now I am going back seventy six years. Mrs Knight had Doris and Irene, she lived in the gate house of Puckle Hill, then Ken was born he is now fourteen months old. Mrs Knight waited for her husband to come home, (thought he cannot be driving the

Darnley's around this late) so she went down to the big house (by the way it was right in the middle of a huge wood) to look for him. When she went by the garage he was in there with the head cook from the house....Well you can imagine they went mad at each other. Anyway Mrs Knight said he went off with the cook that very night and she never saw him again!

One day I will show you where all this happened. Mrs Knight hated men after this, Doris has never even had a boyfriend, she is ninety years old as I write this. Rene lived it up a bit, but sadly Ken died in his sixties, it must have been like the series 'Upstairs Downstairs'.

Another story was one of the servants at Cobham Hall fell in love with one of the Lords, so she went up to the top of the pleasure grounds to one of the big ponds and took all her clothes off and jumped in and drowned herself.

Another yarn was about a girl called Peggy Taylor who was madly in love with one of them but she walked up the pleasure grounds and went out to the golf course and hung herself. The path she took is still called Peggy Taylor's walk.

There was also a gorgeous marble seat and shelter where Charles Repton did lots of his writing you may come across his name in history books.

I cannot begin to tell you all the different yarns.

Ern and myself

Now to get back to Ern and myself. We saved twenty pounds (felt like millionaires). Ern's Gran was selling her home furniture well we went out on our bikes to have a look at it all and it looked good as it sat in her house, we couldn't afford much anyway. So we gave Gran our money (the whole twenty pounds). When we went back to get it the rest of the family had taken what they wanted and we were left with all the junk. There were straw pallias's (I didn't know what they were used for) my mum said years ago people slept on them instead of mattresses. There were two pictures which took up all the wall (of Queen Victoria's funeral) a towel rack full of wood worm and a round table that tipped up when you leant on it and a big iron bedstead with big brass knobs. Anyway we bought it all back to Mrs Bicker's lodge until we had a place of our own to live.

Getting married

We had a cheap wedding at the Registry Office on 14th October 1947 (same day as my mum's wedding). Lord and Lady Darnley came to see us on the morning of our wedding, shook hands and gave us a lovely cake. We had just a few people back to the hall and a very small buffet. I had a couple of Land Army girls, Tim had quite a laugh with them, it was a really bright full moon, we all walked up to the village in the evening it was great. Vi gave birth to a baby girl on 27th October 'Trudy' so I was kept pretty busy

as housekeeper for them all, seven days a week. Mum used to get cross, she said they expected too much of me. Anyway when Vi was up and about (in those days you would stay in bed for two weeks) I told her we were going to look for a place of our own, she said 'Why? We get on so well' which we did but we also wanted to start off on our own. Ern went to see Mr Lawrence the farmer. He said if Ern was willing to train for pruning trees he could have work.

Mr Lawrence was the main figure in the village. Mrs Wilson was his sister she had a lovely photo of her and her brother taken when they were presented to the Queen. Mrs Wilson had one son John, he was not interested in the farm. Mrs Lawrence was mostly in a wheelchair, she had three miscarriages so they didn't have any children. Such a shame because Mr Lawrence was a real toff, such a lovely man (to look at as well as his nature). He was a Justice of the Peace as well as President of the Agricultural Committee. Anyone who needed help, he knew the answer. He let us move into a Nissan Hut down Lodge Lane until he had a house vacant on the farm, it was huge and very nice if we had some furniture for it !!

Mr Lawrence said Bert Bower can move your things for you, well really we could have put them in a pram. When Bert came I felt awful, he was a right old gossip! He put our bits in the lorry, they all fitted in one corner for Mr Lawrence. The first night in the hut was awful. We sat without music, there was no noise at all, we both looked at each other and said 'Isn't it horrible not having Vi's children around us'. We had never been without them, always playing snap or snakes and ladders or just playing with them. I didn't tell Vi.

After six weeks of living in the hut Mr Lawrence said the house at Round Street 'Sunny-Side' is available, you can move in any time so if you want to go and see it you can. Well we came round to have a look. A Mrs Holmes was living there but Mr Holmes had died. I most certainly did not want her moving out on my account so I went to see Mr Lawrence but he said Mrs Holmes wanted to go to live with her sister who lived at Brighton and had two teenagers. So I went to Mrs Holmes to make sure that it was true. I told her we were in no hurry to move in but she had made all her plans, so on the 1st May 1948 we moved to Sunny-Side. I loved everything about it. We had hardly anything, nothing on the floors and no curtains but still we didn't mind too much. We had each other. BIG THRILL I thought I was pregnant. You didn't go to see the nurse early, in those days you waited until your waist thickened. We were so thrilled, Ern went to the lodge to tell his mum, she said 'surely that could have been avoided' I could not believe her. Mind you I wondered how we were going to manage. I suppose that is what she thought.

We were so happy. We used to walk in the cherry orchard in the evenings, the birds would be singing. I used to stand and watch the bumble bees on the blossom. They looked like they had little yellow wellies on with all the pollen on their legs. They looked like black and yellow velvet.

Having a baby

We had a little canvas crib given to us, so we tivated it all up, Ern made a v shaped top 'It arf looked posh'. We put muslin all round it and wait for it a Big Blue Bow, I got really excited about it. We never stopped talking about it when we were on our own. I kept saying to mum 'What's it like mum how will know when it's on the way'. 'Don't worry my girl. You will know soon enough, it's no picnic'. But I used to think it cannot be that bad for mum to have had ten.

Mum said I could go up to have my baby in her house, so that gave me a nice safe feeling. I said 'What happens at first' she told me how it should start with a small plug of jelly followed by back pains then front pains, so now I was all ready for the word go.

Mr Bates daughter who lived opposite us used to do a taxi business, she said she would take me when the time came, up to the villages for three shillings.

Nurse Backhouse used to call in once a month to feel my tummy and tell me all was well. She did not come the last month just said I will come when you call me for the birth. She said the baby should come on 29th August, she was nearly always right and was very good.

A week before I was due I got out of bed and was bleeding quite a lot so panic panic. I go up to my mum. Doctor Hasler came to see me and said I had a small opening but it was the afterbirth (placenta) breaking away. He told me to take things easy. Anyway Mrs Walker lived opposite my mum she told me I could walk down her garden which was nice and private and down to the college lane. I did not want to be seen by folk. When at last it was time for the nurse to come in, Nurse Backhouse was on her day off. So you will not believe it but a nurse Backaline was called, she was very old, she had been with my mum when I was born. So they had a lot to chat about while I was in agony. In those days one had to lie on your side to give birth. I did not even want to take my knickers off in front of my mum. Nurse kept saying 'bear down dear' I thought she meant bow over. Eventually my mum said 'just strain girl as if going to the toilet' I understood then, so after what seemed a lifetime I gave birth to a lovely baby GIRL!!! Eight and a half pounds, mind you she was beautiful lots of black hair and all nice and round. I found a small pink bit of ribbon out of one of mum's bed socks to put on the crib. Mum was very proud. Mrs Walker gave me a very pretty 'Vyella' dress, it was ever so posh. In those days you kept them in long nighties for six weeks and long petticoats we called 'beds' (can't think why). They had 'belly binders' and a cork with cotton wool over their tummy button so that it would be nice and flat.

I had to stay in bed for ten days, everyone did. The day you got up, the first place you went was to church to give thanks for the Lord for safe delivery. It was always called 'being churched'. Only myself, mum and the vicar. You were considered very wicked if you did not go.

Now my baby was the best one ever. She was so good, always feeding and sleeping (still very good at it now). She was really pretty with big brown eyes and fair hair, we loved her to bits. Ern used to say will I ever see her awake. She was such a happy baby. I fed her myself for nine months. We were so

happy, still broke but money could never buy us such happiness. I felt a bit like the nightingale, God gave us a pretty baby to make up for not having any money.

Ern cut the tall irons off our bed to make it a bit more modern, mum gave me a very old twill unbleached sheet so I bought a green dye to make it look like a bedspread, I thought it looked very 'posh'. We painted liquid lino (also green) on the kitchen floor which was cement, so it was very easy. We bought some cheap lino for the sitting room as that had a wooden floor, it was more like cardboard, it nearly broke up when you touched it. We varnished a border where the lino didn't reach, it was the biggest border I had ever seen. I had an old jute mat given to me, I couldn't shake it because it would fall apart, so I used to use a dustpan and brush, before that I had used a shovel (none of your hoovers for me). My sisters had them but we could manage with what we had ('little heros'). I had a small kettle which we put in the Kitchener (stove), you could open the top of the stove and pop the kettle down in and we had a cup of tea in no time.

When I first moved here in 1948 I had an old bucket lavatory, it had to be emptied every day (lovely job). I was lucky because in August they put us cisterns and flushes in.

I must tell you this, the workmen were nice chaps. I had only one smock before Jen was born. In those days you tried to hide your bump. Anyway I washed it out in the morning brought it in and put it on to walk up to see my mum. One of the workmen looked at me and said 'I hope that's not damp love', funny what one remembers.

Cobham Hall, badgers and daffodils



Cobham Hall postcard c.1900

Now a few more yarns from Cobham Hall. One morning Lord Darnley told Ern's Dad (Mr Bicker) that a badger had fallen into the swimming pool, it was

lucky because it was dry at the time. It had been a lovely pool in its time. They reckoned Lady Marguerite would run across the south front lawns 'naked' to jump into the pool. Mind you it was very private so I suppose she made the most of it. It was a gorgeous spot, the lawns sloped down and it was next to the 'acacia gardens' (they were beautiful trees, covered in white blossom and the leaves were shaped like little French nickers and the most sweet smelling). I do get carried away, I relive every moment that I am writing about. Anyway we had a large plank put down and up the side of the pool. Mrs Knight had one side and me the other, we stood at the top with long poles to prod and poke the blessed thing he was very big and fat, black and white with a long nose. It took us ages to coax him out but in the end he ran up the plank and away to the cover of the trees.

We used to plant hundreds of daffodils, all those you see down the hall are what we put in.

Mr Bicker used to be the grave digger for Cobham so when he used to be off I was left to milk Buttercup and Daisy the cows. He was very good at digging graves. He would have to measure the ground to get it about right, it had to be the shape of the coffin, people were very fussy in those days. They put green netting stuff all around so that no one saw the earth. It wasn't an easy or nice job, he used to get ten shillings for doing it. When he had an old grave he said that sometimes the old coffin would cave in. I will tell you more about that later.

Anyway when we used to be planting bulbs we would have three barrows filled with them, we had a special tool for planting them, one at a time, right way up. One day Mr Bicker said 'I will leave you two to plant them, it is four o'clock and I have to go to milk the cows'. Off he trots, well we looked at each other, we both decided we were fed up so off we go up the Avenue, we took two barrows and we just broadcast them under the trees and covered them with leaves. When Mr Bicker came back, he just looked at us and said 'Didn't take you two buggers long to get rid of them did it' we said 'No we have really worked hard while you have been away'. We had a good old laugh about it BUT next spring I think every one of the blighters had grown. Mr Bicker said he didn't recall planting that lot. They did look pretty. I think even Lordy thought they looked nice.



Daffodils at Cobham Hall

Ern would shout his father's name just like Lord Darnley, it used to be so funny, we would hide behind the shrubs when we knew his dad was close by, he used to like to be with Mrs Knight on her own sometimes, so we would wait, then Ern would shout very loud 'BICKER' his dad would run out from where he was, come past us and say 'Watch it, the old mans about' meaning Lord Darnley. We had so many laughs. Mr Bicker never found out it was Ern.

Sometimes when it was snowing, we used to go inside the hall, it had lots of flat roofing, so it let the water in, so we would go in to mop some of the water up. Used to be quite interesting. When we worked outside every morning we had a place called Pinkies Hut, a man called Pink once lived there. We used to light a big fire, put the kettle on and have our ten o'clock break and again in the afternoon. It was really cosy, we had chairs to sit on and an old sack on the floor, we used to dry our clothes off as well. When we had to cut tall flowers we would get soaked, like Lupins, Delphiniums, Manarda, Dhalia, Plox of all colours, Tulips and even Snowdrops. We would put them like a little posy with ivy leaves around them. Sometimes we would get an order for a hundred bunches for the florist, so we were kept pretty busy. I got on well with Mrs Knight, her name was Emily, she had lived in the village since she was a young girl.

Tom Kingman worked down the hall in the kitchen garden (nice looking chap). He was Bill Kingman's brother (you know Aunty Min's husband). He told us he had his calling up papers to go into the army. He came down to see us just before he was being sent too war. Next news was he was killed first time out. I cried when I heard the news, he didn't want to leave the hall, it was so sad. His poor mum never locked her door and always left her light on, she was sure he would come home to her. She was about to have her 100th birthday, (she lived all alone in a bungalow in Manor Road, Sole Street called Glengarrie) when one night she put her electric blanket on and it smouldered

and she was suffocated with the fumes. Poor soul, she had always looked after herself and got around right up until the end. She had one daughter, her name was Nellie. One day she was walking along the pathway on the Meopham road on a Sunday afternoon when a motor bike mounted the footpath and it killed her instantly. She was doing someone a good turn at the time, she had been to Nurstead to feed someone's cat. It was tragic, some folk get more than their share of sorrow. They were a big family, lots of boys.

Getting back to Mum, she had a big black and white dog named 'Chuff' we were walking over the church fields one day, I was about six months pregnant with Jen, when out of nowhere came this huge dog. Our dog was on a lead, this beast flew at Chuff, they had a terrible fight, I was scared stiff. I kept saying to mum 'Let go of the lead' but mum wouldn't. A man came along, the shepherd (owner of the dog) pulled the dog away, when I looked at Mum her hand was bleeding really badly. I kept crying I was so worried about my poor Mum. She just kept saying don't get yourself all upset, think of your baby. When we got her to the hospital they thought at first she would lose one of her fingers but luckily they were able to make it better. Mind you mum could never use it after that as it was always bent. After that she found a good home for Chuff, he went to a farmer somewhere. One thing for sure, I wasn't going to have anything to do with it. Remember Dandy?

Now I must tell you this, my mum attended all of us girls at the birth of our babies, except for Lena (she went into hospital for Les) mum told me after Rob's birth 'that's the very last baby I will deliver' she said and it was.

Mum should have been a midwife

When Lil lived in Manor Road Sole Street 'Glendale' she was giving birth to Maureen, mum was on her own the nurse and the doctor were already with someone else. Mum was very good but when the baby came Mum said she had never seen anything like it, first the baby did not cry and she had a thick skin all over her, by this time the baby was going blue, mum was worried sick, then she noticed a pucker of skin on her shoulder, mum said she took a chance and pulled at it, it came away like a big plastic bag. Mum kept pulling and it came away from all over her body, then the baby started to cry so did mum. When the doctor arrived, he said 'Well done Mrs King, you have saved her life'. He said he had seen this before but it was most unusual, it was what was named a 'caul' it was in fact just a skin that sometimes forms on the baby as it grows, he said years ago they used to give them to sailors for 'good luck'. The saying was that you would never go down if you owned one of them (horrid thought). Mum burnt it along with all the rest of the rubbish, that was another belief. My mum always stuck to it as well. The saying was when the birth was over you had to burn the afterbirth, otherwise you would have bad luck and the baby would not survive. Good job they had closed in fires, not central heating. I think my mum would have been a wonderful midwife. She never got into a panic.

Entertainment and days out

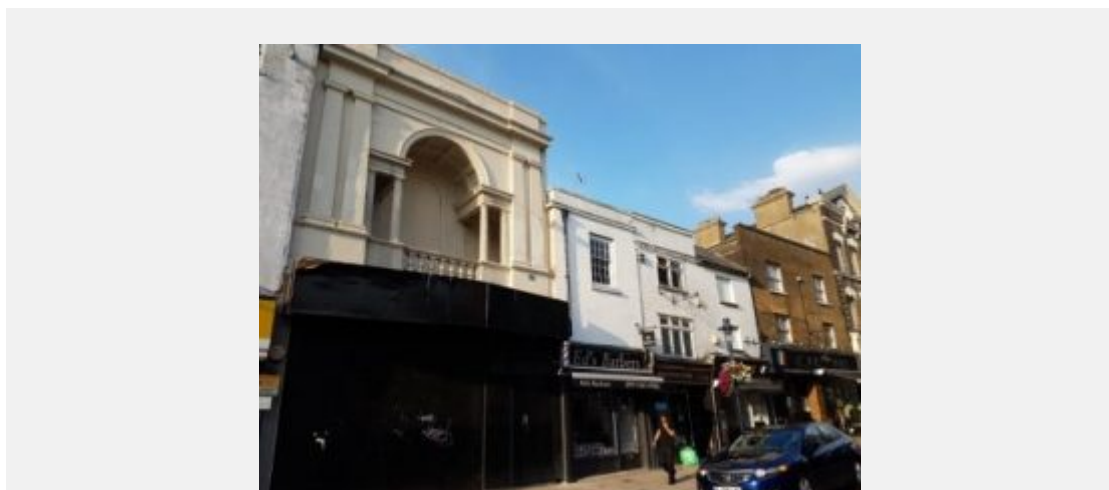
When I was a girl living in the village we used to go to the 'Old Mill' behind the Mill Café or rather tea rooms every Tuesday night we would have a magic lantern show. We thought it was wonderful, there was a big white sheet they put the pictures onto it from a big machine thing, when it was on the man would tell us about it. He would tap the pictures with a big long cane, sometimes he would put music on to blend in with it.

It used to be really exciting if you sat next to a boy that one liked. Some of them would be more like a history lesson. Then we would have a part from the Bible so we could sing, one of the songs we sang was...

*Climb climb up Sunshine Mountain, heavenly breezes blow,
Climb climb up Sunshine Mountain faces all aglow
Turn turn from sin and sorrow look into the sky
Climb climb up Sunshine Mountain you and I*

After a while they had a few old out of the arc pictures but at least it was something to do.

Some Sundays I was allowed to catch a bus into Gravesend to go to the real pictures. It was six pennies to catch the bus and six or nine pence to sit up the back in the pictures, much nicer in the back with a boy friend, always a chance he might put his arm round your shoulders. In Gravesend there were four cinema's The Majestic, The Regal, The Super and Plaza. You could stay as long as you wanted, some people would sit and watch it all over again. The Majestic was the best one, it used to have a man playing the organ before the film, he used to be right down the front he seemed to rise up out of the floor. I hated it but all the old dears loved it, including my mum. They would come round in the interval with threepenny tubs of ice cream, we didn't have them many times.



The Empire Theatre, Gravesend, today

One day we went into Gravesend, Mum, Lena, Ern and myself before we were married. We went across the Thames on the ferry boat (it was very cheap) then we caught a train and went down to Southend for the day. We went into the Kursal Amusement Park, the rides were also very cheap. We had a wonderful time. We went into Kelly's house which was all wobbly, on the ghost train, the caterpillar which blew all our dresses up in the air and showed my mum's knickers with elastic in the legs. We laughed all day. We saved our money for ages so we could go. We talked about it for ages. Never did go anymore.

Another thing when we were kids, whatever we had wrong with us Mum would make it our own fault. If we had a stiff neck she would say 'I expect you have been sitting in a draft'. If we had a cold, 'Expect you have been sitting on wet grass'. If it was a pain it was 'What have you been eating?'. Mind you Mum's cures were worse than whatever you had wrong in the first place. If we fell over or had any cuts she had a bottle of iodine with a little brush in the lid, she would paint it on and it drove you nearly crazy. It would smart something awful. We had Epsom Salts for tummy ache, you couldn't get off the seat of the lavatory next day. We had to gargle with salt water for sore throats. Mum would cook the tops off the turnips and then we would have to drink the green water to 'clear our blood'. We could not have vinegar because that we supposed to dry you blood up.

Until we moved into Gravesend we had never seen 'chips' let alone tasted them. Mum would boil joints of bacon and we would have the brown rind from the outside, I loved it (I still do).

It was always horse and carts in those days, we would try to stand on the bar at the back, until the driver saw us, he would give us a good clout round the ears and tell us to 'Bugger off', we didn't dare to tell mum. The first bus I saw that came through New Barn, was number 49 and a man called Pat was the driver.

Back to Sunnyside

Now to get back to our life in 'Sunny-Side'. We were very lucky because we could get all our veg and fruit from the farm, also quite a lot of fruit from the farm, also quite a lot of log wood, we also had a pig club, everyone would take turns in cleaning and feeding it. Mr Lawrence would buy it and keep it in the yard on the farm then when it was big enough they would take it to be killed and prepared by the butcher in Gravesend. They would then draw numbers from a hat and whichever number you received you would get that joint. The liver we would share, some people did not want the 'chitlings' (as we called them we loved it.

We didn't ever eat pork if the month had a letter 'R' in it. (I never did find out why.)

At Christmas Mr Lawrence would give each worker a large hundred weight sack of potatoes, a box of Cox eating apples, a box of Bramley cooking apples, a big bag of oranges and one week's wages in a brown envelope. Also two bright shiny halfcrowns in a little brown envelope for each child. It was so thrilling, we used to go into Mr Lawrence's house to receive all this. He was very kind I would have liked to give him a hug. There was no other farmer who was so good.

When we had used all the potatoes we would give Ern's mother the sacks, she used to make rag rugs with them, she was very good at it, they would look very pretty when she finished them, but how she could lift them to shake them I never knew, they were as heavy as lead. Once thing was they would never wear out, she would cut up all sorts of things for them, even old coats. She was a lovely old dear, always put 'Libbys milk in her tea (that is evaporated milk). She also knitted the most gorgeous socks for men, they were so soft. When Ern had a hole in his she would unpick them and re-foot them as good as new. She used to remind me of a 'Mummy', her name was Suzannah (most unusual), her sister was Floss who was married to Theobald (he used to play the violin). They were a devoted couple, Ern and I used to visit them. They had three children, Mary, John and Alan. I still keep in touch with the children. Ern's mother's name was Earl, very unusual to hear that isn't it. The children live in Halling near Cuxton.

I forgot this bit: When Mrs Bicker made a cup of tea she always put loose tea leaves in the strainer, poured hot water over it into the cup, she never ever used a teapot. You didn't have tea bags in those days.

I loved the 'Lodge' where they lived, it had been thatched years before and the porch was made from the boughs of trees. [I must take you down one day, perhaps you could take a camera then we could take the boys up the park to show you where I used to live. Also when the hall is opened to the public we will go down there, you would love it.]



Cobham Park Lodge Gate



Lodge Gate today

Another baby

When Jen was two we thought we were ready for another baby (a boy), after a while I was pregnant or rather 'with child', again Mum came to the rescue, said I could go to her for the birth. Lena had moved into Mrs Knight's house (she had moved to Lawrence Drive) which by the way was named after Mr Lawrence the farmer. So Lena said she would look after Jen for me while I had my baby. I was still working on the farm we were picking apples one lovely sunny day. Jen was talking! and playing with the rest of the children, when all of a sudden someone said to me 'Jenny has eaten some black berries from under a tree'. When I looked they were deadly nightshade (very poisonous) so I took her up to Mr Lawrence's house, he had a friend with him who took me to Gravesend hospital. They pumped her tummy out, quite a few came out, enough to make her very very ill they told me. She was soon her old self. Mind you I was very scared, I was about three months pregnant so I was a bit worried about the baby. Then Jenny had a bad cough, the doctor said to keep her in the one temperature in one room so Ern brought our bed downstairs in the sitting room. We kept a small fire going all night with a few logs. Well I must tell you this, in the middle of the night I had an awful nightmare, I felt I was awake and looked in the bottom of our bed and my sister Ivy was lying there dead. When I looked around there were little angels flying all around the room. When I woke I was really upset, I felt something had happened to my baby.

I think it was the fire flickering and I must have been half awake, so I suppose that would account for the angels. Then I kept saying to Ern 'I cannot feel any movement' I kept moving about to wake this baby up. I think it was being so worried about Jen that caused it. Anyway all was well. Then I was at my mum's one day and Jen was running and fell over and knocked a tooth out. Never a dull moment.

When at last it was time for my new baby 'boy' Lena and Len came round for tea and I started to get pains, so after their tea they took Jen home and Ern and I walked across the church fields up to Mum's. I had to keep stopping while the pains went away. When we arrived at Mum's my brother Fred was

there with his family, it was Whit Monday. Anyway they soon went home, so I prepared for the big event. Everyone said the second one is a lot easier, so I felt confident. Mum and I got the bed all ready but the kettle on to boil on the old Kitchener, a big draw sheet on the bed, a piece of old blanket to wrap the baby in when 'he' arrived. Then came the big wait. Mum said to keep walking about as long as you can, it will make the birth easier.

Well at three o'clock in the morning I am still walking about, apart from killing back pains, nothing! Mum kept saying he won't come until you get a show of some sort. Ern said he would go and get the nurse, so we agreed. He was gone for ages. When at last he came back, he had cycled all the way up to Laughing Waters Nissan huts to find the nurse, she was attending another birth so could not come. Mum said not to worry she knew what to do. All at once I was on the bed everything was happening, Robert was born so quickly my poor mum was really crying, I said 'mum what is it, a boy or a girl', she said 'it's got so many bits hanging I'm not sure'. When we really looked at him he was a boy but he had extra little fingers on both hands.

At last the nurse came, she said the doctor would have to come in because I was so torn and needed stitches. So Dr Kagan came in the next day and put stitches and took my sons little fingers off. I said to Mum isn't he like Jen, my Mum said no he was very different. When Jen came into see me and the new baby brother, she said 'not very handsome is he' mind you he was very red, even the doctor called him a little red lobster. I thought he was just everything I ever wanted. Mind you Jen was such a good girl, she never wanted to come along to see me or worry Mum. She really loved being with with Unc, she went everywhere with him. He was so proud of her she was always holding his hand. It was a nice feeling knowing she was being well looked after. We were so happy. I would just lay there thanking God for being so kind and giving me everything anyone could want. I wanted this to last for ever. My son was nine pounds.

We stayed with Mum for two weeks, it was lovely. Then came the time after being 'churched' to go home to 'Sunny-Side', it was a nice sunny day so we proudly walked home with our little family. Ern said 'I will get the copper alight ready for you to have a nice bath' I sure needed one. The nurse used to put this huge bedpan under one's bottom and pour a large jug of Dettol water through your legs, mind you even that made you feel a bit fresher.

Anyway Ern had been down home in the morning to light the fire and get the room warm. We only ever had heat in the kitchen. Ern said he reckoned the water was hot enough now, I got Jen ready I thought I would pop her in first then get in after. My house wasn't anywhere near so comfy as my Mum's. I was already missing her. Just as I got Jenny ready the darling little baby started to cry. Ern had put an old rubber pipe in the copper which was in the kitchen to reach the bath he had made a small hole in the door to put the pipe through. Well when he opened the door the pipe had come out of the bath and all the boiling water was on the floor. It was too hot to even mop up, the baby was still crying, Jenny was whinging she was getting cold. 'Well' Ern was

saying 'I didn't think it would come out of the bath'. I just broke down in tears, I wanted my Mum, I thought I will never be able to cope with all these things. I did find it very hard at first, it seemed never ending.

Hop picking

I didn't take my new baby on the farm to work, I was feeding him myself so it was a bit awkward. So I went 'hopping' we would walk up to the village as soon as it was daylight. Ern would push the pram with Jenny and Robert in. I would push Ern's bike for him to come home on. In those days you had to be on the hop fields very early, there were quite a few do's and don't's. At dinner time a man would call out 'pull no more bines' so one would make sure you had plenty hidden in the bin so you could pick a few more after time. Then he would tell everyone when to start again.



Hop pickers (KAS ref HPM04)

We had a short break in the morning and again in the afternoon. We would have what they called faggots, they were bundles of twigs to light a fire. A big tank on wheels full of water to fill the billy can for tea. We just put leaves in the can and a tin of condensed milk to spoon into our mugs of tea. Most of the mugs were enamel, so they didn't break. Everyone had bread and cheese, might have been one or two onions if there was an allotment close by. The stain from the hops would make the bread all green and very bitter tasting, but we all loved it. The tea would taste of wood smoke but we didn't have time to moan about it. In the morning it would be very foggy and everywhere was wet and cold. In the afternoon when the sun came out it would be so hot it nearly baked everyone sitting on the bin.

When it was time to walk back home, I would go into my mum's house to clean my hands with a paraffin rag to take the hop stain off, then dash back home to cook dinner for us in the evening. We always had potatoes with our

main meal and not much else, perhaps a rasher of bacon and some cabbage, followed by apple and custard. Ern did love his puddings. Then it would be one mad rush to bath the nippers and get them to bed. I had about twelve pounds at the end of it all. You only got paid at the end.

Back to the farm

After that year I went back to the farm, mind you the women were very good to me. There was a lot of work in the barn so if I had to work outside they would let me leave my baby in the pram with them. Mr Burns was the foreman and he very often gave me work in the barn, packing fruit. We were very happy working for Mr Lawrence. Ern used to take his mouth organ and when everyone was settled up in the trees picking cherries, he would play us all a tune we would all join in singing even old Mr Burns used to smile which was very rare. Everyone was so happy we all got on so well. There were about twenty of us. We used to have a break at ten o'clock then twelve to one dinner and finish most times about four. You had to finish your box of fruit. It was nice being able to work with Ern. We never came home without something, either pieces of wood for 'mornings wood' or logs for the fire, fruit or veg of some sort, it helped out such a lot. We used to get corn for our six chickens. My children loved to run up when the chickens were telling us they had laid an egg, they would cup it in their little hands all warm and brown. I often wondered how many they dropped. Sometimes the chickens would eat them so we would fill up a shell with mustard to stop them. We also kept a few cockerels to fatten up for dinner and if we sold any I would get them all ready for the table and get one pound for each of them. We really thought it was wonderful. Bet they did as well, I mean the folk that bought them! Ern used to get Maurice to come up to kill them as he could not do it himself.

When Robert was seven months old Lena went into All Saints hospital to give birth to Les. He was such a poor little thing, only weighed four pounds. Lena had to keep him rubbed over with oil and not put him in a bath. I did feel sorry for her. Robert was just at that bonny stage so it made it seem worse. Poor little love I felt I wanted to take him and care for him. I never did think anyone could look after them as well as I could. (Things never change). It was nice when after a while Len and Lena came down to live next door. I loved old Len nearly as much as my Ern, he always seemed to be the same, bless him. Ern and Len got on very well with each other. They were always having a laugh.

When we worked in the orchard, they had a hut with a long handles at each end, like a hop bin, it had a closed front with a lavatory seat on top. The men would dig a large hole in the ground and put this hut over the top, it was for everyone to use as a toilet (well for a wee). There was a nice lavatory up at the farm with flush toilet. The men used to move the hunt, which was called a 'Dunacan' every few weeks. Also up the farm for everyone's dinner hour was a nice room with an open stove to boil the kettle and wash basins.

I stayed for dinner, I would sit on the carrier of Ern's bike then he would haul me pulling the pram behind him. When we got home we would have bread and milk. We both had it down to a fine art, Ern would do the milk and I would cut the bread up, then I would sort the nippers and pram out while Ern got the basins ready. I used to say to the kids, if anyone asks what you have had for your dinner tell them you cannot remember. I did not want them all knowing we were hard up. Mind you it kept us going. I did cook a meal when I finished work at night. Good job we liked bread and milk

When I was a girl I used to think people were very posh if they had cows milk. I thought everyone had tin milk, it only used to cost about three pennies a tin. We used a lot of tin milk even after we were married, Ern loved it in his flask.

When Rob was three months old, Lena and I took him to a baby show over at Istead Rise, he won first prize. I was so proud of him, mind you I don't like baby shows, because everyone thinks their babies are the best. Anyway Lena and I brought some raffle tickets between us, we couldn't afford many and we won a lovely chicken meal, all the veg, stuffing, fruit and even a Christmas pudding with cream, there were also some nylon stockings. We came home very pleased with ourselves. We had dinner together on Sunday.

When Rob was about fourteen months old, just learning to walk, he fell in the garden and split his lip open, I was so scared I couldn't stop it from bleeding. Ted Body lived next door, he said 'jump in my gal, I'll get yer to the quacks' which he did. Dr Kagan stitched it up. In the morning he had pulled them all out with his teeth, he looked awful. So I go round to Mr Lawrence, once again one of his friends took us to the hospital. The doctor said he was far too young to have been stitched, so he put something on his lip and said bring him back every day. I had to keep it bathed, the doctor said don't let it heal too quickly or he will have a big scar. Anyhow it did heal very well thank goodness.

Rob was always knocking his head and would get awful nose bleeds. One day they were playing blind mans buff, he put a sack on his head, of course he fell and hit his head on the wall. I said to Ern I'm sure I can see his brains, it was a bad cut, it must have been muscles I could see, but it sure did bleed. My children were never indoors, even when they were in the pram I would put them in the stable ('No Ern, not feed them hay silly').

One day we were over Thong picking up potatoes, ruddy hard work. I was sitting on a sack of spuds for two minutes waiting for the spinner to come round, little Rob put his arms round my legs and said 'Mum I love you with all my blessed heart'. Mr Burns was close by, he said 'Well you can't say better than that'. I worked like ten men after that, it really made up for everything. I never ever forgot it.

They were very good kids, they could always find something to do. When they were at home they used to tie a piece of hop string on an old stick, let the chickens out and play 'Raw Hide' it was a series from television. The blinking

chickens would be all over Ern's garden, squawking and hollering, I think they laid two eggs a day after that.

We didn't have anything modern, we had what we called a 'safe' on the wall outside it was like a box with wire gauze on the door, we used to keep things cool in it making sure it was in the shade.

We had Jim and Pete, butcher boys, who came round twice a week with meat. Mr Cook used to come once a week, he sold all hardware stuff including paraffin. There was also a baker and milkman. We didn't buy very much from any of them. We would sometimes get a small cheap cut of meat on a Friday. I used to cook it in the summer the same day, we had to as there was no fridge, when we had milk I used to boil it as soon as it came, otherwise it would go sour. It was funny really because I thought that was how everyone lived. Mind you the old Kitchener was a good stove, I used to boil bones which one could get for nothing, on top of the stove for a stew. A kettle would be kept boiling on top for whatever hot water was needed. I kept an old big bucket type thing in one corner for the nappies. A milk pudding in the oven. On the top shelf I would bake potatoes in their jackets, if I had bacon I would put that on an enamel plate in the bottom, it cooked really well.

On the Farm

If on the farm I was picking after my flask was empty I would shuck the peas and put them in my flask, they would be already to cook when I got home. Beside that I would also fill a bag up with peas for another day. Whatever we worked with we would take some home, we were never without something.

Sometimes Ern would take Robbie up the field in the evenings. Nine times out ten he would bring a rabbit, a hare or even a pheasant. Once the pheasant had got to close to the wire in the hedge, it couldn't fly that's when Ern would catch it. Mind you he was a very good shot with a gun.

We used to feed our dog on hares, they were really big. He had a 12 bore shot gun and a 10 bore they were not as popular as the 12 bore. He had a license for them and also permission to walk the fields. Sometimes he would take Robbie (I'm sure he used him as a gun dog). You could hardly see his little head above the brussel tops. His little cheeks would be like bright red balloons when they came home. It made him feel very important and he loved every minute of it.

Ern was a good man, he made a lovely dad. I said I would have liked four boys, Ern used to say we can't afford what we've got, he was very down to earth. He loved music, he was always whistling away or playing his mouth organ. The first tune he ever played was '[Now the day is over](#)' we all loved to hear him play.

When Vi came over to visit from Australia we put on a good old party. No TV, we had Gert and Vi and all of us mob also Rene and Tubs Spellar. We had a really lovely time, Gert sang '[Only a bird in a gilded cage a wonderful sight to see](#)'. Ern played very softly so that we could hear her. Vi and Gert sang quite a few songs with Tubs joining in. He said it was the best party he had ever been to. When he was a boy they used to sing around an old piano, nearly always someone could knock out a few old tunes. Rene and Tubs were good friends of ours. I always sent him a valentine card and sign it with lipstick from 'Hot Lips'. At Christmas I sent him a card which said 'Meet me under the Christmas tree and I will kiss you under the balls'. We used to have some really good laughs. He said to Rene one day (they were having a few words) 'I can't say two words to you these days' she said 'I can SHUT UP'. I suppose in one way I was very lucky. I had some really nice friends as well as family. I have had lots of love all my life the benefits of being the youngest of ten children.

We used to have moth balls in drawers and cupboards everywhere, they were little balls of camphor, we, well most people smelled of them. When Lil was very small she put one up her nose, mum had the devil of a job getting it down.

Now getting back to our days on the farm. We had work all year round, you were not supposed to take children on the farm at all really, especially not in winter months but as a lot of the work was in the barn he allowed us to take them.

I loved all the work, except picking potatoes, God it was hard work. We used to have cherries in very high trees, we used to pick in buckets, before that it was baskets lined with fleece, but when it was wet you had a job to lift them. We also had a long hook to pull the boughs in that one couldn't reach, it made your feet ache standing on the ladders all day. Ern and Maurice were 'our men' for moving the ladders. Mr Burns would weigh our fruit and mark how many we had picked. We were paid so much a box. It was called piece work. You really had to keep going to earn anything at all but if we worked in the barn it was 'day pay' which in those days was one pound a day. Most of the outside work was 'piece work'. In the winter and early spring we were pruning, we collected all the twigs up and burnt them on a big fire. I loved it at break time we would find a big twig with two prongs and lay our cheese sandwiches on it and toast it over the embers till all the cheese melted and ran over the sides.

Mrs Redsell had been a gypsy so she could always get a fire going. We picked the wood up in big sack aprons so she would light the fire and to get it going she would lay her apron on the side of the wind on the fire and in no time it would really get it going, even though the wood was wet. She would also tell us how when anyone feels faint or even have fainted, light an old piece of rag or paper and let the smoke go into their nostrils, also anyone who has cut themselves pull some old cobwebs from an old shed or anywhere you could get them from and put them tightly on the cut, it would stop the bleeding. She would then hum all day and picked quicker than anyone on the farm. She

would never run off for a wee, like we did, we all liked her though. I wouldn't cross her, I really think she could put a curse on you.

Then there was 'Aunty Flo' she used to bike out every day from Gravesend, never knew her to be late or ill. She was telling Jen one day that there were some wild kittens in the barn, Jen said 'You won't kill them will you Aunt Flo'. Flo said 'My dear girl I wouldn't kill a flee' so Jen said 'Ooo Aunt Flo do you just let them itch', so she thought Aunt Flo had a few. (Got your matchbox handy Ern).

Then we had Hilda, Flo's sister, she used to bike out later because she worked at the bakers shop before she came out to the farm. I must tell you this, Hilda loved cats, Flo's husband couldn't stand them. One day Hilda's cat went into the bakery, it followed Hilda and fell into the doughnut vat which was full of oil. Well Flo's husband found it in his back yard (they lived next door to Hilda) when he took it round to her she thought he had tried to drown the thing. You can imagine what it looked like. Well Flo said Hilda was going to kill him, they had a job to hold her off. They did finally manage to clean him off and take him to the vet. Flo said Bill (her husband) couldn't stop laughing.

Then we had Emeline, she was an old spinster, she always wore a scarf, summer and winter, her name was Emeline Dunne. Ern would sit on the bottom of her ladder she would be picking cherries and he would sing 'Old mother Dunne never been done' and she would sing back 'And she's proud of it too'. The men used to sit on the bottom of the ladder to hold it firm and stop it slipping. She was a very jolly person and could take a joke. She used to bike out from Gravesend and go home for dinner (made of good stuff in those days).

One day Mr Burns had a big green tarpaulin tied to four trees for a shade or to keep the rain off us. One day it had been raining so we were in the barn, the children were playing. Come dinner time we yelled for the nippers to come up from the orchard. Two ends of the tarpaulin had come undone and the kids had been using it as a slide, when they arrived they looked like little green men from outer space, they were covered, faces, legs the lot. They looked so funny we all had to laugh, mind you it was one heck of a job to get it off. Even old Mr Burns had to laugh.

After a few years they got machine in for planting potatoes, I used to go on it with Ern and Maurice. Mr Burns would drive the tractor we sat on three seats on the back to make sure the potatoes went down the holes one by one. I loved it, nice and easy work just sitting there. Then eventually they bought a new machine for picking potatoes up. I liked that as well, but you really had to keep your wits about you. Sometimes it would pick up huge flints, a bit dangerous they could easily crush your hands but I loved breathing the air from the fresh earth, it made you feel alive.

That is one thing I remember about being in the land army in Gloucestershire, being on an old Fordson tractor and using ring rollers on a field of corn. It

was a really massive big field. The morning was early in spring and on the way down to the field I had seen a whole nest of stoats, all ginger and white. Once in the field it was like another world, the sun just starting to warm up, the smell from the dew on the young corn shoots, a soft breeze on my face, it made me feel so happy it was like paradise. It would take me all day when I stopped for my dinner I could hear the sky larks high in the sky, I hoped they hadn't nested in the corn. I went back to the hostel at night, I would lay on my bunk thinking about it.

Years before one used to have men cutting the corn and we would have to put them in 'stocks' that was stand the stems down in sacks of eight all across the fields to dry. They later went into a machine called a 'binder' which cut the corn and threw each bundle out to the side. When it was fairly dry we went into the fields with a two pronged pitch fork to pick them up and take to a corner of the field and two men would make a large stack of them. Then it would have thatching like a house on top to keep the weather out. Come winter we would have the threshing machine come to thrash all the corn out, it was a very hard and dirty job to do. The dust would get right into ones eyes, no goggles those days and the string would make your hands bleed. We used to have to change jobs every so often. Mind you everyone just took it in their stride, no moaning we were all in the same boat.

Then we would work round the potato clamp when it was freezing cold, kneeling down on an old sack sorting the chats from the ware, also the rotten ones. Your feet would get so cold it was a job to walk on them 'Why should I have to work such rotten jobs' feeling sorry for myself, mind you it didn't do me any good 'or harm'.

I think the good days outshone the bad. The weather made such a difference to all the jobs. Sometimes we would pick early Worcester apples, they were nice low trees, the fruit was the most beautiful colour, all red and warm from the sun, they used to smell gorgeous. Then we would have to pick Victoria plums, they were nice low trees. In Mr Lawrence's chicken run there were more nice low trees and I have never seen such large 'Vics' in my life, they were really delicious. He also had Morello cherries for cooking, we used to have to cut their stalks with scissors, not pick them, they had to have stalks intact, they looked like wax in the chips. The chips were made of ply wood.

When we worked in the barn we had a machine which would grade the apples by size, then we would pack them in tissue paper, not just place them, they had to be on their sides, bright side up, we would have a circle in the middle without papers so they could see what they were buying. The small apples went into larger wooden boxes with a blue paper collar round the inside to save the bruising. We also had to do the same with pears and the Bramley apples. We each had our own stand for packing. Then Mr Burns would inspect them and put paper tops on with clips. The names and all the details would be put on with a rubber stamp, it was a nice job. We always had two or three robins in the barn singing away. They knew they would be well fed at

ten o'clock break. The time used to go very fast in there but if we were out in the cold picking Brussels it would seem forever.

The barn was always nice and clean, we all cleaned it up every day once we had finished. We had a piece of wood and an old sack to stand on to keep our feet warm. We all had something most times to keep our feet warm. We all had something most times to talk about. Bert Bowyer was the lorry driver, so he would be full of jokes that he had heard in the market. I won't write them down. He was always singing that song called '[Try a little tenderness](#)' he was quite a nice chap, one of those who always took his time.

Later years when my mum was living with us, Bert was taken ill, he had to go into hospital for an operation, for at least two weeks they said. Mr Lawrence asked Ern if he would be willing to help him out, so good old Ern said 'Yes'. We couldn't have done it if mum hadn't been living with us. I went with Ern because we worked all day on the farm, back after tea to work in the barn, home at eight o'clock back to the farm at eight thirty to a full load of fruit to the market in London! By the time we had unloaded and stacked all the empties to bring home it would be two o'clock in the morning before we got home. This was every day or night I should say, even on a Sunday. It was a nightmare, this went on or eight weeks until Bert was fit again.

Ern

Then I went back down the Hall to work, Babs came to do the washing up. Mind you down there you did whatever was needed of you, cooking, cleaning, washing up, waiting on tables or anything else. It made it a bit more interesting.

Then my poor Ern got ill. He kept saying his legs ached, I just used to say 'They will now we are getting older'. However, it just got worse. The hospital and doctors didn't know what it was. He was in and out of hospital, he was ill from the May right round till September. I still thought he would be alright when they got him sorted out. When they said it was cancer I just didn't believe them, he was still eating and gaining weight. I even called Dr Newton in and he said 'He doesn't look cancerous to me'. I was on cloud nine. We planned as soon as he was better we would go up to Scotland for a long holiday. I slept that night, first time in ages.

The next day the doctor came out from the hospice, took one look at Ern and said 'He will be much more comfy if he comes into the hospice'. I had been pulling Ern about a bit and it used to take an hour to get him up the stairs and onto my very high bed. Also getting him out to the lavatory. We would stop on the first landing for a kiss and a cuddle and both of us would be crying. I didn't want him to go away from me. I felt I had let him down. I was his wife yet strangers were going to be able to give him what I couldn't. I kept thinking after all these years of caring, now he needs me I can't cope. I just didn't want to think of the future.

Anyhow, poor darling went into the hospice. Well I just couldn't believe it. The minute Ern was in his bed he looked easy. Mind you they gave him medicine, which seemed to help him relax. He took a liking to everyone and said they had given him a shower, which he said was heaven. I was very pleased he took to it so well. When I asked Dr Oliver when I could have him home again he just said we will keep him for a fortnight and see how he is. So once again I was fooled into thinking that means I will have him home. Everyone who went to see him thought he looked good and how happy he was, he loved the girls. When I went in one day they said, he is our good looking Ernie, he has had all three of us in bed with him. They didn't realise how heavy he was so when they tried to lift him apparently they had all fallen on his bed.

One of the girls took her three puppies in for him to hold, he loved them. We even took our dog in to see him. Well on Saturday morning Jen said if you like I will take you down to see Dad, I was thrilled, I thought he won't be expecting us so it will be a nice surprise for him. He was sitting in his chair looking very comfy, so we chatted to him, he told me that he had eggs and bacon for his breakfast. Then Jen and Rob went for a smoke, I was talking to Ern. He said 'I'm very hot'. He just looked at me and said 'Love you' then he closed his eyes and went very quiet. I called the nurse and she said I'm very sorry but Ernie has died. I just couldn't believe it. It was the worse day of my life. I felt that our love for each other was different from other peoples. I just kept looking for a sign of some sort, I felt I would go insane. I prayed very hard for God to let me die.

When I went to bed at night I would just lie there, it was so dark and quiet I felt I was in a coffin. No more loving, no music, no Ern whistling it was hell. I felt very alone, I'm sure I was different to other folk, they just seemed to carry on with life.

Yes I suppose I was feeling sorry for myself but Ern had been my whole life from about sixteen years of age. Whatever I did or wherever I went he was always in my mind. I won't say we didn't have a few 'ding dongs' over the years because that's life.

My whole life I had had a lot of loving from all my family. I must have been very lucky really. When I was about seven years old I remember going into Captain Bentley's stables all on my own and as I stood by the door it started to snow really great big flakes. I stood very still after a while I didn't even blink. I wanted that moment to last for ever. It seemed just like I was floating up, up very high. I felt as if it was magic. It was a lovely feeling at the time. I wondered if going up to heaven was like this. I have never forgotten the feeling of just peace. Anyhow I thought of this when Ern died. I hoped it had been like that for him. We should have held hands and floated up together.

Nothing seemed to matter anymore. One has to learn to live with it but you never get over it. People say but life goes on and you think 'What life?' I

thought 'Well no matter what happens now nothing will ever be so painful as my darling Ern leaving'. Good job we can't look into the future years.

People were very good and kind, I had some very good friends and family so in that respect I was lucky. I still had Honey my dog, she was good company, we used to go for long walks. Mind you she would sit at the top of the drive waiting for Ern to come home bless her.

Back on the Farm

Mr Marks came to see me and asked if I would go back to work, said it would be better to be with folk. So I started down the hall again. I used to look at the lawns and think of when Ern used to do all the mowing. If only we could turn back the clock.

I didn't tell you this, when Ern was about seventeen he used to work in the hall big generator house (which gave all the light to the hall) well one Boxing Night he locked all up and when he got back to the lodge he looked and saw flames shooting up in the sky. They called the fire brigade but the whole place went. All burnt away. It was a big worry for Ern, they said it must have been a fault of some sort, mind you, it was years old. It was a shame because it was next to the big old clock which used to chime. Mind you later years they did their best to make it like it was. It was up in what they called the square, it was very pretty. When I first worked down there it had a lovely pond with fish in and weeping cherry trees with bright pink blossom all around it. It used to look gorgeous with all the daffs planted in the grass surrounding.

Lord Darnley had a Rolls Royce he used to go to the House of Lords on a Tuesday so at least we knew where he was on one day at of the week !

We used to get some funny people to work with down in the kitchens. Some hadn't a clue. One girl was told to wash the lettuce, she did it really clean, under the hot tap with suds coming out!

Another time Rene had to thicken up eight pints of cream, she put the machine on top speed, in a matter of a minute it had turned to butter so she threw the whole lot in the pig bin. Rene was my very good friend but she could be so dopey at times. Another time we were all ready to go home she went prancing through the kitchen, her apron caught a huge gallon drum of cooking oil, it went everywhere. We spent ages trying to clean it up, it went all under the gas cookers, we used soda but it didn't help a lot. When the kitchen did dry out it was all white, it looked awful.

One Sunday morning while at work Bessie, a lady that worked on the washing up machine came in very late. She used to drink a lot, well she seemed to me still drunk, she said she didn't feel well. She was Roy Parker's wife so she lived down the hall in the caretakers flat. After a while she went down home. Well she didn't come back. In the meantime the Bursar came in and asked me what

I thought was wrong with her. Well I didn't want to get her into trouble so I just said she had a very bad headache. Next thing they had an ambulance to take her into hospital, I was so worried I thought I should have said she had been drinking. Anyhow she died soon after getting her into hospital, it was awful. She had always been good fun. One time she came into the Guilt Hall still drunk and sat down at the Grand Piano and played 'let's all go down the strand'. She could play really well but we were afraid she might be caught. She just laughed and said I'll play some of Cliff Richard's songs and she did. After we finally got her away from it she just kept saying don't worry they can't shoot me for it. I really missed her after she died.

Now I am a firm believer in fate. When I was first working on Lawrence farm and my mum had come to live with me and Ern and I never seemed to get ill. Well one morning I was busy doing the washing, I started to get the most awful pains in my tummy, it was worse than giving birth. My mum said it sounds like appendix to me. I was scared stiff of the thought of going into hospital but eventually we had to get the doctor in. He said you will have to go straight into hospital I think it is your appendix. So I was packed off into hospital, they were not too sure but they got me all prepared in case I had to have an operation. Well I nearly died I had never been away from Ern, ever. I was so worried. They asked if I thought I was pregnant. I said I wish I was but no it wasn't a baby. Next day I saw Mr Chester one of the top ones. He gave me a right going over, he said you have a very large cyst on the ovaries I will have to remove it but I said the pain has gone away at the moment. He explained the cyst was on a stem like a mushroom when it twisted it gave me pain, when I vomited it righted itself. Anyway he said go home, when the pain comes back, which it will, you must come straight back into hospital and I will remove it. So I came back home, on the Friday it was back again so Ern took me into hospital. They operated straight away and Mr Chester said it was as big as a grapefruit. I had to stay in for ten days. I hated it. I was really homesick.

Well back to fate. One morning I was coming home (I've told you my dear brother was in Joyce Green for two years) well I asked the nurse if I could go and see my brother before I went home. It was in the morning so it wasn't visiting time. Anyhow she said yes so I went to find Fred, he was so pleased to see me but he looked so very ill. I just wanted to cry. I didn't stay long he looked so tired. I looked back at him when I was leaving the ward, he called out 'Goodbye Blue' bless him. I hadn't been indoors long when they phoned and said he had died. Now I was the last one to see him alive and it would never have happened if I hadn't been in hospital at that time. So now you know why I believe in fate.

Fred was such a good man. He came over to cement all our paths and runway for the car, he loved to go down into the cherry orchards with Ern and Dixie our dog. He used to say to me you are so lucky girl. I never felt so at the time.

We used to have some lovely times all of us together. Lena, Len and Les were much like one big family.

When I worked with Babs on English's farm we had so many laughs. One day we were having our lunch break, Babs and I were discussing what each person looked like. Mrs Dray was very fat and always wore cut off trousers to look like shorts. Mrs Day was like a pole with a mac and hat on. Mrs Claydon was getting a real hump on her back. We had spoken of this to each other and all of a sudden Mrs Claydon said 'I went up to the market on Saturday and bought a really lovely camel coat'. Well we didn't know how to stop laughing. Wicked we were.

Another time it was Joyce Barden's birthday so we took some drink in for her to have at dinner time. Well after dinner it was Joyce's time to walk behind the potato machine and pick up the loose ones that were left. Well we were on the machine when we looked back Joyce was lying on the ground laughing her head off. Len her husband was not amused, he had a right old moan.

When we were down the Hall working (Babs and I) Mr Marks was the manager over us all, he was a very funny man with a wicked sense of humour. One day he was bragging as usual and he said 'I bet you would all like to see me in my underpants and look at my bulge' so Babs piped up with 'why have you got a boil on your bum' he went down like a popped balloon. It was silly things like that we used to laugh at.

Another time we were picking up potatoes and a chap called Michael (he was very shy and used to go very red when we spoke to him) used to stop the tractor every so often to put the odd potato in the truck where we were. Well Babs had this big stick and whenever he popped his head over the side of the truck Babs would tap him on the head and say in a very funny voice 'That's the way to do it' like Punch and Judy. In the end he said 'Put that bloody stick down Babs' I think he was getting a headache, he took it all in fun.

This is the end of my years on the farm. It was hard but so carefree and happy.

The end of my years with Ern and happy times.

Life with Ted

Very hard but no more sitting back feeling sorry for myself. I wanted to die but I didn't. I did ask God but he said 'no'. Ern had been taken up to heaven.

Ted Robinson

Two years later I had a huge bunch of red roses delivered. They were from Ted Robinson. I had worked with him on the farm with Ern so I knew him quite well. He wanted to come over to see me. I talked it over with Lena she said it would do no harm to see him. When he came to see me he said his wife had died of cancer. We went out for a drink and a good chat. I was missing Ern's loving and company, it seemed nice having someone to talk to. He lived

in Gravesend so he sold his house after a lot of thought. We said we would try to make a go of it so we decided to buy Sunnyside. I have lived here sixty-two years so I didn't really want to move. I feel this house is full of so much love and happy memories. I moved here on 1st May 1947. We had the house altered as to how we wanted it.

We seemed to get on very well. Not all the time, you know what men are like. They won't always do as they are told.....

We went to Australia to see my sister Vi. She had cancer of the breast. We stayed with her for six weeks. She sadly has since died. We have seen our grandchildren growing up. In all we have twenty including two of Teds.

We are very happy. So many things happen in life it makes it much easier if you have a shoulder to cry on.

When poor Ern died I thought I would never hurt so much again but worse was to come. My darling son died of cancer of the throat. I didn't realise God only lent him to me for a short while.

Now, although I had Ted I still just wanted to die. I know one has to learn to live with it but it is so hard. I think it is worse than any illness. I hold his photo close to me just wishing it was him. I am not trying to make you feel sorry for me or unhappy but I must tell you how I feel.

Looking back

Even as a girl I loved teddies. I was never keen on dolls. So to have my very own baby boy was everything to me. Anyway must get on with life. I still had quite a lot of my family left so in one way I was lucky. Gert in Longfield, Glad in thatched cottage at Longfield Hill, Lena next door. We had all been such a happy famiy.

We had no money but we didn't even think about it, we only ever had what we could pay for. Our food was simple, just veg from the garden, the odd rabbit or pheasant or two, hares which Jenny loved. Plenty of fruit from the garden. Our main thing was bread and jam. We all kept very well on it.

We didn't think or birthdays, never had cards or presents even at Christmas. We never saw cards. Mind you we never went to the shops so we were never aware such things existed. When we lived in New Barn we had one bus a day. The drivers name was Pat. I can never remember going on it, there was no need. Mum made sure we were never idle. She used to say the devil makes work for lazy people. We all had our jobs to do every day.

My mum was a happy person, after all that had happened in her life she never became bitter and she used to say to me 'Life is what you make it'. I would argue and say 'No mum it's what other people make it'. She would look me in

the eye and say 'It's your attitude to life, you must learn to deal with what life sends you'. Sound advice really.

Modern days

Getting back to Ted and myself. We went to North Wales for a holiday, we just got in the car and drove. We hadn't a clue as to where we were going to stay, we didn't tell anyone where we were going. We were very lucky we went to a farm house and they had a bungalow to let, so we took it for two weeks. It was really wonderful. We were up in the mountains and the views were breath taking. It really was a truly grand holiday, the weather was great. We used to have our breakfast then go out for the rest of the day. In the evening we used to bring home a bottle of wine etc. etc.

When we came home in the evening to the bungalow we had to come across a pass with water falls cascading down it really was so beautiful. We sat one day with our feet in the stream as it was so very hot. I felt as if I was walking on air when we came out of the water.

You will remember Em it was at Bedgelert. No, I won't make you cry again. I wanted it to last for ever. When we were in the village we saw the salmon leap up the rocks. There was always so much to see and do. We keep saying we will go back one day. Our life is very good at the moment. We are now both retired.

We went up in a hot air balloon when I was eighty years old then we went up in a helicopter for my eighty second birthday. It was all very interesting.

We go out for the day at least once a week – gives us something to look forward to. Since Ted has his op on both knees he is great. He works very hard.

When he came home from hospital I had to give him an injection every day so for a short time I had the upper hand of him. It was a lovely feeling. He had about twenty seven injections, he was very brave. I felt like Florence Nightingale but didn't have her lamp.

When we go out we look for a good place to have our lunch. We found a lovely place it is called the Snoring Owl. It is in beautiful grounds and they even make rabbit pie. They make a wonderful meal, all sorts of different dishes. I love trying things for the first time. Also there is a gorgeous shop full of goodies and a craft shop so it makes a nice day out.

Sometimes we have a run down to Greatstone. I can get some really nice fresh fish there. Food is always on my mind as well as in my tummy! It is a nice drive down also lots of little lambs enjoying life.

I remember Ern and I used to take the children down there to stay, it used to cost five pounds for one week. All the children wanted was the sea and the sand. That's all they did get, we were short of cash but we were all very happy. I used to take plastic flower pots and an old spoon for them to make sand castles. Ern would find an old tin and put it on a stick in the sand then we had to throw pebbles at it and try to knock it off. Simple but the children loved it. You know Ern he would just sit and giggle. We used to take Dixie the dog with us. We used to take a wide berth around the ice cream man, shame really but it didn't do the kids any harm, they just knew we just didn't have the money. They were lucky to be on holiday. I'm a hard old nut Emma as well you know.

At last Ted and I have given up going out to work. We love being retired, just ourselves to please. It might sound selfish to you but after a while it seems everybody's troubles are made to seem like ours. We are making plans for our future hoping we have one.

We have been up to stay with Andrea and Dennis for two weeks in Norfolk. The weather was really hot. We had a simply wonderful time. There are so many interesting places there to visit. We even went to the old workhouse I must tell you all about it when I see you. They have a lovely bungalow on it's own and lots of wild life.

We have booked to go and stay up in Scotland in June. We are hoping to go on the Jacobite train, it runs right through Scotland's mountains. It looks lovely on the TV programme. Then we are going to stay in another cottage in the Dales for a week. That is the plan. We are also going up to stay with Andrea and Den for Christmas. Saves me a lot of bother, my party days are over.

I am still taking warfarin tablets, they seem to be doing the trick. Ted is keeping very well at the moment.

I am going on the train for my eighty third birthday that is my treat from Ted.

We have been together now for twenty years.