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My Life.

I was born on a Sunday on the 24th of August 1930, when the church bells were ringing for morning service or so my mother told me. At the time my parents were living in the basement of my paternal grandmother's house at 91 Hills Road Cambridge. My Father was trying to make his way as an artist and my Mother worked as a housekeeper to a family in Park Terrace. I have very faint recollections of the basement just as a place of dark frightening shadows. I can just about remember my second sister, Yvonne being born there. It seems that my Father was in partnership with another aspiring artist and my Mother, quite rightly as it turned out, didn't trust him. It seems that they rented a studio between them and one day my Father went to the studio and found everything gone, His partner had disappeared with everything. There was no way that he could set up again from scratch and I believe that they were pretty desperate. Two babies and no money coming in.

Then fate took a hand, as it so often does, and a friend of my Father offered him the managership of one of his menswear shops with a house to go with it. It must have seemed like a gift from the Gods. Before my mother and father married my Mother had been a parlour maid in a solicitors house. She was a country girl and was brought up in a little village called Westley Waterless near Newmarket.

Her Father had been a farm worker. He looked after the farm horses and lived in a tied cottage. She had two sisters and two brothers. Her sister Doris married a jockey who became the King's jockey. He was called Bert Jones and became famous when a suffragette threw herself in front of the horse he was riding. My mother's sister died at the early age of thirty two and my Uncle Bert was inconsolable and two years later he committed suicide. My cousin John came home from school and found him with his head in the gas oven. He was just nine years old at the time. Because suicide was considered to be a mortal sin at the time, he could not be buried beside his wife in the cemetery but had to be buried in unhallowed ground. I heard only recently that after at least fifty five years the church have relented and his body has at last been re-interred beside the wife that he so adored and their remains are now lying side by side in Girton church

yard.

My Mother left school at only thirteen as the first world war was then on and her Mother had to do some kind of war work and she needed my Mother to help in the house and to look after her younger brothers and sisters. Later on she went into service and became a parlour maid. Then she did an unforgivable thing for her time and became pregnant. It all had to be hushed up and my mother was packed off to London to live with my great Aunt who at that time kept a pub in London's Dockland which was then a very rough area. My Great Aunt always kept an empty bottle handy and had been known to smash it on the counter and push it into the face of dockers or sailors who became drunk and threatened her. It must have been a very big change of life style for my mother who then supported herself by working in a department store. I believe that it was Woolworths but I am not sure of that. After a year or two my mother came back to Cambridge and went into service with a local solicitor where she was a parlour maid.

My Maternal Grandmother took her baby boy and called him Russell. To this day none of us know who Russell's father was not even Russell. My maternal Grandmother cared for him until she died and by then my Mother and Father were married and the family tried to make my Mother take him but I am not quite sure if my Father knew about it and anyway my Mother refused to take him and he was brought up by my mother's bachelor brother, my Uncle Will. While we were children we knew nothing of his existence except that very occasionally we went to visit my Uncle Will and our so called cousin Russell. So much was hidden away in those days. I often wonder how my Mother felt when she went to visit with Yvonne, Anne and I and had to pretend that she was Russell's Aunt.

After my parents moved into the shop my third sister was born and I can remember that my Father employed a lady with a little girl of her own to come and look after the house and Yvonne and I. I really hated it and wanted my Mother back in control but I was very excited about my new baby sister and was most upset when I was told that I wasn't big enough to hold her all on my own. I don't remember very much about the next two years just a few odd memories. Going to the cattle market with my father and a bull getting loose and my Father putting me on his shoulder and running up some steps and how safe I felt on his shoulders. Coming home from my paternal Grandmother's house one day and my

parents realising that they hadn't got their key. My Father deciding to climb the six foot brick wall to get into the yard and forgetting the broken glass on top of the wall and cutting his hand quite badly.

I remember starting school. It was a little Church school called St Barnabus and I hated every moment of it. I felt that I had somehow been rejected and thrown out into a frightening and uncaring world while my sisters were still at home with my mother and were enjoying the life that I should have been enjoying too. At school in those days we used to write on little slates with pieces of chalk and if we broke our chalk we were in trouble. For some reason I used to get 9 and P muddled up and one day I had to stay in all through the playtime and write a whole slate full of 9's and a whole slate full of P's after which I became even more muddled. The little school didn't have a gym or a playing field, just a little tarmac yard but the teachers used to take us out there in good weather and play games with us. Some of the favourites were Poor Mary sits a weeping, Here we come gathering nuts in May, Oranges and lemons, and Old Roger is dead and he lies in his grave. There were a lot of others but I can no longer remember them and I daresay that they will all be forgotten before long.

On Friday afternoons the muffin man called. He used to carry a tray on his head and ring a bell and call out "Muffins Muffins". My Mother used to buy some and we all used to sit around the black kitchen range while she toasted them on a long toasting fork. My Father would then butter them and they tasted like manna from heaven. I can still remember the taste and feel the butter running down my chin. Muffins have never tasted quite like that since. Sometimes my maternal grandmother used to send her maid to collect me in a pushchair to visit her for the day. I was her favourite grandchild and my mother was very upset that she sent for me and not my other sisters but my Grandmother was bedridden at that time so I suspect that it would have been hard for her to have all of us and I suppose, as I was the oldest, and as my sisters were so young, it was easier to have me on my own. I suppose also that as I was born at my grandmother's house she was more attached to me. On the days that I spent with her she used to let me sit on her bed and she used to read sad little stories to me all about poor children who had to beg in the streets and who starved to death or whose mothers died of tuberculosis and always it was because the father of the household was a drunkard. She used to tell me that drink was a great evil and

being very young this made a deep impression on me for many years.

My Father often used to buy us crayons. He very much hoped that we would inherit his artistic talent and had planned to send us to Art College if we did. With the wages he made managing the shop he began to build up his art materials again and started to take on commissions. He designed the trade mark of Forum Dry Cleaners, a spotty dog and also the trade mark of another dry cleaners in town which was three white lilies. He became very excited when he was commissioned to illustrate a book and I think that both Mother and Father thought that things were really looking up and that his career was at last taking off.

Alas his hopes were never to be fulfilled. How different my life might have been but life is life and fate is fate and we all have to live with that. One day I was met from school by a neighbour who kept the next door shop and was taken home to a very solemn house where several neighbours were comforting my Mother and I distinctly remember being given a helping of meat pudding and told to eat it all up. I knew that something dreadful had happened but didn't dare to ask what it was, maybe I didn't really want to know. After the neighbours had all left my Mother told me that my Father had been taken to hospital and it wasn't until some time afterwards that she told me that he had died and gone to heaven to live with Jesus. When she told me I was sitting on her lap and my sisters were sitting in front of the window watching the people going by. They took no notice at all of what Mother was saying and I remember thinking that they were very hard hearted not to care. In actual fact they were only two and four years old and just didn't understand what it was all about.

My Father died when I was just six years old and my Mother was left at the age of thirty to bring up three girls with a very minute widow's pension and of course she had to leave the home at the back and over the top of the shop as it was needed for the next manager. After my father died, an aunt of my mother's came to stay with her for a little while and while she was there my mother was visited by the local vicar who sympathised with her sad loss and then went on to suggest that she should put all her children in a home and take a living-in job in service. My mother's aunt was so horrified with that suggestion that she told the vicar to leave in no uncertain terms. I suppose that it would have been an easy solution but how heartless to try to persuade someone to give away all their

children when they have just lost their husband. She was, after lots of traumas, given a council house. In those days it was quite a disgrace to have to live in a council house because they were only for needy families or at least that was how my Mother saw it. She had to earn some money to keep us all and pay the rent and so she went out doing other people's house work. It must have been very soul destroying for her but when you have kids dependant on you, you just have to do what ever you can.

I think that I grew up at six years old because after my Father died my mother went into shock. His heart attack had been very sudden and unexpected and at first my Mother had difficulty coming to terms with it. She used to keep fainting and I used to have to go over the road to the pub and the publican's wife used to come over with some brandy to bring her round. I then used to have to look after my two younger sisters until she felt better. My sisters were only two and four and sometimes I got really worried trying to stop them getting into mischief. One of the ladies who lived near us and kept a greengrocer's shop was so impressed at the way I looked after my mother and sisters said one day when we went into her shop, "Bless your little heart dear, you are such a good sensible little girl I am going to give you something" and she went to the back of the shop and came back with two dolls that had belonged to her daughter but who by then was too old to play with them any more. I was so excited as I had never had a doll before and in fact they were the only dolls I ever had. We were too poor after that to afford such luxuries.

My sister Yvonne never forgave me for having them. About that time it was also discovered by the school doctor that she had a lazy eye. In those days a doctor visited all schools once a year. Those were the days before the National Health and people who were poor often could not afford to take children to the doctor and relied on medicine from the chemist or old wives cures which were handed down from mother to daughter. Had it not been for the school doctor's annual visits many serious complaints would have been overlooked until it was too late. Complaints such as tuberculosis for one, which was very rife at that time. Well, the school doctor said that Yvonne had to wear glasses and worse than that, she also had to wear a patch over one eye in order to make the lazy eye work. My mother could not afford to buy her glasses so she had to wear the free glasses provided by the council. In this day and age they probably wouldn't look

very out of place but in those days they were considered very ugly as they had steel frames and all other glasses had tortoiseshell frames or celluloid frames which were something like today's plastic ones. She was very self conscious about her glasses and was teased unmercifully by the other kids who all called her "old four eyes".

After we were settled into our house in Hobart Road my mother got all of us into school at the Sedley. It was a very nice little school and the teachers were very kind and used to teaching children from poor families. As this was in the days of the depression the majority of their pupils had parents who were struggling. Some more than others. I remember that some of the children came to school barefooted and sometimes the teachers went out and bought bread rolls for children who fainted in school because they hadn't had anything to eat. There were also children who were so dirty that they smelled dreadful and the teachers had a zinc bath in the cloak room where they used to bath the dirtiest of them and then of course there were the children who were regularly beaten and sometimes the teachers used to take them to the doctor's but social services were not what they are to-day and unless the situation was life threatening, in which case they were put into a children's home, they were patched up and sent home again to await the next beating.

Every year at the Sedley the teachers used to organise a May Day celebration and we all used to dance round the maypole and learn special songs to sing and of course the parents were invited to watch us. In her last year at the Sedley School my sister Anne was chosen to be May Queen and we were all very proud of her. We also had a big celebration at school when King George and Queen Elizabeth were crowned. Every child had a coronation mug and a lollipop. The lollipop was a very exciting gift as we very rarely had sweets. The money was needed for basic food.

Life soon settled down into a routine. Mother used to go to one house to work in the morning and another one in the afternoon. She always managed to be there when we got home from school but couldn't be there to meet us after school so I had to meet my younger sisters and take them home. I was about seven then and my sisters were five and three. My sister Anne shouldn't have started school at three but they took my Mothers desperate circumstances into consideration and broke the rules for her. After I turned seven I had to transfer to the junior

school but I still had to go to meet my sisters from the infants school and take them home

My Mother was having a very hard struggle to make ends meet and she started to take in washing which she did in the evening. It all had to be done by hand and I can remember seeing her rubbing and scrubbing away at the sink with the sweat and tears coursing down her cheeks. I so much wanted to help her but I was too little. I could only help to look after Yvonne and Anne and try to make them be good so that they wouldn't worry her. This of course made me very unpopular with them.

It was around that time that we discovered the swimming pool. My Mother must have been only too glad to get us off her back for a few hours while we were on summer holidays so she let us take some sandwiches and a bottle of drink and go off to the pool. The trouble was that it cost a penny to go in and my Mother didn't have threepence to give us so she used to give me a penny as I was the oldest and least likely to lose it and I used to pay my penny when we got there and my sisters used to get down on their hands and knees and crawl past the window while I was paying. I only found out years later when I took my daughter swimming there that the ladies knew what we were doing all the time. One of the ladies told me, "We knew what you were doing but you enjoyed it so much we didn't have the heart to turn you away. We used to call you our little water babies". They will never know just how much joy they gave us. I have a lot of quite sad memories of my childhood but I also have lots and lots of happy ones. In the days back then it didn't take a lot to make me blissfully happy.

We had wonderful sunny days when we wandered over the woods and fields and picked wild flowers to take home to my Mother. She always loved the wild flowers and poor woman she didn't have much opportunity to wander around the fields herself as she was always working. I remember feeling very sorry for her when we were just about to go swimming or rambling and she was standing over the sink or the ironing board with the sweat pouring down her face. When we went out on our rambles, Mother would make us take an old doll's pram and a sack with us so that we could fill them with fallen pieces of wood for the fire. It was a small price to pay for the freedom to roam but if we saw any of our school mates we used to hide as we were ashamed to let them know that we were so poor that we had to gather wood. I'm sure if we had met one of the snobby girls

we would have died of shame. How silly. I have gathered wood on many occasions since I have been grown up and been perfectly happy about it. It's so silly how important things are when you are young. It must have been very hard to feed and cloth three little children in the depression when there was little or no help available.

Any help that there was tended to be charity and my Mother was too proud to be happy about taking it. I remember that some of my Mother's pride rubbed off on me and when someone from the British Legion brought us a box of second hand toys for Xmas, Yvonne and Anne were delighted but I refused to have any of them. Another thing that caused me dire mortification was the fact that we were given free dinners at school. When the teacher was taking the dinner money from the pupils who paid she would then say, "stand up all the free dinner children" and then the whole class would see that we were poor children. We were also given free shoes sometimes, usually after my Mother had kept us off school because our shoes were worn out and she couldn't buy us new ones. Again the teacher would call us out from the class and she would take us herself to the shoe shop while another teacher watched her class. She would march into the shoe shop and tell the assistant that she had brought some of her poor children to get shoes on a council grant and that they had to be very strong so that they would last a long time. We usually ended up with boys laced up shoes that all the other better off kids used to laugh at. No one will ever know how I longed for a pair of black patent ankle strapped shoes like the posh little girls wore.

After we got home with our new shoes my Mother used to make the humiliation complete by nailing big studs in the bottoms of them. A lot of the kids had blakeys which were little metal tabs on the toes and heels but our studs were like workmen had in their hob nailed boots and they used to clatter as we walked along. After giving the matter a lot of deliberation I suddenly had a flash of inspiration. I told all those posh kids that I was lucky to have studs in my shoes because I could tap dance with them and they couldn't with their shoes. It worked and I used to get all sorts of little favours for a loan of my shoes in the playground. They would give me one of their pomegranate pips to suck or their apple core after they had finished with it and sometimes they would let me try on their black patent shoes. I got very good at making things happen if I really wanted them to. My Mother often used to cry when we needed shoes and she

didn't have the money to buy them so we tried not to tell her when we got a hole in the soles of our shoes. We used to cut out a piece of cardboard the same size as the sole and put it inside our shoes so that we didn't hurt our feet on the stones and then no one knew about our holey shoes. My Mother used to somehow find time to make our clothes. They were usually made from old clothes that the ladies she worked for gave her. They were never the height of fashion but then neither were most of the other kids' clothes. We lived in the depression days of hand me downs and darns and patches.

When the sun was shining and the day was warm none of those things mattered. We were off across the fields and living wonderful adventures in our imaginations. We used to go across cornfields that are now Birdwood Road and then down a little muddy lane where the blackberries grew in high banks and always the biggest and juiciest were just out of reach, but Mother used to be really pleased when we took a basketful home and always used them to make blackberry pies and, if there were enough, some jam too. They have never tasted as delicious since I have been grown up. Blackberry time was of course harvest time and if we were really lucky we would meet up with a loaded cart being drawn by cart horses and if we really smiled nicely at the driver he would sometimes let us sit on top of the loaded cart or even the horse. An adventure like that would make our day.

The Spring was also a very nice time for us. After being unable to go far all through the winter, we were at last allowed to roam again. On Sundays we had to go to Sunday School and after Sunday School we were allowed to go for a walk as long as we didn't get ourselves dirty but walking along roads was boring and the lure of the open fields and lanes always won. We would only really notice how dirty our shoes were when it was time to go home and to clean the mud off our shoes we used to turn our gloves inside out and clean our shoes with them and then turn them the right way again and put them back on our hands. We were usually able to get past mother's watchful eyes and hide our gloves until she was at work and then wash them out and she was none the wiser and we were out of trouble. In Spring we loved to look for violets along the edges of ditches and in the woodlands. In those days the very first wild flowers of Spring were the coltsfoot. They are a yellow dandelion like flower and as soon as they appeared we knew that it would soon be violet time. I have noticed in recent years that the coltsfoot

is not the first flower any more, in fact it now tends to bloom much later in the season. We would pick big bunches of violets to take to Mother and no one minded at all. I don't think that anyone ever thought that one day it would be necessary to conserve them. They were just part of nature and there for us all to enjoy. After the violets came the celandines and then the cowslips and oxlips and we used to pick great armfuls of them. It was a magic world walking among all the flowers and breathing in the wonderful perfume of them all. No car fumes in those days, just the smells of flowers and grasses.

After the Spring flowers came the early Summer ones. Hedges covered in creamy white hawthorn blossom and the road verges sporting tall white cow parsley and bright yellow buttercups followed by knapweed and scabias and lots and lots of other wild flowers. Mother knew the names of lots of them and used to teach us the old fashioned country names for them. Sometimes she would take us for walks when she could spare a bit of her precious time. She always made use of our walks and she usually took her bicycle along to carry any useful thing we might find. Sometimes it would be firewood but sometimes we would go to some fields where cabbages or carrots or swedes or potatoes were growing and we usually came back with some of them in the sack in Mother's bicycle basket. We didn't think of it as stealing. The farmer had so many that he would never miss them and our need was great.

I couldn't wait for the summer holidays to start. Six wonderful weeks of freedom when it didn't matter if we had holes in our shoes and holes in our socks and scruffy clothes. We were living in a little bit of heaven. When we woke up in the morning and the sun was shining we made a few sandwiches for our lunch, usually margarine and Marmite. Margarine in those days was pretty disgusting and the Marmite was strong enough to disguise it. We used to go through the fields to a little brook and we managed to make fishing nets with a little piece of old net curtain and a stick and a little piece of wire and we used to tie a piece of string round a jam jar to enable us to carry it and then we were ready for a fishing trip. We used to take off our shoes and socks and paddle in the brook and the water was crystal clear so we could see all the minnows and tadpoles and newts swimming around. One day we made the mistake of putting a fish that we used to call a robin redbreast in with our catch and by the next day we had a very fat robin redbreast and very little else. We learned by our mistakes. After the

hawthorn blossom came the wild roses and the hedges were festooned with long branches of the delicate pink blooms and here and there were sweet briars which smelled strongly of green apples.

One day when we were walking along our lane we discovered a gap in the high hedge and an iron paling fence with a rail missing. It was just too inviting and we absolutely had to go through the fence to explore. We were very frightened because we were pretty sure that we were trespassing and when we saw notices saying that trespassers would be prosecuted we thought that it meant that if we were caught we should have our heads chopped off. However, in spite of our fears, curiosity got the better of us and we crawled through the gap and at once entered a magic place. We didn't know it but we had entered the grounds of Cherry Hinton Hall. At that time it was derelict as the owners had gone abroad and then died and no-one had taken it over. As we wandered through the grounds we found huge rose bushes that had not been trimmed for years and among the tall nettles and grasses were all sorts of garden flowers. There were also lots of little bubbling springs and it was truly a secret garden. We immediately called it Wonderland and spent many long magical hours there, and there was always some new wonder to discover. At the back of the gardens was a large field full of buttercups and cow parsley and long, long grass where we also spent many happy hours. We named it buttercup meadow.

One day as we were playing there we saw a man and a policeman walking round the field and pointing to various trees and we lay flat on our stomachs, absolutely terrified in case they saw us and beheaded us. However after a while they walked away. I believe that they were deciding which trees had to be cut down but we were just so relieved when they departed without seeing us. The next time we visited Buttercup meadow there were workmen there cutting down some of the trees and we ran away as fast as we could.

Sometimes we followed the lane until it came out in Cherry Hinton village and as the lane came out into the village there was a small hut which was a blacksmith's forge. If we were lucky we were able to watch the farrier shoeing some of the big farm horses. We watched in amazement as the smoke and steam billowed up when the farrier put the hot shoe on the horses feet and we couldn't believe that it wasn't painful for the horses although the farrier assured us that it wasn't, I think that the unanimous opinion was that we were all glad that we

weren't horses.

Another of our haunts at that time was the Beech Woods, I can hardly believe that little girls of seven, five and three were allowed to roam so far from home all on their own but those were the days of capital punishment and good neighbours and Mother used to tell us that any grown up would help us if we were in trouble and so they would. More than once when we hurt ourselves or got lost we would knock on a door and sure enough the adults who lived there would help us. They would very often offer us a glass of lemonade and a handful of biscuits to help us on our way. Biscuits were a great luxury as Mother could never afford to buy them. We used to set off with our doll's pram for collecting wood and a stolen box of matches and some potatoes to cook on the fire we intended to light but maybe luckily for us we were never any good at lighting fires and our efforts in that direction were not very successful. Even when we did manage to light a fire we could never keep it alight for long enough to cook our potatoes properly but when you are little and hungry even half cooked potatoes taste like manna from heaven.

In early summer the woods were carpeted with purple spotted orchids and spectacular bee orchids and a little white one which we had never been able to identify until recently and we found that it was a wild helleborine. We used to pick bunches of them for mother and armed with our orchids and the wood that we had collected we were excused for coming home very dirty and maybe a bit later than we should have done. No matter what time we started out for home we always seemed to have to run as hard as we could for the last part of the way. We usually arrived home hot and panting at about five minutes before or after curfew. We used to get into quite a lot of scrapes when we were little but it was very rare that Mother knew anything about them.

There was an orchard along Cherry Hinton Road where we used to scrump apples. We discovered that it was owned by a very elderly couple who had no chance of catching us when we ran away but there was one drawback. When my sister Yvonne was scared she always froze and so because we couldn't leave her to her fate Anne and I had to get caught too. If we were caught by the farmer it was usually just a good telling off but if we were caught by a policeman it would be a jolly good clip round the ear and if we were really unlucky he would go to see our Mother and then we were really in trouble because we would be grounded for

a week and we couldn't bear that.

During that period the Council started to build the Coleridge School in a field opposite our house. At first it was just a large building site and not of very much interest to us but as the building neared completion we became very interested in exploring it. Of course it was very strictly out of bounds which made it even more interesting to us. We would climb up the fire escape and onto the flat roof and find all sorts of interesting places to explore. The caretaker had, by that time, moved into his house and used to come and shout at us but we were always too quick for him to be able to catch us. However my sister Yvonne let us down and left her school blazer behind on one of our forays and when we arrived home without it Mother made us go to the caretaker's house to get it back. We were absolutely terrified at having to face our deadly enemy in his own house but the only worse thing was to face Mother if we came home again without the blazer. We were all shaking as we knocked the door and as the caretaker opened it we were struggling not to burst into tears. When he saw us on his doorstep he said, "Ah, you're the naughty children who keep trespassing in the school aren't you. Come into my sitting room and sit down while I call the police." At that we all burst into tears. I don't think that he ever really intended to report us to the police but, at the time, we quite thought that was what he was going to do. After leaving us to stew for a little while he came back into the room again and said, "Well I have thought about this very carefully and I have decided not to call the police this time but you must promise me that you will not go into the school again because if I ever catch you in there again I now know who you are and I shall call the police straight away". Funny, but after that little episode, the school definitely lost its attraction.

By then it was summer and we were off to the swimming pool again and forgot about the school anyway. At about that time my Mother told us that she was going to take us to the seaside for a holiday. Holidays were for rich kids not us and we could hardly believe it. We had never had a holiday. Just before we were about to go my mother left us with an aunt while she went somewhere or other and we were all playing and I decided to give my sister Anne an aeroplane. This was a case of holding her by one leg and one arm and swinging her round and round. Unfortunately I hit her head on the corner of a wall and split her head open. My aunt called the doctor and he stitched her head while she was lying on

the kitchen table. Strange to say she bore me no malice and my mother made no fuss about it, saying that accidents couldn't be helped, but I remember feeling so guilty and I think that I should have felt a lot better if I had been punished. My poor sister had to go for her first holiday ever with her head swathed in bandages.

The following day we set off on the train which in itself was a great adventure. We went to the East Coast village of Heacham and we stayed in a chalet. I thought that it was a wonderful place. I shall never forget the banks and banks of cream roses growing over all the fences around the chalets and the fields of lavender growing just down the road from the chalet. The perfume was wonderful and even to this day when I smell lavender and roses I am transported back to those lovely happy days. However towards the end of the holiday we were surprised when a strange man appeared and was introduced to us as Uncle. At that point we were not given any other name than Uncle. He went out of his way to be nice to us and he did silly conjuring tricks and told silly jokes and Yvonne and Anne were quickly won over but I was not so easily convinced that he was really as nice as he pretended to be. Maybe I was jealous that he was taking too much of my mother's time and that she was making such a fuss of him. I'm really not quite sure. Anyway, for me the holiday lost its magic as soon as he appeared.

What we were never told was that he was married and lived next door to us. We were just told that he was our neighbour's twin brother and that we mustn't talk to our neighbour after we got home because he would be very cross if we did. The holiday wasn't over then of course and he did do all he could to make us happy. We walked along the beach to Hunstanton and picked up shells and pretty coloured pebbles and "uncle" showed us how to collect mussels and cockles which we took back to our bungalow and he cooked for tea. When I bit on something hard and thought it was a stone he told us all that it was a black pearl. Not valuable of course, but fun to collect. It was our very first time at the sea so everything was new to us. We had such fun swimming in the sea and dodging the waves and looking for crabs and little fish in the pools. The weather was wonderful and I thought that we were in a place where the sun always shone. Such are the wonders of childhood. Holidays always have to end sometime and we were all very sad to have to go home.

However when we were home again we found a new interest. We watched avidly everything that our neighbour did and compared him to "uncle" in every

detail and could find no difference at all. Children though we were, we didn't really believe that they were two different people and we had long discussions about it but always came to the conclusion that we were being hoodwinked, however none of us were brave enough to speak to our neighbour. After a while he became a regular visitor and without anything being said, Mother realised that we were not being fooled any longer but we also realised, without anything being said, that we should not give anything away. I suppose that we were much more streetwise than most of today's children and we learned at a very early age when it was expedient to keep our mouths shut – whether it was to save ourselves a beating up from other children or to save us getting a hiding from Mother or to have her curtail our freedom.

Of course we had the usual children's complaints such as measles, mumps, chickenpox, whooping cough etc. At these times Mother used to keep us in bed and she used to light a fire in the bedroom. Most houses in those days had a fireplace in the bedrooms but they were very rarely used. Many times when we were ill I saw my mother cry because we needed the doctor and she had no idea how to find the money for the doctor. When we were ill my mother used to get her friend to sit with us while she was at work and we loved that, as her friend loved children but had never been able to have any of her own. She used to play games with us and read stories to us. Her name was Mrs Butler and although she and my mother were good friends I never heard them call each other by their Christian names it was always Mrs Butler and Mrs Fenn and we kids all had to call her Auntie Butler. It seems funny now but that is the way things were in those days.

George became a regular visitor to our house. He was a telephone operator and used to work the night shift so on his short nights or nights off he used to stay at our house and sleep with my mother with no thought of his wife and two children in the house next door. When I was nine years old my sisters and I were playing with some other children on the recreation ground when a boy came running over to us and shouted quick run home the war has started. We were all terrified and ran as fast as we could, expecting that at any moment we should see loads of German soldiers with guns coming down the road to kill us. When we arrived home puffing and panting we were amazed to find that everything was normal. I don't know what we expected but certainly not normality. We were

lucky in Cambridge because the war tended to pass us by.

Of course we had to put up with rationing like everyone else but my mother was very good at making a good filling meal out of scraps she had been doing it for years so we really fared quite well. Bones were not rationed so she used to buy large marrow bones and boil them up and then scrape off the meat and make a stew with lots of fresh vegetables and added dumplings made with suet from the butcher which was also not rationed. Lots of people didn't know how to use lumps of suet and so it was reasonably easy to obtain. My mother also made suet crust pastry and suet puddings which again were very filling and nutritious. In fact the war even made us a little bit better off because my mother couldn't afford sweets or many clothes so she used to sell our surplus coupons to the highest bidder and used the money for more essential things. Because Cambridge was considered to be a safe area everyone was forced to take in evacuees from London or other danger zones.

A man from the council came to see my mother and said that we had enough room for three people. We were living in a house with one little box room and two normal bedrooms so we were forced to utilise our sitting room which was only ever used on high days and holidays or when we had important visitors. It really upset my mother She decided to put her own bed in the sitting room and give her bedroom to the evacuees. It was a very difficult time as the evacuees consisted of a mother and a boy of five and his twelve year old brother. The little boy wet the bed every night and his mother just put the sheets out for my mother to wash and, as the sheets were my mother's, she didn't have much choice. My mother still worked all day but the evacuee mother was at home all day but she just went out into town and left my mother to cook and clean for everyone when she came home from work. It was really disastrous for my mother and in the end she went to the Guild Hall and told the officers that she could not cope with the situation any longer. After she had told them her story and how she had to work to keep us all the officer decided that he would find our evacuees somewhere else to be billeted. He told my mother that, because of her circumstances, she should never have had to take evacuees in the first place. We were all heartily pleased to see the back of our evacuees but when they left, they helped themselves to my mother's sheets and pillow cases and a blanket or two. She was able to claim a little money and some clothing coupons but they nowhere near compensated her

for what she had lost and for several years we slept under old coats when it was cold and we needed extra blankets.

Just at the start of the war we were all issued with gas masks and my sister Anne, because she was under five, had one with red Mickey Mouse ears. The rest of us had black ones. Parents of babies were issued with ventilators for their babies and when they put them into it they had to keep pumping it. If they stopped the baby would die. I found a way to make a little extra money for my mother because all the gas masks were in cardboard boxes and had to be carried at all times. A cardboard box with a string is not very long lasting and so people started to buy gas mask cases but they were in very short supply so I made one each for our family out of rexine a sort of forerunner of plastic. I was only nine but I had been using my mother's sewing machine for ages and the gas mask cases were so successful that all the neighbours asked me to make gas mask cases for them. They used to pay me two shillings and six pence and it came in very handy. When the neighbours realized that I could sew, I got lots of little jobs altering clothes or making something out of something else.

During the war we had no imported food except dried egg and very occasionally spam which I think the Americans flew in. Our rations were two ounces of butter, four ounces of margarine and cheese, four ounces of sugar and one egg each. We forgot what bananas and oranges and coconuts and grapefruit tasted like and instead of lemons we used lemon essence and in the winter when onions ran out we even had onion essence. We used to cook parsnips and put banana essence in them to make a kind of mashed banana. I don't think that we really missed the food that disappeared from the scene because we were too young to remember them very well. So long as we had enough to eat we were happy and my mother always made sure of that.

The war had not been on very long when we had our first serious illnesses. It started with Annie. She had a bad earache and her ear started to run. I remember that she used to scream with the pain. My mother kept taking her to the doctor who kept saying that it was an abscess. It cost my poor mother a small fortune in doctor's bills and all to no avail. I can still remember the awful smell of the discharge when we got close to poor old Annie. In the end my mother took her to the doctors and said that if he didn't write her a letter for the hospital she would take her there anyway and tell the emergency doctor that her doctor had

refused to send her. In the end with reluctance he did write the letter. When my mother got to the hospital with Annie and finally got to see the consultant after a very long wait, he ordered her straight up to the ward and told my mother off for not taking her before. She explained about the doctors reluctance to write the letter but I don't expect anything was done about it. In those days the people of my mother's age group were very poorly educated and doctors and clergymen and school teachers were regarded with awe. They were almost gods. Anyway the consultant operated on Annie for mastoids the next morning and he said that if it had been delayed by even another day she would probably have had meningitis and would surely have died. After the operation she was kept in hospital for six weeks and in those days children were not allowed any visitors whatsoever, so by the time Annie came out of hospital she had forgotten what we all looked like. And no wonder, she was only five years old.

Anne had only been home about a week or so when Yvonne and I developed a rash and felt very ill. My mother called the doctor and he took one look at us and went to phone the ambulance. We had scarlet fever. In those days it was a very serious disease and lots of children died of it. Yvonne and I were terrified. We were sure that we were going to die. We were put in beds next to each other in a huge ward with about twenty beds in it. In the middle of the ward was a large tortoise stove with a large fire-guard round it and the nurses used to air our nighties on the fire-guard. One day the nurse forgot to turn the clothes round and scorched them all. One of the children called the nurse when she saw the smoke coming up and the nurse ran down the ward and grabbed the clothed and ran out of the ward with them. When she came back we were all told that if we told anyone about the incident we would be in really big trouble.

Our food was very basic, lemon jelly only for the first three days and then fish, mashed potatoes and dried peas for the next week and after that for as long as we were there it was mince, mashed potatoes and cabbage. Our breakfast and tea were two slices of bread and margarine and a little scraping of apricot jam. The margarine was a very cheap brand and was truly disgusting. I tried to eat it as the nurses said that we must but it was so awful that it made me retch so I used to break it into tiny pieces and throw them under the beds of my neighbours.

We were in the "fever" hospital over Xmas and merited a little charity. On

Xmas morning the council sent one of their number dressed up as Father Christmas who gave us each a small gift. Our parents were not allowed to send any presents in to us as they would all have had to be burnt when we left the hospital because of infection. We were also visited by the Mayor and the Salvation Army. We even had a Xmas dinner of sorts, a very small slice of beef and luxury of luxuries a small piece of yorkshire pudding and roast potatoes and some Xmas pudding to follow and for tea we had jelly with our bread and margarine. When mother finally came to collect us after six long weeks we hardly recognised her and I had got so thin that I could span my ankles with my thumb and forefinger I believe that it took us all quite a time to become fully recovered.

One winter evening as we were sitting round the fire we heard a cat mewing. I ran to the door and let it in. I have always loved animals and the poor little thing was all cold and wet as it was snowing. My mother said that the cat had to go as she couldn't afford to feed animals however I did manage to persuade her to let me give the cat some milk and after that she settled herself in and I used to save some of my dinner to give her and I used to sneak bits and pieces for her when no one was looking. I called her Tibby and I adored her. She was always on my lap. Well, in those days people didn't have cats spayed and so, before long, Tibby presented us with a litter of kittens. My mother said that the kittens had to go and she was going to get George to drown them all. We were all upset about that so we all begged and bullied all our friends to take a kitten and somehow we found homes for all of them. Of course, we were not very wise in the nature of cats and before very long Tibby was pregnant again. This time she decided to have her kittens on my mother's bed and that really was the end. This time there was no argument we were told that either I took Tibby to the cats home to be put down or George would put her in a sack with her kittens and weight it with a brick and throw it in the river. What could I do? I was totally heart broken. My mother made Yvonne and Anne come with me and I shall never forget seeing the lady pick up poor little Tibby and put her in a kind of bin. It seems that the bin was then filled with gas. She even asked me if I wanted to see my cat after she was dead. I cried and cried for nights and nights and for years afterwards I used to think that I felt her jumping on my bed.

The next pet I had was a rabbit. It was a fluffy blue grey one and I loved it to bits. I brought it home in a cardboard box and called it Smokey. The boy who

lived next door to us helped me to make a hutch out of orange boxes. In those days oranges used to come in wooden crates. Between us we felt that we had made quite a good job of it and I suppose it wasn't bad for two kids with no money to buy anything and very few tools. A great deal of improvisation went into it, I can tell you. Well I had my rabbit for about two years and I used to collect dandelion leaves and hog weed and sow thistles on the way home from school to feed him. In those days people didn't buy special pet foods and feed pellets had not been invented. Even if they had been, we couldn't have afforded them. Well, one day I came home from school with weeds for my rabbit and found the hutch empty. I ran indoors and asked my mother what had happened to my rabbit and I was told that she had given it to the butcher in exchange for a joint of meat. It was a long while before I could eat meat and even now I only eat a very little.

Round about that time I became friendly with a girl who lived just down the road from us. Her mother was a widow too and went to work at the cinema as an usherette. As we were both in the same circumstances, I suppose we formed an immediate bond. Her name was Beryl Denyer and we stayed friends for the rest of our lives. We used to play in the fields near our home and make dens under the bushes. Usually I had to take my sisters with me and as they were so much younger they tended to spoil our games. On this particular day, they weren't with us but another girl started to tag along with us. She was about our age but was a little bit slow witted, we used to call her daft Esther. I think that it was Beryl's idea to play hairdressers with her. We wouldn't have dared to cut our own hair but I think that we thought poor Esther would be fair game. Beryl went into her house and got some scissors and we took Esther to our den where no one would see and we cut her hair all off. We just left about an inch all over her head. After we had finished we suddenly realized the enormity of our crime and felt frightened. We told Esther that she was not to tell anyone who had cut her hair and if she did we would give her a really good hiding. For days we waited for the sword of Damocles to fall on us but as time went by and nothing happened we began to breathe easily again.

After the first year of war when nothing much happened in our little world we began to forget that there was a war going on. My mother couldn't afford to buy newspapers and although we had a radio, or wireless as we called it, we found the news boring. I suppose that we had no close relatives in the forces and

most of the places they spoke of were unknown to us. We heard about the bombs in London and Coventry and other big cities but again they were very far away from us, and could have been on the other side of the world for all we knew about them. I remember getting into trouble at school because at the start of the day each child had to tell the class one small item of news. When it was my turn I had to say that I didn't know any. My teacher asked me why I didn't read the newspapers and I told her that we didn't have them as my mother couldn't afford them. She didn't believe me and said so amid titters from the rest of the class.

Soon, with the eternal optimism of children, we began to feel that nothing would happen in Cambridge so we had a real shock when one night the sirens sounded and we heard a German plane going overhead and suddenly there was a loud explosion and all the doors and windows rattled. We heard the next day that the bombs had fallen in Rustat Road which was where my Mother worked. They had actually missed the houses that she worked at so her jobs were still safe. We then heard gunfire and more bombs falling further away and we suddenly realized that we were not as safe as we thought we were. The second lot of bombs were dropped on Fenners cricket ground which is behind the Gonville hotel. I expect that the planes were aiming bombs at the railway in actual fact but Fenners has always been hallowed ground so I expect that a lot of people were really devastated. We were told that if the siren went when we were on our way to school, we were to run to school or home whichever was nearest but of course we always ran home.

A large air raid shelter was built opposite our school and if the siren went while we were at school we were all ushered down there as fast as possible. I don't remember any of us being frightened, it all seemed like an adventure. We all had to keep little tins of emergency rations in our desks at school, these consisted of Ovaltine tablets which weren't rationed and some biscuits, a rare treat and other little odds and ends that could be kept without going bad. We all had to take our tins and our gas masks with us and once we were all seated in the shelters we sang songs and played guessing games and generally enjoyed ourselves. We weren't supposed to eat our rations, as they were meant to be kept in case we were in the shelters a long time. However we always managed to eat them without the teacher seeing us and every time the siren went when we were at school mother had to replenish our tins. After a while the teachers decided that

we were wasting too much school time and they stopped the singing and games and started giving us mental arithmetic and spellings and it wasn't nearly so much fun any more.

Soon after the war started we had an air raid shelter delivered to us. I believe that better off people had to buy one but ours was free. However it never got erected because the ground needed to be dug out in a hole about seven feet by six feet and about six feet deep. There were then pieces of a sort of heavy gauge pig wire to line the sides of the hole and large slabs of metal to roof it with. There was no way that my mother could erect it herself and in fact it never got put up. However when my mother was at work and we were on holiday from school we decided that we would all dig the hole. After a lot of struggling we managed to make a hole about three feet deep and three feet square. Nothing more was ever done to it and we used to play in it. We used to lay old curtains over the top of it and use it as a den.

At that time the war was beginning to hot up and great Aunt Ruth who lived in London, which was by then being blitzed very badly, came to stay with us. She was a very short fat lady and very grumpy. She told us all off all the time and we used to make fun of her behind her back. She used to wear knickers with legs that had elastic in them and came right down over her knees. We used to sit under the table when she was sitting at the table and look at her long drawers and giggle. At that time our toilet was out in the garden and because of the blackout it was very very dark out there. Well, one night she went to the toilet and wandered off the path and fell down our hole. The first we knew about it was when we heard her shouting and swearing somewhere out in the garden. My mother got a torch and went to look and there was Great Aunt Ruth sitting at the bottom of our hole with her short fat knicker-encased legs waving about. We all fell about laughing and even my mother was having great difficulty keeping a straight face. The next day we were ordered to fill the hole in and that was the end of our shelter. A few days after that Great Aunt Ruth, to our great delight, packed her bags and announced that she would rather take her chances with Hitler's bombs than stay in a house with such little hellions as us.

In January 1940 we were all issued with ration books. Children under five had green ones and were able to get concentrated orange juice to make sure that they had enough vitamin C. Annie was just young enough to get the orange juice

and we all used to drink it. As oranges were not obtainable we thought that it was lovely. With rationing and food shortages the price of food went up by fifteen percent almost overnight, which made it very hard for not only my mother but women with children whose husbands were called up to serve in the forces. That was all men between eighteen and forty years of age. The forces family allowance was not a great deal more than the money my mother was living on and it was very hard for them to take such a sudden drop in their incomes. They were not used to making do as my mother was. Food was always available on the black market for people with enough money but, of course, we couldn't buy it and neither could most ordinary people. All single women and women without children were also forced to join the forces or to work in some kind of war work such as munitions factories. I decided that if the war was still on when I was eighteen, I would be a land girl but that ambition was never realised as the war ended when I was sixteen.

At the start of the war the blackout was made law and anyone showing a light could be fined quite heavily. George hopped over the fence one day while his wife was at work and made my mother's blackouts for her. Every window in the house had to be covered so that no chink of light showed. George made wooden frames for every window and covered them with tarred paper and every evening as it began to get dark we had to rush round the house and put up the blackouts. At first it was quite frightening to go out in the blackout because there were no street lights and no lights from house windows, and the only light you were allowed to carry was a very small torch and you had to keep it pointing down all the time. There were hardly any cars on the roads as petrol was only allowed to people who needed it for their jobs like farmers and doctors etc, and even they were rationed not that it made any difference to ordinary people as only very well off people possessed a car in those days. In the first year of the blackout the road accidents doubled from the previous year. All the older men who were not called up had to be fire-watchers or air-raid wardens and had to do shifts after they finished work.

Their other alternative was to join the Home Guard. They trained at weekends and in the evenings and were supposed to go into action if we were invaded. At the beginning of the war they had to train with wooden guns as they didn't have any real weapons. There were even wooden machine guns erected around

the coast and in strategic places to make the Germans think that we were well armed. That is just how unprepared Britain was to meet Hitler's war machine. All metal was confiscated and so all metal fences etc. were collected by the councils and everyone lost fences and gates and anything else that was metal. The metal was used to make arms and tanks and anything else that was needed for the war effort.

Everyone was expected to grow food in their gardens so all the flower gardens and lawns were dug up and planted with vegetables. Instead of seeing flowers in front gardens as you walked down a road, you saw cabbages and sprouts and carrots and peas and anything else that could be grown to help feed the family. People in towns also started to keep rabbits and chickens for food and people in the country with a bit more ground used to keep pigs. As our garden was a corner plot we had a lot more ground than anyone else in the road. It had all been lawn which we used to cut on our hands and knees with shears and when the shears broke we used large scissors so, after mother had somehow managed to dig the lawn up, it was really easier to plant it with vegetables than it had been to cut the lawn with our primitive tools. I used to help mother to plant and dig and weed and I found it very exciting when the seeds came up and when we were able to dig up or pick our own produce. They were also really delicious to eat. I think that was what started my lifelong love of gardens.

We were lucky that my mother had a brother who lived in the country at a village near Newmarket. He was exempt from having to join the forces as he was a farm worker and he would often bring my mother a rabbit or a hare or some pigeons which were free and also helped out the meat rations. My mother's sister also lived in the country and used to keep bees and chickens so we occasionally got some eggs and honey when she came to visit us. My mother taught me at about the age of ten, how to skin and gut rabbits and to pluck and gut pigeons.

George, the father of my three younger sisters, was a keen fisherman and so we often got freshwater fish such as bream and dace and rainbow trout which again I was taught how to prepare. One of our favourite fish was pike as they were large and didn't have so many small bones. Mother used to gut them and cut off the head and tail and she then stuffed them with sage and onion and wrapped them in butter paper and baked them in the oven. They were really delicious. George also used to catch eels sometimes, but as they had to be alive when they

were prepared for the table, my mother didn't like to prepare them, so George taught me to take hold of them with a tea cloth making sure to keep well away from the mouth as they had nasty teeth. I then had to cut off the heads and as I did this they would wind their bodies round my arm. I didn't enjoy doing this but I didn't really mind too much. After I had gutted and chopped them up my mother used to cook them and put them in an aspic jelly with onions and herbs and they were very good to eat. During the war the only sausages we were able to buy were made with oatmeal and herbs and just a tiny bit of scrap meat but we were very glad to get them as they were not on the ration. We also used to make mock mashed banana with mashed parsnips and banana essence and saccharine. We were also able to buy onion essence, lemon essence, vanilla essence and several others and because there were no real foreign fruits in the shops people got very ingenious in the use of the different essences.

I have got such a lot of pleasure during my life from watching nature and all her wonders. I can't believe that anything can be more awe inspiring than to watch a bud unfolding into a beautiful flower or to watch a small bird feeding its young or gradually getting less and less frightened of you and coming ever closer to eat proffered food. One really bad winter I had a blackbird and a robin that would sit on my hand to feed and it was like a minor miracle. I feel really sorry for people who have never known the joy of walking through woods and fields and observing all nature's wonder and beauty. It is all there for everyone and it is free but so many people look and don't see.

Soon, I was ten years old and it was time for me to sit the "scholarship exams" which were the eleven plus of later days. These exams determined whether or not we should be given a scholarship to a Grammar school. The exams consisted of first, an intelligence test followed by an arithmetic test and finally an English test. In those days the Grammar schools offered free places to children who passed the examination. They also took fee paying children from better class homes. In an attempt to stop too much snobbery and bitchiness all the girls had to wear a uniform and were known as the clever ones by everyone so it was a great honour to pass the Scholarship and wear the uniform of a grammar school. When I was told that I had passed I just couldn't believe it and I ran all the way home to tell Mother. She was very pleased and proud of me but then there was the problem of the uniform. She went to see the head master and he

told her that the council paid for uniforms for poor children and she had to go to the Guildhall and was given some vouchers to exchange at the shops for the required items. I have never been more proud of anything in my life than I was with my uniform. We all wore brown gym slippers and white blouses and brown cardigans in the winter. We also had to have brown top coats and brown stockings. I had never been allowed to wear stockings before as they were more expensive than socks and didn't last as long. In fact I used to pull my long turn down socks up above my knees and pretend that they were stockings so when I got real stockings to wear I was really excited and Yvonne was very jealous. We also had to wear a brown beret with the school badge on it and we also had a school badge on the pocket of our gym slippers. In the summer we wore brown gingham dresses with white collars and cuffs and a brown blazer with the school badge on the pocket and a straw hat with a blue and brown ribbon round it.

On my first day at the new school my mother offered to take me but I was afraid that the other girls might laugh at me for having my mother with me so I declined her offer and I think that she was disappointed. The school was an all girls' school. It was built in a large square with class rooms running all the way round and a corridor to go from class to class. The girls' school occupied half of the square and the boys' school the other half. The only thing that we shared with the boys was the gym but of course we used it at different times. The corridors between the girls' and boys' school were separated by large doors which were always kept locked, not that we would have dared to open them anyway. Most of the girls who lived near me who attended the Central school went by bus as it was about a mile and a half away but my mother couldn't afford a penny a day for the bus so I used to walk. In hindsight I'm sure that it was good for me because even to this day I am a very good walker.

On the way to school I used to cross a railway bridge and one day, after a night of bombs falling, I came to the bridge and saw that all the houses that were built under the bridge had been bombed. It was the first time that I had actually seen a bombed house and I remember it reminded me of a row of dolls houses. All the fronts of them had been blown off and the furniture and baths and sinks and toilets were still in the houses just as if someone had just opened the front of a dolls house. I never knew if anyone was killed or injured in the blast but the houses were left in that state until after the war.

On May Day, the Central School used to have the school's most important celebration. It was the day that the new May Queen was elected and when we said goodbye to the old May Queen. The May Queens were, in fact, the head girls of the school and the Maids of Honour were the head girls of the younger years. It was one of the most impressive ceremonies I had ever seen. All the teachers got together and made big balls of cowslips which all the girls had to collect. In those days we were all allowed to pick wild flowers and no one ever thought that there might be a day when they had to be protected. They were just so plentiful and covered the whole of the countryside. Almost every girl turned up with bunches of cowslips a day or two before May Day and when the teachers had made all the balls they were hung from the ceiling of the main hall. There were rows upon rows of them and they looked really beautiful. I don't know how the teachers found the time to make them all but somehow they did. On the day every girl had to bring a bunch of flowers to school. It didn't matter if they were garden flowers or wild ones and we all had to file up to the stage and place our flowers there. As there were three hundred girls one can imagine the masses and masses of flowers that arrived. On the stage were two thrones, one was covered in forget-me-nots for the retiring May Queen and the other was covered in cowslips for the new May Queen. Both of the May Queens were dressed in long ball dresses and wore crowns of forget-me-nots and cowslips. The Maids of honour also wore long ball dresses and wore crowns of flowers and stood on the stage beside the thrones. At the start of the ceremony the first years used to dance round the maypole at the front of the hall and then all the school used to sing various songs specially learnt for the occasion. We then said goodbye to the retiring May Queen and wished her well after she left school and we welcomed the new May Queen and wished her a happy year as head girl. To me it was a really magic day. After the ceremony all the flowers were sent to local hospitals and homes.

As always, money was short and my mother saw an advert in a shop advertising for a schoolgirl to deliver papers so she sent me round to see the shopkeeper. The result was that I ended up with my first job. My paper round was a very long one and I didn't have a bicycle so I had to take half my papers and then go back to the shop to get the rest. I used to get to the shop at six thirty and if I hurried I finished by about eight o'clock. I then went home to have a very hurried breakfast and started out to walk the mile and a half to school at eight

thirty. I found that if I was really pushed for time I could get there in twenty minutes if I ran all the way and sometimes I had to do just that.

I never found lessons hard except for maths and my English was so good that the marks I got for that more than made up for the lower marks for maths. I was usually first or second in English and history and geography and always first in art. By the time I was in third year I was recognised by the staff and the girls as the school's best artist. I was the only girl in the school who was allowed to paint in oils as they were almost impossible to purchase in the war years. I was also asked to paint a mural on the walls of the corridor. I was allowed to paint it in the break times and the dinner hour. Lots of the girls used to stand and watch me and I felt really important. I have been told by good authority that the mural stayed on the wall for many years after I left.

When my mother bought my school uniform she bought it very long and large for me. She turned up a big hem and I used to let it down bit by bit as I grew. I wore the same clothes all the way through school and by the time I reached fourth year my gym slip was decidedly short. In fact I learned later that the boys used to watch the girls through the railings and they used to call me legs. Of course at the time I was totally ignorant of this which was just as well because at that time I was painfully shy. In the first weeks at the Central I made friends with a girl called Averil Lynn. She was one of a large family and her father was a driver on the railway. In those days it was considered a really good job. She lived quite close to the school and sometimes I went round to her house with her on the way home. We stayed friends until third year when she decided to go to the Technical college to learn to become a secretary and to take exams in shorthand and typing and book keeping.

I missed her a lot when she left as I was too shy to make a lot of friends but by then Beryl Denyer had arrived at the school so I used to talk to her in the breaks and the dinner hour. She was only five months younger than me but my birthday was in August and hers was the following January. Hence we were a year apart at school. We both stayed to school dinners because we could not get home and back in the lunch time and also we both had free dinners which was a great help to both of our mothers.

While I was in the first year my mother had to have an operation. The money side of it was not a problem as mother had always paid into a hospital

club. It cost sixpence a week and entitled all its members to a stay in hospital or to have out patients treatment when ever they needed it. What to do with all of us girls while she was in hospital was however another question. In the end my mother's sister Aunty Doris offered to take me but couldn't manage all of us. She already had two children of her own and was not very well herself. It was decided that I should be the one to go to her as I was at the Grammar school and it was more important that I didn't miss my schooling. Yvonne and Anne were still at the junior school. My mother got pretty desperate trying to find somewhere for them to go but in the end Great Aunt Ruth agreed to take them for the duration of mother's illness. The only drawback was that Great Aunt Ruth lived in London where the bombs were falling.

In the end it was a choice between that or a children's home so they were packed off to London. My mother put them both on the train in charge of the guard and wept bitterly as the train disappeared from sight but of course Yvonne and Anne didn't know this. Aunt Ruth met them at the other end. I feel sure that Yvonne would have been much more upset if she had have had to go into a children's home for six weeks. When my mother went into hospital for her operation it was early summer. She said goodbye to me in the morning and gave me the money to get the bus to Girton when I came out of school. It was about a month or more before I saw my mother again. My Aunty Doris was at the bus stop to meet me when I arrived at Girton. It was the first time that I had ever been there on my own but Aunty Doris was kind to me and as my cousin Thelma was about the same age as me and had a friend who lived next door we all played happily together. At week-ends we all used to get on bicycles, they borrowed one for me, and Aunty Doris, Thelma and John, my other cousin and Aunty Doris's neighbour and her daughter Valerie all went for picnics. We went to a different place every week and often found a place where we could swim. Those weekends were magic and I am sure that that is what made me long to live in the country. I had to wait a very long time before that was possible but I have always loved the countryside.

During the time that I was at my Auntie Doris's I was taught a new game by my cousin and her friends. We used to go looking for spies. Anyone who was doing anything that we considered a bit different was immediately under suspicion and we would follow them around and make notes in a book and we

were quite sure that one day we should catch a real spy. My mother had her operation and was then sent to a home of recovery for another three weeks. That was normal in those days after surgery, believe it or not.

Finally the day came when my mother returned home and I was sent home post haste to look after her. At first she had to go to bed every afternoon and was not allowed to lift anything or do any hard work and as it was by now the school summer holidays I was able to take over. I did all the washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning and shopping. As George was a regular visitor I had to cook for him as well. I quite enjoyed looking after my mother but I have to say that I resented looking after George as well. Eventually my mother returned to normal and it was time for Yvonne and Anne to return home from London. I remember that when they came home they seemed to look different to what I remembered but I suppose that was because it had been such a long time. It must have been between two and three months. It is amazing how much longer it took to recover from surgery in those days.

After Yvonne and Anne returned home it was almost the end of the summer holidays and with our return to school my mother returned to work and life returned to normal. One day while we were at the school dinner table Beryl said in a very loud voice "Von, your mum is going to have a baby isn't she" I was very innocent in those days and hadn't even noticed my mother's swollen stomach. I said, "Don't be silly, my mother is a widow and widows don't have babies". I'll bet that no twelve year old today would be that innocent. I was so sure that it wasn't true that I forgot all about it. One day our Great Aunt Emm arrived. She was there when I arrived home from school. We were just told that she was visiting and accepted this without question. I remember that she was not quite as disagreeable as Great Aunt Ruth but she was very bossy. However she used to play cards with us in the evenings and make us clothes and sometimes she used to buy us little treats so all in all we quite liked her. One day we came home from school and mother wasn't there but Aunt Emm told us not to worry. She said that mother had had to go to hospital but it wasn't anything serious and she would be home in a fortnight. One day I came home from school and mother was sitting in the chair where she usually sat. Although I hadn't noticed that she had put on weight I saw immediately that she was a lot thinner and I thought that she must have been very ill. We all had tea and then when we had finished mother

said that she had something to show us. She took us all upstairs and lying in a drawer was a new baby.

Aunt Emm told us that mother wasn't going to keep it. It would be adopted. In those days you could not have a baby adopted until you had kept it for six weeks and of course that made it much harder to part with a baby which is what it was meant to do, I think. Yvonne and Anne were delighted with their new sister but my feelings were very mixed. I realized what a great shame it was in those days to have a baby out of wedlock. None of the neighbours would speak to us and all the kids at school would be really bitchy. They would hear their parents talking about it and they would follow their lead. On the other hand I couldn't bear to think that, that poor little baby would have no one to love it and I loved it already. Mother decided to call her Diane Georgette which left me in no doubt of who her father was. Not that my mother had any other boyfriends. I remember him coming in and making a fuss of Diane and saying to my mother we shall have to have another two like this. Mother said, "Not if know anything about it" but he turned out to get his way in the end.

Around that time I became old enough to be allowed to go to the school Xmas ball. I was really worried about what I could wear as my school uniform was the best clothes that I possessed. All the girls were going to wear evening dresses which in those days were long and made of silky material in pastel shades.. I thought about it hard and long and couldn't think of any way that I could get my mother to buy me a ball dress. In the end I came up with what I thought was a good idea. I told my mother that I had to be a fairy in the school play and had to have a pretty dress. Well mother did her best and the end result was that she sewed tinsel all over one of my summer dresses. I shall never forget it. The dress was a navy and red paisley pattern with puffed sleeves and a gathered skirt and with it's covering of tinsel, well, I leave it to your imagination. I thanked her because I realised that she had done her best. I then put it in my satchel and when the ball started I went and hid in the cloakroom.

Soon after that my sister Yvonne was chosen to sing a solo at her school and she also tried to get a dress for the event but again mother did her best. She found a dress that she had in the cupboard. It was pink georgette and had a handkerchief hemline. She stayed up until midnight altering it to fit Yvonne and I thought that it was a lot better than my Fairy dress. However Yvonne was totally

humiliated at having to wear it and swears to this day that all the other girls laughed at her when she appeared on the stage. But my sister Anne was in the audience and says that no one laughed at her at all. Great Aunt Emm stayed with us for about six weeks after Diane was born. I think that she was hoping to persuade my mother to have her adopted but as I watched my mother with her little new baby I knew that it was never going to happen and I didn't really want it to anyway. After all, the neighbours all knew about the baby by now so the harm was done and we were all ostracised by most of the neighbours. The only ones who ignored the fact of the new baby were those who had dubious reputations themselves. We had definitely joined the ranks of the undesirables. From being a respectable widow my mother had become a scarlet woman. My sisters never even noticed but I found it very hard to take. I didn't blame my mother because I loved her and felt sorry for her but I blamed George very bitterly.

While Great Aunt Emm was with us, we all needed coats for the approaching winter but as usual money was short and so Aunt Emm said that she would make us all a coat. Her intentions were very good but unfortunately she was at least thirty years out of date and we all ended up with coats down to our ankles when the fashion was knee length. They were also very loose fitting rather like great big tents when the fashion was fitted waisted coats. Well, needless to say, we were all very ashamed to wear them. I believe that Yvonne and Anne did wear theirs but I never did. I used to hang mine over my arm and run all the way to school to keep warm. Even when it rained I used to dodge from one shop door way to the next to keep as dry as possible and usually arrive at school puffing and panting and very wet and bedraggled. The other girls used to ask me why I didn't wear my coat and I always said that I had run all the way to school because I was late and had got hot. Eventually I think my mother got the message and after Aunt Emm went home in disgust because mother wouldn't have Diane adopted, we all got jumble sale coats which although they were not new were very much less hideous than our Aunt Emm coats.

Less than two years later my sister Primrose was born. This time I realized as soon as my mother was pregnant as I heard her arguing with George and she cried for days. I felt really upset as I thought what the girls at school would say. In actual fact I learned afterwards that, unlike the neighbours, they didn't think much about it at all. They were all just as innocent as I and several of them said

afterwards that they envied me having a new baby sister. It seems that their mothers tutted in whispers but they never got to hear much. Nevertheless, I cried myself to sleep for nights and nights when I first found out about the pregnancy. And to think how ashamed I was and how I tried not to talk about it. When anyone asked me when my father died I used to say oh some time ago and quickly change the subject. Yvonne and Anne were still at the junior school and Anne had to take some wool to school and a pattern to knit something. Mother gave her a pattern of a baby's vest as she thought that it would be easy to knit. When the teacher asked her who she was knitting the vest for she said, "It is for my new baby sister," and she couldn't understand it when the teacher gave her a clip round the ear and told her not to tell such lies as she knew that her mother was a widow.

My mother had Primrose at home and a friend of hers came round on the day Primrose was born. She stayed until the nurse left and then went home to look after her own family which left me in charge once again. I used to get up at six o'clock every morning to make a cup of tea for mother when she fed Primrose and then I had to get Yvonne and Anne up so that they were ready for school. I also had to dress and feed Diane and then get breakfast for Yvonne and Anne. After they went to school I had to get the new baby bathed and make my mother's bed and then I started on the housework I used to wash up the breakfast things and then clean the house and then it was time to start the washing. As it all had to be done by hand it took quite a long time. There were three of us school girls and Diane who was not yet two and of course my mother and the new baby.

Before I was half way through it, the nurse would call to see mother and the new baby and I would have to make cups of tea for her and mother and provide her with clean towels and anything else she decided that she needed. By the time she left and I had waded through the washing it was time to get some lunch for mother and Diane had to be fed and I often was too busy to eat anything myself. After all the clothes were on the line and mother and Diane had been fed, I had to do the shopping taking Diane with me of course and at four o'clock Yvonne and Anne used to get home from school. It was then time to cook the dinner for everyone. After dinner I began to feel really tired but then there was the washing up to do and all the ironing. I remember begging Yvonne and Anne to help me with it but they were cross because I was at home while they had to go to

school so they refused and said that I was at home so it was my job. I can remember sometimes standing ironing at well after midnight with the tears running down my cheeks because I was so tired. No one else knew about it because everyone else was in bed and fast asleep. After a fortnight my mother was allowed to get up and then things started to improve. I stayed off school for another two weeks but mother was helping by then and I began to enjoy being at home. While I was at home with mother, after she was up and about again. I borrowed a book called Black Beauty by Anna Sewell and although I was always a book worm I remember that this particular book affected me more deeply than any book I had read up to then. It made me really long to have a horse of my own. Of course it was totally impossible and I knew it all too well but anyone can daydream. From that day on I made up wonderful daydreams as I walked to and from school. I imagined galloping over fields and trotting down country lanes with my wonderful beautiful horse and in the end I almost believed in his existence myself. I used to tell my school friends that I had a horse and that I kept it at my Auntie's house in the country. I used to think that one day I would marry a farmer and have a big garden and live in the country and, of course, have my own horse and I knew that I should love him so much, but I also knew that it was only a daydream. Never did I really believe that most of it would come true one day. I had to wait until I was middle aged but it did eventually happen and when it did it was just as wonderful as I imagined it would be.

When I was in third year at the senior school we were all asked if we would like to help the war effort by going to Devon and helping the farmers with the potato picking as manpower was very short. I was very excited at the idea as I had never been further from home than Hunstanton and Beryl and I both put our names down but alas we were told that we had to pay our own train fare. Food was provided also tents to sleep in but no wages were paid. We were supposed to be happy to work for nothing to help the war effort to tell the truth I think the farmer got the best of that deal. However my friend Beryl went as did most of my class but I was bitterly disappointed that my mother could not afford the fare. When they came back they all said that they had had to work hard but they had all had a lovely time.

Not long after Primrose was born, my life changed quite radically. My mother met me out of school one day and said that she had just been to see my

headmistress and had got permission for me to leave school. I was then fourteen and as I was at Grammar school I should have stayed until I was fifteen at least. However she had told the headmistress that she could no longer afford to keep me at school and after explaining her circumstances, I suppose that the headmistress was forced to see her point. She told me that she had got an interview for me with a greengrocer who had a shop on the corner of Station Road and she had come to take me to see him. The last thing I really wanted was to work in a greengrocers as all the girls I was at school with expected to get jobs in offices and banks and I had supposed that, that was what I should do.

I hoped that I shouldn't get the job but of course I did and I had to start the next day so I didn't even get to say goodbye to my school friends. The shop was about a mile from home and I had to start work at eight o'clock in the morning. The shop closed from one until two fifteen and in that time I had to run all the way home grab something to eat and then run all the way back again. I then worked until six o'clock at night. When I first started there it was near Xmas time and so it was dark when I set out in the mornings and also when I walked home at night. The shop closed on Thursday afternoons but as we delivered orders on Friday to lots of customers the orders had to be got ready before we were allowed to start our half day. It was usually about three or four o'clock before we were able to get away.

At first I wasn't allowed to use the till. I had to give the money to the other lady I worked with but after a short time I was considered able to cope. The till had a roll of paper in a space at the front and as nothing was automatic, the takings had to be written on the paper which moved up every time the till was opened. As it was still war time everything was in short supply. Mr Frohock who owned the shop had a small-holding at Waterbeach and used to grow fruit and vegetables there. When the first soft fruit or the first tomatoes arrived in the shop a queue, hundreds of yards long, used to form in a matter of minutes and we worked so hard to get through the queue that by the time the particular commodity was sold out we were absolutely exhausted. No one was allowed to buy large quantities. The usual amount was one pound to a household and people used to argue to try to get more than their share or they used to send their children to get some more but we got around that by refusing to serve children. Sometimes people used to try to jump the queue and then there would be a real

free for all, sometimes even ending in two or three women actually getting into a fight.

I used to feel ashamed of working in the greengrocers as I always had broken finger nails and cracked hands with ground in dirt which would not come out no matter how hard I scrubbed. Sometimes girls who I had been at school with used to come into the shop and when they did I always dashed out to the back of the shop on some pretext or other. My wages were thirty shillings per week. In today's money that would have been one pound fifty. Out of that I had to pay my mother one pound twenty five which left me twenty five pence with which to buy my clothes and go out. The first thing I did was to buy myself a bicycle on the never-never and it used to cost me one shilling per week. Today's equivalent would be five pence.

After a while I was given a rise of five shilling. I had to give my mother half of it but it meant that I could now achieve another ambition. I joined a tap dancing class. My friend Beryl had been dancing since she was a little girl but I was so keen and so determined that before very long I was allowed to dance at the same level as she was. We formed a partnership which lasted through all our dancing days. Neither of us would dance anywhere without the other. Once a year Barbara Leader, who was the owner of our dancing school, used to put on a really big show. Partly to show what her pupils were doing and partly to advertise her school. We all had to go to rehearsals every Saturday and several evenings in the week for about six weeks before the show but we all loved it so it wasn't hard. We couldn't wait for the day of the show to arrive.

All our costumes had to be made by ourselves as it was in the days of clothes rationing and the only materials off ration were a strong black material used for blackout curtains and butter muslin which was used to stick all over windows to stop glass from shattered windows flying all over the place and wounding people. We were all very ingenious and managed to make all sorts of costumes out of the materials available. Lots of them were made out old clothes which were no longer wearable and of course butter muslin was white so it was easy to dye. The only trouble was that it became transparent in the spotlights. However it made lovely diaphanous blouses which looked good with a bra underneath them, and of course we were able to dye them any colour we wanted.

When I had been dancing at the Barbara Leader School for a year or so,

Barbara met an American serviceman who had his own school of dancing in America and he used to come to our school any time his duties allowed. He taught us lots of new dances and it was all very exciting. When he showed us the can-can I really wanted to be chosen to dance it in our annual show so I made sure that I kicked higher than anyone else and put in all the effort I possibly could. The end result was that Beryl and I were both chosen and we were really thrilled. We had to practise a lot and got really stiff aching muscles but we didn't mind at all.

At last Barbara Leader put on her annual show and we were able to dance the can-can for real in front of an audience. We got a really good round of applause from the audience and we loved it. The sequence was called Café de Paris and we came on as French maids. The scene opened with customers of the café walking on and then they played a waltz from Orpheus in the Underworld and all the customers danced. After that they all sat down and we were on stage. We did our can-can and then we went to the back of the stage and pretended to take orders. After that a gipsy fortune teller came on and did a gipsy dance and ended by throwing the cards up in the air and running off. The next people on stage were a couple who did an Apache dance. Jay took the male role in that, with one of the more senior girls and after that dance finished Jay and another senior girl came on and did the can-can in real can-can costume. Beryl and I decided there and then that we wanted to wear those costumes and in the end we did.

We had done a lot of cabarets and various other shows for Barbara Leader and were getting known around the town and often got asked to do cabarets at places like the Firemen's Ball, the Young Farmers' Ball and posh Birthday parties which were held in Hotels. All these were private engagements and nothing to do with Barbara Leader. We were just asked by the people who were arranging the Balls or parties. We got a repertoire of dances which I used to have the ideas for and also designed the costumes for while Beryl who had danced longer than me used to do the choreography. It all worked very well. We did a Russian dance, a Spanish dance, a clog dance, a Hawaiian dance, a Latin American dance, a gipsy dance and we also had quite a repertoire of straight tap dances – but our favourite was always the can-can. We used to need to rehearse quite a lot and we used to do that at Beryls house. We used to dance on her lino in her living room

and then polish off the marks we made before her Mother got home from work. As she was an usherette at the cinema we had all the evenings to ourselves. We also used to make our costumes at Beryl's as my Mother's house was always far too full to give us the space and privacy we needed. We used to dream of being discovered by a film director and were always excited when we were asked to dance anywhere as we never knew if this just might be the day we would be discovered.

One day we were asked to dance at the Regal Cinema which was the largest cinema in town. It was to advertise a film called Rhapsody in Blue and we made ourselves pale blue floaty costumes from butter muslin and were really excited to be dancing at the cinema. In those days the cinemas all used to have stages in front of the screen with footlights and spotlights and they all had a theatre organ which used to rise up in front of the screen in the interval and an organist used to amuse the audience until the next film came on. It was in this interval that Beryl and I danced and it was really exciting as it was by far the biggest stage we had ever danced on. We had never had a theatre organ to accompany us, neither had we had such amazing lights. Well, in spite of all our hopes, we weren't spotted by a talent scout but we had been spotted by a more humble sort of scout.

One day a strange man knocked at Mother's door and asked for Mrs Fenn. He introduced himself as Mr Leo Neaves and told my Mother that he had seen Beryl and I dancing and would like us to join his concert party. At first my Mother was rather dubious about it but he produced lots of bills of shows that he had done and a list of his future engagements. He also told Mother that none of his girls were allowed to leave the back stage area during or after the show and that he would personally get out of the coach and escort every girl to her door and wait with her until she was let in to her house. Eventually my Mother decided that it would be all right and then I had to take Mr Neaves round to Beryl's house and let him convince Beryl's Mother that he was genuine. She took quite a lot of convincing but in the end she agreed so Bubs and I became members of a concert party. It wasn't exactly Metro Goldwyn Mayer or the Arthur Rank charm school but we were very excited about it never the less. We couldn't wait for our first engagement which was the following Thursday. He told us that he would want us to do three or four numbers each time and also appear in the last scene which

was the finale. At first he said that he wanted us to dance in the chorus as well but after watching his chorus girls we both told him that there was no way we would agree to that. All the girls who sang and did other turns were expected to dance in the chorus but we felt that it was definitely far below our standards. We had to go to a hall which he used for rehearsals and learn the dances and songs for the finale and then we were ready to start. They were very easy to learn and took us no time at all as his cast were not really very good dancers and only did very simple steps. We were told that we should be paid one Guinea for each performance and that was the equivalent of one pound and 5p. To us it was riches indeed as it was almost as much as we earned for a forty hour week.

Our first engagement was a show at the army barracks at Bury St Edmunds and as you can imagine our can-can was very well received. We had soldiers queueing up at the stage door asking for our autographs and photographs. After the show we were all asked to a party in the sergeants' mess and we had so much fun. Beryl and I were only sixteen at the time and we felt very grown up and sophisticated. We didn't arrive home until two o'clock in the morning and it was by far the latest we had ever been out in our lives. Mr Neaves was true to his word and took good care of us and after a while both of our mothers relaxed and took great pride in coming to watch our shows when we put them on in Cambridge. As well as our Thursday evening shows we sometimes did shows on Saturdays at Village Fetes or on Christ's Pieces in Cambridge. In those days there was a Bandstand on the green and a band used to play there at weekends and on Saturday afternoons the council used to put on shows. This went on all through the summer and Leo Neaves was quite often invited to put on a show there. Bubs and I would often be walking in the town and hear people say, "Oh look. There are the can-can girls", and we used to think we were very special.

At that time it was possible to get photos taken. They were called Poly Photos and for 2/6 you got 48 photo's like passport ones. You sat in a booth just as you do to-day for a passport photo but the camera just kept on flashing and you had time to change your pose between shots. These sheets of photos, we used to cut up into individual ones and sign each one and then we were able to give them away when we did forces shows. We danced at all the army, navy and air force bases within the area. After all the shows at the bases we were always

entertained afterwards. In the army camps it was at the sergeants' mess but in the navy and air force camps it was always the Officers Mess. Mr Neaves always kept a very close eye on the proceedings. He let us have fun and chat with our hosts but he made it very clear that we had to be treated with respect. We were able to have loads of fun without getting into any kind of trouble. We really did have a wonderful time. It is hard to explain but every show we did was exciting. The dressing rooms with all the hurly-burly of everyone trying to get into costume and get made up and going into the wings to look at the audience to see if they looked like a friendly one. The last minute run through of our steps and then the magic of going on stage and into the spotlights and going through a routine and knowing that you had done well by the applause of the audience and after the show when the lads came to the back of the stage to get our autographs. I think we really felt like film stars. It was all so exciting. Because I was so young and had so little experience of life it was probably the most exciting time of my life. There is never anything in later life that is quite so exciting as the things you do in your first years of young adulthood. Looking back it was a wonderful, wonderful time.

When the war ended in 1945 Beryl's mother took us up to London. It was the first time I had ever been there but she said that it was such an important time in history that we had to be there to see it. When we got off the train at midnight we were in an absolutely amazing atmosphere. Everyone was so excited and they were all hugging each other and kissing each other. They had all come to see the huge victory parade which wound its way through all the main streets of central London. It was so long that it took at least a couple of hours to pass by. All branches of services and civilian war workers were represented and there were military bands and loads and loads of razzmatazz. We had taken sandwiches with us and it was lucky we had as all the shops were closed for the occasion and once you got into a place where the parade was going to pass it was impossible to get out again, as the police closed all the exits to avoid people rushing from place to place with the danger of people getting trampled to death in the rush. I remember that there were two cockney ladies standing just behind us at one of the barriers and they wanted to go to the loo. The policemen said that they were not allowed to let them through the barrier and after a lot of argument they dropped their knickers and peed in front of the policemen. Everyone was in such a party mood

that they all laughed and some other ladies even followed suit.

The end of the war was a wonderful euphoric time. Before the war during the 1930's we had been through a very bad depression when there was great poverty and hardship. Men committed suicide because they could not find work and could not feed their children, children suffered from rickets and tuberculosis was rife. With the war came full employment all be it in the forces but people at least had enough food to stop them being malnourished. The rations were sparse but at least the people could afford to buy them and the country as a whole became healthier. As we entered the post war period there was an atmosphere of hope, of better times to come. The world was suddenly a wonderful place and we all looked forward to a new world and a land of peace and plenty. At this time we were assured that we should be looked after from the cradle to the grave. No one would ever again die from starvation as social security came into being. Children would all be able to go to university if they were bright enough instead of only the rich and privileged few. No old people would be neglected. There would be old people's homes for them to go to, to be cared for to the end of their days and of course the National Health System was born – there would be health care for all which would be paid for by Insurance contributions from all who were working. Dentistry was also free, again paid for by the National Health. It was indeed utopia after all the hardships of the depression and the war. We all happily and gladly paid our National Insurance every week from our wages and felt that we should be secure from the worries of getting ill but alas it seems that the dream has now folded. In spite of paying for our entire working lives we now find that all we have paid in for all these years is disappearing and just when we are getting old we have been betrayed.

We now have to sell the houses we have worked so hard to own and to pass to our children if we need care. If we need urgent medical attention we have to use our savings to pay for private treatment. How things have changed, the only thing that seems important today is making money and people don't seem to matter any more. Even the old spirit of friendship and caring for one's neighbours seems to have gone as everyone scraps and rushes to go to work to make more money and get more and more goodies. In my early married days back in the fifties everyone knew their neighbours and we all used to get together for any occasion. We all helped each other all the time. When someone went away on

holiday the neighbours would look after their gardens and when they were due home the neighbours would go into their house and dust and open the windows to freshen the house up and they would have a meal waiting for them when they arrived home. If one of us were sick the neighbours would rally round to take children to school do the housework and get meals for the family. We didn't have a lot of money but with those kind of friends we were rich indeed. All the streets organised street parties and as Beryl and I were known as dancers we were invited to dance at a lot of them and it was great fun. The town council also put on a huge victory display and again we were asked to dance in it. Barbara Leader, our dancing school teacher, was also asked to join in and we danced with her pupils as well. One of the numbers was a huge parade of dancers all wearing union jacks, one at the front and one at the back and joined at the shoulders and waist. We all had to march into all sorts of different formations and the whole effect was very dramatic.

As we began to get well known in the area we also got asked to do cabarets at local balls and parties and of course we were always honoured guests. We managed to have all that fun while still keeping our virginity. In those days of course things were very different. There was very little birth control and what there was, was very unreliable and abortions were illegal and were only practised by totally ignorant unqualified people, usually in back rooms of dirty squalid houses and the results were often death or very bad damage. In this day and age it is hard to describe the terrible shame and disgrace that having an illegitimate baby brought with it. Nothing usually happened to the father but the poor girl was either sent to a mother and baby home where she was made to scrub floors and do any menial degrading task that the staff could think of to make her realise what a wicked sinner she was. After the baby was born the mother was made to take total care of it and of course a bonding took place and then the poor unfortunate girl was made to take the baby to a room where it was taken from her and taken to a room next door and handed over to the adoptive parents. After this the girl went home if she was lucky but a lot of parents refused to have their daughters back again and as it was impossible for girls of a young age to earn enough money to keep themselves in even the meanest room and as there was no social security or help they often ended up in prostitution and then of course every one said, "There we always said she was no good". It is really hard to

imagine how any parents could turn out a child and grandchild but you had to live through that time to know how it was.

For as long as I could remember I had wanted to be a nurse but one had to be eighteen to start nursing training and also my mother said that she needed my money to help to keep the family and during the first two years of nursing training it was obligatory to live in at the hospital and, as rooms and keep were provided, the wages were infinitesimal. I had almost put the idea out of my head when I saw an advertisement in the local paper for trainee mental nurses. Today it would be psychiatric nurses. It was at the local mental hospital and as I now had my bicycle the journey was no problem. I suppose that it was about two or three miles from where we lived. I made an appointment for an interview and was asked to go to see the matron. The interview was quite short and I was really surprised at how quickly I was accepted. The reason of course was that after the war it was very hard to get anyone to nurse in mental hospitals and they were therefore extremely short of staff. The maids were all eastern block refugees who did not speak any English and most of the younger nurses were Irish. In those days anyone wishing to emigrate to England had to agree to work in jobs of national importance and of course hospitals were top of the list.

In those unenlightened days any mental illness bore a stigma and people used to refer to mental hospitals as loony bins or nut houses or other such derogatory names. After I got home and told my mother that I had got the job she was really worried. She really thought that if I worked with mentally disturbed people I should catch their illnesses. When I arrived at the hospital on my first day I was kitted out with a uniform and I felt so proud of myself. I had always wanted to nurse and I couldn't believe that it was really happening at last. The uniform consisted of a blue dress and a white starched apron. The dress had short sleeves and we had to wear starched cuffs and a starched collar which were separate from the dress and put on afterwards. On our heads we wore white starched caps which were a sort of box shape with wings at the sides and were very difficult to fold until you got the hang of it. We also had to wear black stockings and flat black shoes. I loved my uniform and felt really important in it.

When I first went onto the ward I had quite a shock as it looked more like a Dickens workhouse. Most of the patients on that ward were pretty seriously mentally ill and when I entered the ward for the first time they were just serving

out the breakfasts. The scene was just like something out of Dickens. I almost expected Oliver Twist to appear and ask for more. I walked over to the table at the centre of the room where the Sister was serving the food onto metal plates and she just looked up and said, "Well don't just stand there nurse, get these plates served out." I picked up two plates but she said it would take all day at that rate and I was expected to carry four plates at once, two on each arm. After a time I got used to it but at first it was a bit terrifying as I knew that I should be in direst trouble if I dropped any of them. On the table I had to serve, the patients were all dressed in blue sail cloth dresses as they were very bad and would have torn their clothes if they had been thinner. The forks all had webbed tines as they might have hurt themselves or each other otherwise and of course the knives were totally blunt. They all had their hair cut very short and straight just to keep it clean basically. As I walked down that ward on my first day I didn't realise that, because they had been institutionalised for years, some of them even from childhood, they had developed habits of making faces and over the years a lot of their faces became distorted. They looked rather like a lot of gargoyles when I first saw them. As I became used to them and learned their names and characters I forgot about my first impressions and they became individuals to me with different needs and different ways.

After breakfast there were about a dozen patients who had to be taken to the toilet as they were incontinent otherwise. I had not been nursing very long, about a week or two, when I was given the job of taking the incontinent patients to the toilet. The sister warned me to be on my guard with one of the patients called Margaret, as she was schizophrenic and would attack unexpectedly. When I looked at her I thought that she looked very inoffensive and when I tried to get her to sit on the toilet I wasn't at all worried about her, but that was a very big mistake. As soon as I bent down in front of her she grabbed hold of my hair and threw me onto the ground and pulled out a big handful of hair. One of the more sensible patients ran to get the sister who ran to my aid. I didn't get any sympathy though. She just said well I did warn you, Fenn. Now you had better finish toileting the rest of these patients.

Afterwards the sister told me that I should have to be ready for Margaret in the near future as she would think that I was afraid of her and take advantage and could quite possibly attack me again when she thought I was alone with her.

Needless to say I was quite scared of her although I tried not to let her see it. I somehow knew that we should have a show down soon as her eyes used to follow me all the time. I didn't have to wait very long for it to happen. I was on night duty and was just getting the patients up and washed and dressed before the day staff came on duty. In those days we only had one night nurse on a ward of sixty patients. The night sister used to come round every hour to see that all was well but apart from that the night nurse was alone all night from seven p.m. to seven a.m. Some of the patients could wash themselves but a lot of them had to be helped and Margaret was one of those. As I approached her, I expected trouble and so I held a wet flannel in my hand and sure enough she turned on me but this time I was ready for her and slapped her really hard across the face with the wet flannel. Then I threw her down and sat on her and said, "Don't you ever dare to try to hurt me again". After that I felt quite safe with her and managed to get quite close to her. She used to smile when she saw me and I used to give her sweets now and then and eventually I got her to start talking and she hadn't spoken for years. I found, to my surprise, that she had a very nice educated voice and had been a nurse. She worried so much about her exams that it made her have a nervous breakdown and that in turn started the schizophrenia.

In those days it used to be very hard to get out of a mental hospital once one had been certified as it required someone to guarantee to be responsible for you for three months after leaving hospital and as it used to take a very long time to get better. Many husbands or wives had got themselves new partners and didn't want to know about the unfortunate person languishing in hospital. One of the patients in my ward was a case in point. Her parents had died when she was only eleven years old and at first her older brother looked after her but, by the time she was thirteen, he married and his wife didn't like poor Florrie so she treated her very badly and when Florrie tried to retaliate she managed to persuade her brother that Florrie kept attacking her and the outcome was that they got her certified. When I knew her, she was a simple soul but perfectly able to look after herself, but she had been in the hospital from the age of fourteen and she was then thirty-five and so she had become very institutionalised. What a terrible waste of a life.

I used to feel very sorry for her and I got permission from the matron to take her out for days when I had time off. She was so excited to be out and was

just like a child. I remember that, on one of the days that I took her out, there was a fair on the common and I took her to it. She was so excited and flirted with all the men who were in charge of the rides. She got us lots of free rides but it was all rather embarrassing because the fair men were pretty grotty and Florry told them all that we were nurses so they kept calling us nursie. However I couldn't help being pleased that she was having so much fun. Her life had been very short of fun of any kind. I often took her home to tea at my Mother's who always made her welcome as she was as sorry for her as I was. Several years after I married, I bumped into her in town much to my surprise, and learned from her that after I finished nursing the new head doctor realised how wrong it was to keep people locked up all those years just because they had no one to take responsibility for them and he started to get lots of programmes going to restore them back into the community. He found them work and set up safe houses for them with supervision until they were ready to take over full responsibility for their own lives. Florry was one of the lucky ones and when I bumped into her she had been out of hospital for several years and was working at Pye's and had married one of the released male patients. They had been given a council house and were very happy.

When the staff at the hospital found out that I was in a concert party they asked if I would dance at all the shows that the staff arranged for the patients so Beryl and I did quite a lot of shows and they always wanted us to do the can-can every time. While I was working at the Hospital, Beryl and I went to a film ball. It was the heyday of the cinema and everyone wanted to be a film star. At the ball there were talent scouts and everyone who was picked out was invited to go to London to one of the big dance halls to enter into another round of the competition when the winners would receive a screen test. I was delighted to be one of those chosen. My mother arranged that we should go to stay with my Aunt Ruth who lived in London and from there we would go to the film finals Ball. Well, you will not believe it but my Mother called a taxi to take us to the ball and we took our clothes with us to change into when we got there as the weather was very wet. Alas and alack, when I got out of the taxi, I forgot to pick up the bag with my evening dress in it so I had to go on stage in my jumper and skirt while all the other contestants were in glamorous evening dresses. Needless to say that was the end of my chances. It was a really big disappointment and I cried myself

to sleep that night.

In order to go to the ball I had to change my night duty with another nurse and I just missed a very nasty accident. The nurse who took my place was attacked in the night by one of the patients who hid behind her chair while she was taking some other patients to the toilet and when the nurse sat down again the patient jumped up and started to strangle her. It was just by sheer luck that the night sister was passing the ward on her rounds and heard one of the more sensible patients banging on the door with her shoe to try to attract help. She wondered what was going on and went in to have a look and was just in time to save the nurse's life but it was a very close thing and the nurse was in hospital for several weeks. So even though I missed out on a screen test I was very lucky not to have been on duty that night.