

Women's work

is

# Never Done

Compiled by  
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Introduction by  
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by

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First Edition

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## **Preface**

This compilation of women's work has several sources: interviews from the Seventies and Eighties for the Farmland Museum Sound Archives (visitors told such wonderful stories that it seemed a good idea to record them "on tape" so that other people could listen to them). Family anecdotes told round the fire when I was a child (no TV or computers in the War years) and the realisation that the role of women has changed so much since my grandmothers' were married in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Students from Homerton College Department of History related oral history to exhibits in the museum, completing a set of four teaching files: in 1977 the museum was awarded a grant to buy and install 'listening posts' so that more use could be made of the tapes and they have also been used in such BBC Radio programmes as "The Archive Hour". By producing this book it will ensure that memories of "How we used to live" will reach a wider audience and that children of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will have some idea of the hard times in which their ancestors lived in the area around Ely in the Cambridgeshire Fens.

## **Acknowledgements**

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Also Homerton College for the use of the drawings and text which I have used taken from their 'Education Handbooks' which were issued in 1986. All the other photographs and pictures are from my collection.

Lorna Delanoy 2007

## INTRODUCTION

The three Delanoy boys, who put such energy and work into the Farmland Museum, started recording tapes of “oral history”, which had become a new and exciting source of history in the nineteen seventies. This development interested me very much as a local historian, even though the snag about it is that it will only take you back two generations, to your grandparents’ life time. So I helped get a grant for the museum in 1977 to encourage them on. They collected some very good interviews, which were mostly connected with specialist outdoor (and poor!) mens’ jobs like eel catching, ploughing etc. I noticed, though, there was a skew in the records that were being collected. These boys were naturally drawn to their father’s activities and hobbies, especially since he was particularly good at teaching his sons to shoot and other rural pastimes. The core of stability, huge amounts of filling cooking, clean clothes to put on, warm care if they were ill, came from their mother. Of course, they didn’t ask questions about this. It just WAS, like the sun coming up every day, one doesn’t remark on it. When I read one of the early classics of oral history, George Evans’ ASK THE FELLOWS WHO CUT THE HAY (1956) I discovered there was not a single index entry to women, or their work. Then I asked Lorna Delanoy, the boys’ mother, to see what she could do to fill this huge hole in our awareness of women’s work, which is often simply unobserved and unnoticed. I am very pleased indeed with this result.

Looking back, the core of a married woman’s work is the upkeep of her home, cleaning, scrubbing, washing, shopping and cooking for

hungry families, staying within a budget, which is often very tight to do so, and frequently helping her neighbours who are, perhaps, not well. She is often pregnant, and small children take up much time. Before the coming of electricity and the tools that went with it, a woman's job was one of hard, physical labour. Annie Lythell who had been "in service", married an agricultural labourer earning six shillings a week in 1903. From carrying all the water, except the rainwater from the roof, for the household and the washing, to knitting and sewing the family clothes by the light of a paraffin lamp, and then turning the worn fragments into rag rugs for the floors, her days were laborious: yet she helped look after the children of a neighbour who died (as many women did) in child-birth after her eighth delivery. This pattern of hard physical labour went on for many till after the Second World War.

*When Kath Peacock married in 1947, she had no mains water and no electricity: "Water to drink was brought in milk churns from the village and lighting was by paraffin lamp. I scrubbed the tiled floors on my hands and knees, boiling up the water from a well in the yard. On Mondays I took my washing down to my Mum's (she had mains water); I boiled up the whites in her coal-fired copper and the process took most of the day"*

Mabel Demaine described her farmhouse kitchen between the wars: "I can remember in our kitchen we had a stone sink and a large copper which was heated by a stick fire for wash days and baths. There was a low hearth where pots and pans and kettles boiled and how black and sooty they got from the open fire. We had a large Dutch oven, we lit a fire under this twice a week - on Sundays, the only day in the week

when my father was in for a mid-day dinner, when we always had a roast and Yorkshire pudding with plenty of vegetables, then rice pudding. This meal on a Sunday never varied and it was the only day when we had the sweet course last - the other days we always began with a pudding, usually a suet crust, jam roll, apple pudding or spotted Dick.....we had most of our meals in the kitchen and all the work of washing, washing-up and cooking was done there. What a change there is in that kitchen today: gone is the low hearth, stone sink, old-fashioned copper and Dutch oven and in their place a modern sink unit, electric cooker, washer, fridge, mixer, kettle....all electric”.

Annie’s Lythell’s daughter, with ‘only a bicycle’ on her marriage in 1929, illustrates the drawback of ‘oral’ history, which I have already mentioned very clearly. A generation earlier, now out of reach of the oral historian, bicycles had come in, and transformed the lives of working people in rural villages. They increased the range of ordinary people’s social circle. They increased the range of possible courtships. The banns were called for young men and women coming from a much wider area than before, since bicycle riders were now able to meet. The weekly carrier’s cart had been in existence since the seventeenth century, for those who needed to go to market, or even futher afield. The young women who, later in the century went to jobs further away, travelled by the new rural buses which in their turn again revolutionised transport in the 1920s. This was not necessarily an easy thing to do. The account of Edna Collinson travelling to the lab’ in Cambridge, where she was responsible for the animals’ food, in the 1950s shows us that. She was expected to be there on Saturdays and some Sundays as well as in the week. But

given determination like hers, it could be done, either by buses or individual cars. Chivers and Pye ran buses to collect their women workers around 7 a.m. Now the bus service is almost gone, and unless she has a private car, the area accessible for a job for a woman has shrunk again. Cars have, of course, multiplied, but now drivers are under both moral, and financial, pressure, in the current wave of anxiety about global warming, to dispose of them again. Rural transport remains a problem.

Two primary school headmistresses spoke of the change in children because of life revolving round these family kitchen: “children were more socially orientated; conversation with the family may have been about mundane matters but family meals were a time for exchanging news and ideas; *only one room in the home was heated so children were not isolated in their own room upstairs as many have become today* and Sunday observance made the seventh day of the week “special”.

The women who have told us their stories have said much less about their outdoor labours on the land or the small-holding. Edna Burgess left school in 1948, and “worked on the land for my father”. We don’t know how many women continued to work in the fields, as well as in the house, after their marriages. Certainly Edna continued, fruit picking while her children were young, because it fitted in well with school times and terms. “It was not until I was in my fifties that I had a proper wage-paying job”. But certainly, many women helped outside.

Mrs. Howe of Prickwillow was up ready to strain the milk as soon as her husband and their milkman brought it in in the morning. She made butter once a week, and ran four hundred chickens. The eggs were collected every afternoon. She made their cooked meal after that for 4pm. There seems to have been a general assumption that wives worked on the smallholding wageless, but did other land work for a wage.

Joyce Thulbon recalls;”*Women worked, very different work from what is expected today. There were many land owners within this region and these needed flower pickers, fruit pickers – ladies picked up potatoes, hoed out sugar beet and pulled up carrots. Whereas today’s workers have mental strain managing computers – this was unheard of in the 50’s and 60’s. Women who regularly worked the land, in some cases formed themselves into gangs and these gangs moved together around the various smallholdings helping wherever needed.*”

Before the First World War, there was very little employment for girls and women, except domestic service, which was often where girls started, just as Annie Lythell had. But the war, terrible in its effects as it was, did have one good wide-ranging result. Women, who had taken up the jobs when their men were away, were reluctant to give up the jobs they had worked at during the war. From then on, the opportunities, and varieties of jobs for girls widened and widened.

Florence Blott, daughter of a Wisbech tradesman, taught for eleven years and founded the Women’s Institute in Chatteris. She went on to develop a political career from this. Florence was an early qualified

teacher, and many more girls followed her in this career; her daughter, Rita Goodger, who started school at three, wanted to be a nurse, but her mother steered her into teacher-training. The accounts of the various lives of these young women, shop assistants, helpers in “special needs” homes for disturbed and sick children, factory workers making jam and plastic containers, laboratory assistants, become more and more multi-faceted, and showed how much bigger their world had become.

There was one disadvantage. Reading of the opportunities opening up for women, when many still kept their domestic responsibilities, has resulted in a decline in support for the voluntary organisation; the chapels, churches, Women’s Institutes which had been so powerful in lobbying for the services like water mains these rural women needed so much, and also provided social groups and life for them, all started to lack members. The ladder by which many were encouraged, had fallen away.

As well as social opportunities narrowing in the villages, the village economies have changed radically. In the 1960’s, the fen ridge which hosted these villages carried huge orchards. The apples, pears, plums and soft fruit have gone. So also have the dairy herds. There are no cows in Mepal or Haddenham now, so local opportunities for women are much more limited, as are social groups. Electronic work at home is possible, but isolation is a danger.

This volume is a marvellously mixed group of reminiscences of women spread over time, and also demonstrating how world events changed

their lives. One of its strengths is the mixed social nature of the group contributing, from very poor upwards to much more comfortable farmers' wives. At last the skew in the first Delanoy tapes of subjects interesting to men and boys is corrected. Here we have the lives of their sisters and wives.

Margaret Spufford, Professor of Social and Local History,  
Roehampton University.

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# Pre War Years



Living Room at Farmland Museum, Haddenham

**Annie Lythell - maternal grandma, Stretham,  
married for over 50 years to an 'Ag Lab'.**

Annie was married in 1903 and had two daughters. From the age of 12, orphaned. She had been “in service” at one of the large farms in the village. As a wife and mother her work revolved around her “2up-2down” rented cottage.

Water for drinking and cooking had to be carried from the village pump and ‘stored’ in a large earthenware pot under the stairs. Water for Monday’s washday was ladled out of the “soft water butt”, (which collected rain water from the roof) and put into the copper that was situated half way down the garden in an outhouse. The outhouse was shared by the other cottages. The fire, made of sticks from hedges, under the copper was lit promptly at 6 a.m. each Monday to heat up the water for a prompt 8 a.m. start. No immersion heaters or washing machines pre WWI!



The weekly  
bath routine

Bathrooms were unheard of and a weekly “wash-down”, in a galvanised bath, was done in front of the kitchen fire each Saturday evening so that the family was clean for the Sabbath. Water was heated in the copper and brought in by pail; the youngest child was washed first and then in turn each family member used the same water ....economical use of water and heat!

Lavatories were buckets under a wood frame in the “privy” at the bottom of the yard; contents were highly regarded as good manure for the land and were emptied when “full” onto the muckle (muck hill) of cow dung in the adjoining farmyard.

It is interesting to note that children today find the privy at Walnut Tree Cottage at the Farmland Museum most intriguing.....they cannot imagine life without a flush toilet and modern bathroom.

Gleaning was another ‘work’ to be done. After the farmers had gathered the corn harvest, villagers were allowed onto the fields to pick up the ears of corn that remained. Annie took her two daughters; each with a corn ‘bag’ tied round their waists, into which the ears were put. Enough corn was collected together with scythed corn from the allotment to be ground at the local windmill to supply a sack of flour for winter cooking (stone ground flour was the norm for many an Ag lab family and not the luxury healthy-eating flour it is regarded as today. How I hated the heavy brown flour which I had to eat during World War II)

Work, by the light of a paraffin lamp in the winter evenings, was knitting long black socks (changed only once a week - wow!) for her husband and even stitching shirts by hand (she could not afford a sewing machine). Old clothes were cut down to make the girls garments and sheeting (non-bleached and therefore of a yellowish hue) bought by the yard from Swans, the village shop, and sewn to fit for iron-framed bedsteads.

Sunday joints were cooked at the local bake house for one penny and in the summer months when her Zebra-blackened cooking stove was not in action, she would send her loaves and cakes to be baked there too (a job for her girls to transport in their 'box on wheels'.)

Making homemade wine was one of her specialities and the story goes that her eldest daughter, when a teenager, had a glass or two of it - and promptly swerved off her bike when cycling to work at Haddenham, a distance of 4 miles.

Old clothes, even worn out, were never thrown away but cut into strips - thin cottons for bedroom mats (on the cold lino), and heavy materials for hearthrugs in the rooms downstairs. Hands were blistered due to using scissors on heavy coarse trouser materials.

Annie's family of just two daughters was rare in Edwardian times - many of her contemporaries were producing a baby every 18 months - 2 years. It was thought that if a mother continued to suckle her offspring, it would not be possible to conceive: hence many women when working on the land would breast-feed their babies at 'dockey' times.

It is also true that a few drops of 'opium tea' (made from the white poppy) would quieten a grizzly infant: it made them sleepy and more content. The fens were an area where laudanum and opium were used as 'medicine' even within living memory!

Annie was very careful with money (she had to be!) a shilling was put by every week (from her husbands wage of 6/-) to pay the rent each half year.

Annie always found time to help those less fortunate: her neighbour died in childbirth (her 8<sup>th</sup> confinement) and Annie helped look after the remaining seven for no monetary reward.

Time though to chat over the garden fence with other housewives. No modern facilities, but time to spare for those around her.

### **Lydia Freeman - paternal grandma: Haddenham, wife of a self-made Fen Farmer.**

Lydia had 5 children. Her time before WWI was spent looking after her family and also her ageing parents (her mother died in 1917, only in her fifties.) Never being able to ride a bike and not being 'rich' enough to own a horse, her transport was, as she used to say. 'Shank's Pony.' My, how she could stride out with two small children bundled into the 'pram' and another clinging to her hips. She stood no nonsense and even when her children were 40+ they still 'did as she said'. Parents of that era had a lot of control over their offspring and

parent's instructions were rarely questioned: a truly Victorian existence.

Her farmhouse was always 'open house' for the farm workers during the week and for preachers at the local Methodist Chapel on Sundays. (So generous was her Sunday entertaining that in 1947 her only daughter, Mabel, met and married the then widower-superintendent Methodist Minister of the Ely Circuit Rev George W Demaine!)

Like so many of her generation, Lydia, lost two babies, twins, in their first few weeks of life: she never ever mentioned them but regularly attended their grave in the Nonconformist Churchyard (Anglicans had their 'own' graveyard until the Parish Cemetery was opened in 1928). Another 'not talked about' situation was that her younger sister, Lizzie, was taken into Fulbourn Hospital in her early twenties suffering (according to family recollections) from a broken romance or religious mania (she had become violent and threatening in the family home and the doctor decided she needed to be kept in a safe place). Visits were made to her just twice a year (no cars for easy transport) and she lived until 1951, aged 60+ years. What a sad and uneventful life - stitching kettle holders in heavy material for Christmas presents and yet, with today's treatment she could have led a 'normal life' (she used to write letters to the family and could carry on reasonable conversation with staff.)

Chapel, the Wesleyan one in the High Street, gave Lydia not only worship on Sundays but socializing during the week. She was secretary of the Wesley Guild and had to organise speakers and

programmes, sales of work and bazaars gave her chance to 'show off' her sewing skills and baking (especially masses of ginger biscuits which I loathed!) for Chapel Teas gave her another raison d'être.

### **Florence Barratt (Née Blott) born at Wisbech in 1893.**

A very strong character she began a teaching career of eleven years at St Peter and St Augustine's Day School. She took a great interest in local affairs and especially in her father's work. He kept a shop in Lower Hill Street where he sold and repaired sewing machines and electrical goods. He was Superintendent of the Fire Brigade for 50 years.

Florence was most interested when Lord Baden Powell started the Scout Movement - she thought it would be a wonderful movement for girls as well and so wrote to inquire if this was possible. The answer was 'Yes' but shortly after forming a group of 'Girl Scouts', Lord Baden Powell's wife changed the name to Girl Guides and Florence stayed in contact with the movement until she died at 92.

But she also believed that women were as important and capable as men. Women at this time usually stayed at home - marriage was a career - you kept house and brought up the children. Father worked, supplying the necessary income to keep his family.

Settling in Chatteris with her husband (a builder and undertaker) and two daughters Florence needed other interests.

The W. I. had just come into being - this was a good idea but unfortunately the movement was for rural areas and villages with a population of not more than 3000 and Chatteris had a population of 5000. But in 1927 rules were changed and the Chatteris WI was formed - organised by Florence. Its popularity increased until there were 400 members and a waiting list - the largest WI in the country. Fortunately there were plenty of women with time to help and young girls eagerly waited for their sixteenth birthday when they could join and go out with their mums to all the interesting functions. Florence was Secretary for a time and then President; later she became County President.

Still determined that women should play a greater part in the management of the town and with only men on the UDC she decided to stand for Council and with the help of WI members and friends for canvassing she was elected in 1931 - she went on to stand for the Isle of Ely County Council and eventually become the first and only Lady Alderman of the Isle of Ely County Council.

As a former teacher she was interested in local schools and became a Governor of local schools and March High School.

She had joined the Red Cross when a teenager in Wisbech and during the 1<sup>st</sup> World War collected eggs and knitted for our troops - helped by her guides. She continued to be a member and later formed a detachment in Chatteris - members taking certificates in Home Nursing and First Aid they were able to take over the nursing in an Old

Peoples Homes - this London home had been bombed and the old ladies moved to Chatteris where the local Freemasons allowed them to use their building. Some of our Red Cross nurses also helped at Doddington Hospital when staff were short. They were trained to deal with emergencies and helped at many functions.

Our Country needed money to help with the war and the National Savings Movement organised branches all over the country. Florence started and organised the group in Chatteris. Many of the collectors were WI members and nearly every street in Chatteris was covered and received a weekly visit so local people could regularly buy saving stamps.

After the war County Councils formed Community Councils, older people had had a hard time during the war and it was felt the time had come when these older people should be able to enjoy life more - they needed repaying for the effort they had made during the war. So as a member of the County Community Council Florence put the wheels in motion - contacting the heads of all our churches and other organisations she called a public meeting. It was decided to form a group 'The Good Companions' still going strong in 2007 - 60 years old. Regular meetings are held where the members can enjoy relaxing and being entertained with, of course, a cup of tea.

During the war the women had to work so much harder - taking on jobs when men were called up and ensuring they had enough money coming in. The war over but everything had changed, the women were much more capable and wanted to continue working. They were

ready and able to take their share in running the town. Sadly though working full time and with families today they haven't time to spare to help with organisations - so members are decreasing, groups like WI and Girl Guides find it difficult to find members willing or able to serve on committees or help with organising. Where will it all end?

It is thanks to such women as Florence Blott that the role of women in 'high places' (e.g. our first woman PM, Margaret Thatcher who was born just across the county borders in Lincolnshire and Betty Boothroyd, now retired to South Cambridgeshire, was the first Woman Speaker of the House of Commons) in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century has been achieved.

### **Grace Lane - mother-in-law: about her mother Emily neé Martin.**

Grace was the fourth of eight children and was born in Fordham in 1903 and died in 1989. She wrote the following notes just before she died.

How can I describe my Mother! I thought that she was the most wonderful person in the world and I still think so. We were a large family and my mother worked for us from early morning till bedtime which was approximately 9 o'clock in those days sometimes earlier. For weekdays she was generally up at 5 o'clock in the morning to get my fathers breakfast as in those days men started their day's work at 6 o'clock and they worked until 6 o'clock at night. My mother would then settle down to sewing. Before she had done the usual knitting,

embroidering etc but never any serious sewing so she taught herself by trial and error to make amongst other things, sailor suits for my brothers complete with cord and whistle. She was a farmer's daughter and remained at home until she got married at the age of 21. She was singularly innocent in all things. She had a very quiet way with her but under that quiet exterior was a woman of great character. She must have made up her mind to make the best of things under her straightened circumstances, as my father was a Tradesman and worked in a cement factory at Burwell.

All would have been well had the family stopped at 2 or even 3 but it grew at an alarming rate in little steps until there were 8 of us. As there were 5 girls in my mother's family the housework was fairly evenly distributed between them so mother never worked hard before marriage. However, she could cook and all our food was plain but delicious.

Mother made all our bread, we bought our corn from a relative and it was taken to the mill to be ground. I remember when the sack of flour was delivered there was a small bag of the wheat kernel resting on top of the flour.

We always had plenty of fresh vegetables and meat was very cheap and good. There were so many of us mother used to make puddings in a mixing bowl instead of a basin, they were always cooked in the "wash house", more of that later.

On pancake day she would make a large bowl of batter and stand at the kitchen range cooking numerable small and delicious pancakes on which she would put lemon juice and brown sugar, needless to say we looked forward to the day.

Sunday was a special day in the culinary sense as we always had extra dainties for tea namely blancmange jellies etc. also always a sponge cake which I can remember to this day. An old man from a neighbouring village used to bring these cakes in huge baskets obviously made for the purpose with a spotless cloth covering them. It was a “cottage” industry; he and his wife used to make and sell them for a living. To me they were unique in that they were spongy on top and when pressed they made a little squeak which I thought was very clever, of course I only had my piece to press down as we were never allowed to touch food on the table prior to having our meal. We had to behave at the table and very prominently on the wall was a large framed text thus:- “Christ is the head of the house an unseen guest at every meal and listener to every conversation.” I took that to heart and in my small mind was the conviction that it was really true. As I grew older it didn’t, I am sad to say, impress me so much.

Texts were abundant in our house and in the kitchen was a large and very remarkable picture which fascinated every child that entered the house including the inmates! On the top of it was a large eye, very large, and it always seemed to be watching me in particular. I’m sure it helped to keep me in the straight and narrow way. On the left of the picture was depicted from bottom to top in vivid colours the way

to damnation. On the way up were scenes of revelry, drunkenness and easy living, man and women sprawled in easy chairs drinking and seeming to be having a good time, but at the very top of the picture on the left of the “eye” was a terrible picture of hell with the most livid of flames leaping up and up. It made a great impression on me as when I was in the act of something naughty, I was suddenly jolted to a full realization as to what would happen to me if I continued. It truly scared me into a semblance of saintliness until the next time at any rate.

## **George Green**

George Green was born in 1890 and served with the Suffolk Regiment in WWI, known as “Greenie” to his friends.

### **Family Life in a terraced house (2 up and 2 down).**

“There was ten of us family - five boys and five girls. And there was the Allsops: There was ten of them. And there was the Angiers there was ten of them. And there were the Howards; there were ten of them. We were all within a hundred yards of one another, down West End. I remember when I went to Wilburton school cuz we used to have to go for a labour certificate to leave school ya know, and I went to Wilburton and passed out. The schoolmaster (He was a very good schoolmaster Mr Miles was) he come down see my father one night ..... He says, *“Tom, you’re not gonna let that boy leave school.”* He says, “Look at these little mouths around the table.” (There were ten of us there).

He says, “There’s only me, we could do with the money!”  
So I left. A wonderful man, Mr. Miles were.”

### The Shopping Bill.

“My mother bought bacon at fourpence halfpenny a pound and got a pailful of chitterlings for sixpence, a full shopping basket for four shillings with biscuits at four pence a pound and coconut sweets at two pence. For sixpence (now two and a half pence) I could get a clay pipe half an ounce of ‘bacca’ and a box of matches. I walked to the butchers shop before going to school and carried home a complete sheep’s head which my mother would boil up with vegetables over the open hearth making a meal ‘fit for a king’ for us to eat when Dad got home in the evening.



“Barrel-type” caravan which was an exhibit at the museum for many years. The Ashton Family travelled all over Britain in horse-drawn vans.

## Charles Ashton

Charlie Ashton, a real gentleman, had so many interesting stories to tell of his travels that a complete book could be written about him.

### Patriotism in WWI.

Charlie was one of a family of thirteen; some of them were born before 1914. As soon as war was declared that year, his father pulled the horse-drawn wagon to the side of the road in Worcestershire and went off to fight “ For King and Country.”

“My Mum took the kids down to London and lived in a house until Dad came back. He could not stick it there and so he bought a wagon for £20 and took to the road again.

### No Electric Blanket or Double Glazing.

Charlie recalled sleeping under the caravan on an “oat flight bed” or “under the sheet” (tarpaulin) on the horse-drawn trolley. The boys made pegs while looking after the horses - seven or eight of them - and the girls fashioned paper flowers to sell from door-to-door. The family travelled from Cambridge to Nuneaton, on to Birmingham and Coventry and through Shropshire up to Manchester, where in winter months, he had to attend school which he did not like!

### Charlie’s Mother, the Fortune Teller.

At the time of the interview, 1977, Charlie’s mother was still alive at ninety-five and living in a stationary caravan at Over, near St Ives. In her youth she was famous at fetes and fairs in Essex as a clairvoyant known as Gypsy Mead.

Two or three years passed before the Ashton family were back in Fyfield again, within hours a smartly dressed man knocked on the caravan door. “Is Mrs Ashton in?” he asked. On seeing her, he pushed a £10 note (one of the big old white ones) into her hand and said. “Gypsy Mead is what you were called at the fete, your predictions for me have all come true and I have called my garage (specialising in Rolls-Royces, no less!) “The Gypsy Mead Garage” in honour of you.”

Charlie said that sometimes his mother would decline to tell fortunes, saying, after the client had left, “There is no future for that person.” Often this proved to be true.

### **Grim Woman Lane - a Ghostly story.**

“Sitting by the open fire, Dad often told us children stories of his travels; this one is true, and the lane is still there in Staffordshire, linking one road to another.

“One evening a gypsy couple and their son pulled their caravan onto the lane, the grass was lush and the horse was put in a nearby field. The couple retired to sleep in the van, and the son settled down under a sheet (tarpaulin) to sleep.

About midnight a rattling noise woke the son, and there, looking at him, stood a smashing girl. Her face changed to a grin, and the lad was terrified. He knocked up his parents and sat in the caravan by candlelight.

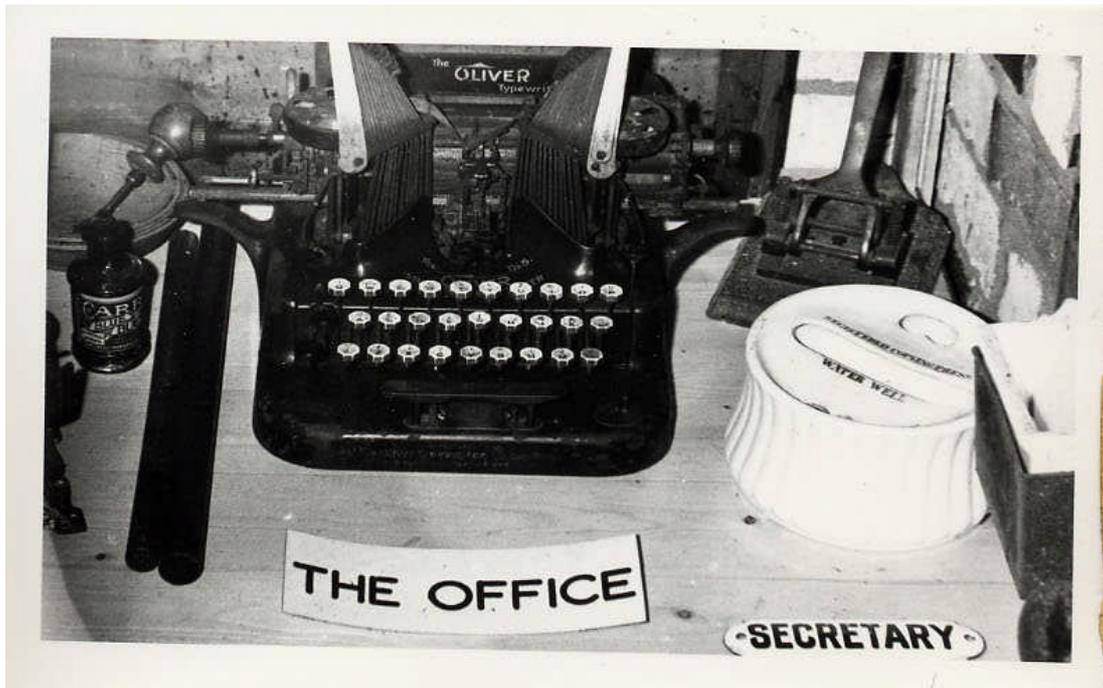
About an hour later he heard voices; a policeman and a local gamekeeper appeared at the door. “Surely you are not going to move us on at this ungodly hour?” said the father. “No, we are just surprised you are here at all. Don’t you know that this lane is haunted?”

Apparently, the grim woman only appears to solitary people; hence the P.C. always accompanying the gamekeeper on his rounds for illegal poachers. The gamekeeper dare not walk the lane alone for fear of being accompanied by the Grim Lady!”

### **Royal Connection.**

One time I’m talking about b’fore I were born, my mother sold some flowers on London Bridge to the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII). He come over and got out of a coach or somthin’ and she spoke to him and he bought tow bunches of flowers off her; I think she was selling violets and something else. And she also, in my time, she wrote to the Queen, which is the Queen Mother now (died 2002) and she got a reply. Straight from her hand, not from her secretary’s, straight from her hand. She still got the letter now. I could show you. If she passes it on I should perhaps get that. We used to boast a bit about that and show it to the other Romany’s.

# Between the Wars



Note the mechanical typewriter and ink pot—  
secretary's now use computers.



Group of Girls in Secretarial 'Uniforms'

## Rachel Lythell - my mother - “in service” 1918-1924

Rachel Lythell was born in 1904 and died in 2003.

“Living In” meant that she had little time for herself - Sunday evenings (to attend chapel and be in by 9.p.m.) and Wednesday afternoons.

Every day brought its own work -

Monday	Washing
Tuesday	Ironing
Wednesday	Bedrooms
Thursday	Downstairs
Friday	Baking
Saturday	Preparation for Sunday.

Her evenings were spent alone in the kitchen where she crocheted miles of edgings for tablecloths, sewed nighties and other underwear. Made *broderie anglais* - decorated pillowcases etc. for ‘her bottom drawer’ (Aged 90+ she decided it was time to “use up” the bed linen she had so painstakingly stitched 70 years earlier).

Rachel’s other work consisted of making pillow’s for coffins (her boss was the local undertaker and carpenter). Arranging flowers in the local chapel and preparing supper dishes for the family’s “Whist parties” (to which, of course, she, the maid, was never invited.) Collecting subscriptions (an odd penny a week I think) from homes at her end of the village, for Addenbrooke’s Hospital (pre NHS days) meant that she was occasionally invited into other folk’s homes - but usually was kept on the doorstep (the woman for whom she worked was an active member of the Haddenham and Wilburton Nursing Association).

Uniform, as a housemaid, was quite strict: starched white apron over skirt and blouse for morning wear: Hessian apron over the top when “scrubbing” brick and wood floors: black dress with small white apron for afternoons/evenings. What “slaves” these girls were to the people who employed them - often for as little as their keep and half a crown a week.

Marrying in 1929 and moving into a rented farm - really just a small-holding - she had only a bike for transport and her weekly grocery bill (at the one and only shop in the hamlet of Aldreth) never exceeded half a crown.



Fruit grown on Chivers' Farm at Aldreth (and elsewhere) was processed into jams and jellies at the Histon factory; many local people worked both on the farms and in the factory.

Note the flag flying!

Potato picking, hay turning and raspberry picking (for Chivers) were some of the outdoor work she did - pay on her husband's land was nil

and for Chivers two shillings a day was considered extremely good.  
(Pay was for amount picked, not time spent)

Summers in the Twenties were 'hot': candles bent over in the candlesticks, some of the wells went 'dry' and windows and doors were left wide open at night to get more air through (no problem with break-ins etc - some house doors were never locked!).

The big improvements of the twenties was that a local bus service was established - prior to that time the only way of getting to Ely for shops and the market was by Carrier's cart or the train (which meant a long walk to and from the stations).



Returning from market

Suddenly Rachel was able to visit her family at Stretham and “catch the bus” home. This opened wider horizons to people's lives, albeit over a very small distance.

## **Mabel Demaine (nee Freeman)**

Excerpts from 'Reflections of a Country Woman - published 1988.

### **Our Village Pump**

We had a pump just outside our back door, even in the hottest and driest summer never failing to release for us lovely, sparkling, clear spring water. In my young days I spent hours lifting that handle up and down each day to supply our farm animals with water and when the threshing engines paid us a visit I had longer spells at the pump.

### **Old Customs.**

When I was a child there were old customs kept up in the village, they were the means of raising small sums of money, they were "Goodening", and "Mayladying". Widows went around on "Goodening" day. I do not know how it originated, but on the 21<sup>st</sup> December, the shortest day of the year, widows in ones and twos went around knocking on doors where they were given small sums of money or a packet of tea or sugar. Only widows were allowed to take part in this and one year Jinny Croxen joined the collectors. We all knew she wasn't a widow, it was true her husband was often ill and unable to work, when she came to our house, her right to join the widows was challenged and she promptly replied "I'm wors'en a widow woman"! Widows were really poor in those days and had a hard life, there were no pensions and often their poverty was acute. Sometimes they got some small "Parish Relief", a mere pittance and it meant pleading poverty and almost begging and these women had their pride. I can remember one woman who was left a widow with an invalid daughter

to keep. She went out washing and became bent almost double through bending over the washtub, there was the hard scrubbing to be done and then the ironing, a full hard day, several times a week - no washing machine or electric irons in those days. We used to see her going home, her stooping figure looking so tired and weary after these wash days. Goodening Day, coming just before Christmas provided them with a little extra for the festive season.

On May 1<sup>st</sup> it was the girls turn to go around Mayladying, all carrying dolls, there was great competition with the dolls, they all had a pretty and as well dressed doll as possible. The girls knocked on doors and greeted everyone with “Please can you spare a copper for a Maylady?” My mother would not let me go Mayladying. She said it was only a form of begging and how I envied the other girls who were able to take part in this activity, especially when they told me of their financial results. This collecting was supposed to end at midday and so the little girls often stayed away from school in the morning going from door to door. There was another old custom, it was Tolling the Church Bell for any death in the village. The bell tolled three times for a man, twice for a woman and once for a child, with short intervals in between. This custom had to end at the outbreak of World War I because the order went out that Church bells were to be used as a warning of enemy invasion only.

### **Spring Cleaning.**

I can remember in our farmhouse kitchen we had a stone sink and a large copper which was heated by a stick fire for wash days and baths. There was a ‘low hearth’ where the pots and pans and kettles boiled

and how black and sooty they got from the open fire. We had a large Dutch oven, we lit a fire under this twice a week - on Sundays the only day in the week when my father was in for a midday dinner - when we always had a roast joint and Yorkshire pudding with plenty of vegetables, then rice pudding. This meal on a Sunday never varied and it was the only day when we had the sweet course last - the other days we always began with pudding, usually a suet rust, jam roll, apple pudding or spotted dick. We had most of our meals in the kitchen and all the work of washing, washing up and cooking was done there. What a change there is in that kitchen today - gone is the low hearth, stone sink and Dutch oven and old fashioned copper and in their place a modern sink unit, electric cooker, washer, fridge, mixer, kettles, all electric, One day during the week my mother had the oven going for baking day, she made lovely bread and cakes, tarts and scones and ginger biscuits, she always had a big tin of ginger biscuits.

There was a strip of coco matting on the tiled floor and a pegged rug at the fireside. Gone is the coco matting and rag rug, all over that farmhouse there is change, what difference in spring cleaning there is today. I remember what a major operation it was to have the chimney swept, especially in that low hearth. Will Watts was our local chimney sweep, we had to book him up weeks ahead he covered a wide area and as he did the chimney sweeping only in the evenings, doing a full days job during the day, he got well booked up, especially in the spring time - he had a donkey and cart for his brushes, etc. I think he knew every chimney in the village, some twisted and crooked taking some understanding. He was a great talker and we learned not to keep in the room with him during operations because he would get the

brushes half-way up and then begin a story, about other chimneys, other jobs, and other people, and on and on he would talk with the job half done and so we found it best to leave him on his own. Going outside to watch the brush come out of the top of the chimney pot. Watty, as we called him, was supposed to be a good sweep, but oh the soot we had to clear up after he left. He has been dead many years, but I wonder what he would think of the electric sweepers and the sweep wearing a white coat of today. I am sure he would say the job was only half done under such conditions.

Spring cleaning the beds was another big job, the covers from the feather bed and mattress had to be washed and the mattress well brushed, especially round the buttons with a small stiff brush, then there was the “valance” round the bed. All beds had a valance, it was like a frilled curtain round the bed. I remember ours were white print with pink flowers on and one with lace insertion, these had to be washed and starched and ironed, what a business it was. A large white honeycomb bed spread was on the bed, white cloths on the dressing table and chest of drawers and lace curtains at the windows - all to be washed, starched and ironed with no electric washer or irons to help.

A flush toilet did not exist in our farmhouse; a double privy up the garden path meant that two of us could “go together” and chat! On the wood wall hung cigarette card collections and many spider webs. It was my job to cut up squares of newspaper to use as toilet paper; my father regarded the contents of the two buckets as fine manure for

the vegetable patch nearby and his leeks and potatoes were second to none!

### Salt Pork

There were two short periods during the year which I disliked. They were when we had the pig killed. Almost everyone fattened up a pig for home consumption. We had two very large porkers, one in the autumn and the other in the spring.

My mother was an expert at making the most of every scrap of those pigs. We used to say the only part she didn't use was the squeal. How I hated the smell of melting fat and the sight of great hunks of raw meat. It meant two or three days of really hard work to salt the pork, cure the hams and bacon, make the lard and sausages and the pork cheeses and clean the chitterlings. And oh the endless washing up of greasy pots and pans. We all had to help. I hated it all, but my mother never let me off, she believed that life wasn't for always doing the pleasant things. She was always generous to our neighbours and friends at these times and a pork cheese and a few sausages or a piece of pork were handed around. We all enjoyed the end product, those slices of pink and white succulent ham, the sausages and pork cheeses and the chitterlings and sizzling bacon. No wonder we always had plenty of visitors to share in this rich food. I think the hams were the choicest of all, there is no comparison to the so-called ham we get served today. There were many women who were shown how to cure hams and bacon by my mother, she was always willing to instruct and help in this task. How wonderful it would have been if we had had a deep freeze in those days.

## Granny Grounds

A little old lady living alone in the High Street gave me one of my first well-paid jobs. We called her Granny Grounds. She had  $\frac{1}{2}$ pt of milk each day and  $\frac{1}{4}$ lb of butter a week from my mother and it was my job to deliver these on my way to school, but this was not all I did for the princely sum of 2d. a week. Any other errands or jobs in the house were included. I remember once having to help paper the kitchen and what a mess it looked - odd bits of paper stuck on in all directions. Granny Grounds was not my Granny, as far as I knew she never had any children. She rode a tricycle and anyone that thinks riding a tricycle is easy is making a big mistake, to balance and steer is quite a skill.

Every Friday evening Granny Grounds rode her trike to our house to pay my mother, leaving her stead outside.

Now I had two friends Mitt Peters and Lil Norman, they were both older than I, but I somehow felt honoured by having older girls for my friends. We met after tea for games and talks and we envied Granny her trike, it would have been wonderful if we could own such a marvellous means of transport. We watched her sailing on the street and when she alighted, she was safely indoors and settled for her weekly chat with my mother, we took our chance. In turn we had the thrill of a ride. Lil and Mitt always went first, they were older and so it was their privilege, they had their rides and then I climbed the seat and with a good push from my friends I went off down the slope to little 'stile'. I had been taught "be sure your sins will find you out" and this proved true one night. There was I perched on Granny's trike

when she appeared and those two who professed to be my friends disappeared leaving me to face the music.

### **Lilian Sadler - “Aunt Lil” to so many.**

I was born at Witcham Gravel and have very happy memories of my childhood there with three sisters and a brother. We had a pony and trap for family transport but it was a long walk up to Mepal School where Mrs. Setchfield, the blacksmith's wife, reigned supreme! Often in winter our feet were soaked - no welly boots for us! Skating was an enjoyable pastime (cost nothing!) and I was taught by my Dad, Walter Ladson, to skate by pushing an old kitchen chair along in front; he fixed a rope across the New Bedford River so that we could skate carefully across to the Washes; it was great fun to skate at night round and round an old yard lantern - what simple pleasures we had. The Winters years ago were colder than they are now. When in our teenage years we 'saved' up the bus fare to Chatteris for an evening out - and often walked the 6 miles home in the dark.

### **Olive Drake 1910-1993 a woman of wide talents.**

Olive was born in Fordham, Cambs and had 6 brothers and one sister. Apart from one short period in Bexley Heath, Kent, she spent her whole life in East Anglia.

At the age of 14 she left school to train as a drapery assistant at Pledger's - what we would now call a family-run department store in Ely. By the time she was 17, she had risen so far in the ranks that she was taken to London by her boss to choose and order the new fashions of the day (1927) and she was soon doing these buying trips on her own.

At 22, she married and in accordance with the customs of the day, gave up work to become a full-time housewife. She always retained a strong interest in fashion and throughout her life, always bought high quality clothes which often lasted 20 years or more. In her new role, she became a renowned cook and baker, entertaining Methodist ministers and local preachers every Sunday for lunch, tea and supper and helping to cater at the large church gatherings of those days - Circuit Rallies, Chapel Anniversaries and so on, usually for well over 100 people at a time.

A typical Sunday Tea had these delights:

Sausage rolls, 3 kinds of sandwiches, always including egg and cress, cheese scones, plain scones with jam and cream, fruit bread, date and walnut bread, trifle, fruit salad and cream, cream horns, plain sponge, coffee and walnut sponge, meringues, lemon curd tarts and fruit cake.

If you didn't sample something of everything, you were supposed to be ill!

When the war broke out, her husband's office manager for his transport firm joined the WAACS and so Olive taught herself double entry book-keeping from a book and took over all secretarial duties for the business learning to type at the same time. Since she also had 3 Jewish evacuees from London's East End; looked after her elderly parents; sang in the church choir and a regional choir; played the

piano and presided at the Women's Bright Home meeting; visited wounded personnel at the RAF hospital, and entertained any servicemen who came to Ely Wesley Church, she was a pretty busy lady! She decided to employ a housekeeper who also helped to look after her demanding baby daughter.

However, unlike her mother, whose 'leisure hours' were all taken up with work - sewing, mending, cleaning brasses etc - Olive did have some treats. She went to matinees at the cinema quite regularly and she and her sister (who was also her best friend) went 4 or 5 times a year to Cambridge for the day. Their favourite shops were Eaden Lilley and Joshua Taylor; they often visited their brother and sister in law, who kept lodgings for aristocratic undergraduates; and they always had a slap-up lunch at the prestigious 'Dorothy' restaurant.

Once a year, came their big day out in London, with lunch and afternoon tea at their favourite store, Selfridges. They staggered home, laden with new 'frocks', costumes, hats and shoes.

Unlike her mother, Olive also had holidays. Most were self-catering at Heacham or Hunstanton, but later on, Methodist Guild holidays all over the country were sampled and in 1960 she went to Switzerland, her only trip abroad.

In old age she still cooked and entertained on a large scale, both for family and church, culminating in 75 guests for her golden wedding.

When she died, her freezer contained all that was needed for a substantial post funeral buffet!

Extended leisure time also gave her the opportunity to read much more, developing a taste for historical novels. TV led her to a strong interest in snooker, on which she became quite an armchair expert.

SCHEDULE III.

Local Education Authority Isle of Ely.

**LABOUR CERTIFICATE, No. 1 (a) (for total exemption after 13 years of age).**

AGE AND EMPLOYMENT.

I certify that Rose Alice Shipp,  
residing at Twenty Pence Farm, Wilburton,  
was on the 24<sup>th</sup> day of November, 1913, not  
less than thirteen years of age, having been born on the 27<sup>th</sup>  
day of May, 1907, as appears by the  
Registrar's Certificate ~~for the~~ Secretary's Declaration now produced to  
me, and has been shown to the satisfaction of the local education  
authority for this district to be beneficially employed.

(Signed) [Signature]  
Secretary  
~~Principal~~ to the Local Education Authority.

or other officer.

PREVIOUS ATTENDANCE.

I certify that Rose Alice Shipp,  
residing at Twenty Pence Farm, Wilburton,  
has made 350 attendances in not more than two schools during  
each year for five preceding years, whether consecutive or not,  
as shown by the (1) certificate furnished by the Principal Teacher  
of the (1) Wilburton School,

(Signed) [Signature]  
Secretary  
~~Principal~~ to the Local Education Authority.

Dated the 24<sup>th</sup> day of December, 1913.

N.B.—In districts where the bye-laws extend to the age of fourteen this Certificate can only be granted if the bye-laws permit full time exemption on an attendance qualification.

Rose Shipp's school leaving certificate. She too spent her childhood at Twentypence.

Her last new 'artistic' interest, at 80, was decoupage at which she soon became very proficient.

The main differences between Olive and her mother were; that her daily work was mainly very pleasurable; that she could chose which work to specialise in and which to have help with; and that her increasing leisure time was always rewarding and pleasurable, involving new interests and new skills. Money was never a problem as it had been in her own mother's life.

## **Mrs Goulty**

Memories and School days when living at Wilburton

### **Twentypence.**

Mrs Goulty had had experience of the characteristics of the Fen Rivers (which flow at a higher level than the fields which they drain) having spent her childhood beside the Old West River at Twentypence, Wilburton. "There was only a fen drove leading up to the village and it took me a long time to walk up to the school: my granddad kept the Public House (demolished in 2002 to make way for houses by the Marina) and we lived in the white cottage (later owned by Eleanor Sommerfield and Leonard Sachs of Music Hall fame). Beer for the pub was fetched by horse and cart from Wilburton Station and if I could get a lift home from school by horse or donkey cart I thought I was very lucky. I lived there until I went into service at Cambridge." (employment for girls at this time in the early years of the twentieth century was very limited).

Mrs Goulty recorded her memories of the 1947 fen floods - "I used to pack my husband up on a Sunday evening and he would be away all week, bagging the river banks with clay and driving the river tugs.

### **Con Cameron (Houghton) and Ethel Drake (Ely) were an unusual 'breed' - lady taxi drivers**

Con said " I do everything, make it talk. The old thing used to rattle. We only got curtains in there, they had to put a hood up if it rained and ya'd get your fingers squashed.

#### **Foot Control.**

I burnt me brakes out down at Shrewsbury because there was a flock of sheep coming up a hill and I went and shoved me brakes on quick. Course you could always use your reverse pedal there. See there's no gears. All your gears was with your feet.

I could drive one now if I had one! They'd be worth some money today!

#### **Repairs to Cars.**

After Dad left the mill (Houghton near St Ives) we had these three taxis and then we had fifty boats and punts on the river, we used to look after them.

We used to do our own repairs with the cars; you used to grind the valves in. Oh yes! They'd all fall to pieces at the back axle there.

We used to take the plugs out and clean those. We used to have to put side curtains up, well, it was ever so draughty. I used to be out all hours of the night. You had to have a rug round your knees cos it was so cold!

### **No Heating.**

And you used to have to let the water out at night if it was freezing because they used to get froze. There was no such thing as anti-freeze in those days. And jack it up to start it in the mornin'. And then as soon as you get the jack up you could start it up and crank it up to try and get it to start! You'd jack it up then it'd fall off the jack!

### **No Money for a Cuppa**

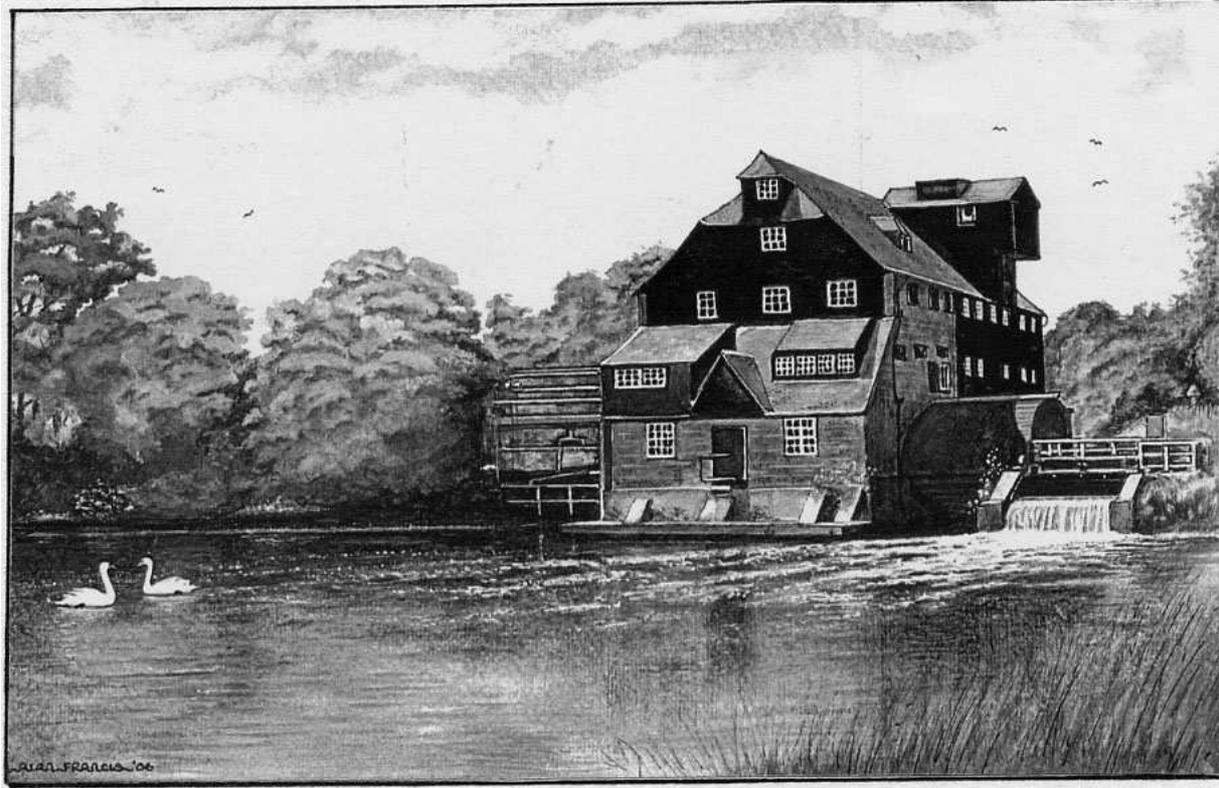
They were happy days in that old Ford. They used to say,  
*"Send Connie along to take us to St. Ives shopping."*

I used to wait there all day long for these old fogeys to go shopping. And daren't charge them anything you know. I had't got any money to go and get a cup of tea or anything with. Because those days, I mean, six pence a mile.....

My husband used to say to me,  
*"I can run quicker than you can drive!"* -

I was very steady driver! He used to say,  
*"You're a nuisance on the road!"*

(A comment often made about women drivers nowadays!)



Houghton Mill today, a painting by Alan Francis

It is of interest that Houghton Mill (Now National Trust property) has a WOMAN miller (2005). Corn is ground and wholemeal flour sold to visitors at Summer weekends. Is she the ONLY woman miller in the UK? Today? Certainly a RARE BREED!

### **Kath Barnes - a volunteer at seventeen.**

Having left the village school at fourteen, career opportunities for a girl in the Fens were just about nil in the Thirties.

“My Dad had seen active service in World War One in the Royal Sussex Regiment and when war was declared in 1939 I was eager to ‘join up’.

It would mean an escape from the Cambridgeshire Fen Country and bring me new horizons.

The age requirement was seventeen and a half, and as soon as I was old enough I joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), leaving by train from Ely Station.

My destination? Northampton. For someone who regarded a trip to Ely on Market Day as an adventure, this was indeed 'foreign parts.'

After basic training and being taught to drive Army lorries, both Austin and Bedford, I was given the status of 'A' Driver, being responsible for driving ambulances and important staff cars. My pay? Eleven shillings and sixpence (fifty seven and a half pence) a week - much, much more than I could have earned working on the land or 'in service'. I was billeted out in private digs so never had the experience of 'mucking in' with the gang in hostels or barracks.

Memories of taking an Italian Prisoner of War (who was suffering from a nervous-breakdown) to the secure hospital at Rampton (where my co-driver and I were locked in too, albeit temporarily!) and driving a lorry over a mass of wet concrete in error (you should have seen the look on the face of the man-in-charge) are two of my vivid recollections.

Postings took me to Halifax, Derby, Salisbury Plain and Matlock - such far-off places for a Fen lass of 17. Getting from place to place was easy in these far off days: a girl in uniform was quickly given a lift al-

though traffic on the roads was much lighter than it is today. It was SAFE to travel alone. One of my longest hikes was from Nottingham to Sutton-in-the-Isle to visit my boy-friend, a childhood sweetheart who was later to become my husband.

My albums of black and white photos bring back many memories of the war years, some happy, many sad. For me it was the only time I have lived away from the parish in which I was born. On my lounge wall I have two large framed photos - of my Dad and my father-in-law, two true Fen Tigers who fought for King and Country in World War One. I wonder what the Twenty-first century holds for my grandchildren and great grandchildren?"

**Mrs. Esther Howe, wife of a small farmer in the village of Prickwillow, known to her friends as Essie.**

"I used to get up about half past six. My husband would get up just a bit before cos I used to like my cup of tea in bed, you see. But soon as I had that I had to get moving. So I used to get up at half past six. My husband and the milkman used to go out and milk and I'd be ready to separate (take cream off by passing milk through hand operated machine) at ten minutes to seven when they came in with the milk. We used to take the cream off. People used to come years ago and fetch a ha'peth of milk. A ha'peth of skimmed milk. Quite a can full cos you wouldn't do anything cept give it to the pigs. Whatever container they brought, you just filled. I had all the housework to do and course there was butter to make once a week.

And chickens, I had about 400 chickens. They were free range. Every afternoon, wet or fine, eggs were collected and the egg man used to come round and collect them in a big lorry. - a huge container lorry. The boxes they used to bring would hold thirty-six dozen. I'll tell you an ordinary day's work. We had what we called dockey at quarter past ten. And then the men stopped for oneses just for a cup of tea and a bite of cake or something. And then come in at four o'clock for a cooked meal. That was in an ordinary day's work when it wasn't harvest. But harvest there were these four meals to get.

We went to bed earlier than what we do now. Yes, half past nine. If we thought it was ten o'clock, my dear, we was late!



Helping gather in the corn

### The importance of the Women's Institute.

I belonged to the WI and I've always belonged to the chapel. Years ago there were real old members, you see. They worked hard to get things going in the village. For instance, they got water brought down here. Yes. That was through the WI that water was brought to Prick-willow. Now this was in the 1920's I'm talking about. What the WI said then bore quite a bit of weight.

### Real Fen Food: Before the Days of Slimming.

“You cut your onion up and make your dough what used to be done with the suet. You'd roll that out, you'd put your onion and perhaps slices of bacon or perhaps spread some sausage meat over it and then you'd boil that for about a couple of hours. And they're delicious. But you can't tell that to young people now cos my lot won't eat them. You see, they were too fattnin'. But we didn't study our figures in them days.” (Folk needed to eat lots of carbohydrates to make the energy needed for hard land work.)

### Wash Day.

*What about washday? That must have been quite an ordeal without a washing machine.*

“Oh, my dear, that's right and without a copper. That used to be a boiler hanging over an old hearth. And you'd have a big hook come down from the chimney and your boiler hanging on this hook and your clothes boiling in it.”

*What would you use - because they wouldn't have Persil or Ariel would they?*

“We had soda and soap. And I remember the first washing powder that came out, it was A1, penny a packet. We thought that was marvellous, A1 that was called. We used to soap all our clothes before they were put into the copper. Our clothes all went into the soap.”

*And you literally boiled the clothes?*

That's right. No copper, that was in a big ole boiler, but that was in my mum's day. Cos I always had a copper in my day.”

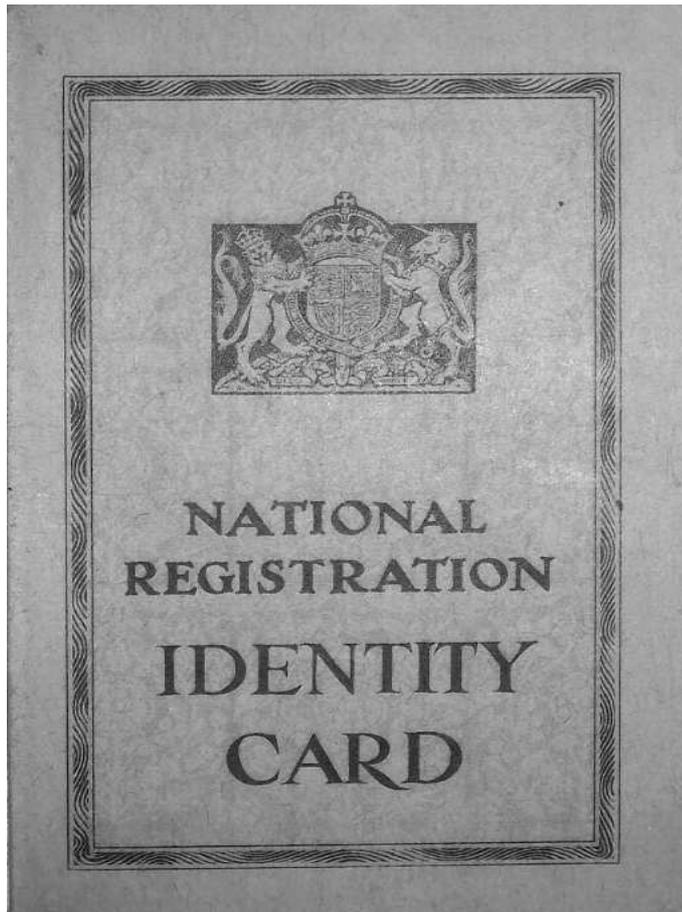
*Did you use a scrubbing board at all?”*

“Yes, an ole wash board.”

*When did you have your first washing machine?”*

“Well my mother when we lived up Quanea, Cutlacks they were the first people in Ely to have these, a Darling, I think it was called, a big pot with something in it to swish the water round (See exhibit in cottage at Farmland Museum). Some handles did go round and round. But this Darling washing machine pushed backwards and forwards. Course, before that there were these dolly things. You know you used to work them up and down but I never did have one of those.”

During World War II



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## **Rita Goodger (née Barratt) born at Chatteris in 1920**

At the age of three I was allowed to start school - it was two minutes away at the top of our road. My elder sister was there and my younger sister was still a baby so I couldn't play or talk with her. I so wanted to start school - to be able to read and write like my parents. All went well, of average intelligence but so enjoying the work I passed the scholarship when nine years old.

I wanted to be a nurse but mother was adamant - I was to be a teacher. Looking back she was right. Unfortunately war broke out in Sept 1939, the month I was to start training at a London College - but I wasn't allowed to go to London - I might get bombed!

Eventually I heard that Hockerill College, Bishop Stortford would take me. A week or two into my second year there air raids started, the house in the college grounds where I was living had a direct hit - three students were killed but I was dug out. Home from hospital once more I had a transfer and finished my second year at Homerton College, Cambridge.

I started my teaching career at Ely where I was expected to wear stockings AND a hat each day to school. All these extras had to be bought from a pay packet of £11-12 per MONTH (Rita paid 1s.10d bus fare RETURN from Ely to Chatteris each week where her lodgings cost 22 shillings per week.) However, before the end of my first term I was offered a job at the Cromwell School at Chatteris. The King Edward Junior School had moved to Cromwell to leave their school free for an evacuated London school and Mr Precious became Headmaster at

Cromwell Senior School for boys combined with his King Edward Junior School. Knowing that I had taken Advanced Horticulture at college and with all the young male teachers on active service they needed someone to take gardening and 'dig for victory'. This I enjoyed but after the war when the male teachers returned I had to teach juniors full time.

After a few years I joined the staff of Cromwell Secondary Modern School (now Cromwell Community College) where I was now teaching Geography full time, one of my ambitions was to take a party of students abroad but not until my daughter was old enough to accompany us. My first visit was planned for 1959, collecting brochures of firms specialising in school holidays. I was impressed by one, a plain little white booklet - not like all the others that were like large glossy magazines.

Not having been abroad before I organised a meeting of parents inviting the head of my chosen travel firm to come and talk and answer any questions. This was not a holiday but an educational visit they went to learn all about the country they were visiting, which was so very worthwhile. During the trip members of staff were each allocated a group of children.

Outings were carefully planned and included visits to factories in Holland and Switzerland.

At a diamond factory in Holland we were given a talk and refreshments before watching men cutting diamonds. They happily

handed diamonds over to my pupils to look at - I was petrified, what if they dropped them?

In Switzerland we had a comprehensive tour of a chocolate factory. At every stage plates of tasters were handed round - chocolate - fillers - the finished sweet.

Another visit was to a factory where boxes were designed and made for chocolates and other fancy items. This sounded rather boring but was in fact it was one of our most interesting experiences.

In the evenings the students would join into their group to write up events of the day. At the end of the trip these diaries would be written and illustrated with photos and other memorabilia that had been collected during the tour. Diaries were judged and the winner presented with a prize at the parents evening when a cine film I had taken was shown.

One of my great interests at school was drama - besides helping with school productions I ran the Evening Institute Drama Class for many years producing 3 act plays and pantomimes.

There was a much closer link between the young and old in those days. Old Peoples Club from Chatteris and surrounding villages were invited to various school functions. A Christmas tea and entertainment - harvest festival after which the produce was divided up and given to the old folk. Students went out to deliver parcels to members unable to attend owing to ill health.

Schools for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were so much a part of the town. National Savings were needed and the schools sold saving stamps weekly and Cromwell had a savings cup that was presented regularly. Some of our local girls were willing to visit house bound OAP's to chat and do their shopping. The May Day celebrated every year was enjoyed by hundreds of people, the May Queen was voted for by the top class and singing and dancing was rehearsed for many weeks before the event but all the town knew about it.

But times have changed and even the pupils don't look the same - girls and boys all in trousers! - all face exams which they must pass if they want to go on to college or further training - no time to mix with the old folk.

## **Mabel Demaine's recollections of the war**

### **Our local G.P. who lived at the Lodge.**

“Early on a very enthusiastic branch of the Red Cross was formed, run by Dr. and Mrs. Fairweather. They organised classes for the members. The Lodge, Dr. Fairweather's home, was its headquarters. In fact, the Lodge became the busiest house in Haddenham. Not only was it the first-aid post, but also the big business of organising homes for evacuees was done there, with all the problems involved in that undertaking. Mrs. Fairweather was tireless and hard working. It was amazing the amount of work and organising she did. One day she said

to me “You know, I’ve got into a dreadful state. If I sit down and do nothing, I get such a guilty feeling.” Her house was chock-o-block full of blankets, gasmasks, first-aid equipment, stretchers, clothing and food for evacuees.

### **Invasion from the East End.**

The evacuees sent to the village were mostly Jewish from the East End of London - The Whitechapel slum area. I shall never forget one of the first coach loads to arrive. It came on a Sunday afternoon. There were a number of expectant mothers with young children. With their gasmasks and bundles of belongings, they were a pathetic sight, frightened and bewildered. And although they were given good homes and every care, they could not settle. They missed the noise and bustle of Whitechapel and its fish and chip shops, its cinemas and pubs. And before a week had passed many had returned home, preferring, as they said, to be bombed out in London than to stagnate and die of boredom in a quiet country village.

However, the staff and scholars of a London East End School settled in more successfully, using the Church Hall as their school. The children with their own teachers found it easier to adapt themselves and make friends among the village children.

### **Volunteers Help with Food Shortages.**

Another worthy scheme in operation during the war was run by a willing band of volunteers. It was the pie scheme. With the restrictions and rationing of food it was difficult for the housewives to

feed hungry families. A group of us met twice a week and made jam turnovers etc which were baked at the local bakery and sold for a nominal charge; a very worthwhile job.” Profits made from this scheme were, some 40 years later, added to the village charities accounts.

## **Esther Howe’s memories of war work**

### **In the War Time**

“All this canning fruit went on, you know the WI had its own canner. And then we used to go up to the Hall in turn so many afternoons during the week you see. And when the peaches were in season we used to go Ely market and buy a big tray of peaches and take them up to the WI hall to do. Cos we had our own hall then.

### **War Effort**

We used to knit for the war effort, you know, mittens and balaclavas and scarves and socks and that sort of thing. This fruit business was for ourselves; when we was canning all this fruit we got up to 106 members! So you know they came for what they could get out of it. You see everybody was so pleased to get this fruit done. And I forget if we was allowed any sugar or not but you know during the war for the harvest months and the sugar beet season the farmers did get extra margarine, tea, sugar, cheese.....

## Rationing was not a Problem

Course it happened that I got one thing somebody else got another. Cos I could never make my tea ration last out, you see. But I could easily get a quarter of tea for a bit of butter cos we made our own butter. All this went on, you see. And of course we had our own eggs. We weren't short of milk or chickens. But there were things that we were limited with, but on the whole we did well."



Feeding the chickens

## **Recollections of Nancy and Kath - Teaching in Primary School over three decades**

After the 1902 Education Act, secondary schooling was more readily available and both Nancy and Kath (born during WWI) considered themselves to be very fortunate: Nancy attended the Grammar School at Huntingdon and then did a 2-year teacher training course at

Peterborough. Kath was an Ely High School pupil and went on to teacher training in Norwich.

So many of their contemporaries worked in Primary Schools as 'uncertificated' teachers but both Nancy and Kath felt privileged, working for a monthly payment of £7. 'Digs' took up a pound a week but in the inter-war years both these young teachers felt 'well off.' (Domestic staff that 'lived in' were paid half a crown).

Both went on to be head teachers in 'Miss Read type' establishments - Nancy at Woodhurst (near St Ives) and Kath at Mepal (near Ely). Conditions at both places (one in the old county of Huntingdon and the other in the now-obsolete Isle of Ely) were very similar - no playing fields ('drill' was on the playground) no radiators (wet clothes had to be dried on the fire guards) no central heating (teachers made the coal fires up at lunch times) no school bus service (many children trudged miles along slubby droves in all weathers) no visual aids (blackboard and chalk were the only 'help') BUT no child left either school unable to read: 'We spent every spare moment encouraging even the slowest pupil'. Break and lunch times were a chance for one-to-one help.

Kath recalls walking three and a half miles to catch the main-road bus in the snowdrifts in '47 - otherwise her trusty bike was her mode of transport: she did have a little car but that was 'put into store' during the War years due to petrol rationing.

Teachers had to supervise play and dinner breaks as well as TEACH every lesson (no LSA's or free periods in that era) What Kath and Nancy said was LAW and no child ever queried them - or answered them back. Each day began with a Christian assembly for the whole school, based on Bible stories and large passages from it were learned 'by rote' although neither was a 'church' school. Responsibility and honesty were qualities that were instilled into children from a very young age: - courtesy was a foregone conclusion.

Both Nancy and Kath agree that although times were hard, teachers were always neat and tidy in appearance (slovenly dress was not an option) and children 'looked up' to teachers as role models: teachers were held in respect, very different from today.

Teachers of that generation took on far more menial tasks than their modern equivalents - Nancy recalls making costumes for her entire school one Christmas (parent - teacher associations were unheard of) and if a job needed to be done, she did it.

Kath recalls teaching the entire school at Sutton-in-the-Isle to 'do' country dancing for a Maypole event in the sixties: not only did she teach the fen lads and lassies to DANCE but she made all their costumes as well - stitching 40 yards of material in the process!

In spite of today's livewires, children were more socially-orientated: conversation with the family may have been about mundane matters but family meals were a time for exchanging news and ideas: only one room in the home was heated so children were not 'isolated' in their

own room upstairs as many have become today and Sunday observance made the seventh day of the week 'special' - today for many, Sundays mean a trip to the supermarket or recycling centre.

Asked what they thought of today's schools - on which much of our rate money is spent - both Nancy and Kath agree that their generation was much more satisfied and happy than children are in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **Jean Richards, Editor of 'Village Voice'**

Jean was a lay reader for the Church of England and received the M.B.E. for her work with Ugandan Refugees.

"I had a very nice job in the Land Army, I was sent to a very large farm; by the standards of the time a tenanted farm of round about a thousand acres. My posting was partly being the farm secretary; I did all the paper work. And I used to rear about 120 calves a year. A cousin of mine was in the Timber Corps that part of the Land Army, which was concerned with forestry, and timber. And they worked as gangs. In the horticultural areas they worked as gangs too. But in an awful lot of the other areas there would perhaps be a single girl just living in the household. Some areas they had hostels and a group of girls would live together and go out to the farm. I lived in the household, with the farmer and his wife and the children, and that was perfectly common then. The hours were very very long but I mean, people don't know they're born nowadays."

It took many years for members of the Womens Land Army to receive official recognition for the valuable work they did in rural England.

**Mary Hufford, a shop assistant late 30/40's  
Recalls her work-schedule.**

“I worked in a corner-shop cum Post Office and thought nothing of walking to and from my work - a distance of a mile each way, even coming home at mid-day. Cars were few and far between - even the Huntingdon Police had only one car (driven by my Dad, a retired police constable.)

War-time rationing made a lot of extra work for us in the shop - cutting out coupons, weighing out foodstuff (½ lb sugar weighed up in blue bags per person, 2 oz. butter, 4 oz. bacon to be sliced on the slicer, cutting off lard and cooking fat from big blocks and using a deadly ‘wire’ for cutting cheese from its hessian ‘skin’.) No pre-packaging in 1940! No carrier bags either - customers always brought their own baskets.

My pay for these multi-tasks was eight shillings (40 pence) per week and the day lasted from 9 am to 5.30 pm with an hour’s break at lunchtime. Most shops closed mid-day and also half day on Wednesdays; now mid-day breaks and half days off no longer exist; many shops are open even on Sundays.”

Today, food arrives in packets and containers and there are few ‘shop assistants’ as such - merely shelf-stackers and check out operators and no worry about adding up the bill ‘in one’s head’ - the computer lists everything and its prices.



Village woman often exchanged news and gossip when they met at the well.  
Hence the expression “Parish Pump Politics”..

# Post World War II



*A little girl turning the handle of a butter churn just like the one used by Mrs. Howe in her farm kitchen at Prickwillow: hand power and horse power were all-important before mechanization.*

## Ruth Bester - A life with children

“Oh look Charles they really do have trees up here!”

These words were spoken by my mother as she and my father and I were heading towards the county of Yorkshire from my home in the Fens. September the month, the year 1963 and I was heading into the wide world of work.

As I couldn't enter into Dr Barnardo's until I was eighteen I was going to work in a foster home, at Pateley Bridge, run by a relative of our local Methodist minister. 'Woodroyd' was a largish house, on a hillside surrounded by trees overlooking the Nidd Valley, filled with children from a week old to the eldest at 24. No one seemed to be turned away - but somehow everyone had a bed.

Days were filled with cleaning, ironing, washing, cooking and caring for the little ones from 6 a.m, till 10 p.m. Meal times we sat on forms round a long table with good healthy stews, mince and sausages as main food with suet and steamed puds and pies for dessert.

The things I remember mostly about my first Christmas away from home, was 24 people to cook for and then hanging the nappies on bushes and the fence when the line was full. Aunty Doris, the owner and organiser, rushing here and there this meeting, that meeting, new babies to collect and babies from the home leaving us for new homes with adoptive parents.

They were happy days but hard, very little modern equipment, stone floors to scrub each day digging our way out each morning from the heavy snow fall of 63/64, winter, laughter, tears, joy filled the house which I left in March 1964 to go to work at Barnardos in Ripon.

I chose to work with mentally and physically handicapped children at the Bishops Palace, about a mile from the centre of town. To begin with I was in the 'Cottage'; children aged 5-7. with a mental age 3-5. Here I came in contact with children who had been physically and mentally abused but they were happy in the home with a schoolroom attached.

During the day when the children were at school it was our job to polish the floors, twice a week, with liquid polish and then buff them clean with cloths on the end of long poles. I always seemed to be taking polish off!! Very high and wide windows needed to be cleaned once a month and at the end of each term the ornate woodwork on the walls was dusted down.

Upstairs each house had their own two bedrooms, one for boys and the other for girls, again wooden floors with mats by each bed and down the centre of the room. These had to be inspected by the matron each day and woebetide if 'us juniors' didn't make the beds right or make sure the children had put their clothes away. Each day there were maybe four or five 'wet beds' to deal with so off to the laundry. Whilst I was at work I would take time to think about each child as, with the help from senior staff, I got to know some of their background and special needs. Again abused children, rejected ones,

those with 'water on the brain', partial disfigurements and those who would sit and rock backwards and forwards, those with terrible anger tantrums and those who suffered epileptic fits. It was emotional and physical work as you never knew what would happen next. The child who was quiet and happy one moment could be as strong as four men in the blink of an eye. A missing child could have been on the roof or running away over the fields. Patience, silence, then talking often defused a very difficult situation.

Each day began 'with a short service' in the Chapel, wonderful stained glass windows and ornate woodcarvings, before the children went to school. Sunday morning we'd all go to church in Ripon, as was the custom. Everyone in their best clothes and hopefully in good moods. Afternoons were for pleasure and leisure, again games and walks.

Then there were the walks to the river, football, cricket, rounders, after a fashion. Saturday it was walk to town to spend pocket money. That I found quite hard, as some of the children had no road sense, would throw a wobbly in a shop, or generally cause a scene. Everything would be sorted out though and off we would go back home.

Today, in my sixties, I am involved with transporting special needs children to school at Linton and in each job there have been lessons to be learnt - highs and lows, sadness and happiness but through them all I always had the love and support of my mother and father and friends I met along the way.

Would I have changed one moment of my working life, the answer is a definite NO!!

### **Kath Peacock (Née Watts) - wife and mother.**

In 1947 my husband and I began married life in what had been a Public House some 1½ miles from the centre of the village. No mains water, no electricity. Water to drink was brought in milk churns from the village and lighting was by paraffin lamp.

I scrubbed the tiled floors on my hands and knees, boiling up the water from a well in the yard. On Mondays I took my washing down to my Mum's (she had mains water): I boiled up the whites in her coal-fired copper and the process took most of the day.

After 5 years of living in Grunty Fen, we sold up and moved into the village so that it was easier for my children to attend school.

Linda Freeman, Kath's eldest daughter recalls work at a factory in the sixties.

### **Linda Freeman (Née Peacock), work in the Sixties.**

I left Witchford Secondary Modern school in 1963 and started work at Chivers factory at Histon, those days many village girls and married

women worked for either Chivers or Pye's, both companies ran their own bus service and Chivers went out as far as Ramsey, March, Sawtry and Warboys and villages in between, also they went out to the other side of Newmarket, many of those women had to catch the bus at around 6.45 and didn't get home until 6.30 p.m., they then had to cook the evening meal for their families and do the housework, husbands did very little in the house then. It was a long hard day for them. I caught the bus at 7.15 am and arrived home at 6.p.m.

We started work at 8 a.m. and finished at 5 p.m. it was hard work as you were on your feet most of the time. We had three breaks during the day. A tea break at 10 a.m., dinner was at 12 noon and a tea break at 3 p.m. My wages when I started were around £4-5 a week and when I left in 1969 they had risen to around £9. per week, and you paid 1s a week to belong to the union. Chivers were very good employers they looked after their work force very well.

For school leavers Chivers provided further education classes. They provided a canteen where you could buy a really good meal for 2s. a day they also served proper Lyons Coffee at 6d a cup (not out of a vending machine).

They also had their own surgery staffed by a Doctor and Nurse and you had a yearly check-up and flu jabs. The surgery was important as there were several injuries, people were working with very dangerous machinery and fast moving belts also there were scalds from the vats of boiling jam and on the floor where I worked there were many

'stitched' fingers from the machines that stitched the cardboard boxes that held the jars of jam.

I worked on the Export 'floor' and we sent jam all over the world as far as New Zealand, Kuwait, and all over Europe, we even had 'Kosher' jam and a Rabbi would come and bless each stage of the process. To help while away the hours we had our own radio station and you could have a request played and we had some BBC music programmes such as 'Music While you Work.'

### **Alison Hammond - Factory work and her mother Pat.**

I have been employed by Anson since 1989, the company is based in Haddenham (with further sites in Sutton and Livingston in Scotland). This means that I can cycle or walk the mile or so to work. I work a two-shift rota, alternating 6 am - 2 pm one week and 2pm - 10 pm the next. The factory is in operation 24 hours a day. During particularly busy periods sometimes seven days a week.

Anson manufactures plastic food packaging and containers. It supplies many well-known high street names and established brands. Some of the products are used for direct food contact, such as biscuits and cake trays and chocolate box inserts and other products are used to stack and display goods on supermarket shelves, like yogurt pot collation trays.

The plastic trays are produced from either a vacuum formed process, or from a pressure formed machine, the trays are produced in one sheet, it is then cut to separate the products which are then stacked and packed into boxes or cartons ready to be despatched to the customers.

In recent years there has been a move to using more environmentally friendly materials for packaging. Newer plastics such as A-pet and PLA are now being used. The latter is totally biodegradable.

### **Alison's mother Pat.**

She recalls that in the fifties work-opportunities were greater for school leavers than they are today in that Chivers (fruit preserving) and Pye's (telecommunications) both had buses which passed through Haddenham and many other villages giving employees free transport. Public Transport to Ely and Cambridge enabled young people to take on jobs in shops there - but today the bus times do not coincide with shop-openings so unless one has a car, employment outside the village is extremely difficult.

This, in turn, makes a lot more car traffic on local roads and problems with car parking in Ely (even the curator of the museum there had to use 'roadside' parking for her car as long-stay places were quickly filled every morning). The problem of the CAR will not go away and will lead to more and more problems in the twenty first century.

## **Jane Edmenson - Manor House Mepal.**

Shows that the voluntary work still goes on in 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

At present I am the Parochial Church Council Treasurer and have been involved with the Good Companions which was started by Rev. John Bidder, Rector of Mepal, in 1968; it is a group of Mepal people who meet fortnightly to socialise. Other church activities include flower arranging and cleaning, both done on a rota basis; monthly magazine deliveries (the Grapevine) and Sunday Cream Teas in Summer hosted by Rosemary Wells at Grove House. As always there is the round of fund raising and services both here and in the adjoining parishes of Witcham and Sutton.

My most recent 'village work' is that of building up a record of photos and archives on the Commanet web site - a project funded for rural communities such as Mepal over the next three years. This has been most rewarding in that documents and photos have 'come to light' from a wide section of local folk and will form a useful and interesting collection for the coming generation.

## **Edna Burgess, wife, mother and relief post woman.**

I left Cromwell Secondary School, Chatteris in 1948 and worked on the land for my father in Hill Row.

After marrying in 1956 I helped my husband 'on the land' and brought up a daughter and son. Fruit picking, 'top fruit' (apples pears and

plums) at Wilburton (the Stretham-Haddenham ridge had many orchards until 1980's) and gooseberry picking locally fitted in well with school times and terms. It was not until I was in my fifties that I had a proper wage-paying job - for up to 32 weeks a year I was relief postwoman at the Haddenham Post Office covering holidays, illness etc of the regular full-time employees.

My days started at 5.30 am, getting breakfast for my husband and myself and then biking up the hill to the Post Office for a 6 a.m. start.

Sorting letters in a room at the back of the shop, helped by the Post Master, Edwin Glendenning, meant arranging them street-by-street, odds and evens: then piling on the bike and off! Peddling up the hills like the one from Sutton took a lot of 'pull' and parcels such as trees, a long curtain pole and even a beehive, made riding the bike difficult. I well remember coping in the deep snow one winter - and one of the residents pushed my bike for me!

The post in the afternoon (and on Saturday mornings) was much less bulky as only first class mail was delivered 'on the beaten track' included deliveries to Hinton Hall Farm and Shepherd's cottage: often there were fewer than a dozen deliveries to be made to Aldreth (a cycle ride of 1½ miles each way) but part of my duties was to collect letters from the posting box both in the hamlet and the one in Mill End so I had no excuse but to pedal the distance regardless of weather conditions.

One of the bonuses of the job was that I met and chatted with so many people and got to know folk I would never normally have met: it was a 'paid' job which I did for 6 years.

Today there is no afternoon delivery: post to outlying homes in the parish is delivered by van: the centre is covered by a trolley and postman-on-foot and there are NO post women!

### **Barbara Norman - memories of the 'smaller' Mepal.**

On leaving school I worked on the land, met Clifford and we were married in Witcham Church in 1954, setting up home at the end of New Road and later moving to Rectory Cottage off Sutton Road. We bought the milk round from Ingrams and with an old Austin 7 car pulling a little trailer we covered the entire village with the daily delivery of milk (remember there was no Laurel Close, Meadow Way or Chestnut Way in those days). Milk was supplied (often at dead of night) in bottles from Keith Wright, Fenstanton, and we had the luxury of a small box-fridge after a few years (what a treat for the Fifties!)

For over thirty years my husband combined the milk round with fen farming. Our acreage was small so at busy times such as harvest we combined with other smallholders. Cooperation among small fen farmers and small holders was important: today there are very few 'self-employed' fen men - the days of the 30 acre farmer are over.

A lot of the local women were keen members of the Women's Institute which met each month. Sadly, numbers in recent years became too low (although the number of houses in Mepal has increased enormously) to be viable, but some Mepal ladies now attend the Sutton W.I. Country women owe a lot to that organisation....the Keep Britain Tidy Campaign, village signs, educational evening classes etc.

Village life years ago had a much more 'community' feel; neighbours were always ready to help out in times of need; the local baker would cook Sunday joints of meat or Christmas cakes after the bread had been removed from the ovens; children took it in turns to help with daily chores (busy children are NEVER bored ones) and garden plants would be shared out (no Garden Centres fifty years ago!) Mepal was really like one big Happy Family, each sharing in the good times and bad; money was in short supply but there was always time for a chat.....where does all the time go in these days of labour saving gadgets?

### **Shirley Woolstenholmes recalls memories of a milk lady.**

I started my 'temporary' thirty-six years as a milk person for F.C.Palmer & Sons, Hill Row, in October 1961, the first few years I did a short round, and then back to the dairy to bottle T.T. milk which was produced by the cows on the farm. After a few more years the dairy cows were sold, and all the milk was bought in from Keith Wright's the milk depot at Fenstanton, later Dairy Crest. Over the years my round

grew bigger, remembering peoples name and their requirements, took a while to learn.

When I started this job, it was seven days a week including Christmas and all Bank Holidays, but as the years went by and fridges became the norm, I did get Sundays and Xmas off by delivering double milk the day before. Starting work in the early morning was the best time of the day (well summertime, and when it wasn't raining) but whatever the weather, the job had to be done. Fridays and Saturdays, were pay days, on Saturday I'd have a schoolboy or girl to help me, but Fridays I was on my own. I'd be invited in by a couple of my customers for a cup of tea or coffee, very welcome and warming, during the winter months. I didn't have a set time to start or finish the job, the earlier I started, the earlier I finished, walking on average five miles a day (I walked further than I drove) kept me fit and slim. On wet days I cursed, but on the whole I enjoyed my time as a milk lady - one of the few to do this job.

I would also get passers by stopping on their way to work to buy a pint of milk. I remember one dark morning, a van pulling up, and a man in a long saffron coloured robe asking for a pinta. He paid me and then said, "Hare Krishna." Puzzled, I replied, "The same to you". He then said "Say Hare Krishna" which I did, still not understanding the words. The dictionary was brought out when I got home to enlighten me!

Quite a few of my customers were elderly people, who'd ask me to change a light bulb or when Christmas was over, would I mind taking the cards down. One morning about 5 am I was asked if I could put an

elderly lady back into bed, she'd fallen out and couldn't get up, after making sure she hadn't hurt herself I obliged. All part of the job, as was clearing blocked drains, very satisfying.

On snowy mornings I liked to be the first vehicle on the road especially if the roads hadn't been gritted, armed with a spade and an old hessian sack, I often dug myself out of trouble, occasionally I did have to ask for help, as I did on 31<sup>st</sup> December 1996 when I got stuck down Lode Way.

In April 1997 F.C.Palmer ceased milk deliveries.

A sad day for me.

Today many families buy their milk at the supermarket but there is still a door-to-door service operated by one of the multiple suppliers.



Lady delivering milk by hand cart during World War I

Where does our milk come from! There are no dairy herds within a 10-mile radius of Haddenham.

Nell Faux recalls that over 20 people kept cows in the nineteen thirties in the small village of Mepal - many were pleased to sell milk direct to the then Milk Marketing Board (it meant that a regular monthly cheque was paid) and a few just kept cows 'for the house' making butter and selling it 'at the door' (pin money for the housewife in those days when she was not paid for her labour on the smallholding!)

### **Joyce Thulbon (née Salmon)**

Life in the late 50's early 60's - Whats new?

Women worked, very different work from what is expected today. There were many land owners within this region and these needed flower pickers, fruit pickers - ladies picked up potatoes, hoed out sugar beat and pulled up carrots. Whereas today's workers have mental strain managing computers - this was unheard of in the 50's and 60's. Women then came home suffering with back strain or aching muscles that they didn't even know they had. Indeed the first time I picked up potatoes, I did not know how to get out of bed the next morning. I was lucky up to a point that my husband had his own smallholding, so I did not have too far to travel to my work. Juggling this with housework, washing, cooking and caring for three small children was not an easy task in those days as there were not the

modern conveniences of today. Plus there were no packets of ready meals, it was good old-fashioned food prepared by the lady of the house.

When my children were very young I only worked when weather allowed me to take the children with me as in those days there were no nurseries or play schools, running in rural areas, as there are today. Other mothers, who really wanted to work, took their young families with them, spending time sheltering from spring and summer showers in garden sheds and barns. It was fun though, as every one joined together to make the work enjoyable. Women who regularly worked the land, in some cases formed themselves into gangs and these gangs moved together around the various smallholdings helping wherever needed.

When we ourselves were in the first flush of spring flower growing for the year about six of these ladies would move in to give us a hand with the cutting of them. These were very happy days and looking back I often wonder how we managed. There were not the amount of cars on the road and all the children walked to school, yes life was certainly quieter and no one gave a thought to being out alone during the evening. Yes - we have progressed, but not without our casualties.

Later on, when all three children were at school I took on paid work. Travelling by car each day, I worked for the MOD at Waterbeach and Oakington from 1970 - 1992, meeting up with people from all walks of life.

## **Edna Collinson (née Carman) an Ely High School Girl.**

Transport to and from Cambridge was not easy.

When I started work at a laboratory in Cambridge in Nov 1957 life was very different for me than it is for today's workers.

People didn't have their own cars so I relied on the bus service. As I lived in Hill-Row outside the village of Haddenham only a limited number of buses passed my house (none do today) therefore I often had to walk up into the village. I had to catch the 7.45 am bus (which did pass my house) which took me to Stretham, where I had to catch a connecting bus to Cambridge. This was usually straightforward but occasionally the Stretham connection had already gone. This was disastrous as it meant I would have to start walking to Cambridge hoping for a lift (how dangerous along the A10). More often the next bus caught up with me.

I was expected to start work at 8.30 am which was O.K. for me as the bus would drop me off at the labs in Milton Road. However, missing the connection, my fault or not, was frowned upon. I would be expected to make up time after work by clearing up the lab and doing the washing up. This wasn't as bad as it seems as we finished work at 5.15 and 5.00 on a Friday. My bus was due to leave Drummer Street at 5.45 but it was always 6.00 pm before it arrived at the labs in Milton Road. Therefore I had nearly 3/4 hour to make up time. The bus arrived at Stretham at about 6.20 pm and the connection bus was due at 6.30. This bus always waited for a train at Ely Station which was often late, so it was usual to have a long cold wait often in the dark

until it arrived. I always hoped to get home by 6.45 in time for the Archers on the radio but more often than not I was just in time to hear the signature tune as it finished!

Working in the lab we had experimental animals mainly Rats and guinea pigs and these had to be fed every day. As I had one day off every week for day-release study I was expected to come in every Saturday morning to feed and water them in order to make up 'time-off'. I always arrived at 8.30, those living nearby would turn up at 9.00 on their bikes. As my bus was due at 10.30 I liked to get a move on: I wanted to get home. On Sundays I was expected in about once a month. As there was no bus in I had to stay in a B&B in order to be there, for this I was allowed 7.6d (37½ pence). The B&B cost 10/6 so I had bed and no breakfast. My weekly wage at this time was £4 before deductions. After a while the landlady became sorry for me and gave me a cup of tea and a bowl of corn flakes. On Saturdays and Sundays there was no connection bus at Stretham, so I would walk the 5 miles home. After 2 years I got lodgings in Cambridge where I had my bike and a good bus service. Life was much easier than living in the Fens.

After marriage and having children I returned in 1970 and found working conditions to be very different. My weekly pay packet was around £7 for half time. I started work with 8 O levels and worked my way up from the bottom. On my return everyone started with A levels or even degrees (Degrees became essential in later years). Older personnel had started with no O levels they just worked their way up. (This included the chief technician.) In the 1950's anyone with a degree would have been employed as scientific staff not as a

technician. No longer were the juniors expected to feed the animals on Saturdays and Sundays, as there was now a separate Animal House with specialist staff. No longer was I expected to stay over in a B&B on Saturday night in order to feed the animals on Sundays. No longer did I have to walk the 5 miles from Stretham to Hill-Row because there was no connection bus.

It was now possible to leave work early (4.30pm) for someone living in the country and having problems getting a bus home. They could even come in late due to the bus times, and not have to make up time after work as I had to do; Flexitime had now been introduced. Juniors starting with degrees never had to do menial tasks, e.g. washing up. We now had special ladies to do that. Eventually we had large industrial washing up machines.

During the next thirty years life in the lab was to become very different. Technology had arrived. Simple scientific instruments such as spectrophotometers where everything was operated manually were to be superseded by equipment such as GLC's (gas liquid chromatography) or HPLC's (High Pressure Liquid Chromatography). With these machines everything was automated; samples were put on; data entered on the computer; I could start things going just before leaving in late afternoon and a print out of my results would be ready next morning.

The lab was now a very different place than it had been in the 1950's.

## **Yvonne Haddock - voluntary work with Uniformed Youth Organisations.**

In the early Eighties I started as an Assistant Cub-Scout leader with a pack in Sutton-in-the-Isle: quite soon I became Akela and then Assistant District Commissioner, responsible for leader-training in the Ely District.

By 1986 there were several guides and scouts who wanted to continue with these activities but who were too 'old' for the normal set-ups so I decided to form a group of Venture Scouts. These were well-established in other areas of the UK but there was no unit in the Ely District. We met at my home in Sutton Gault and discussed a suitable name, which would characterise our locality. Realising that the Fen Country had been famous for ice skating (on the washes and flooded fields) we decided to call our unit "Fen Runners", after the name of the skates.

Members were aged from fifteen to twenty, both male and female: it was a big responsibility to be 'in charge' of these teenagers! Hiking, orienteering and camping took place both locally and in places further afield. An executive committee was formed to manage affairs both financially and socially. As a unit we undertook community projects for the District Council, installing smoke detectors in all council houses. Another regular commitment was to 'do' car parking at events such as the Littleport Show each July.

We built our own raft for the Aquafest on the Ouse, having tested our prototypes on the Bedford Rivers here at Sutton. Our 'proper' rafts were held together in the traditional way, with ropes!

Some members had never been abroad - remember youngsters were not as well-travelled twenty years ago as they are today - and I can recall very exciting holidays on the continent, to Holland and Germany. Planning, sorting out travel arrangements and, of course, the financial aspects, gave these Venture Scouts an 'inkling' into the Big Wide World.

Several members gained the Queen's Scout Award, including Clare Johnson (a former student of Witchford Village College) while they were with me. One of them became my Assistant and eventually took over the running of the unit while I went on to become Assistant County Commissioner for the Scout Fellowship. There was nothing for Venture Scouts to be involved with after reaching twenty, so a "Young Fellowship" was formed, based in Ely, to which all ages could join - and which still survives. I coordinated meetings of District Fellowship for the entire county of Cambridgeshire from Wisbech in the north to Royston in the South. However, in the year 2000 I left the area, thus ending my involvement with Uniformed Youth Organisations. Happy Days!

## **Jenny Davey (née Honey) self-employed hairdresser.**

“For over twenty years I have been ‘doing the rounds’ visiting ladies in their own homes to ‘do their hair’.

I left school in Cambridge at fifteen and did a 5-year apprenticeship (3 years training and 2 years improving). My wage was £1.2s.6d (£1.12½ pence) and out of this I had to buy all my hairdressing equipment (scissors, rollers, hair dryers etc) so my parents had to help out and buy some of my clothes. We even had to take it in turns to provide milk and sugar for our drinks at break times!

By the time I was twenty one I was fortunate to get the post of manageress of a salon in King Street where I had a staff of six. How nervous I felt on my first day there ‘being in charge’.

Hairdressing is a skill which is always in demand: when my sons were young I did hairdressing in my own home so that I was always there for them when school finished or they were ill. It must be so difficult for working Mums today to get ‘cover’ for young families.

When the boys grew up I took up a full-time post in a Haddenham shop but I prefer ‘being my own boss’ and so for the last two decades I travel round the village cutting and setting people’s hair. Often my clients are stroke-victims or are house-bound. Extra duties include shopping, filling out forms, posting letters, etc and on one occasion I even had to rescue an 80-year old out of her bath! We had to talk through the letter box (the house was locked) I had to break a window

and get in and then physically lift the old dear. She never ever bathed again!

As my older clients move away or die, I find that others come to replace them so I am kept very busy driving from place to place; never ever have I had to 'advertise' for work. In my leisure hours I am a keen member of the Haddenham Bowls Club acting as skip for matches throughout the season.

At 60+ myself, I continue to do the job I was trained for nearly half a century ago. I hear of my clients joys and sorrows, their confidences and their problems. Life is a series of meetings and greetings.”

### **Sue Lyon - a psychiatric nurse working in the community around Ely.**

“I trained to be a Learning Disability Nurse in the late 80’s. It was at a time of change, when the large institutional hospitals were shutting down and the philosophy was to move people into the community, no longer being shut away from society but being part of it. (see Lydia Freeman’s account re her sister)

What I had not expected was the endless reorganisation of the NHS, but that is what I have experienced. This stood out recently when I updated my CV. I have worked in the same place for 15 years, yet during that time I had four organisational changes, looking on my CV

as moving jobs four times. When in fact my desk, colleagues etc have stayed the same.

These changes started in the Thatcher Years and when we had a change of government the hope was that stability had arrived. Yet this was not to be. I heard on the radio someone comparing the NHS with a ship out at sea in a storm being continually repaired, having parts added and taken away but never coming into dock for repairs. How can we expect an organisation that had been modified so much, to function effectively?

When I first started in the NHS, jobs were available and you could go where you wanted and find an equivalent job in another part of the country. That certainly has changed with all the cuts, jobs have been frozen and posts not being replaced.

What does the future hold, more organisational changes? Its not a question of whether it will happen but when!”

This proves yet again that today, in the Twenty first Century we are living in a period of constant CHANGE, whether it be in schools, hospitals or the wider world. “Semper eadem” is a quote from school-girl Latin that is no longer applicable!



### **Sandra Barker - a woman in a man's world.**

Sandra Barker is a village Basketmaker and chairseater working from her home. She first started making baskets about 30 years ago when a local potter asked her to make small cane baskets for mini pottery animals. Sold for 10p! Once seen orders for other baskets arrived, and she then found a training course in Cambridge followed by a final year in London, taking City & Guilds Basketry parts I and II. Teaching training and other courses here and abroad.

She runs workshops, gives talks to a variety of Societies and Groups, and demonstrates her trade and is a very popular craftswoman at the Farmland Museum, on the A10, ten miles south of Ely.

In 1995 she very proudly became one of the few Yeoman Members of the Worshipful Company of Basketmakers in the City of London, followed three years later by being nominated and accepted as a Freeman of the City.

She has had many commissions, making baskets for presentation to Royalty, baskets for magicians, umbrella baskets for vintage cars, specific period baskets for television series, repairing chairs for Royal Hospital Chelsea to name just a few. Her raw material, willow, is not fen-grown but is brought in from the willow-growing area of the Somerset Levels. Ely was once an important centre for basket making. Willow holts, now overgrown due to lack of pollarding, can be seen along local river banks as at Sutton Gault. Local women there were employed seasonally to 'strip the willow' (this was peeling the outer layer off). There is a county dance of that name. Do you know it?

Sandra describes herself as a traditional Village Basketmaker whose aim is to preserve every aspect of her trade, its materials, history and to explore the future and share her knowledge in the widest sense.

## **Jenny Wallace - recollections of 3 generations of 'Ely Women'.**

I was a war-time baby and my family were staunch Wesleyans: Sunday was hardly 'a day of rest', morning Sunday School, lunch for a visiting minister or local preacher (and my mother was a superb cook), afternoon Sunday School, on to visit a cantankerous Great Aunt, home for tea, evening chapel and back for supper and hymn-singing around the piano with any young service men stationed at the Royal Air Force hospital. No books were allowed other than the bible or the religious tomes such as the life of famous missionaries: after 1950, no TV whatsoever, no games indoors or out: it was a somewhat joyless, if hectic day!

I remember being given a book on cricket one Saturday when I was a teenager, how I longed to read it the next day, a Sunday. But my parents would not have allowed me to do so (I did read it, in secret of course, and then felt wicked, just as I did when I had my first alcoholic drink at 18!).

My maternal grandma had a great influence on my life - she had brought up eight children of her own and then took in her widowed sister's little boy, always referred to as 'Little Percy' even when he became a twenty-stone adult!

Grandma worked so hard, cooking, washing, cleaning, that many evenings she climbed the stairs up to bed on 'all fours'. She tried to persuade her two daughters (my mother and my aunt) to NOT marry as

she feared that they, too would have a baby every two years or so as she had done.

After granddad died (he was a very strict 6-foot Victorian of whom I was very scared). Grandma was anxious to be of use and frequently said 'find me a job'. She spent hours darning socks for her grandsons (remember I was born in 1943, the 'Make do and Mend era) and stitched all the Cash's name tapes on my school uniform, including 24 small handkerchiefs!

Schooling for me began at Acrement House (now part of King's School) a little private establishment belonging to Mrs Saunders, the wife of a maths teacher at Soham Grammar School. Aged 11 I was offered a place at the East Anglian School for Girls in Suffolk. This pleased my parents as it was a Methodist Foundation: I became a boarder and met up with girls from all over the UK, some of whom are my friends half a century later. All the staff were, of course, female: the only time we associated with the boys at Culford School (our 'brother' school in Bury) was the annual Christmas dance after we were 16!.

After 'A' levels I worked at the Cambridge University library; following marriage and the birth of two sons I was fortunate to obtain a place at Lucy Cavendish where I read English and Education. Life as a student, wife and mother was NOT easy to juggle and I shall always be grateful to my mother who often stepped in as loco parentis and my boys always enjoyed her masses of home baking!

After graduation I taught in a secondary school, retiring as head of Sixth Form in 1999 and then spent a further three years teaching part-time in a Girls Public School. My life has been very different from that of my mother and grandmother in many respects with more and more opportunities: I have been able to travel widely, have had so many choices (where they had none) but nevertheless I have often felt my work to be 'never done'.

### **Women at end of Twentieth Century - Summing up**

What a change has been made in the role of women over the last century. Life as a wife, mother, servant and carer had gone on for centuries but with the advancement of education after the 1902 Education Act, the opening up of horizons due to easier travel and wider media coverage (many people could not even read a newspaper if there was access to one, in Victorian times) the world is, to use the phrase 'their oyster'.

Haddenham parish has a woman vicar, the senior partner of the medical practice is a woman, a member of the local Mother's Union was one of the first Woman Police Constables in the country. Women run their own businesses (e.g. a prize chrysanthemum grower has inherited the business from her father): one housewife, now retired, had an HGV licence and drove a heavy lorry for lime transportation and several buses and taxis have women drivers. (see Con Cameron's account). The heavy farm work done 'by hand' is now done by machines, which again, can be operated by women, and today there are very few full-time housewives/mothers. The need to pay the mortgage and buy more 'disposables' has meant that women have to

contribute financially to the family income, and play an equal role with their husbands/partners. Since the sixties, with the advent of the contraceptive pill, the 'size' of families can be 'tailored'.

The war (1939-45) proved that women were capable of doing men's work (factory, farm and workshop) and better education opened up wider horizons - women of the Twenty-first Century are not content to be 'at the husband's beck and call' as their grandmothers were - there is more to life than 'stuffing a mushroom'!

Today childcare is often done by paid nursery nurses: food is bought pre-packed and often pre-cooked and the drudgery of washday has been eradicated by the automatic washing machine. Modern homes no longer have gardens large enough in which to grow veg for the family (and space at the bottom for a pig-sty!) and so, in this consumer-age, food is 'bought in', clothes are 'off the peg' and furnishings can be selected on the web.

Who now, works long hours growing vegetables, black-leading cooking stoves or sewing clothes into the night as some of the contributors to this book did? The role of church/chapel has, in many cases, been superseded by membership of health/golf clubs and the 'picture' of family meals and conversations, for many is unknown. What changes shall we see in the role of women in the Twenty-first Century? A suitable title for this study is therefore

**“A woman's work is never done.”**

# Glossary

Bacca	Tobacco, a luxury for Ag Labs pre WWI
CV	Curriculum vitae
Dockey	Food eaten out in the field mid-morning (often bread and cheese/fat pork)
Dolly	Mechanical aid for moving clothes round in the wash-tub.
Gleaning	Gathering grain left after harvesting.
Ha'peth	Half penny
LSA	Learning Support Assistant -(help with children on an individual basis.)
Mudguard	Metal cover of wheels - especially on tractors
NHS	National Health Service
Pingle	Fussy about eating
Rivers	An early variety of plum.
Semper eaden	Always the same.
Sevensie, sixie,	Ball game progressive played against a wall, competitive.
Slub, Slubby	Wet mud, a fen word
T.T. milk	Tuberculin-tested (i.e. non-TB)
UDC	Urban District Council
Ya'd	You would/could

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