

A SPALDING CHILDHOOD

by
EDITH MORTON



IF ONE admits to being born in the Fens of Lincolnshire, people laugh and say, "Oh, a Lincolnshire Yellow Belly"!

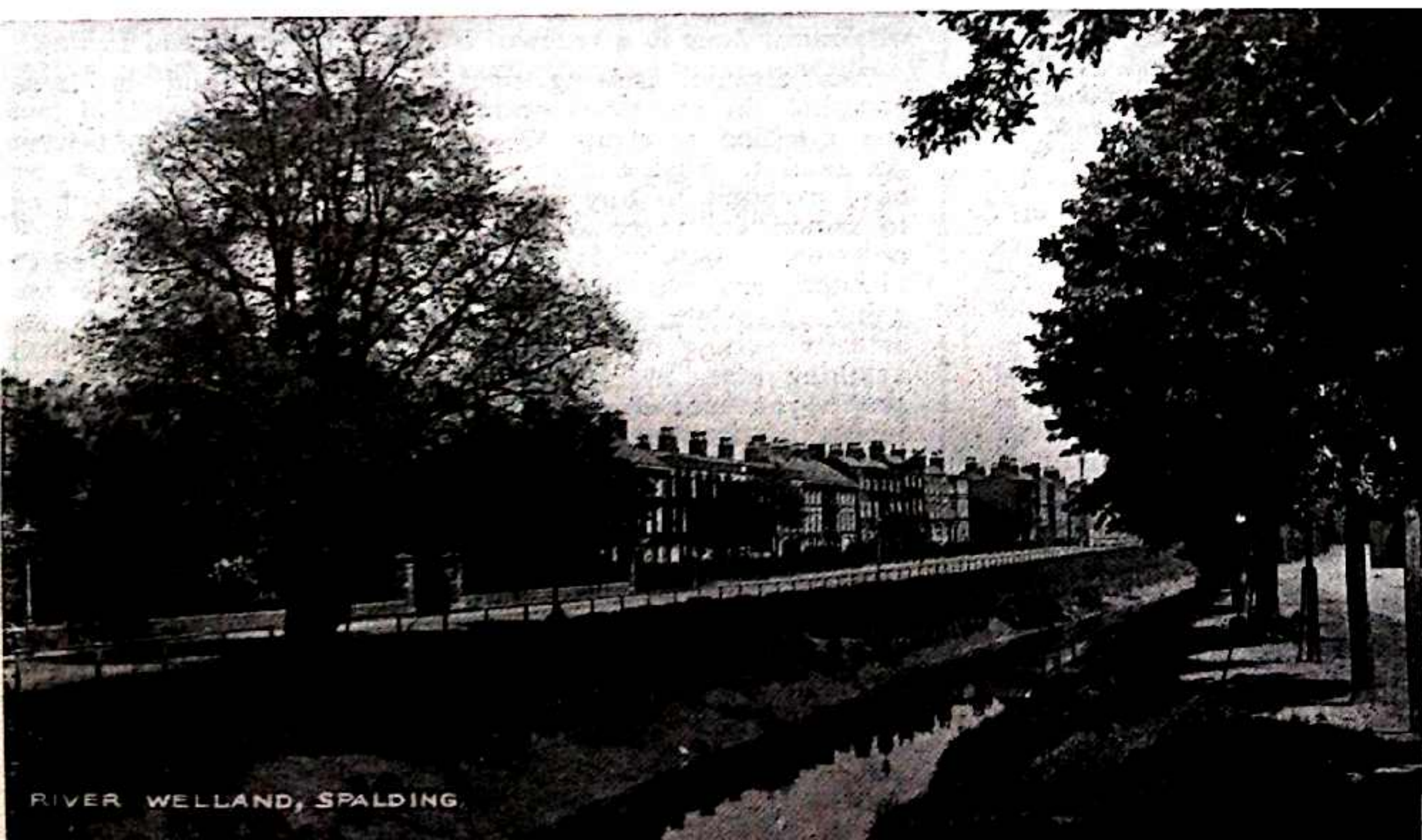
I was born in Pinchbeck, but was brought with the rest of my family to live in Spalding whilst still a baby. My belly certainly was not yellow, and I have never been able to discover from whence the saying came. The Fens are very flat, and dykes and drains abound of course, but the land is rich and fertile.

My family name was Alves, and we were closely related to the Enderbys and the Slys by marriage. My earliest memory is of living in Linden House in Hight Street, a lovely old house covered with virginia creeper, and with two gables. The front of the house faced a lane, at the bottom of which was a blacksmiths. Our house faced the River Welland, the bank of which was lined with lovely trees. To go into the town we had to cross the High Bridge. There were two other bridges as the river really divided the town in two; there was the chain bridge further down from us, and another between Cowbit and London Road.

The river was not very interesting, especially at low tide, but at least once a year the Eagre arrived. We all rushed out to see it—we were told it was a sort of tidal wave which came from the sea. It was possible to jump down

from the bank to the very edge of the river, where what we thought were little dykes were really sewers; we used to jump these being careful to climb back to the bank before we could be seen from the house. I remember being sent for a pound of rice, which was in a blue paper bag; I decided to jump the little dykes but dropped the bag of rice, and had a terrible job trying to pick up the bits of rice and put them back in the bag. Some of it was in the slush, so I arrived home with half a bag, and was punished. Punishment was either a halfpenny being deducted from our 2d a week pocket money or, for being very naughty, sent to bed with dry bread and water. As Dad bought a whole bunch or rather stalk of bananas which was hung in the back attic (and the key was under the mat outside the door) by carefully avoiding a known creak we did not only have bread and water—we used to sneak a banana.

Our games were great fun and seasonal. In the Spring we had hoops; mine was a wooden one which I propelled along with a short stick, the idea being to keep it going for as long as possible before it fell (boys had iron hoops). Then we had whip tops. We made our own, using a cotton reel with a wooden skewer through the hole, the top part being cut off; we used a short stick with a piece of string, coloured the top of the reel with crayons



Above:
Uncle Harry Enderby's
new horse and trap,
with (L to R) the author,
Kathleen Enderby
and the author's sister
Barbara.

Left:
River Welland,
Spalding.



and very pretty it was too. Sometimes we were given spinning tops from a shop, but the home-made ones were much more fun. Then there was skipping, marbles and hopscotch. Of course these games were general and not peculiar to Spalding. However we did have games that children who lived elsewhere did not have. For example one could not go for a walk in the country without finding a dyke. We would take a strong pole and play dyke-jumping. By planting the pole firmly in the centre of the dyke one could jump to the other side and back.

We seemed to have very cold winters every year in those days. I am sure that the fens were frozen over nearly every year, and we were all taught to skate. Cowbit Wash was the nearest and favourite spot. Our skates were simple, the base made of wood to the size of one's boot (we always wore boots). There were strips of leather to fasten them on, and fixed in the wood a strip of steel about half an inch wide, upon which we skated. There was a screw on the heel of the skate to fasten it onto the boot. With two adults holding each hand, one quickly learned to skate. We loved it, and looked forward to it all the year. I remember that once, just before a threatened thaw, all the boys and girls at the Grammar School were given the day off to go skating, I expect all the teachers wished to go too!

I can just remember an ox being roasted on the ice on the River Welland. On the Wash, that is at Cowbit, when dark flares were lit it looked like Fairyland to a child, and men roasted chestnuts which we could buy quite cheaply.

Not for nothing was this part of Lincolnshire called the "Holland Division". I shall never forget the young Dutchman who came to stay with us, when he came to survey the land. It was not long after Christmas. My mother had made a large and beautiful Christmas cake, but

after Christmas it was only brought out for tea on very special occasions. It was on the table the first time this gentleman had tea with us. Mother had cut several slices, and of course the cake dish was passed to him first. To my horror he took not a slice but the rest of the cake! We had been taught that when visiting we should take the smallest slice. I shall never forget that, it was awful watching the last bit disappear!

Not far from our house was a granary. A Mr Plowman held a position of some importance there, and I went to school with his daughter Connie; they lived next door to Grandmother Enderby in Windover Road. Barges tied up on the river bank and men carried bags of locusts into the granary, and some would be spilled. We seized a few, they were lovely to eat, but looked rather like a ripe banana. This was forbidden, but it was worth the risk. When I first heard that John the Baptist lived on locusts and wild honey, I thought he was lucky! Also some ships brought bags of maize and corn, and we used to pick them up when spilled. Down our lane, next door to the blacksmith, a Mr Pidgeon kept ducks and other feathered birds, and we fed them with the maize and corn. He caught us doing this and complained to Dad, and we were punished. We could not understand why, surely the birds enjoyed the corn and no one else would have bothered to pick up what had been spilled. We thought that grown-ups were very unpredictable people.

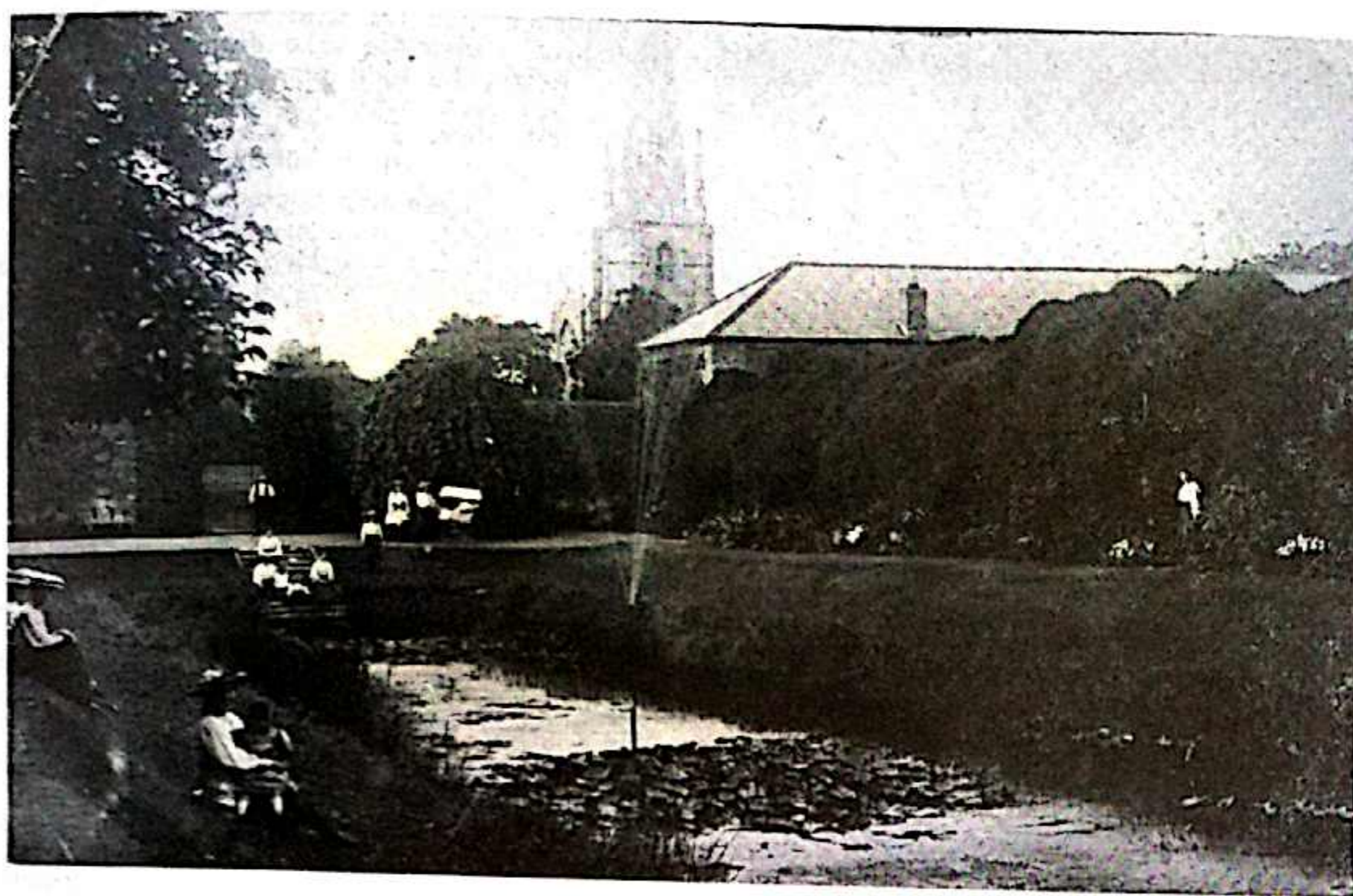
Opposite our house on the other side of the lane was another large house, belonging to a nice old gentleman called Mr Bennett, we called him Pa Bennett. He had a large garden and beyond that an orchard. He used to bring us a pail of what we called "scrumpies" every year; we did not deserve it because we were very naughty to him. We had two attics with gable windows facing his house, and we could with practise throw a toothglass full of water at his front door and then peep at him coming out and looking up and down and chuntering to himself. Then we thought small pebbles would be more effective. I think we felt a bit ashamed as we did not keep it up, and were not found out.

The highlight of each week was market day. How well I remember the Market Place, with shops on one side, the Town Hall and Corn Exchange across what I called the top, and the other side the White Horse and the Red Lion Hotel. Market days were on Tuesday and Saturday, with stalls of every description. The trinket and sweet stalls interested me most. I saved up and bought an imitation watch; when Dad saw it he removed it with a, "Teh, such rubbish", and threw it on the fire. A Mr Spikins had a stall of homemade sweets. I loved to watch him making rock, and eagerly waited for the moment when he threw it on to a large hook, shook it, and lo, it became hard; then he took it off and cut it with a large pair of scissors. Grannie Enderby kept a tin of his peppermint

Above:
High Bridge and
White Horse,
Spalding, 1909.

Right:
Market day in
Spalding, 1905.





Ayscoughfee Gardens.

rock and we were always given a piece when we went to see her.

There was also a sheep market opposite the Post Office, and a cattle market in what I believe was called the Bull Ring. Once a year the Fair came and was in the Black Swan Yard. We were taken once for a treat and allowed a ride on the roundabouts. We were not allowed to stay very long. I was quite friendly with the daughter of the owner of the Black Swan, but in those days our parents thought that pubs were places of sin. The only wine we ever had was Grandmother Enderby's Home Made Wine. We were allowed that when we were 14, but only at Christmas time.

I must not forget the shrimp stall in the market, nor old Mrs Linham who would drive into town in a horse and trap, calling "Shrr-i-mmps, mussels, cockles and shhrimmps". Whenever we heard her, one of us would be sent out with a basin to buy a few pennyworth of brown shrimps. We always had shrimps for tea on Tuesday from her stall in the market.

The Corn Exchange was used for many other events, other than selling corn. We had a very good amateur dramatic society, and I think I saw most of the Gilbert and Sullivan operas performed by them. My older cousins, Enderby and Sly, were always part of the cast; I remember Ethel Sly playing Iolanthe. Sometimes my young cousin Kathleen Enderby and I sold programmes at these events, clad in our Sunday best of course.

Underneath the Corn Exchange (or was it alongside it?) was the Butter Market, where farmers' wives and other countrywomen sold home-grown fruit in season, new-laid eggs, butter, curds and cream cheese. Every Tuesday, Grandmother Enderby would come to our house for dinner, and one of us would go with her to the Butter Market to carry a large basket into which she put all the good things she bought, some of which she gave to us. I loved to go with her. Then after dinner, Mother and my Auntie Sly would go home with Grandmother and have tea with her.

My Uncle Harry Enderby had a shop in the Market Place, he was a maker of harness and other leather goods. I loved the smell of leather. Over the shop was a very large room, known as the "sitting" room which had two very large bay windows with a splendid view of anything which took place in the Market Place. Nearly all the relations would gather there to watch a special event. I remember

the Boys' Brigade assembling there, before being dismissed after a church parade, but the worst thing I watched was the parade of the volunteers when the First World War was declared. We watched those splendid young men lined up and being inspected before they marched off to the station, many of them never to return.

All our family went to the Congregational Chapel, the Minister at the time was a Mr Yates, called by us children as "Old Yatey". He was considered to be very intellectual, but I did not like him as he had a habit of poking his finger down the neck of ones blouse and saying, "Tick Ticky Too". I did not like being "ticky tooed"! The Superintendent of the Sunday School was a Mr Catt who had a drapers shop next door to Uncle Harry. All I can remember about him was that during his long prayers his top front teeth used to fall down, and I spent my time waiting for it to happen.

We had yearly Sunday School outings to Mablethorpe, and parents and other relations came too. On arrival the children were taken to a hall and given a glass of lemonade and a currant bun. Mablethorpe is or was then a lovely place for children, sandy beaches, and sand-dunes which we could roll down. Then there were donkey rides, Punch and Judy shows, and always perriots who gave very good shows on the beach. It was a real treat. Before we caught the train home we were again taken to the same hall and given cups of tea and another currant bun.

Next in popularity to the market was Ayscoughfee Gardens, which were our playground in the summer. There was a Keeper named Mr Stannard, who carried a cane to keep us off the formal flower beds. There was also a lake with lots of water lilies, but our joy was the other parts where one could have lovely games of hide and seek. We were often allowed to take our tea there. Then on a certain day in the summer, Mother would give us a birthday party. Although our birthdays were months apart, this party celebrated them all. The Keeper's wife Mrs Stannard would make the tea, trestle tables were set up, and a wonderful spread laid out. I remember helping to carry a clothes basket full of salmon and cucumber sandwiches. Then we had games with prizes.

We left Spalding in 1917. I have been there twice since, once to my father's funeral and then many years later to my mother's funeral. As I am now 80, I do not suppose I shall ever go there again, except in these very happy memories of a delightful market town in the Fens.