

# *THE EARLY YEARS*



Eva Mary Allen Burch

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*Summer 1926 aged 2*



*Summer 1928 aged 4*

## Eva Mary Allen, the early years

This is an attempt to show something of the lifestyle of the working-class family in which I grew up. I do not know if it is typical of the rest of our kind, but it may serve to explain why I became the person I am.

I was born in Spalding, a smallish market town in Lincolnshire, on Friday Dec seventh 1923, and spent the first sixteen years of my life there, in a Council house by the side of the River Welland.

This house, one in a terraced row of four, was of red brick under a tiled roof with a dormer window to the attic, which in our family was always referred to as the 'top bedroom'. The front door, painted a rather nasty shade of brown, opened directly on to the pavement and into the living room, the house being termed a 'non-parlour' type.

My remembrance of this room, which was I would guess, about eleven feet square, is that of a very draughty place, always spotlessly clean and adequately though by no means comfortably, furnished.

Beneath the one window, a badly fitting thing which rattled fiercely when there was any wind, stood an ugly large black horse-hair couch with a carved wooden frame of a red coloured wood, very prickly to one's bottom in those days of short skirts and thin cotton knickers!! A large table stood in the centre of the room, and in my early years this was of white wood. After the morning chores were finished, it was thoroughly scrubbed then out came a golden coloured plush cloth with a bobbled fringe which was spread to cover its nakedness and prepare the room to receive 'company'.

A large and very ornate chiffonier, the bane of my young life when I had to dust all the carved 'twirly bits', filled almost all of one wall. It had a central mirror, which, when one viewed oneself in it, gave the impression that either one had at some time suffered a bout of smallpox and was permanently scarred, or had failed to wash for some time!! However, its shiny polished wood almost compensated for these deficiencies, for when the sun shone, the surface was a joy to behold.

Undoubtedly the prize piece in the whole house, was an upright piano, made of rosewood, and which I, to my eternal shame, defaced for ever with the aid of a table fork in, I suppose, a fit of acute boredom or frustration, at the age of about four years.

Only one chair made any pretence at comfort and this was a wood-framed reclining chair with an adjustable rod at the back, which allowed the occupant to sit upright or to relax... very slightly! Two brown corduroy cushions, one for the seat and the other tied to the back by tapes, was all the luxury it afforded. It was always known as "Mam's chair" for obvious reasons. All the rest of the chairs in the room were wooden with no upholstery at all, though there were two large ones that were high-backed and had arm-rests.

In later years, we acquired an old 'wind-up' gramophone, (not as old as to have a horn) and a home made cabinet to hold the records, which were of course the heavy ones which had to be handled with great care, or they chipped or cracked, and were then quite useless.

We were not rich enough to have carpets on the floors, so highly polished linoleum was laid: and in front of the fire, we had a large 'snip rug' made by the family during the long winter evenings, from 'snips' of cloth cut from old coats, skirts, or trousers, and 'pegged' through an old sugar sack, or if that was unobtainable, a potato sack was washed and used. This was before the days when paper and plastic sacks were used to pack all manner of goods.

The cooking range was fitted into this solitary living room too. It was a huge black iron affair, which shone from repeated and regular doses of black lead and elbow-grease! One side of it was the oven, and the other, a small boiler for hot water with the actual fire between. The boiler had to be filled by hand from water drawn from a cistern in the back yard, and since this was where the rainwater from the roof collected we always had lovely soft water to wash both ourselves and the dishes. When the water was hot, it was drawn off by means of a brass tap set into the front of the boiler. A steel band ran the full length of the grate and there were several steel plates in front of the oven and firebox. These were kept highly polished with bathbrick, a coarse powder which had to be dampened with water and rubbed vigorously onto the steel, allowed to dry and then polished off with a soft rag. Over the length of the whole fitment, was attached a rack, used for many purposes from heating plates and 'proving' dough, to airing clothes or even drying out boxes of newly hatched chicks; well out of reach of the family cat.

The room was lighted by a gas-light suspended from the centre of the ceiling, the fragile incandescent mantle being protected by a glass globe. The papered walls were liberally adorned with family photographs, an exceptionally long picture of a boat and a certificate awarded to 'Mam' by the Red Cross Society for (I believe) sewing for the troops during the war (1914 to 1918).

The final touch in the room was the mantle-piece which housed the chiming clock and a number of ornaments, and was hung with a 'fringe' of the same material as the table-cloth and sporting a number of bobbles of a smaller size.

When I think back to that room now, I smell floor polish, fire-smoke and, in the summer scene, lupin and marigolds; the winter recalls chrysanthemums and oddly enough, burning brussel sprouts! This latter, because thrift was of paramount importance and nothing was ever wasted. In the days when we had chickens, they of course ate up all the off-cuts from vegetables, but later, when the hens disappeared, these pieces were wrapped in newspaper and placed at the back of the fire to eke out the coal; being damp they burned slowly and with a pungent smell, though it was not really an unpleasant one.

The kitchen which was behind this room boasted a shallow yellow sink, with a wooden draining board and one cold water tap. A door opened to the staircase, a dark, entirely enclosed place which terrified me, for there was no lighting of any description on the first flight. The second flight, leading to the top bedroom, (there were two rooms on the first floor) was served by three transparent tiles set into the roof. In wet weather these tiles leaked so there were frequent sorties to wring out the odd pieces of towelling which were draped over the staircase linoleum. Snow of course almost blotted the light out leaving an eerie half light.

We had no bathroom as such, but the wash-house attached to the kitchen contained a large black iron copper, used on Mondays for boiling the washing and on Saturdays in the summer for heating bath water, which was then tipped into a greenish white enamelled bath, over which was fixed one brass cold water tap. The place was an ice-box in winter and it was then that the old zinc tub and large black kettle came into their own and we bathed in

luxury before a roaring fire in the living room. The wash-house also contained a large iron mangle with wooden rollers, a dolly tub which stood beneath it and two wooden clothes horses hung on nails in the wall beside it. My bicycle, the joy of my youth, stood beside the bath at night; the gas stove, used mainly in summer when the front room fire was not lighted, completed the furnishings.

Behind the house was a concrete yard about 14ft. x 10ft. and enclosed by wooden palings some 8ft. high. The coal-house and lavatory (of the bucket-type in the early days) were the sum total of out-buildings. The lavatory was emptied once weekly by the "night-soil men" whose unenviable work was carried out late at night and I recall that they first used a horse drawn vehicle but by the early thirties this was replaced by a motor driven tank. When in the mid thirties we were connected to the main sewers and had a water closet put in, we really felt we had moved into the wealthy side of society!

To the left of the yard stood an old table, which was used for many things, from holding the wash-tub in the summer months when the laundry was done out of doors, to a place for laying out the onions to dry, before they were strung for winter use. At first there was a small round affair, but later this was replaced by the table from the front room when a smart new "polish top" one was bought. During the long summer holiday from school, when my quota of the housework was finished, I spent many hours sitting outside in the sun, either painting with a box of water colours, or more often sitting on the top of the table, my back leaning against the palings and reading anything and everything that came to hand. All was grist to my mill. I was never able to get enough reading matter. I ploughed through piles of "Film Fun" "Schoolgirl Own" "Sunbeam" and even "Uncle Arthur's Bedtime Stories", seated at or on that table, with the sun shining and drowsy flies buzzing about my head. Enid Blyton's Magazine was another firm favourite. This was passed on to me by a younger girl whom I knew. She never did the puzzles and I enjoyed doing them. Once I entered a short story competition and to my complete astonishment and unbounded joy, I won five shillings (25p; a great deal of money to an eleven year old in those days when regular pocket money was unknown, and when the most I ever owned at one time was sixpence, and that was only very rarely. I cannot now remember what the story was about, but I think it was a tale of toys that came to life in the dark hours of the night. I was often ill in my early days, and whiled away the time writing little fantasies so that they tend to merge one into the other.

Occasionally, my special friend Dulcie, came for tea, then if the weather was good we were allowed to take a table-cloth outside and lay up the table for ourselves. It was great fun and we were usually fed at these times on treacle sandwiches, home-made jam tarts and fruitcake, accompanied by lemonade made from crystals of a vivid yellow. Sometimes however as a very special treat, we had a bottle of "pop" the fizzy variety, usually "Cherryade" because we liked the colour!

There was no garden in the real sense of the word attached to the house, only a minute plot outside the gate of the backyard. There we grew a few flowers, tulips and daffodils in the spring, marigolds, golden-rod, lupins, pansies and sweet-peas through the summer and of course Michaelmas Daisies and chrysanthemums to end the year. We also kept a few hens to provide eggs for the family.

Somewhat further away from the house was a vegetable garden and here was grown an assortment of things from salad stuff and herbs to rhubarb and blackcurrants. The posts for

the clothes lines were there too, which meant quite a trek to fetch and carry heavy laundry baskets.

But--! back to the house. As I said earlier, there were three bedrooms, two on the first floor, and the attic. When I was still small enough to sleep in a cot, which I was until six or seven years old, because my cot was so large, I slept in the front bedroom with the parents. Their bed was a gloriously Victorian affair, adorned with a wealth of brass knobs and 'curlicues'.

I was a foster child, and there were at the time that I went to live with them (when I was only two weeks old) four of their own unmarried daughters still living at home. The eldest of these, Mabel, married when I was four years old. Next came Dorothy then Nellie, and Phyllis the youngest was nine years my senior. The parents, whom I always referred to as 'Mum and Dad', were about fifty-one years old at the time they took me to live with them, and had ideas which had changed little from their own youth, in respect of the ways children should behave. Mother's word was law in our house. Father rarely intervened, except if he saw something blatantly unfair going on. We did not have the family prayers of earlier days, but we were expected to kneel by our beds and say a prayer night and morning. As a small child, I remember kneeling at the lap of whoever was to see me into bed, and reciting "Gentle Jesus, meek and mild" followed by The Lord's Prayer, and to be quite honest, I would have been afraid to go to sleep without this ritual so strong was my childish faith in a listening, caring God. I was also taught to say 'Grace' before and after each meal, a thing very few of my school-friends did, except at the Sunday School Christmas party!

However, I digress. I don't really recall just how the girls were fitted into the available room for sleeping, but I believe they all slept in the attic; I seem to recall two black iron double beds up there. I do know that after Dorothy and Nellie were married, Phyllis and I shared the back bedroom and the men used the attic. Some of these men became almost part of the family, others moved on quite quickly. I remember one particular man, a Mr. Rowbottom, (we were never allowed the familiarity of first names) who used on occasions to drink rather more than was prudent, and when he got home, was often unable to walk straight. He had a peculiar habit of sitting on the bottom of the staircase, unlacing his boots and singing in a loud and very unmusical voice, 'Lead kindly light'. There were others; Mr. Walton had a great affection for Mabel I believe, before she was married. I only remember him for the beautiful doll's tea set he gave me one Christmas. It was truly magnificent, of very thin china in a lovely pale duck-egg blue shade and had a gold band at all the edges.

In some respects mine was an odd childhood. I was illegitimate, hence the fostering, and I never seemed to really belong anywhere in the first few years of my life, I was well cared for in as much as that I always had sufficient food, clothing and, when needed, medical attention, but I instinctively knew that there was resentment, and I never at any time felt secure. If (or rather when!) I was naughty, the most frequent threat to me was that I would be sent to my mother! This terrified me, for I had no idea who the 'mother' in question was, or what she looked like. I know that she had visited me in the first year or so that I was with the Burton family, but after she married and had other children, it was impossible for her to come. Her home was about twenty miles from Spalding and in those days that was a long journey, especially as her husband was a 'small-holder' and their land was in a part of the country where the local bus only went on Wednesday and Saturday and then only about one journey in each direction. My only contact with her therefore, for the first thirteen years of my life, was by a very occasional letter, a card at Christmas and for my birthday, and a little gift, usually a Postal Order for a shilling or two, at the same time. Looking back, I

suppose it was a pretty sadistic way to treat a child. It was certainly effective! I really was terrified that one day it might happen, and in a way tried to prepare myself. The bus I would have to go on, made a stop on Boston, and I planned that when it reached there, I would get off and become a flower seller, like the girl in a song that Phyllis used to sing to her own accompaniment at the piano. It all seems very fanciful now, and in this day of the Welfare State, there would be no need for any such thoughts, but that is how it was with me in the nineteen thirties.

Oddly enough, the threat to send me away was actually put to the test when I was about nine years old. Times were pretty hard, and Father Burton was involved in a road accident which resulted in his being in hospital for several months; my mother had on several occasions sent the odd pound or so to help towards the cost of my upbringing, but for some time no money had been received from her, so a letter was sent to ask for a contribution. When the reply came, it said that no further financial help could be sent, but if the Burton's could not afford to keep me, I could be put out for adoption: I was not to go to my natural mother but to other complete strangers! I really know what terror was at that point. Anyhow, I don't now think there was ever any real chance of my going, but I did not know that then. I suppose that after nine years, even the most bothersome child becomes a sort of habit, and in their own way, the family were quite as attached to me as I was (and indeed still am) to them.

The Burton family was classed as 'religious', amongst the neighbours and I suppose we were to a degree. Certainly, we went to chapel each week, or rather I went to chapel and to Sunday school, the older members of the family went to the local Railway Mission.

Each Sunday morning at about nine-thirty, I set off, all dressed up in my Sunday clothes, to arrive at the Baptist Chapel in time for morning school at nine-forty five. We had a system of registering attendance by means of a card which was stamped with a purple star each week, or, when one was ill, a letter S replaced the star, so that at the end of the year, when attendances were counted for prize-giving, one was not penalised for sickness. I always enjoyed Sunday School. When I was in the Primary department, we had a splendid superintendent, a Miss Dorothy Walden, who at the time of writing this, is still alive and has her home in Spalding. But-- that was in the afternoon school. At the morning session, we all were in the same room for a short service, then we went into chapel with the adults. During the sermon, which was always long and way above our understanding, we youngsters, would produce pencils and an odd bit of paper, and while away the time playing noughts and crosses or hang the man!

At about twelve o'clock, we went home to lunch, or dinner as we always called the mid-day meal. This was very special on Sundays. Always, there was a crisp, feather-light Yorkshire Pudding to begin with, served with gravy; the roast followed and finally a sweet, mostly some kind of fruit pie with custard.

It was then time to wash and go back to Sunday school. The afternoon classes lasted about an hour. We assembled all together for the opening, and then went into individual classes for the lessons.

About the first week in May each year, we began to prepare for the Anniversary. This was the highlight of the year. Special hymns were practised every Friday night, not to the usual piano but with the organist Frank Murrell, in the chapel, (what patience that man had), and almost everyone was given some part to play in the presentation of a concert type demonstration of what we had been doing throughout the year. There were monologues,



solos, duets and a short sketch referring to the benefits we gained from trying to follow Christ.

Naturally, as we were permitted for that one day in the year to occupy the choir seats, everyone was on his or her best behaviour, and were extra carefully dressed. All the girls wore white flowers and the boys sported blue buttonholes. The chapel was decorated with flowers, and every pew had jars of buttercups and daises attached to the metal rings, which normally held the empty glasses after the communion wine had been drunk. Oh yes, it was a great day in our young lives. We were even allowed to use the choir seats again at the evening service. I suppose it must have rained sometimes on Anniversary Sunday, but my memories are all of the sun shining brightly through the chapel windows on to well scrubbed faces and the proud parents watching their children. I am sure too, that some of us must have forgotten our lines or failed to sing in tune, if we did, it has all faded. They were happy days, and we weren't ashamed of going to worship, even though we were considered a bit odd.

Tea was a special meal on Sundays too. As I said before, we were pretty poor, even by the standards of the times, and usually our tea meal, taken at about four-thirty consisted of bread and butter, jam or golden syrup and a home made fruit cake. However, on Sundays there was generally a tin of salmon, or fruit and a jelly as a special treat. In the summer this would be varied by salads, and very occasionally by a pork pie or haslet, the latter being a Lincolnshire dish.

Having washed the dishes, we then set out yet again to chapel. On the way, we would stop for a while to listen to the Salvation Army at their open air meeting in the market place. They always stood in the same place, in front of the Corn Exchange, a ponderous Victorian edifice, now alas torn down and replaced by a hideous red brick building that stands out like a sore thumb. I admired the 'Sally Anners' but I was very thankful that our family did not have to parade their beliefs in so public a fashion, for I was basically a shy child, and hated to stand out from the crowd in any way. That admiration for the good work the Army do, has in no way lessened over the fifty years or so since I first encountered them, in fact it has increased, but I still wouldn't have the courage to undertake their kind of witness.

Our meeting at the Railway Mission was in some respects rather like the Army in that it was a very uninhibited form of worship. There were some real characters who attended regularly and as a small child I was glad of them, because they were so much more fun to watch than the sermon was to listen to. And the prayers --- how some of those preachers went on and on and on ---. There was one whose name escapes me for the moment, who really used to get down to sorting the Lord out about the weather, the wickedness of the young folk of the day and any other item he could bring in. It was nothing for him to rant on for twenty minutes or so twice and sometimes more during the evening; his sermons were even more tedious, and full of hell-fire and damnation for all who dared to stray. The one bright spot in the whole procedure was the singing. Sankey and Moody would have rejoiced greatly at the fervour with which their hymns were belted out, accompanied by Mabel, her cousin Cissie or by Mrs. Turner, wife of the Superintendent of the mission, on a very wheezy harmonium. Sometimes to the consternation of a visiting preacher, Albert, one of the regulars, would throw an epileptic fit, which broke the monotony a bit, though none of the congregation would take a lot of notice, and when he recovered, Mr. Bell who was the Mission caretaker, and who sat at the back of the hall, would scoop Albert up from the floor, and send him home, whether the service was over or not.



When the service finally ended, there was a prayer meeting to follow. Not everyone stayed to this, but my family did! It was quite an experience. We would begin by singing a chorus, unaccompanied by the wheezy harmonium, now deserted by whomsoever had been playing earlier, and led by Mr. Turner. Thereafter the meeting was open to all, to say a prayer or sing a chorus or just speak if they felt so inclined. These after meetings didn't take long, and then there was just 'the flowers' to attend to before we went home. 'Taking the flowers' was looked on with mixed feelings. What it amounted to was removing the flowers that had graced the hall for the week-end, tying them into bunches, writing a card with some suitable text, such as "Underneath are the Everlasting Arms" or "Let not your heart be troubled" and delivering them to the members of the congregation who were ill. Now this was fine on a warm summery evening when an extra walk was welcomed, but in the cold wet nights of winter, there was no great rush of folk eager to go out of their way to take a few half dead posies to, in some cases, people who had no desire to receive them.

Just as Sunday always followed the same pattern, so did life generally. I think that was probably one of the most comforting things about life in that period between the wars. In a good many ways life was very hard, money was scarce, and unemployment was rife. I can remember the long dole queues, men in threadbare suits, a Woodbine, their only consolation, hanging from the corner of the mouth, and a dead look of complete hopelessness on the faces. Even a child could not miss that, though perhaps we did not understand it. Opposite the house where we lived was a bridge over the River Welland. It was built in the late twenties, and on each side of the river there were concrete walls. The men who lived in the area used to congregate on these walls to talk and smoke the days away, probably to keep out of reach of the nagging tongues of their wives. Often the men were accompanied by a toddler and sometimes a baby in a pram too, if the mother was lucky enough to get an hour or two charring or some other work not open to men. Small wonder these men had little self-respect, how could they?

We were among the more fortunate families. Until nineteen thirty-six, I never remember Dad being out of work, and then it was only because he was ill. He worked for the Spalding Urban District Council as a road sweeper. Not a very glamorous job, and in the winter it was pretty grim, being out of doors in all weathers; but it was work, and it brought in a regular if meagre wage. I am not sure of the exact figure but I know it was well under two pounds a week!

Mum was a good and thrifty housewife; at no time do I ever remember going out hungry, clothes might be old and well worn but they were always spotlessly clean and well mended. I hated it when I had to wear Phyllis's out grown things re-made, but I realise now, how fortunate I was to have the sort of home where I was not allowed to go ragged. Many children did. To help keep us all decently clad, Mum paid whatever she could spare each week, usually about sixpence, into a clothing club at Berrills department store. There were two hundred and forty pence in a pound in those days!! Twice a year, there was a spending time, when the owner of the shop added a dividend of sixpence to every pound saved. Of course one had to spend the money at the shop, it couldn't be taken out in cash. I enjoyed those shopping days. Sometimes I had a new hat (costing about three and eleven) that would be fourteen pence at today's rate of exchange! A new coat was really an occasion, and could cost as much as fifteen shillings. Naturally there were times when sheets and towels wore out and had to be replaced, then we had to do without new clothes, and I guess that is when I had to make do with hand-me downs.

School uniform was only compulsory at the Girl's High School and the Boy's Grammar School, and only the well off went to those, unless one were clever and gained a free scholarship. How I longed to go to the 'High', but it was not to be. I took the first part of the examination for the scholarship, but I was ill when the time for the written part came round, and although I was given a second date, I was not well enough to take part. By the next year I was too old, and that was the end of that dream. My best friend, Dulcie gained a place, and while I was very glad for her, I was infernally jealous and envious of her.

The school I went to, the Parish Church Day School, had a sort of uniform for those whose parents could afford it, but very few could. In the main the children wore whatever was available, and what an assortment we must have been!!

Mostly we wore cotton dresses in summer and jumpers and skirts in winter, with long black woollen stockings. Which did nothing for the girls with nice slim legs, and even less for the short fat ones. I was highly delighted when at about twelve years old I was given a 'gym-slip', a navy-blue serge dress box pleated on a square yoke, and with a girdle of black plaited cotton. I wore it until I left school at the age of fourteen. With it was worn a white blouse, and tie. Mine was pale blue, for I was in the school netball team, and that was our colour when we played the other schools in the area. When I became captain of the team, I added a pale blue girdle in place of the black one.

All this of course came in the latter years at school.

Spalding is a quiet sort of town, some even say 'dead': but it is not without interest. Of course, it has changed vastly over the last forty to fifty years. The once attractive park, Ayscoughfee Gardens, is much less of a show place than it used to be. The tennis courts and bowling greens are still there, as is the lake, but the large aviary has gone, there are no fat gold-fish in the lake, and the small animals that delighted us as children, now live in a concrete floored pen, not on grass, where the rabbits were free to do their own burrowing. The band-stand too has disappeared, along with the Town Silver Band that used to give concerts on Sunday afternoons during the summer months. It was a regular walk after Sunday school, around to see the men at their bowling and the younger element playing a not too brilliant game of tennis, but apparently enjoying it all the same. And what a wonderful display of flowers there were! Bright scarlet dahlias, lobelia and alyssum edged the paths and looked quite splendid around the beautifully tended greens. The large lawn just through the turnstile, made a grand place for ball games; the ancient yews, well over a thousand years old, were ideal for hide and seek, and all around the gardens there were (and I think still are) wooden seats so that one could simply sit and enjoy the peace. The war years changed it, and somehow it has never recovered its former glory.

Ayscoughfee Hall is a splendid building. It was originally owned by one Maurice Johnson, quite a benefactor to the town in the eighteenth century. The local hospital bears his name and he was the founder of the Spalding Gentleman's Society.

Spalding's first public library was housed in the Hall during my school days. I remember being quite overwhelmed at the number of books available to choose from when it was opened. My particular interest at that time was any book about life in boarding schools, but with so many different subjects to hand, my taste soon widened, and I owe a great deal to the service for setting me on a different road to learning.

Nowadays the Hall houses the town's collection of stuffed birds, and a small private school as well as the Tourist Information Office.

The river was once a busy water-way, carrying various kinds of goods from The Wash. There were a number of bridges over it, the most modern being the West Elloe Bridge, the building of which was completed about nineteen seventy nine. I was Very sad when it was dismantled in favour of two smaller ones which form a roundabout, a necessity in these days of more, and heavier traffic. Juggernaut lorries were unheard of when the bridge was built. A great deal of the traffic was still horse-drawn.

West Elloe bridge was made to lift mechanically, so that the boats could come up to their moorings when the tide was high. Most of these vessels belonged to one firm, G. F. Birch, and carried cow-cake, meal and locust beans. It was quite an occasion when 'the bridge went up'; all the children, and a fair amount of the adults too, would leave what they were doing to watch the boats or barges go through. The mechanism of the bridge was so noisy that anyone living within about a quarter of a mile couldn't fail to hear it. Sometimes there was a load of goods to be delivered when the tide was out; then a large cart-horse would be harnessed to a barge to walk along the bank of the river towing the whole thing. When it reached the bridge, the ropes were removed to allow the horse to walk around the road and so there was no need to raise the bridge, the barge would drift under and the horse's rope re-attached and away they went again.

On the Spalding stretch of the Welland, there were six bridges, three road bridges, one to carry the railway, and two for pedestrians. Of these, West Elloe was nearest the sea, next came a footbridge, officially named 'Albert bridge', but always called 'Chain-bridge' by the locals. The High Bridge was the third one. It is still there, a stone edifice, taking the road across the water from Church Street to the town, another quarter of a mile and 'Victoria' the second footbridge, then the railway crossing and finally the third road bridge simply known as the 'Little London bridge'. Only West Elloe and Chain bridges were movable, as no boat went as far as the town bridge. Birch's granaries were in High Street and they were the end of the line for any vessel using the river.

There was an abundance of small shops in every part of the town. In the area where we lived it seemed there was a shop every few yards up and down the street. Just along the road, a Mrs. Wilson kept a tiny room, attached to the house, in which it was possible to buy practically anything from paraffin to fly-papers, and from sweets to cough mixture. I always bought my whips and tops from her. The top would cost a penny if it was mushroom shaped, and twopence if it was a 'stubby'. Mushrooms were easier to spin, so I never bought any other. Whips were dearer, they cost three halfpence each and as I rarely had more than one ha'penny at any one time, even so small a purchase needed to be saved for. Mind you, once bought a whip lasted several seasons; at least the stick did. The thong was a strip of leather, and I always found it rather stiff to wind, so it would be removed, and a length of cord attached in its place. Tops had to be 'adorned' with as intricate a pattern as one could fit on to the limited space. The patterns were usually done with coloured chalks, though sometimes, it must be said, we tore small pieces of coloured paper from the advertising hoardings and stuck those on.

Games were very seasonal. No-one ever mentioned the fact, but oddly, at a given time, out would come skipping ropes, tops, hoops or whatever, as though a signal had been given. I cannot now remember which came when, but I do recall that it seemed always to be coldish and windy in the 'top season' so I feel that must have fallen early in the year, perhaps March or April.. I also recall, that we were sometimes unable to continue playing on the roads as the men came to 'tar the road'. It must of course be remembered that there was very little fast traffic on the move in those days. A few cars and the odd motor-lorry, but they were

fairly noisy and one had a lot of time to get out of the way before they were near enough to do any harm. Horse traffic bothered us not at all. Since we lived in the poorer part of the town, most of the wagons moved at walking pace because they were farm goods being transported, and there was not the urgency that seems to overtake everything in this day and age. A funeral would cause a stir, simply because it was so smart a turn-out. The hearse would be drawn by two beautiful jet black horses, with black plumes on their heads, and the 'flies', which carried the mourners, were each drawn by a similarly be-plumed, slightly less magnificent horse. The undertaker and his men walked on either side of the hearse, wearing black silk top-hats and tailed coats. Again the pace was very sedate and slow. I look back with something like awe, when I think of the respect with which everyone treated a funeral. No man would think of keeping his hat on his head as the cortège passed, and all stood quietly without moving or speaking, until the last 'fly' had passed.

About half a dozen houses farther along the road, towards the town, Mrs. Wilson had a rival. This was primarily a baker's shop, but in the way of those days, seemed to stock a great many kinds of goods. Again, a few yards along, the son of the baker, whose surname was James, also had a small 'sweet shop' house in his front room. The next one was the sub-post-office, run by the Lanham family, another baker, by name Mr. Seaton; and last on that stretch of road was Jonty Longbottom, a tobacconist. All these were in a matter of a quarter of a mile, and so it was in most parts of town. There was a splendid choice of places to spend a few coppers if one was lucky enough to have any.

Beside this wealth of small shops, the long road had a number of pubs, two fish and chip shops and a place that sold bicycle parts, tyres etc.

It was a special treat to have "a penn'orth of chips" for supper. Fish at two-pence a piece was not for 'kids' unless it was a mid-day meal. It seems strange to think that a family of four could have a fairly substantial meal for a shilling (5p). The fish shop also sold bottles of 'pop'. I think they cost 3d. And there was 1d. refund when the bottle was returned to the shop! The bottles themselves were quite different from anything we see today, having a peculiarly shaped neck, and in place of a cork or screw-top, a glass marble was inserted. To open the bottle, this was pushed to one side of a groove, and there it remained, rolling to and fro, as the bottle tilted. Such a bottle is now a collectors item. There were a number of local 'bottlers'; one that stays in my mind particularly, is the firm of Lee and Green, whose names were painted on a wall, backing on to the river, in very large letters. Since this was on my way to school, it is firmly imprinted on my mind. It took years for me to work out that the fascinating word, effervescent (sic) was simply a posh way of saying 'fizzy'.

My best friend, from about 1930 was Dulcie Richmond. Indeed we are still good friends and she is my only daughter's Godmother. Her family moved to Spalding from Elm in that year, and since her parents wished her to attend the Church School and I was the only child living near-by who went to that school, we always went together.

Much has been said and written about the hardship and poverty of the nineteen thirties, and there is no doubt that it was a terrible time for certain sections of the community, and yet, although the family income was so appallingly low, as a child, I don't ever remember feeling in any way 'deprived' of the essentials of life at any rate. True there were times when I, and others in the same position envied the better off children, for instance those whose parents owned a car. To ride in any car was a highlight in my young life, but the point is that we accepted the fact that there were different social levels, (perhaps not even consciously), and at that stage, the agitators for equality did not encroach in our lives. The odd thing about all

this, in retrospect, is that, although I longed with all my heart for the privilege of a good education, i.e. to go to boarding school, it never occurred to me to be jealous of those lucky enough to go. This may of course have been in part at any rate, due to the fact that I only knew about three girls who actually were so privileged, and they were definitely daughters of the 'gentry'.

When I look around me today, in the year 1980, and see every house that is built having a garage as an essential part of the whole, and see the children, from the first day at school being driven to and fro, often by harassed adults who would far rather be doing something else, I am tempted to wonder just which of us is the less fortunate. True, we often were wet and cold, true, it was a long trek, four times a day for five-year old legs; there were no hot dinners at school for my generation; but it did us no harm in the long run, and we had so much of interest to take in on those journeys. I would not have had it any different.

How we loved, on a bitterly cold afternoon in winter, rushing along the road in the twilight, each trying to outdo the others in a race to reach the 'smithy' where we were allowed to warm ourselves by his roaring fire, and even, oh bliss! to pump the bellows and send the hot fiery sparks soaring up the wide chimney as though they were alive. This only of course, if there was a horse in to be shod at the right moment. I can still feel the heat on my face as I pumped away when I was the lucky one; and smell the heady mixture of human sweat, horse and most of all the throat-tearing pungency of burning hoof. What can the modern world offer its children to compare with such a sensation? Television? That highly sophisticated sterile and hypnotic box that takes away the desire to get out and do things for oneself; an arranged picnic? Ferried to and fro in a car, food all carefully prepared and wrapped in plastic bags? No, I venture to say that our considerably less hygienic treacle sandwiches wrapped in whatever came soonest to hand, were then jolted about in a bicycle basket and eaten in a field, often surrounded by a herd of cows, or on the river bank, among the cast away daffodil and tulip bulbs in varying degrees of decomposition, were enjoyed with as great a relish as the finest chicken drumsticks or hot barbequed delicacy.

Dulcie and I, together with one or two others, had many such outings. No grown-ups breathing down our necks, no-one saying "Hurry, we must get home for so and so is on tonight". We rode off on our cycles, neither of us even possessed of a watch, and when the sun began to sink, we gathered up our rubbish and rode home to the sound of blackbirds, sleepily returning to their nests. They were golden days.

The second world war changed so many things! Of course, any war does, I have heard folk who remember the days before 1914 say much the same thing, but one can hardly imagine just how different the lives of we children of the thirties, and the lives of present day children are.

It is not just that the modern child has so much more than we had, their whole upbringing is completely different, from the cradle onwards. I am always astonished at the way even very young children join, sometimes very bossily in adult conversation. They are mature (seemingly) at a much earlier age than my generation, but I think they miss a lot, in that they are taught too much, too soon. A great deal of wonder seems to have been lost in the eagerness to give the young what my old foster mother would have called 2 Old heads on young shoulders".

Maybe it is simply that in this highly technical and scientific day and age, there is no time for childish fantasy, I do not know; I do however know that I am glad I was a child when I was, glad indeed that I had the chance to see the beauty of nature as a God-given blessing, to

believe that the moon was a light for my comfort, in the long frightening nights when, through some childish illness I was unable to sleep. It was not an accessible world, it was an impossible distance to comprehend, and so it was a 'wonder'. Now that man has walked on its surface it can never again have quite the same air of mystery, which I fell is a great pity, and a loss to the generations as yet unborn.

Childhood games, as we knew them, belong to a bygone age too. I never hear children in the streets in these days playing such games as "wall-flowers", "the farmer in his den" or even the once very popular "Oranges and Lemons". In fact I was quite shattered when my son's wife, arranging her small son's fourth birthday party, confessed that she had never heard of any of the above games.

When I was between the ages of about five and nine, I remember lying in bed and hearing the older children of the neighbourhood, at play in the street, chanting the rhymes that accompanied the games, among them, Here we go gathering nuts in May, The big ship sails through the alley-alley-o, Oats and beans and barley grow, Mr Wolf, and many more. Ring games were always played around the lamp-posts. Games like leap-frog, were splendid on cold days to get the circulation going and warm cold toes and fingers. Our fifteen minute 'playtime' at school, when we were relentlessly pushed out of doors to get some fresh air between lessons, was filled with these activities, and then we were ready to settle down to the business of learning again.

Methods of teaching too, are very different from my schooldays.

When I started my school days, in the year 1929, all the first class of infants were in the charge of one Miss Wright, who seemed very old to my young eyes. I have no real idea how old she actually was, but she had grey hair, and wore rather old fashioned clothes, almost always black, or so it seems to me in the hazy memories I have. My first day at The Parish Church Day School, in Church Street, Spalding, is indelibly printed on my mind!! It began with a walk of about a mile, through a very cold, damp morning. That in itself worried me not at all for hadn't Santa brought me a lovely pair of warm woolly gloves in a gorgeous shade of red? And had I not a brand-new pair of wellingtons? So, let it rain! I had other things on my mind.

I was to be left alone at school all the morning, Mum was going home to finish her housework, once she had given the necessary details of my age, parentage and whatever else the authorities needed to know. It was a great adventure, but I was not very sure that I wanted to take part. I had never been away from home for a whole morning before, and the time seemed to stretch endlessly. However, there we all were about twenty I think, some in tears, some, like myself on the verge, but trying hard to fight the flood, (because I had promised Dad I would be a good girl, and I would hate to say when he asked how I had got on, 'I cried') and some who seemed quite at home, within a matter of minutes.

The first thing we were required to do after the last parents had left, was to sort ourselves out for seating. I was glad to be told to go to the same table as a girl whom I already knew slightly, one Brenda Wilson. There were four of us to a table, but I do not recall the others at all.

The room I can still see in my mind's eye, though undoubtedly because I was constantly there for several months. It was a largish square room; the walls were painted a dreary shade of grey. The windows were set high in the walls, presumably to prevent the children wasting time, looking at whatever might be going on in the playground. Two gas lights

hung from the ceiling, and in those first weeks, seemed always to be alight, for I started my school days in January, and the weather was at its darkest and except for the days when there was snow reflected on the top walls, the room was very dark.

There were a number of low, square tables, each with four small chairs, where we spent our time, first with slates and noisy, scratchy slate pencils, and later with lead pencils and paper, mastering the art of pot-hooks, graduating to the letters of the alphabet and figures in due course.

But, back to the first day; I think we played with plasticine a good deal, and I certainly remember making Lowry type men and animals of dried beans and thin, long matchstick-like pieces of wood. The most humiliating episode of the whole of my school career also happened on that first day. No-one had told me that schools were provided with lavatories. There came a moment in the day when I needed such an amenity. I fidgeted and fretted, but too scared to ask, I simply waited too long, and there to my shame, was a wet patch beneath my chair for all the world to see! I didn't know what to do..... so I simply placed both feet tightly together over the tell-tale patch and sat absolutely still. Of course, time to go home time arrived, and I was no longer able to hide the evidence! Teachers in that period were not the kind and compassionate folk they seem to be today, and I was held up as an example of crass stupidity to the class.

How I wept, all the way home! Possibly in some part because I was jolly sore, and the cold wind on my wet socks and bare knees was pretty horrid! Thank goodness I was never reminded of the affair again in class, but it brought the colour to my face for many a long day when I thought about it!

During those first days, I learned to enjoy school, a feeling I never lost, and to the end, I wanted to stay at school as long as possible, and would have willingly forgone a number of the extra days off that as a Church school we 'enjoyed'. These were church festivals, such as Ascension Day, when we all crossed the road to the Parish Church of Sts. Mary and Nicholas, for a brief service, after which the Vicar, Canon Basil Nicholas, would come over to the school and with great gravity say, "you all behaved very well, and since this is a special day in the Church Calendar, I think you might have a holiday". Naturally he was cheered, and we all scrambled into our coats and went home, but it always seemed a bit of an anti-climax. We had been to school, and then half-way through the morning there we were, home again. A full day off was different, one could plan for that, but mostly on these occasions, the parents were involved in their legitimate affairs, and had no time to spare for children who should be at school anyway. I always wished I didn't have to go home, I'd far rather have kept to the regular routine. I have a sneaking feeling that the parents wished that too.

Miss Wright may not have been what is considered the 'ideal' by today's standards, but by the time I moved to the next class, I was very much advanced to the child I was when I arrived on that first day. I could write and figure, could read quite well, and had learned to mix with the other children to a greater or lesser degree, none of which I had been able to do when I went to school for the first time.

Our day began at nine in the morning, when we were called into class by a hand-bell, vigorously rung by Miss Loweth, head of the infants department. When we had said, "Good morning Miss Wright", in unison, we had to kneel on our chairs, facing the East wall, for morning prayers. These consisted of the Lords Prayer, and the Apostles Creed. We then sang a hymn, after which lessons began. At about ten-thirty, we had a break of fifteen



minutes, when we ate the biscuit or apple or whatever, packed by mum, to sustain us until dinner time at twelve o'clock. At that time too, although there were no school dinners, our headmaster, Mr. E. Andrew, felt that the country children, who had to bring sandwiches, needed, in winter, something warm at some time during school hours. He therefore arranged for the purchase of a large urn, and each morning it was filled by one of the teachers with cold water, to which was added Horlicks malted milk powder. It was then left to come to the boil, which it very conveniently did at about ten-thirty. Those of us whose parents were willing to pay 3d per week were then able to have a hot drink with our biscuits. I loathed the stuff, and to this day the smell of Horlicks turns my stomach. My foster mother was determined I should have this sustaining beverage daily, so we got around my revulsion by adding a spoonful of cocoa to each mugful. I used to go to school on Mondays, armed with three pennies to pay for the week's milk and a small Burdall's gravy tin, containing the cocoa and sugar mixture to enable me to force the wretched stuff down! In the summer months, the hot drink was replaced by Horlicks in tablet form. These I flatly refused to have, and after a good many struggles, was finally allowed to get away with that. The morning session ended at midday, with the whole class standing with hands together and chanting a grace. We were then free to go home for lunch, or in the case of the country children who lived too far out to be able to cycle there and back during the allotted time, to eat the packed sandwiches in the classroom, under the supervision of Miss Wright, who, because her home was in Bourne, a town some sixteen miles away, and to which she daily travelled by train, never went home to dinner so was constantly on dinner duty, not only for her own class but all the dinner children in the infants department. Not I imagine a very enviable task.

The afternoon session began at a quarter to two, and with a fifteen minute break at three o'clock, continued until a quarter to four for the infants and four o'clock for the pupils over seven years of age.

As we progressed through the school, naturally certain things changed. The first-year children were the only ones who sat at tables, in the second and third years we used long desks, each accommodating about ten children. They were made of wood and iron and were screwed to the floor. Both the seats and the tops of these desks were hinged and lifted for easier access, but if the child in the middle seat had to go to the front of the class or elsewhere during a writing lesson, the chaos of half a row of youngsters grabbing at books and pencils can be imagined.

In the final year I was at school, these monstrosities were at length dispensed with and the more convenient double desks replaced them. I think the teachers must have heaved huge sighs of relief.

The building in which the infant classes were housed, was heated by large black iron pipes which ran through all the rooms and the cloakroom where our coats hung. Miss Loweth's room was the home of an open fire, well protected by a massive nursery type fireguard. We all longed to get to the dizzy heights of the 'top class' if only for the privilege of sharing the room with that comforting blazing fire.

I learned many things, apart from the usual things any beginner at any school learns, in the time I spent in those early classes. I had come from a nonconformist home, to the best of my belief I had never entered an Anglican church in my life until I went into the church as a member of the school and to my eyes it was all rather overpowering. A regular part of the curriculum was scripture lessons. These I always enjoyed, as apart from the usual bible

stories, we were taught the whole of the Catechism, which was of course completely new to me. Naturally we did not learn it all in a short time, and in fact I believe the commandments and the main part were not attempted until we were in the bottom class of the senior school, but I certainly could recite the whole of the creed by the time I was six years old, and had a fair smattering of a good deal else that my family had never taught me, although I had been brought up to say grace at meal times and prayers at night and morning.

How different were the teaching methods when my own children began their education! So free and easy was the classroom atmosphere. Not for them the repetitious chanting of 'times tables'.

Just as Sunday was 'Chapel day', so, come what may, Monday was wash-day; not only for our family but for the whole neighbourhood. Every house in the town, seemed to have a long line of laundry signalling like a naval flagship, that it is Monday morning.

I loved washday in the summer, but it was less enjoyable in the cold weather, when the wet clothes had to be dried indoors.

Looking back one can only wonder how the mother of the household coped with all the washing, starching, mangling and ironing for large families with the heavy equipment she had to use.

In our home, wash-day really began late on Sunday evening with Dad filling the large iron copper in the wash-house with soft water from the deep cistern in the back yard. He did this so that the fire under the copper could be lighted about five in the morning and the water ready to begin the actual wash by six o'clock. First he attached a length of rope to a large bucket, this was then lowered into the water and carried indoors as many times as necessary. The folk next door were better organised than we, they had a long hooked pole with which to draw up their water. Having filled the copper, Dad cut some very thin sticks ready to get the fire started, and carried in a box of small knobs of coal, (once the fire was well alight, all kinds of things were burned to keep it going).

Monday had its own special smell! It was a mixture of steaming soapsuds – no fancy detergents in those days – smoke, gosh that fire could really fill the house if the wind happened to be blowing in the wrong direction! – and believe it or not, fried potatoes!! Because the laundry took up the whole of the day to get through, we always had a 'scratch' mid-day meal consisting of a cut from cold meat, left from Sunday, eaten with fried potatoes, home-made chutney and either pickled red cabbage or beet-root as a second vegetable. We seemed to regularly follow this with a milk pudding of some kind, tapioca, sago, rice or macaroni, presumably because they would cook happily without any further attention once they were in the oven.

Mum always liked to get the 'first boiling' well on the way before breakfast, and that was no mean task! First the hot water had to be bailed from the copper to the dolly-tub, a deep zinc tub, soap-powder, (usually Rinso at our house) added and the 'whites'; sheets pillow-slips and table linen first, were then given a jolly good pounding with a large and heavy dolly-stick. And what a fine misnomer that was! The wretched thing was about four feet high, a thick shaft with a cross-piece to hold on to as one bashed away as best as one could. The base of the thing was a great chunk of wood with a sort of cross cut out, leaving a set of what looked like four very thick legs, these allowed the water to get through the clothes, taking the dirt along with it.

There was a lighter version of this monstrosity, which looked rather like an inverted funnel and was fashioned from copper, the handle looking exactly like a broom-stick. It rejoiced in the name of a 'posser'. A third type was also made of wood, but was lighter to handle as the legs were very slim, in fact it looked just like a three-legged milking stool with a broom-stick through the seat, and it was called a 'peggy'.

Having 'dollyed' out all the dirt, the articles were then transferred to the refilled copper, and left to boil, while the next load were soaking and we were eating breakfast.

When all the white clothes had been so treated, they were lifted into a zinc bath full of cold water to rinse, and then into another of 'blued water' to give them a final rinse before being

mangled through the large wooden rolled mangle for the umpteenth time, and the carried all the way down to the vegetable plot and hung on to the wash-line.

Seeing that practically all blouses, shirts, underwear and bed-linen was white cotton or linen, it was quite a formidable pile. All table cloths, pillow-slips, pinafores and most petticoat had to be starched, and again, there were no instant varieties. We bought starch in three pound bags, from Boots, the chemists. The pieces looked rather like lumpy icing sugar, and had to be mixed first with cold water to a creamy consistency and then the boiling water was added and the whole lot stirred until it thickened; rather as one makes custard from powder.

Once the 'whites' had been dealt with, it was the turn of the 'coloureds' towels, tea towels, coloured aprons and so on, then, as the water cooled, in went socks and stocking, and finally dusters and cleaning cloths. All these were hand washed with yellow soap, which came in long bars, and had to be cut into manageable sized chunks. We used 'Watsons', which was packed in cardboard cartons and each piece was stamped with a rams head. The side of the carton had a coupon printed on it, and by saving these, gifts could be obtained. My very first camera came to me in this way.

Once all the clean clothes were blowing on the line, stretched across the vegetable plot, the great clearing-up process began. The remains of the fire under the copper was raked out, the copper itself was washed and covered and the soapy water was finally used to scrub the table in the back yard, and then it was decanted into a bucket for washing the yard itself. This was a chore I was always willing to undertake! First, on went the wellies, then armed with a long-handled, stiff-bristled yard brush and a pail full of sudsy water, I sallied forth to sling (literally) half the water along one side of the yard and chase after it, scrubbing like mad with the brush. The second side was treated in the same way then the thing was rinsed with clear water to rinse it.

If the weather was good and the clothes dried quickly, as soon as dinner was over and the dishes washed, they were fetched indoors, folded and put through the mangle again. This obsessive use of the mangle really did pay off when it came to ironing, for the sheets and towels came out so smooth, they were never ironed at all, and even the starched articles were much easier to cope with.

Our house never boasted an ironing board. The table in the front room was well padded with an old blanket topped by a folded sheet and the ironing done there, with heavy 'flat-irons'. These needed very careful handling to avoid damage to the clothes, the table and indeed one's person!

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*With Mrs Burton*



*Outside the house on Holbeach Road*



*Baptist Chapel, Spalding 1935 (front 3rd from right, front row)*