

ROOTS, TRUNK, BRANCHES & TWIGS:

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by

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FOREWORD

One of the most fascinating and frustrating projects I have ever undertaken is the researching of my family tree. Trouble is, I did not start my journey back in time to find my ancestors until after I retired, long after both my paternal and maternal grandparents and great grandparents were deceased.

There have been many times during my years of research when I have wondered what life was like for my ancestors. If they could talk to me now - what would they have to say about life in today's world, when compared to their own lives? I can't answer for them, but I have lived long enough now to make some comparisons of my own from 1928 to the present.

Jean Martin, 2006

CHILDHOOD YEARS

1928 - 1938

I was born on 3rd July, 1928, in the slums of the East End of London, within the sound of Bow Bells which, I am told, makes me a true Cockney! My eldest brother, Len, was born in 1926, my younger brother, Fred, in 1930, and my sister, Margie, in 1932. The first few years of my life come back to me via various anecdotes told by my mother during the course of her life, plus my own and my siblings' vague memories and flashbacks.

Dad was a Peterson. His father and grandfather were born in Denmark, or so my Mum said, but I have been unable to find proof of their origins so far. Mum herself was a Wyles.

At the time Len and I were born we were living in a house in Steele Road, West Ham, London with our paternal grandparents plus several aunts, uncles and cousins. The place must have been bursting at the seams and with at least six or seven small kids running around it would have been Bedlam! I can just imagine the rows that would flare up between the adults about 'your bloody kids' etc. These were the Depression years and it was not unusual for several branches of a family to live in the same house because those who were able to find some work, however short-lived and menial and earn some money enabled the rent to be paid thereby keeping a roof over all our heads and putting some food on the table, at least enough to keep us from starvation and the dreaded Workhouse! It was what families did to survive in those days. Yes it was a very hard life but it taught most of us to be self-sufficient and to look out for each other. If we had nothing else, we had our pride, and we would pawn anything pawnable in order to pay the rent of our hovel or put a meal on the table rather than accept Relief or Charity. We didn't have the Welfare State or the National Health Service of today, until 1948.

It must have been 1929 when Mum was planning on entering me in a baby show at an upcoming local fete. However, a few days before this event we were visiting a friend of hers who had a large Alsatian dog chained up in her back yard. I was toddling around with a biscuit which I offered the dog, who jumped on me and bit my face causing quite a bit of damage which had to be cauterised and took weeks to heal. I still have the scars from that bite. Well that put paid to the baby show plans and the dog, who was promptly put down! I have often wondered why this experience didn't leave me with a fear of dogs but, on the contrary, throughout my life there have been a succession of them, all of them with their own individual personalities.

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Dogs

I remember Nipper, a Wire-Haired terrier (bred by our Grandad Wyles), who loved to sing along with Len's bugle. And Buddy, a mixture of heaven knows how many breeds - the neighbourhood's doggy stud, who would find the smelliest garbage or compost heaps to roll in, every time we bathed him, and was a

champion apple scrumper. And then there was Sally, alias 'Niffy Wo-Wo', as my two eldest boys called her, when they were small. She had a weakness for Polo mints and insisted on having her pups in my father-in-law's armchair and then brought all seven of them up to our bedroom one by one by the scruff of their necks. She too was a 'bitsa' and had a beautiful, glossy coat, which we put down to my mother-in-law feeding her a dishful of skate eyes and pieces every day. She used to stink the house out cooking those skate pieces!

Then there was my first Jollick, a pure-bred Golden Retriever, to whom I became very attached when I was in the Land Army. His owner, who was Dutch, was going back to Holland and since she couldn't take him with her, I adopted him. I was stationed in Otford during my time in the Land Army. Opposite the hostel was a field, which was a playground for hares and rabbits, and Jollick had some wonderful doggy times, chasing them all. When I brought him home to Merlin Road, Buddy, who was half Jollick's size and feisty with it, challenged his right to be there. Jollick, as is the way of Retrievers, treated him with disdain and just ignored him until Buddy took that one step too far and started snapping and snarling at Jollick's heels. Jollick grabbed him gently by the neck and pushed him to the ground with one of his big paws - you could almost hear him saying - 'listen Bud I'm here to stay, so live with it!' They became the best of pals and had lots of fun playing together and chasing each other all over Danson Park.

Jollick II was a present to me, from my Bill, in the mid-1960s. This one was a she-dog and seemed to think her mission in life was to take care of the kids! Our youngest, Fred, was still a toddler when we got her and they both grew up playing together. I would often find Fred and the dog, asleep on her bed under the stairs, when they had tired themselves out playing. Alas, poor Jollick - she developed cancer of the liver and had to be put down, not long before we went to the States, in 1977.

The next dog was chosen by Fred from a litter of pups, soon after we moved to California - a crossbred border collie/Alsatian, who he christened 'Major'. He was a doggy version of Houdini! When Bill and I were at work, and Fred at school, we would leave the French doors ajar for him to get into the garden. The garden was surrounded by a six-foot fence, which we found he could jump with ease, whenever he felt like going walk-about. To stop his steeple-chasing antics we raised the fence facing the front at each side of the house a further 3ft - but he still managed to clamber over it. So then, reluctantly, we decided we would have to tie him down. We strung a line across the full width of the garden, looping it through the hand loop of his leash, which was attached to his collar, leaving him enough length to go and lie in the shade of the patio and reach his water bowl.

Didn't work: he found he could put his front paws behind his collar and push it over his head! It was a long time before he finally understood that STAY meant just that!

When we retired and returned to England, I had planned on getting another 'Jollick'. However, houses in this country are much smaller than in the States and we decided it would be best not to have any more dogs. So we spent the next few years settling down to our retirement and getting our new home and small garden sorted out. Bill now had time to give to his favourite pastime, golf. He joined a club

and is off playing, three, sometimes more, days each week. So I decided it was time for me to get another dog for company. I had never been keen on small dogs until I discovered Shih Tzus. Bill bought my little Mitzi for my birthday nine years ago and what a wonderful little companion she is.

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I wish I had photographs of all the hovels we were obliged to live in during my pre-teen years. Cameras were an unaffordable luxury for us in those days, so I have to rely on the vague memories and flashbacks I mentioned above. All those earlier houses were dark and dismal places, as I recall. Mum once told me this was because the main lighting was supplied by gas mantles and supplemented by candles and paraffin lamps. She couldn't always spare the money to buy replacement mantles, candles or paraffin, or money for the gas meter. She recalled that trying to keep us all fed each day was a constant nightmare.

Dad, Edward Peterson, died on 20th Oct, 1933, at the age of 28, in Dagenham Sanatorium, from Tuberculosis. We had moved out of Steele Road and were living in Windmill Lane, West Ham, when this happened. I don't know how long he was in the sanatorium before he died but, towards the end of his life, I remember that Mum had an accident which injured one of her legs. She was in plaster from her toes up to her groin and was on crutches. I have never known why it was – with so many relatives, both paternal and maternal, living close to hand – that some of them did not help out with looking after us four kids. Instead, all four of us – ages 7, 5, 3 and 1 – were put into Aldersbrook Orphanage, at Wanstead. Once in there, we were separated – Len and Fred in the boys' section, me in the girls' section and Marg in the nursery. Len had to go to the nursery each day to feed Marg. She was fretting for Mum and the rest of us and would only eat if Len fed her.

As for me – all I can remember is the awful fear I had that I would never see any of them again and the utter bewilderment and misery of being torn apart from them all. Len ran away twice back to Mum, but each time he was picked up and returned to Aldersbrook. In retrospect I have to concede that the Home took good care of us, according to the standards of the time. I remember we were all kitted out with warm clothing, shoes and overcoats, probably the best we'd ever owned up to then. But, 'be it ever so humble', it wasn't our home. Mum and Dad were missing and I was separated, not only from my parents but from my siblings, too.

As it turned out, we never did see our Dad again. We kids were not allowed to attend his funeral so, by the time we all went back to Mum in 1934, after she was out of plaster and off crutches, it was as if he had just disappeared. And Mum had moved again. From what she told me in later years, he adored his girls and was proud of his boys. Poor man must have been going down hill fast, though, by the time Margie was born. It did have its effect on us all, of course, particularly Len and me. Len had a bedwetting problem for a few years. Hardly surprising, when we other three looked to him, as the eldest, to take the lead and look after us when Mum wasn't around. Bit much for a barely eight year-old!

With me, it took the form of nightmares and the fear that Mum, too, would disappear, like Dad did. For a long time I would have hysterics whenever she left

the house without us. I became very envious of girls who had a Dad and, even as an adult, there have been many times I have wished mine hadn't died so young.

It must have been a terrible time for my poor Mum, emotionally and financially, to be left a widow at the age of 26 with four small children to bring up. Let's face it, we were dirt-poor and one of the reasons we moved around so much was because the rent would get into arrears. When this happened the landlord would send in the bailiffs to grab anything saleable, to make up his arrears, and this would be followed by eviction. To survive, you either had to pawn anything you could – it was usually Mum's sealskin coat – or you had to 'go on Relief' as it was called. There was no such thing as the Welfare State then! 'Relief' help was given only once they, too, had satisfied themselves that you had nothing worth selling, to tide you over. With us it took the form of free meal tickets and second-hand shoes and clothing for us kids. Mum was expected to work, which she did at a succession of menial jobs: in hospitals as a ward maid, as a cleaner, as a cook to the wealthy. She also had a very good voice and often earned extra cash, singing in pubs and clubs at night. When Mum was working during the day, Marg and Fred were farmed out to a willing relative or neighbour and Len or I would collect them when we got home from school.

I think we must have moved around quite a lot, because I can remember the names of other roads we lived in, for example, West Street, near Maryland Point. I was dragged along by a tram there, when trying to cross the road from my first school. Luckily, except for a few bruises and grazes, I was unharmed, though it did scare the pee out of me! Taught me a lesson I needed to learn, though.

I can't remember much about my first school, except that I didn't like it. Sometimes I only pretended to go and would skip off to play somewhere for the day. Now and again I would bump into Len, who was doing the same. We made a pact not to split on each other but, inevitably, we were caught out when the School Board man came calling on Mum! When he left, she burst into tears, put her coat on and made as if she was about to leave which, of course, frightened the wits out of us. We promised that from then on we would be perfect little angels and, no, we wouldn't play 'hookey' again! I imagine my teacher must have instilled at least the basics of the three Rs into my childish brain somehow, though, which would have been a help at my next school.

Then there was Chandos Road and then Crownfield Way. I believe we were living at Chandos at the time Len was in the Boys' Brigade. When Len joined the Boys' Brigade he was loaned a bugle, which he had to practise on at home, so he could be note-perfect for the Sunday parades. It was then that we had our Wire-Haired Terrier, named Nipper, – our Grandad Wyles, who was into breeding these dogs at the time, gave him to us. Len would have to shut Nipper in the outside loo whenever he practised his bugle, because he would howl like a wolf as soon as he blew a note. If Mum wasn't around to stop us, Fred and I used to let Nipper out as the Sunday parade was marching past the house, just for the fun of hearing him howling at all those bugles and drums making such a racket, and having a giggle at Len's embarrassment. Kids can be such little rotters at times and we were no exception!

One of the favourite pastimes of my brothers was chasing the bugs and cockroaches up the walls to see who could squash the most. Cats and dogs took good sustenance from the rest of the vermin, which we had in abundance. They used to get up to some really gruesome things when they were little. Once, we were playing cowboys and Indians and I was captured and, of course, had to be tied to a stake (the lamp-post). But one of the neighbours decided they were getting a mite too realistic when they decided to burn me at the stake and started to light a fire round the post! She ran out, 'doffed' the pair of them and took me into her house, for safety. They both got another wallop from Mum when she got home and got another earful from the neighbour about their antics.

You never saw any fat kids around the hovels we lived in. Len and I did get issued a mid-day meal ticket from Monday to Friday, as did Marg and Fred when they, too, started school. Mum's earnings were erratic and barely enough to pay the rent to keep the all-important roof over our heads. So the rest of our meals were somewhat sparse a lot of the time and we kids would often go down the market and look for 'specs' under the fruit stalls. Len and Fred were braver than me; they often pinched other things from shops and stalls, until they got caught, once too often, and finished up in Fegans Boys' Home for years!

Another reason you didn't see any fat kids was because we made our own amusements in those days, all outdoors and very energetic. There were no computers, TVs or stereo systems. If you had a wireless - and for years we didn't - you were well-off!

We used to play all sorts of games in the street with the rest of the neighbourhood kids. Cricket, rounders and football were not too popular with the adults though, because too many windows got broken. Sometimes we would organise ourselves into teams and we would have all kinds of races like jumping, skipping, relay, hopping, hop skip and jump, leap frog, and 'Oi, Jimmy Knacker', where the leader of a team would bend down with his hands on the wall and one of the team would bend behind him hanging on to his hips with his head tucked down and so on until all the team were bending. Then the opposing team would have to run and jump onto the bending teams backs as far up to the wall as they could get, one after the other, when all were on the backs of the bending team they would all yell out, 'Oi, Jimmy Knacker one, two, three', and try to make the bending team collapse. If the bending team didn't collapse it was their turn to be the jumpers-on in the next round.

Someone usually had a length of clothes line we could stretch right across the street with a turner at each end. Then, with the rope turning, six to eight of us would jump in, one after another, chanting some little ditty, like:

1,2,3, a'lairy, My ball's down the airy.

Don't forget to give it to Mary, Early in the morning.

If you didn't jump high enough and the rope caught your foot you were out and had to take over, turning the rope. Then there were the conker and marbles seasons, mainly played by the boys. Cigarette cards were collected and traded and a game played by flicking them to cover your opponent's cards. Then there was dressing up and Cowboys and Indians, Touch, and Hide & Seek.

There was always a lot of competition to see who could build the best and fastest go-cart. Our Uncle Bruce helped my brothers to build theirs out of a set of old pram wheels and its handle bar, a piece of rope for steering, an orange box and a plank of wood. Apart from racing, it came in very handy for lugging home shopping, firewood or coal. We roamed for miles with ours, often with Marg and Fred in the passenger box with Len or me steering and the other pushing.

We climbed trees, learned to fight back when bullies tried to pinch the few things that were ours – especially our go-cart and its contents – or attacked one of us. In one fight Len got one of his eyes knocked crooked and had to wear glasses eventually to straighten it. In his first tree-climbing effort, Fred managed to fall and break an arm, which was so badly set that he had a crooked elbow for the rest of his life. All of this happened during the few years we had together, before Len and Fred became inmates of Fegans.

The sleeping, bathing and toilet facilities were, by today's standards, horrific. With one outside loo shared by everyone, buckets and chamber pots were in constant use during the daytime as well as at night. We kids were bathed each Friday in a long tin bath with a few inches of water in it. When you have to heat water for a bath, on a stove or in a scullery copper, you get to be economical with it. The youngest was always first, finishing up with the eldest – all in the same water, with a kettle-full of boiling water to top it up to keep the chill off, when it was your turn. I hated it because I was quite sure our Fred used to pee in the water, when it was his turn, and I was always next! Before this weekly bath we would be attacked with a flea comb (and later any nits would be killed off with a final rinse of our hair in strong vinegar water, or anointed with sassafras oil, if the fleas were particularly numerous that week). Then, before going to bed, we were made to take our weekly purgative, which would be whatever was handy – Syrup of Figs, Liquorice Powder, Senna Pod Tea, Epsom Salts, or anything else that could be guaranteed to give you the 'skitters' all through the night and most of the weekend!

Most adults used the Public or Turkish Baths each week, which must have been bliss compared to that damned tin bath, every Friday! As for the loo – toilet paper being a luxury we could not afford (too many mouths to feed and too few pennies to do it with) – Len and I were given the job of cutting up old newspapers into toilet roll-size pieces, to be stuck on the meat hook which served as a holder in the outside loo.

According to Mum, shopping for almost everything was done at the local open market stalls. Unless there were hand-me-downs to fall back on from Relief, when we needed shoes or clothing we would be dragged off to the second-hand stalls to be appropriately kitted out. I can remember one pair of ghastly-looking ankle boots, with buttons all up the front, that had to be fastened with a button hook. I was so disgusted with them I cut all the buttons off and caught a wallop for my pains. I couldn't win though; I had to walk around in a pair of cut down Wellies until Mum was able to find me an affordable pair of shoes.

It wasn't all other kids' left-offs, though. Mum was always knitting jumpers and cardigans, or crocheting. The wool she used would often come from an adult's old cast-off, which would be unpicked, rolled into balls and then wound and

stretched on a piece of wood into skeins. These would then be washed to get most of the crinkles out, then drip-dried and rewound, ready for knitting or crocheting the next garment. She would pick up cheap remnants from time to time, to be turned into frocks, blouses, skirts, pinafores, shirts, trousers and coats. My Grandma Wyles was a dressmaker and one of my aunts on our Peterson side was apprenticed to a dressmaking firm, so we were luckier than some. The trouble was that they always made them several sizes too big, so we could 'grow into them'.

As for food, we had meat, once a week on Sundays, if we were lucky. We used to get scrumptious basins of dripping from our meat, though - the liquid from the meat would set into a jelly beneath the dripping. I don't know what they do with meat today but it doesn't have the same rich flavour it used to have and the jelly part is like water most of the time, fit only to use for gravy. Mum would often make a stew out of a huge marrow bone, sawn into pieces by the butcher, and a penn'orth of pot-herbs, which consisted of turnips, parsnips, swedes, carrots, onions and potatoes. Pearl barley would be added and, by the time she had plopped in a few suet dumplings, added a couple of stock cubes and thickened it with flour, it was a feast!

The milkman would come round with his horse and cart selling it by the gill and the pint, etc. Len often used to make a few coppers helping the milkman. Then there was the Muffin man, who would walk the streets, usually on a Sunday, round our way. He'd arrive with a tray of freshly cooked muffins on the tray he held on his head, ringing his hand bell with one hand and clutching his tray with the other. This was a rare treat for a winter Sunday teatime. We would toast them on a three-pronged fork with a long handle, in front of a red fire, and smother them in margarine - butter being another luxury we didn't have very often.

When we did have butter it would be bought from the local grocer who, wielding a pair of wooden platters, would chop a hunk off a huge block, weigh it to get the amount requested, add or take off a bit with his platters, and then attack the remainder until he had shaped it into a neat slab. I remember one grocer, who was extremely dexterous with his platters, and would often use them to threaten unruly kids, like my two brothers, that he would 'pin their lugs back' when they misbehaved in his shop.

Bread in those days was scrumptious and often made a main meal when Mums' purse was empty. It would be spread with a scraping of marg, perhaps dipped in sugar or spread with jam or condensed milk, if we had any to spare, or even some of the previously mentioned dripping. It was baked fresh every day and bought at the local baker's shop. For a reduced price you could buy a stale loaf and toast it in front of the fire. Unlike most of the pap you get today! If I can find a really decent loaf of bread these days, which isn't often, I can still make a good meal of bread and jam or cheese.

In those days condensed milk was used a lot. Mum would often use it in tea and cocoa when we were out of fresh milk or it had gone sour. She would also water it down to make custards, blancmanges or milk puddings. She used to make a smashing suet pudding or spotted dick with real suet from the butcher. I realise now, she was dead crafty and always made a point of being friendly with the tradesmen. So she often came away from their stalls with a bag of specs

(unsaleable fruit) or bones with some meat still on them, broken biscuits, stale bread for toasting or for one of her delicious bread puddings. As for her pigs-head brawn...! It was my Mum who taught me how to prepare and cook a meal, and to knit and sew and, years later, to crochet.

Mustn't forget the Shrimp and Winkle man! If the budget permitted a pint of shrimps or winkles were another Sunday tea treat. However, I went right off winkles when I got food poisoning from eating a dud one. Haven't missed them really - never did like wriggling them out with a pin; they looked like bogies to me!

And there were all those lovely shops that sold Pie and Eels, Saveloy and Pease Pudding, and Fish and Chips. They were all cheap and, if the pennies were available, helped to keep us from hunger. My favourite was a pie and mash, with liquor with parsley in it, made from the water the eels were stewed in. The pie had a very distinctive pastry consistency, which, try as I might, I have never been successful in recreating. But oh, my mouth waters for a plate of pie and mash with liquor and mushy peas, even as I write this! Thinking about the old pie and eel shops reminds me of the time I was down the market with my two brothers. Len and I were standing at a fresh fish stall, looking at a tray of live eels and our little brother, Fred, wanted to see them so Len lifted him up. Fred leaned on the edge of the tray because he was slipping and pulled the tray off the stall. This was followed almost immediately by screams from me and the women round the stall, who didn't care for eels slithering among their feet, and bellows of rage from the stall owner, who, from the names he called us, evidently thought we were all illegitimate!

Some local fish and chip shops used to make their own mustard pickles. Often, if Len or I had earned a penny or two for running an errand (good source of income for kids in those days), we would splurge a penny on these pickles, which were wrapped in newspaper, just like the fish and chips were. We had to eat these pickles with our fingers but, believe me, they were finger-licking good! The closest I can get to the flavour now is to buy a jar of mustard pickles and run the contents round the liquidiser with a good splash of vinegar and a couple of tea spoons of sugar.

Washing was an all-day chore. In later years Mum would send big things like sheets and towels and colour-fast shirts to the Bagwash laundry, which would come back a few days later, still wet, but clean and ready to be dried and ironed. But with four children and herself there was still a lot of personal washing to do and so, early in the morning, the stone copper in the scullery had to be manually filled with water and a fire lit underneath, to get the water boiling. Some of the hot water from the copper would be scooped into the stone sink, a handful of soda added. Mum would then start with all the whites and colour-fast clothes that she preferred not to send to the Bagwash, rubbing them with a large bar of Sunlight or other soap and scrubbing them up and down a rubbing board. Those she wanted to get as white as possible, or remove stains from, she would rinse and put through the mangle (a wringer with wooden rollers) kept in the back yard, and then poke them down into the copper to boil in soapy water for about an hour.

Talk of that mangle with its wooden rollers, I remember another anecdote about my brothers. They kept a few frogs in an old, covered bath in the back yard and one day, with Fred turning the handle, Len was trying to push a frog through the rollers, when it escaped and Len's fingers got trapped in the rollers instead. He ended up with a sore backside to match his fingers, as well as the indignation of the loss of his frogs – Mum tipped them out and off they went!

Back to washing day – there were usually two or three lines of it to hang out to dry if it wasn't raining. If it was, the urgently needed things would have to be dried on the fire guard, some on the ceiling clothes horse and the backs of chairs. The rest would have to wait until the weather improved.

Next would come the never-ending ironing. Mum had two flat irons, which had to be heated on the range – a black leaded one, terrible thing to keep clean. Later on, in a different house, she had a gas stove, which made life a little easier for her. She never ironed the household linen; they were all stretched, while still wet from the Bagwash, to pull out most of the creases, then neatly folded and passed through the wringer, ready for drying and finally put away in the linen cupboard. Neither would she iron the tails of shirts, claiming it was a waste of time and energy since they only got creased again once they were tucked inside trouser bands!

When I think about the houses we lived in during those very early years I often get a flashback of a worn, cupboard-like door, which opened on to a flight of dark stairs which, in turn, led down to another, similar door. To my childish mind it must have looked very sinister since I remember having screaming nightmares about what I imagined was lurking behind that door at the bottom of those stairs. In another flashback I recall an elderly man sitting in a dilapidated armchair by a table with an oil lamp on it. I also remember someone referred to as 'Grandad Cavell'. In retrospect I think he and the man in the armchair were probably the same person and that the title of 'Grandad' was a courtesy one, because of his age. Certainly, the name of Cavell has not appeared in my family research so far. But what he was doing in a house full of Petersons I have yet to find out. Perhaps he was the Landlord.

As I've indicated before, with Mum having to work to feed us and keep us, we kids were left pretty much on our own. I believe Margie was looked after by a friend of Mum's. Uncle Bruce, one of my Dad's brothers, who still lived in Steele Road, had helped Len to make a kind of go-cart which we three elder ones had lots of fun with. This same Uncle was a lorry driver and often used to take Len with him on his runs to Ipswich I believe. So, on good-weather days, when we weren't at school, we would take bottles of water and anything available to eat with us, pack it in the passenger box and off we'd go to a park or Wanstead Flats or sometimes an area where we knew crops were growing. I remember scrumping apples, pulling up raw carrots, beetroot, and sugar beets – all of which we would eat raw, after we'd wiped most of the dirt off, if we were particularly hungry – turnips, onions, potatoes. In blackberry time we'd be out all day, come back loaded up, with hands and mouths stained the same colour as the berries we'd picked. We'd all yell blue murder though when Mum performed minor surgery to pull out

all the thorns we'd collected too! We had broomsticks with a large cup hook screwed in one end, so we could reach up and pull down the branches with the biggest and blackest berries on. If there were enough berries Mum would turn them into jam or use them for afters, with a few apples thrown in.

That box on wheels was not only used for fun. When we were out of coal in the winter, Len, Fred and me would take it out, looking for wood and anything else burnable. A lot of the roads consisted of tar blocks about the size of a brick and when they were being dug up for repairs, all the local kids were allowed to harvest the old blocks. These blocks were pitted with small stones, which would explode into the room when they got really hot but they gave off a satisfying heat that lasted quite a while. All of us sustained some painful burns from those spitting stones though, and several times the chimney caught fire from the highly inflammable tar – much to Fred's entertainment who, as I recall, was determined he was going to be a Fireman when he grew up. Mum also used to mix tea leaves and coal dust together and let them dry off in a wooden mould. They didn't burn well on their own but did help to eke out the real coal when we had some. One effect of the dog bite I mentioned earlier was that it messed up my body's oil glands for life, leaving me with extremely dry skin, which reacts badly to very cold weather and too much sun. I used to get painful splits on my fingers, heels and lips. And the chilblains would drive me mad! Most nights in the winter Mum would smother my hands and feet in Vaseline and I would sleep in an old pair of socks and gloves, kept especially for this purpose. On hot, sunny days I could (and did) burn, blister and peel frequently and Mum would bathe me with cold tea and again smother me in Vaseline. Even now, when my feet get cold I still develop chilblains. The skin all over my body would dry up and crack if I didn't anoint myself from face to toes with a thick moisturising lotion after each wash and shower. Can't do much about my scalp though, except to use a mild shampoo and conditioner, and I stopped perming and dyeing my hair years ago. So if you've ever caught me having a surreptitious scratch, don't worry about it – I'm not really cooty! Over the years it's proved to be a very expensive dog-bite though!

It was at some time in 1935-1936 that the next separation came. Len and Fred were caught pinching from the market stalls and the local bobby nabbed them. Evidently, it wasn't the first time and they were getting into too much trouble and in danger of turning into young criminals. So, at age 10 and 6, they were both shipped off to Fegans Boys Home in Goudhurst and I didn't see them again until they were each 16 years old respectively.

The day of parting was particularly harrowing for all of us, but especially Len and Fred. I missed them terribly and was very bitter against Mum. I felt that, if she'd had any love for them, she could never have let them go. I kept on at her for years to bring them home. She tried to tell me many times that once they got into trouble with the law it was out of her hands and she could do nothing about it, but I felt so miserable for them and myself, I didn't believe her. The nightmares returned and I was sleepwalking too. I became a right little bitch of a daughter to her and was determined to give her hell until she got them home again. But it

didn't work! They didn't come home until the powers that be decided to release them.

It was shortly after this, still in 1936, that I was raped by one of Mum's boyfriends. I was no more than 8. Little was made of it at the time, at least in my presence. It was yet another of life's wallops that I had to learn to rise above! However, one night, many years later, when Mum and Arch (my second stepfather) were spending a weekend with us at Glenhurst Ave, Bexley, we were sitting around drinking and reminiscing. Something must have been said to trigger off the flashback because I recall asking Mum, "Which of your boyfriends was the one who raped me"? Shockwaves went through the room. Arch spilled his beer, Bill choked on his and Mum was struck dumb! Arch insisted on her telling us what had happened. According to her the man was a stranger who was drunk and had entered the wrong house. He wandered into the room where I was sleeping and started in on me. She came home and caught him. There was a hell of a row during which she said she punched him and kneed him in the groin then he took off and we never saw him again. She reckoned he didn't actually rape me. But I know different. You don't forget an experience like that, no matter how young you are! Evidently it caused a big row between her and Arch and a few days later she phoned and gave me a right rollicking for daring to drag the incident up after all these years. I've never regretted it though; in some strange way it enabled me to finally lay that particular nasty event in my life to rest. One thing's for sure if my big brother had been there it wouldn't have happened. Even though we used to fight like cat and dog among ourselves at times, Len was always very protective of his family.

Not long after this incident - about 1936 - I was sent off to one of Dad's sisters for a few weeks. Aunt Dora and Uncle Sonny were living somewhere in Lancashire at the time. As I've said, I was at loggerheads with Mum over Len and Fred and then came the rape incident, which must never be mentioned, but I had also become very jealous of my sister who, to my way of thinking, got more than her fair share of love and kisses from the adults and none of the grief I managed to land myself in. I was in a pretty low state at this time and had gone from lean to skinny. So it was decided that a change of scenery would be good for both me and Mum. Separation again - my life seems to have been full of it!

However, Dora and Sonny were kind and good to me. Dora - the aforementioned dressmakers apprentice - ran up some pretty dresses for me and even curled my hair! They had 2 infant children of their own, Barry or Brian and Hazel and Aunt Dora would trust me to push the pram when we went shopping. At least their home wasn't the hovel ours was. I slept on a sofa in their front room and was very impressed that it had a carpet on the floor instead of just bare boards or worn-out lino. While there I was given two lovely baby dolls, one black and one white, by a friend of Aunt Dora's, which were fully dressed in baby clothes. I was delighted with them and took great care with them. So this, my first holiday, is one of my happier memories of childhood. Bless you Aunt Dora!

But all good things come to an end and the next separation was looming on the horizon! On getting back to Mum and Margie I was still far from well and the local doctor decided I was undernourished and anaemic and got me into a

convalescent home in West Mersey for the next 6 months. I was heartbroken that the Home rules did not allow you to take anything other than clothing with you and I had to leave my lovely dolls at home. Six months later when I came home, my dolls were gone, broken beyond repair by my sister Mum said. I cried buckets and remember screaming at her for letting Margie anywhere near them. Needless to say, this latest separation and the loss of my beautiful dolls did nothing to heal the breach between Mum and me. I was convinced in my own mind that she didn't want me any more than she wanted Len and Fred.

As I've mentioned before, Mum used her considerable singing talent to earn desperately needed extra cash in those days. I think it also provided her with a social life and she got to meet and speak with a lot of people. After all, she was a young and healthy woman and, although she loved and grieved for Dad when he died, she wasn't the type to go into a decline and mourn him for the rest of her life, not with 4 kids clamouring for attention and sustenance!

One of the men friends I can recall was a yodeller, by the name of Ernie, who she probably met at one of the pubs or clubs she sang at. He brought one of those wind-up gramophones to our house once so that he could play her some of his records. I've often wondered whether he ever became famous. Then there was a middle-aged Irishman, called Shawn Kearns. I think she met him at one of the social clubs she sang at - far too smarmy and touchy-feely. I didn't trust him and always kept well out of his reach. Unlike Margie, who showed no such fear and used to lap up all the cuddles and kisses, particularly the bars of chocolate that came with them. Mum attended a few political meetings with him. Years later, it came out that they had been at the Battle of Cable Street in 1936 when Mosely tried to march his Blackshirts through the East End. They were on the side of the rest of the East Enders who were determined to stop Moseley's crowd. But, as these things do, it quickly developed into a 'free for all' and they both wound up with numerous cuts and bruises.

It would have been in 1938 when we moved out of our last hovel. By this time Mum had met Arch Forge, who was in the navy and married to a Catholic! And no chance of setting up home with him. She was also seeing Albert Gardner when Arch was at sea. I'm pretty certain that she agreed to move in with Gardner, ostensibly as his housekeeper, to make life easier on herself. And who can blame her - the past five years since Dad died had been a constant struggle for survival. Albert was a widower, 14 years older than Mum, worked at Customs House as a shipping clerk, had a 14 year old son, Frank, and a daughter Eileen who was about 17. They lived in a 4 bedroom ground floor flat in Constant House, Poplar. Compared with what we had been used to the flat was luxury. At last we had an indoor toilet and bathroom, electric lights, a gas stove with grill, and running hot water and a wireless! Not a bare board in sight and decent furniture. The whole block of flats shared a communal washing room equipped with large sinks and wringers and an area with lines to dry the washing. For once Mum didn't have to work and was able to spend most of her time just being the housekeeper (and probably dishing the dirt with the new neighbours). Eileen was a lovely person, tall and slim, and I was soon treating her like a big sister. She had some pretty clothes, made a lot of her own, and was very clever with her hair. She took over

doing my hair for me and finally my 'orrible rats tails were tamed. I believe she was working in an office where her Dad worked at that time. Frank was still at school I think. I liked him, but he was male and tall and good-looking, a bit of a tease and I was inclined to be painfully shy of him. Likewise Albert, who liked to be quiet, listen to the wireless and read his paper. He always seemed a bit of a sobersides to me and he seldom laughed. But he never lifted his hand or was ever unkind to us. Mum was happier too and, once again I began to urge her to get Len and Fred home, but this time it was Eileen who told me not to be silly there wouldn't be enough room for two more boys in Franks' little box room. And I guess she had a point.

But our new life didn't last long - WW11 was rearing its ugly head and many more people than I were about to be separated, some permanently!

THE WAR YEARS

1939 – 1945

The day War was declared in September, 1939 it seemed as if every woman I saw was crying. Some men were cheering, others like Albert looking very serious. I was 11 and didn't understand what all the crying and cheering was about at first. Wasn't long before I found out!

Many parents decided to take advantage of the government scheme to get their kids out of the East End, knowing that Dockland was going to be extremely dangerous when the bombing started. So, shortly after WWII began, Mum deposited Margie and me at Woolmore Street School, with a small suitcase each of clothes, all we were allowed to take, a packed lunch, a bottle of water and our gas masks. A large card was hung around our necks, which gave our names, Mum's name, our school and home addresses. Then it was 'goodbye' time - Mum telling me to:

"Be good, take care of Margie" and, not to worry: "It would be like having a holiday in the country; I'd get to see and do all sorts of things, and she would come to see us as soon as she could".

We were then all tearfully lined up and marched off to board the waiting coaches. I became frantic when I realised Margie wasn't on my coach! I fought like mad to get off to go and find her but was no match for the adults in charge. When the coaches arrived at the railway station I was marched off with the rest of the evacuees and put on a train to I-knew-not-where. I kept telling any adult who would listen that my little sister was supposed to stay with me and they said they would find her.

We were taken to a place called Dedworth, just outside Windsor itself. The people who were taking us in were allowed to take their pick so it was hardly surprising that me and another girl - a stranger to me - were among the last to find a billet. Beattie had made herself sick with crying for her Mum and I had cried all the way to Dedworth for my own Mum and Margie. We must have looked a right couple of tired, miserable wretches, with our dirty, tear-blotched faces and runny noses.

We were taken in by the Bunds, of Kentons Lane, who had a baby boy about none months old, whose pram Beattie Mann and I later took turns each to push. Miss Thompson, one of the teachers who evacuated with the school, had promised to contact Mum and the authorities to find out what had happened to Margie. She was finally traced to Sunningdale, where she had been billeted on a family with two infant children of their own. I suspect her nose was put a bit out of joint - up to then she had been the baby of the family. Millie Bund, or Aunt Millie, as she asked us to call her, lived next door to her parents and sister, the Barnshaws, who hadn't intended to have any evacuees, but on hearing about Margie they wrote to Mum and offered to have her. It was almost Christmas before a transfer for Margie could be arranged but eventually Mum was able to collect her and bring her to the Barnshaws. We were so pleased and happy to see each other - until the novelty

wore off and we were back to our normal sisterly love-hate relationship. I didn't need to 'look after my sister' as Mum had told me to; she learned how to do that for herself, faster than any of us did. The Barnshaws took very good care of her and spoilt her rotten while she was with them and now she was back in her normal role of baby of the family again.

A Nissen hut-style school was built in a field for all us evacuee pupils. There was also an air-raid shelter, dug into the ground with steps leading down into it, which we were all marched to whenever the siren sounded. The teachers used to get us all singing, to help keep our fears at bay when all the anti-aircraft guns began firing. Even underground you could hear the noise.

We spent a lot of weekends at the school too, playing games and sports and country dancing, all organised by the teachers. I became captain of one of the netball teams while I was there and our team won quite a few matches. As for indoor lessons, well I seemed to have a mental block with figure work. The arithmetic teacher used to walk the aisles between our desks when we were working on sums in our exercise books. If she caught you whispering or trying to copy someone else's answers, she'd rap you across the knuckles with her drum stick. First time she did this to me I swore at her, called her a spiteful cow, got sent to the Acting Head for more of the same, this time with a cane across my backside! (But I guess I finally got some of my sums right because I actually won a prize for best all round effort in that class on Prize Giving Day).

Luckily for me the other lessons - reading, spelling, writing, geography, history, domestic science, art, nature study, *et cetera* - came more easily and I managed to stay in the top half of my class; all except for needlework. I got into trouble several times for swearing and losing my temper when I stuck the needle in my finger instead of the cloth, or when the cotton got in a knot. My language was in fact that of a typical east ender! Yet I don't recall ever hearing my Mum use any of the really filthy words. A mild 'bloody' or 'sod' when she was mad about something was the most she ever used. She wasn't a cockney and she didn't speak like one either. Whenever she heard any of us using bad language we'd either get a whack or she'd threaten to wash our mouths out with carbolic - this being a very strong disinfectant used for cleaning floors, dustbins, drains and the like. It was so strong it would make your eyes water!

Looking back on that period I realise that Margie and I were very lucky to have been placed with people who did the best they could for us. We settled down more - Mum visited us, as and when she could. Travel wasn't easy for civilians during the war and she not only had to try to visit us, but Len and Fred too. Margie and I stayed in Dedworth for about 14 months.

The Battle of Britain raged, followed by the Blitz. As was predicted, the East End and the docks were a main target and Poplar was right in the heart of it. Mum, Albert, Eileen and Frank and the rest of the residents of Constant House were bombed out. My lot decided to move out of London and went to stay, temporarily, with Anne and Fred Thurlow - relatives of Albert's dead wife who owned the Blackfen Social Club on Blackfen Road. Albert knew most of the club members, one of whom offered him the tenancy of 20 Arcadian Close, Bexley. I think they moved into Arcadian towards the end of 1940. Then suddenly cases and bags were

being packed for Margie and me and we were told that, having moved out of London to a safer area, Mum was coming to take us home with her, not just for Xmas but for good!

That Christmas was a memorable one for me. Mum was happy to have her girls back and we were overjoyed to be there. That was all I needed for Christmas, and this smashing house to live in made it all the more exciting! Mum told me that, having lost everything except what they had on their backs, she, Albert, Eileen and Frank were given war compensation. This - plus help from the Thurlows and others who contributed household linens and various pieces of furniture and things they themselves bought from second-hand furniture stores - helped them set up home again and replace some of their lost clothes.

There were four bedrooms, Margie and I shared while Frank and Eileen had rooms of their own. The bedroom floors were all stained and varnished, with large rugs at the sides and feet of each bed. Upstairs there was a bathroom and separate toilet and downstairs there was a toilet too. I thought I'd died and gone to heaven! The stairs were carpeted, with windows at the top and bottom, unlike the old, dark and dismal hovels we were used to. The hall and downstairs rooms had parquet flooring, except for the kitchen, which had lino. Then there was a large dining room with French doors to the back garden and a large front room with a bay window. All the windows had leaded lights. The back garden had a gate, which opened into a back alley and came out near the Blue Anchor pub, where I used to get the bus to Blackfen School. Bexley Woods were close by.

At this time Mum and Albert were working for the Thurlows - he in the bar and she cleaning, cooking and making snacks - generally making themselves useful wherever they were needed. Eileen got a job at Bexleyheath Bus Depot. In those days bus conductors had to take fares and give you the appropriate coloured ticket for your length of journey, in which he punched a hole via a little machine strapped to his waist. It was Eileen's job to count the tiny punched-out pieces, sort the different colours, do the arithmetic and check that the money in the cash satchel tallied. Frank, I believe, had left school; he would have been 16 then, but I'm not sure what he was doing, job-wise. I do know he joined the Home Guard while we were at Arcadian but I don't recall it being a full-time occupation.

Despite the war or, one could say, because of it, our lives had taken an upward turn. I was certainly feeling more settled and secure, even with a war on. I still missed Len and Fred, but I had become resigned to their absence. Mum would tell me about her occasional limited visits to them and let me read their obligatory letters to her. Having a step-brother and sister now had helped in part to fill the gap, too.

I was 12, going on 13, when I insisted the family called me Jean instead of Ethel - Mum was a bit indignant at first, but eventually got used to it, realising I was serious whenever I refused to answer if she forgot and called me Ethel. Also, I began making a big effort to drop my cockney accent, with Mum, Eileen and Frank yelling at me to "pick up that aitch". By this time too I was developing a bosom and for my 13th birthday Mum used some of our precious clothing coupons to buy

me my first bras. It didn't happen overnight but, with the help of both Mum and Eileen, I began to lose my 'urchin of the East End' image.

It would have been one night in August, 1941, after Margie and I had gone to bed - Eileen and Frank were out - when I heard Mum and Albert shouting and realised they were having a blazing row. I lay listening to them for a few minutes, trying to hear, with little success, what they were rowing about. Then I went out on to the landing, calling out to Mum to see if she was alright. She came into the hallway, said there was nothing to worry about and told me to go back to bed. They quietened down after that and I went back to sleep. (It wasn't until a few years after I myself was married that the reason for that row clicked into place when I saw Arthur together with one of Arch's daughters and thought I was looking at identical twins!)

I think Albert knew she had been seeing Arch, on and off, and suspected the child wasn't his. I don't think Mum knew he had terminal cancer at that time, but I'm sure Albert knew, and that's why he stopped arguing and married her quietly on September 13, 1941, at Dartford Registry Office. The marriage was witnessed by Lucy Pearman - a close friend of hers - and the previously mentioned Fred Thurlow.

We moved out of Arcadian Close into 82 Merlin Road very soon after they married. According to Mum, Albert had become convinced that Arcadian was too damp and was affecting his health. A bit of a come-down from Arcadian Close, it was a semi with only three bedrooms, a bathroom with toilet upstairs, no separate toilet, front living room, dining room and kitchenette. It had a side entrance gate, leading to a fair-sized back garden and a coal shed. Four months after the marriage Albert died in Southern Hospital, Darenth on 16th January, 1942. On 6th March, 1942, my half-brother, Arthur, was born at West Hill Hospital, Dartford.

So 1942 was an eventful year for the family. Frank got his call up papers when he reached age 18 and was drafted into the Oxford & Bucks Light Infantry 2nd Airborne Battalion. (He was killed aged just 21 on March 24th, 1945 during the invasion of Germany and is buried in Reichswald Forest War Cemetery in Kiev, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany.) Soon after Frank went into the forces, Eileen left Merlin Road and moved in with her Thurlow relatives. (I felt so sad for Eileen when we heard Frank had been killed. They and their dad had been very close, since the death of their Mother. It must have been an extremely miserable time for her, to lose Frank as well as her dad).

That same year Len was released from Fegans, aged 16, and I left school, aged 14. It was wonderful to have my big brother back again and it wasn't long before we were bickering and teasing each other, the way we used to do before Fegans. But with the death of Albert, and Frank and Eileen no longer living at Merlin Road, Mum's old nightmare of trying to keep a roof over our heads was back with a vengeance. She couldn't go out to work herself until Arthur was weaned. She sent both Len and me off to sign on at the local Labour Exchange. Len was found a job with a local builder and decorator and I was put to work in a button factory at Fooks Cray. It was so boring and poorly paid that I quit after two weeks and got yelled at by Mum, who told me:

“Never quit a job until you have another to replace it with!”

Good advice, actually, which I followed for the rest of my working life. Meanwhile, she turned our front room into a bed-sitter and rented it out, with the use of kitchen and bathroom facilities, and took on the paid day-care of a few of the neighbours' children. My next job was at the Blackfen branch of Liptons, helping on the shop counter, in the stockroom, refilling the shop shelves, and cleaning. It was almost as boring and poorly paid as the first job!