

# Shop Parlour Tales

## A Walthamstow Childhood.

### Joan Bigby (nee Simmonds) 1929/1995

The following article has been sent in to us and is placed here on several pages. Please use the arrows at the bottom of each page to read the complete article.

I was born at 12 Station Road, Walthamstow. London. E.17. on February 12th. 1929 above a small Confectionary and Tobacconist shop which was kept by my Father. On many occasions during my childhood, I was told of that particularly bitter February; how the shop was a chill and draughty place, where the rows of glass jars containing the favourite sweets of those days ....Fruit Drops, Dolly Mixture, Chocolate Buttons, Mint Humbugs, Liquorice Comforts and many others, were agonisingly cold to handle with chilblained fingers and how the bottles of R. Whites Lemonade actually froze in their wooden crates, as great icy blasts swept into the shop with every muffled customer who opened the door.

The shop was large and square shaped with green linoleum on the floor and with a wooden waist high counter forming an L shape round two sides. As customers came in through a centre door from the street, they would find the left hand side of the shop, devoted to a large variety of confectionary. There was a long row of sweet jars behind a brass rail on the counter, boxes of loose chocolates and sweets displayed on shelves at the back and a glass case for the many types of chocolate bars and the several varieties of Whipped Cream Walnuts. In pride of place, behind the jars of sweets, stood a large pair of brass scales which had to be regularly cleaned with Brasso, the range of weights for use with the scales and the toffee hammer. This was used for breaking up the slabs of Sharpes Toffee, Fruit and Nut, Plain or Choc. Cream flavour ...a messy business, especially during the Summer months when fragments of splintered toffee would stick all over the counter and to the pan of the scales.

The extreme left hand corner of the counter, was given over to an array of small boxes containing the cheaper kinds of confectionary, much sort after by the children who would flock in on their way to school whenever they had a half penny or even a farthing to spend. Here, there were Gob-stoppers and Liquorice Skipping Ropes, Sherbet Dabs and Sweet Cigarettes, Chocolate Animals and Coconut Squares, Flavoured Chews and packets of Chewing Gum, to mention but a small sample of the collection. My Father usually stood in the serving space behind the counter where a hinged wooden flap allowed access into the main body of the shop. Leaving the curtained door of the parlour behind him, he could walk to the left or to the right of the counter, depending on the customers requirements.

The shelves of cigarettes, displayed Weights and Woodbines, Minors and Black Cat, Players, Senior Service and many other brands, whilst packets of pipe tobacco were concealed in wooden drawers at the base of the shelving. Behind the brass rail on this side of the shop, stood a very dainty pair of brass scales, on which loose tobacco could be weighed as well as small quantities of snuff. There was also a flat glass case containing pipes of wood and clay besides odd items such as cheap cuff links and elastic armbands. Other miscellaneous wares for sale, included a selection of cheap toys ...tin soldiers, table tennis balls, balsa wood planes which flew, if you were lucky, by means of a rubber band, marbles, balls and whips and tops when in season. Envelopes and paper, rubber bands, bottles of ink, fly papers, birthday cards, pencils and mysterious looking packets of foreign stamps, were also stocked. At certain times of the year, some of these items were packed away and sent to languish in the spare bed-room whilst the shelves were devoted to more specialist items.

There would be slightly more expensive toys and paper decorations at Christmas time, Easter eggs and chocolate novelties at Easter time and a great effort around November 5th, when rows and rows of tin boxes appeared containing many kinds of fireworks. There were squibs and bangers, Catherine wheels and rockets, packets of Sparklers and boxes of coloured matches as well as indoor fireworks. During the dark November days, the celebration of Guy Fawkes Night was very much an event to be enjoyed and so many customers invaded the shop, that Alf, the Window Cleaner was usually engaged to help out with the rush, for a few hours on the big night. I was always allowed to stay up on November 5th. The night sky would be lit up with sparks and flashes as rockets whizzed and Coloured Rain descended; the night air, acrid with smoke from the many back yard bonfires where home made Guys were being burned.

For weeks past, these Guys had been touted round the streets in rickety carts or broken down prams, with the local children crying out, "Please spare a penny for the Guy." The pennies so collected, usually found their way into the shop to buy fireworks for the great blaze. I never had a Guy, but my Father always found the time to let off a collection of fireworks in our back yard and to my delight, we sometimes had a bonfire too, to stand around waving starry sparklers or spluttering coloured matches.

Always, there was a variety of bottled drinks for sale. Immediately on the right as you entered the shop, there were stacked the wooden crates of Lemonade, Tizer, Ginger beer and Cream Soda which were delivered to us by horse and cart and later by the R. Whites lorry. Fixed to the wall above the crates of drinks, was a large glass fronted cabinet in which was displayed cheap sets of popular games such as Draughts, Snakes and Ladders, Tiddly Winks and Halma. The shop certainly had a wide selection of goods for sale and these were kept before the eyes of the public at large, by means of two big plate glass windows, one on either side of the shop doorway. One window was largely given over to dummy cartons of Tobacco ...Digger Shag, Old Bonded, Erinmore etc. and to the range of cigarettes available. The other window mainly contained jars of sweets and many little dishes heaped with Milk Gums, Liquorice Allsorts, Jelly Beans etc. There were also dummy boxes of chocolates and advertisements for all kinds of confectionary items. These windows, were looked after on a regular basis, by a Window Dresser, who would come along with his case of ribbons and long pins, to juggle with the dummy boxes and suspend them in the windows with artistic flair. There was always a flurry of activity on window dressing days. All the many items had to be cleared out of the windows and the interiors made fresh and sparkling, before the "Dresser" came to begin his work. These observations of course, were made over the early years of my childhood. On that bitter February day in 1929, I was warmly tucked up with my Mother in the big front bedroom immediately above the shop. There would have been a blazing fire in the small black grate which must have made the shadows dance on the walls in just the way I remembered years later, when confined to bed up there with Measles. Downstairs, my Father no doubt, would have been escaping into the comparative warmth of the little shop parlour, where again, a fire would have blazed in a well leaded grate and from where he could peer out into the Siberian depths of the shop, to make sure that no small child with prying frozen fingers had slipped in unobserved. Yes, it was always warmer and cosier in the shop parlour during the dark days of Winter.

The yellow gas light hissed gently above the chenille covered table, a blind was drawn down over the back window which looked out onto a bleak yard and although one could see out into the shop through the glass panelled door with the lace curtain, no one could see in. This was the room where I spent much time as a small child and from where I escaped eventually into a wider reality.

My most abiding memory of my Father, is the memory of him standing with his back to the fire in the small shop parlour, an open newspaper in his hands and much engrossed in the daily news. He was of medium height, with a neat stocky appearance and had originally been intended for a career in one of the city Banks. Born in the East End of London, he had spent his childhood mainly in the Stepney and Limehouse Districts, where along with his four sisters and one younger brother, he had managed to pick up some kind of an education. This must have given him a taste for study and motivated him to attend night school. He also enjoyed boxing and rowing as a young man and took pleasure in keeping fit. Obtaining a position as clerk in Threadneedle Street, may have enabled my Father to rise eventually above his very humble beginnings had not the tragedy of the First World War intervened and sent him into the trenches for four dreadful years.

As with most children whose Fathers had been through that trauma, I was brought up hearing a great deal about it. The Somme, Arras and Paschendale were engraved on the memories of those men forever. Miraculously, Father survived in the physical sense but his job was gone; unemployment was the reward for so many of the young men who did return and neither my Father nor his brother, who had also fought in the war, were able to obtain work. The family meanwhile had moved to the country ...to the small estuary town of Burnham-on-Crouch. Here the girls went into Service and my Father and his brother Tom eventually obtained a series of local jobs. Working in the local Iron Foundry was one of them; a very hard and dirty occupation which my Father felt disinclined to accept as his destiny in life especially as by now he was courting my Mother, a Miss Rose Burt, whose parents kept a local General Store.

Tom joined the Black and Tans and went away to the troubles in Ireland for a short time. When he was wounded however and returned to Burnham, the two brothers decided to pool all their resources and to obtain a small business which might give them some stability and future. Hence, they arrived at 12, Station Road Walthamstow and shared between them, the Confectionary and Tobacconist business until eventually my Father wanted to marry and to bring his wife into the accom-

modation there. My Father, whose first name was Fred, managed to buy out his brother and Tom went off to Suffolk to try chicken farming. Consequently, my parents were married at Burnham-on-Crouch and then came to live in the accommodation behind the shop in Walthamstow. F. Simmonds, appeared over that shop doorway for the next forty years.

The door would be open at six o'clock in the morning and rarely closed until 10 o'clock at night, Saturday and Sunday included. In a rather poor working class district, everybody who was in work of any kind, worked very long hours and my Father was no exception. He built up a good steady flow of regular customers and was well liked. However, when I was eighteen months old, tragedy struck. 1931 besides being a year of continuing depression, was also a year when that dreaded disease Diphtheria was prevalent. Somehow my Mother was stricken and I too caught the disease from her. We were both isolated in Chingford Hospital where my Mother died. I survived after being extremely ill with the added complication of Pneumonia which left me with a legacy of ear trouble. My Mother was buried in the Churchyard at Burnham-on-Crouch and two of my Fathers sisters, Emmy and Annie, came to live at the shop, one to house keep and one to look after Baby Simmonds, as I was sometimes called. Unfortunately therefore, I have no image of my Mother in the shop parlour at 12, Station Road.

### The Shop Parlour

Before I was old enough to go to school, I spent a great deal of my time in the shop parlour, increasingly aware of shapes, voices, faces ...the daily procession of customers beyond the parlours lace curtained door. There were the regulars in their working clothes coming in on their way to work for perhaps a flimsy paper pack of five Woodbines or a few ounces of shag. The more affluent might buy a packet of Players or Kensitas and also leave a small standing order for sweets or chocolates which they would pick up on a Friday night after receiving their pay. Harry the Coalman, with blackened face and red lips like some perpetual nigger minstrel, was a regular who would come in for cigarettes, whilst outside at the curb the horses harnessed to his coal cart tossed their nose bags and like as not, some neighbour would rush out with pail and shovel to collect the horse dung for their tomatoes. Stan the Paperman, would whistle his way in about teatime to buy his cigs and to deliver the Evening News from a huge bundle that he somehow managed to carry under his long arm, whilst shabby ladies in black coats and big black hats might shuffle in for a penny flypaper or a packet of Aspirins which always seemed to be prominently displayed on the counter.

Always too there were the children in and out ...noisy, excitable and reluctant to make quick choices as to which delectable morsel they might purchase. Whilst waiting for customers, my Father would often sit me on his knee and read to me. I remember a very well worn copy of the Brothers Grimm and their fantasy stories of dwarfs and wicked step-mothers, of princes and princesses, which I demanded to hear over and over again. There were also the traditional stories which my Father made up about Red Riding Hood or The Three Bears. These were often interrupted, and Dad would lift me up to sit on the big table whilst he popped into the shop to serve a customer. I was soon used to this and would peer out through the lace curtain to see who had come in and hope that he would not be too long detained. Sometimes he would draw me pin men pictures or try to teach me to write the alphabet, whilst if a Traveller arrived with his case of samples, he might carry me out to the shop in his strong arms and sit me on the counter to see what was going on while he sorted out a new order.

I remember a stout jolly Mr.Cummings who owned a sweet shop in the High Street and from whom my Father purchased most of his confectionary, a Mr Ashby whose line of business escapes me and a representative from a firm called Skeggs who seemed to deal in the many odd items. There was also Mr Hickman from the Wholesale and Retail Tobacconists in St.James Street from whom we bought most of our cigarettes. I very much enjoyed these diversions from life in the shop parlour. When I was a little older, my Father and I used to collect cigarette cards together. He helped me to fill books with these attractive cards. We had birds and butterflies, cricketers and film stars, kings and queens as well as those lovely silk flags of all nations which were found in the more expensive packets of cigarettes. There can be no harm in confessing now, that my Father sometimes connived with me in opening up packets of cigarettes to look for particular cards we needed. This was easily done in the days before the packets were encased so impenetrably in cellophane.

We also played Ludo, Draughts and Snakes and Ladders together. A favourite spot of mine, was under the shop parlour table. The heavy fringe of the table cloth came down quite low and almost enclosed me in a little private kingdom where I could play with my doll's tea set or colour in a crayoning book. Once, I sat hidden under there and ate up a thick chocolate clock which I had taken from the shop. It gave me agonies of tooth ache and I was reluctantly taken over to see Mr.French the Dentist who had a gloomy surgery on the opposite side of the road ...punishment enough for a small child. Another

time, I got myself into deep trouble, by collecting up a quantity of silver threepenny pieces and six-pences from the shop change cash box which stood on a small table in the shop parlour and supplied the change for all pound or ten shilling notes. I arranged the money in gleaming heaps inside one of the two coal boxes which stood on either side of the fireplace connected by a coppery coloured fender. It was not the value of the coins which attracted me and it is doubtful that I knew about stealing. It must have been the collectors instinct which grips young children when they are at the ordering and categorising stage of development but no-one being aware of these concepts at the time, my misdemeanour was viewed quite seriously and for me quite painfully. I had my bottom spanked. My Father never owned a cash register or ran a Bank account.

All money was kept in the tin cash box, literally under the bed at night and bills were promptly paid out of this as they fell due. The temptation of the cash box was my undoing but the lesson was learned and I never tried coin collecting again until old enough and responsible enough to serve customers myself. I also must have learned to pay up promptly and never owe a penny to anybody which has certainly been my life long habit. There were many changes in the shop parlour over the years. I canst say exactly when, but I do remember the hissing gas mantles being replaced by the magical globes which lit up at the flick of the new brown bakelite switch. I remember also, the little black grate being replaced by a yellow tiled surround with a Viking Ship tile in the centre. The old fender with the fuel boxes at either end and the high mantelshelf over the fireplace went and one day too, the wireless arrived in our shop parlour.

This bought a new interest to my Father and myself. We would listen to the commentaries on Football matches during the Winter and on the Cricket matches during the Summer. I only had the vaguest notions about these sports but picked up the names of the various team members and could run them off from memory. Likewise, the names of the Football teams. Who were Celtic and Patrick Thistles?? The names heard on the weather forecasts intrigued me too ...wherever was Lundy and Ushant and the Scilly Isles?? The Wireless also meant that marvellous innovation, Children's Hour, to which I listened avidly. I also recall the Ovaltines, whose book and badge I was later allowed to obtain. A whole new world of imagination was opened up which became a real companion to a quiet and rather lonely child, isolated for long hours in the back parlour of a small shop.

## Aunts

My Aunt Emm, was a big bosomed lady of few words, who had been a cook in Service. Her domain lay at the end of a dark passage, past the coal hole under the stairs, where a door opened and led into a small kitchen with adjacent scullery. In the kitchen, was a black leaded cooking range with large oven and tiny glowing fire where much of the cooking was done even when later a small gas stove was installed ...oh for one of those creamy rice puddings which emerged from that black oven beside the fire! In a dark corner of the scullery opposite the back door which led into the yard, was a large brick copper. also a shallow back breaking sink with a single cold tap. Monday was the traditional wash day when Aunt Emm would light the fire under the copper in preparation for a mighty boiling of sheets, pillow slips and table cloths. This was the day too, when the hasty mid-day meal would consist of the remains of the Sunday joint with pickles, boiled potatoes and bubble and squeak. However busy Aunt Emm might be, there was always a sweet to follow, perhaps rice pudding or sago or stewed fruit and custard.

My Father's shirts and stiff collars were sent to the laundry and I presume that the more delicate clothes were washed by hand in the back breaking sink but I canst recall seeing this operation. Only the memory of the large white wash remains, being hauled out from the steaming copper on the end of the copper stick whilst my Aunt Emm pushed a wisp of damp hair out of her eyes and manoeuvred the washing into a tin tub. There was always a singing kettle on the hob but large quantities of water were boiled up in the copper which was again lit on a Friday afternoon in preparation for our weekly baths. These took place in front of the kitchen fire in a long tin bath before Friday bed time and the saying was, "Friday night is Amami night", which must have come from an advertisement of some kind. The large tin bath hung on a nail amongst the creeper on the yard wall all the rest of the week; the trailing creeper, which during the Summer months was a paradise for the spider's webs and made my trips to the outside toilet with it's scrubbed wooden seat, quite a scary undertaking but which looked magnificent as it turned from green to red, then to yellow and a rusty brown with the return of Autumn.

It was long after Aunt Emms time, that the copper was finally knocked out, a deeper sink installed, that wonderful invention, the Ascot hot water system supplied all the hot water we needed and the kitchen range was supplanted by a larger gas stove and an ordinary gas fire. Eventually, we even had a modern toilet bowl installed but it was still outside in the yard where the colourful creeper trailed.

Aunt Emm was used to cooking with good food and served up some wonderful meals which seemed to send their aroma all around the kitchen for hours before they were ready to eat ...shades of the Bisto Kids ....She would make various kinds of "hot pots" sometimes using sausages instead of meat, there might be rabbit stew or steak and kidney pudding or stewed eels with mashed potatoes. Meat pie too was a favourite with a little white cracked funnel to hold up the delicious pie crust. Aunt Emm was a dab hand at pastry and puddings. Jam tart with custard, treacle pudding or suet roly poly might be dished up for "sweets" and there was always plenty.

When my Aunt Emm was not busy cooking or cleaning, washing or shopping, she liked to sit out in the kitchen by the fire reading a magazine or doing the Fashion Competition which appeared regularly in the "News of the World". On Summer days, she might sit out in the back yard on a low chair or weed and water a few plants which she coaxed to grow in the hard clay soil. I can remember Marigolds and Canterbury Bells, sweet smelling Stocks and mint for the new potatoes but nothing was very successful in our back yard. It was only Aunt Emm who ever even tried to grow anything and she was often discouraged by the clay soil and the sabotage inflicted by the local Tom cats. Aunt Emm seemed to have most of her meals in the kitchen and rarely stayed for any length of time in the shop parlour. She was a warm, stout, comforting body and I remember her best peeling potatoes in her floral wrap around overall or skewering a black hat to her head with an enormous hat-pin in preparation for the almost, daily food shopping expedition. Sometimes I would go with her up the road to buy potatoes, greens and meat for the mid-day dinner or to get the smoked haddock, kip-pers or duck eggs which my Father favoured for his breakfast.

Aunt Emm was a little hard of hearing but a great doer. Looking back it seemed as if all her life she had been quietly getting on with whatever jobs there were to hand, without fuss or complaint but I think she sometimes resented, the somewhat easier life that her sister enjoyed. My Aunt Annie, was small, thin and garrulous. She had been a Parlour Maid and apart from a little light dusting and an occasional spell behind the shop counter, her main task was taking me out for walks. She would push me for miles in my push chair, far away from the back streets around where we lived, to the rather more salubrious parts of Walthamstow where there were large well kept houses with fragrant gardens, spacious parks and quite a few areas still very countrified in appearance. My Aunt Annie, spent a lot of time in the shop parlour. Before our outings, she would sit me on the table to hook up my brown leather gaiters and to put on my warm coat with matching hat. In Summer, she would dress me in a pretty frock, adjust my yellow straw bonnet with its trim of artificial flowers and turn over the tops of my white ankle socks before buttoning on with the button hook, my Summer pair of black patent leather shoes. Baby Simmonds, was well fed, well dressed and often over protected.

Although I was a bonny child with dark brown eyes, brown hair and sturdy brown limbs, I would be dosed up with Virol, which was a brand of Codliver Oil and Malt, made to wear a fleecy Liberty bodice and often too, a vest of Thermagen wool next to my skin in Winter. No doubt these precautions were on account of my earlier serious illness and the unfortunate death of my Mother but just the same, I managed to pick up all the usual childish complaints.

Shopping with Aunt Annie, usually meant shopping for clothes. She was a bit of a nag but she loved me and certainly did her best to take me out and about. One thing was lacking however ....the companionship of other children. Until I turned five and started school, I cannot recall playing with another child of my own age. My young life pursued a course which was in marked contrast to that of many local children. Some of those who came into our shop, were barefoot, had perpetually running noses, head lice and unhealed sores. They wore the flimsiest of clothing Summer and Winter and existed in cold, damp, bug ridden houses with the wall paper peeling off and from which their parents fled as often as finances permitted, to the Coach and Horses. There they would drown their sorrows before lurching home to another round of family violence, frustration and abuse.

Where there were large families and unemployment, there were certainly these pockets of squalor and real poverty. However, most families struggled along in an effort to stay "respectable", and in those days, even in the best of circles it was wise to give the bed springs a liberal sprinkling with Keatings powder against the common bug and to see that the children's hair had a weekly going over with the nit comb. Once at school, I was certainly not immune from this procedure and can well remember bending over a sheet of clean paper whilst Aunt Annie harshly scraped my scalp with the comb. Although in my very earliest days, I was kept away from the teeming life of the surrounding streets and as a shop keeper's daughter enjoyed a life of comparative luxury, I do not remember any hint of distain or rejection of the less fortunate, from those close adults of my childhood. We were all part of the same town, of the same humanity, only we had been lucky. Both my Aunts had experienced a tough time in Service with wealthy employers. My Father had been bought up in the slums of Stepney and had seen the seamier side of life at first hand, so in no way was I helped to feel superior

to those around me. In later life, I found myself able to speak easily with all kinds of people, especially in shops and market places ...that, and an abiding sympathy for the underdog, may well have stemmed from those early influences.

Besides Aunt Emm and Auntie Annie, my Father had two other sisters. Lily had died young but Dolly was married and bringing up a young family. Her eldest, Dick was only a little younger than myself but for some reason, these relations did not cross my path until many years later. The shop parlour had but few visitors, though I do remember a visit from Great Aunt Sarah who was the sister of Grandpa Simmonds and who lived at Bow. She came to see me when I was lying ill in the huge feather bed which I shared with Emm and Annie in the large front bedroom above the shop. The blinds were down to deaden the light and I was hot, flushed and itchy with Measles. I remember a diminutive lady who smiled at me and left a gift of black grapes and Custard Cream biscuits. Again, it was many years before I really got to know Aunt Sarah but Custard Creams did remain my favourite biscuit.

## Walks

Lloyd Park was a considerable distance from where we lived but it was a favourite destination and Aunt Annie often took me there in the push chair. Just inside the huge iron gates, was a round goldfish pond enclosed in a green iron railing, the top of which just about reached to my head. Here I would get out of the push chair and peer through the railing at the large coloured fish which swam lazily in the cool, dark depths amongst the weed. This was always our first stop. Then there unfolded a mass of concrete paths wending their way around the bowling greens and between well ordered flower beds, past the tea kiosk and down towards the moat where the ducks and swans lived. This was always our second stop, for we rarely failed to take a bag of stale bread with us on these expeditions and attempt to throw pieces across the iron railings and in between the low bushes to where the birds swam and quacked on the water. Beyond here, extended a large area of playing fields where I was to come later on as a school child for Sports Days and for Country Dancing Festivals. Nearby were the swings.

I was never allowed to have a go on anything the slightest bit dangerous but could usually persuade Aunt Annie to push me on one of the "baby swings", which had wooden bars all the way round and were quite safe compared with the slide or the see-saws or the jerking horse. Just outside the entrance to Lloyd Park, was a toilet block, presided over by a large lady in a long white apron. There was a tiny low toilet for children with gleaming copper pipes. This one was free, though the Ladies had to feed a penny into a brass slot on the door of the larger toilets. We nearly always paid a visit here before leaving for the long homeward push and I have often wished that toilet blocks today, were still presided over by large ladies in white aprons. I must not forget to mention the Water House, a large, compact Victorian looking mansion which was once the home of William Morris. This was later turned into a school Dental Clinic to which I paid many an agonising visit. It is now the William Morris Art Gallery and Museum in memory of one of Walthamstow's famous sons. To one side of this old house, there was a large area of green houses, where the most gorgeous Chrysanthemums I have ever seen were grown and exhibited. Aunt Annie never neglected to take me into these green houses when the blooms were at their best and she would also point out the War Memorial which stood near there but just outside the actual bounds of the park.

The walk home, might be via back roads where Privet hedges blossomed with their pungent white flowers tidied away behind neat iron railings or where in cottage gardens, Lavender heads or bright Fuschia buds might trail within touching distance of my chubby hand. Another favoured Park not so far from home, was Selbourne Road Park. Here we might sit on a wooden seat and watch Bowls being played or Draughts on an outsize concrete square. Aunt Annie liked to gossip with any acquaintances she might meet in the park and then I would slip off and play behind the low bushes behind the seats, where large green seed pods were to be collected and burst with a delightful popping noise. Again here, there was a section of playing fields and swings, separated from the flower beds and bowling green by a tree lined alley which led through from Selbourne Rd to the top end of the Walthamstow High Street. We could therefore, walk to the park via Selbourne Rd, which had terraced houses on one side and the noisy trains chuffing by on top of a high embankment, on the other side; then home via the ever interesting High Street.

To extend this particular outing, we could pass the park and go on further towards Church Hill, where stood the Parish Church of St. Mary's, a row of old Alms Houses and some ancient shops. We might also take in The Drive, with its huge leafy trees, its large mansions and gravelly unmade road. At the time of course, I was not old enough to appreciate the interesting historical aspects of this area, but recall in particular, the colourful gardens of the Alms Houses with old people sitting in the sun and the

bumpy gravel of the Drive which was rather difficult for the push chair. Other walks of which I have some memories, include those which took us down towards the Lea Marshes or up towards Higham Hill. Coppermill Lane, led down to the low lying Lea Marshes and once the houses finished, a gravel lane continued on to where brimming reservoirs with strangely shaped pumping stations had been constructed on the open marsh land by the River Lea. It seemed a very countrified area but pushing me there was difficult and we usually stopped at the last house in Coppermill Lane which was itself most interesting.

To my young eyes, it appeared to be a veritable mansion surrounded by a farmyard. I would press my face through the railings of the large iron gates and peer into a yard full of gobbling Turkeys, hissing Geese and strutting Cockerels ...was this large house with its farm yard, ever really there? So completely had it vanished when I looked in later years, that I wondered if it had ever really existed. When we took a walk up towards Higham Hill, we would go along Blackhorse Road where the trams ran and which was lined with Warner Flats, until we reached the less populated part called Blackhorse Lane. Before the factories and houses completely took over this area, it really appeared to be out in the country, with fields and cottages which had hens pecking about in the gardens. I can distinctly remember seeing a tethered goat along Blackhorse Lane and asking my Aunt about this strange chewing creature which seemed to have a beard. Later, as a teenager, I would often escape on a Summer evening, to moon about in the tall grasses by the River Lea, listening to the trill of the skylark and scribbling teenage poetry which helped me to rationalise the confines of the shop parlour.

## Holidays

Holidays did not figure prominently in my early childhood. My Father would disappear sometimes for a week or ten days to Skegness or Yarmouth, where he liked to stay at The Garibaldi or the Y.M.C.A. and from where he would be sure to send back to us a box of kippers or bloaters. Aunt Annie would look after the shop on these occasions, for whatever happened, the shop door was never closed to customers. We visited few relations but sometimes during the Summer months, the Aunts would take me by train to visit either their parents who now lived at Southend-on-Sea, or my dead Mothers parents who still lived in the corner grocery store, opposite the school in Devonshire Road Burnham-on-Crouch. I remember very little about my Grandparents in Southend ...just a dim recollection of a dim little house with rickety furniture and vague black clad figures who left me with no feeling of relationship. I heard that Grandma Simmonds had gone blind on account of close sewing work that she had done over many years and this accounted for the fact, that my Father always supported the Institute for the Blind and had a collecting stocking hanging up in the shop. Grandpa Simmonds was a small man with a moustache and had once been a Church Warden at Christ Church Stepney but that was about all I ever knew about him and I never knew either Grand parent well.

My best memories of Southend, are of digging in the sand and of going to Howards Dairy to buy St.Ival Cheese, crusty rolls, custard tarts and milk in preparation for long spells on the beach or in the beach shelter if the weather was inclement. There were also the trips up and down the steep cliffs in the Cable car and the rides on the open train to the far end of the Southend Pier where there were slot machines, Comedy Shows and always plenty of families strolling about and enjoying the sea air. I remember too, walks to Leigh past the Cockle sheds with their steaming cauldrons of fresh cockles and visits to Priory Park where I seem to recall a small zoo and bird aviary. Also on one never to be forgotten occasion, Aunt Emm took me out in a motor boat for a trip around the Lighthouse and a man covered me up with a large tarpaulin as a protection against the spray. In her own quiet way, Aunt Emm was inclined towards the rather more adventurous activities and perhaps I have her to thank for the great exhilaration I still get from being out in a rough sea.

The Burts at Burnham-on-Crouch have left a more vivid picture of themselves in my mind. Perhaps because they appeared to me as large and hearty people. They existed too, in an atmosphere of glorious smells which wafted into their rather jumbly shop parlour from all the foodstuffs they sold in the shop. There were cheeses and hams, dried fruits and biscuits ...the A.B.C. biscuits being my favourites when I visited there ...and all the smells associated with barrels of loose vinegar and goods of all kinds which had to be either weighed up or measured out. Their remaining daughter, my Aunt Sue, her husband Jack and two young children, Margery and Roland lived there too before later moving to Chelmsford. The visit I remember best, is at the time when my cousin Roland was a toddler and Margery was just a tiny baby still at the breast. I clearly remember watching with wonder at my first sight of a tiny baby imbibing milk in this way as Aunt Sue sat on a very low chair with Roland leaning over her knees. I remember too, wandering out into their back yard and watching the dying wasps accumulate in jars of some sticky substance and of hearing the shouts of the children from the school yard just over the road. The Burts lived in a shop parlour too but it seemed to me, a brighter and jollier place than ours at 12 Station Road When I was twenty one my Father handed over to me a

Post Office Savings Book in which Grandma Burt bequeathed to me twenty five pounds. It was a pity that they seemed to just disappear from my life whilst I was so young.

Neighbours.

Our next door neighbours on the corner of Lynmouth Road were Coal Merchants who sold various grades of loose coal as well as bundles of firewood. A lady named Lucy, whom I remember because of her deformed jaw and bright blue overall, would shovel up the coal onto a huge scale and then transfer it into any suitable container which the customer had bought along. Often, this would be a broken down old pram. The coal shop was also engaged in the delivery of coal and kept the carts and several stamping, snorting horses in the stables at the back. I used to peep through cracks in the wooden fence at these great beasts and watch them flicking their tails to keep the flies off their backs. We had very little to do with the coal shop however, as we favoured another source of supply named Harry, who worked for Silks and who bought his cigarettes from our shop. Periodically, Harry would stop his horse drawn cart outside by the curb and hump through on his back several sacks of the best Nobs ...but only after Aunt Emm had laid down some newspapers in the passage and shut tight the door leading to her clean kitchen.

The shop on our other side, was extremely dim and dusty too and smelt strongly of wood shavings. Firewood was also available here, dispensed by another Harry. This Harry was tall, though stooped. He had a droopy moustache and large yellow teeth. This Harry made odd little cages for sale of the kind which might hold a small bird or a few white mice. He always seemed to be busy making these boxes amongst the wood shavings, though I never saw anyone leaving the shop with one. On dark Winter afternoons, he worked by the light of a candle. In the shop parlour behind Harry's domain, there lived two black clad ladies; a tall one named Emma and a short, stout one named Sarah. I never knew what relationship they were, if any, to Harry.

Emma would sometimes ask my Aunt Emm to go in for a cup of tea but she was always discouraged from taking me in with her, as my Father thought I might catch something from the many cats that Emma harboured there in rather squalid surroundings. Nevertheless, they always spoke kindly to me and I was allowed in their shop to buy a bag of firewood occasionally. I often wonder what happened to the pretty fluted Victorian cups and saucers which they sometimes gave me from their dresser.

A little further along Station Road was a Laundry which specialised in the 'bag wash'. Here huge bundles of dirty washing done up in coarse linen bags, were deposited and then returned all damp and crumpled, ready to be ironed. We only used the best wash and I was allowed to take my Father's stiff collars and best shirts along and to get the ticket from a lady with very large arms who used to hang all over the counter. Next to the Laundry, was a tiny shop where people would take their wireless accumulators to be re-charged. This shop all acid and wires, was presided over by an extremely tall man with a pipe, whose name was Mr. Brookes. There was also a fried fish and chip shop where a man was once badly bitten by a Chow they kept and who came running out with a bloody towel wrapped round his arm. Next to this shop, was a Barbers with a red and white pole outside and further along past the top of Clacton Road was a Dairy cum Bakers, where milk could be purchased by the jug full and where beautiful cheese cakes, topped with icing and wisps of coconut, were to be had.

The real aristocrats of the road however, were the Tappenden family on the corner of Station Rd and Hartington Road. They kept the local Off Licence and actually owned a car by the time I knew them in the late thirties. There were three Tappenden girls and the youngest, Geogina was my best friend by the time I went to Junior School. On the opposite side of the road, there was Mr. Gipps who kept the corner paper shop. Mr. Gipps had a wooden leg, a legacy from the first war and he supplied our morning copy of the News Chronicle as well as my comics, once I was old enough to be allowed The Dandy and later, The Girl's Crystal.

Next to the paper shop, there was another Barber's shop with Mr. Evans downstairs and his wife Mrs. Evans keeping the Ladies Saloon upstairs. They were a neat and dapper couple to whom we rarely spoke. Next door to them, was the surgery of Mr. French the Dentist, one of whose daughter's was eventually destined to become my Step-Mother and whose acquaintance I had already made on painful occasions. Further along the road, was Frank, the Cobbler who would toss a handful of tacks into his mouth and spit them out as he needed them to tack on new soles and heels. The children found this performance very interesting to watch as they passed by on their way to the nearby school which lay round the back of the shops on this side of the road. On turning left out of our shop doorway, passing the coal shop and crossing over the top of Lynmouth Road you would come across three more well established traders whom we regularly patronised.



There was Harrisons the Chemist where we would buy items such as Vic Vapour Rub, Zambuck ointment or Germaline or corn plasters. Next door was a Dairy run by Mr. Davis, a big hearty Welshman who took milk around the streets in a small handcart whilst his small wife looked after the counter sales. Third in this group, was Lavis the Butcher, whose daughter Dora, tall and elegant with her hair in a bun, acted as Cashier for her Father who chopped up the meat in response to each customers needs. These were our immediate neighbours before Station Road gave way to St. James Street and a rather different kind of shop where not many families actually lived on the premises.

St. James Street.

Although we lived in Station Road the Station itself was called St. James Street Station and was situated in nearby St. James Street where there was the large High Anglican Church of St. James built in the early eighteen hundreds about the same time as the railway. St. James Street, was a short but busy thoroughfare, with tram lines running through the centre and with railway lines carried over the top of the road by means of a bridge just near the actual Station. Station Road led directly into St. James Street and from our shop door step, we could both see and hear the double decker trams screeching around the corner by the Coach and Horses.

We could also hear, if not actually see, the noisy steam trains, snorting and puffing into the Station. "Stopping all Stations to Liverpool Street" the Guard would call, or, "Stopping all Stations to Chingford," if the train was going in the opposite direction towards that quieter more countrified district. St. James Street Church, where I was later sent to Sunday School, was a great cold barn of a place, heavy with the smell of incense. It had to compete with the Brewery Tap Pub just opposite, the actual Brewery in the small street just alongside and the Coach and Horses but a few steps further on. There was always a pungent beery smell around the area, much the same as the smell which emanated from the whiskers of an old man who played a Barrel Organ outside our shop on a Friday evening and who would come in and hold out his battered leather pouch for a contribution. My Father always gave him a coin and said that, it was a penny to go round the next street. At one stage, I remember that the old man had a scrawny monkey on a chain. He would stand in the curb with the monkey on his shoulder, turning the handle of his ancient organ and soliciting the home going workers or the evening shoppers, for coins.

Opposite the Church and most suitably placed, was a long established Undertaker, Alf English and Sons and on one corner of St. James Street and Station Road was Skinners, the Oil shop. Again, it is the smells which predominate ....the smell of Paraffin and chopped firewood which assailed the nostrils as one went up the steps into the dim interior, where household goods of all kinds hung from the ceiling and stood out from the walls. Items like brooms and buckets and wooden clothes horses, ladders, shovels and shopping bags. One could also buy matches and candles, night lights and oil for all kinds of lighting and heating appliances as well as those strange, black, free standing oil heaters. I vaguely remember Mr. Skinner, as a bent old man in brown overall and gum boots, putting some goods outside the shop on show each morning and taking them in again at night. The miscellaneous assortment of goods for sale was certainly a source of wonder to me but it is the smells which linger on.

I liked to linger round by the Brewery if I could get my Aunt Annie to take me past there at the commencement of one of our walks. We could stop and watch huge burly men in leather aprons man handling great barrels of beer up into the dray carts and admire the waiting horses with their gleaming coats and burnished hoofs, tossing their rough jute nosebags and scattering small clouds of oats onto the road. There was also a flour mill in the vicinity with much hauling of floury sacks up through a doorway high in the wall, by men covered from head to heel in white powdery flour. I used to wonder just what went on in these establishments but was always one to look and wonder rather than ask questions, for in those days, to be in favour, children were to be seen but not heard.

There were shops on both sides of St. James Street. These however were mostly of the lockup variety, where families did not live behind in shop parlours. The often quite spacious rooms above the shops were either used as store rooms or were inhabited by families unconnected with the business carried on below. It was here in St. James Street, that I first became aware of the household name of Sainsburys. There was a deep and rather narrow Sainsbury shop, right next to the Coach and Horses. The interior of this shop was completely covered with gleaming white tiles except for where an occasional blue and white Delft patterned tile was interposed. I seem to remember that the floor was tiled in black and white. Assistants behind the long counter, wore white coats and stood ready poised to plunge their moist wooden patters into the mountains of yellow butter. They would then pat into shape, a pound or a half pound, a quarter pound or even a 2 oz. piece, whip it quickly from the pol-

ished brass scales and deftly parcel it up in a piece of grease proof paper. Large Cheeses too, stood ready to be attacked with silvery cheese wire or German sausage sliced in the twinkling of an eye.

These operations were fascinating for a small child to watch and once again, the smells were all pervading. Sausages, Bacon, Brawn, Ham, Cheese and Butter all exposed and ready for immediate purchase, imparted their own delicious flavours to the air. In Summer of course, Blue Bottles buzzed and then white butter muslin would protect the Dairy produce and a large circular fan whirr overhead.

I can remember nearly all the shops in St. James Street and many of the stalls too which were allowed on one side in those days of the tram and the horse and cart when the whole width of the road was not needed for motor transport. Next to Sainsburys, there was Balls Bros. the Off Licence, then Nokes the Butchers ....a large shop with many assistants and deeply strewn with sawdust. Then came Rosins Bakery exuding delightful smells of warm bread, sugary jam doughnuts and rich slab fruit cake. Further along there was Briggs the Chemist and a Tobacconist whose name escapes me, before you came to the Cinema and then the Station.

Once in Junior School and 7/8 years old, one of my escapes from the shop parlour on a Saturday morning, was to visit this Cinema. These sessions were known as, "the Tuppenny Rush,". Long before opening time, a great horde of youngsters would begin to line up in the alley way between the Station and the Cinema, pushing and chattering and gouging out the brickwork with their pennies until the doors opened. Then in they rushed to grab their favourite seats and to enjoy a blissful couple of hours with Tom Mix and Trigger, Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin or Mickey Mouse.

I also seem to remember some early films about Space Travel and of course, we loved the diet of Cowboys and Indians, Cops and Robbers, Goodies and Baddies, whom we would either boo or cheer whilst shelling our peanuts, chewing our yards of liquorice skipping rope or blowing bubble gum ...though I was never allowed to have bubble gum myself. The Cinema certainly needed a good sweeping out after those exuberant Saturday morning sessions.

Past the Station, was Sansons Men's Wear where my Father bought his stiff collars. Then there was True-Form Shoes and Titus Ward, the Grocers. This was a real old fashioned Grocery with sawdust on the floor and square tins of loose biscuits fronting the counter behind which stood the assistants each in their own small section surrounded by jars of this and boxes of that, ready to weigh up and to put out each order and to tot up the bill. Biscuits, Sugar, Currents, Sultanas and much more, could be bought by the pound and shovelled into the stiff blue paper bags.

Shop Assistants worked very long hours and always seemed to be on the go. When they were not busy with customers, they were busy weighing up loose goods or tidying up their counter or putting up weekly orders which would be delivered later by bicycle. This shop was a paradise at Christmas time, when there would be boxes of dates and candied fruit, sumptuous Christmas cakes and tins of fruit to crowd out from the shelves the ordinary every day grocery items ...and the smells!!

Just past Titus Wards, there was another small Bakery with a row of windows at pavement level, though which the heat from the underground baking arose. I used to peer down here and see the sweating men in their shirt sleeves, putting up the dough and sliding huge trays of bread in and out of the ovens. Here, we might buy a brown Hovis loaf from a small lady who had her hair arranged in large plaited buns one over each ear and sometimes too, a delicious custard tart which just melted in the mouth. The last shop on this side of the road, with windows stretching right around the corner into the Walthamstow High Street, was the Fifty Shilling Tailors. This was the side of St. James Street too, where a variety of stalls were allowed to stand in the road alongside the curb. Several sold fruit and vegetables and I can remember a cats meat stall where two pennyworth of cooked horse flesh wrapped up in newsprint, could be bought for the cat or liver and lights for the dog but it was always referred to as if the meat was for cats only.

It must be remembered, that shopping in those days was a daily occurrence. No one had refrigeration, very few had any means of transport in which to convey food for a whole week or the money with which to buy large quantities. Every morning house wives would take their baskets and bags up the road and shop for what they needed or could afford for that day. Shopping took up quite a lot of time but it was a very sociable task and you nearly always met someone with whom you could stop for a chat.

On the other side of St. James Street, starting from the Station Road end opposite the Coach and

Horses, was a cafe called the Coffee shop into which local workmen would disappear for a cup of tea and a sandwich. Next came the Pawn Shop. This was a large establishment with three brass balls overhead and was very well patronised by local people when they were short of ready cash. Unclaimed second hand clothes could be bought from a series of stalls along the open frontage of the shop, whilst jewellery and more valuable items were sold in an enclosed part of the shop. Then there was Humprey and Gordons, who dealt in Building Supplies, a Co-op Grocery, Magnus's who sold wet and fried fish, a Bank and also another, larger Sainsbury's shop. Finally, on this side of St. James Street there was Smith's who sold toys and fishing tackle, Edwards, the Opticians, where a huge pair of bespectacled eyes looked down from the second story and a shop selling shoes and slippers which I believe was called Brahams.

The few little roads which ran off this side of St. James Street, were rather different in character. There was Grange Road with the Pawn shop on the corner and Frederick Street with the Co-op Grocery store on the corner. Both these roads contained some of the poorer housing of the area, whilst Edward Road, which had the second Sainsbury's store on the corner, was a road of Warner's flats; very neat, much sort after accommodation.

The High Street.

Shops and shopping seem to figure very prominently in my early memories. Perhaps this was because other shop keepers and stall holders were our customers and we were theirs, so we got to know one another fairly well. It was only a very short distance from the confines of our shop parlour and left along St. James Street, before one reached that Mecca of shops and shopping, the Walthamstow High Street.

Here was a whole mile of shops and stalls; noise, smells, shops and bustle, where the weekend shopping was done and where a small child could get jostled and pushed and possibly 'lost', if not tightly clutching the hand or coat of a grown up.

The crowds were particularly thick around the many stalls, for every stall holder was a showman and entertainer, besides a salesman. Bargains abounded ...cheap crockery, table linen and patent medicines were popular stalls. My Aunts liked to stop at the patent medicine stalls which sold corn plasters, cough mixtures and Beechams Pills ...guaranteed to cure,coughs, colds, pains in the chest and pimples on the nose, my Father used to say of these 'quacks'.

The Fruit and Vegetable stalls nearly always had their produce displayed with artistic flair and were often as not, presided over by a member of the Worsley family, whilst the 'fish families', the Legus's, Magnus's or Menzies were well known on the fish stalls. Often, a shop would also have its own stall outside. Particularly fascinating to me, was the stall outside Menzies Eel and Pie shop which sold live eels and skinned rabbits. One could stand on the pavement outside the shop and sniff the succulent smell of hot parsley sauce soaking into the hot meat pies and mashed potatoes or into the stewed eels and mash, whilst watching the live eels on the stall, squirming about in their metal trays. When a customer came along, a slippery eel would be hoisted up onto the chopping board and swiftly dispatched into two inch pieces ready for the pot. One could also watch the rabbits being skinned. The legs were tied round the uprights of the stall and the fur expertly peeled off the unfortunate creature. I do not remember feeling any revulsion at these gory spectacles. Aunt Emm often made purchases there and we all loved stewed eels or stewed rabbit dinners.

The Eel and Pie shop stayed so much in my mind, that years later when expecting my first baby, stewed eels was one of the delicacies that I yearned for and resulted in several visits to the still thriving Eel and Pie shop.

There were also many shops and stalls in the High Street selling clothing. Underwear and slippers, dresses and shirts, socks, stockings and gloves. It was a delight for the bargain hunter. My Aunts usually patronised either Leslie Bros. or Madame Cowen's when they wanted new Winter coats but at other times, they kept well away from these two establishments for fear of being enticed in by the very persistent ladies who strolled up and down outside the shops to point out unrepeatable bargains to unwary shoppers.

Many of my own clothes, including my Summer straw hats, were purchased at a large Department Store called Lidstone's which was situated at the St James Street end of the High Street not far from the "nothing over 2d." and later, the "nothing over 6d." Woolworths Store.

There was an elegant, subdued air in the carpeted emporium of Lidstones. Tall cane bottomed stools

stood alongside the glass fronted counters, from which the black clad shop assistants would pluck drawers full of gloves, handkerchiefs, ribbons or stockings. Wires hummed overhead, as bills and change whizzed along in metal containers between the sales assistants and the cashier in her glass booth. Transactions in Lidstones, were pregnant with hushed mystery in marked contrast to the noisy buying and selling in the market outside.

Outside Lidstones, in the gutter, there used to stand a little round moustached man in a bowler hat, who sold hot chestnuts, freshly roasted on a roaring fire contained in a large metal drum on his barrow ...oh, the smell and the warmth! Sometimes too there stood a grey haired lady with a cage of "love" birds (budgies?). For a copper or two, she would encourage one of the birds to perch on her stick and peck out from a tray, a slip of paper with a fortune written on it. Aunt Emm, who was herself adept at reading tea leaves, could be relied upon to stop here and let me watch for a while. The High Street with its vitality and pungent smells, was always full of noisy interest to a young child. On dark Wintry afternoons, great hissing pressure lamps threw their yellow glow over the goods on display and the stall holders stamped about on the slushy pavements, swinging their arms in an effort to keep warm. There was no hanging about at these times but more likely, a quick shopping expedition and then home to a warm drink and a warm up in front of the fire.

At Christmas time, the High Street was all pandemonium from early morning until late at night. Mandarin oranges and many varieties of nuts appeared on the stalls from far away places and great rows of feathered poultry hung upside down outside the butcher's shops where noisy auctions would take place on Christmas Eve. There were many exotic items which would only be seen at Christmas time and certainly, this was the only time of the year when most families would be able to indulge in poultry. I can remember Aunt Emm sitting on a low chair in the kitchen, plucking the Christmas chicken. A special treat for me, might be a bag of Brazil nuts to be cracked with a hammer in front of the fire. These have always been my favourite nuts and still seem special to Christmas time and not an item to be bought all the year round.

The St. James Street end of High Street always struck me as being the busiest, the noisiest and the most congested end of the High Street though on a Saturday it was crowded with shoppers all the way up to the very end where it met Hoe Street. Besides shops and stalls, there were two Cinemas. The Dominion down Buxton Road just off the High Street near the St. James Street end and the Carlton, about two thirds of the way up, near to the Hoe Street end. Near the top end too, was the very well patronised Walthamstow Palace. Here there were weekly music hall type of shows and always a Pantomime at Christmas. My Aunts enjoyed visits to both the Cinema and to the Palace. Occasionally I went with them and I certainly always went to the Christmas Pantomime. I remember being rather puzzled by the song and dance acts and the comedians whose acts intruded into the traditional stories of Cinderella or Little Red Riding Hood, that I knew so well. The only film that I remember going to with the Aunts, was to see Paul Robeson in "Sanders of the River". That deep haunting chant of the river as the canoe paddles dipped rhythmically into the water, has stayed with me over the years.

Towards the top end too, was the Public Baths and Swimming Pool, the Carnegie Public Library and the old Monoux School buildings. These places however, had no particular significance in my early childhood. It was the part of High Street nearest to home which added colour and excitement to the quiet tenor of my life in the shop parlour.