

When Phones Were Immobile
and

Lived In

RED BOXES

by

Gladys Hobson

A pick and mix assortment
of childhood memories

1939-1953



Illustrations by Gladys Hobson
and cartoonist Gary Lyons

When told that a son of a friend was going to climb Kilimanjaro as part of a project to raise money for a children's education programme to combat AIDS in Africa, I wanted to help. In appreciation of my own childhood, I decided to write this little account of life as I lived it in the 1940's to early 1950's. All income from the book's sale has been promised to the above cause.

All incidents in this book are as I remember them but names may have been changed occasionally to preserve privacy.

Copyright © Gladys Hobson 2004.

All rights reserved. This work may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, lent, or hired without the permission of the author.

Published by Magpies Nest Publishing.

Printed and bound by Stramongate Press, Kendal.

Further copies may be ordered from:

Magpies Nest, Old Hall Drive, Ulverston. LA12 7DG

email: redboxes@thehobsons.co.uk

Or www.ifyouwrite.com.



When Phones Were Immobile and lived in RED BOXES

Contents

Introduction		5
Chapter One	School-days: sewage, sex, sport and school dinners	7
Chapter Two	No NHS	23
Chapter Three	Of God and Bananas	37
Chapter Four	Of war and play	47
Chapter Five	Innocent youth or just plain daft?	61
Chapter Six	Family affairs	75
Chapter Seven	I want to be a designer	85
Chapter Eight	Moving on to where I started!	99
Chapter Nine	Boys!	109
Chapter Ten	You shall go to the ball	119
Conclusion	The beginning of the new	127

Acknowledgements

It isn't easy teaching an old dog new tricks and my thanks go to my son Simon for his patience in the production process of this little book. My thanks also to Norman Price of Manuscript Appraisals for donating his proof-reading skills and to Roy Scott of www.ifyouwrite.com Writers' Showcase for his encouragement and making this book available on his site and donating the income. Gary Lyons turned up at just the right time to add his cartoon humour and I thank him most sincerely.



Introduction

I was waiting in the bank a few days ago when someone's mobile started ringing. A young woman took the phone from her pocket and said to me, "What would we do without them?"

I had to smile. I remember the days before mobiles; when outer space was the realm of Flash Gordon fantasy, and only doctors, businesses and posh people had a telephone installed – the rest of us had to queue at the red box down the road. I was well into my teens before I actually used one. But then, whom could I possibly ring?

It isn't difficult to remember when I first handled a phone. At the time, I was working on the cutting bench in the outerwear department of an old factory in Nottingham. No one in that building could have been more sensitive or naive than I was – nor as incredibly stupid!

One morning the overlooker called me over to his desk.

"A call for you, Gladys," he said.

It was with great fear and trepidation that I took the receiver from him.

"I've never used a phone," I said, my hands shaking. "What do I do?"

"Put that end to your ear and speak in there," he instructed with considerable clarity.

What could be easier?

But my imagination was already working at full speed. My father had been ill for some time; he must be dead! Worse, he'd lost his temper and had done something dastardly! No, it must be my poor mother rushed off to hospital! The house has caught fire, the Trent has flooded, the dog has been run over!

"Yes?" I said into the mouthpiece, fearful of what was to come.

"Gladys?" the voice queried.

"Yes," I said, my mouth dry with anxiety.

"Bring the sheets," the voice demanded.

“What?”

“The sheets, bring the sheets!”

Who was this person demanding sheets? Why should I have sheets, except on my bed? I must have got it wrong.

“The sheets?” I queried, my brain in a whirl and my wet palm gripping the receiver to stop it shaking.

“The sheets!” the voice bellowed. “Bring the bloody sheets. Now!”

Tears were about to run down my face. I turned to the overlooker and handed him the receiver.

“I can’t hear what he’s saying,” I lied.

He took the instrument of torture from my shaking hand. He spoke a few words into the mouthpiece, grinned, and turned to me.

“The wrong Gladys,” he said, with an apologetic shrug of his shoulders.

He called to the machinists’ overlooker, “Gladys, take the production sheets into the office, please. Mr Raymond wants them.”

I had been speaking on the phone to the deputy manager. I hurried to the toilet!

For ages afterwards, I dreaded the phone ringing. But of course, need and ambition force us to adapt and accommodate to modern gadgets.

This little book is a trip down memory lane. Just dip into its pages. If you think it quite unbelievable what we thought and did in those days, believe me, we would have laughed at the very idea of men on the moon and a handy phone in your pocket! As for sex, that was as hush-hush as State secrets. But, delve into these pages and all will be revealed.

Chapter One

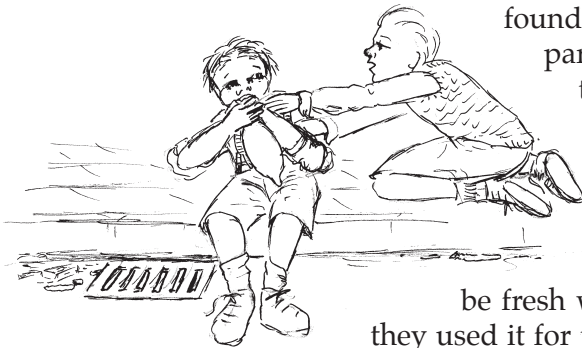
School-days: sewage, sex, sport and school dinners

When I was young, it was normal to have single-sex schools. That suited me very well. Boys were loud, rude and dirty. Apart from which, their mothers favoured them, and that made them pushy and arrogant. I dare say we were jealous of our brothers, but why should they get extra helpings of pudding? What did they do that we didn't? We girls were the labourers in the home. We were the good children.

But some senior girls let our school down – the rotters! They were thirteen and should have known better. However, I'm pleased to say the miscreants came from posh homes. They never had anything to do with us lesser mortals, and so we were not dragged into their criminal activity.

We had been given the privilege of touring the new local sewage and waste disposal works. The sewage was very pongy but it was interesting to see what was floating on top – certain rubber objects that were often

found in alleys and in the park. Boys would blow them up like balloons.



Why would people put balloons down the lavatory? The liquid in the final tank was supposed to

be fresh water, and the man said they used it for their tea. As far as I was concerned, it already looked like tea.

We viewed the latest means of recovering scrap metal, had a peek in the fiery furnace and watched them bundling waste paper for recycling. The naughty girls found a package of private letters written by a soldier to his wife and were in fits of giggles as they passed them around for their buddies to read. *'When I come home, you know what'* became words of awe, wonder, thrills

and tremendous excitement. The girls were going around telling others that the wife now had a baby – apparently from doing ‘*You know what*’.

But what had the married couple actually done? The girls obviously knew something I didn’t and I found that irksome. We outcasts heard that the girls were in big trouble – the wife in question came to school and demanded action or the police would be called in. It was a case of “He-he!” as far as I cared.

As we were expected to leave school at fourteen, we were to begin lessons about sex. What excitement! We were to be introduced to the mysteries of our very existence and that gave us a tremendous feeling of awe.

We gathered in the biology classroom with its long benches and stools, its wall pictures and never-used equipment; its cabinets and raised platform for the teacher’s demonstration bench. Compared with the rest of the tatty school, it was a grandiose place of learning. There could be no more fitting stage for the demise of our ignorance and the birth of new knowledge.

Textbooks were given out. We were given the page number. A little embarrassed, but decidedly curious, in silence we turned the pages. What did we find? The life cycle of the single-celled animal!

What a let-down. The biology teacher did not get away with it though. A few pages away we found something very interesting – pictures of frogs mating. So that was how “it” was done!

But if our school was shy about sex, our dog wasn’t. Every time she was on heat, she did a lot of humping with her bedding and anything else that happened to be handy. Mother would worry about her. Poor dog; was she being denied release of natural instincts? Should Jenny be allowed to have puppies? Of course, we girls thought puppies would be a very good idea. A large brown and white spaniel-type dog was sniffing around the house at the time. Mother decided he would make a decent mate for Jenny. We opened the side entrance gate to let him in. He didn’t oblige. Mother went out and dragged him in! He was introduced to Jenny in the garden and we went inside to let them get on with it. After a while, Jenny started howling. Why howl

when she got what she wanted? Mother was now worried that Jenny was being hurt and went out to rescue her. But the deed was over and the borrowed dog was trotting off home. A few days later, my mother saw the borrowed dog with its owner. She told the lady that her dog had got at our dog.

“Really? I would be very interested if she has puppies. He’s a very old dog.”

Jenny had a beautiful litter. They were all like their dad. Now, was that how babies came to be born? But that did not explain all the touching and kissing business that humans engaged in. Or did it?

Today, I see kids going to school labouring with huge bags on their backs. At my girls’ school, I had nothing to take except ingredients on cookery days. Our education was simple: English, arithmetic, geography, history, biology, art, domestic science, sewing, religion and physical education. All textbooks were kept at school and all work was done at school. We had longer hours but life in those days was uncomplicated, in spite of rationing, certain restrictions, and the occasional bomb and air-raid siren.

For a year we had a whole day for learning domestic skills. There was no book learning. It was entirely practical. Half the day, we washed dirty clothes, and ironed with flat irons heated on the range; only the teacher used the one electric iron, which was plugged into the ceiling light. Washing was by hand or by boiling. We rinsed, wrung, rinsed with dolly-blue, wrung, rinsed with starched water, then finally wrung and put to dry on a pulley airer. Dirty clothes were soaked, cuffs and collars scrubbed, and if you accidentally took to school a grubby handkerchief in your washing bag, it had to be given disgusting treatment. Salt-water helps loosen green mucus and it’s just not nice before lunch!

We cooked simple dishes. Being wartime, there could be nothing fancy. And with nothing wasted, it was a wonderful foundation for good housekeeping: economical cakes and pastries, nutritious stews and pies. To make our Christmas cake we had to substitute soya for almonds, dates for sultanas, and a mix of condensed milk for icing. It was that good, my brother ate half the cake as soon as I got it home – greedy boy! Sometimes

there would be little else than vegetables in the meat and potato pie, but they always looked great with their scalloped edging. And what did it matter if I accidentally used ginger instead of pepper? They were days of making do, pulling together, no complaints and getting on with it.

We had blackberries from the hedgerows, windfall apples from neighbours' trees, cabbages from the allotment, and eggs from our own few hens. My brothers got the double-yoked ones, of course. Occasionally, we had a small share of a pig kept in someone's backyard. Sweets were rationed but we were all the better for it. Mother made our own jam with the sugar ration and she pickled eggs, preserved fruit, preserved the grease from the Christmas goose for our poorly chests in winter, riddled the coal dust to help our fuel ration, and did many other things to keep the home fires burning.

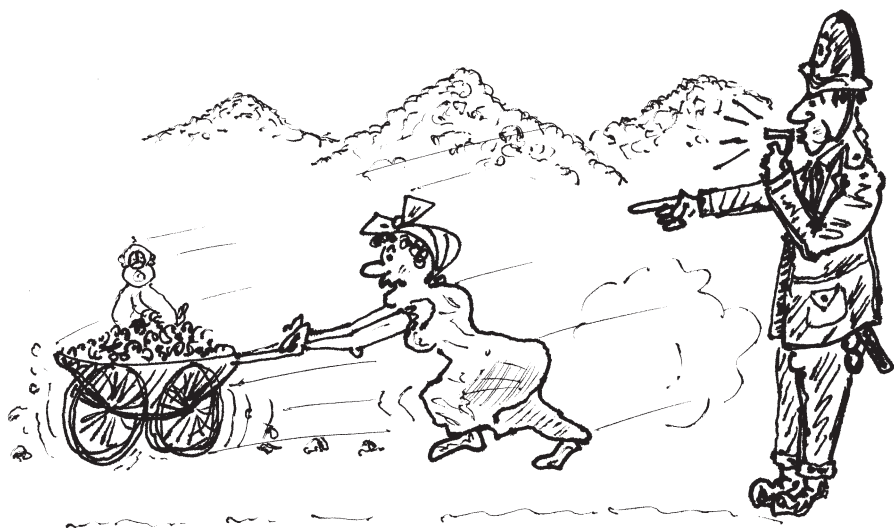
Unfortunately our fires seldom fitted the picture that propaganda merchants liked to get around. Coal rationing made life difficult. There was no central heating. We had no electric fires, and power supplies were uncertain anyway. The kitchen range needed coal for heating water as well as for warmth. Gas pressure was low and would often fall even lower when a cake was in the oven. Our coats hung on the back of the kitchen door – not just as a place to keep them, but to get them dry. Mother would often go down to the coal wharf near the station to beg the coalman to bring us some fuel. It was very rare to have a fire in a room other than the kitchen.

One winter we joined with a number of other desperate people, digging through the wharf's waste heaps to sift out fragments of coal. When a policeman arrived, a stream of women and kids with baskets, mothers with prams and pushchairs with babies sitting on top of nutty-slack, would rush from the site. The policeman would wave his arms and issue threats but no arrests were ever made. It was from cold damp homes that we left for school. School was warm and dry and a good place to be.

Clothes were on coupons. No worry about designer labels in those days; all our clothes bore the utility label. We had been taught at school to make do and mend. So I darned, stitched and

patched, unpicked and made new. Everything was a challenge. No worry over what and how much to buy. Bread was brown or white, bacon was lean or fatty, butter was butter and marge was marge. You were allowed your ration and when you shopped, you handed over your ration book and asked for butter, lard, marge, cheese, and sugar. You bought your meat ration and queued for offal and fish. We were taught how to make the most out of what we had, and encouraged to swallow our daily spoonful of free cod liver oil and malt. We never went without and were seldom hungry. When bread was in short supply, our domestic science teacher told us that potatoes were better for us. When the potato crop failed, bread was the healthier food. Our parents and teachers taught us to adapt to circumstances and be satisfied with what we got.

During the long years of food rationing, Mother usually only allowed us to have either marge or jam, but not both, on our bread. Blackcurrant puree became a delicious substitute for jam, and we had it on bread and sometimes on puddings. Some poorer people sold their clothes and sweet coupons; there were always people ready to buy them. In times of emergency, such as a flood, food parcels arrived from the USA. Occasionally, Yanks would hand out goodies and nylons for either favours or out of friendship. Everyone became familiar with SPAM and



different ways of using it. We ate other tinned food, but it could only be purchased using your coupon allowance. Tinned salmon and tinned fruit were especially prized and saved for special occasions. We queued for hours for sausage rolls, pastries and bread, which for most of the time were free of coupons. When soya flour became a good substitute for just about everything, my mother made us sweets and we ate ourselves sick.

The introduction of school milk was great. Before little bottles arrived, it was served to us in beakers. We had it in the large art room. You went through the door, picked up your beaker, drank your milk while you were walking round the room and then went straight out, having put down your empty container. Milk in little bottles was wonderful. When not heated up by the hot radiators, we had ice to crunch.

Then came school dinners. Fantastic! For one shilling (5p) we had a plateful of dinner and a pudding with custard. You were not allowed to leave anything on your plate but that was all right most of the time. However, being a greedy girl, I went back for seconds of a peas and beans mix. They still had some left over. After another helping, I threw up in the lavatory! All that food was so very new to me, and how awful to see it going to waste down the pan!

School discipline was strict but you knew where you were and what you could get away with – nothing! Take a day off and the school-board man would be calling on your parents. Be cheeky and it would be a visit to the horrid headmistress. Pass a book forward or talk at the wrong time and the result was a whack on the hand from Miss Crosby. Stammer on your reading and receive a caustic comment from Miss Smith: “No wonder you failed your eleven-plus oral exam, Gladys. You can do better than that.”

A few teachers were warm and friendly and had more creative methods of teaching. School plays and concerts were organised, whereupon my friend and I were daft enough to put on our little acts. When asked to create a natural aquarium in the biology room, we were an hour late getting to another teacher’s boring lesson. Our biology teacher was a gem and we would do

anything for her. But it isn't what she taught that I remember her for, it is the witness she gave about her baptism. She told us how she went down into the water and came up a changed person. Angels came into it somewhere and the look on her face was quite something. She glowed.

Having failed the eleven plus oral (not surprising when I told them I wanted to be a dancer or an artist) I later passed the test for pupils in their fourteenth year to go to the Nottingham Secondary Art School. It was a two-year course; half the day spent on regular subjects and half doing nothing but art and craft. There were only thirty pupils to a class instead of forty-three or more. I blossomed!



I had a grant for a black blazer and badge, two shirts, a grey jumper and a tie. I bought a second-hand grey skirt for five shillings but it fell to my ankles when the zip broke. To save money, my disabled dad thonged together a grey leather satchel. It was a lovely bit of craftsmanship but everyone else had the usual tan leather ones. Because the uppers of my shoes were worn, my dad stitched on little patches. I felt the shame of

poverty terribly, especially when, instead of the uniform navy gabardine, I had only a second-hand pea-green coat to wear. In the playground I stood out like a huge parrot. Needless to say, I wore my blazer throughout most of the two winters.

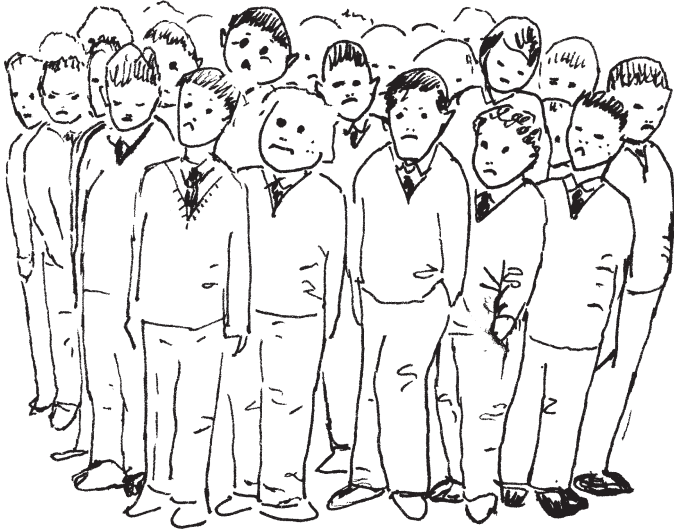
I had other essential items throughout my schooling: a vest to keep me warm and to give tenuous support to my growing breasts; and that inevitable bastion of defence – our navy-blue bloomers. Unfortunately, they tended to bulge the skirts of the yellow dresses we were allowed to wear in summer. Of course, elastic had a habit of perishing, or breaking free of the stitching, and could let you down badly. Sometimes you had to rely on the leg elastic to spare your blushes. Thankfully, skirts were at mid-calf length! Gym knickers were useful for PE and it was handy to have their secret pocket. With classes of boys at the art school, perhaps they were essential. The girls' lavatory was on a half-landing and the boys had a habit of hanging around the bottom of the staircase. I guess, seeing a bare knee between sock and knickers must have been a very erotic experience, or they would not have risked being caught where they were not allowed. Girls today have got it wrong – too much on display is not necessarily alluring, but what is hidden can send boys wild! I should mention that the headmaster was a bit of a tyrant. He dragged two boys out of their classroom for whistling at my friend and me when we had taken in their crate of milk at playtime, and gave them a good caning for their disgraceful behaviour.



But boys will be boys. Some of them joined the photography club and made the most of the darkroom, or so a friend, who was a member, told me. Since I saw my friend in the arboretum, sitting in a shelter with a boy's hand inside her blazer, I did not find it hard to believe. What did they do in the dark? Frankly, at that time, I thought touching was abhorrent – only allowed by tarts – and I could not understand why she allowed it.

The only time the boys officially mixed with the girls was during the last term of the two-year course. Since it was a two-classroom school with no hall – the other year’s two classes would be at the Art College – they joined us for dancing lessons in the YMCA gymnasium. What a lark!

Some of the boys may have acted macho to impress the girls in the playground but when it came to exposing their inadequacies in front of a whole class of girls they were all scared rabbits.



They bunched up together one side of the hall while we girls were at the other. Of course, it has to be said that we had had a bit of practice. But it was not a good thing for us girls to dance together. Both my friend and I were well endowed in the upper regions; we couldn’t stop giggling as we constantly bumped our assets.

Being awkward with the dance movements was embarrassing for the boys, but being pressed up to us girls is what they dreaded most. The teacher was without mercy. When the boys refused to choose a partner, she would grab a lad by the wrist, drag him across the floor, and slap him against a girl, chest to breast! Fearful of the same treatment, the rest of the boys would immediately speed across the room to find a partner.

“You can’t dance at a distance. Hold your partner close up,” she would bellow, frustrated by the boys’ obstinacy.

Of course, they did no such thing. Whatever they might have got up to in the arboretum, in that dance lesson they fought shy of close contact. So the teacher went around slapping the couples together. The boys’ hormones inevitably played tricks with their anatomy. Needless to say, we had some very hot and flushed young men in that dancing class.

I can’t say we were thrilled at dancing with coy stiff-limbed boys. They seemed to have a habit of practising football tackles in the middle of a quickstep.



But, I have to admit that dancing with the boys was preferable to playing hockey with the girls. One girl in particular had a reputation for knocking out the front teeth of her opponents with her hockey stick. Apparently she never fouled; it was the others who got in the way! She would carve a path through the opposition like a hot knife through butter. Scaredy-cat girls like me just ran out of her way and hoped she would trip up on her own hockey stick. I can see that girl now: reddish long fuzzy hair,

a wild look on her face, a strong athletic build and a bombastic talker who seldom had a nice thing to say about anyone – well, at least, not about me! But I must admit I was useless at hockey. When I did get the ball passed to me I always managed to hit it straight to the opposition.

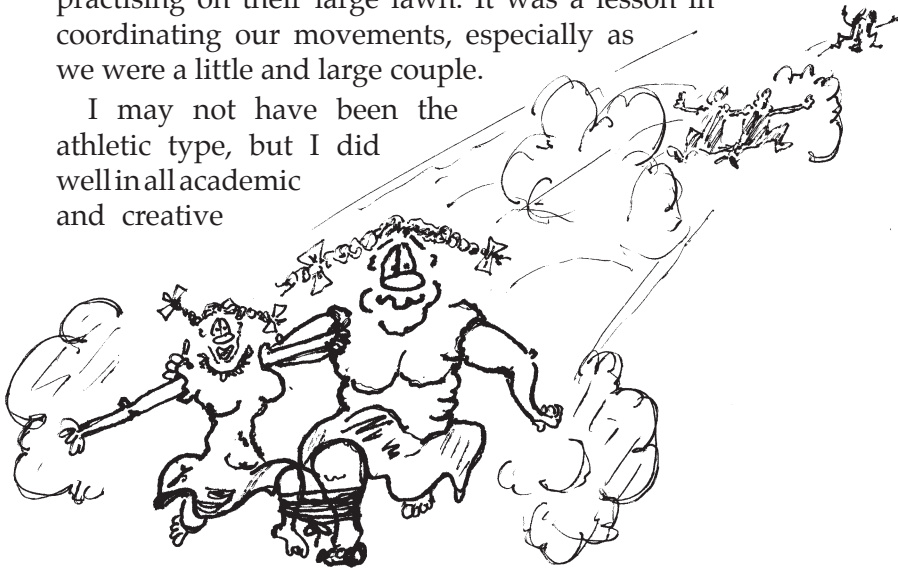
I was hopeless at swimming too. When practising a roll at the side of the bath to get us used to our head being under water, I would inevitably end up like a duck – head down, bottom up – and have to be pulled out. The teacher got used to receiving my not-well-this-week notes, and either thought I had a major period problem or accepted I was a serious risk to her teaching career.

At my previous school I was part of the netball team - that is, when the regulars failed to turn up. I must have been the only shooter that never scored a goal in a match. At least, I was keen. I practised shooting at my friend's house. We found an old bent iron ring discarded from a netball post. My dad put it back into shape and my friend and I, between us, fixed it to a drainpipe in the courtyard of their big house. I don't think leather balls were available in wartime – we could not have afforded one if they were. Plastic ones did not exist. So I made a ball out of oilcloth table covering. It was a trial and error method of making a pattern. Eventually, about eight segments roughly made up the spherical shape. I stitched it together on our ancient Singer, stuffed it with kapok, hand-stitched the gap, and we had the perfect ball to practice our shooting technique. Perfect, that is, to ensure remarkable accuracy in the courtyard with no opposition, and just the job to make sure I would never score in matches! The weight, shape and feel of the ball were all just too different. Of course there is a simpler reason for not scoring. I was useless!

I was no better at athletics. Fancying myself as a high jumper, I nearly injured my back. Entering for the hurdles, I did not even reach the finishing line. I managed to knock down every hurdle, bruise my legs and fall flat on my face. Try running and I always came last. But, one thing I was terrific at was the three-legged race. Unfortunately it was not a school event, but in local community competitions my friend and I won every time. It was

not because we were good runners, but because we spent hours practising on their large lawn. It was a lesson in coordinating our movements, especially as we were a little and large couple.

I may not have been the athletic type, but I did well in all academic and creative



subjects. Of course, lessons were totally different to today's approach to learning. No computers, no televisions, and although most people had a wireless, it was not something we had in schools. It was mostly chalk and talk with the occasional visit. On one occasion we were taken to see *Henry V* at a city cinema but I was so bored I dropped off to sleep!

Our art classes were fantastic: lettering, nature drawing, memory and imagination, weaving, fabric printing, dress design, dress decoration, pattern cutting, dressmaking and others. We were a privileged few and proud to have been chosen. I guess being happy at school and rightly placed – perhaps a lesson for today's education system – ensured we all worked hard. I shone in every subject.

Towards the end of the final year, the whole school of one hundred and twenty pupils went on a visit to London. We caught an early morning train and set off on what for me was a great adventure. I had never been so far away from home. But, although we had a very interesting time in the great city, what

was most memorable was what happened on the way home.

Unfortunately, our group, along with two others, missed the train. This was more of a devastating blow for our nice teacher than it was for us. She was the one the head was most furious with. I can see him now, pacing the platform with wrath distorting his face into an ugly grimace. If he had had his cane with him I'm sure he would have whacked the lot of us. Buses that were meeting the train had to be rescheduled to allow for our late arrival. A lot of telephoning had to be done to change the arrangements. The majority of parents could not be contacted because few people had telephones in those days and there was considerable concern about pupils getting home very late.

By the time the train steamed into Nottingham station and we boarded our buses to take us home it was very late indeed. I was very tired but some of the pupils were being very lively; a lot of kissing was going on and a bit more besides. This in spite of having a responsible adult in charge of us. A student teacher nicknamed Mr Inkwel, who had helped supervise the groups of schoolchildren, was on the bus to make sure we got to our individual bus stops safely. We girls, now fifteen, thought he was fantastic. I sat there tired and dreamy, thinking about this gorgeous guy who was sitting up on the top deck.

I was also wondering why girls were coming down the stairs and going back up with one or two others. At first I thought it was just the lads getting a bit of what they wanted, but it soon became obvious what the main attraction for that evening was. Each time students left the bus, it was Inkwel's job to make sure they did so safely. He came down the stairs and before reaching the bus stop, girls were giving him a final kiss before parting. They were nearly all at it. I was feeling quite jealous but I was much too shy to do anything about it. I never knew if the headmaster found out but we didn't see Inkwel again!

I was never a popular girl at our art school. I was far too shy to make many friends and no other girls came from my area of Beeston. I had a lovely friend called Olive, but she left early when her family moved. I also had a friend called Mary. She was the one I danced with at school – you might say that we were bosom

friends! Mary had a very close boyfriend called Pinter whose hormones were well developed, and who had a friend called Jake. It was inevitable that the four of us would occasionally meet up in the arboretum during our lunch breaks.

One lunchtime, the know-it-all Pinter was giving us the benefit of his knowledge concerning fighting and self-defence. He asked me to stand up so he could demonstrate a point. Gullible as usual, I obliged. He took my arm and twisted it round my back, causing me to howl in pain, and then cry like a baby as he held on to it. In absolute fury, Jake jumped on him and started to beat him up.

Swinging his fists, my hero yelled, "Leave her alone, you swine!"

It was the first time I had seen Jake in action – any action. I was very impressed and my opinion of him went up a few notches. It was a rotten thing that Pinter had done and I couldn't understand why Mary went out with him. The fact that she was grinning throughout the whole episode probably meant that she enjoyed the excitement he engendered.

As you might expect from a sensual person like Pinter, he was always ready to tell dirty stories and raunchy jokes. I laughed along with the others, mainly because I didn't want to show my ignorance. For in truth, being ignorant about sexual matters, I was not aware of the significance of most dirty jokes.

Every time Pinter saw a male with his hands in his pockets, he would laugh and say that he was playing pocket billiards. I twigged the possibility of a willie being used like a billiard cue, although the only male genital organs I had seen were those of babies, a young boy's pencil-like object, and a man's rubbery hose-pipe thingy (he was peeing up our house wall at the time). But billiards needed balls as well. Was Pinter saying that certain males went around with balls in their pockets to get their willies excited? Better to laugh than ask questions and become the fall guy for his jokes. I would be the laughing stock of the whole school.

Children can be so cruel. A few months earlier, I'd had a chair pulled away from under me when I was about to sit down. It had

happened one wet lunchtime when the room was full of boys as well as girls. I fell badly and it was an incredibly painful and humiliating experience. The prefect told the boy off but the room was already full of shouts of glee and laughter.

In many ways I was a romantic young lady. With the cinema providing the main entertainment in the nineteen-forties, I saw a lot of films and I had my heartthrobs just like other girls did. In those days, actors in films were only allowed to kiss; touching and any other sexual activity was absolutely forbidden.

But eye contact and kissing was enough to stir the young female heart. I would fantasise about such things. Since I had nothing to put in my diary, I once wrote that I was not sure of my love for Jake. Of course, someone at school grabbed my diary and read out the only words in the book. It was lunchtime and Jake was in the classroom. I was mortified. Nearly everyone was laughing but he was looking very pleased with himself. Poor lad, what sort of message did it give him? No way did I love him.

Before the end of our two years, Jake raised the courage to give me a kiss. Pinter, who was doing very nicely with Mary, had been trying to get him to do it for ages. In a way, I wanted him to kiss me because he was a nice boy – even if he was stiff and awkward. But I have to confess that his pimples put me off. His face was a little bristly too, because shaving would have made his pus-filled spots worse.

We were in the arboretum when he finally summoned up enough courage. Pinter was having a sloppy session with Mary to show him the way. Not that Jake required showing but he certainly needed encouraging.

“Come on, Jake, it’s now or never. She’s standing waiting. Do you want me to show you how?”

Pinter grabbed hold of me, but Jake yelled, “No! You leave her alone.”

“Do you mind if I kiss you, Gladys?” he asked nervously.

I felt like saying, “Get on with it!” Instead I whispered, “No, I don’t mind.”

I closed my eyes and waited. He didn’t put his arms around

me. He just came close up and bent his head to reach me. I felt the touch of his lips on mine, along with a slight brushing of the short bristles of his chin and upper lip. I knew the horrid pus-filled spots were close to my flesh but I tried not to be repulsed by them. And that was it. After we left school, we never met again.



Chapter Two

No NHS

If ever I feel like grouching about our National Health Service, I dig out of my memory bank of how things used to be. Fortunately for our family, my dad paid into something or other that took care of some medical bills.

During the Second World War we had a lovely old doctor, Dr Bonner. He had served as an army doctor during the earlier war, and was well beyond retirement age. He loved children and gave us little pieces of fruit cake sent to him from South Africa, and let us pick the bluebells from his vast garden. He also showed us inside his underground air-raid shelter, built in a clearing a little way from his huge house. He always gave us time and made a fuss of us. If he had been practising today, the way he examined me when I had chickenpox – as if it had invaded my intimate parts – might well have brought his motives under scrutiny.

But he wasn't the only dodgy friendly doctor. Some years later I had to visit a consultant chest specialist. Alone in his room, he had me sitting in a chair opposite him. We were in front of a roaring coal fire. He slipped my vest straps off my shoulders while he examined my chest in fine detail. Then, still sitting in the chairs, he pulled me up to him while he examined my back with his stethoscope. I was practically on his knees, pressed hard to his chest with my head on his shoulder, his Brylcreem strong in my nostrils.

One day, when I was getting better after a serious illness, Dr Bonner came to see me. Afterwards he took me with him in his car while he visited a few sick people. A girl sent me out one of her precious oranges. It was the first time I had been in a car and I had not had such exotic fruit for ages. Only infants and the sick were allowed to have oranges. Like all food coming from abroad during the sinking of supply ships, they were in very short supply.

With Dr Bonner's casual approach to time, it was hardly surprising if patients could wait for two hours or more to see

him. The situation was made worse because he dispensed his own medicines: counting out pills and pouring out colourful liquid – usually pink linctus, iron tonic or brown cough medicine – out of huge jars into small bottles. Of course, there were no antibiotics, and for painkillers we just had aspirins. Mother made bread poultices to draw out boils, rendered goose-grease for chesty coughs, and we all had good old TCP to gargle with and tackle any other problem. We only went to old Bony, or he came to us, if all else failed or we were very poorly indeed.

But if there was a long wait, there were compensations. Our doctor had dramatic pictures on his waiting-room walls. These were no tatty posters concerned with health warnings, or advertisements of groups and associations there to support and advise. I can only remember such things existing in public lavatories where we were all expecting to get VD if we sat on the seats. No, these were framed prints hung on each wall – a veritable picture gallery.

The one I liked the best was of a man being punished by being publicly sawn in half. On reflection, it may be that he was going through the last stages of the traitor's fate – the dreaded drawing and quartering. On the other hand, it might have been a surgeon's very public demonstration of his skill with knife and saw. That, and the other pictures, set our young imaginations alight, giving us sober food for thought whilst waiting for our kindly Dr Bonner to give us his personal attention. Yes, it was worth the wait just to view the doctor's art gallery.

Hospitals were places you never wanted to enter; people died in them! Surgery was not advised unless it was considered a dire necessity. When I was just turned twelve, I went with my mother to see my dad after he'd had his hernia fixed. He was in the large surgery ward of Nottingham City Hospital. It was packed with very poorly people secured in neatly-made beds. The nurses, in starched white uniforms, made sure there were only two visitors to each bed and that they all left at the ring of the bell. Young children were not allowed inside. Just as well perhaps, because by the door was a young man with meningitis. He was a terrible sight, his eyes wild and his whole body shaking. There was a

strong smell of disinfectant about the place but it failed to hide all the other smells. My dad's wound had turned septic and the pus was making a bit of a stink. The man in the bed next to my dad was dying. The whole atmosphere was depressing and there was no privacy. I expect the nurse had to be able to see around the whole ward. The only happy thing out of the visit was to see my dad and know that he was getting his nightly bottle of stout.

But I was not totally shocked by the hospital scene. I had been in hospital myself, twice.

I had just turned seven. It was December 1939 and the war had recently started. And my own happy little world was about to be shattered.

I had been sitting at my desk working away at my lessons, when the teacher came up close to me and looked at my face. She seemed quite alarmed and wanted to know how I was feeling. She sent for the headmistress. Between them, it was decided that I should be taken to the clinic for a medical opinion. No doubt they were mostly concerned to know if I had a contagious disease and wanted to get me away from the rest of the children. The clinic confirmed that I had Scarlet Fever. In those days, it was a notifiable disease and regarded as being quite dangerous. Years ago there were no antibiotics or medicines to cure such diseases. The body had to heal itself with the help of rest and healthy food. Complete isolation of the patient was needed. For the unlucky ones, like myself, this had to be in an isolation hospital.

My adult brother, Jack, caught the disease too, but he refused to go away. Mother had to nurse him at home, keeping him isolated in his bedroom until he was better. She had to take him his meals, water to wash with, and empty his smelly chamberpot every day so he didn't use the bathroom. It was the only time she ever smoked cigarettes! The whole house had to be fumigated to prevent the disease spreading.

After being taken to the clinic, I was taken home and handed over to my mother and our own doctor was contacted as soon as possible. By the time the doctor arrived I was tucked up in bed wondering what was going to happen to me. After the doctor had

done his examination, he took my mother over to the window to have a quiet word with her. They had little looks towards the bed and I could see that my mother was looking very worried. I heard the doctor talking about hospital and eventually saw my mother nodding her head in agreement.

Sure enough, when the doctor left, my mother came back upstairs to tell me that I was going to be taken to hospital.

“Don’t worry, Luvvy, I’ll come and see you. You’ll soon be home again.”

But I did worry. It all felt strange and unreal. Soon the ambulance arrived. I heard it stop outside the bedroom window. There was a knock at the door, the sound of voices in the hall, footsteps on the stairs, and then a uniformed man came into the room. He rolled me in a blanket with my arms by my sides, threw me over his shoulder, and took me down to the street and into the ambulance. I began to live in a timeless world away from everything and everyone I knew and loved. I was very poorly and exceedingly unhappy, but I tried not to cry.

I was taken to the isolation hospital miles away into the country. There I was put to bed in the women’s ward. As a young child I had little control over my life but in that place, I had none.

I was put in an end bed next to a girl who was about twelve years old. I was too young for her to talk to me. Except for a baby in a cot, we were the only children in a ward of adults. I was next to the nurses’ small office. Since there was a window in the wall, I could just see into the room, at least, the upper part of it. There was a clock on the wall. By patients asking me to tell them where the hands were, I was soon able to tell the time. At least, it was a bit of education and the only sort I was going to receive for a while. There were no books to look at or toys to play with.

After the first night in hospital, I wet the bed. I felt such a big baby. No one was cross with me but I felt the shame of it keenly. What would my parents and the rest of the family think?

I was to spend the first two weeks in bed. Then, for another four weeks, I would be allowed to get up and dress each day. I was given a very odd garment to wear in bed. It had sleeves and

legs, buttoned right down the front, and had a buttoned flap at the back so that I could use the bedpan without having to get undressed. I hated it, especially that silly flap.

The bedpan was quite new to me and seemed a very strange shape. In those days they were made of enamel and shaped like frying pans with a hollow handle and rim. I hated having to sit on them in full view of other patients. It was terribly embarrassing when I made a smell, then having to wait for the nurse to come and get rid of the pan and its contents.

It must have been the first day after my arrival at the hospital that I called for the nurse, as I thought I had been told to.

"Nurse, nurse, I need the bread pan," I called. Afraid of wetting the bed, I yelled for the pan again. "Nurse, nurse, I need the bread pan."

The nurse came with the pan, plus a broad smile on her face.

"What did you ask for?"

"The bread pan", I answered, nearly in tears because everyone was laughing.

She burst into fits of laughter and so did the ladies in their beds.

"*Bedpan*, Gladys," she said. "You use it in bed."

I had, of course, merely repeated what I thought I had heard, without reasoning as to what it meant in the context of how it was being used. Since it was shaped like a frying pan, it was not unreasonable to think it was a pan for frying bread in. I felt exceedingly stupid. Knowing what went into it, of course they would not use it for cooking!

Every morning we had a banana for breakfast. They must have been some of the precious few available before the war was over. Funny, as I write, I can actually smell the banana and taste the bread that came with it. Early morning, a nurse would wake me up so that I could use the bedpan. She would ask me if I'd had my bowels moved. Bowels moved? What were they and who would move them? No doubt she explained. If I said no, then I was given some horrid black medicine and told to eat my breakfast banana with it. So I only had the piece of bread for

breakfast. It seemed a long time until dinner-time. The food was terrible. Usually mince for dinner, and bread and jam for tea, unless the patients had their own eggs for the nurses to boil for them.

My parents were the only permitted visitors. They had to talk to me through the glass windows. Visiting was for thirty minutes, twice a week. Only my mother could get to visit me in the week and sometimes father would come with her on Saturdays. Although it was a two-bus journey and the weather was very bad, my mother always came. Once a week I was given a sixpence to buy pop. Altogether, it must have been a very expensive time for my mother.

I had been in hospital nearly two weeks and I was going to be allowed out of bed to go to the Christmas party. My mother had been asked to bring me some clothes to wear for the occasion. She forgot and I was bitterly disappointed. It must have been very hard for my mother because she would have known how I felt and she could not even give me a cuddle.

The nurse said that I could wear a hospital dressing gown to go to the party in. My parents thought that would make me happy and were able to go home feeling that all was well. But all was not well. I was feeling utterly sad and alone. I wanted to be home with my family, not in that strange place where I was continually being teased that there were crickets in my bed. I wanted to be back in bed with my sister and to have someone to play with. I did not like bedpans, or being woken up to take nasty medicine. I wanted my mother. But I did not say so. I did not say anything.

I put on the dressing gown and began the lonely walk to the party in the men's ward, on the other side of the hallway. I felt utterly, utterly, alone and unsure of myself. Would they laugh at me in a dressing gown? I did not know much about parties as we never had any at home. There had been a school party once. We wore our best clothes and I knew the children and teachers. Now I was in a dressing gown and I had no friends. I was overwhelmed by misery.

Tears trickled down my cheeks as I passed the nurses' office

door.

"What's the matter with you?" asked a nurse when she saw and heard me cry.

I did not know what to say. Wanting my mother and to go home, were things that must never be said.

"I'm cold," I lied.

She threw a blanket at me. "What a big baby. Put this round you and stop crying."



Stung by the rebuke, I did as I was told. Thinking that I looked even more stupid with a blanket wrapped around me, I pushed open the door to the men's ward and walked up to the table where everyone was about to start the party. There was just the one empty seat.

Before long we were all pulling crackers. Someone helped me to pull mine. I looked for the little toy. There was none.

"Gladys hasn't got anything in her cracker", said the person next to me.

“Gladys doesn’t deserve anything,” said the nurse who had thrown me the blanket.

Now everyone would know that I was a bad girl.

I was beginning to experience the harsh realities of life beyond the security of my home and family. I must not cry. I must not show how I feel. I must be good. I did not know the word rejection but I felt it just the same. I did not know the meaning of isolation but I was experiencing it. That hospital was built to keep seriously diseased people apart from the rest of the community in order to avoid epidemics. But it also had an effect of promoting a deep sense of individual isolation, and of being unclean and unwanted.

The Christmas party over, I went back to bed in the women’s ward and waited for Santa to come. I had a brown baby doll in my bag. I was asked to let the crying baby play with it. The baby pulled its head off and then messed on its body.

When allowed out of bed, I watched snow falling outside of the window and looked for footprints on the soft white carpet. I waited for my parents to visit. I waited for the sixpence. I waited to go home.

At last, after six long weeks, the day arrived when my mother brought my outdoor clothes. The clothes that I had worn in hospital, along with my small collection of personal things, were stoved. I put my clothes on in the office. I had to wear almost two of everything. It was a cold day and snow still lay on the ground. It was my first time out for six weeks and there was a long journey home. I stepped outside into the sweet fresh air. I was free! I was with my mother. I was holding her hand. I was going home!

Later that year, my brother was rushed into hospital. He had been suffering a lot of pain with appendicitis. The doctor sent for an ambulance. By the time he reached the hospital, his appendix had burst and the whole area had become numb. The surgeon went straight ahead with the operation and only gave him a whiff of something when the feeling returned during the operation. I was very impressed with my brother’s bravery.

But it was only another year or so before I had another hospital

experience. Before the days of penicillin, tonsillitis was a painful and debilitating problem. The popular cure was to have them removed, along with your adenoids. Lured by the promise of ice-cream and jelly, I agreed to be treated - not that I had a choice!

Along with my sister, Mother took me to hospital where she handed us over to a nurse. We were herded with other children into a ward that consisted of two rows of iron-framed beds. Before long, we were dressed in gowns and waterproof hats. When we were all ready, we were taken to a waiting room that had a seat running around all four walls.

Two nurses kept us singing with loud voices. Every few minutes a door opened and a child was taken out. So we had to sing all the louder. "*Ten green bottles*" might have been more appropriate than the "*White cliffs of Dover*"!

My turn came – not many of us singing by this time! The door opened. Someone took my hand and, trembling with fear, I was walked to the other side of a corridor. A door opened the way to the operating theatre. I saw the high narrow table, overhung with brilliant lights and surrounded by people in white gowns wearing masks and head coverings. I was lifted onto the table and had something placed over my mouth. I was frightened; I couldn't get my breath. I opened my mouth and screamed.

I woke up lying on a bed. An enamel bowl was wedged against my mouth to catch the blood trickling from my nose and throat. I hurt badly. I looked down the line of beds. Each child was like me: head at the bottom of the bed resting on a rubber sheet, and with a bowl bright with blood. Some children were crying for their mummies; some were moaning or whimpering. None was eating ice-cream and jelly! Occasionally the sound of a bowl falling on the floor brought a nurse scurrying to mop up the blood. Someone would come round wiping mouths to see if the bleeding had stopped. To my young mind, it was a scene from hell!

Next morning we were all lying in bed the right way round and a doctor came to examine our throats. If we were healing all right, we could go home.

Not long after getting home, my sister was found to have

chickenpox and a little later, I too had the same infection. I do not know which was worse, the sore throat or the dreadful itching!

Immunisation had arrived and we were given injections to save us from diphtheria and smallpox. The site of the injection swelled and spread out into a large painful circle and I felt a little unwell. But having suffered from all the other childhood diseases – and they were very debilitating – it was worth the price.

But disease was not the only public health concern. Wartime conditions spread parasites that lived under the skin. Not long after being in hospital, along with my mother and sister I had to pay a visit to a cleansing centre. I was in the grip of utter shame and humiliation. I had scabies!

I could not tell my classmates why I was not at school. My closest friend's mother, possibly worried her children might catch whatever I had, continually quizzed me.

"Come on, Gladys, what's the matter with you?"

"Summer rash, I think," I would say, hiding my hands with their tell-tale scratch marks.

"Don't be shy; you can tell us. We won't think you're a spy if you've got German measles!"

"I've eaten too many plums and they've given me an itchy rash."

By that time I was not contagious. I had already been cleansed.

The clinic was set up in an old village school. We had to catch two buses to get there. I felt like an unclean outcast. The nurses were kindly enough but the procedure was very humiliating. I had to strip and take a hot bath. Then, while I stood in the bath completely naked, the nurse used a big shaving brush to cover me with a creamy substance. I had to part my legs while she worked the stuff into every crack and cranny. I then had to wave my arms about to get the stuff to dry. Even while the cream was still damp on my body, I was told to dress and run around the old playground. Although in a fairly isolated spot, I was frightened of being seen by someone who knew us.

If I thought that experience humiliating, there was even worse

to come. When I moved up to the girls' school, I managed to pick up head lice. The headmistress had a policy of name and shame. The nit nurse visited the school at regular intervals. Fear gripped the whole class when she walked into the classroom. You stood in a line while she parted your hair, hoping that your name would not go down in her little black book. Knowing what was going to happen, some children would sit down crying. In the morning at the end of assembly, the head would read aloud the name of every pupil on the nurse's list.

"These girls have dirty heads. Stay away from them."

During the war years, many children were infected with head lice. We were constantly using a nit comb. It was a bit like going fishing. With a sheet of newspaper on the floor, we would kneel and comb through our hair, watching the lice fall and run. We picked them up and killed them between our thumbnails. How many caught today? Then the eggs, sticking on to hairs, had to be removed. With the usual hair washing, using soap with a vinegar rinse – no fancy shampoos in those days – we had a bottle of stuff from the chemist to help us clean up. But we still managed to keep picking up the little beasties. When my name was read out, I could have wept for shame. Girls close to me moved further away. Once more, I was unclean!

What joy when my name was no longer read out. I heard a girl standing behind me whisper, "Gladys is off the list."



Worms too, became a menace. With the shortage of paper in the school lavatories and less-than-perfect washing facilities, it was easy for an epidemic to break out. London evacuees were always blamed, but that was unfair. With our cold damp house and lack of hot water, I could be just as scruffy as anyone else could. The nit nurse told me off for having a dirty neck.

“Well, soap’s on ration,” my friend’s mother said, when told of my disgrace. I thought she might have been thinking of her own neck.

No way was I going to strip down to wash in freezing cold conditions. Some nights the water pipes, which ran under our bed, froze. So much ice gathered on the window pane, it was hard to scratch it off. My sister would come home from night shift and snuggle up to my sister and me. She was incredibly cold. We had hot-water bottles and heated bricks in the beds, but we still put our clothes on top of the quilt to keep us warm. We didn’t want our clothes to be frozen either! As it was, I suffered severe chilblains every winter.

Having outside lavatories probably helped spread worms and diseases. Our baker, who called several times a week, always used our back lavatory. He never once washed his hands, even though bread was unwrapped in those days. Other callers – tea vendor, milkman, greengrocer, sweep, insurance man and various collectors of money – were just the same. Food was handled in shops but no one complained. People had their chamber pots under their beds, as did we, but there was no washing of hands afterwards. During the night, the bathroom was only used in summer. It was a cold dark trip to both light-switch and bathroom. Many people only had an outdoor lavatory. So why bother going out in the rain and frost?

Unless there was an attendant, public lavatories left much to be desired. They could get very smelly. The containers for dirty sanitary towels tended to fill up. Having no bin liners or bags to put discarded objects in, made the situation worse. I once saw the refuse collector come out of the ladies’ lavatories carrying an armful of the smelly objects.

My father was disabled and there were no special lavatories

or facilities of any kind. Every time my mother pushed him out in his wheelchair they had to carry an empty milk bottle with them.

There was little help for the disabled when I was young. Being so helpless after a very active working life, made my father very bad tempered. His wheelchair had a mind of its own and would occasionally veer to the right. Whilst being pushed around Nottingham University Park, several times he nearly landed in the lake with the fish.



“Your mother’s trying to bloody drown me!” he was wont to yell.

Unable to get to work to do his job, he was forced to retire on sick benefit – very little in those days. Mother had a number of cleaning jobs and Dad tried to earn money by working from home – shoe repairs, leather work, motor restoration, and relining baby prams. Weary with pain and immobility, he became very frustrated when things went wrong. The air became blue with his language and Mother suffered much verbal abuse. Home was not always a happy place to be. Even at night, I sometimes heard my dad yell with agonising cramp.

“Give me a knife so I can cut the bloody thing off!”

Sometimes, when he was poorly, we went out at night to find an open fish and chip shop where we would queue for hours to get his favourite food. Because he was hurting, we hurt too.

With others, my dad struggled to get disabled people motorised vehicles and, eventually, the government provided them. They were only single-seated and some of the most dangerous vehicles on the road but at least he was mobile. Thankfully, we now have a more caring society.



The cleansing clinic