

Interviewee: **Mary Cuzner**

Interviews conducted by Nicky Leap and Billie Hunter during research for the publication '*The Midwife's Tale: an Oral History from Handywoman to Professional Midwife*' (1993; 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 2013)

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**Description:**

Transcript of an interview with Mary Cuzner covering her memories of her mother as a midwife in London during the early part of the twentieth century, and her own training as a midwife and nurse during the Second World War, including experience as a midwife in Malta (1954-1959), the introduction of antenatal care, discussion of delivery positions and place of birth, premature babies, and contraception.

**Topics include:** Midwifery; Maternity services; Childbirth; Antenatal care; Homebirth; Contraception; Abortion; Second World War; Malta

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**[START OF INTERVIEW]**

Interviewer Yesterday afterwards she said to me, was it all right? I said, yes, it was one of the best ones I've done. She went absolutely bright pink and she said, ah, really, was it?

Mary Well, I'm going to ring her up later on to... to confirm about her coming to lunch. I can say, I knew... I knew, um, Mrs Hunt was coming to see you. You know, I'm, um... I wanted to know how you got on ((laughingly)) tell her what you've said. She'll be so thrilled. That isn't on?

Interviewer Yes, it's on. We might as well just leave it on.

Mary I see, yeah. What do you want me to... tell you all about... the bits that I told you about my mother?

Interviewer That would be nice actually. Anything you can remember about your mum would be great.

Mary Oh, help.

Interviewer Now you can't remember anything.

Mary ((Laughingly)) Turn it off while I collect my thoughts. Yes. Well, no, she - well, she trained obviously before... well before the First World War. She trained at Plaistow. And, um, when... it was only a six-months training, and I really think, as far as I can make out, you know, they hardly ever went to bed. They clearly worked so hard. And, ah, they certainly had some very hairy conditions under which to work.

And, um, she was... regaled stories many times of how the midwives would go out and they were at night, where policemen would always go in twos. And, um, coming back from her cases and having to stand in the bath in the days of course when they wore long cloaks and long, um, uniforms, and having to shake all the- in the bath to get rid of all the fleas and bugs. And actually even though... mine was in the 40s, I still went to houses in London, there were bugs...

And then my aunt who, um, trained at Guy's Hospital, she, ah, actually started the Sullivan Centre ((?)), which was the first, um, antenatal and, um, child welfare clinic. She started with

Sister Martin. And so she trained at Guy's and worked in the borough for many years. She also had similar stories.

Interviewer Yeah, because the borough was quite a rough area.

Mary Oh, it was a very rough area. But she absolutely loved it, you know. Even, you know, when she married - she married when she was in her 40s - I think she kept in touch with, you know, quite a lot of them. She was a lovely person; a really sweet-natured woman, wasn't she? Everybody loved her. I nearly... I was going to do my training actually at Guy's but in the end I went to Bart's and had no regrets.

Interviewer Where did you...?

Mary Queen Charlotte's. Yes. When I said - I followed down and I came down to Plymouth with my Queen's training, you know, six months' training, and worked in Tavistock on the district; just... well, the war hadn't... you know, the second war... the, um, war in the Middle East... in the Far East hadn't finished. And, um... so of course all the soldiers were returning. Very hectic... hectic time.

I remember once, there were two of us. We had, ah, 23 babies in 21 days. You know, we hardly went to bed. Somebody said... it got into the papers. Somebody said it sounded like the latest cricket score. ((Laughs)) Yes.

Yes, but I don't think Aunty did much midwifery. I think she did more hospital work. She trained at Queen Mary's Hospital in the East End. There were the three sisters, you see. My mother and... my little aunt, I always used to - because she was the youngest one who was at Guy's. And her sister, who also was my other aunt, who was at Queen Mary's Hospital in the East End. But she... she really stayed and worked in the hospital and then got married. She didn't do midwifery, you know, like mother had done.

Interviewer A real family of midwives.

Mary ((Laughs)) Oh yes. And a cousin... I've got a cousin, a doctor, and both my nieces, um, are nurses, midwives and district nurses as well. And I've had cousins as well. Anybody else? Oh yes, another of my aunts married an uncle - she was a matron of a little hospital in Enfield.

Interviewer What a shame somebody couldn't have interviewed your mum about- amazing stories.

Mary Oh, I know. Yes. She was marvellous really, and then she eventually went out, um... and nursed out in South Africa. She went out during the Boer War, you see, because... she had a marvellous time out there, but she was in a hospital then, you know. She wasn't particularly doing midwifery.

But do you know, um... when we were young, um, my mother went back, um... well, it must have been during the war, mustn't it? Yes. My mother went back. My mother... the Second World War, my mother went back, um, to do midwifery, you know, again and nursing for a while, for a few years. She loved it. She was a wonderful nurse.

Interviewer But she was doing more district midwifery.

Mary Oh yes, yes, but that was private. She was doing private work.

Interviewer Independent.

Mary Oh yes. But, um, the doctors used to say if my mother couldn't save, um, anybody, nobody could ((laughs)). We always used to pull mother's leg about this.

Interviewer There must have been quite a high mortality rates.

Mary She worked, um, in... before she married, she married in 1916, she and my aunt, the one Molly was talking about, the one who trained at Queen Mary's Hospital in the East End - they were the two district nurse/midwives down at St Austell. And, ah, they lived in... in a home. I think there were three of them and my mother was, you know, the single one. And again, you know, she used to have very interesting stories of the things that happened.

She used to say to me, you know, when I was... coming to the end of my training... I wanted really to go into the services, you see, and war - I thought that was something to do. She said, do you know, I'm sure you'd enjoy the district. I thought, oh - I used to say to her, that's the last thing you do before the tomb, you know, because, um... ah, when I was a little girl, I lived in Bridgewater, there was this enormously fat midwife - she was always very smartly dressed



in navy - who was so fat she used to go round on a tricycle. I thought, this is the only thing that I can think - this was my image of what a district nurse midwife looked like.

I used to say to my mother, good gracious, you know... I've forgotten the old nurse's name now. I don't want to ever grow like that. I mean, I couldn't see myself doing anything else but growing and going round on a tricycle ((laughs)). I believe she was a wonderful old girl too.

Interviewer One thing I'm specifically interested in is, even in the 30s there were still quite a lot of untrained midwives practising.

Mary Oh yes. I think she was one of the ones that... you know, when the Midwives Act came into being, she, you know, was put on the roll.

Interviewer That's right.

Mary And then had to... oh yes, there were some ghastly midwifery tales. I expect you've... you've heard some hairy stories, have you?

Interviewer Not that many. A lot of the midwives have said we never came across any of these handy-women.

Mary No, I didn't of course, because of course they were... they were...

Interviewer Too late, yeah.

Mary But I did in Malta, you see, um... I worked out in Malta, 1954 to '59 running the district midwifery nursing services. And of course they... they weren't, um... you know, didn't have the same training or anything. Very rudimentary really. And when we were out there Joan - Miss Joan Grey, who used to be head of the Queen's Institute, she came out, and we had a meeting with some of the senior midwives who were all very large ladies, you know. They all... they arrived with beautiful bouquets of flowers for us. I've never forgotten. And we talked to them about, um, having recognition under the central midwives' board and then, um, having the same training, you see.

But when - unfortunately my father died, so it was only in the discussion stage then. But we felt that we really had got something off the ground. And of course now they are properly trained and recognised. But I think they weren't awfully pleased when start... we went over.

Um, I don't think it can possibly have taken a tremendous amount of their work, because of course there was a very, very high birth rate in Malta. I was there five years and I can't remember ever losing a baby. And they used to have tremendous families. I mean, I know we've nursed... 16 - mothers having their 16<sup>th</sup> baby.

They used to have a wonderful custom there. They used to always pray to St Rita, you know, when they went into labour, and lit a candle for St Rita. And so it was all supposed to be over by the time the candle had burnt down. We suspect that sometimes they did a little cheat and blew the ((laughingly)) candle out. But that was always... you know, because they had great faith. Usually... thankfully it went alright.

They were all big women and I suppose had reasonably big pelvises, but I can't really remember that we had any... ah, we must have had some, but I can't... there's nothing that sticks out in my mind that we had any really bad, um, abnormal midwifery out there.

Interviewer      What was it like when you did your training at Queen Charlotte's?

Mary      What was it like? I don't think I was there perhaps... perhaps this is the... I raised this. I don't think I was there at the very best time. I think it was at the end of an era with dear old Miss... Deyer, I think her name was. She was a wonderful old person. I was devoted to her, but you see... just as I started my training we had all the... flying bombs and the buzz bombs and everything going over. Life was a bit difficult.

But when I look back on some of these ghastly, ghastly cases. I remember one woman who was in labour for five days. I've never forgotten. I remember I used to go on every day and she was still in labour.

Interviewer      What happened in the end?

Mary      Oh, she was all right. She survived and so did the baby, but, um... You know, we obviously... we couldn't possibly ((inaudible)) we had excellent consultants. And we did get a lot of the ((inaudible)). Um, and I suppose they, you know... they coped with them very well, but, um... nowadays it's... I think a lot of the cases that they hung on to would have been Caesared today and they wouldn't have allowed them to go on for the length of time.

But it was interesting, you see, because in those days, you know, we used to keep the privates in bed certainly for about ((laughingly)) six days. You know, they used to be swabbed and, um, all the rest of it. But when we had all these bombs flying over, we used to have to get them downstairs. And, I mean, you know, it made you realise that they were perfectly all right. They were having their baby; a normal function of your body. And ((inaudible)) So in my early days it taught me quite a lesson. And, um, you know, obviously we used to try and get them home a bit earlier...

But the minute I went... I nearly gave it up. I nearly gave it up, because you know, as I say, we had so much of normal midwifery... and then I knew that I would always regret it. And the minute I went off to district I simply loved it. It was quite a different kettle of fish. You know, you realise the value of you and the mother and father and the granny, or the family support - how really lovely it was; and your management of the case.

Obviously you had your midwife hovering around you, but you realised what a much more peaceful event it all was. But, you know, having said that and having enjoyed it, I would never really want to go back to have some of the hair-raising experiences again, you know, with difficult forceps deliveries and frightful- at home.

Interviewer At home, was that?

Mary You know, um... and then we came down and worked in Tavistock for four years. That was marvellous because, you know, it was a very rural area. My friend and I... I think... well, I know I'm right, were the first two midwives in Devon - this was between 1945 and '49 - to start teaching relaxation. Her brother was a psychiatrist. He gave us this... very interesting book. So we used to have them... we had a little tiny surgery in our little house and we used to, um... we used to have the mothers there. We'd have them in the sitting room, showing them how to relax. So we pioneered that and we were quite pleased.

Interviewer Did women know much about their bodies, do you think, and the facts of life?

Mary Oh, I think they were very ((inaudible)) very, very ((inaudible)).

Interviewer That is something a lot of midwives have said.

Mary Oh yes.

Interviewer It was quite a shock when they went into labour. They didn't know where the baby was coming from.

Mary Oh yes. I mean, we've had girls that... that, you know, we've been sent for: baby's in the bed; girl was in - terrible stomach ache; had no idea they were having a baby. Um, incredible stories. Incredible stories. Very interesting. ((Laughs)) ((inaudible)) Mmm? Carry on. Carry on. I'm just putting things... But then, um... Oh yes, you see, and they hadn't really... had very much in the way, um... in the way of antenatal care, you see. And I mean... I remember... because we used to have this very rural area all around Tavistock, um... you know, they weren't used to midwives going regularly, doing antenatal, ah, care an examination. And a lot of the grannies thought this was a whole lot of old nonsense. Nurse, I never had this when I had my babies, you know, and I had 10 babies and nothing ever went wrong. But gradually, you know, we won them round. We simply loved it.

Interviewer Because antenatal care was quite a new idea even then, wasn't it really?

Mary Yes. Well, I mean...

Interviewer It was only in the 20s...

Mary Yes, and I mean... I think we started - we did get the, um, GPs to take their blood. But I mean, some of the GPs, you know, had... we were rather lucky. We had some very good GPs, and they really did. And we had our own antenatal clinics with the doctors. You know, we used to take them to the doctors.

But the use of pethidine of course was new, and gas and air. You know, a lot of them... the rural parts, up on the moors. So it was something very, very new to their mothers and grannies, you know. So, you know, we felt we did a little bit of pioneering.

Actually when I was a senior nursing officer in the area, we pioneered quite a few little things, and one of them... you know, when you look back on it now, it was a 10-days' wonder then. We pioneered early transfer from hospital to midwives' care. Oh, my dear, you've no idea the hands that were thrown up in the air. And, you see, nothing ever went wrong. They were much happier and much better.



You know, I think the Domino scheme of mothers being looked after by their GPs and their midwife, and going in - if only the midwife could go in and deliver, take them home - it's ideal. I wouldn't want to go back, much as I loved domiciliary midwifery. I really wouldn't want to go back again, because it's those vital minutes, isn't it, that are lost. You know, even if you've got a very good back-up service.

Interviewer Is there a ((inaudible)) school?

Mary No, we haven't now, because we don't do any, you see, except - you can get the odd, um... you know, girl living in a commune. But not very often. You absolutely insist ((inaudible))

Interviewer And did she have the baby at home?

Mary Oh yes, I mean... but there's usually quite a bit of argy about it, because, you see, all the doctors and midwives, even though the community midwives - they do go in now regularly and spend a little time in the, um... unit so that, you know, they keep well up-to-date with what's going on. But, you know, they all get out of practice, don't they?

Interviewer Yes, that's right. It can be a bit nerve-racking.

Mary Yes. I sometimes think, um... I mean, I came out certainly on to the district to do my training with a very, ah, normal attitude to midwifery. But then you realise that the majority of babies are born normally, aren't they?

Interviewer Yeah. That's right.

Mary I'm not sure... you know, perhaps... I don't know about interference these days. I think we know so much more about the placenta failing and, you know, how long you can leave a baby with all the various scans and, um... what's the other test they do? Um... oh, you know... the test they do... when they...

Interviewer Oh, amniocentesis?

Mary Amniocentesis, you know. I mean, there's so much more that they know, isn't there? But I sometimes wonder if some of the poor girls, you know... if they're a bit terrified ((laughs)) going into labour. How did you feel about it, you know, as a midwife?

Interviewer I had mine at home.

Mary You had yours at home?

Interviewer Yes, because I knew I'd be much happier at home. I've been a district midwife.

Mary And you had no problem in getting somebody to...

Interviewer Well, Nicky, who is writing the book with me - she is an independent midwife.

Mary Is she?

Interviewer Yes, and she delivered him. But I had a GP who was... I think it's easier in London, you know, because there are GPs who are sympathetic.

Mary Yes.

Interviewer I think there are probably more home births going on there. Maybe there are more people demanding it. It actually wasn't a fight. I expected a fight and it wasn't a fight.

Mary And you had quite a good labour, did you?

Interviewer Yes. It was long. He was past due.

Mary Oh dear. Isn't it annoying? It always happens to midwives. You think you've got nine months to jockey into position and then you had to be in the wrong...

Interviewer I know, yes. But I didn't have any pain relief and that was because I had a good midwife...

Mary You controlled your breathing.

Interviewer Yes.

Mary And does it... did you really find, because you carried out your breathing, relaxing, that you could cope?

Interviewer It really helped. Without it I would have been lost. Sometimes I just thought, I can't; I'm going to... I can't carry on. And I know if at that moment somebody, a well-meaning midwife had said, have some pethidine, I would have said, yes, give it to me. Because Nicky didn't - she said, come on, you know, do this breathing, and I did do - and I got through it. When I look back it was the most amazing experience. I was up and about all the time. I never laid on my back once.

Mary No.

Interviewer She had to examine me once. But it was an amazing experience.

Mary Was it - you know, I always say you don't have to have a baby to be a good midwife or to be ill to be a good nurse, but, you know, obviously experience must teach you. When you think of all the things you've told mothers, was it an experience anything as you imagined really? Even with all your knowledge.

Interviewer A bit. It hurt much more than I thought. I remember thinking, all these women I've looked after and I never knew it hurt this much. I mean, it really hurts. Because you don't know, and you can never explain to somebody else, because you forget the pain anyway; what it was like.

Mary Yes, it's incredible; really marvellous.

Interviewer Yes, but also how frightening and how it feels quite outrageous what's happening, especially when you get to the second stage. I just thought, this is... and he was nine-and-a-half pounds. I thought...

Mary You're not exactly large, are you?

Interviewer No. I couldn't believe it. I actually gave birth to him on all fours, which was a very good position, in think, because there actually is a lot of room for him to come out. And Nicky could see what was going on.

Mary What, you mean she delivered you from the back, as it were?

Interviewer Yes. I just got into the position. I'd spent all -

Mary Most comfortable.

Interviewer Yes, I just got into what felt the right. I wouldn't come over or do anything else.

Mary But this is the thing, isn't it, to allow mothers to be in the position that they're most comfortable in. Because, I mean, I can't think of anything worse with racking backache being made to lie on a bed.

Interviewer That's right. The only time I lay down was when she wanted to do an internal, and it was excruciating. I just thought, oh, these poor women in hospital having to lie like that because they had monitors on.

Mary You mean it was excruciating lying on your back; not having the internal?

Interviewer No, just lying on my back. It felt like the contraction was coming on top of you; instead of you being on top of it and controlling it in some way.

Mary Yes.

Interviewer It's like if you have bad period pain or any stomach ache or something. You want to move around and moan and groan.

Mary Yes, it's interesting.

Interviewer Certainly afterwards, that was quite a shock. I think you get so geared up for the birth, you forget about afterwards. Certainly my body felt knackered. I really felt like I'd been through it.

Mary You've been through it!

Interviewer Yes. It felt like all your bones had been - it felt like I had this huge pelvis.

Mary Yes, and you suddenly all go ((makes *pff* sound)).

Interviewer Yes, and you go - like you deflate. Funny feeling. And just how emotional you feel and very vulnerable for quite a few weeks. I wasn't prepared for that.

Mary No.

Interviewer I thought I'd be up and zooming around the supermarket, and I wasn't.

Mary No. Yes, it... it is most interesting. And everybody is different, you see, aren't they? Some very phlegmatic people, you know, sail through everything. But I do think you're right - I don't think we in the past have always allowed for the emotional and the hormonal changes that are going on; and the milk coming in and all the rest of it.

I mean, the psychology of midwifery wasn't even mentioned. I can't remember anybody ever telling me about the three-day blues. I mean, all these things. This is why I think I enjoyed

community midwifery so much, because you really... you know... there was a much more personal relationship, wasn't there? You saw them in their homes ante-natally and you had a chance to see what stresses perhaps they were under; not very sympathetic husbands, half a dozen kids or that kind of thing.

Interviewer That's right.

Mary Oh, we've come a long way, haven't we? You know. In North Devon we're very lucky because they have tried to make it as homely an atmosphere, you know. And they do give the mothers the choice of, you know, how they want to have their baby; which is very nice. So whenever was out... I think our figures... I know I'm right in saying this - certainly when Mr Dawson, who's our senior consultant, he's been retired a couple of years now - but our figures would stand out, I think, anywhere in the country. They were very good indeed.

So what I say when I look back in coming here in 1959 when there was a lot of room for improvement. But sadly the midwives I don't think are as... as happy. They miss... they miss... the satisfaction of having the delivery. You know, even though I used to tell them, well, you still in my book got the best of it, because you've prepared them and helped them up to this great day, and then you have them back fairly soon. So you still have them for the longest period, don't you? And then you see them sometimes in the hospital. Not quite the same satisfaction, because of course you only see them so briefly and then they go home so quickly.

Interviewer I certainly found it was very important having somebody I knew with me. I kept thinking, what would it have been like if I'd had to go into hospital now, halfway through my labour? It would have been strangers. Must have had a couple of funny ideas.

Mary We do... all the mothers do go up to the unit, so that they do know... they do meet the midwives. But I mean, it's the luck of the draw. They obviously can't meet every midwife. But then those that have to go up, um, to the consultant's clinics where they obviously... you know, they get to know the midwives. You know, we do try. There's no... I don't think, I mean, in this very un-ideal world I don't think there's any ideal answer to it. Do you?

Interviewer It's very difficult. One of the things is, if you work in that way where you giving women antenatal care delivering them then you're just working every hour under the sun. Because I was in independent practice for a year and it was...

Mary Were you?

Interviewer I could only stand it for a year because you made so little money.

Mary Really?

Interviewer Oh, it was terrible. I mean, I wasn't in it to make money. I guess if you were in it and charged a lot. We did quite a lot for free because they either couldn't afford it or for not very much money. It was a bit of a Robin Hood scheme anyway. We just worked ridiculously. We were on call so much. It was like Miss Burgess talks about working, but you actually had a lot of job satisfaction.

Mary Well, you do.

Interviewer You do exhaust yourself. You can't have any personal life.

Mary Yes, I know. You see, as I was telling you, when we were at Tavistock, our very first job. I mean, after all, we'd done four years at Bart's; the last one as a staff nurse. We'd done 18 months at Queen Charlotte's, because we were staff nurses in between doing our district. This my friend and myself. Six months Queen's training, and I'd done two years' orthopaedics before I started, you know. So we weren't exactly spring chicks to go out in the world. And yet when I look back on it, I suppose one is frightfully conscientious. But I... you know, you felt very vulnerable yourself. You know, very much on your own without the support of the full hospital backup services.

Honestly, I always said I never would have done district midwifery without a lot of prayer, you know, because by Jove you needed it. Because we used to go and do all the relief work up in Princetown, you see, which was about seven or eight miles away. And so, therefore, we got up to Princetown - you could go anywhere on the moor. If you were stuck up there in the middle of a snowstorm, which I have been on many occasions in awful weather, um, you know, it wasn't easy to get an ambulance up and get them - the nearest place was Plymouth. And I

always used to wonder who was going to die first - me or the patient? I used to feel so sick.

((Laughs)) Neither of us ever lost each other.

Interviewer Were you delivering breaches?

Mary Oh yes. Oh yes.

Interviewer Only quite recently things have changed.

Mary Yes. Oh heavens, yes. Twins. And premature babies, you see. And we never lost a prem baby. Never lost one. I mean, the tiniest one - it makes your hair stand on end - was two-and-a-half pounds. We went on to the district... at Queen Charlotte's, and this little thing, we used to always call her Premmy, had been born and... I think I was the midwife. You know, we... the pupil midwife handed over.

My friend also got very interested in Premmy, so she used to visit her a lot too. We used to go several times a day and feed her. It was a very simple young mother with, um, a husband who was in the army. He'd been allowed to come home to help her look after this little thing at home. An old granny who had great fat arms and curlers; always looked grubby and used to say, well, duck, must go off now and give... give myself a good wash. And I don't think she ever got round to it.

That little thing went on until it was about six-and-a-half pounds, and then it got stuck. We used to take expressed breast milk from the hospital. No little thing could have had more love. But it just got stuck. And I think it needed a change. We put it on to Cow & Gate - it never looked back ((laughs)).

Interviewer Where was it being nursed?

Mary Oh, at home. Oh, yes.

Interviewer In a cot?

Mary Oh, yes, in a little tiny... you know, little tiny, um, little carrycot. It was absolutely wrapped in everything warm.

Interviewer How much was it?

Mary It was two-and-a-half pounds, and I think it was terribly premature. I think it must have been about 13 weeks. It must have been. It was very, very frail. When I first saw it, it looked like a little kind of wizened lemon, you know ((laughs)); rather jaundiced. But, um, anyway, it was a very interesting experience. Of course, we were frightfully proud of Premmy, as you can imagine.

Interviewer Yeah, I can imagine. So which area were you doing the district in when you were at Charlotte's?

Mary Well, we used to do, um... we used to cover... Shepherd's Bush and, um, Chiswick, and part of Hammersmith - *Floreat Actona* - a bit of Acton; North Acton, was it? Where that terrible old town hall is which says *Floreat Actona*, which always... was doing anything but flourish in those days. So we had, you know, quite a good mixed bag of, um, patients. But, ah, quite a lot of really poor ones.

I always remember being called out ((laughs)) somebody in Chiswick one day. It was quite a poor mother. She was lying on the kitchen floor. You know those dreadful old... I don't suppose you do - those dreadful old navy knickers we used to wear at school with elastic.

Interviewer I know what you mean.

Mary She was lying on the kitchen floor with two of the tiniest little babies. They were only about three pounds; little twins. We whipped them into hospital. It was no place to cope with them at all. But they were as warm and cosy as anything in this fleecy lining. I mean, she'd literally kind of pulled her pants down and had them on the floor. ((Laughs)) Oh dear. We had some marvellous... well, amusing experiences.

I always remember a woman in Tavistock who always looked as if a good blood transfusion would have done her good anytime: no teeth, very poor. She ((inaudible)) Always in a muddle. She used to have a baby every year. I can remember going in, seeing this little head just coming out - you dived in; you couldn't wash your hands or anything. Ah well now, she used to say every time: they bring their love, she used to say. Poor, poor Mrs Long.

Interviewer Because even then there wasn't a lot of family planning, was there?

Mary Oh no. It was almost a dirty word. There was somebody who... who, I think she must have been ((inaudible)) family planning advice. You see, I... I mean, we never... we never talked



about it, quite honestly. I mean, I'm a Catholic, but that's beside the point, because I mean, Catholics don't tell you you've got to have a baby every nine-and-a-half months. But, um, you know, so I had an awful lot to learn.

I remember when I went and did my health visitor's training. I went to spend a morning with the family planning doctor and nurses as part of the training. I had a Catholic health visitor then. She said, you should have refused to go. I said, well, I don't agree. I said, of course I've got to learn to know about it. I mean, it doesn't mean to say because if, um, somebody wants advice, well then you can... it's your job to direct; you don't have to give the advice directly.

But oh no, there was... there was very little I think in those days. I'm sure the... I'm sure there wasn't. What the patients talked to the doctors about, they never talked to us about; and we never talked to them about it at all.

Interviewer Did you ever come across women who tried to miscarry?

Mary What, purposely? Well, not... no. I can honestly say I can't remember any really... purely abortion. One had abortion before. Of course, that was ghastly. You know, the terrible stories again that you heard of these backstreet...

Interviewer From your mother, was that?

Mary Well... oh yes, I have... you know, I have heard, you know, talk about those poor women who bled to death; terrible septic conditions and ill for the rest of their lives. Mind you, I think it's desperate how the abortion story in this country I mean we're the abortion country of the world now. To me, it's quite frightful. I mean, morally I think it's wrong to destroy life anyway, um, but, ah, another thing is I think that these girls aren't given, you know, counselling. Oh, just go and have an abortion. They're not... they're not counselled. There isn't enough counselling at all.

Interviewer I think it's often better in some of the private clinics in terms of counselling than it is in the National Health Service.

Mary And you see, they don't realise that probably... it may affect their future fertility. They don't realise the psychological effect that it might have on them; the guilt that it might have on them. You see, there's so much, isn't there, apart from the moral aspect, which of course I

wouldn't agree with anyway under any conditions. I mean, I've argued with priests about it in my youth, you know, when I used to think of people being raped or even knowing that they were going to have an abnormality and things like that. I mean, you cannot destroy life. Well, in my book. ((long pause)) I've gone on far too long.

Interviewer No, it's been great.

Mary Going on... I meant to continue with telling you when we started this, um, parent-craft, um, you know... apart from all relaxing and everything, we used to teach them - demonstrate how to bath a baby ((inaudible)) and things. And so when I went to Plymouth eventually in 1952 to '54, before I went to Malta, I started, um, relaxation class there; you know, parent-craft as well. And, um, you know, when I look back... I mean, that I absolutely did pioneer that. We just had, ah, old army blankets which they lay on the floor with a pillow, so that, you know, it was quite ((laughs)) tough. But they all came and we used to have some... have some rollicking times.

Then when I left, um, they employed a physiotherapist to do it, you see. Funnily enough I met her last year. She, um... because this... Dora Williams, she's another person I would love... oh my goodness, why didn't I think of her? She's 80 - going to be 81 this year. She used to be the superintendent of the Queen's training home and the part-two midwifery training. She is the most marvellous midwife. Would you be coming West again?

Interviewer I might well do. Where is she?

Mary Oh, can I give you her name and address? Because she's one of my greatest friends now and I... as I say, I went back. She trained me, you see, and then she got this vacancy and she wrote to me and said, would I like to apply for it? So I ran the part-two midwifery training... you know, scheme... training with her. And, um, she was a wonderful midwife. But frightfully amusing. I mean... you never want to leave her. She's very good value. She trained at St Thomas's.

Interviewer Really? I trained at St Thomas's and Guy's - half and half.

Mary Yes, I can give you her... all the details. If you wish to... wish to ring her up.

Interviewer Where is she living now?

Mary She lives in Plymouth. Are you seeing anyone in Plymouth?

Interviewer No, but even if I don't go down, I think Nicky certainly has got some midwives to visit in Somerset.

Mary Oh has she?

Interviewer And she's also been in contact with Dora Russell. Do you know Dora Russell? She was the wife of Bertrand Russell.

Mary Oh really?

Interviewer She's an old feminist campaigner. She's in her 90s now. She lives down in Cornwall. Nicky is in touch with her and she often goes to see her.

Mary Does she?

Interviewer So she might well drop in on Plymouth on the way.

Mary Oh my dear, how interesting. Now, I read this marvellous book about them, because they were a bright lot, the, um, Bloomsbury Group. They used to come down to Linton, to stay, you know. Great graphic details about that. Well, it's Miss Dora M Williams, and, um... OBE, and she lives at The Cottage, Richmond Walk, Plymouth, PL1 4LL. Her phone number 075253363. She's going to be - she'll be 82 on 17<sup>th</sup> September, but she no more looks 82 than I do, does she? We went to her marvellous, 80<sup>th</sup> party in Plymouth last year, and we had a great time.

Interviewer And she's a midwife?

Mary Yes. Oh, she's a midwife and, um, SRN, and she's also Queen's... trained me to be a Queen's nurse. She's worth a guinea a minute - absolutely, isn't she? You'd really enjoy her. Is it all doing well? The cake is doing well? Is the meat all right?

Interviewer It looks all right. Smells all right.

Mary I'd forgotten the tape.

Interviewer Don't worry about it.

Mary ((Laughs)) Little domestic scenes.

Interviewer That's great. If you're in touch here, just warn her about me. But I'll write to her anyway.

Mary Will you? Yes. Oh yes.

Interviewer If you do speak to her.

Mary I will. As a matter of fact if you, um... if we've got time when we've had lunch, I could give her a ring up and just say that I've got you here; would you be willing - would she be willing? I'm sure she would be, um, and... in actual fact, I should put Stonehouse I think. No, she's on the, um... she's just over Stonehouse Bridge, which is quite a good, um... on the way to, um, ah... what's it called? Not Davenport. What's the place in Plymouth, just beyond...?

Molly ((inaudible))

Interviewer No, Molly - Stonehouse and, um... where the dockyard is. Devonport, yes. You turn - when you go... your friend - visiting. It's very easy to find actually if you happen to know Plymouth ((short laugh)). But I mean, we... depending on which way she comes in she could be easily directed. But tell her if she makes for Stonehouse Bridge, um, which is on the Devonport side, she just turns left and goes along. She lives at the end there. There's a lovely - they've built a marina right outside this cottage.

It used to be the, um... it used to belong to the, um... the man who worked the gate at the level crossing, you see. For years she used to look over from Dermotford ((?)) Street, the training school, to see. She used to say, I'd love to live in that little cottage, and then she ended up by so doing. It's charming. Looks over to King William Victualling Yard and Mount Edgecumbe, and now of course the marina and all the boats, you know. It's gorgeous. Now, anything else that I can tell you?

Interviewer I know one before I get off - can you remember in your district work any superstitions that women used to have about pregnancy and childbirth?

Mary The only one I can remember was about St Rita in Malta. Yes, I'm sure there must have been, um... ah... oh yes. well... about... well, I don't know if this is really relevant, but... if the crown of the baby's head was in the middle, the next baby was going to be a boy. But if it was on the side, it was going to be a girl. And extraordinarily it does work out so many times. Not always.



If you've got... yes, if you've got a double crown, I don't know quite what the answer to that is.

Interviewer Twins.

Mary No, I don't think it always works out. Um, there must have been some superstitions. Can you think of any, Molly? Poor Molly wasn't a keen midwife, were you?

Molly I didn't really enjoy midwifery.

Interviewer I think you either love it or hate it, probably.

Mary Oh I absolutely loved it, but, you know, as I've said, I really wouldn't have done midwifery without strong faith. I think you often did need it actually. But I still think it's one of the most rewarding things of one's professional life. Don't you?

**[END OF INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]**