

Interviewee: **Edith Burgess**

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)

Date recorded: February 1986

Duration of audio: 1:43:59

Collection: Special collections of the archives of the Royal College of Midwives

Archive Reference: RCMS/251/4

### **Description:**

Transcript of an interview with Edith Burgess covering her experiences as a midwife, including her training in Newcastle during the First World War, attitude to unmarried mothers, social conditions, positions at Burnley, Lancashire and with Lambeth Borough Council, where she worked for 50 years, some of it as a district midwife, pain relief, delivery techniques, feeding for mothers and babies, conditions in the homes and in the hospitals, infections and maternal mortality, relationship between patients and midwives, delivering breech babies, antenatal care, treatment for jaundiced babies, memories of her association with the Royal College of Midwives, sexual knowledge, and disposal of the placenta.

Edith Burgess was born in Hull in 1894, the eldest of eight children from a working-class family. She trained as a midwife in Newcastle in 1921 and moved south to Lambeth in London, where she worked in a maternity home for 50 years.

**Topics include:** Midwifery; Childbirth; First World War; Maternity Services; Maternal Mortality; Analgesia

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**[START OF INTERVIEW]**

Interviewer This is Edith Burgess in Broughton, Devon on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1986.

Edith What do I do? Do I ask questions or answer whatever you ask me?

Interviewer Well I've got a list of questions that I can use to sort of get you going if you like?

Edith Oh that's good yes, because my memory at my age isn't so good.

Interviewer That's not surprising. So let me ask your name is Edith Burgess.

Edith Edith May Burgess.

Interviewer What is your date of birth?

Edith 28<sup>th</sup> May 1893.

Interviewer That's quite an age isn't it?

Edith It is getting on a bit isn't it?

Interviewer Yes, you look so well on it.

Edith I don't know, sometimes I, it's, this kind of thing, if I'm going to do anything, anything different it sort of makes you all of a kind of doo dah.

Interviewer Oh don't get all of a doo dah, it's all right. ((Laughter))

Edith And I haven't got a very good voice.

Interviewer It picks up very well this thing; don't worry about that, no problem.

Edith Does it?

Interviewer If you are getting tired just tell me won't you and we can stop.

Edith What happens about the rest of it? When Miss Castle spoke to me she spoke about five hours. I thought I couldn't sit for five hours.

Interviewer Oh no only a couple, a couple of hours.

Edith A couple of hours?



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Interviewer Yes, because I've got to get back to get back to feed my baby anyway, I can't leave him for that long.

Edith Oh, sweet. How lucky you are to have a baby.

Interviewer I'll show you a photo shall I?

Edith If I can see it with these glasses. How lucky you are to have a baby.

Interviewer Oh he's beautiful, he's lovely.

Edith He sounds it.

Interviewer He's a real pleasure. Here's a picture of him.

Edith Oh bless him.

Interviewer He's really curly; he's got a head of curls.

Edith Oh doesn't he look intelligent. He looks as if he knows it, all doesn't he?

Interviewer Oh he does, he certainly does and he was born on Christmas day, a Christmas baby, and I had him at home, which was lovely.

Edith Good.

Interviewer We'd been on holiday in Spain and he got very brown so he looks as if he's got that lovely tan.

Edith How old is he?

Interviewer He's a year on Christmas Day.

Edith Oh I understand about that.

Interviewer So he's what, thirteen months now. He's a handful; he walks and climbs up -

Edith I wonder, it starts; he's more difficult now than he was in the pram?

Interviewer Oh yes, I know. Where were you born?

Edith In Hull in Yorkshire.

Interviewer In Hull? Oh gosh so you've come a way down here.



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Edith Yes and I took my training in Newcastle upon Tyne.

Interviewer Did you? Your general training?

Edith General training, yes. General training and midwifery training. During the First World War I did my general. It was the First Northern General for the forces coming in, you know, wounded.

Interviewer And you were saying it was 1916?

Edith 16, yes. It was a three-year's training and a year's staff nurse.

Interviewer And you couldn't start till you were 23?

Edith 23, yes.

Interviewer So they wanted you to be quite mature did they?

Edith Yes, they wanted you mature in those days and thought you weren't mature until you were 23.

Interviewer The magic age.

Edith And I was champing at the bit before that; I was so wanting to get into it that I joined the St. John Ambulance.

Interviewer Did you?

Edith Yes.

Interviewer What made you want to be a nurse?

Edith Well I'd wanted to be from being a little tiny girl. I used to bandage my dolls and present they were patients.

Interviewer How big a family are you from?

Edith I'm the eldest of eight. They've all gone except me.

Interviewer And you were the oldest?

Edith Yes.

Interviewer What work did your father do?



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Edith Father worked on the railway, the North Eastern Railway.

Interviewer Actually working manually?

Edith He was a working man, yes; I came from a working class family.

Interviewer So did that make it difficult for you to get into nursing?

Edith No, no.

Interviewer Because the person I interviewed yesterday was saying it was often a social thing?

Edith It was a sort of social thing but I happened to have the necessary, you know, I'd passed and everything and there was no trouble and they were rather short of nurses anyway. They probably wouldn't have had me but they were a bit short and -

Interviewer So how did your Mum and Dad feel about you training to be a nurse?

Edith Oh they were glad, they were pleased. They helped me, yes.

Interviewer How long was your midwifery training in those days?

Edith A year, a whole year. And my training was, to begin with the practical side of it was an unmarried mother's part and they were very, very unkind to them.

Interviewer Were they?

Edith Well there was a kind of terrible, terrible prejudice about all that kind of thing and my, the practical, the theoretical was at Princess Mary's in Newcastle.

Interviewer Oh yes, I know that, a friend of mine trained there.

Edith I didn't train there but I did my training on the practical side and my exam was there too you see, at Princess Mary's.

Interviewer And that was 1919 or 1920?

Edith 1920 and I think the midwifery certificate is dated 1920. I would have to look it up again to see. And in 1921 I took a job in Burnley, Lancashire but it was most unsatisfactory, I didn't like it because it was a kind of semi-nursing home place and they were not kind to the patients. There was a thing about not being so terribly kind to the patients in those days



and they seemed to object to analgesics. Anaesthetics of course, unless it was completely necessary, were out of the question; they were told it was one of the things that you had to put up with and they were not at all kind. So I didn't like it in Burnley and so I left and then I got a job with the Lambeth Borough Council.

Interviewer Oh did you?

Edith Yes and I was there working for them for 50 years.

Interviewer 50, oh I didn't realise. So you retired down here.

Edith I retired; after I retired, yes.

Interviewer So what area of Lambeth were you working in?

Edith West Norwood.

Interviewer Because I was born in Kennington you see.

Edith Oh yes, you know West Norwood then.

Interviewer Yes, my Mum used to live in Norwood. She was in South Norwood.

Edith Were you born in Norwood?

Interviewer No, I was born in Kennington. They'd moved by then.

Edith So not one of my babies?

Interviewer No, I don't think I'm one of your babies. No, I was a breach; I was born in hospital. I was a tricky one.

Edith Oh I used to love delivering breaches.

Interviewer Did you? You'll have to tell me about that in a minute.

Edith Oh I loved it. There was a certain technique wasn't there?

Interviewer So you were in West Norwood for 50 years.

Edith Yes.

Interviewer All that time. And as a District Midwife.

Edith Well for not quite the 50 years. I was working for the Lambeth Borough Council for 50 years but during the war we had to move out, evacuate in 1940, and we evacuated to Tring in Hertfordshire. But it was still Lambeth Borough Council you see and then the last two years of my work I worked for Hemel Hempstead; they transferred me to Hertfordshire County Council. I worked for them in the Maternity Unit of the Hospital.

Interviewer When you were in West Norwood you were on the District?

Edith I did a bit of District but I wasn't a District Nurse but I did some District. There was a District Nurse but when she was off I helped out.

Interviewer Were you working in the Maternity Home?

Edith I was Sister at the Maternity Home, yes.

Interviewer What sort of area was West Norwood?

Edith A mixture. There was one part that considered itself much better than the other, you know, in the back part, in the High Street and that part they considered themselves rather, well they looked up to the other people, in those days there was a class system but that doesn't happen in these days fortunately.

Interviewer Not as much anyway, not like it used to be, I suppose. What I am particularly interested in in the 20s and the 30s; I'm interested in what midwifery was like before the National Health Service started. So I will try and remind you about what it was like then.

Edith Well of course babies have always come the same way and always will so I mean there were different positions in the patients and difference in the approach and different to the attitudes to the people who approached them and er it's quite, quite different. But they very quickly came on to the idea that the dorsal position was the correct. But we preferred the left lateral.

Interviewer That's what most of the midwives I've interviewed have said.

Edith All the time, yes.

Interviewer Why did you prefer it?



Edith Because it was easier, if you were on your own you could manage it much easier with the help of the patient, you had two arms and you could control the babies and you could control the fundus better.

Interviewer You could see the perineum better as well.

Edith Exactly, yes, yes, and they laid great stress on not tearing the perineum. You thought that was a terrible thing if you got a tear no matter what the structure of the patient, if you couldn't help it well I mean you were made to help it.

Interviewer So what technique did you use for helping the perineum? What technique?

Edith Well we um, we used our left hand to sort of keep it together as much as possible. If there was an LOA of course it was easier, you could keep your finger on the occiput and help the other part forward much easier. But if it was a different position, posterior or, it was very difficult indeed to help the perineum but there was no excuse it was your fault if you tore the perineum. And, of course, what a worry, I was a sensitive kid, I used to feel so sorry for them because they were not allowed to have anything at all for ages, for years after I started to train, they were most rigid.

Interviewer Mmm, so the women were really distressed were they with the pain?

Edith They really were, yes, but they used to give them horrible stuff called chloral hydrate, which immediately made them sick and was no good. That was the only concession they had to it.

Interviewer Because it was a long while before pethidine came in was it?

Edith Pethidine came in yes pethidine came in quite a long time afterwards. But there was one phase where they had horrible little chloroform capsules. I don't know whether you've been told about those. Little capsules filled with chloroform and you had a lint mask, you know the facemask with lint, and you just squeezed one of those capsules with lint and put it over the patient's face every time the pain came. However they soon stopped it because I think they found it not very successful, a bit dangerous.

Interviewer What effect did it have on the woman?



Edith Well she did begin to get a little bit of relief from it but they didn't think it was a wise thing to continue with that and of course the Minute's Machine came in. That was a great help, a terribly great help.

Interviewer So which women had their babies at home then and which women went into the nursing home?

Edith I think it was their choice really. There was an antenatal clinic, a kind of primitive sort of place where they were sorted out and if they wanted to have their babies at home they did. That was the District Nurse's remit.

Interviewer Was there a difference in how much they had to pay to have their baby at home?

Edith Yes, a slight difference. I think that made a difference in those days.

Interviewer Was it cheaper at home?

Edith Yes. I don't know whether they paid anything at home.

Interviewer How much did they pay at the Maternity?

Edith £2.10 – unless they went into a different section of the home, which was slightly done up, a few more pictures on the walls and lighter you know, then they paid £5 for that. But the methods of midwifery I shouldn't think, I haven't seen a recent delivery of course but I think it is all dorsal position isn't it?

Interviewer Yes, except they are quite interested nowadays in getting women to move around more in labour and to give birth squatting and that sort of thing.

Edith And of course we did not have early ambulation; that was frowned upon.

Interviewer Yes, women were in bed for a long while weren't they?

Edith Ten days.

Interviewer That's a long while isn't it?

Edith Well they considered it quite reasonable in those days and we had people who adhered to that principle and for the first two days after delivery they were not allowed more than a cup of Bovril and toast for lunch.

Interviewer Oh gosh, they must have been starving.

Edith Well they were – on the third day they were allowed fish for two days until the fourth day they were not allowed a proper meal. I think many of the fathers brought in pork pies and things at night, you know. ((Laughs)) But they were certainly not allowed and on the fifth day they were given a blanket bath. That was blanket bath day. On the ninth evening they were allowed to just get out of bed and sit in a chair for a few minutes and get back. On the tenth day they could get up and on the eleventh and twelfth days they could go to the toilet and on the thirteenth day they were allowed to see their babies bathed. They were taught how to bath baby and on the fourteenth day they went home.

Interviewer Gosh you remember it so well.

Edith I went through it so much.

Interviewer And where were their babies? Were their babies in the nursery?

Edith In the nursery at night but by the mother's during the day and they were fed rigidly every four hours whether they cried or not. They weren't fed on demand.

Interviewer And they were all breastfed were they?

Edith Well as much as you could make them and if they were bottle fed it was still rigidly four hourly and measured and they were test weighed the babies. I think that still goes on.

Interviewer Yes, they only do it usually if there is a problem, if the baby is not feeding well or if you are a bit worried about it.

Edith Yes, but I think they feed on demand more now, which is better really.

Interviewer Yes because their stomachs don't know how long four hours is. So what did you do? Did you have all these screaming babies who were ravenous? I mean my one fed every two hours.

Edith Well I didn't with me because I used to fill a bottle and plug it in when people weren't looking. ((Laughs)) I was wicked really; I was naughty, naughty but nice. But you would have a great big ten-pounder starving hungry and you couldn't let that baby cry all night could you if you happened to be on night duty. Awful.



Interviewer Awful because the bigger ones do get hungry don't they?

Edith Of course they do, they've got more to fill and more to feed.

Interviewer Mine was like that. He was 9½ lbs and he used to feed every two hours.

Edith Two hours?

Interviewer Yes, he was terrible.

Edith Oh well nothing's happened to him, he's all right.

Interviewer Yes, they work it out for themselves I think. They do gradually cut down as they get older.

Edith Yes, yes, well they work with nature don't they?

Interviewer It's like us, their appetites vary throughout the day as well.

Edith And the older you get the less food you want.

Interviewer Mm, yes I can imagine that.

Edith I don't ever have an appetite. I eat food and sometimes enjoy it but mostly not. That's just the way it goes.

Interviewer Still you've obviously been very energetic.

Edith Oh I could skip around in those days, one had to.

Interviewer Perhaps we'll stay with the postnatal care a little bit. I'll just ask you a few questions.

Edith Well I didn't do very much of that.

Interviewer Were you more doing the delivery?

Edith The deliveries and the puerperium part. The postnatal care was more connected in my case with the babies; if the cord hadn't come off or you know, or if they had eye trouble or -

Interviewer What were you putting on the cords in those days?

Edith Just powder ordinary baby powder.

Interviewer And you tied it with umbilical string did you?

Edith We did, when the baby was born we had two sterilised strings and cut in the middle but now I think they have different things but I don't know about that. But we cut it in the middle and then to dress it we had little dressings, little circular dressings. Powdered well, packed up with the binder, you stitched a binder on and then if the mother went home with the cord on then you naturally were interested to know what happened after that.

Interviewer Did the women have many problems with breastfeeding?

Edith Well the inverted nipple people did and we had horrible breast pumps but they weren't like the modern breast pumps at all.

Interviewer What were they like?

Edith They were big, clumsy looking things with thick glass and they used to bring the nipples out but the nipples immediately dropped back when you took it off and it was impossible to get the baby's mouth onto a nipple that was inverted, so we used to have to draw off the milk and bottle feed the baby with the milk if the breast was engorged.

Interviewer Did many women have cracked nipples?

Edith Oh yes.

Interviewer And how did you used to treat that?

Edith Well we had various ointments and lotions, which we dabbed on and we always washed the nipple before the baby went to the breast and washed it afterwards.

Interviewer Can you remember any of the lotions and ointments, what they were?

Edith No, not really the names.

Interviewer Did some women get quite engorged, did that happen quite often?

Edith Oh yes, yes, quite engorged in which case we had to use the breast pump to get the milk out.

Interviewer Yes, you see that is one thing I think about demand feeding that you don't, I never got engorged because he was feeding so much I never had a chance. But I think -

Edith The baby saw to that.

Interviewer Yes, I think they probably do if they demand feed. It does seem to help that.

Edith Oh much, much better. A long time ago, there was a booklet out in those days, which midwives were very keen on, you know, what was it called? Some New Zealand person?

Interviewer Oh Truby King?

Edith Truby King – he was a stickler wasn't he? He had a terrific influence on our midwifery population, what was correct and what wasn't. And then of course if a person got slightly overdue we used to have them in the Maternity Home and it was drastic for them. I used to feel sorry for them.

Interviewer What used to happen?

Edith Well it was, they used to, it was usually a Monday when they came in and the antenatal clinic was on a Monday morning and they would send them for admission on a Monday afternoon. Well that was all right, when they came in they had a hot bath and an enema whatever, whether they needed it or not, a bath and an enema and bed. ((Interruption while tea is served))

Interviewer So you were saying about the inductions?

Edith Yes, and in the morning they had a further hot bath – it was rigid at the time. They had breakfast about eight; ten o'clock they had a hot bath and were dosed, I think, I don't know whether those quinine tablets were five grains but they had ten grains of quinine after that hot bath and another enema poor souls and then at two o'clock they had, not by the midwives but by a specialist, they had an internal vaginal examination and if it was any way dilatable they used to try to dilate it manually, just like that.

Interviewer Oh, just with their fingers.

Edith I know, yes. It was terrible.

Interviewer It must have been excruciating.

Edith I used to feel sorry for them.



Interviewer The women were really hurt.

Edith Well of course it would wouldn't it and if the membranes were bulging of course they went and hopefully that started labour. And a further dose of quinine after that, another ten grains four hourly at ten, two and six.

Interviewer Did it work? Did women go into labour?

Edith Not every time. Sometimes it took a day or two.

Interviewer And did they have a bad labour because of it do you think?

Edith I don't know whether it made any difference to their labours but it was getting them to get into labour that was the difficult part.

Interviewer And why would they have been inducing them in the first place?

Edith Because they considered that they were post-mature. They didn't want the baby to get too big; obviously the baby must have been full term and slightly big but they didn't want them to get -

Interviewer How long did they let them go overdue?

Edith About a fortnight and that was after that. But I used to feel sorry for those poor things.

Interviewer Going back to the breastfeeding, how long did women feed their babies for before they weaned them? Do you have any idea?

Edith No, one woman went on nine months, about nine months.

Interviewer That's what I thought.

Edith But when I was young a child used to be running about and going to its mother.

Interviewer Yes, they all change. It's all fashion isn't it that sort of thing really.

Edith Yes, it is.

Interviewer So the mother's just had the babies with them when it was time to feed and then they went back to the nursery?

Edith No, they were in a cot by the mother's bed.

Interviewer Oh they were, so they were there next to them.

Edith But they weren't allowed to just pick them up and feed them any minute.

Interviewer They had to wait for the time.

Edith Yes, changing times and bathing times. And they did circumcisions if necessary on the tenth day.

Interviewer Was that on religious grounds?

Edith No, just medical grounds, with the parent's consent of course.

Interviewer So most of the women you were looking after, were they more middle-class women in the Maternity Home?

Edith Yes, I think they were, the others used to like to have their babies at home.

Interviewer Did you ever come across any handywomen, untrained midwives?

Edith Yes, well dear old Auntie Flo. She was everywhere, if there was a woman on the District coming into labour and you were called out Auntie Flo would be there with blankets and hot water and everything. And you would go perhaps two or three streets away to somebody else in labour. Auntie Flo would be there, an amazing woman she was. She was the only one I met.

Interviewer And did she ever deliver babies herself?

Edith No, no.

Interviewer Because she wasn't allowed to I suppose.

Edith There were people called maternity nurses in those days weren't there but no now I don't think.

Interviewer Auntie Flo, did she do other things? Did she lay out bodies as well?

Edith No, it wasn't quite so Dickensian as that.

Interviewer Because I have heard of it, you can relate to them at the time. It depends on the area I suppose.

Edith Yes, but we used to go into some awful poor houses.

Interviewer What were they like?

Edith Well not very wholesome at all. I remember one woman saying, when we wanted to take the placenta of course, "Take the watercress out of that bowl," you know. ((Laughs)) Very often they wouldn't have adequate things for the baby. "Oh well, tear up Daddy's shirt," or something, you know, and roll it up like that.

Interviewer Yes, did the women used to borrow things, share things with each other and pass it on when it was someone else's turn?

Edith Yes, they were very kind to each other and those babies seemed to thrive quite well.

Interviewer What was the typical house like that you would go into?

Edith Well it would be a kind of kitchen and a little room downstairs, a flight of stairs, perhaps knocked in the wall and you'd go up and they'd call, "Mind the second step it isn't there!" kind of thing and you would go up and find rather a cold bedroom with grubby old bits and pieces about and perhaps a bed with a woman on it, barely clean and unless you asked for a basin of water up there, there was no tap, no bathroom or anything like that.

Interviewer They had an outside toilet did they?

Edith Yes, an outside toilet.

Interviewer And would they be sharing that with other families?

Edith Well I don't know about that, possibly, because it was very primitive, Lyme Grove and that way.

Interviewer It was more like back to backs?

Edith Yes, yes, but in London they didn't have real back to backs but they were very, they were normally very nice people, just unfortunate. They didn't think they were and of course there were possibly two or three other children running about.

Interviewer Who helped with the other children?

Edith I think Auntie Flo used to shuffle them about.



Interviewer To different neighbours?

Edith Perhaps, but I remember one place in particular, a note was handed in: "Will you please come because Mummy says the cord is already born."

Interviewer Gosh, so it was a cord prolapse then.

Edith Yes, of course needless to say that was a stillborn because we had to get her into hospital. We didn't like to tackle her.

Interviewer Would she have gone in an ambulance?

Edith Yes, the Kings College ambulance got her in there. The cord had been born and she'd been walking about with this cord for a long time. Did you come up from London yesterday?

Interviewer On Thursday, Thursday afternoon I drove up.

Edith You went to do one of these?

Interviewer Yes, I came yesterday to see a midwife there, she's 71, she's young.

Edith Was she able to give you a lot of information?

Interviewer Yes, she didn't practice as a midwife very long and she nursed in Uganda for 20 years so she talked a lot more about Uganda and what had happened. Yes, she was very interesting.

Edith We got onto the Minutes, they were very, very good gas and air machines. They were very good indeed.

Interviewer So you took them with you when you were on the District?

Edith What did we do when we were on the District? I don't think we did and I used to walk about on the District because we had no transport you see.

Interviewer Yes so it would have been a bit difficult.

Edith I think we just relied on our own techniques; most of those women didn't want anything anyway. They were mostly having their babies the minute you got into the room.



Interviewer Were they up and about then when they were at home? Did they move around more in labour?

Edith I'm sure, yes.

Interviewer Did they get on with the housework and stuff?

Edith Yes, I think most of them liked it better than being restricted; they couldn't stop in bed for ten days they said. Some of those matrons and people would have been horrified at the things that happen today with ((inaudible))

Interviewer Yes, it's very different isn't it?

Edith I can't get used to the two days you know and walking about I suppose, well it must be better but it seems horrifying.

Interviewer So when you were working in the Maternity Home, were you delivering babies yourself?

Edith Yes, very often on my own.

Interviewer How many staff did you have?

Edith We had only about six of us on duty and they weren't all midwives; there were two maternity nurses.

Interviewer Were they allowed to deliver babies?

Edith Not the maternity nurses, they were allowed to do the nursing because of course it was a bedpan routine you see and a wash down.

Interviewer A lot of actual nursing work.

Edith Absolutely, yes, and of course the babies had to be changed and very frequently sometimes. But they had no system, no proper system of keeping those babies warm. They relied on hot water bottles, which was very dangerous indeed. Once or twice we had accidents with them and babies burnt. Of course nowadays they have a proper system, don't they?



Interviewer It's so warm in the hospitals anyway now. Did you have a fire in the ward to keep it warm?

Edith No, it was centrally heated. In those days it was considered very modern, radiators, etc., etc. and electric light and everything.

Interviewer Going back to on the District, talking about having their babies at home, was there a lot of unemployment at that time?

Edith Mmm.

Interviewer So there was quite a lot of poverty.

Edith Yes, I know I was given the job of collecting some money, when you go to Mrs So-and-so's house, remind them that they owe, you know, it was a dreadful job and I hated that.

Interviewer What sort of heating and lighting did they have in the houses?

Edith Some gas, some lamps, dangerous lamps; very few people had electricity. Some did but very few.

Interviewer And were most people like big extended families? Did they have their Mum down the road and their sister in the next street, that sort of thing?

Edith Yes, yes.

Interviewer So do you think they had a lot of support from each other?

Edith I think they did because they are very loyal the Londoners aren't they to each other?

Interviewer That's right. Yes, they certainly are.

Edith I enjoyed doing my midwifery; it was very hard work. At first we only got a day off a month, one day per month and we didn't get a day off a week until well into the Second War – 1940 something we were allowed a day off a week. I had an invalid mother and I used to wonder if I should give up nursing and go home and nurse her. And then I thought, well they wouldn't be able to afford to keep me, I would have to get a job locally so what's the point of giving up a very good job here. But I couldn't get weekends off so it was rather hard that way in those days. I loved the work but it was very restricting like that. The only



concession was that you could get a half day before your day off so you could travel up to Yorkshire on your half day and travel back the next day if you wanted to.

Interviewer What a long journey and of course it wasn't so fast the transport in those days either.

Edith Well you had to get up to Kings Cross you see.

Interviewer Yes that would take forever.

Edith So that was one of the personal things, it didn't come into the work at all. But I enjoyed the work and I had very nice people to work with. Our matron was a very understanding woman but very rigid in her beliefs. What she said went, which was good in a way but this five-day blanket bath and the restriction on the food; I always thought they wanted a jolly good feed after all that hard work.

Interviewer Yes, that's what I felt like.

Edith But no, Bovril and toast.

Interviewer What do you think the reasoning behind that was?

Edith I really can't think unless they got their anatomy mixed up and they thought the baby came from the stomach and the stomach wanted a rest. ((Laughs)) I can't think. I am quite sure they got more than that because they used to send messages out to their people and say, "For God's sake bring me sandwiches." They got that and they got breakfast, which of course was porridge and I think they were allowed an egg or something in the morning and then they had a coffee and then they had this fish; well Bovril and toast for two days and fish the third day.

Interviewer How about at home, the working-class women, what was their diet like do you think?

Edith I think they chose themselves, they were lucky.

Interviewer But do you think, did they eat well?

Edith Yes.



Interviewer They did.

Edith Oh yes and they got out of bed when they wanted to. I am sure they did. I think on the whole they were happier at home if the people around them could bear it and the children and everything, if they could cope. But very often they couldn't cope, it was difficult for them. Grandparents used to come in to help.

Interviewer The women, unmarried mothers, did you see many unmarried mothers?

Edith I trained with unmarried mothers.

Interviewer Oh yes, you said, that's right.

Edith But after that no.

Interviewer In your training what happened to the babies? Did they stay with their mothers?

Edith Well they were either adopted or I don't quite know what happened when they went out of the hospital because it was a Maternity Unit at the hospital.

Interviewer Yes, and it was just for unmarried mothers?

Edith Well I think it was, it seemed to me most, I can only remember unmarried mothers; it's a long way back.

Interviewer Was there much stigma attached to being unmarried?

Edith Yes, terrific, terrific and why I can't think because it takes two to make a bargain and it's always the woman who gets the bad name, yes. It's fading out that kind of attitude isn't it. Because the stigma very often left its mark on the child, which is wrong of course but I do remember they were not allowed anything to ease their pain and if they had stitches, well they just had stitches.

Interviewer So they were stitched up without painkillers?

Edith Yes, I think they would have done forceps without an anaesthetic but it wasn't possible to do forceps without anaesthetic.

Interviewer Would they do forceps under general anaesthetic?



Edith Yes but it was ordinary chloroform or ether; I think plain chloroform or ether was rather sick making.

Interviewer I should imagine it was. Do you think they knew much about the facts of life and about their bodies?

Edith I don't think so. They only knew, they used to say, "What comes in must come out." That was about all they knew.

Interviewer So it must have been a bit of a shock for some of them.

Edith Yes, oh yes, because nature will have its way won't it, whatever happens? I used to feel very sorry for some of those poor girls, youngsters, but of course their babies will have grown up and be on their old age pensions now.

Interviewer I know it's an amazing thought isn't it?

Edith Yes.

Interviewer I was just thinking I must ask my Mum where she was born because she was born in Norwood; she was born in 1928; I think so she might have been one of yours? ((Laughs))

Edith She could be because there's one down here in the shop I discovered was one of my babies; a little village shop about a mile away. I discovered by accident that she was born there.

Interviewer What was it called the Maternity Home?

Edith Just the Lambeth Borough Council Maternity Home.

Interviewer I must ask her; I wouldn't be at all surprised. I know she wasn't born at home so I must ask her.

Edith Of course some of the hospitals had maternity units didn't they? She could have been York Road at the GNI.

Interviewer Oh yes, the lying in hospital.

Edith I went there for a bit.

Interviewer Did you? What was that like there?



Edith Well I didn't do midwifery there, I went for a course in analgesics because of course we weren't allowed to give anaesthetics but we had to learn all about gas and that sort of thing, gas and air and how to control it.

Interviewer Did you have to do a course before you could give it to a woman?

Edith Officially but unofficially we used to use it. But I went there and the funny part of it was, York Road as you know is quite close to St. Thomas's Hospital and it was during the war, or was it during the war, I can't remember, it couldn't have been. But some of these young students over in St. Thomas's Hospital were presumably doing their midwifery and they used to do it at York Road and they were bits of devils some of them. Because there was a pub, basic, where you could get drinks, and they once left me with a Boyles, have you heard of a Boyles machine?

Interviewer Yes, I can't remember what it is now.

Edith Well there is a certain amount of oxygen and a certain amount of gas and a certain amount of something else and I was terrified because you see I was just taking this course and they left me with this woman and she was unconscious at the time and I didn't know whether to press this button, that button or that button.

Interviewer How safe do you think things were in those days?

Edith Safe? I think they were fairly safe, I am sure they were. Things didn't seem to go wrong very much. We didn't seem to have great problems.

Interviewer In the 1930s the maternal mortality rate was quite high and in fact it was rising; do you remember that and were people worried about it?

Edith Yes they got puerperal fever didn't they in those days?

Interviewer Did you have any maternal deaths?

Edith Yes, we had to close down for a week.

Interviewer Did you? Was that because of puerperal fever?

Edith Well I think it was more a precautionary measure than anything. I don't think we were affected but they did close it.

Interviewer Yes, and somebody died did they?

Edith None of our patients no, but I think there was a kind of a message round that all this had to be clamped down a bit. People were sent home and had their babies at home.

Interviewer Because it was interesting because it was actually in the richer boroughs of London and it was higher there than in the poorer boroughs.

Edith Yes, well that's what happened. I don't know whether poverty or riches make much difference in that respect.

Interviewer No. And I know they thought that one thing that contributed to it were the number of women trying to procure an abortion?

Edith An illicit abortion?

Interviewer Yes, that's right. It was very high in the 1930s particularly. Did you ever come across any women who had tried to do that?

Edith No I didn't come across any of that. We were quite apart from that kind of thing.

Interviewer I wondered if any women got brought in who were bleeding or anything?

Edith No nothing like that. We once had a gypsy brought in and she had her baby and she demanded to go out at once. ((Laughs))

Interviewer How about any baby deaths? Did you have any babies that died?

Edith Only stillborns; no baby deaths. They didn't seem to have cot deaths then that they talk about now.

Interviewer That's interesting, yes.

Edith Although the babies were all taken out at night and put in the nursery we used to regularly go in and look round the babies and somehow I used to get a little worried about them because they were not put in cots. We had an enormous kind of a stretcher thing, a great long stretcher, and each baby was taken out with its mattress and just put one after another like sardines along.

Interviewer And they couldn't roll off?



Edith No, no there was nowhere they could roll off; they were very firmly put but I used to get worried for fear that they would wriggle over and got their faces buried. That was not a good idea. Cots were not taken out and they should have been. There were a lot of things I personally didn't like but I couldn't do much about it?

Interviewer How did you know which baby belonged to which mother?

Edith They had a little name on their wrist.

Interviewer I imagine you would get them all muddled up if they were all on there.

Edith No, they each had a name on their wrist and a date of birth.

Interviewer Can you remember what names were popular then?

**[END OF FIRST AUDIO FILE]**

**[START OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]**

Interviewer I liked the general but it wasn't until I did my midwifery and then I thought, that's it.

Edith That's it, yes.

Interviewer I did my midwifery partly at Guys and partly at St. Thomas's; I did half at each.

Edith St. Thomas's is lovely isn't it? I like St. Thomas.

Interviewer And then I worked for a while at Guys and then I worked in Wales near Brecon; I worked in like a cottage hospital. There were just a few midwives and we did all the deliveries ourselves. It was quite old-fashioned really. And then I worked with an independent practice doing home births in North London and then I had my baby. But I haven't practiced for a couple of years now.

Edith Will you do it again?

Interviewer I hope so but I've got to go back and do my refresher course you see and they want me to back and do a month in hospital.

Edith And of course if you've got a baby it's difficult.

Interviewer It's difficult; I'll have to wait till he's a bit older really.



Edith Yes, yes.

Interviewer Are you still, are you going all right? I'm not tiring you too much?

Edith No, not at all.

Interviewer You are remembering well.

Edith I hope I remember, there are things I can't remember. Of course the technique of delivery, the first thing we did and I suppose they still do, I don't know, was clean the eyes the moment the baby was born.

Interviewer What did you clean them with?

Edith Boric

Interviewer Boric

Edith Yes, we had a bowl of boric lotion and a little kidney dish with the scissors and the little two pieces of special twine that we used, sterilised, it had all been boiled.

Interviewer What were you wearing? Did you wear a gown?

Edith Well at first we didn't, we wore a gown but we never wore masks but afterwards masks came in and we hated them.

Interviewer Mm, they are horrible things aren't they?

Edith Absolutely horrible.

Interviewer How about gloves, were you wearing gloves?

Edith We were supposed to but we preferred not. We could get on better without them.

Interviewer You can feel better can't you?

Edith You can but we were asked to wear gloves later on. It was better really when we got used to the gloves.

Interviewer There is less chance of infection.

Edith Yes and it was cleaner wasn't it for you because the rectum very often gave you trouble didn't it?

Interviewer So what would happen, the woman would come in when she was in labour would she or would she come in beforehand?

Edith Well she was usually starting labour unless she was sent in and she would be immediately plunged into a bath and given an enema. That was the immediate -

Interviewer Even if she was in labour?

Edith If she was in labour, yes, bath and a PV and if she was well advanced in labour well the membranes ruptured or you ruptured them. If she was getting on towards fully dilated it was better to rupture the membranes because it gave the, it made it quicker didn't it?

Interviewer Were the women shaved?

Edith Yes, and the third stage of course was always a tricky business wasn't it?

Interviewer Yes, I was going to ask you about that. What was your technique?

Edith Well we always waited a little while, and of course naturally you had to, and we didn't exert fundal pressure, we waited until there was a contraction and helped it with a little fundal pressure. We never pulled on the cord and after the placenta came away a dose of Ergot was given to the patient.

Interviewer You always gave Ergot?

Edith Yes, that was routine.

Interviewer Was that into the muscle or intravenously?

Edith No, orally, yes. But the disadvantage of that was it gave the mothers cramp or we used to think it did. I don't know whether it does or not.

Interviewer Yes but it is quite powerful isn't it? So did you have many cases of post-partum haemorrhage?

Edith No, we used to get clots, big clots but you were able to deal with those.

Interviewer So you never had any emergencies with the third stage?

Edith No, no, I don't remember.



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Interviewer It is what all midwives worry about isn't it, the third stage?

Edith Yes it is a more tricky stage than the second stage.

Interviewer It is, it is, the baby is easy.

Edith Well the baby, yes, you've got the baby that's, everybody thinks that's it but it isn't and it is about an hour after the third stage that you have to be careful because you get the uterus filling up with clots.

Interviewer How long would you wait for the placenta to be born?

Edith Well there were a lot of wide limits to that; it depends how strong the contractions are. We used to help them along with a hot cup of tea and forget about it for a little while and give them half an hour and then usually try to stimulate the uterus with a little fundal pressure. But we have had an adhering placenta once or twice and we've had to get the doctor.

Interviewer You just would call the doctor if there was a problem would you?

Edith Oh yes, yes, we always had a doctor at the other end of the phone permanently on duty. Women doctors.

Interviewer All women doctors; that is very nice isn't it?

Edith Yes, nice people they were.

Interviewer That was very nice for your patients as well.

Edith Yes, they preferred that.

Interviewer And quite unusual because there weren't many outlets for women doctors at that time.

Edith No we had a whole rota of women doctors, we had three or four of them so if one wasn't there another one was. All nice women, understanding women they were and if they were going to be somewhere different they would ring up and say, "I'm not going to be here but Dr So-and-so will be on call."

Interviewer So what sort of things would you call the doctors for?



Edith Well an adhering placenta; or excessive haemorrhage or a difficult presentation or a prolonged second stage. Too long if the baby was not advancing at all and the contractions were coming then you would call the doctor.

Interviewer Were they doing caesareans there?

Edith Yes, we had one or two caesareans with Lady Barratt, a woman doctor used to come and do caesareans; we didn't have many. I only remember two and I was terrified. ((Laughs)) I was not a very good general nurse; I was a certificate hound. I wanted the general certificate to get a good job in midwifery that's all. You didn't care for general nursing and I didn't.

Interviewer I've never liked the surgical wards and the drama of theatre, I always get frightened and panicky. I'm much happier with a nice birth.

Edith A good straightforward delivery, it's a joy isn't it.

Interviewer Yes, it is. Yes it is a wonderful job isn't it?

Edith Yes, a certain approach to the patients you know.

Interviewer What was the relationship between the midwife and the patients?

Edith Well of course it varied according to different people's natures; some of them were a bit bossy. Do what I say, not what you want to do. But I always seemed to manage to get on very well with my mothers; I loved it.

Interviewer Do they look on you as a friend or as a professional?

Edith A friend, I like to be, you know, as a friend.

Interviewer What did they call you?

Edith Sister; yes, I was a Sister.

Interviewer And what would you have called them? Their first name or Mrs?

Edith Mrs Something; they didn't use first names very much in those days. Have we nearly everything.

Interviewer Yes, how are you doing?

Edith I'm all right.

Interviewer We can have a little gap in a minute anyway. When the woman was in labour, she would come in and she would be in labour and what would she do? Would she just get on the bed or would she be walking about?

Edith She would be walking about if she wanted to and if she wanted a cup of tea we'd get her one. If a meal was coming up we'd ask her if she'd like something; would she like to talk to somebody who had already had their baby?

Interviewer Would she have somebody with her all the time she was in labour? Would she be on her own?

Edith Well not all the time; she had a bell and immediately she rang the bell somebody would go. Perhaps the staff would be down at a meal and we'd leave the woman and say, "Do you mind if we go to the staff meal? There's the bell if you need anybody." And we were on call you know straight away.

Interviewer But she wouldn't have had her husband with her?

Edith No, not in those days.

Interviewer It has changed now hasn't it?

Edith No, that was the rule. ((Laughs)) But if she was in labour and it came to visiting time, which they had in those days and the husband came, of course he could see her. But not during the birth. No it was strictly considered to be sterilised and we didn't let anyone else in the room unless gowned and masked.

Interviewer And was it usually you on your own delivering the baby?

Edith Yes, I used to think those masks were a danger because you were breathing into them weren't you?

Interviewer And you often put your hand up and touch them don't you? The times when you delivered babies at home, was there someone else in the room with you then?

Edith Usually, Auntie Flo! Yes, Auntie Flo, I don't know whether her name was Flo but she was a dear old thing; she was everywhere.



Interviewer She sounds amazing.

Edith Well it from the ((Dickson?)) days.

Interviewer She got on well with the midwife did she?

Edith Oh yes, she made us up and the children, she loved the children.

Interviewer Had she got children of her own, had she had babies herself?

Edith I think she had, yes.

Interviewer I'd love to interview some of those women that were like that. I don't know how to find them.

Edith I think they are dead probably; no, you wouldn't find them now.

Interviewer How old was she?

Edith Oh she was old, because I was in my 20s and 30s. I came to London in 1921 and 1922 and was there all during the war, well not all during the war because we were bombed out in 1940 and went to Tring. Lord Rothschild's place, very posh, our maternity people were there. But there used to be all these bombs flying about London and we used to take the mothers out every week, they used to bring a cartload of expectant mothers out you see. But when the mothers had had their babies and were allowed out again they were longing to get back to London believe it or not, in all the turmoil. They used to say, "We cannot stand this 'orrible 'ush – somebody rattle a tin can or something." ((Laughter))

Interviewer Did you ever have any babies that couldn't breathe properly when they were born? Did you have to resuscitate any?

Edith Not really, only by turning them upside down and the usual methods. We didn't have to do anything further. We were mostly normal; if there was any doubt at all they were sent off.

Interviewer Where did they go then?

Edith King's College, if there was, which was very seldom. They were mostly normal. We had one or two that were, what's that back thing that they have? Spina Bifida; they are nasty and one or two Mongol. You can't always tell the moment they are born can you?



Interviewer No, no.

Edith They look perfectly all right.

Interviewer Have you got any tips for some of the problems you get? Things like posterior position babies, have you got any tips for helping them through the labour?

Edith I don't think you can do much for the posterior position, you just have to let nature take its course. You can't alter the position.

Interviewer Because it is usually a long labour isn't it?

Edith It's usually a long labour and you get a face to pubis; but otherwise you can't make it into an anterior because the whole baby is that way but the breech of course is easy; it is easy to deliver a breech.

Interviewer Tell me how you do that then.

Edith Well of course -

Interviewer I've never delivered one because you hardly see them nowadays; most of them have caesarean sections?

Edith Do they?

Interviewer Yes, most primates having a breech baby do.

Edith My niece had a breech but the baby was perfectly all right but you'd get the buttocks presenting and then if it's presented and coming down you just put your hand up and release a little foot and bring it out and give a little twist and release the other foot and then pull it up a little bit and then go up in the middle of the back and release an arm and give it a little twist and release the other arm and then give it a little push and out the head comes.

Interviewer Beautiful.

Edith Beautiful, a perfect breech and I don't see how breech can, you can manipulate a breech but you couldn't manipulate a posterior. An ROA or an LOA can be but an LOA is the ideal of course, but a breech you can manipulate it a bit even if a foot is presenting you can pull

it down and help. But how dreadful to have to have a caesarean. Of course caesareans are easier now.

Interviewer Yes, it's different to what it used to be actually. Would the woman be in a dorsal position to deliver the breech?

Edith No, lateral or the dorsal position but I used to like the lateral; I used to love delivering breeches, it was easier than birthing sometimes. Just out, then out and then a push and then out.

Interviewer Lovely. Was it always a surprise that the baby was breech or had you diagnosed?

Edith Oh it was usually diagnosed. You can tell with the PV can't you?

Interviewer Would you be doing PVs, did you do them a lot in labour or just maybe once?

Edith As little as possible but it did seem to be necessary, especially if the membrane has ruptured you wanted to know what was going on or if they were fully dilated and the membrane hadn't ruptured, you used to rupture them. I never used to think it was a good idea to wait until you saw the membranes.

Interviewer Why did you think that?

Edith Well because it took much longer, once the membrane has ruptured it gets space for the head to come down but you are obstructing it with that kind of river of water; so I used to rupture the membranes and you got the baby quicker. But they don't allow it now; I don't think they do, do they? They wait until you see the membranes don't they?

Interviewer Well it is just one of those things that varies I think depending on where you are. Some places they are keen to rupture them at about 2 cm.

Edith I think you can do it too early but you can't be too late. At full dilatation it has done its job hasn't it? There's no point in, it's just obstructing and the cord round the neck of course, you have to be careful of that don't you. It brings it all back. I used to love it.

Interviewer The antenatal care, did you do much of that yourself?

Edith No, that was different. I used to like to look at a woman when she was pregnant you know but we didn't get much opportunity because they used to come to us in labour you know.



Interviewer Would it be the doctors seeing them at the antenatal clinic?

Edith Yes, it would be the doctors, the women doctors. They would attend at the maternity.

Interviewer How often did they get to see them?

Edith Once a week I think during the latter times.

Interviewer Antenatal care was quite a new idea I think in the 20s.

Edith Yes, of course they went all for it. Exaggerated it almost; giving the mothers different stimulants and all this kind of thing. Making them drink orange juice and all that.

Interviewer Did they take iron supplements?

Edith I think they gave them quite a lot of things that we didn't hear about. They were happy times and I was glad I chose that profession. I think it was lovely but you have to be dedicated to it; it is very hard work but if you are prepared to work hard.

Interviewer Were you on call at nights as well?

Edith Oh yes, very often. One has been called about six in the morning and gone on until midnight you know.

Interviewer Do you know how many babies you've delivered?

Edith No, I can't think now but hundreds over the course of the years. And I keep running across them. I ran across one in Reading ((Laughs)) I wouldn't be surprised if your Mum was one.

Interviewer I'm going to ask her.

Edith She may not want to know when she hears my name.

Interviewer Well her Mum has died now, her Mum died when she was a teenager so she might not even know, she might not have that knowledge.

Edith But your own Mother, she'd know me, if I was there when you were born.

Interviewer No, I was born at South London, it's her mother, my grandmother that would have been. I was born at the South London.

Edith Oh well your grandmother wouldn't have a thing against me if she's not alive any more.

Interviewer I'm sure she wouldn't have anyway. ((Laughs))

Edith We had some nice doctors and some not quite so understanding. I remember one woman, she'd been in labour quite a long time, and the doctor came to see her and the doctor said, "You must pull yourself together; it's your baby, you're having it, you do the work." And the woman said, "Can I have a cup of tea?" She said, "Not until you've had your baby." So I said, "Well anybody's who's doing hard work can have a cup of tea, it's good for them." So she got her cup of tea.

Interviewer That's good.

Edith I mean it is hard work, hard manual labour having a baby. But they just didn't understand, they were hard-pressed themselves.

Interviewer I suppose most of them hadn't had children themselves?

Edith No they were all single people.

Interviewer Because they wouldn't be able to make a career anyway would they?

Edith No, no. I often wish I'd had a baby.

Interviewer Do you, yes, I bet, you saw so many.

Edith Yes but there it was, I chose the profession.

Interviewer That's right. Did you mostly get on well with the doctors?

Edith Oh yes. I once did a forceps case because the doctor collapsed. That wasn't good for her but she was on the point of collapsing, "I don't feel very well." I said, "Well what do you want me to do?" She said, "Do you think you can manage?" I said, "Well if you tell me the position and where to put the instrument." What do you call those, I've forgotten what the names are – the forceps?

Interviewer Kiellands?

Edith I said, "If you tell me exactly where to put them and how to feel I'll have a go. But you must take responsibility." And a healthy baby was born and I went about with an imaginary medal on my chest.

Interviewer I bet, yes.

Edith But she was there all the time.

Interviewer Yes, so she was watching.

Edith I enjoyed that feeling of power you know.

Interviewer Because midwives in some other countries they do forceps deliveries and things.

Edith They are allowed to do episiotomies too now aren't they?

Interviewer Yes, you didn't get to do those?

Edith No, we were allowed to put a stitch in, just the odd stitch but not episiotomies.

Interviewer No I don't like to do them, I hardly ever do, it terrifies me. They get a bit scissor happy sometimes and are inclined to do it without waiting.

Edith They can be impatient.

Interviewer They are impatient all the time I think nowadays.

Edith Have you put stitches in?

Interviewer I've done it a couple of times but I don't feel very skilled at doing it. I'd rather the doctor did it.

Edith I don't like doing it but I've done it several times.

Interviewer Well especially if you didn't have any analgesics, that must have been -

Edith Well they used to give an injection of whatever it was, cocaine or something a few minutes before you stitched them. But I don't like hurting people; I don't think anybody likes hurting people, or very few people do.

Interviewer If the occasion arose where you had to disagree with the doctor, how would you have done that? Have you ever had to disagree?

Edith No, I never had cause to. I can't think. No, our doctors were very, very nice.

Interviewer Did they treat you as an equal then?

Edith Yes, they were very nice indeed.



Interviewer They respected the midwives?

Edith Yes, oh yes, and they very often said ((inaudible)) all right, you know. They trusted you and you felt the feeling of trust. You know where we are, we are on the phone and we'll be here in a minute if you want us. Sometimes, very, very occasionally the doctor would say, "Now tonight," I would be left perhaps with them and matron would be out or away or something and I would be left in charge. She would say, "Now tonight we are going to the West End to the theatre." "Which theatre?" I would say. "If you have any difficulty, telephone the theatre and we'll come back, or I will come back." So quite occasionally they have been called from the stage to come back.

Interviewer You'd ring up the theatre would you?

Edith Yes, ring up the theatre and then they would come – is doctor so-and-so in the house, they are wanted.

Interviewer Because now they just have those little bleeps that go off?

Edith Yes, but it didn't happen very often because they usually left another doctor in charge if they weren't going to be there. But things do happen don't they and there's nobody available.

Interviewer Did you see many cases of toxæmia?

Edith No. We saw cases of birth- what is it when there's an excess of albumen?

Interviewer Oh, eclampsia.

Edith Yes, eclampsia, no we didn't see an eclamptic fit but a pre-eclamptic state where they had to be put on a strict diet and that kind of thing; and diabetics, they had to be specially dealt with. Diabetics usually were big babies.

Interviewer Yes, cherubs they call them don't they?

Edith They have to have special diets. We had one case in Tring where a woman came in, she'd been in an air raid and she'd had an arm blown off; she'd been treated in hospital. That had happened three or four weeks before. She came in and had a perfectly normal baby and it never interfered with that pregnancy.



Interviewer She was lucky that she didn't go into premature labour wasn't it really?

Edith It must have been more weeks than that because we didn't have to do anything about the arm you see. Oh they used to come in frightened to death but then they wanted to go back to what was familiar. They couldn't stand the country; I like it here in the country but I wouldn't have liked it 20 years ago. Oh, I wouldn't.

Interviewer No I don't like it; I'm itching to get back to London.

Edith It's beautiful but I'm such a long way from the shops. I can't get to the shops and that worries me. We have to take a taxi every Monday to do our shopping because Pat obviously can't, her car is in use you see. So her father, who lives at this end, and myself, we take a taxi down on a Monday morning and do our weekly shopping and then – you're not a country person are you?

Interviewer No, no, a Londoner born and bred.

Edith I'm town born and bred; not London born and bred.

Interviewer But it makes a difference doesn't it?

Edith Oh yes, they don't understand do they? What are you writing?

Interviewer I'm just writing down that you live with one of your babies so I don't forget that. Do you think there is such a thing as midwives intuition? Some people say there is midwives intuition.

Edith How do you mean?

Interviewer You have a sort of intuition about the woman, about what sort of birth she's going to have?

Edith Well I've not met it, no.

Interviewer I've just heard some of the midwives I've interviewed have said things like, "Oh I'd go to bed but I'd think there's going to be a baby tonight."

Edith No, I'm not like that. I very often delivered a baby in the morning and then perhaps I've got one of these half days I was talking about and I've been travelling from Kings Cross up to



Yorkshire and I'd think, oh dear, I wonder if that woman and baby are all right. I wonder if the cord's leaking. And I could do nothing about it because I was in the train. I'd get that kind of feeling and it's gone lasting right on into the night. I have nearly phoned through but it would have sounded feeble to have made a long distance call to ask if the mother was all right and they've usually been perfectly all right.

Interviewer You get so involved don't you?

Edith Yes, yes. You must go back and have a look. I used to be terrified that the baby would bleed to death through its cord and I don't really think that could happen.

Interviewer No because it shrinks down doesn't it?

Edith I don't think, if it bled I don't think the baby would bleed to death. I don't know.

Interviewer How about blue babies, rhesus negative, because they hadn't discovered it then had they in the 20s? Did you ever see any blue babies?

Edith They used to be yellow.

Interviewer Jaundice.

Edith Yes, jaundice. We used to give them horrible things called grey powders. What they were I don't know, I don't know what they were made of.

Interviewer Why were they jaundiced?

Edith I really don't know the answer to that? Could it be kind of deficiency of the blood or something?

Interviewer Did you get many women who had mastitis or breast ulcers?

Edith No.

Interviewer Did you ever have to put infusions up? Did you ever use drips or intravenous infusions?

Edith No, they were all hospital cases. We weren't a hospital. We were a hospital when we got to Hemel Hempstead but the doctors had to do things like that. They had a hospital staff.

Interviewer What was the atmosphere, the general atmosphere like in the 20s?

Edith Lovely.

Interviewer And the 30s; was it different in the 20s than the 30s?

Edith Well the 20s was tough and the 30s was a little less and then gradually as the war years came behind it all relaxed. They were all very, very professional and London hospitals; Matron was Matron and this kind of thing but it didn't work with maternity.

Interviewer No, it has to be more free and easy, doesn't it?

Edith Yes. It just doesn't work with maternity.

Interviewer Can you remember the General Strike?

Edith Oh yes.

Interviewer What was that like?

Edith Oh 1926, I was in Newcastle.

Interviewer And you were up there then were you?

Edith I was in London not Newcastle. But it didn't affect us and of course during the war and the shortage of food, well we got the best of everything, the hospitals got the best. We were the lucky ones.

Interviewer So you were around at the time that women got the vote? Do you remember that? What was that like?

Edith I do, I do. It's going so far back it's almost gone out of my mind.

Interviewer Were you a teenager, how old were you then?

Edith I remember Queen Mary, as a girl more or less, Princess Mary. And I was outside Buckingham Palace when our present Queen was born, waiting for the announcement and she is now 60 or something isn't she?

Interviewer What a life; so you saw the first motor car and -

Edith Oh yes. Yes, it's a long time to live. I wonder if it's worth it but I can't do a thing about it.

Interviewer You are not in control really are you?



Edith They tell me I've got to go on to 100 but I have to wait over seven years for that.

Interviewer Have you got any photographs of when you used to be a midwife?

Edith I have but my brother has got them, or my brother's wife. All my brothers have gone now.

Interviewer We want to put some photographs in the book. In fact perhaps later on I could take your photo before I go?

Edith Well I don't take a very good. I look absolutely awful.

Interviewer I'm sure it will be lovely.

Edith I hate looking in the mirror and to have it put on paper well I mean what a terrible thought.

Interviewer It will be very special because of your age but if you don't want me to I won't take it.

Edith We'll see. Do you mean today, now?

Interviewer I'm not coming back, well I don't think so, unless maybe in the summer or something because tomorrow I'm going to see Miss Cousins in the morning and then -

Edith She's a dear isn't she?

Interviewer I haven't met her yet. I've only talked to her on the phone and she sounds lovely. And Miss Bald in the afternoon, who is in Bideford I think. I think she was the midwife, I think it was round here she practiced. I don't know, I'll find out.

Edith Pat's a midwife but she doesn't practice.

Interviewer She said that yes and then on Monday we have to go back to London you see.

Edith Who is looking after the baby?

Interviewer The friends in Hartland have got him. They've got a baby as well; she's two months older and he likes playing with her so they are quite happy together. He is fine. He's very good at being left with other people. He's not too clingy.

Edith You've trained him well.

Interviewer Do you want to have a little break?

Edith Is there much more to do?

Interviewer Not much more. ((Tape stops and restarts within the same recording))

Edith It must have been during, what do they call it, in recess, they don't call it holidays and we were sent down there for a week a whole party of us. We had lectures down there; refresher course lectures. We could have taught them as much as they taught us, you know, but it was beautiful and we enjoyed that. It was lovely. I would like to do that now but I wouldn't be much good physically.

Interviewer Do you still read anything about midwifery?

Edith I get the Midwife's Chronicle sent to me and I've got a lovely honorary certificate from them because I'd been a midwife for so many years.

Interviewer Were you a member of the Royal College right from the beginning?

Edith Yes, yes, yes, right from the early days. And I remember even Miss Paget. Are you a member of the Royal College?

Interviewer Well I'm not at the moment because I'm not practising and I ought to -

Edith Well I'm not but I'm a member, well I'm an honorary member. I had a lovely certificate from them and a very nice little message that they sent and they send me a little Christmas present every year.

Interviewer Because I went to the Christmas party; you know they have the retired midwives Christmas party every year.

Edith Yes, I couldn't get up there.

Interviewer It's a long way for you to go isn't it? But it's very nice. I went with Nicky, my colleague and we met quite a few midwives there who were interested in us going to interview them. I mean they are all, they are mostly living in and around London.

Edith It's too far for me to go. You see there is no railway here and that's the problem.

Interviewer You would have to go to Barnstable?

Edith Yes, Barnstable and then you have to change at Exeter.

Interviewer Oh yes.

Edith And then you get to Paddington and you are out of this world, unless you go by coach and get to Victoria. I've tried to get to London to see my niece but I think I should go by coach because I think one could pick on up at Barnstable.

Interviewer Yes, I would have thought so. Gosh you're amazing going off to London!

Edith I went to Doncaster last year to see my brother.

Interviewer Did you?

Edith He's died though. He died on Boxing Day, this Boxing Day. It was ((back two weeks?)) wasn't it? What sort of a labour did you have with your baby? Was it terrible?

Interviewer No it wasn't terrible; it was hard work. It was about 18 hours and he was posterior so it was quite a long haul. I took quite a long while to dilate.

Edith That's the trouble, you don't get the occipital.

Interviewer Yes, so it took me a long while, it took me a good, half that time I wasn't really getting anywhere and then suddenly he moved to anterior and then it was all right, it was quite fast then. I didn't have any painkillers; I did lots of breathing techniques.

Edith No pethedine?

Interviewer No, I nearly did a few times but my friend, Nicky, who is doing the book with me, she was my midwife. She's a midwife and she came and delivered him and she was fantastic and my husband was there. They all kept me going really, I couldn't have done it without them. I am sure in hospital I would have had a forceps delivery.

Edith Yes, but you were a good girl.

Interviewer He was, the doctor didn't do anything. He came along and just sat in the corner because the midwife was so good and he was very nice to me.

Edith Shall you have another one?

Interviewer When I've got the book done. I've got to get the book done first. I'd like another one, maybe next year or something when he's a bit older.



Edith Oh yes, let him get on the way first, it's too much.

Interviewer I enjoy him too much.

Edith And of course he's at the most, they take a lot of looking after at this age.

Interviewer They are a real handful.

Edith I know, my mother was nearly always pregnant.

Interviewer I guess she must have been, yes. Where did she have you then? Did she have you at home?

Edith At home, well that was 80 years ago, 93 years ago.

Interviewer I wonder, do you know who delivered you?

Edith Grandma, well the doctor came but I think Grandma did most of the work. I'm not sure. I don't remember.

Interviewer No, you wouldn't.

Edith I think I came before I was expected and I wasn't supposed to live an awfully long time and I was the eldest and look at me.

Interviewer She must have been very tired always having babies.

Edith I know, she died when she was 66, worn out.

Interviewer Did she have to do work as well to bring in a bit of money?

Edith No, oh no.

Interviewer She had enough with the kids. Because I know some women had to go and do cleaning and things as well.

Edith But what she had to do though?

Interviewer And the housework was terrible too in those days wasn't it?

Edith Oh housework, yes, and no help whatever. So you are going to have a family are you?

Interviewer Well a couple; I don't think I'll have eight I don't think.



Edith I wouldn't advise it.

Interviewer I was going to ask you that – did women know much about birth control or family planning?

Edith No.

Interviewer There wasn't much available then was there?

Edith No, there wasn't much available. I think it came on the man's side didn't it?

Interviewer Did they ever ask you for advice?

Edith No, oh no, it was forbidden.

Interviewer Yes, taboo.

Edith My mother never told me a thing about anything. I thought I was dying when I was about 15. "Oh Mum, I'm dying, I'm bleeding to death." She'd told me nothing at all. I hope if you have a girl you'll tell her.

Interviewer Oh I would, I'd tell her everything. I think it is very important and for a boy, they should know shouldn't they? It's the same with labour isn't it? It is really important to know what is happening to your body. Were there any antenatal classes or childbirth classes at all?

Edith No, I don't think there were. Not in my day.

Interviewer No, so they really didn't know anything apart from what their Mum's had told them.

Edith Which was practically nil; they just knew that they were pregnant and they would have a baby and they didn't know what to expect. They weren't prepared for pain. They weren't even told it was painful were they? Poor little things didn't know a thing. I thought they were terrible. I cried. I used to go to bed and cry for these poor girls.

Interviewer But when you'd had a few babies at least you knew what was going to happen the next time.



Edith ((Interruption)) No, they were tough days but we didn't realise it, we thought that was normal didn't we?

Interviewer I think nowadays the women who have been to classes and know what is going to happen, they are much more prepared and I mean fear is a big part of it. What do you think it takes to be a good midwife? What do you need?

Edith Understanding principally and it's no good just learning theory; practice is the thing.

Interviewer Was your training good? Did it prepare you for your work as a midwife?

Edith Very good, yes. Very good. We used to get some fun out of it I know. We had young men; in fact one was so silly it was really funny. He used to pull his own white coat aside and put the uterus on his body ((Laughs)) and point out all the parts.

Interviewer Was it very different when you were up North and delivering the babies up there?

Edith The babies they were tougher on the mothers, they were kinder down in London. The moment I got to London I could sense the difference. I think they are very kind people the Londoners aren't they?

Interviewer Cockneys and that. And do you think there was more poverty up North?

Edith They are tougher, they pride themselves on -

**[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]**

**[START OF THIRD AUDIO FILE]**

Interviewer - a rough idea of what was on it and then the book is going to be divided up. It is going to be in sections like antenatal care, the birth, midwives delivering babies at home and ones delivering them in maternity homes and hospitals. And then I will take out little bits of what you've said and I'll transcribe, it's called transcribing, you write it down word for word, so I'll write down your exact words and then they will be included in the book in little bits. Do you see what I mean?

Edith Mm

Interviewer So it might say like, Miss A from Norwich says this about delivering babies. And then it will say, Miss Burgess from Braunton says this about delivering – you know, so it will have little bits. Is that all right?

Edith Mm, I don't mind. I don't think I've said anything derogatory about anybody.

Interviewer No, no, if there was anything I thought you might object to I'd send it to you and let you see and if there's a name, but you haven't used anybody's names or anything at all so there's no problem I don't think. And I'll send you, of course you'll get a copy of the book.

Edith Will I?

Interviewer Oh yes, of course you will, oh yes. It's 1<sup>st</sup> February isn't it? I've just realised.

Edith Yes, yesterday was the last day of January and I thought I wondered if you meant really this sort of half weekend the beginning of February or next weekend.

Interviewer Oh yes.

Edith So I was very pleased when you phoned.

Interviewer Oh right, yes. I suppose it could have meant that.

Edith Because it could have meant next weekend, which is the first complete weekend, couldn't it?

Interviewer Yes, that's true, I thought have thought that I might have confused everybody. Do you think the women then, were there many superstitions about childbirth and pregnancy? Did you come across any?

Edith Well they used to hang their wedding ring on a string and let it, and do that and if it did that it was a boy or if it did that it was a girl. Have you heard of that?

Interviewer Mmm

Edith Over their tummies. I can't remember which way it was but that was the only one I do remember.

Interviewer Did they use any sort of home remedies, herbal remedies, or anything?

Edith Only in history books! ((Laughs))



Interviewer You didn't see it happening?

Edith No and no preventatives, not orally. They used to take, I have known people take, what is that strong pepper, Pennyroyal, to try to get rid of babies.

Interviewer Oh yes.

Edith But I don't think it worked.

Interviewer It could be quite dangerous I think.

Edith Yes. I don't think smoking is good for mothers either.

Interviewer Did women smoke then?

Edith Mm but they weren't allowed to smoke in the Maternity Hospital.

Interviewer No, because they think nowadays it makes the babies smaller don't they?

Edith Well they don't think it is good for the mother anyway do they?

Interviewer What happened to the placenta when you'd delivered it?

Edith We had a handyman and he had a great big furnace somewhere and it all went in the rubbish after it had been thoroughly examined of course. I think we once had a curetting; a piece left behind. But I can't remember thoroughly, I think we did. Because it was a simple curette. But those clots were very painful for them when the uterus used to fill up afterwards. Did you drive all the way from London with the baby in the car?

Interviewer With a friend, I had a friend with me.

Edith Oh you had a friend with you.

Interviewer So we took it in turns. But he slept most of the way because it's quite -

Edith It's quite a long way, eight hours.

Interviewer Well it was eight hours because we kept, we stopped to let him have a run, because now he's walking you see he wants to run around and burn up some energy so we stopped and let him have a good run around and some food. He couldn't work out where we were going.



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Edith It's quite a nice run, enjoyed it did you?

Interviewer Yes, I did.

Edith Will you do the same on the way back? Hopefully with the weather.

Interviewer Yes, we were lucky I think because the day before the weather had been terrible on the Wednesday it had been quite thick snow in some parts. Do you think, were the women in quite good health the women who came in to you?

Edith I think they were, they were well nourished. The food was good in those days. I suppose it's good in its way now but it's more, you know, artificial. These convenience foods and stuff that they have now. Would you like to do geriatrics?

Interviewer Not really, no. I did do it for a bit when I first did my general training I worked as a Staff Nurse on a geriatric ward and I quite enjoyed it actually.

Edith But you wouldn't like to take it up?

Interviewer No, I think midwifery is my thing.

Edith Is your job.

Interviewer You never know, I might become a famous writer after this. ((Laughs))

Edith I know, that would be good like Rosalind Paget; I've got her book.

Interviewer Have you?

Edith Yes. Oh you'll find Miss Cousins charming, she's a lovely person.

Interviewer She was the Nursing Officer.

Edith She was a Superintendent but she's elderly; I think she's retired.

Interviewer That's right, she said she trained in '41 I think she said.

Edith That's recent isn't it?

Interviewer Mm it is quite recent compared with you. Most of the midwives I'm interviewing trained, most of them in the 30s actually. They did their training at the beginning of the 30s.



Edith And I'm the eldest am I?

Interviewer Mm you are.

Edith I mean I'm the one that trained the earliest.

Interviewer Yes, Miss Hodges who we interviewed, she was born in 1898 and she trained I think in 1926.

Edith Yes, they wouldn't let you then until you were quite old. Would you like to see my old midwives certificate?

Interviewer Only if it's -

Edith It's quite easy, I can unlock the drawer and get it out because it's, I am sure they are not like it now. I'm sure yours isn't like it.

Interviewer Yes, it must be different.

Edith I'll go and get it just to show you and the lovely thing they sent me from -

Interviewer Oh yes, I'd love to see it. You haven't got any of your old text books have you or anything like that?

Edith No, I've lost even my old papers on it. I've got an old Honnor Morton, the Nurse's Dictionary 1940 something but that's old for you, new for me.

Interviewer ((Laughs)) Yes

Edith What date is it dated?

Interviewer 1920.

Edith Yes.

Interviewer It is May 12<sup>th</sup> 1920.

Edith I must just find that other thing, it is in my room somewhere but – it's only a kind of, not a Certificate of Merit, the other one, it's only to say that I'm a Member of the – yours is different is it?



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Interviewer Mm it is, it's difficult to describe it. It's smaller than this and I think it goes this way.  
It certainly looks different.

Edith ((Pause)) Now this, you see the midwives thing didn't come in, although I trained before,  
this didn't come in until 1923 so I had to be, I had to sort of sit again and -

Interviewer You didn't take the exam again did you?

Edith No. No, they accepted it. ((sorting through papers)) Now you can see what I was telling you  
about ((inaudible)) London.

Interviewer Oh yes. That's lovely. Can I take photographs of these? It would be nice to have  
them in the book; they are lovely.

Edith Take a photograph of the midwives; it would be interesting.

Interviewer Yes, and this one.

Edith Of course the war would never have been won if it hadn't been for me ((laughs)). Is that  
about the war?

Interviewer Yes, that's the Civil Defence. Isn't that nice?

Edith And then there's the other thing, which I know I've got. It's black somewhere do you see,  
but I don't want to pull everything out.

Interviewer No, no I don't want you to pull out everything. Let me see if I can try -

**[END OF THIRD AUDIO FILE, INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]**