

Interviewee: **Florence Wright**

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; 2nd edition 2013)

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Description:

Transcript of an interview with Florence Wright covering her experience as a midwife, including her training (1938-1939) at Peckham Salvation Army Mother's Hospital, memories of her own mother's role as an untrained midwife in Great Yarmouth, reactions to high mortality rate of young children, acting as midwife in evacuation centres during the Second World War, changes brought about by the introduction of the National Health Service, access to contraception, uniforms, unmarried mothers, social conditions, environment as a Salvation Army midwife, postnatal care in the nursing homes, and cases of adoption.

Topics include: Midwifery; Maternity services; Childbirth; Maternal Mortality; Analgesia; Contraception; Stillbirth

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Interviewer You did your midwifery training in 19...?

Florence I went in 1938, end of '38, and I qualified in '39 because for some reason or another I missed out on a group of... we used to go in as a group of about 20 every three months, and I came in between that lot so took a bit longer to do it. But actually I got the qualification in September 1939, at the onset of the war.

Interviewer And that was a six month training?

Florence That was a six month training, yes. We did one month on the district then, then they changed it to a year for general training assistant then.

Interviewer They did, yes.

Florence And they did a year with maybe three months out on the district, another three months in the hospital, but they had more advanced training than public health, I think that's what happened in that time. We had a lot of nurses that weren't general trained and they used to come when I was there for one year, but they paid for their own training, they didn't get any pay, I don't know whether you know that.

Interviewer No, I didn't know. So how did you get in... you were a nurse first?

Florence Mm. I was a general trained nurse first.

Interviewer How did you come to be a nurse?

Florence Well it's a long story really, because I came through the Salvation Army. Now I'd no idea that this would happen, but when I was a child, always wanted to be a nurse, of course nobody ever asked you what you wanted to be, did they?

Interviewer No.

Florence I don't... I can't remember, except I said to my mother on one occasion, "When I grow up and get married I'm going to have ten children." She said "Oh you only need two!" but I haven't had any. However that was the way I came through the social services, social work

of the Salvation Army. And I worked in a children's home first and then went to Manchester to have an insight into maternity work and then went to general for four years.

Interviewer And how did you get in touch with the Salvation Army first? They were in touch with you when you lived in Great Yarmouth?

Florence Yes. I belonged there when I was in Great Yarmouth, and I offered to go to work, went to the training college, did nine months training in our training college. You know Camberwell in London?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence Denmark Hill, the training college there. So that's how I started.

Interviewer And did you work as nurse for a while after... before you did your midwifery?

Florence No, I went straight from...

Interviewer Straight into it?

Florence I was delayed a bit... that was another reason I was delayed a bit, because during the training I got scarlet fever the first year, so I had eight weeks to make up at the end. You see that's how I missed out on this set as well.

Interviewer And where did you do your midwifery?

Florence Mothers' Hospital midwifery.

Interviewer You did the training at the Mothers'?

Florence The midwifery training at the Mothers'.

Interviewer In Peckham?

Florence Yes. Clapton.

Interviewer And so you stayed on there...

Florence So it was like an accompaniment. I didn't have the... of course I had to be willing to go, but it seemed to have been planned out that way for me. I made my own decision from the beginning although it seemed when I was growing up I didn't have any education,

couldn't afford it, you had to buy your own uniform, textbooks, and pay your way through nursing.

Interviewer Did you have to do that as well?

Florence No, I didn't have to do that. It was under the London County Council. I was, I suppose, recommended by the Salvation Army, you see, having done this Army training, and there's a bit in the social work, services for children. I didn't have any qualifications really, and no learning that you have to have now.

Interviewer And the grant sort of paid for your training and your uniforms?

Florence While I was there I got my ordinary salary from the Salvation Army and the cost... the London County Council was even less than my Army pay; it was very poor pay. Do you know what it was when we...?

Interviewer No.

Florence £25 a year, £30 a year as you advanced, £35, £40 a year, that was your salary then. But going back to 1934, it's difficult for you to understand that.

Interviewer It is difficult, yes.

Florence And we got an honorarium award, ((inaudible))

Interviewer What about when...

Florence I was seconded to that, you see, from officership I was seconded to the hospital, because we hadn't got our own general hospital trainings here in this country, now we haven't even got our midwifery.

Interviewer That's right. It's poor, isn't it?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer What about women who, unlike yourself, didn't come through the Army who were poor? Did they not have any opportunities to train?

Florence You see you don't have the opportunity if you're poor and poorly educated.

Interviewer And so no ways in really.

Florence I mean I never even had any idea that they'd ever do it, but this is the way it happened.

Interviewer It was a big opportunity for you then.

Florence Yes. And although I offered for Salvation Army work I could have gone anywhere. I didn't really want to do evangelical work and the preaching and that, I wasn't cut out for that, more cut out for the practical side of things.

Interviewer That was good that you had that chance, wasn't it? Do you think you were drawn to nursing because of the work your mother did?

Florence Maybe. Yes. Because everybody helped each other. Oh, they were marvellous really, those women.

Interviewer Can you tell me a bit about your mother, and her life and how she worked? Because one of the things that we've found very difficult when we're writing this book is getting in touch with people who knew handywomen, women who worked as midwives and helped other women.

Florence I don't think my mother had any training, but she had an aptitude for it; she was a marvellous mother really. Within this little community where we lived it was either one or the other having a child every year, and they helped each other. You see, that spirit as gone now because the change of situations and circumstances. But everybody I knew was poor.

Interviewer Yes. Can you tell me a bit about your mother, where she came from and what her life was like.

Florence Well as far as I know she was born up in South Shields, so she was North Country. She never really talked very much about it. You know, it is very difficult to get any information about it at all, but I understand that her mother died in childbirth, and her father was killed in a level crossing, rail – this is what I've heard – when she was about eight. So she came down to Norfolk and stayed with an uncle of hers, so that's how she got into Great Yarmouth and met my father there. So she'd no family of her own, as far as I know, none of her own flesh and blood.

Interviewer What was her name?

Florence Her name was Harriet, so we always... she was always known as Alice but her name was Harriet Camebury, I think. I think that was her name.

Interviewer But she... everyone called her Alice?

Florence Alice, yes. But we called her Mum, you see ((laughing)). And she was always there, you know. When we went home from school she was the first thing we called out for. So although we missed out in other ways we did have that security. And she was the one who seemed to make all the decisions in the household.

Interviewer Did she? Very interesting. Did you see much of your dad?

Florence Yes, he was... Well he was away in the First World War for a while. I remember him coming home. But he seemed to be... he didn't want to be taking big decisions. He didn't want to be bothered with much. I suppose he was a good father in his way, but it seems always though he had to have a little bit of a push. But it was like that with some of our family, you see. Lacksadaisy and don't seem to want to make an effort to do anything different you see. But you can't help that, can you? But my mother seemed to be the homemaker and decider and planner really. And she was a very strict woman, very strict.

Interviewer And how many children did she have?

Florence 13 children. One set of twins. So she'd 12 pregnancies.

Interviewer 13 children, my goodness! And ten survived? Is that right?

Florence Well the twin of Ken, who lived to seven months, and I understand... I think it was a pyloric stenosis that that baby had, so it was poorly. And by this time my mother couldn't breastfeed, could she, because, you see, she'd two to feed. So I think she used to get this special milk from the welfare, and I suppose it didn't agree with this baby. How they described it to me that seems to be the one. And Lily, she was a little girl who lived until she was about eight, I can remember her now being about that age, but she was very lively, playing hopscotch and skipping ropes and that, very lively. And she must have taken a severe form of pneumonia. But, you see, there was no hospital or oxygen or even antibiotics then,



you see. They've all come in my... in our lifetime, haven't they, these things. And so she died, in the house. We didn't... I mean the kids, we didn't know... was so ill, but I remember the Saturday, my mother sent us all out to the park, to the plantation, and we hadn't to come until a certain time, we just did as she said. And when we came back Lily had died and my mother had laid her out on the front room table, done that all herself. I think she'd had a doctor but there was no suggestion of putting her into hospital then. Women looked after their dying children.

Interviewer That's much better, isn't it, with it being... And did you all have a chance to say goodbye to Lily?

Florence We just saw her on the table. As I say, we didn't realise that she was so ill. And then I don't quite know about this child, Violet, she was called, she must have died in infancy. I'm not really... I suppose she must have died of one of these childish complaints, that was the three that didn't survive.

Interviewer Of course it was very common then for children to die, wasn't it?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Do you think people accepted it more, or is it...?

Florence They must have done, because... I don't quite know how my mother reacted to it. You don't do you? How you feel.

Interviewer You don't, no.

Florence We never really talked about our feelings, never had much opportunity to say what you thought or what you wanted.

Interviewer Can I get a bit of perspective on the dates? Do you have any idea when your mother was born, or how old she was when she had the children?

Florence When she died in August 1958 she was 74 that May. So she'd be 74 and two or three months, wouldn't she?

Interviewer Gosh. So she was born in the last century, wasn't she?

Florence Now she'd be well in her nineties, wouldn't she?



Interviewer Yes, she would. And when did she start having children? Do you know how old she was?

Florence Well I presume she would have started, you know, as soon as... after their... I don't know when she was married. John is the eldest, the one who's gone missing. And Alice would have been 79, had she lived till last December. And I will be 78 in April, so that's that difference. And approximately the same difference again between her and the first born; that's what I can conclude. But I don't know when my eldest brother was.

Interviewer No, okay. And you were born in when, in what year?

Florence April 1909. You see we were on the First World War then and there was poverty for everybody. To think that you could come through two World Wars, and the general depression, so that made everybody poor, because work was even more difficult then than it is now. Because now people can get benefits, can't they?

Interviewer Yes, they can.

Florence My mother must have been a good manager because she used to make clothes out of second hand... second hand skirts and coats she would make the boys' trousers; she was always knitting and sewing.

Interviewer She must have been so busy with 10 children and...

Florence And there was always handing down, wasn't there? And I can even remember, she took on the cutting their hair, you know. They wouldn't have the money to send them to a barber to have their hair cut, she had to do it herself.

Interviewer Do you know how she came to be the person that was called when babies were being born?

Florence Well they seemed to help each other. I can't ever remember... I know that she was there but I can't ever remember somebody coming.

Interviewer What, and calling her out?

Florence No.

Interviewer You don't remember her being...?



Florence I think she possibly just went when she knew they were needing her. That's the impression I always got.

Interviewer But she was... was she especially somebody that went? I mean did they call for her...?

Florence Oh no, they just it between themselves.

Interviewer So there were other women who went as well?

Florence Oh yes, nearly all the women around that time with children used to help each other.

Interviewer So it wasn't one specific woman who was called?

Florence No.

Interviewer They all did it ((overtalking)).

Florence I can't remember that there were.

Interviewer And did she get called as well for things like laying out bodies?

Florence Yes. I used to even help when people were dying. When people died.

Interviewer So they all used to do that.

Florence It seemed to us... The working class women, it seemed just to be working from around there. There was a case in point where the neighbour's daughter had twins and she wasn't married and she had to go to the workhouse. This is what happened then, you see, you had to go to the workhouse, and that must have been terrible. I can see this woman now, bringing these twins home and sitting outside the house and everybody admiring these twins, and she was received back into the family.

Interviewer Was she? Even though she wasn't married.

Florence Mm.

Interviewer Why did she have to go to the workhouse to have the twins?

Florence Because there wasn't facilities in the house where she lived.

Interviewer I see, it was because she was having twins?



Florence Well I presume so. I just gathered that now as I think about it when I get older and more experienced.

Interviewer Were there many young women then having babies who weren't married? Did it happen a lot?

Florence Yes. You see you didn't get to know about it because they were more or less ostracised by their families, weren't they? Considered to be a terrible thing.

Interviewer So did they get sent away to different places?

Florence Yes. They used to sometimes go to... well, the family in Yarmouth and this daughter went down to London to one of the Salvation Army mother and babies homes in Clapton there. And eventually she brought this baby home and married the father.

Interviewer Did she?

Florence And they started another family. So that can happen, you see. Such a big disgrace, they must go away.

Interviewer And sometimes did you find that the grandmothers looked after the babies?

Florence Yes. Yes. But there isn't the grandmother now in the homes, is there, they don't all live together, do they?

Interviewer Yes. It's interesting.

Florence I feel sorry for children who don't have any grandparents. I don't really remember my grandparents, just grandparents on one side, you see, they were...

Interviewer They would have been on your father's side, because your mum didn't have...

Florence And I can just remember him sitting in the corner in a big chair and never doing anything. Now you see the elderly gentlemen do all kinds of things, don't they?

Interviewer Yes. So when your mum was called out to help somebody, would all her children look after each other, sort of thing?

Florence Yes. I think we possibly were brought up, you know, to help each other; that's what you do in a large family, the younger ones get looked after by the older ones, you see.



Interviewer And if a woman was having a baby who'd look after her other children?

Florence Well they would all look after themselves. She'd still look after them. On two or three occasions I remember my mother having had a baby and then the little ones would go up at night and she'd have a bowl of water there and be washing them ready for bed, you see. Or I've seen her peel potatoes in her bed. So, you see, they didn't make an illness of it.

Interviewer And who delivered her babies?

Florence I suppose one of these women friends. There was a... there was a woman, who I don't know whether she was qualified, who used to sometimes be there, but often she never got there. But maybe...

Interviewer Would they have to pay that woman?

Florence I'm not sure about that. I think you had to pay if you went to a doctor, and that's why some of these children died at home, you see, they couldn't afford to pay the doctor.

Interviewer And so the women who were called, they didn't pay each other for going?

Florence I don't think so, but I really don't know. She never mentioned payment. But I think they all were very neighbourly.

Interviewer And things like the laying out of the dead, was that all done as a neighbour's gesture as opposed to...?

Florence I would think so. I don't have a lot of experience of that, except my mother laying out the little sister of mine; that's the only real thing that I remember very plainly.

Interviewer So do you think all of that was one of the reasons why you wanted to be a nurse and a midwife?

Florence I used to... we lived near an outpatients department of the hospital at that time, and whenever I heard an ambulance I'd run round to see the patient being carried out. I think it was admiration for the nurse in her uniform. It might have been sort of that that attracted me to it, I don't know. You think it's marvellous but it's not all glamour is it ((laughter))?

Interviewer So was it a nurse you really wanted to be, or a midwife?

Florence A nurse really.

Interviewer So why did you do your midwifery?

Florence Well in the Army we had at that time more social work to do with midwifery than in general hospitals, you see. We had these unmarried mothers' homes around the area in all the big cities, and they mostly had a wing for private paying patients, which helped the finances, because we didn't have the insurance like the benefits and maternity benefits that we get now, you see, there was none of that. So we had to be self-supporting if possible. And these girls who came had very little money to pay, so they used to come two or three months before the child was born and stay three to four months afterwards, and during that time they were able to say, you know, what they were going to do with the baby. And earlier on, you see, many of these women used to keep their babies and go into domestic work with the child. That doesn't happen now because there's nobody goes into domestic service.

Interviewer So in Hackney, in Clapton, when you were training and working there, was it mainly with unmarried mothers?

Florence No, we just had one block for unmarried mothers. There's seven blocks there, and one of the blocks was 'specially for the unmarried mothers. They were separated then but they're not now. And it was a very self-satisfying job, because I was at the one in Bristol, we had one in Bristol, we had one in Bradninch down in Devon. Liverpool, Scotland – Glasgow – Manchester, Birmingham. Had these homes in all those big cities you see, and it's been a very good work because you can help these people, some of them are not trained in even how to set a table when they come to you, so they get this training, housed for free and care of the baby and all that, you see, which is invaluable to these young girls that have never had any experience of that.

Interviewer Did you just work in the Hackney... in the Mothers' there, or did you go to these other places?

Florence I went to these other places. It was like a... you'd get an appointment, a new appointment. Then I've been back to the Mothers' Hospital in different capacities in between whiles. I went to Bristol and went down to... back to the Mothers' Hospital as a

ward sister. And then I went out again to evacuation centres by this time, and sort of qualified. You see, we had evacuation centres out of London. There were some of the patients that never went out of London because they kept the more complicated cases in, but those that they thought were going to be straightforward went out to... went to Bradborough, that's near Rugby, right out in the heart of the country. And that was supposed to be used as part... to training, with straightforward cases. So the nurses that couldn't get their cases in the peoples' homes on the housing estates, they went up there. So that was for the fairly normal living from there. That can tell a few stories too! ((laughs)). And then they had the Willersley Castle in Matlock. Do you know Matlock?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence The big Methodist building there.

Interviewer Gosh!

Florence And the Mothers' Hospital took that over for several years, so I was there a year. And these people used to come up in a coach and stay in villas in the villages. Come to the house for antenatal care and for deliveries, but nearly all of them, after they were delivered, went back home.

Interviewer Out of choice?

Florence Yes, they didn't want to stay in the villages, they wanted to get back home. So then we had the work of getting them on the train at Matlock back to London again.

Interviewer Did you have any midwifery problems with those women? I mean did you ever have women in real troubles, needing caesarean sections?

Florence I suppose we must have done, but if they needed a caesarean they had to go to Sheffield, I think was the nearest from Matlock, to the big hospital. We did forceps and breech deliveries.

Interviewer Did you?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Midwives did them?



Florence Yes. And there was a doctor who lived in the village who was like a registrar, she used to come and help.

Interviewer Did midwives ever do forceps?

Florence No, I've never seen midwives to it. Or suture. But I think they do now, don't they?

Interviewer Yes, we do suturing. But it's good really, it means you don't have to call a doctor out.

Florence Because it's done today, isn't it, if possible.

Interviewer Yes. It does make a difference.

Florence So then I went back as... when did I go back? Catering Officer. Did the catering and housekeeping and supervised the domestic staff and orderly staff. I had done six months course at Charing Cross Hospital for administration and catering, so that was another sort of sideline which stood me in good stead as well; I worked very hard there, for a pittance ((laughs)).

Interviewer And did you live in at all these places?

Florence Yes. Yes. And then I've been back again as the Home Sister, the next time I went back as the Home Sister, you see, so had a shot at it all. And finally I was appointed there as Assistant Matron, that was for three years between 1960 to 1963, just three years, because you could see that the red light was showing that they were going to have to close, because there'd been an insidious change. It's changed over since 1947 when the National Health was changed, that's when the Mothers' Hospital ceased to be voluntary.

Interviewer The National Health Service took it over in...?

Florence Well, they took over the financial side. The Salvation Army still did the management side, but gradually, you see, they did a bit more and a bit more and a bit more. It's difficult to explain, but...

Interviewer No, I can imagine. It's a shame that it was closed down.

Florence Yes.



Interviewer I mean speaking as a midwife working now, it was a hospital where you had more normal deliveries.

Florence And the had women doctors, you see. And the consultants were women, that was all... a lot of Jewish patients were there because we were in a Jewish area.

Interviewer And they closed down the South London Hospital which was...

Florence Yes. That was another one they...

Interviewer Women doctors, yes. Because I was born in the South London.

Florence Were you?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence So you see all those things have a bearing on what's happening today, doesn't it?

Interviewer Yes, I suppose so. I guess it must have been quite a changeover when the National Health Service came in and took over. The period that I'm most interested in for the book is the period up to '47, '48, so with the National Health Service coming. So you'd have been working as a midwife for ten years. And when you did your training, did you go out on the district a lot?

Florence Yes, we went round, for one month, that training that I had. I explained to you, when it was extended the training I did three months, and the districts were out in the places like Shoreditch, ((inaudible)) Bermondsey, Canning Town. And then the new estates out at Barking and Dagenham and ((inaudible)), all those districts they had Salvation Army midwives in charge of those and then pupils used to go and live in the quarters and have their own clinics and deliver their people in their own homes and that.

Interviewer Where did you work when you were on district?

Florence I worked the Barking district for a short time. And I went to the Downham district.

Interviewer Downham in South East London?

Florence Yes. Catford and...

Interviewer Did you? That's near where I live.



Florence Is it?

Interviewer Yes, I live in Lewisham.

Florence Oh yes, you do, yes.

Interviewer And so what was it like then, going out doing home births on the district?

Florence Well it was during the War, the time that I was out on Downham district it was the doodlebugs, so they had...

Interviewer They were about then?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer I've heard about them. Yes, tell me about it.

Florence Well I mean if you went to do a case at night the midwife in charge would go on her bike, and she was a slow biker, but I had to walk. Well I mean now if you went on district and had a case in the middle of the night the husband or somebody would drive you back to your quarters in a car, wouldn't they? But they couldn't leave their... they don't have cars and they don't leave their family, you see, they can't, so you have to go on your own. And several times I've been called out and these things have been on and just about home again, just stood in a doorway until they'd passed over. And I never was nervous of being out in the middle of the night.

Interviewer Weren't you?

Florence But I'm nervous now as soon as it gets dark.

Interviewer True. But you weren't nervous. Did you do any deliveries on your own as a student midwife?

Florence Yes, you do... What do you mean, without a midwife supervising?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence No, I can't really... Only on a very rare occasion, if somebody came on very quickly and the midwife wasn't there, but no, not really.

Interviewer How did they get hold of you? Did the husbands come and knock on your door?



Florence What do you mean, on the district?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence They used to, I think, go to a telephone box and phone, or if they were near enough they'd come and knock on the door. You would stay with a patient all night and then you'd not have a baby, you see, instead of going back to your bed you'd stay all night, if you were very inexperienced. You see, when you first qualify, don't know whether you're like that, there'd come the experience and be able to go and leave them and come back again. So I've often stayed out all night, you know. Then the sister in charge would say, "Come on home and leave her," you know, you'd be worrying all the time.

Interviewer Yes. How old were you when you were doing your training?

Florence Well I was 21 when I was in the training college and I was three years before I went to... 1934 when I went to the... so I would be 24, wouldn't I, when I started in the general. So I'd been what you'd call a mature student now, wouldn't you?

Interviewer So you were 24 when you started your training?

Florence Yes. My midwifery.

Interviewer 24.

Florence Mm. No, 20... 24... I finished my midwifery general training in '38 and qualified in '39, so it would be 25 or 26, that kind of age, wouldn't it.

Interviewer What year were you born?

Florence 1909. You've got that.

Interviewer Oh yes, that's right. So what about the other women you trained with? Were they younger than you or much the same age?

Florence Of course in general training they were younger. They mostly were in their 18s and 19s because they'd come straight from college or school, you see. So they've not known what it was not to be studying, but when you've not been studying it's difficult to suddenly start again.

Interviewer How did you manage?

Florence I just worked very hard. I had bad feet, that was my biggest problem. I nearly didn't get past my medical because I'd got bad feet.

Interviewer Really? But had you done any schooling, any studying, before you started your training?

Florence No, I didn't really have a lot of chance of doing much studying because we were doing this theological study, you see, in the training college; it's a different kind of... except for first aid and home nursing we didn't really have much chance to study.

Interviewer But as a child were you sent to school?

Florence Yes. I'd left school when I was 14, just an ordinary elementary school, we didn't have any special education.

Interviewer Did your mother have to pay to send you to school?

Florence No, we didn't have to pay; it was a free education, but it was very limited really to what they have now in modern schools.

Interviewer But they taught you to read and write?

Florence Yes. Because you learn yourself, don't you, with books and that?

Interviewer But you must have worked very hard.

Florence You have to work hard if you've not got that... I can't retain knowledge now, I easily forget, but I suppose that's with ageing. And if you... you see the thing is you learn something different and that has to go in the background, doesn't it, when you're studying.

Interviewer Did your mum read and write at all?

Florence Yes. Yes, she was a good writer, yes. She used to write lovely letters.

Interviewer Did she?

Florence Mm. I suppose she must have sort of educated herself to a degree and then... because experience is a good teacher, isn't it?

Interviewer Yes, that's true. I wonder how much information they passed onto each other. There must have been a lot of that going on amongst those women, mustn't there?

Florence I would think so, yes.

Interviewer They must have been quite skilled really, basic-

Florence They had the psychology to reason things out. Because I've discovered this since I grew up, and I said to her on one occasion, "Why didn't we ever go down to the seafront on Bank Holidays and that?" In a seaside place there's always a crowd of you. So she always used to arrange for us to... she took us to a recreation ground and we always avoided the front; we went on a road that was parallel to that. And there might have been one or two other kids nearby, you see, "Is your mother going to the recreation ground?" on Easter Monday or Good Friday. "Can we come?" So we used to tag on a few others, and there'd be a big pram, the high handles, one on each side. And we used to go along this road past this cemetery, and there was a subway where the trains ran over, and we used to run up and down this subway where you'd call and your voice echoed, and we thought that was marvellous. And we'd have this place all to ourselves, because they had amateur football matches, but everybody would be going to the beach. And she made a ball, you know, rolling up loads of newspaper. And a homemade bat with a bit of wood, and a great big bottle of that... did you ever have that sherbert lemonade?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence And jam sandwiches or something, and we used to play rounders. And she used to join in, there was all these other kids as well? So she said, "Well, I couldn't afford to buy you ice-creams you see." If you see an ice-cream you want it don't you?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence So the psychology was not to see it.

Interviewer Interesting.

Florence I thought that really was thinking things out, wasn't it? What you don't see you don't yearn for.



Interviewer So she was quite old when she had her last child, wasn't she?

Florence Well, she quite possibly... she was on the change of life I think.

Interviewer Was she in forties?

Florence Well Barbara is now 58, I think Barbara is. She's the youngest. She's 58 in January. So she'd be well in her forties then, wouldn't she. She would be, yes.

Interviewer She would have been in her forties when she had twins ((?)) wouldn't she?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer But I suppose in those days women had no access to contraception.

Florence No, no there was nothing like that. Possibly half of us wouldn't have been born if there'd been the Pill then, it's quite likely.

Interviewer They didn't have much choice did they?

Florence No.

Interviewer Having children. Do you think they tried at all to control their fertility? Do you think they...?

Florence I don't really... I don't really know, I never quite knew what went on ((laughs)). I suppose people that were living at very close quarters like people abroad, aren't they, they live at very close quarters with one another.

Interviewer But you never heard of women taking special potions or anything to...?

Florence No. I did wonder once whether that had happened. I think possibly my mother had had a miscarriage, she was desperately ill. I can remember seeing her now, desperately ill. But I think they used to, you know, talk among themselves about this, because it didn't register anything, ((inaudible))

Interviewer You must have seen when you were working as a midwife and nurse, you must have seen women coming in who'd tried to abort themselves.

Florence It was when I was doing general training it first came home to me. Because in the women's medical ward we did have women that came in and died of septicaemia as a result



of these abortions, you know. And at that time... sulphonamides was the first drug that they used, sulphonamides. And if you could get them before they got too seriously ill you could save them. But that was the start of those kind of drugs that I know about. You see if you had bad pneumonia in the thirties you didn't have the antibiotics that you've got now. So we've seen all that; you see the change of drugs and that.

Interviewer What about midwifery? How have you seen midwifery changing?

Florence It seems to perhaps go in cycles, doesn't it, like the question of breast feeding, I don't know what you feel about that.

Interviewer Well, it does tend to have fashions doesn't it?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer I mean I think, I hope, we're back to promoting breast feeding.

Florence Yes.

Interviewer But I know there was a long period of time, wasn't there, when women were encouraged to bottle feed.

Florence Yes. It has swung back and forth, hasn't it? And when you think of all the care and all the times they tried to get them, to help them with the breast feeding. But you see my mother possibly breastfed all us until she came to have twins.

Interviewer Did she breastfeed the twins?

Florence No, she wasn't able to. That's why they had to have this dried milk, you see. I suppose in that case they had to do it for economic reasons, didn't they? That makes a bond between parent and child too, doesn't it?

Interviewer That's right. So have you seen midwifery change a lot?

Florence Yes, the actual... well, the stay; when I was training we used to keep the people in bed for at least a week, even after normal deliveries. So there was all the swabbing two or three times a day, you know.

Interviewer What a palaver that must have been.



Florence Yes. And...

Interviewer But did women on the community, on the district, stay in bed that long?

Florence Oh, I don't think so, no. They tried to get them but in their own homes when you're not there they do as they like, don't they? But, you see... so then they had to change the buildings, don't they, to give more bathrooms, more toilets, so that's the kind of thing that happens. And they had their own laundry at the Mothers' Hospital, and they had a laundry staff, and you were always sure that your laundry was going to come back alright. But now when they go out to a big laundry, you know, and they centralise it, you're never sure. So that all changes. And then diets and that have been, you know... they now give more diets, more main meals, whereas before they used to reckon not to have these two or three big cooked meals a day, we used to have lighter meals. And of course they were much poorer, everybody's standard of living has advanced, hasn't it, over those years. You wouldn't want to go back to that.

Interviewer So after you finished your training as a midwife did you always work in hospital or did you go back out on the district at all?

Florence No, I didn't go back on the district at all, but I did a bit at the hospital to get some experience, you know, in the labour ward, and then I went out to these various homes that I've told you about, you see. And then eventually came back to the administration side.

Interviewer Did you miss the hands-on work when you were an administrator?

Florence Yes. I was doing actual midwifery for about 25 years, I did miss it then. But sometimes you have a chance of having a go at it, if somebody was sat in front or, you know, when you'd do the admissions and you're waiting for the ambulance and delivered the baby. On the odd occasions, you know, you got a chance but...

Interviewer And when you were working, doing the actual midwifery, did you do things like breeches?

Florence Well you mostly observed. You know, there was usually a doctor there in the hospital. But we did do a breech delivery on the Barking district, and I'd just qualified... I was coming up to qualifying, you know, and I'm reading the book that we were studying all about breech

deliveries, and I could sort of just think of all the worst that could happen of course. And we went to this woman, and the midwife, she did her examination, and then I was to do an examination, you see. And I was, I think there's something queer here ((laughs)). And if I go and tell her and say, "It's not a normal head, you know, vertex delivery," she'll say, "Oh, you young people from the Mothers' Hospital all make everything abnormal," this is the way they used to feel in that... if you didn't sort of keep to the straight and narrow, everything must be perfectly normal because they're in their own home. So when I got back she questioned me about my findings and didn't believe, no I told her, and it was a breech delivery.

Interviewer She knew, did she?

Florence She knew. And she didn't want to tell me what she'd found you see ((laughs)).

Interviewer That was mean.

Florence Oh yes, she didn't tell me until she got back to the house, not in front of the patient. She did the breech delivery in the house.

Interviewer How did she do it?

Florence Very badly, I thought. She took a lot of pulling and... oh, I thought to myself, this baby's never going to be alive.

Interviewer Oh dear. Did she lie the woman down with her legs over chairs or something?

Florence Well it's such a long time ago, can't just remember except all this pulling that she was doing. And the baby's perfectly alright. These old midwives, they weren't general trained, they did midwifery for years, they didn't worry the same as somebody that's just new learning and don't think they can handle a breech birth.

Interviewer Do you remember the times when lots of babies died at birth or...?

Florence No. There would only be the very, very rare occasions. I mean sometimes you knew that the baby was dead beforehand didn't you, so you knew you were going to have a still birth.

Interviewer What about maternal deaths?

Florence Every time I've been there we've never had one, but they have had one or two. One that sticks in my memory was a high ranking officer of Salvation Army and this woman had been in her forties and she'd been the matron out at one of the hospitals in New Zealand, I think, or Australia. And this was her second marriage. And she had a caesar and when she recovered I think had an embolism or something, so she didn't survive. She died. But I wasn't there in time. It was a terrible thing to happen. She so much wanted this child, you see, which she never really should have had at that age.

Interviewer And how many caesars were they doing back in the late thirties, early forties?

Florence They weren't doing so much as they do now.

Interviewer No, definitely not.

Florence That leaflet about the closing of the Mothers' Hospital will give you some idea of the numbers. You can take that with you, let me have it back if you like. I've sent several of those to various people who are abroad and that, but that's the only one I've got now.

Interviewer I'll photocopy it and let you have it back. Thank you.

Florence But there's certain things you can't repeat, it's about copyright, is there something to do with copyright?

Interviewer Yes. No, I won't use anything in there. So do you remember the caesarean sections?

Florence Yes, we used to go in to observe. First of all you went to observe and then you went and you were given the job of wringing out hot towels. They used to use hot towels to cover over the exposed area. So you dressed up, you know, made yourself as sterile as possible with gloves. And I can remember this time I was wringing out the hot towels and my glove slipped and the surgeon who was doing that instructed me to go out and get fresh gloves, you know, or get a call for fresh gloves for me. It was ever so...

Interviewer What did they use the hot towels for?

Florence They used to put them just over the exposed area.

Interviewer Did they?

Florence Yes. I suppose it's all about treatment. But the shock... That's the only place... well I haven't seen caesars since then.

Interviewer It's interesting. But mostly women did recover from them didn't they?

Florence Oh yes. But very rarely... I mean I don't know whether you ever seen a case of eclampsia, have you?

Interviewer No.

Florence No. That's another thing we sometimes used to have. And they would be in a darkened single room.

Interviewer And did they do a caesarean section for eclampsia then?

Florence Usually, depending on the state of the patient and the state of the child. And then there's twins and triplets, there's a picture of triplets being born, I knew those girls too.

Interviewer Did you?

Florence And the parents were in the Eventide home, my last appointment, and they were a lovely married couple, and they celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary and their daughters, you know, were there, and the people in the home were there and we had a lovely time. They've since died. In fact one of them didn't-

[FIRST AUDIO FILE ENDS SUDDENLY]

[START OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]

Florence And that was the group... you sort of keep with the group of nurses that you trained with.

Interviewer Did they carry on and work alongside you?

Florence What do you mean, in the wards?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence Well you may not be in the same ward because junior, you see, there'd be a different junior on the ward, very seldom two juniors on, two of the same group. That was when I was at Charing Cross doing that house midwifery course. So that's a different nurse's uniform.

Interviewer Was that the hospital?

Florence No, that's the uniform of the hospital, Mothers' Hospital. I took it with me, you see, because I was seconded to do that. The nurses at Charing Cross all wear these crosses, you see, these...

Interviewer Oh yes.

Florence It's interesting though, isn't it.

Interviewer Incredible hats, some of them have got on.

Florence Yes, they did wear the hats and those big...

Interviewer Gracious! Did they get washed at the hospital laundry?

Florence Oh yes.

Interviewer Yes, you didn't have to wash them yourself?

Florence No. We were mostly down in the kitchens and the store rooms and then had a change up in the matron's office, you know, and home sister's office. It was quite a hard job. These are some of the babies that I borned when I was- Isn't that lovely?

Interviewer It's lovely.

Florence This was when I was at Liverpool, it was a home... I was telling you about the private patients, that was some of the staff there.

Interviewer Lovely. Isn't that a good photograph? It's wonderful.

Florence They're all ((inaudible)).

Interviewer Are they? And were they all working in nursing?

Florence They're not necessarily midwives but they were working on the, you know...

Interviewer At the home?

Florence Yes. I've got one picture here of the Mothers' Hospital to give you some idea of the uniforms.



Interviewer When you say you worked a lot with young mothers who weren't married, what normally used to happen, then, to the babies? Did they get adopted, some of them?

Florence They were, some of them were adopted, some of them kept the babies. And sometimes the parents changed their minds and allowed them home, you see. All different kinds.

Interviewer There must have been a lot of work around them.

Florence Because during that time when I was in the homes we had a lot of American babies, you see, because of being in the war there was a lot of American babies, so they never knew their fathers; the fathers went away and went back. So there's all different kinds of people's circumstances. And some people come from very good circumstances but they have to go as far away as possible so that none of the neighbours or the friends know about it, and sometimes those girls would change their minds and not have the babies adopted.

Interviewer That's interesting. Were they ostracised at that time?

Florence They were, yes.

Interviewer A lot of stigma attached to them was there?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer There isn't today.

Florence No. It's swung too far the other way now. But that's a group of nurses at the Mothers' Hospital at a prize giving, so that'll give you some idea.

Interviewer Oh yes.

Florence That's taken 30 years ago.

Interviewer That's lovely isn't it? And there you are, yes.

Florence I think I was home sister then, you see.

Interviewer Ah, it's lovely.



Florence So the ward sisters wore this white, and staff midwives wore this navy and white, and administrative staff wore these navy things, you see. This was when I was assistant matron, head of domestics.

Interviewer That's lovely isn't it? When you started to do your nurse and midwifery training did you get any time off to go home and see your mum?

Florence Yes, we used to get a holiday once a year.

Interviewer Was that all?

Florence You couldn't afford to really do it on a day or on a short basis. The hours of work were very much longer than they are today.

Interviewer Did you get homesick?

Florence No. No, because I'd got used to being away hadn't I? And before I went to training, you see, my sister and I had to take jobs where we had to live out. My brother was working in London, he was living in with his job, to make a room for the young ones coming up, you see.

Interviewer Because you lived in quite a small house?

Florence Very small house. ((inaudible)) Two up and two down. One cold tap in the little backyard and an outdoor toilet, where lots of... where several of these children were born.

Interviewer Do you remember any of your brothers and sisters being born?

Florence Not intimately. I couldn't start to say which one was there, but if this baby was being born in the evening my father was sent out and we were all told to, you know, read or amuse ourselves down in the downstairs room, and then we went up to troop up to see this baby. But never heard any noise or anything. Even if we sat on the stairs listening we couldn't hear much.

Interviewer Amazing, to give birth so quietly.

Florence Well as I say, when she had the twins I didn't even know she was pregnant.

Interviewer Isn't that amazing. Were the twins born at home?



Florence Yes. Never was in hospital for any of them.

Interviewer Extraordinary. Who delivered the twins then?

Florence I presume that this woman who... whether she got there in time or not I don't know.
I wasn't living at home then, you see.

Interviewer Ah, of course not. Because then you had a job.

Florence Yes. We had to move out, you see, because there wasn't room.

Interviewer Would a doctor have been called because it was twins?

Florence No. No, I don't think so. No.

Interviewer And one of the twins didn't make it?

Florence Seven months. So she had them to bring up, and all these other children as well as
my dad.

Interviewer How did she manage? It's incredible isn't it? And so you were around for some of the
earlier births?

Florence Yes. I suppose the middle group I was around for.

Interviewer You remember.

Florence I've got a picture of my mother somewhere.

Interviewer Have you? So you only got to see her really once a year for holidays?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Yes, Ken was telling me that she was very keen that you all got good jobs and security.

Florence Yes. She was the one who'd go to the schoolmaster when my brothers were coming
up to leave school, and try and get an opening for them, you know.

Interviewer She knew how important it was.

Florence They used to call it... uh...

Interviewer Scholarship do you mean?

Florence Now that's an interesting one...

Interviewer Apprenticeship?

Florence Sandbags in the distance.

Interviewer Oh yes. What did you use those for?

Florence Well when the war first was declared we were closing up all the windows and sticking them all up, you know, because of the gas... that we were all going to be killed by gas. And reinforce your buildings and that. That Sunday that the war was declared in the afternoon everybody in the hospital was called back to fill up sandbags.

Interviewer Really?

Florence Yes. ((laughs))

Interviewer What would you have actually done with these sandbags piled up here?

Florence Oh, I suppose... I don't quite know what we wanted them for. I suppose we thought we were doing our...

Interviewer Doing your bit. But yes, there's a great big pile of them isn't there?

Florence Yes. That's what's special about that picture.

Interviewer That's an amazing picture, isn't it?

Florence But I know... we were never going to get any air in the buildings again, you know. We had two domestics who came over, they'd heard it on the radio, and they brought their sandbags and they sat in the corridor, you know, and that's where they were going to stay till the end of the war ((laughing)). You see, amazing how people reacted, it really is. You see, and when these women went to these place for evacuation, if they were Londoners they didn't like it in a little village, did they, they wanted bingo or fish and chip shops or in the cinema, you see. So that was not really a good... it was all arranged so hurriedly.

Interviewer Which one are you in that photograph? ((pause)) That's you.

Florence ((inaudible))

Interviewer Ah, isn't that lovely. It's good to have these photographs, isn't it?



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Florence I'll just show you a picture of my mum.

Interviewer Yes.

Florence I don't know what to do with them all, you see, that's the thing. Because you have so many photographs over the years, you move around and so many different friends.

Interviewer Yes, they're very precious, aren't they?

Florence Oh yes.

Interviewer They're lovely photographs.

Florence I even remember when they were taken.

Interviewer Yes, they're lovely. ((pause)) She's got a very strong face, hasn't she?

Florence Well that little girl that I've cut off, that's taken outside the house where they later lived in Yarmouth. And they were down there on holiday, Bill and his wife Joan and Janet, their young girl. Of course she's married and got her own children now, an 18 year old. And that's George.

Interviewer Oh, lovely. And that's her with her grandchild?

Florence Yes, with her grandchildren.

Interviewer Lovely.

Florence And that's one taken in 1936, that was a different house again.

Interviewer What happened when all her children grew up? What did she do?

Florence I don't know, she began to live a bit more of a social life herself, you see, and she used to save up her money to come down to London for a break, and she used to love travelling on a coach.

Interviewer Did she? Did she come and see you, come and stay with you?

Florence Yes, she stayed with me once at Mothers' Hospital, one night, and then we went on to Cyn and Jack for a holiday, from London.

Interviewer So she had a bit more time for herself eventually?

Florence Yes. She did eventually have quite a nice little bit of social activity. She used to like going to the cinema. She used to go to... you know, it was quite cheap then to go to a cinema, and I said, "Well, how do you decide what you want to see?" So she said, "I go by the cast," the actors and actresses.

Interviewer Oh, she knew who she liked.

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Was your dad still alive then?

Florence Yes, he died after her. He died on January 1st 1960. I was up in Scotland at that time so I'd got to come down from Scotland in the morning and she cried because I couldn't get a seat on the train that night. I was up in Isle of Rothesay. So it was like being a missionary there because in the winter after Friday, you see, there's no boats over to the mainland until Monday evening again. But by this time they're all going back from Hogmanay.

Interviewer Yes. So were you posted up there?

Florence I was posted up there.

Interviewer Did you have any say about where you went at all?

Florence No. You were usually, when you came to a bit more senior position they usually discussed it with you. It was very nice, I was only there for nine months and I came back to the midwifery again.

Interviewer Did you?

Florence There she is again with a... I think that's Jim, and that's some visitors she had staying, I'm not sure who they were, that's Barbara von Mee behind her there. Now this'll give you some idea of the length of the skirts we had. That was in about 1935/36. Look at this!

Interviewer It's lovely.

Florence And that's that small picture, that big one blown up, you see. That's very clear too.

Interviewer Lovely isn't it?



Florence She would have us stand just so, you know. She wanted us to go to the studio, you see, for a photograph. She must have had some... must have felt she needed a photograph of all the family with the other...

Interviewer It's lovely, isn't it? Is that a nurse's uniform you have on?

Florence No, it was a kind of a reddish dress with a...

Interviewer With a white collar.

Florence ... with a lace collar. And the hair is done in rings, you see, blonde.

Interviewer Yes, round your ears.

Florence You don't remember that fashion, do you?

Interviewer No. It's lovely. And was this picture after you'd started your training?

Florence No. I started... that was the day before I went to start general training.

Interviewer Right. It must have been very exciting for you, going off to do your training.

Florence Oh, very fearful. Very fearful, yes.

Interviewer A bit daunting?

Florence Yes. Because you always felt as though you were inferior, not having had the- you see, although you had other experience that those nurses hadn't had.

Interviewer A lot more experience of life.

Florence In the family and life and that, you didn't have the head knowledge of the others. However...

Interviewer But you soon caught up.

Florence Seemed to.

Interviewer Your experience of life and difficult life must have been very useful to you.

Florence Yes. Well I suppose it helps to build character doesn't it?

Interviewer Mm. It must have helped you when you were looking after people in similar circumstances.



Florence Yes. Well I've always got a feeling, you know, for the underdog, kind of style.

Interviewer Yes. I suppose some women coming into midwifery haven't got a clue about that sort of thing, have they? Because they tended to be more privileged women, didn't they?

Florence Yes. Yes, exactly. I mean when I went to training college and I realised then how inadequate I was, because there were older cadets there that had had good jobs, they were well-known in business and the music and reading and that, it all helps doesn't it? So in those kind of cases you start off at a disadvantage. But you don't realise it until you've changed from one circumstance to the other. I didn't realise that I was underprivileged ((laughs))!

Interviewer But it must have made you a very different sort of midwife.

Florence I never had a room of my own until I went there, you see, and I was 20, 21. So I never knew what it was to be private. And I think everybody needs a bit of privacy. I think all children do.

Interviewer So did you love it when you suddenly got that...?

Florence Oh, I thought it was marvellous. A room of your own, and you have some privacy. Of course I wouldn't have valued it the same had I not had it, would I? I mean if you've known this kind of luxury all your life you don't appreciate it when you have it, do you?

Interviewer No, I suppose for some of those women, coming into nursing midwifery, it must have been like coming down into hardship, wasn't it, rather than gaining.

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Was there good comradeship between the midwives that were training?

Florence Yes. We did have a very good fellowship because we used to have... at the Mothers' Hospital there was always morning prayers, all the nurses used to come down for meals, for breakfast, and they'd call a roll to make sure everybody was there, and then have short prayers and then we'd go to the wards after that. And every Tuesday night we had a meeting in the staff sitting room, and different sections of the staff would do these meetings, so there was always that, you see. I mean in the Salvation Army wherever you go you always know somebody and you're quickly made welcome, so you're never likely... you see you never



need to be-, you know somebody that's been there before, or have known them before. I think you do need something out of your own home, I think whatever circumstances you're in.

Interviewer Did you find your really particular love for midwifery...?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer ... or was it just another side to the general work that you were doing?

Florence Well I felt, you know, fully stretched, if that's what you mean. You know, I was fully stretched doing midwifery. But my mother was always amazed that I ever went in for midwifery because when she used to have the babies and the napkins would be in the ((inaudible)) I used to always feel sick and heave ((laughter)). She used to say, "I never can understand how you've taken on that work because you never would look at the nappies when they were there."

Interviewer She must have been proud of you though.

Florence Very deserving though, isn't she, wasn't she?

Interviewer She sounds quite a character. She must have been very proud of you.

Florence When I first wore a uniform, you had to ask permission, you know, now you don't, of my mother. So I didn't really get any sympathy. She said, "Well if you start wearing it you'll have to wear it all the time, every Sunday. No putting it on one Sunday and taking off next time."

Interviewer Really?

Florence Then when I said I was going to... you know, applying for the training college so she said, "Well make up your mind what you want to do, but don't come crying home here if you don't like it." It's what happened. I daren't go home after that! ((laughter)). And then when the suggestion came up that I should do nursing I wrote and told her, so her reply was, "Well, I thought you wanted to be a Salvation Army officer." But she didn't realise I could combine the two, you see. "Now you want to be a nurse, you know, you can't make up your mind what you want to do."



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Interviewer I see, she thought that was...

Florence So I didn't have it easy. ((laughter))

Interviewer She wasn't exactly giving you a lot of encouragement.

Florence Oh no. But I suppose that was the right approach, actually.

Interviewer Well she was leading you to it, wasn't she?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer And within the Salvation Army, if you became a nurse, could you still go up through the ranks, as it were?

Florence Yes. And if, when I went to do general training that still counted as years of officership, you see, for promotions and that.

Interviewer And so you went through and got promoted.

Florence Yes.

Interviewer What did you become in the end?

Florence Well I'm a Brigadier now.

Interviewer A Brigadier, my goodness, that sounds very top ranking.

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Yes, is that the top of the profession?

Florence No, after that... people in big positions, you know, who have a lot of oversight of other departments and that, they can become a colonel, a lieutenant colonel or colonel and then commissioner. Commissioner is not a highest rank. Then we've got a woman general.

Interviewer Where does a major come in?

Florence That's only the...

Interviewer Is that before brigadier?

Florence Yes. They've changed the ranks over the years, you see, and the uniform and trimmings and everything has been changed. So there have been quite a lot of changes.



Interviewer Were you involved in training midwives at all?

Florence Yes. These students, you see, that came, I had a lot of... well, mostly practical training, not necessarily classroom training.

Interviewer No, but hands-on work?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer What would you say were the qualities that a midwife should have in her work, or in her attitude?

Florence Well she's got to be fond of, you know, being human. A bit of humour. I suppose it takes some brains. You need to be strong and healthy too, doing it in practice. And you've got to really want to do it, I suppose that's the thing. You've got to have certain medical knowledge, haven't you? But the practical side is the best, rather than book-learning.

Interviewer Yes. I think a lot of it's about patience as well. I think they forget that a lot these days, that actually most women will give birth if you trust them to get on with it, won't they?

Florence Yes. The thing is, you see, we tend to interfere too soon, don't we?

Interviewer That's right, yes. And especially with all the technology we've got now, we tend to use it when it's not needed really.

Florence Are you attached to any hospital?

Interviewer No.

Florence You're a freelance then?

Interviewer Yes. I'm just doing home beds.

Florence And do you come under any authorities?

Interviewer What happens is when I book a woman for home birth then I notify the supervisor of midwives for that area. So in Hackney I'd notify Miss Bradshaw.

Florence Oh yes.

Interviewer And she'd send the relevant forms. And then she has the right to inspect my equipment and make sure that my records are up to date and all that sort of thing.

Florence When did you qualify?

Interviewer About four years ago. Because I went and did my training after having the children.

Florence And were you previously general trained?

Interviewer No. I just did the midwifery. Because I wanted to be a midwife. Didn't want to work with illness and sick people.

Florence That's like these nurses I was talking about who did the training without the previous... The other nurses who came, you see, they would be on a contract to the authorities that helped them with their fees and that. People used to pay for the nursing training didn't they?

Interviewer Yes, they did.

Florence It's hard to believe that, now they don't get enough pay do they? While they're training.

Interviewer It's dreadful. But that must have restricted the number of women who could go into it considerably, having to buy your uniforms and your books.

Florence Well it possibly would be people that had relatives that could help them. They'd be in a job where they could do some savings. I mean to live for a year without getting any pay at all must be very hard; this is what happened when we went into training college, you didn't get any pay there. They would have enough to see them through the nine months, outfits and personal things as well. Now that training is nearly two years instead of nine months. So nearly all the trainings have lengthened their periods, haven't they?

Interviewer Yes. When you were working as a midwife do you remember knowing of any women who worked unofficially as sort of handywomen, who did midwifery work?

Florence No. No I didn't know of any.

Interviewer You didn't hear about it or anything?



Florence No. Why are you sort of pursuing that?

Interviewer Well I suppose because we've found it quite hard to find any of those women. And there definitely were some women.

Florence Oh yes.

Interviewer But because of the legislation they were practising illegally really. But certainly in some of the poorer areas...

Florence I've heard about it in history books but I've never really come up... It might be, you know, even before my time.

Interviewer I think, yes, it probably was. But poor people couldn't afford to hire the qualified midwife and so very often there'd be this woman who went and caught babies really, for a lesser fee.

Florence I suppose there were these people about when my mother was having her family, but I wasn't aware of it. I never can remember her having any proper medical help, you know, when I got a bit older.

Interviewer Yes. And I suppose by the time you were doing your training she'd stopped helping women give birth.

Florence Oh yes, yes.

Interviewer Because of the legislation was that?

Florence And possibly because there wasn't the same need, because now she's moved somewhere else, hasn't she, moved to another area.

Interviewer Has she?

Florence When they were in rented accommodation they used to be able to get it more easily than you can now. Because rented accommodation was very difficult to come by. We rent these flats, you see, so we were very fortunate really. We'd never believe owning... enough money to buy a place when you retired.

Interviewer So when do you think she gave up going to help people have babies?



Florence I should think when she moved from her little two up and two down room.

Interviewer Was that in the thirties?

Florence Yes, because I left in the... went into training in '30 and became an officer in '31, you see. Well I don't remember much after that or when Ken and Barbara were born; I don't remember much about that. By this time we were living away from home.

Interviewer You'd moved away, yes.

Florence So it was only just for that time when... one, two, three, four, maybe five of my brothers and sisters were born.

Interviewer So because you were moving around such a lot did you feel you got to know an area very well that you worked in?

Florence That I worked in?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence Oh yes. You do... it was three or four years in one place, you get to know a lot of people.

Interviewer And so you'd see women coming back for subsequent babies?

Florence Yes. ((inaudible)) Yes.

Interviewer But you were always working in hospitals for these...

Florence In unmarried mothers' homes, nursing homes they called them.

Interviewer But would they go into the hospitals to have their babies?

Florence No, they had the babies in the home.

Interviewer Actually in the nursing homes?

Florence Yes, the ones I've been in. Yes, it's all been fitted up for the confinements, so you did the antenatal care, a doctor would come and would have so many to see, usually routine visits. And then the delivery, and then the lying-in, and then the care and the training of the girl to look after her baby afterwards. So you saw them...



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Interviewer That was a lot of continuity really, wasn't it?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer That would have been satisfying.

Florence In the early days when I was at Bradninch we used to... during the war a lot of girls kept their babies and went into places of service and they used to come and keep in touch with the home; you used to have... we called them 'associates', and they would come for a special function once a year, and some of them would bring their babies, you see. So they kept in touch with them with correspondence, and often got the jobs for them. So that was like aftercare, wasn't it? Well that doesn't happen now. We did a lot of aftercare in those early days.

Interviewer It must have been good.

Florence Yes. You sort of think you've really done something worthwhile.

Interviewer Yes. You must have got quite fond of them too.

Florence Well you get fond of the babies too, don't you?

Interviewer Yes.

Florence And you like to feel that you're helping. There is a picture there of one of those associates' gatherings that I've just said re the aftercare. A little tiny one.

Interviewer How many girls would there have been in these homes at any one time?

Florence Maybe there'd be about 20.

Interviewer That's a lot, isn't it?

Florence Yes. It was on the steps at the front of the home and it was just starting... these girls all came in for the special occasion.

Interviewer Isn't that amazing?

Florence Yes ((inaudible)) you see?

Interviewer Oh yes.



Florence And some of them are quite older children.

Interviewer And they all came back with their children?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Good gracious. So mostly they went out into service did they?

Florence Yes. Some of them went back home.

Interviewer Isn't that an extraordinary picture. Where's this?

Florence Bradninch, near Exeter.

Interviewer Oh, I know, yes.

Florence Ten miles from Exeter.

Interviewer Yes, I know. I lived down there once.

Florence It was a house that was given over from Plymouth. The home originally was in Plymouth and when they were bombed they got this house there. It belonged to some titled ladies.

Interviewer How amazing

Florence They made into maternity. But we did take... we had beds for three private patients, and they were mostly farmers' wives from around there that used to come in, and that was a nice little sideline, and they helped to finance the place, you see. Because we didn't get very much from many of these girls who had confinements, they didn't have anything to give.

Interviewer No, they wouldn't have done, would they? Did the council give you money as well?

Florence I think there must have been some grants. And then they... you know, you used to... we didn't have to employ any domestic help because everybody did something.

Interviewer The girls helped?

Florence Yes. But you've always got to have some staff, some paid staff, of course.

Interviewer And so they'd come and stay, some of them for quite a long time wouldn't they?



Florence Some of them would be there for six months.

Interviewer And during that time would some contribute financially to their keep?

Florence Well it depended on what insurance they were in. But you didn't bar them because they couldn't pay. Because there's always some that will sort of ((inaudible))

Interviewer Did they support each other a lot? I mean did they make good friendships there?

Florence It varies. On the whole they got on very well together, you know, because they had to share like dormitories. And I think they made a lot of lasting friendships, some of them did. But for some, you see, it was better for them to make a clean start somewhere else without keeping in touch. You don't have to keep in touch with these people, they do it voluntary. And when you feel that it would be best for them to sever that connection, then that's what they do.

Interviewer So they were in dormitories after they had the babies as well?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Did they breastfeed the babies then?

Florence Most of them did.

Interviewer That's good. And were they mainly young women, or were they all age ranges?

Florence They were varied ages. For instance when I was in midwifery they had a girl there of 13, and her father was in jail for... he was the father of this child.

Interviewer A case of incest.

Florence He was doing a term in Wakefield jail. And she came from somewhere in Wales, I can't think of the place right now, in Wales. And she had this baby that was perfectly normal, and quite a big child, but she was an under... she was developed physically but she wasn't developed mentally, so she was like a child. And this baby was like a doll, you see. But you can't get a baby like that adopted.

Interviewer Oh, because of the incest?



Florence And she's not allowed to go home, because there were brothers there, you see, and it was unsatisfactory. She was in the care of the Salvation Army until she was 18, and the children's department helped to finance her.

Interviewer Isn't that sad?

Florence But she didn't seem to worry about it. She didn't seem to be a bit bothered that she was in this state and she wasn't with her family. They never came to see her, none of her family ever came to see her. And her father couldn't come. Eventually they got her a little job in one of our Eventide Homes there, she really wasn't much of a worker either. She'd not... she didn't have the brains to be educated.

Interviewer What happened to her?

Florence Well I'm just trying to think what happened. Eventually this baby went to Barnardo's. And I took it down from Liverpool on the train to Barnardo's in Essex. Ooh, he was a big child. So I often wonder, you know, what's happened to that child.

Interviewer Isn't that sad? Do you remember a lot of cases of incest?

Florence No, not a lot. That was one that was very outstanding. Well the doctor came to deliver her in the house, she didn't live on the place but she came to look after her and she always came for any of these very young mothers to deliver them. But they were perfectly normal and straightforward.

Interviewer Were they?

Florence Yes. That one was at any rate. In the home at the same time there was a woman of 40 having her first child. I'm just telling you the contrast, you see, in the one home. And she came right up to a day or two before she was to pass this baby over for adoption, and then she couldn't go through with it. So then she told her story that she was the subject of a bigamous marriage. So she decided, against all odds, against her relatives, to keep this boy, and that's what she did. She'd got a very good job. So you'd get the two extremes, you see.

Interviewer Yes. You must have heard some amazing stories.

Florence Yes.



Interviewer Were there many very young girls?

Florence Yes, there are a lot of young girls, you know, 13 and 14, especially in Birmingham, when I was in Birmingham, a lot of young ones. Eventually they kept this home just for the young mothers. But still they'd come back a second time, because they'd get so much help. They get now flats, don't they? They get much more help. I think they've swung too far, whereas before they didn't do enough now they're doing too much; that's my impression now.

Interviewer But in those days were they treated kindly, do you think, these young girls?

Florence Yes. I suppose some of their parents wanted to turf them out, because lots of parents had got no... they don't know how to cope, do they?

Interviewer What about in the homes? Do you think the attitude towards them was kindly?

Florence Well we always treated them kindly. You don't condone it, but you try to help them all you can. Yes, we were never unkind or cruel to them. Is that what you meant?

Interviewer Yes. I just wondered.

Florence I mean you wouldn't sort of brazenly say that they shouldn't have been there, kind of stuff, you might have thought it but you wouldn't say it.

Interviewer Yes. You must have seen a lot of very sad things.

Florence Yes. It teaches you a lot of lessons really about human nature and the different way families cope.

Interviewer Were there any patterns in how their families coped? Did some families... I mean did you find the poorer families were more accepting?

Florence Yes. We did find that anybody that was professional, better educated, they couldn't stand the shame. Some of them would apply to the headquarters and they'd get away as far as possible. Never come to see them or see the grandchild, you see, that must be hard for grandparents, mustn't it? I mean you can't reckon that every adopted child is going to be put in the right place. But we weren't an adoption society, but we had contact with the various adoption societies, we used to arrange these fosterings or adoptions through them.



Never sort of handled them ourselves. But that's always a heartbreak, it's never easy, you see, when they know that a girl is going to give a child away, and you've just got to comfort her and help her in the future.

Interviewer Terrible. There must have been a lot of heartache. Yes, a lot of heartache.

Florence But if anybody asked me what was the highlight of my career, I would say that was a bit.

Interviewer Would you?

Florence Yes.

Interviewer That was the work that really was fulfilling?

Florence Yes. Even more than the hospitals and that.

Interviewer It must have been amazing to work with them for such long periods of time and get to know them so well.

Florence Yes.

Interviewer Did the ones who had their babies adopted keep in touch?

Florence No, you didn't encourage it the same. They could if they wanted to, but you didn't sort of make it easy for them to do so. I've kept in touch with a girl who was down in Bradninch. She was a poor thing really; I still keep in touch with her. And this girl that she had... I don't think she'd had much love as a child, that's the impression she gave, and so she clings to you, rather than to make a big fuss of. But when she went into labour she had a very long drawn-out affair, and eventually she did have delivery by a doctor and forceps, but she'd had a previous pregnancy and that baby had been born dead. So we never really knew why. But I think myself even for the second baby she should have been in Exeter Hospital, that's where they used to go if they had to go into hospital from there, Exeter. I sat with her for two or three nights, you know.

Interviewer Did you?

Florence But she rather clings to you, you see, these people, they can't do enough for you when they're alright, and always wanting to be doing for you. And then this baby, a little girl,



was born, and we were a bit concerned about this baby and when Matron went ahead and kept on going down to see the cord and that was alright, but then she started to pass this melena stools, you know, the black stools, and it was very excessive so she must have had some distress in... I think that's why the forceps were eventually put on. And this baby was bleeding to such an extent that we had to take it to the hospital...

[END OF SECOND AUDIO FILE, INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]