

Interviewee: **Jane Wood**

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 Jane Wood covering her experiences as a mother in London in the 1930s, including discussion of her deliveries, social conditions, evacuation during the War, and baby clothes.

Topics include: Midwifery; Maternity services; Childbirth; Second World War

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[START OF INTERVIEW AND FIRST AUDIO FILE]

Interviewer So, everyone used to go and have their photographs taken there?

Jane Actually I was born in Ellscott Road, which is about ten minutes from here, and when I got married my first home was in Ellscott Road this end, facing where the, uh, what its name is – oh dear. Um, where the Fort pub is.

Interviewer Oh yeah.

Jane Near the solarium. I was born right opposite there. And I had my son there in the house right opposite. That was before the solarium was built. There were two houses, you know, and you had to go into the garden for the welfare.

Interviewer The solarium, was that the sunshine treatment the children used to have?

Jane Yes.

Interviewer Oh right, I heard about that.

Jane Yeah. When it started it was only a hut. And my father-in-law he was a councillor at the time and he used to go and help out when it first started to give the children their sun ray treatment for a length of time they had to have. I've seen some changes round there.

Interviewer Yes I bet you had.

Jane When they said, my daughter asked if I'd live over there I said, "No, my roots are here; I'm quite contented".

Interviewer Where does your daughter live?

Jane At the top of Shooters Hill.

Interviewer So, quite a way.

Jane Got a lot of space there. But she said, "Well, all right, tell me why". I thought about it. I said, "There's too vast differences in my ((inaudible)) you know, the way you've been brought up, what you are today and what I like". I'm thankful for small mercies, but they accept they want more still, don't they? You know, they ((inaudible))

Interviewer Yes.



Jane This is a house that has been converted into two houses.

Interviewer It's a lovely house.

Jane It's got its advantages. It's got them because I'm handicapped, you see, and this knee is terrible. Um, I've got, what you call, a straight leg. You won't see anybody else like me. I was very unfortunate because, um, I can't bend it. I had it done, the operation before the plastic came out, you see. If it happened today they wouldn't put me in a plastic joint. It was badly diseased. And it wasn't affecting my calf because I used to be running, skipping, dancing – in fact dancing best of all. When I found I couldn't do those things... I found getting up and down kerbs was getting painful, um, I just went to me doctor for medicine. They kept on the rheumatism. Then I wasn't, wasn't happy about it. Took me up to Guy's, they couldn't find nothing wrong; they thought it was me, in my mind. I've been through hell I don't know how many times with it, um. Fortunately they made it straight.

Interviewer When did you have that done?

Jane When did I have it done? Well, they put... I was in hospital all the time I was pregnant with my daughter. And how many years, um, 12 years old, my boy, and I was in bed calliper. What do they call it: bed calliper. I couldn't help it; I was absolutely helpless. And, um, I had a surgeon and he said he couldn't do nothing because I was pregnant having this baby. I went in the hospital I think when I was about two months pregnant and I didn't come out again until after I had the baby. They transferred me to the surgical ward with the baby, under surgical, because I was breastfeeding. I went on the surgical ward and, um, anyway, it was a bit of dispute. I mean, I had one special surgeon was marvellous. He was the only one that believed me. He got me in the theatre one day – couldn't move, as I say, it was all in the calliper – and then he started trying to get some fluid out. Where Guys got no result; but he did. He told me afterwards his result was arthritis, you see. He said, "They've suspected it's TB". He said, "Personally I don't think it is" he said, "Because you wouldn't look so well in yourself." He said that, he said, "I could be wrong" he said, "We've got to wait and see". Anyway they had a conflag among themselves and they decided to send me to an orthopaedic hospital called St Vincent's – a long way out. They were the only hospital that would take me with a baby. So, in the end we went up there. They put me out on an open

ward. After being in hospital them months closed in, nice and warm, it was cold; it was terrible. I didn't seem to get enough food there, or the right food to feed the baby. I wasn't happy there at all, so I took the law into my own hands and discharged myself. I said to my husband, you know, "I'm discharging myself". But I hadn't done anything about it; just told him that, trying to get away with it. It worked. And, um, I told him what to do, you know, bring a shawl and blankets and everything for us. He came. And there were so many things that didn't suit me. I'm easy to please. I won't go into details what I didn't like. Anyway we left there. I got myself on my two feet, and I was able to because I knew I would be condemned for what I'd done. I'd see the baby was good, you know. I had plenty of clothes; I'd knitted no end of things, I was good at knitting, in the hospital. And away we went.

Anyway carried on and, um, then I went to the welfare and I said I'd like to go to ((inaudible)) Grange where the mothers after their baby for a holiday, for a rest. They said no, because you're a TB suspect. I was very, very angry at that. Anyway I got on with it. Then the next thing the leg gave way and then back I was in hospital. Then they had to try and wean the baby, do something. They did. Then they operated on me. It was a big operation. But, um, they said, patient said, and the priest then used to come and talk to me, how worried he was for me; been over the church and said some prayers; and how old I looked. And I had to grin because I never look my age. They had me down at the hospital as ten years younger. I didn't know that. Anyway, got over that.

Two weeks after that, it was just a couple of days before Christmas the first op I had, and the next one I had later. Had to have that quick. I had to do something else. I was back. So, I was in hospital I don't know how long I was in there. I didn't know when I was going to come out again. In fact I had my daughter christened in there in St Olive's because I didn't know when I was going to be able to walk. I must say St Olive's oh they was kind; everyone from the lowest to the top rank. I couldn't speak high enough of them, so kind.

Interviewer That's closed down now, hasn't it?

Jane Yes. I was sorry to hear that. That's a shame. They were wonderful to me. Anyway, they put me at the time out on the balcony, there was a couple of women, always very friendly, and they were looking in the cot next to the bed, they said to me, "You age is down as ten years



younger” and they couldn’t work it out because I was talking about my son, my Dennis, going to buy him some long trousers when he came in hospital to see me. He was 12 or 14 and he was at school. So, that’s my first son.

Interviewer I’ll just put this there because I don’t want to miss what you’re telling us.

Jane Now then, when I was going to have my first baby I got myself, so they’d believe me, I got it in writing my birth certificate.

Interviewer Is that up there?

Jane Did I leave that on the top? If I haven’t I know where it is. Did I leave it on there? ((Searching)) I was 23 when I got married and I was 24 when I had my son, just over the year. I got married on the December, 13th, and I had him the following 21st, following 21st.

Interviewer Yes, not much time.

Jane That was fairly ghastly, that.

Interviewer Was it? What happened then when you had him?

Jane What happened? Well, I used to have a medical mission them times I was a bit nervous of men doctors going through, you know. So, I always had a medical mission in my time. I was used to the medical nurse and ladies and stuff. When they knew I was pregnant they asked me if I would book up with them. Before that I had a cousin, she had a baby, she was all right, out next day after it, so I thought the woman must be good. I asked her if I could have a woman to look after me; which I did engage her. So, of course used to have to go around again up the hospital for check-ups. Anyway, my sister-in-law was also pregnant, my brother’s, only brother. So, we worked it out, there was hardly any difference between us who was going to have the baby first. Anyway, I went up and this day to be examined, and the doctor said, “Ooh, I think it’s going to be twins”. Oh my face, when she see, you know, the expression on it. And she said, “I don’t mean you” she said, “I mean you Mrs Herbert”. That was my brother’s wife. ((Laughs)) She thought we were going to have them at the same time; she was calling them twins. Anyway she had hers three weeks before; his was on the 4th, nephew; my son’s the 21st. Well, anyway I’d been out the day before with one of my sisters. Where we hadn’t been; we’d walk miles, great walker, looking for toys for her



children. So, I came home and there was my landlady waiting for me. She said, "The nurse has been there from medical mission, and she's left these pills you've got to take every hour, and at lunch loads of castor oil, and then when the pains start send for the doctor". Oh dear, I didn't know where I was. I had no experience, you know, nothing to know what to do. Anyway I did it all, and I started, you know. Didn't know if it was the castor oil or whether it was the baby, what was happening. So, sent for that woman first. This women – my eldest sister, she was alive then, she came round and stayed with me – this woman she smelt of drink; she wasn't nice.

Interviewer Oh you said that on the phone.

Jane She wasn't nice. ((Laughing)) She was telling me what to do. Anyway, the pains got more regular and then I said... told the doctor. They came around. This had been going on for a couple of hours. And meanwhile my husband – it was gas, got no electricity – got all the pennies and filled the metre up; he was making cups of tea and getting ready. Then the doctor and nurse, they arrived. She said, "Oh my dear it's nowhere near ready yet" she said, "You want rest; don't do this and don't do that" what the woman had been telling you to do.

Interviewer What was the woman telling you to do?

Jane I don't know the woman's name; don't think I ever did.

Interviewer But what was she telling you to do?

Jane Bear down.

Interviewer Oh, before you were ready.

Jane You get a pain, bear down. And, um, she had got a towel and she folded it, and I had a brass bed, she fixed it over the top of the bed, "Get on top of the bed. Bear down. Pull it" you know, "Headboard down and bear down". Anyway the doctor stopped all that.

Interviewer It was too early.

Jane Of course the woman got a bit narky. She said, "I'm supposed to see to that" she didn't want more; she turned this woman out. She said, "Don't you come in this room again, I'm in charge" and turned her out. Anyway, every now and again she'd try and be in, and she was



pushed out. ((Laughter)) A little tiny nurse was with the doctor. And, um, it was all, all back pains with me, I'd say, "Ooh, me back, me back". The nurse would run around me. She was very good.

Well, anyway hour after hour, then early morning came up and I was there for all the rest of it, terrible. And, uh, in the end the baby did arrive. I don't know, that was after all the pain because he was a big baby.

Interviewer How big was he?

Jane Nine and a quarter.

Interviewer That's big.

Jane And I'm small, small build inside, you see. Tore me badly. Of course, they got the baby there. When she started to see to me, the doctor to switch me up the worse would happen: gas ran out. Total darkness; didn't have any more gas. So, of course she had a torch with her, so she had to stitch me up by torch. Managed to look at her and my god, she should have had a rubber apron on, the doctor, white it was, but it was covered in blood. Terrible it was.

And, um, anyway she said I would have to stay in bed, stay in bed for one month after that baby or else I'd have to ring... wear a ring afterwards. I didn't know what a ring was; I'd heard about it. Didn't like the idea of that, so it stopped me getting up when I would have done. So, then my husband paid a woman on top to come; wouldn't have managed without her. She was a terrible experience she was; smelled of drink. I still don't like to think.

So, that's to me, that's a name I shall never forget all my days. When I had my daughter, you know, being in bed, couldn't put a foot outside, the experience wasn't as bad as at home.

Interviewer What year did you have your son?

Jane Pardon?

Interviewer What year did you have your son?

Jane 24, 25. It was a year – so I got married there. Just over a year it was.

Interviewer Oh that's right, you said.



Jane I stayed at work till I was six months pregnant.

Interviewer What work were you doing?

Jane I used to work down ((Tooley)) Street, army and navy territorial outfitters, Hobson's.

Interviewer And you were a machinist?

Jane Yeah, machinist. And, um, good firm to work for that was. And then at that time, I don't know if you can remember the Chancery Garters, top fashion underwear, called Chancery Garters, and there was all frills and bells and bows, all sorts of things around the garters. Well, I left when I was six months pregnant, see, and then, uh, I got my panel money. Because I had all my stamps. And then I had an aunt where I used to live before I got married and she had this little draper's shop, she used to sell clothes as well, anything, and she asked me if I could make up these garters for her; a bit of extra money, you know, money was a bit tight. And I used to do that. But really perhaps I should have been resting more. I don't know. Anyway, I got over that.

But, um, I got... it was... they say to me, you know, oh it must have been an accident going all those years between the two. But it wasn't an accident; I craved to have another child. I thought, I don't know, I'd be happy if it was a girl, but can't... none of us can do anything about that. So, she turned to be out what I wanted. They used to come round in the ward and say to me, "What do you want, Jane?" I said, "A daughter if I can". So, said, "Don't know about that". But I got my daughter.

Interviewer Did it put you off getting pregnant again because the first time it was so hard?

Jane The second one wasn't so difficult, no. Mind you I think I was a small made. I used to have a terrible time as my monthly period; oh, that used to be a ghastly experience that used to be. I never did anything about it. I suppose there could have been done, something done. I had no one to tell. The time I lived with my mother's sister she never had no children, and you couldn't never get no sympathy; she was hard – hearted, Hannah. Her name was Hannah; she was hard hearted.

Interviewer How old were you when your mum died?

Jane I was four when my mother died. Of course, my father he had no time for children. But I had to go to this aunt to live with, you know; she never had no children. And, um, I was like – she kept me, clothed me, uh – and I was more like a servant. I had to make things, underwear to sell in a shop. Mind you, in a way I suppose it done me some good because I used to be able to make anything. She'd sell them in the shop in them days. Mind you, I'd get a kick out of it in my own way. Used to sell all the old-fashioned chemise, they used to call it, unbleached and white calico; I used to make anything. She used to get me cutting out as well. Pair of iron scissors she had. And I suppose it must have made my hands strong using them. She'd tell me, "Cut off so many yards and fold them this way, fold them that way" whilst she's machining herself, then, "Cut it down the centre, then do this, then do that". I was able to cut them out. And she had a machine at the back of the shop and I used to get on the machine. She'd be in the shop near the till. If there were no customers she'd be machining and I'd be machining. She'd say, "We'll have a race" and the thing would go, thinking I would beat her. And then see, my mother couldn't do a thing. No good at needlework, only washing; she used to do washing. And she had another sister and she could make babies' dresses. See, so you don't take after your parents.

Interviewer Was your mother in her 40s when she died then?

Jane 47 when she died. And she never looked her age. I remember seeing her in her coffin – in fact I was home, I'd been in the passage, cleaning through; I was the only one, see, at home. I remember when she was dying she kept calling me, getting a bit impatient, getting off my knees, you know, going into the bedroom. I didn't realise she was dying. She wanted my company. When I look back, if I had to do that again I'd sit with her; not leave her.

Interviewer You don't know when you're young, do you?

Jane No, no, you can look back on all that.

Interviewer Do you know what she died of?

Jane TB. There used to be a lot about in them days. Mind you, I can never remember her sitting at the table and having a meal with us; never sit at the table and have a meal with us. There used to be a crowd of us. Because my father, being an old soldier, he wouldn't sit at the table



unless he had a towel across his lap. Hold it up, at the table he was ever so strict with us, hold that up. Clean them shoes – do a shoe inspection. He used to use blacken, you know; we'd have to spit on that with a brush and blacken our shoes. Then he'd inspect them and see we'd polished them. And he used to think we was a load of blackens. He'd been abroad. All the names he says now there's trouble going on, you know, abroad out east.

I remember my mother saying the happiest time of her life was the 1914 war when my husband... my father had to go in the army, and she was sure of her money every week, her allowance. She sent me down to go to birth certificate, accounting, Dock End where we was all christened, 14 of us. And I can remember the priest who married me said to me you've grown; you had a very good mother. She had 14 children. I don't approve of that; too many children.

Interviewer Must have taken it out of her, mustn't it?

Jane Too many.

Interviewer Yeah.

Jane Wouldn't be right today, which is a good thing, yeah. In them days there was no such thing as carpets. You were lucky if you had lino. Lots of people just had bare boards. And no one envied the next person. They would give you help if they could. That's what I miss today. See, the war changed everything. Everyone, they was all out for themselves. But I used to live just round ((Bethan?)) Street when the war started, and the neighbour would come in, she'd pick up me baby, someone else would get hold of something else, we'd go to the shelter under the arches – best place you could possibly go, right under Tower Bridge. Anyway I was worried about me baby. She wasn't gonna be neglected. I used to say I'm not going without my husband. I said, "You take the baby over there, I'll just be through" I said, "I'm going to do my washing". I used to stay and wash and cook a meal for them; they'd be under there all night. It was after next morning. They used to get on with what I got ready for her, all nice. And then they reproached me when I wouldn't go over there. The baby needs its food. I got no thanks for doing that. The baby, my daughter, she came first. And she was a pleasure to look at; lovely baby she was.



Interviewer How did you get on with your son when he was born? What sort of baby was he?

Jane Me son? Never forget when I brought her home. He was quite pleased with her. He bought her- her first teddy as well. They think the world of each other today; always have done. And, uh, the boys came for him, his friends knocked at the door, and when he opened the door they said to him, "Ooh, your mum's got a baby" and he slammed the door on them. ((Laughs)) Just shut the door! But, uh, he idolised her; always has done.

As they've been out to work and started courting they take her out, you know, to places. They're very close, very close. It's the best thing I ever done. I had her and she's a wonderful daughter. She's closer to me than the son. She's thoughtful. Where's he's married his own home comes first; I don't hold it against him. She'll come down, and every time she comes down she's got something for me. When I can't get out, there's times when I can't get out, she'll go and get the shopping for me. You see, I walk so slow in the rain. And I know every kerb there is in Bermondsey. I can't go down kerbs. I can't cross this road because the kerb is very high, so walk up there where it goes low, cross there. It's like that. I always have to carry a stick. And also, this is not so long ago, and the disc went down my back; that was a bad experience. I think it's the strain of the leg. I had that done then, uh. I had to go to, um, New Cross Hospital first. I was in there a long time. At that time they had a male matron and, uh, he came and looked at me one day and he said, "Are you all right?" So, I said, "Yes" I said, "I'm all right but getting despondent" I said. "I seem to be in here a long time and nothing's been done". He said, "We're waiting for a certain man to come and see you". And I couldn't even wash my own face, it was as bad as that.

Interviewer Very painful was it?

Jane I couldn't wash my own back. I couldn't turn; it was like being paralysed. And, uh, it was the what's its name, it was lying on a nerve, see. They x-rayed me as soon as they got me there and they said operable. They said, the nurses told me, you know, when I left there that I was one of their worst cases they'd had in there. The ward was kind. The sister would give me a blanket bath. When she come on in the morning she'd take one look and, "Have you managed anything today?" I said, "No, I couldn't even, couldn't even put a flannel to my own face". And she gave me a blanket bath and make a fuss. They ended up being ever so kind. I



can't speak high enough of them. No one need ever be afraid to go in hospital, not if they're genuine. Some people think, I don't know what they do, what they expect. I've seen a few; they used to create a problem.

Interviewer When you had your daughter was it much quicker when you were in labour the second time?

Jane Um, it was all together different because I'd got these labour pains, was getting these labour pains, and, um, one of the patients said to me, "It's ghastly when you get to the next ward, the labour ward". I thought I've been spoilt a bit; I'll keep out there as long as I can. And I knew the time was up, got to have this baby, I knew she'd started because I'd had a show before. They got me all ready then. I'd been in there such a long time. You know, things I'd knitted, all sorts of things, what you accumulate. So, I got one of the patients that was up, very nice, and I said, "Look, I think this is it this time" so took me out. She was saying this and that and sort of packed, she packed it all up for me ready to go. So, of course they began to get more severe. And every time I got a pain I'd dive under the blanket ((laughter)) and shed a tear to myself. And then the second attendant he used to always walk that ward every day, and as a rule I'd be sitting up laughing and smiling and knitting or something, but this day, just as he was walking the ward, I got another pain and dived under the bedclothes. He came over and pulled the bedclothes back. I looked up. He said, "Pains started?" I said, "Yes". He said, "How long has this been going on?" I said, "All night". Whoa, panic stations! They got the screens round; the sister came up, "Oh Jane" she said, "Oh" she said, "Oh" she said, "I thought I was going to have to get it out my locker", but of course I'd got them all packed up. She got them all in that quick; before I knew where I was she came with me up to the labour ward and she said, "Oh" she said, "I thought that was it". Couldn't get up here quick enough; she was terrified I was going to have it there. But I knew different from here; it's not going to be there easily. The other one, what I went through with him, you know, being a long period in between, so I knew it wouldn't be easy. But it was still better than what I had at home.

Interviewer Did you have any painkillers to take the pain away?



Jane No. They offered me something to inhale, but it got such a... I got in such a dither, slam that! ((Laughs)) But, uh, anyway it wasn't as bad as my first. And I had no stitches.

Interviewer That was good.

Jane That's what they said to me, "Did you have any stitches before?" I said, "Oh yes, yes, I had that". They said none this time.

Interviewer When you had your son you know you had to stay in bed for a month how did you manage with the housework and all that?

Jane Well, my husband was very good; very domestic, clean and that. And the landlady, you know, she used to do a little bit for me; she'd do the washing. And my mother-in-law would send around dinner. My husband could cook, you know, small things. We managed all right.

Interviewer Were you breastfeeding the baby?

Jane Oh yes, all through, yes. It was nice. Oh, she was a credit, you know; she was a picture. I'm not boasting or bragging. I mean, every mother thinks their baby is. But I used to put her in the pram outside the door – unless I was going up the town or to the council, or it was dark – they always used to crow over the baby and say how nice she was and all that. Of course then the war came along. I'll never forget that. And we had to evacuate. I couldn't carry the baby; they wouldn't let my mother-in-law carry the baby; they wouldn't let my mother carry the baby. A policeman insisted on carrying the baby up to London Bridge. And that's how... had to come back again. I went, quite nice.

Interviewer Where did you go to?

Jane ((Peterborough?)) And then I wanted to some money, had £100 in the post office prepared, so I came home for the weekend. She started crying; she said, "You won't come back". I said, "I will; leaving all my clothes here. I've taken enough for the weekend". I didn't like to say it was the money. And, um, anyway I was going over to the post office at Dock End and my leg gave way in the middle of the road. Next thing I was back at Guys. And they wanted to send me to the east coast. I said, "No, if you want to send me anywhere send me to St Olive's". I know people at St Olive's; I know nobody if I go there, it's cut off. So, anyway I went to St Olive's where they were very, very good.

Interviewer Where were you evacuated to?

Jane Um, what was the name of it now? Sussex; it was near – what's the name, near the coast, further on that that... Horsham way, that way. I don't know. It was very nice there. Crowd from Dock End we was all together sort of thing. But of course come home and went back there; couldn't go back.

Interviewer What happened to the baby when you went into St Olive's?

Jane Oh, I took her with me because I was breastfeeding, see. They said to me, the sister said to me, "You've got a very intelligent child here, mum" she said. You know why? She knew the differences between the nurses and the sister and even the staff nurse; she knew it was only the sister that would pick her up and walk her around. And as soon as the sister – she didn't care what sister it was, from the other wards, they come up – she put her two arms out like that, and they couldn't resist her; they couldn't resist her. And she brought her back one day, a sister from another ward, that's what she said to me. Mind you, she is, you know; she's good with her hands and everything, cooking.

Interviewer When you were breastfeeding did you breastfeed by a routine, like every three or four hours?

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[START OF SECOND AUDIO FILE]

Jane The only time my daughter, I had her at that other place, the orthopaedic hospital, when I had her there, she was losing weight, I wasn't getting enough of the right food there.

Interviewer You need a good diet, don't you?

Jane But the food, you know. Very poor. There was no need for that. I managed to provide myself with better food.

Interviewer What work did your husband do?

Jane Uh, clerical work. He worked for, um, the government. And, uh, he died of cancer. He, uh... they had to, what's the name, pension him off when he was 60. He could stay on, they would review his case every year, and just as he was 60 he, uh, he had a pensioning off. And they

gave him – he went on a half-pay first for six months, and I didn't know anything about getting help; I never questioned, I never used to talk to neighbours outside. And, um, I managed, you know, a little of my own savings from my aunt of mine especially.

The thing that really fascinates me was the style in them days to today. Boys used to be dressed like girls till they were three. My aunt used to sell everything in her shop; they'd come in, decide the boy was three, the britched, what they called britched. So, they'd bring him in with his long hair hanging down, some would have curls, some would have it all straight – I can see them now – and, uh, a pair of trousers and a, and an awful striped shirt like men used to have, the first sized shirt, put that on him and boots, strapped boots, pair of boots, put boots and socks on him. And the child must have been in tears. And a collar round his neck, and walk out the shop. That was his ((inaudible)) britched. And then he'd go out that shop, and then he'd go three doors along was a barber's shop where they used to have the balls spinning around, and they used to give the children a windmill to encourage them, you know, the boys, and off would come their hair to a close crop. I used to be nearly in tears if a baby used to come in the shop to see what had happened to them. They looked pretty some of them; some would look, you know. But when they come out ((inaudible)).

Interviewer Oh. ((Laughs))

Jane That was britched, what they called britched. And, um, the little girls, they'd have puffed up sleeves – I believe I could still make them today – and a bow on the shoulder under the sleeve, tied round the neck to a bow there, they had a bow there, and all pleated from the waist – that's what the little girls would wear.

Uh, also used to wear... sell rubber collars for the boys when they went to school. All they had to do was get a wet flannel, the mothers, rub them over when they went to school. And elastic bows for the boys. And another thing, there was only the one room at the back, and she had a house round the corner, and she used to shut up the shop at eight o'clock and then perhaps someone would pop up at the side with a little tie not my aunt, the shop was shut, and ask her to open the shop up; they'd want, uh, laying out stockings or laying out socks for children. And the women had to have like stockings to put on a corpse. Don't do things like that; waste of time. That all happened when I used to work up there; that changed.



And the government took the hospitals over didn't have to do that such a lot. And we had to do, make shrouds, we got a contract with the RCC to make shrouds. So long, they were. We were all frightened to make them. Anyway a friend of mine, she had a lovely figure, nice woman she was, and she was comical. So, she went outside to try this. She went out in one of these shrouds what we was frightened to touch; she come in. ((Laughter)) She had us all laughing. We thought it was terrible pay at first; I think we got about thruppence to make one.

Interviewer How old were you when you left school?

Jane When I left school? 14. That was strange, you know; a few years back I joined the needlecraft. What I wanted when I left school was needlework. A woman I used to see at the solarium of the ((inaudible)) club and she called me one day and she said, "Look what I've made". And, um, it was, um, uh, a doll, a doll on her... I always had a chair there to sit down. One day I went in – I was growing up then, so I'd got very quick smell; wish I was quicker at hearing – and I said, "Ooh, ooh, what's this smell? Oh, oh". Looking around the shop; there was only an elderly woman sitting there. "Oh, oh, what can it be?" And then all of a sudden I looked up at my aunt and she gave me a look enough to say, drop dead, the look. ((Laughter)) I got out quick before I said something wrong; got out quick. Anyway, after a time when I went back there, the customer had gone, she didn't half let me have it. She said, "I could've murdered you" she said, "That poor woman" she said, "She's got cancer. And she was saying how they praised her up at the hospital for keeping herself clean and no smell attached to her".

Interviewer Oh no!

Jane "And you come in shouting all about smell". I've never, ever got over that smell. It was like a bad mildew smell; terrible. People walk about now you'd never think. They have something to counter it perhaps.

Interviewer So it doesn't go as far as it did then.

Jane "I could have murdered you" she said. They were telling her, the hospitals had praised her up, she had a bag, on how clean she'd kept it. And this Miss Jones, going back about five

years ago, I was over the doctors ((inaudible)) and I see Miss Jones sitting there, she'd been in hospital and she'd come out with a bag; she was worried to death about whether she smelt. And I said, "No, you don't smell; you're all right, don't smell". Ever such a nice person. Anyway she's, um, still, when I last saw her about, she's taken on a small group of people down at Rotherhithe in the hall down there. Then after that I said to her when I... I want to go in the day centre after I had my leg done, I said, "I don't want to do too much needlework, so you'll understand if I don't come to you". I went to the day centre and do it there.

Anyway the tablecloth I made, it comes out on every special occasion. It's come out for two weddings, you know, put the wedding cake on.

So, then my granddaughter wanted to start up; they said to me, go over the other side, used to love to go over there, but the weather's been that bad. Because what I do is getting the number one bus. I do like John Lewis for wool; I do a lot of knitting. I said, "If you see there's a sale on over there with needlework and that transfers already on there." My daughter, she wants to do one. So, I said all right, I got her one; she paid for it. Anyway, next thing was a couple of weeks after that back it came.

Interviewer At the time when you were having your children was it quite common for babies to die then? Was it more common?

Jane It wasn't really. When my boy went down with diphtheria at the clinic then there were quite a few die there.

Interviewer How old was he then?

Jane About two. Very frightening. It was terrible; he was running around. I'd got visitors. I took him over the doctors with his throat and I said, "He don't seem no better". He was lively enough. He said, "Let's have a look at his throat". He said, "Look" that was on the Saturday I think, Friday or Saturday, he said, "Look" put the torch down and showed him, white pin spots down by his tonsils. He said, "Looks very much like diphtheria". I said, "Oh doctor, don't say that". He said, "I'll take a swab" he said, "And if it's diphtheria you will expect the ambulance Monday morning". So, visitors kept coming to see him, he was the only one, and they said he's got no diphtheria, he's running around happy and playing; he can't have no



diphtheria, can't. Anyway the doctor came round first thing in the morning. The woman downstairs had sent for him because she'd got the wind up herself; wanted him to have a look at her. She was all right. Said, "Look lively, come and have a look at Dennis". So, up here came. He said, "Look" he said, "You know I showed you them white spots?" I said, "Yes" He says, "Now look at them; they've doubled at the back of his throat". He said, "The ambulance will be here". And the ambulance came. So, of course he was beginning to feel a bit ill by then I think, and wanted me. He wouldn't go to nobody; he wouldn't go to them at first. She said, "You'll have to carry him down to the ambulance, take him". Outside the ambulance it was a tug-of-war. They had to tear him away from me. Never stopped screaming.

And then I went round to the in-laws to tell them what had happened. Then when I came back our neighbour said, "Ooh" she said, "((inaudible))" I nearly lost him.

Interviewer Did you?

Jane He was in Shooters Hill Hospital.

Interviewer How long was in there?

Jane They had a canopy over him. I said, "I don't think I'd better let him see me". When he had his eyes closed, he was unconscious you know, I could see him. But when he was awake I prayed for him not to see me in case he wouldn't let me go. He was a mother's boy; no one touch him, only me. So, I used to watch from the other end of the ward. I had to go every week, day, twice a day, get there, which was quite a journey in them days, Shooters Hill. And then he had it again; he had it twice. But he wasn't as bad the second time; he was about three years old then.

Interviewer It must have been very upsetting for you.

Jane Oh it was distressing, yes. He was the only one at the time. Then, as I say, the girl, best thing I ever had; I craved for her. I told my husband I wanted a girl; I wouldn't be happy until I had – not a girl; another child – got to have a child, I said. I get annoyed when people close to me that I know: oh difference in the age; that must have been a bad accident. I said, "Well, it wasn't, believe me it wasn't". I craved for her and I've never regretted it since. Wish I had a dozen like her. She's like you, she's good to sit and listen.



Interviewer She sounded nice on the phone.

Jane She is. She's like it with everybody.

Interviewer Nice to have a daughter.

Jane She'd do anything for you. Whereas now the boy has got his own life. He goes on his own sweet way. I only see him once a week. He comes here and has a cup of tea and puts me dustbin outside for me, and he's off. As soon as he gets home what he does he goes out running. He's all for keeping fit. Then he comes home, jumps into a bath, has his tea, paper and that's his lot. Good to see him.

I don't go round there because they live in these town houses: sitting room is down here like this, and then there's a steep flight of stairs for the rest, bedrooms and kitchenette and all that. So, it's no use me going round there. I go round there then the daughter-in-law feels she's got to come down with a cup of tea, then she's got to bring it up again. Then she can't stop down because everything is going on upstairs. So, don't see a lot of them. She comes round on a Saturday. She rings me up. She is in the square, sort of the square, shopping centre, "Is there anything I can bring you in?" I say, "Bring me in a nice new loaf". She comes with that and then she goes off to have her hair done. She'll have a cup of tea with me and she's off.

So, I make me own life, you know. Mind you, I'm very fond of reading.

Interviewer You've got some big books.

Jane The eldest granddaughter bought me that to read. I would never have started; it's over 1,000 pages in it. How it started really appealed to me. But I put it down and ((audio distortion))

I used to see plenty of it going on, you know, being in a shop, reading a lot.

Interviewer Did women used to know a lot about what was going to happen when they had the baby?

Jane Some of the women didn't used to have nobody; did it themselves have a child.

Interviewer Didn't have anybody come in and help them?

Jane No. You can read; it goes on today, schoolgirls have babies don't they?

Interviewer Did you ever hear of any women that tried to get rid of the baby when they were pregnant?

Jane Oh yes. Did I hear it? They used to call them the naughty ward and put them down the other end of the ward where I was in; put them right down the other end of the ward. Oh, there was one woman next to me, she used to talk to me, what she didn't get up to was nobody's business. She was married and had a husband; she was more or less, uh, you know. She used to go out then when she was pregnant what she used to do – different things than we used to get done to. Oh, I used to be shocked, things I used to hear in there. And it's dangerous what they do; they play with their lives. They can take it, you know, get away with it.

Interviewer Yes, it's dangerous.

Jane But, um, it's silly of them, you know. I wouldn't gamble with my life; no way. Anyway, you know. I mean, if my husband had earned good money I'd like to have had more children; I'd like to have had five or six if we had the money coming in to feed them. But I didn't approve of having children if you couldn't do justice by them; I didn't approve of that at all. I did it myself in my own time, you know. I wanted things I never used to be able to buy, apple, an orange, and sweets; I never had any money to buy them. My aunt would never give me the money.

Interviewer So you were quite hard up really?

Jane Oh yes, yes. I've known hard times, even before I went to the shop. My mum was hungry; I never saw her have a dinner. We'd all sit round the table and she'd be like the waitress passing it on. Whether she had any before or afterwards I'll never know. I don't think she did, when I look back. She said they were the happiest times. I can always remember her saying that when my father was in the army she was sure of her money. Because in them days everyone didn't have much carpet in their homes, there would be one in 1,000 I reckon that way. Lucky to have lino; it was bare boards. And, um, they used to be in the pubs; and, uh, in the pubs it used to be in cider and spittoons all round the counter and clay pipes on the counter – you could help yourself to clay pipes.

Interviewer You can remember all that can you?



Jane Things you spit in, you know. My aunt, used to always have to go over and get a pint and a half of stout every night. I used to hate it going in there. And then there'd be a woman had a fish shop round the corner, she used to be a decent customer, my aunt wouldn't upset a customer. This woman would say – she was a drinker, she liked whiskey – she didn't like to go in the pub by herself. She said to my aunt, “Jane, come over there with me?” “Yeah, she can go over there with you”. And I had to go over there. And she'd order a lemonade for me and a double for herself. And I'd get this great big glass of lemonade and it would all snuffle up me nose, you know ((laughs)) and I'd always be in a state; what to do with her I didn't know. She'd swallow it up and she'd leave me there. I'd put it down quick and get out quick. I used to drink that; used to often have to do that.

Interviewer So, it wasn't common for the women to go in the pubs; it was just the men in there, was it?

Jane Men and women used to go. The women would be more or less in the morning; but the men would do the evening. Sometimes in the dinner hour. Now, my father, I don't know – do you ever go down the ((Neckinger?))?

Interviewer No.

Jane You don't know the Neckinger? That's interesting; it's very, very historic around this way, very old, very historic. ((inaudible)) years ago; I've read all the history. And my aunt's shop, she used to have a ring, it was left in the concrete on the outside, and I think it had something to do with the abbey. The abbey used to run right through, you know. You want to read that. You can get it in the library, the book of Old Bermondsey; you want to read it. And, uh, on the other side of the road they had pits like, they used to do leather in a big way. It was a big industry in every way, especially leather. And these pits they was cow skins, and they used to dip them in some sort of a dye, and it looked like green slime. It was a big square and there would be about that much space around the square for a man to walk around. There were quite a few men. And my father used to work there. They used to have apron ties around. They used to have to do these spins. I don't know what they used to do but the smell was an outrageous smell; I've got an ever such a good smell; it was a terrible smell – one of the worst smells in Bermondsey. Used to have some smells in Bermondsey.

When my mother moved to the Old Kent Road I had to take my father's dinner to him. I used to walk over ((Dundsen?)) Road Bridge. In them times it was called Greyhound Bridge, before it was all altered. I used to have to walk over there and take his dinner. And then what he used to do come in, and all the men would be looking at me, approach me – get me out of this slimy stuff I didn't like – and then he'd take, take the dinner out of my hands with one hand and say, "Here you are, take a penny". Well, that penny first of all was dipped all in that green slime. I wanted to take it but wouldn't touch it. He knew it. And all the men would think it was a big joke; they'd all be laughing their heads off. "Take it" tempting me, and I just wouldn't do it, take it from him ((inaudible)).

The smells in Bermondsey! I can't tell you a worst smell than them pits. Then there was ((inaudible)); that was all right. Then there was all the jellies where they make jellies. And, uh, what other smells was there? The leather. The scents place, Atkins, just up the top here, Atkinson's. Then there would be pickles.

Interviewer Oh yes.

Jane Then the jams. Oh, Bermondsey! Then when I used to go to work there would be all the hundreds of men, dockers waiting to be called on. And then around by Dock Head they had a pub called Dock Side; all the men used to gather there, the Dock Side. Then there was a pawnbroker's shop. On a Monday morning the queue of women ((whistles)), the queue, taking all the best Sunday wear to the pawn shops. That's how it used to be when I was young.

And of course with the men, most men used to get paid on a Friday night. What did they used to do: they'd get their money, straight in the pub. Beer then; no one used to drink spirits, it was all beer, beer, strong. And they'd all come out, they'd throw them out at night. They'd be helplessly drunk and lay down. Two police would come up, uniform, little hat they had in them days, with a stretcher, plop the stretcher down, get hold of them and put them on there and carry them up the town, used to put them in the cell overnight and be charged in the morning, a couple of shillings. And then my father he was never... he could always carry his beer; but my poor mum used to have whatever got left. He used to keep some money as well for himself during the week. He always had enough for one pint though, you

know, one pint. ((inaudible)) But nine out of ten men were the same, you know; all the people were the same. One in about 100 that didn't do it. And, if there was a girl or boy ((inaudible)) nice clothes.

Interviewer Must have been very hard work for the women then, mustn't it?

Interviewer Everyone was happy. Sunday morning along Abbey Street, used to be a very wide road, I don't know, I think they must have come from a club somewhere, every Sunday regular the crowd of girls and boys, they'd be the width of the road; and they'd be happy, laughing, walking to old Bermondsey Church. People were more religious in them days than they are today; and more helpful than they are today. No one wants to know if you're in trouble today, no one. They come home from work, they shut their door and that's it, you'd had it. But the spirit of them days, you know, is slacking. Everyone knows it, they're all the same. Sad to think, you know, we're all better off but that spirit's gone. Greed and envy has taken its place. You know, it's got its good points and it's got its sad ones as well to see, you know; when everyone should be so good to one another.

Interviewer How did you meet your husband?

Jane Oh, he only lived round the corner.

Interviewer Oh, so you knew him.

Jane He said to me, I've got a couple of tickets to the Palladium, would I go. Also already had another boyfriend; he was all right but he was always out of work. The trouble of going to the what's its name, Palladium, couldn't miss that. Me aunt said, "Look, his mother's a good customer of mine" she said, "You can't do that to me" she said, "It's either the one or the other". So, I stuck with the one that had got the advantages, could take me about, like; whereas the other one was out of work, couldn't get a job.

Interviewer There was a lot of unemployment at that time, wasn't there?

Jane Oh yes, yes. The only thing with me I was never unemployed. I hardly earned enough to keep me. There was one job that was shirt work – there was no work about – shirt work. I went up the Labour Exchange, all my stamps was in order, came home, this lady said me – she was a machinist; expected to know everything, "Mustn't refuse, you won't get no pay", so I had



to take it. Anyway when I got there who should I see but a couple of women that used to be friends with my older sister. They were also in the same boat. Women I used to meet used to laugh over that. Got the shock of our lives when we got there. We had a hand inspection. Ooh, your hands had to be perfect; your names had to be manicured – to make underwear. We laughed together. They used to see us. And, uh, we didn't stop there very long.

Interviewer How soon did you go back to work, after you had your son, did you go back to work after that?

Jane Oh yes.

Interviewer Quite quickly afterwards?

Jane Me mother-in-law – how old was he when I left him? – oh, me sister-in-law had him first. I think he was about seven when she had him, when I went back to work. And, um, then I had another break. The next time I went back I got my mother-in-law to give him his dinner, only his dinner. But you sort of had to, you know; wages were so low, you know.

I'd like to... my son is very, very self-conscious; he couldn't bear it, you know. If we was going out to tea Sunday, that was the custom, friends asking round, he wouldn't walk alongside us; he'd walk away. When he'd catch me up he'd say, everyone's looking at you. He'd think, you know, I'm terrible. And I was with it, you know, used to wear white kid gloves – that was the style in them days. But he was very, very self-conscious; didn't like being dressed up. And he would never, ever have any suit, only navy blue, had to be navy blue all the time. And he's still like that today, even with his own son he used to be like that, and his wife – had to look so. My daughter-in-law had to buy her clothes for him, what he liked. Mind you, he's got a nice taste, I will say that. Nice home. I suppose probably inherited it from me or something. But the girl, she used to come home from school, we'd have our tea, she'd sit doing drawing and painting. She was very good at it. Then she started the needlework; she done some lovely needlework. She done that when she was at school, on the settee.

Interviewer Did she?

Jane That, that's been done for years, because she's got two married daughters herself and a son. She done that when she was at school.



Interviewer Lovely colours.

Jane My eldest granddaughter about a month ago she was 21 so I gave her £21 for her birthday, so she brought it last week, to show me what she bought with it. You know what she bought with it? She showed it, like that, about as long as that and about as wide as that, and it was a pretty girl in a garden, been done all in needlework. She'd done one about as big as that when she was at school. And me daughter's got a little frame for it as you go up the staircase. It's very effective; ever so nice. And now she's got that one like that for herself.

Interviewer Lovely.

Jane They're all good with their hands.

Interviewer They must get it from you then.

Jane I reckon I've worn you out talking to me.

Interviewer You've got such a good memory!

[END OF SEOCND AUDIO FILE, INTERVIEW AND TRANSCRIPT]