

A RAINBOW & A CUCKOO'S SONG
by
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PREFACE

This is my story of the time I spent in a home for poor children. There are many depressing images of institutionalised homes of the past. Some may well be true but my experience was different and in this little book I have set out to show a happier side of these homes-cum-schools. This is not a history of the school. I have written about my feelings and experiences during my stay of three years and three months in the 1920's, and the subsequent reunions of old scholars.

The official name of the school when I first became a pupil was Central London District Schools, and it housed the poor children from the City of London and Southwark. It was also known as Cuckoo Schools - an affectionate name which I explain later in my narrative.

In 1930 the school, among others of the same type, came under the jurisdiction of the London County Council. There were immediate changes. The first being the name of the school. It was changed to Hanwell Residential School, a name less popular than the previous names. This remained the official name until the building was closed in 1933. To scholars who attended the school prior to 1930, and to the local residents, it retained its affectionate name. Even today the name Cuckoo Schools is remembered, but not Hanwell Residential Schools.

Many people helped and supported me as I wrote this little book. I wish to thank my colleagues at Runnymede Writers for their encouragement and particularly to Alex Scott - our mentor - who assisted with the editing of the manuscript. I hope this publication will prove his faith in me. My grateful thanks also to Myrna Scott who typed the second draft of the manuscript and to my daughter, Sylvia Gilchrist, who typed the first draft and then typed, edited and published this special edition.

1 LEAVING THE NEST

There are three years in my life upon which I look back sometimes with regret and sometimes with nostalgia. Regret because I wonder what sort of citizen I would have become had circumstances been different; nostalgia because of the happy times I had.

It was in 1922, while we were living in Southwark, that my father, who had fought in the First World War and had been twice wounded, became unemployable. His physical state prevented him from holding a job for long. One day he was brought home in an ambulance after working just one day on the roads as a labourer. He never worked again. I was ten years old and it was the first time I was to see a man cry.

Mother struggled on working as a cook and cleaner in various houses while my father did his best to look after my young brother and me. Although he would sit and brood and snap at mother when she returned home at night, he was very caring with his children. In time the strain began to tell and it became apparent that his mind was becoming unbalanced. I remember one occasion when mother met us from school and went with us to Carter Street police station seeking advice because my father had threatened to cut all our throats and his own with his razor. Poor mother was afraid to go home. The kindly police officer came with us and we were greeted by my father like welcome visitors!

Gradually his mind turned to religion and he would stand at our open window - we were three floors up - and tell all and sundry that he was God and would save the world. He became a figure of fun and at school my colleagues would jeer at my brother and me until I dreaded going to school. The teachers, however, were kindness itself and I feel very grateful to them.

In June 1923 two men came to our tiny flat to speak to my father. Mother was crying as they took him away. I remember watching from the window as he walked happily between them, unaware that he was going to a mental hospital from which he would not return.

Mother continued working long hours to keep a roof over our heads, but was finding it increasingly difficult to care for us. My brother and I were left very much to our own devices.

We shared a scullery and toilet with our neighbours across the landing. The scullery housed an old stone copper for the washing of clothes and mother and our neighbour were allowed alternate days on which to use it. Because mother left home early and got home late, she very rarely had time to use the copper. Our clothes were seldom washed. Our dirty clothes caused us once again to be the butt of jeers from our school colleagues.

I was eleven and my brother was seven. We were missing our father in spite of his odd ways. At last mother managed to get "Relief," as it was then called. Today it is Social Security. In those days the recipients received tickets, rather than cash, which they could exchange for food at a special centre. The highlight of our week was when mother returned from collecting her "Relief." She would bring home a huge square loaf, a large piece of margarine, some lard, tea, condensed milk, sugar, and a large tin of golden syrup. We knew then that we would be having a slice of bread covered with margarine and condensed milk or golden syrup or covered with lard sprinkled with salt and pepper. I really enjoyed the latter!

Eventually mother found that she could no longer keep her job and care for us properly. Officials came to the flat and there were discussions, each time mother ending in tears. At last she told us we were going to another school in the country. I was overjoyed. Not so my young brother. He didn't want to go if mother was not going with us. Gleefully I told my colleagues at school about the school in the country that I would be attending but they only scoffed and didn't believe me.

Then in November, 1923, two female officials came and my brother and I were taken to the workhouse in Southwark. There we were divested of our clothes and given hot baths (what a joy that was). Our hair was washed thoroughly and fresh clothes were given to us. Later we were taken to the

"Cottage Homes," a name given to four small houses owned by the Council. We remained there and attended a local school while we waited to be taken to Central London District Schools at Hanwell, Middlesex - a Poor Law institution run by a Board of Guardians. Its only claim to fame was that Charles Chaplin and his brother Sydney spent about two years there.

It was December when it was decided we were ready to be taken to our new school. It was snowing hard and I remember how cold it was. There were ten of us, seven girls and three boys, and we were taken in an old school bus to our new home. My feelings were mixed. Although I was looking forward to my new school and enjoying wearing warm clothes, I was wondering how soon it would be before mother could visit us. I kept seeing her face covered in tears when the Poor Law women came to take us away.

From the school lodge to the main building was a very long drive and the snow lay like a white blanket over the surrounding fields. I thought how lovely it looked without the interference of high buildings and my heart lifted. Not so my brother's. He was still fretting for his mother.

The building to which we were delivered was called the Probationary, a gaunt-looking place where new arrivals had to stay for three weeks before being given a clean bill of health by the school doctor. Three weeks was considered a long enough incubation period for any disease to show itself. In our case it so happened that we had an outbreak of measles which caused us to stay another three weeks before joining the school proper.

The food in the Probationary was good and plain and slightly more "Cordon Bleu" than in the main building. It was brought to us from the main kitchens by a ruddy-faced man named Mr. Raynor. We all liked him and clustered together to watch him bring in the food, which our young stomachs were ever ready to receive.

The boys slept in the same dormitory as the girls. Our ages ranged from six to eleven, with the older girls looking after the younger at the request of the staff - two, kind, female 'nurses.' They were not nurses in the medical sense but substitutes for children's nannies. To our young eyes they seemed elderly, but I realise now that they were probably in their late twenties. They did their best to break us gently into our new way of life. They must have handled a great many children from broken homes and realised that our wounds were still open.

As we were to spend Christmas in the Probationary I wondered what it would be like. As my last two Christmases had been toyless and joyless anything would be an improvement. It was. There was a big roaring fire in the dayroom where we had our meals. Mr. Raynor brought us roast pork, roast potatoes and cabbage, with Christmas pudding and custard to follow. For those who did not like Christmas pudding, there was the daily issue of rice pudding. Then the jolly gentleman distributed Christmas crackers to everyone; as well, the girls were given little necklaces and the boys a book each. The little six-year old was given a rag doll. In those days a rag doll was a doll with the outer covering cut to shape and brightly painted to show the hair, eyes, nose, mouth and dress; then filled with soft material. Rag dolls were quite popular and really very pretty.

Mother, because she no longer had the expense of feeding us, was able to send me a little doll with a china face and movable limbs. My brother received a box of lead soldiers. Lead was the normal metal used to make toy soldiers and not then known as a health risk. The gift of the soldiers lifted my brother's spirits enormously. So, with the companionship of the others, my first Christmas in Central London District Schools was an absolute delight.

At last our probationary period came to an end and we were allocated to different sections in the big school.

The residential part was divided into blocks. The boys' blocks - A and B - were separated from the girls' quarters by domestic offices, kitchens, dining hall, and some staff rooms. The girls occupied

Blocks E and F, and the little ones between five and seven years went into Block D. I have never learned why there was no Block C.

My brother, looking very dejected, was taken with two boys to Block B, while I and two of the other girls were given Block F. The six-year old moved into Block D and the remaining three were housed in Block E.

Life from then on was tougher, more educational and, at times, even exciting.

2 A NEW WAY OF LIFE

Block F was to be my 'home' for the next three and a quarter years. During my first week, however, I had to get accustomed to the various phrases used by my new playmates before they would accept me. If a thing was nutty it meant nice; a slight mispronunciation of 'natty,' I suppose. Calling someone baldy-ha-ha meant that her head had been shaved and she was wearing a mob-cap because she had ringworm. Slumming was something one did by putting pieces of food - such as a bread-roll, a purloined piece of cake, or a piece of fruit - up one's knicker leg. But toke baffles me to this day. We referred to slices of bread, which were given to us on rare occasions instead of bread rolls, as tokes and they were considered by us to be a luxury. Having mastered the slang, I was welcomed as a new playmate. The seal signifying that I was accepted was when I was given various pieces of ribbon by some of the girls to wear on my long, fair plait.

We were all, except for the much younger girls, given a task to perform before breakfast. One such task, which we all hated, was cleaning boots - we never wore shoes, always boots.

The boots to be cleaned were those back from the boot repair shop which was manned by the older boys. There were many pairs, I can assure you. There was a special room for the cleaning: a dreary place with a stone floor, a wooden bench on which to sit while cleaning, and shelves above where the boxes of cleaning materials were kept. There was no heat and in the winter our hands would get very cold because, for some reason, we weren't allowed to keep the door shut, so all the elements made their entrance at various times. Fortunately we were only on each task for two weeks at a time, but boot cleaning always seemed longer.

Polishing the dormitory floors was a much nicer and warmer task. About ninety children slept in our block in two long dormitories. Block E had three dormitories and, therefore, was able to sleep more children. How we polished those floors! There would be two rows of four girls in each dormitory. The first row putting the polish on and the second row doing the rubbing. My, how those floors shone! As we polished we sang and swayed to the right and then to the left to the rhythm of the song. There was indeed satisfaction at the end of the task when we looked down the gleaming dormitory to see each bed leg in a straight line and the beds neatly made. When we made our beds we would turn the top sheet and blankets down half-way and tuck them in, thereby allowing the beds to air until we climbed into them at night.

A much coveted task was to clean Matron's quarters and this was performed by a chosen few - usually those who were soon to leave and go into domestic service.

Oh, there were a hundred and one jobs to be done. Each day we rose at six, made our bed, and then went down to the washrooms where, stripped to the waist, we would perform our ablutions. Those washrooms were very cold; there was never any heating. There were troughs at waist level right around the room and down the centre, with jets at various intervals under which we washed. A rack for toothbrushes was above the jets and we took our toothbrushes to the nurse, who stood at the door like an avenging angel, and dipped our brushes into the large box of toothpowder in her hands. Anyone caught dawdling over her ablutions would get a slap from the nurse; so, of course, we would hurry and felt warmer for doing so.

Having completed our tasks and tidied ourselves, we would play until the bell rang for breakfast; then we would make our way in an orderly manner to the dining hall. The dining tables were of the trestle type and had a long hinged form or bench on each side which stayed in an upright position when not in use. The noise we made was deafening when took our places and returned the benches to the seating position.

Breakfast consisted of watery porridge, long thick bread rolls with margarine (we were allowed one and one half) and cocoa in enamel mugs. Many of the mugs were chipped and in some cases were showing rust. Whatever would a health inspector today have to say about such neglect? Nevertheless we all seemed to survive! If one refused porridge, depending on the mood of the staff on duty, one had to stand on the form until the others had finished and only then allowed to eat one's roll. For the shy and retiring this was mental torture but for the extrovert it provided a chance to be noticed by the opposite sex who were on the other side of the dining hall.

Breakfast over, we were allowed about twenty minutes in the yards before going to the day school for lessons. The yards - one for the boys and one for the girls - were large, square flag-stoned areas bordered on two of the sides by dormitory blocks. The third side was created by the dining hall, kitchens, and domestic buildings which ran through the centre and separated the two yards. The fourth side was taken up with our dayrooms and lavatories.

All sorts of activities took place in those squares: drill rehearsals for our annual fete; Indian club swinging, which was tremendously popular; counter marching; country dancing and, of course, the area was also used as a playground for the children.

Apart from the yards to play in we had day-rooms. They were gaunt, barnlike affairs with a wooden bench running the length of the wall on each of the two longer sides. The day-rooms were our haven on cold, wintery days. At one end of the room were tiers of small wooden lockers, just big enough to take a few treasured possessions. There were not enough lockers to go around so they were allotted to the older girls; the younger ones having to put their treasures into a cotton bag and then into a large communal basket. Needless to say our possessions were few; mainly dolls, books, crayons and sometimes paint boxes. Most of the things were given by visiting relatives. In spite of these seemingly bleak conditions we were quite happy. So many little things gave us pleasure.

I remember the years of the Great Wembley Exhibition when groups of us were taken in turn to see that wonderful show. The excitement when the great day arrived! We were issued with our Sunday clothes and each given a little bag of food containing some sandwiches (thank goodness, no rolls) a small pie, a piece of cake, an apple, an orange and, joy of joys, a sixpenny piece to spend. By today's standard that doesn't sound like very much but to us it was like receiving a gold nugget.

Oh, the thrill of going out for the day and all the wonderful things we saw at the Exhibition. Each country was represented by a pavilion and we gazed in awe at all the strange things which the countries produced. We had not realised how differently the other half of the world lived. Then, having filled our minds with learning, we were allowed into the amusement park where we spent our whole sixpence riding on the big caterpillar, getting dizzy on the roundabouts, shrieking with delight in the boat-swings and finally returning to the school tired but happy with our hands full of pamphlets and samples. Of course the pamphlets were no good to us, but the delight of having something different gave us a feeling of satisfaction.

3 CLOTHES AND RELIGION

When I look at the children of today in their brightly coloured clothes and see how demanding of their parents they can be in their choice of apparel - utterly regardless as to whether or not their parents can afford the clothes - I wonder how they would feel if they were suddenly made to wear what we had to wear and without having any say in the matter.

Our clothes would cause today's young misses to hoot with laughter, but at the time we were glad of them because of the lack of central heating.

We were provided with a flannel vest - which was a must - which covered our shoulders and came high up the back. Over this we wore woollen combinations buttoned down the front and which had a long slit at the back over our rumps. On top of these we wore a white liberty bodice and, to finish this ghastly array, we wore navy-blue knickers, known today as "passion killers" or "harvesters" (all is safely gathered in!).

These laughter-making knickers proved to be a boon because we used them to store hidden treasures. If we could sneak an extra bread roll or a piece of cake on Friday (which was cake day) our knicker legs were the places to store them. That was called slumming. Likewise, if we went scrumping in the school orchard, once again the dear old knicker leg swelled with pride and apples - and we would walk gingerly across the yard until we could unburden ourselves in the day-rooms and fill our lockers. These stolen fruits we later shared with the much younger ones who had not had the opportunity or the ability to climb the trees.

The rest of our clothing consisted of a gym slip - which could be black, brown or navy - and, in the winter, lined serge blouses. Over all this we wore white pinafores which were changed twice a week unless there was a special reason for an extra change. As soon as May was out we were allowed to "cast a clout" and the serge blouses were replaced with short-sleeved cotton ones in pink or blue stripes. The hideous woollen combinations were discarded until October the First. With the cotton blouse issue, we really felt summer had arrived and there were even tussles among some of the girls as to which colour they were to have. We all had long black woollen stockings held up by tight black garters (how the medical profession would shudder at that today) and black boots with lace-ups and metal tips on the toes to save wear and tear.

The final garment, for wearing out of doors, was a long navy cloak with a hood. This we used all the year round. It was such a useful garment and so easy to slip on. The room where we kept them had pegs right around the walls and when every cloak was in place it looked very much as if we were all standing facing the wall.

Sundays brought a new look to our appearance for we were allowed to leave off our pinafores and were given navy reefer jackets and close-fitting serge hats to make us look smart and demure for attending church. The performance we went through on donning those hats! We had to make sure a quiff was showing so that we would look attractive to the boys, who would be sitting on the other side of the aisle. The hat would be put on so that the front was at the side and eased round to the front causing the hair which was showing to form a wave. Then and only then were we ready to face the opposite sex in the chapel. I am writing, of course, about the older girls of whom I was one, and I must admit we were a vain lot.

The boys were rigged out in serge suits with short trousers and a shirt with white stiff collars - this was only for Sunday wearing. Weekdays we saw them in woollen jerseys and short trousers and, of course, the inevitable boots and long woollen socks. I do not know what they wore beneath these garments but they couldn't have looked worse than we did in a state of undress.

Our attendance in chapel, I regret to say, was not looked upon with much enthusiasm for religious instruction but as a reason to gaze with adoration at our handsome chaplain, and to observe the boys on the other side. There was one very embarrassing occasion I recall during a service. We were sitting in presumably rapt attention as the chaplain preached his sermon, when one of the boys broke wind and it just rattled along the wooden pew like a shot from a gun! All heads turned in the direction of the explosion. It was easy to pick out the culprit from the flaming colour of his face. Poor lad, he had to sit through the rest of the service with the cruel girls having little peeps at him every now and then.

The chapel was on the floor above the main entrance. It was rather an ugly place, but it did

house a fair sized organ which our organist and choirmaster, Mr. Van Stratum, played with such mastery. There was also one very beautiful stained glass window which, since the school has closed, now enhances one of the walls of St. George the Martyr in the Borough in Southwark, London.

The boys in the choir were chosen for their pleasant voices, which caused a little envy amongst the others because of the few "perks" that were given - such as attending singing practice while the others were in the dormitories prior to lights out. They also received biscuits and lemonade afterwards. One soon learnt it was a good policy to try and get involved in any activity which presented itself.

For those old enough to be confirmed, Mr. McKinley, the chaplain, would hold Bible classes and teach us about Holy Communion and prepare us for our confirmation. Although at the time I was an eager and attentive listener and took to heart all that I was taught, events and disillusionment over the ensuing years have dimmed the lamp I once held so fervently.

Confirmation took place once a year, but there were no dainty white dresses for the girls, just a long black frock over our black stockings and black boots. The only white we wore was a cotton head covering like a novice nun's, and white cotton gloves. Because we were unaware of the traditional white regalia we were not disappointed and thought we looked lovely, demure, and virginal. We looked forward with excitement to the ceremony and felt honoured that a Bishop would be confirming us. Afterwards we were presented with a small book on Holy Communion signed by the presiding dignitary. In my own case it was the Right Reverent Bishop Bury and I have the little book to this day, sixty-five years later. I feel sad to relate that I have not attended communion for many years now, but the emotions I felt the day of my confirmation will always be with me.

4 EDUCATION - HAPPY SCHOOL DAYS

Whatever we may have lacked in home comforts we certainly did not in education. The day-school was set away from the residential area. It stood between two fields and was approached from either of the yards by way of sandy slopes levelling to sandy paths. We used part of the fields as our playground during break time.

The school buildings housed the girls, boys, and infants. The infants' were in a separate building. The main school was a long building and was divided into two floors. Each floor had seven classrooms and offices for the headmaster and headmistress. Girls used the second floor and the boys the ground floor. There was no chance of anyone playing truant - but then no-one wanted to. It was a very happy school to learn in. The teachers commanded discipline and were treated by us with great respect. They appeared to be very dedicated to their job.

The segregation of the sexes was extended into the playground by each having a separate break time. This only increased the interest in the opposite sex, although in some cases it caused much shyness when in close proximity.

There was one instance when a delightful fair-haired lad had been sent by the headmaster to deliver a note to our headmistress, Mrs. Fenn. As she wasn't in her office he had to open each classroom door before he found the one she was in, which was my class. All eyes were watching him as he approached the headmistress. As she read the note he was looking everywhere except at the goggle-eyed maidens enjoying his discomfiture. Worse, he had to wait while Mrs. Fenn wrote a short reply for him to deliver. His face scarlet, he took the note, tripped over the easel, which held our blackboard, and accompanied by our giggling he rushed to the door. To add to his misery, having opened the door he was recalled by Mrs. Fenn who was holding the note he had dropped during his stumble. Once more he had to face a battery of eyes as he returned with flaming cheeks to retrieve the note. I cannot imagine a lad today being so overwhelmed.

We attended school on six days of the week. Wednesdays and Saturdays were half-days - Wednesdays, because it was one of the visiting days for parents and relatives (although there weren't

many who did visit - I rarely got a visitor). We attended classes on Saturday mornings to balance the curriculum.

We had a good grounding in English. In arithmetic, great emphasis was put on mental arithmetic and to this day I can add up in my head almost faster than the machine at the check-out of a supermarket! History and geography weren't popular subjects to me then, and yet today I revel in learning them. Handwriting was a very popular lesson. We were taught how to form each letter and marks were given for the neatest and most well-formed sentence. The resulting efforts had their effects in later life and the majority of pupils after leaving school could write a good hand. Religious knowledge we took quite seriously and exams on the subject were taken at the end of each term. We were all Church of England because we were segregated before entering the school with the Roman Catholics going to a children's home which taught that religion.

We had art and handicrafts and singing. Oh, what a joy the singing was. There was a special room set aside for it without any desks, just a piano. Mrs. Mathias, our singing instructress, would put her whole soul into it; so we did likewise, giving full vent to our vocal chords. We produced some very good singing. I have since learnt from an ex boy scholar at one of our reunions, that when the windows were open in the spring and summer, the boys with their masters would pause for a while to enjoy the rendering by the girls of Nymphs and Shepherds and the Heavens are telling Jehovah's Glory.

In addition to general subjects the girls, when old enough, were taught cookery and, believe it or not, laundry work. These classes took place in properly equipped rooms near the main building. The cookery class spoke for itself, but the laundry class taught the little niceties which in those days (the 1920's) were needed for clothes to look their best. There was no terylene, nylon, or polyester then and most things had to be ironed. So we were shown the best way to iron shirts, pleats, tucks, and frills. The teacher had a box with sand, into which she would rub the old flat-iron. This procedure cleaned the bottom of the iron and made it easier for ironing. Then she would wet her finger and tap it quickly on the base. If it was hot enough, a sharp hiss would be heard and we could proceed to iron. We learned how to starch properly and wash things by hand and to put a Ricketts blue-bag in the final water for white clothes to bring out the whiteness. It was not my favourite class but, as with most of my lessons, I took it all seriously and actually won a prize at the end of my last year at school!

The teachers appeared to enjoy their work for they would go out of their way to encourage the backward. At the other extreme they would propel the more promising pupils. Mrs. Fenn, our headmistress, was revered by all. She was very fair and just. Yet her presence in a classroom caused even the naughtiest child to sit up and pay attention.

The end-of-term exam results were very important to Mrs. Fenn. She used them to judge those whom she thought would make scholarship material. She would then take the top five girls and teach them personally for a term before entering them for technical scholarships. She had a success rate of about 80%. There was no eleven-plus examination in those days but an equivalent called the Junior County which, if one passed, entitled one to receive a grammar school education. For some unknown reason none of our pupils was ever entered for it. However, I was lucky to become one of the "famous five" and in due course took my scholarship and was boarded out to attend the Borough Polytechnic in Southwark. Unfortunately for me my educational yearnings were towards something academic. With a technical scholarship one had to learn a trade. The choice was not as extensive as it is today and I found there was not one trade which appealed to me. When I suggested that I might opt for ladies tailoring, I was given to understand that it was poorly paid and, as I hadn't a home of my own, I wouldn't earn enough to pay for lodgings. So with a great deal of persuasion, I was advised to take the cookery course which they said would provide me with a roof over my head when I had completed my two years and had entered domestic service. At this I was appalled because I could have gone there straight from the home and was bold enough to say so. "Could I not go to another school to learn typing and shorthand or maybe a language?" I asked. Mrs. Fenn was very sympathetic, "I understand your feelings, Sylvia, but the terms of your scholarship do not cover those subjects." Then spoke the voice of the Guardians, "You will have a first-class training in first-class cookery, and at the end of the two years you will be sent only to

the very best of households; besides which you will have a roof over your head and a decent place to live in. You will also have a chance to progress to housekeeper." Who was I to argue?

So with my fingers itching to tickle the keys of a typewriter and a yen to learn a language or dabble in chemistry, my fingers were used to wielding spoons to stir with, or measuring quantities on to the scales. At the same time my brain was storing the knowledge of what sauce went with what and how to use a bain-marie.

I was nearly seventeen when I left the Polytechnic, having received, in addition to the cookery course, a good grounding in general subjects. True to their word, the Guardians placed me in a household in Princes Gardens, Kensington, where there was a staff of twelve. Imagine my chagrin when I learnt I was to be the scullery maid!

So the two extra years of education and specialised training had not helped me one bit. It was a position I could have gone to straight from any school at fourteen. However, I should be grateful for the extra years of schooling.

5 A BRAVE LITTLE BOY

There were one or two occasions in the early months when I missed mother, but all in all I had adapted well. I had two very close chums in F Block and we would confide in each other all our little problems and share whatever treasures we possessed. There was great rivalry between the girls' blocks and if a girl made a bosom friend she was invariably in the same block. I loved having clean bed linen, clean clothes, my own bed to sleep in and enough to eat. The companionships of others in the same situation soon allayed any feelings of nostalgia. I was happy.

My brother, unfortunately, did not adapt so well. Sisters and brothers would meet in a corner of the big yard between the girls' dayrooms and lavatories. The area was divided by railings from a path which led to the Infirmary. If a sister wished to get a message to her brother, she would stand at the railings until one of the boys who was wheeling food to the Infirmary was passing and she would pass on her request. Likewise, a boy would wait at the railings until a girl hove in sight on the way to the lavatory. A primitive method but effective. It was with bars between that conversations between the sexes took place.

It was during one of these visits to my brother that I learned the reason for his unhappiness. He still missed his mother, but because he had large protruding ears, the other boys made fun of him calling him "big ears" and making jokes about him. He was eight years old by then and the visits from mother were very spasmodic, which added to his misery. I felt so very sorry for him but did not know what I could do. Children can be unknowingly cruel. Because I was happy my conscience smote me and I felt guilty at not being able to console him.

However, one day when I had cause to visit the Infirmary for vaccination, Dr. Davidson, the school doctor who was adored by staff and children alike, asked me if Edwin Thomson was my brother. When I acknowledged the fact, he said, "You have a very brave little brother there. Do you know what he has asked me to do?" I must have looked baffled and he went on to say, "He has asked me if I can sew back his ears to stop the boys making fun of him! Because of his pluck, I've promised him I will see what I can do." I felt very proud of my young brother and, true to his word, Dr. Davidson performed the operation. Although the size of his ears was still the same, they lay flatter to his head. The scars faded but could still be seen until the day he died. The staff and his colleagues were very impressed by his spirit and no longer taunted him. In fact, I think they felt a little respect for him - young as he was. Although he was never as happy as I was at the school, he seemed more settled than before and no longer cried.

In due course my brother applied to join the school band where he became a very good euphonium player. When the time came for him to leave the school, he was recommended by the

bandmaster to join the band of the Essex Regiment as a euphonium player. He remained with them until the end of the Second World War, seeing service in Egypt and Burma. Although he hadn't been very happy at school he did find happiness in army service. He broke his service for two years at the end of the war only to return to it as a physical training instructor with the Parachute Regiment. He married and had children but was later invalided out of service with a hole-in-the-heart condition - a condition which had remained undiscovered since birth only to make itself known when he was in his late thirties. He underwent heart surgery at St. George's hospital. He survived the operation by many years only to succumb to bronchial pneumonia at the age of sixty-four. Needless to say, my most vivid memory of him is the bravery he showed over his ear operation.

6 YOUNG LOVE

Although a great deal of caution had been taken to keep the sexes apart (which seemed contradictory in view of the fact that we shared the same dormitory in the Probationary) several of the older girls managed to have admirers.

The meeting place where brothers and sisters met became a romantic trysting place for the young Montagues and Capulets - in spite of the fact it was next to the girls' lavatories! Beggars could not be choosers. Messages would be sent via a brother or sister to the chosen one who had caught the eye of the prospective suitor in the dining hall. Then, during meal times, the Romeo or Juliet would be pointed out and if the attraction was mutual a meeting would be arranged at the "railings." If the attraction was one-sided, no meeting took place and we would be subjected to a gloomy-faced reject for a day or two until another Romeo caught our eye.

It was a status symbol to have an admirer - young as we were - so when I was told that Fred Hale would like to be my beau (he was twelve, so was I), I preened myself and smiled my smiliest at him in the dining hall. We would meet at the railings and talk silly nothings, usually about teachers or the nurses or tell tales about our colleagues. He gave me a book and I gave him one of my ribbons. This state of affairs lasted three weeks until someone told me he was a "wet-bed" meaning that he wet the bed regularly. I think the information was supplied by a rejected suitor and, fickle lover that I was, I sent word via the grape-vine that I no longer wanted him as a boyfriend. Next day I received a note from another boy, Arnold Hemp. He was thirteen and very handsome. He wrote that he did not wet the bed and would I be his girl. Once again, I preened myself because my status was restored, but my cruelty to Fred Hale did not go unavenged because a month later I lost Arnold to the charms of a dark-haired beauty.

So it would go on, romances made and broken from a distance, but it all added a little spice to our lives.

7 THE INFIRMARY

The school had its own infirmary and it was here the children were sent if they showed any signs of illness. It was not enough to have a cold - that was something one had to get over in nature's own way. There were one or two occasions when I developed a sore throat which turned into a cold and I would have given anything to go to bed and keep warm because those dayrooms were not the cosiest of places particularly for anyone who was feeling unwell. Nevertheless, if one showed signs of something more serious, to the Infirmary we were sent. In spite of not feeling well, for several reasons we all loved going there.

Dr. Davidson, the school doctor, gave such loving care to his young patients. Joking with them, bringing sweets to those who were able to eat them, and ever ready to listen to a tale of woe. We regarded him as a father-figure and as such we all loved him. Also, the Infirmary was so much warmer and cosier and we had "tokens" (slices of bread) to eat instead of the rolls with the scraping of margarine. The medical nurses were so nice and we had hot milk to drink before we went to sleep. It was little wonder that we looked on it as a refuge.

When I arrived at the school I was a very skinny little girl - in fact, I was given rice pudding every day in the Probationary to fatten me up! However, I have the school to thank for the healthy body I had on leaving. It was not all plain sailing at first because I developed an eye complaint which was contagious. I would wake in the mornings with my eyelids completely glued together and throughout the day discharge would form. I had difficulty seeing the blackboard. My teacher noticed it and informed the day nurse who sent me to the Infirmary. I was isolated with two others for three weeks and had a very enjoyable time! Life was so much smoother and the food so much nicer.

About a month after I was discharged, vaccination took place for those who had not already been done. (It was after my turn that Dr. Davidson told me about my brother's plea regarding his ears.) In those days of vaccination, we received four jabs in different spots on the left arm and, unfortunately for me, my vaccination didn't heal as quickly as it should have done. I had a very bad arm. My armpits were swollen and I could hardly raise my arm. It was dressed regularly but to no avail. During the sixth week, I developed tonsillitis and was once again in the Infirmary. I was very ill and had to be fed through a feeding cup. My arm continued to bother the staff, as well as myself. However, with care and attention, I started on the road to recovery but I carry four very vivid scars on my left arm to this day.

When I was up and about and before being discharged as fit, I would help the nurses with the younger patients. We had a playroom with a rocking horse and it was there that I used to push a young boy two years younger than myself on the horse. I had forgotten the incident until many years later, at an old scholars' reunion, a good-looking young man touched me on the shoulder and said, "Is there a rocking-horse around?" He had never forgotten and I still keep in touch with him to this day. He is now in a retirement home, and we continue to exchange birthday and Christmas cards.

Another incident at a reunion caused me to blush. I have mentioned that the younger children in Block D were bathed by some of the older girls. Imagine my embarrassment when a young, fresh-faced man came up to me laughing saying,

"Remember me, Sylvia? You used to bath me. Gosh, I wish you would bath me now!" Oh, such happy memories.

My only regret during my stay in the Infirmary was missing lessons. I loved classroom work. It was always such a challenge. However, my dedication to learning soon allowed me to catch up.

8 FOOD, BATHS AND GEORGINA

Now that I am in the evening of my life and still possess a healthy body, I realise that the routine diet of good, plain food at the school was a sound base upon which my body was able to build. Admittedly the diet was monotonous and sometimes unappetising by today's standards - though infinitely more healthy - but because we had plenty of fresh air and exercise our hungry little stomachs didn't care how monotonous it was.

Our breakfasts and tea-times were standard throughout the week, apart from Fridays and Sundays when we were given a piece of fruit-cake for tea. Those were the days when one or two of the Governors might visit. Even the main meals on those days were of a higher standard. I remember the Friday meat pies with relish. Huge tins covered with very shiny brown pastry were deposited on the serving tables. With taste buds drooling, we would form our usual queue, each hoping that our portion would be a little larger than the recipient immediately ahead of us. Sometimes it was, depending upon which member of the staff was serving and if one had managed to find favour in her sight. Yes, the meat pie was definitely one of our favourite meals. On Sundays we had roast meat - usually pork because the school kept its own pigs - roast potatoes and cabbage, followed by currant pudding and custard. We had never heard of Yorkshire pudding, so we didn't miss it. How true the old saying is: "what you don't know, you don't miss."

The meal every one of us absolutely loathed was on a Saturday. It was the most unappetising of the lot and a feeling of nausea returns as I write about it. Great metal bowls were delivered to the serving tables containing what was called "stew." Stew?! As I think of the delicious thick, brown casseroles I have since served my family and then remember our Saturday meal with great lumps of fat swimming around in a thin, tasteless liquid with an occasional piece of carrot or turnip bravely trying to gain attention - my stomach heaves.

It was useless to refuse to have any. Everyone had to have a serving, however small. It wasn't worth thinking that we could make up on our pudding because that was just as unappetising - large moulds of thick solid ground rice without any jam to redeem it. Jam? What was that? However, apart from nauseous Saturdays we all enjoyed our food.

We never saw bacon or eggs, but there were times when the rumour went round that there were eggs for breakfast. On those days everyone seemed to finish their allotted tasks in record time. The stampede to the dining hall to be the first to see the eggs was something worth filming. Alas, there never were any eggs. Although these rumours occurred several times, we always believed it might be true.

After school on Fridays we had to queue for our "opening medicine." I am sure the nurse, whose duty it was that day to issue the awful stuff, had a sadistic smile on her face as she gave each of us our dose. The spoon was briefly dipped in water before the next child's turn. The medicine had a horrible taste but there were always one or two who tried to look like martyrs by swallowing it without making a face. They were usually the ones who liked to curry favour. I hated it. I still can't remember if it had the desired effect!

Friday was also bath night. The design of the baths reminded me of large stone coffins. There were long ones and short ones housed in one very large bathroom. My impression to this day is of a steamy atmosphere with those ghostly coffin shapes appearing through the mist. Senior girls used the long baths and the younger ones used the shorter size. I was lucky as I was able to use a long one and had the luxury of lying full length - but not for long. There was no privacy and the nurse with her starched apron and jangling keys kept saying, "Come along. Next one. Don't dawdle. Jump in and be quick about it." We felt like sheep being dipped. If only we could have lain and luxuriated. At least we felt fresher afterwards as we rubbed ourselves dry - not with the soft towelling of today - but with thick linen towels which felt rough to the skin. During these performances the staff got ready our clean clothes and handed them to us in the changing rooms. So we emerged like shining angels.

The children in Block D were bathed regularly by senior girls. Senior meaning the girls had turned thirteen. The little ones had their own bathroom with the smaller size baths and they all appeared to enjoy their weekly tub. The older girls, in performing these duties, would often develop a maternal instinct for a particular child and would take special care of the chosen one outside her normal duty. Unfortunately, in one or two cases, a bully-type girl could make a child's life a misery by making him or her fetch and carry and punishing the child if a mistake were made. I'm glad to say that if it was discovered by a nicer type of girl the tables would be turned on the bully.

In my own case, I remember taking a liking to a chubby, rosy-cheeked little girl with bright red hair. She was five years old and her name was Georgina. She came to me with her little problems and I would sometimes give her something out of my own treasure store, which wasn't much but would bring delight to Georgina's face.

One day she arrived at my side sobbing. Her pinafore was torn, her nose running and her hair awry. Between sobs she told me that one of the girls had called her "snotty nose carrots" and pulled her hair. In trying to save her hair, another girl had torn her apron. She was afraid to go back to her Block because the nurse on duty that day was the one who smacked them if anything was wrong.

Full of indignation I marched with her to the sewing room where I knew the nurse would be. I

explained the situation. To my surprise, instead of thanking me she said she would report me to the Matron for being arrogant and not minding my own business. She told me to get back to my own Block. She took Georgina roughly by the arm and strode off with her.

Being reported to the Matron was considered a serious offence. I felt a few qualms although I knew I had not done any wrong. The nurse was fairly new to the staff and I thought maybe it was just an idle threat. But report me she did. The outcome was a summons to Matron's office - with my colleagues waiting in the yard in suspense.

Matron was a large buxom woman. To me she always seemed to be beautifully dressed and coiffured and she wore lovely jewellery. Her face was plump and she had a proud, haughty look - until she smiled; then all her motherliness shone forth. She had three children of her own at a private boarding school. Her husband was our superintendent and dealt with the boys.

On this occasion she was standing at the window gazing into the yard when I was ushered in with the nurse who had reported me. When Matron turned she was wearing her haughty look.

"Is this the girl in question, Nurse Edith?" she asked.

"Yes, Matron, she was very rude."

Indignant I may have been when I took Georgina back, but rude I was not. I was about to protest when Matron asked Nurse Edith to wait outside. A rather enraged nurse left the room. After she had gone, Matron sat down in a chair and then said,

"Now child, what have you to say for yourself? You know it is wrong to be rude to the staff. They are here for your benefit and their task is not always easy."

I was still smarting from being reported but to be allowed to explain without a starched-collared warden hovering in the background was an unlooked-for chance. I explained to the Matron exactly what had taken place and my concern for Georgina. I finished by saying very earnestly, "but I was not rude, Matron."

Her face started to open like a flower and that wonderful smile shone forth. "Well, child," she said, "go back to your colleagues and forget all about it. However, I advise you not to make a big thing out of your visit to me. Tell to your friends, who I know are all waiting out there to hear the outcome that everything is all right."

She must have read a good deal into my character because I was already imagining being the centre of attention with my friends and making my summons to Matron an important matter. But I did as she advised - to the disappointment of a fairly large audience.

My opinion of Matron had reached pedestal height. Little Georgina seemed happier and clung to me more than ever. Even nurse Edith didn't turn such a sour face to me afterwards. So maybe a wee bit of good did come out of the incident

9 PARK SCHOOLS

Although I spent only three years at the Poor Law School, there were many children who had been in care since babyhood and knew no other home. For the first two years they were cared for by foster mothers in the cottage homes I mentioned earlier. The foster mothers were helped by older girls waiting to be sent to the main school. I remember during my short stay in the cottages I had seven tiny tots to help with. It was my duty before going to school to put them on their little potties and then clean up afterwards. On returning from school I would help feed them, potty them again and assist with putting them to bed. Sometimes I enjoyed it, but I didn't when the tots had screaming scenes. The

foster mothers were very good and seemed to handle their precious charges well.

When the tots reached the age of two they were transferred to a special area of Central London District Schools known as Park Schools. This special area for infants was surrounded by fields away from the main buildings and enabled those in charge of the infants to give them daily airings in their prams or walks without any distractions.

The buildings were in several sections, long and low; very much like the prefabricated dwellings we saw so much of just after World War II. The children remained there until they were five. They were then transferred to the main building in D Block until they were seven, when they joined the 'worldly' older scholars and were allowed to bath themselves.

Several of the older girls were given the chance to assist the nurses in charge of the toddlers; a coveted task which was carried out lovingly by those chosen.

I used to wonder why so many tiny ones came to be there, until I learned that many of them had been abandoned at birth. The only affection they would have was from those in charge of them. This sounds terribly sad. Yet, knowing no other affection, they were reasonably content. When these children reached adulthood, they often made excellent parents. One such case is a lad I have kept in touch with through the annual reunion of the old scholars.

He was found as a baby wrapped in a blanket on a doorstep in Bishopsgate in 1912. After the usual probationary period in the cottage homes, he was sent to Central London District Schools. He was given the surname of Bishop - after the district in which he was found.

His school record was very much to his credit. He was our best swimmer but was not allowed to take part in any gala away from the school because the authorities could not supply a birth certificate. He was top of his class and did well in the school brass band. Eventually he was placed in a job in carpentry and boarded out. Dissatisfied with his job, he went to evening classes to learn cabinet-making and to improve his position. He continued to attend evening classes, studying surveying and valuation, and eventually obtained a post with an established firm. With further study, he achieved the position he had aimed for and by the time he married he had several persons working under him. In due course he had two sons. A better father would be hard to find. Without spoiling them he gave them all the love he had missed as a child but also the discipline he had learned was necessary. His sons now are a credit to him.

I expect we did turn out the occasional rotten apple but, on the whole, the austere existence did not do us any harm. Those babies and toddlers were well looked after with plain but good food, warm clothing and plenty of fresh air.

There are those who will say "that does not make up for a mother's love." They may be right - but what I do know is that they were cared for and never neglected.

10 BECOMING A GIRL GUIDE

As I became involved in several activities I found there was very little time to be alone with my thoughts or to notice the changing of the seasons with their varying colours as I do today. We just didn't think like that. Because we were routine trained, Spring meant lighter evenings with bedtime an hour later. Summer came with the issue of cotton blouses, our annual fete and the Guide camp. Autumn was the return to serge blouses and earlier bedtime. Winter meant cold feet and woollen combinations.

I think the boys were more aware of nature's sounds and changing hues. Those who worked in the school farm and in the orchard were closer to nature. They were able to see everything come full cycle. Today, when I visit the countryside and contemplate its beauty, I realise what we children had missed. It may seem hard to believe but my stomach does a little twist even today watching One Man

and His Dog on television when I see the glorious scenery in the background. So when I learnt that I could become a Girl Guide I knew my horizon was about to be enlarged.

The school had its own company of Guides, a Brownie pack and a Scout troop. The Guides met once a week in a long wooden hut away from the school buildings. The Scouts had their own hut - once again a good way away from the young temptresses. To be a Guide was the envy of all those who were not and each Guide took her role seriously. We had three very dedicated Guiders who set out to make our Company the best in the area and achieved their objective. We were known as the 24th Ealing Guide Company. We would attend Rallis outside the school and this seemed to us the epitome of freedom - that was before we went to camp and experienced untold happiness.

We took great pride in our appearance, vying with each other to present the smartest uniform. At the Rallis we had certain things to do and although I am a little vague on the actual tests, I know that marks were given for performance and appearance. During the two years I was with the company we came top each year. There was one grand Rally when the Chief Guide, Lady Baden Powell, attended and took the salute. Because we were the top Company, our Captain led the march past carrying our colours. Oh, what a proud moment that was. We no longer felt we were different from those outside and we marched with our heads held high. Among the other visiting Guiders was Lady Delia Peel who was so impressed that she adopted us for her own. She also invited us to camp in the grounds of her estate in Sandy, Bedfordshire and to wear tabs on our shoulders bearing the magical words 24th Ealing, Lady Delia Peel's Own. We felt so proud and idolised our Captain and Lieutenants even more.

When the day arrived for us to go to camp the excitement was at fever pitch. There were thirty-two of us and we had been primed at our meetings as to what was expected of us. It was all well thought out. We were to be rotated in patrol order for cooking, potato peeling, dixie filling and washing up. Two of us would be given orderly duty keeping the camp site tidy. But we had little thought of those duties as we were taken in trucks to the lovely estate of Sir Robert and Lady Peel. We were going to the country for two weeks. "Two weeks, two weeks, two weeks," our hearts kept singing. We never gave any thought to who had organized all the equipment and food. We didn't care; we were going to enjoy ourselves.

The estate was beautiful and it was here that I realised how much we were missing by our confinement to bricks and mortar. I loved everything that grew. I wanted to live there forever, especially when we were shown the house. Lady Peel was away but orders had been left that we were to have tea in the dining room one afternoon. It was served by the housekeeper and a young girl in maid's uniform. We were all tongue-tied with awe and afraid to move in case we broke something. When the food arrived our eyes nearly popped out of our heads. There was bread and butter - slices of it - and jam! Also, scones, cakes and more cakes. We suddenly came alive and it didn't take us long to polish it all off. I don't know what the housekeeper thought but she was smiling. The young girl looked stunned. I suppose we appeared to her like so many gannets!

We slept in large bell tents and on alternate nights we had a camp fire, otherwise it was lights out at eight o'clock. Those camp fires were wondrous. Our Captain Hicks had a lovely singing voice and we would beg her to sing as we sat around the fire. Then we all sang the songs we had learnt. The memory of that circle of faces full of happiness shining through the flickering flames brings a moment of nostalgia.

Not for us were there grisly health warnings, air pollution, muggings, and country fighting country - those two weeks in our lives were sheer bliss.

The Guiders decided amongst themselves that we should have a competition to be judged at the end of the holiday. There were four patrols and it was agreed that each patrol would keep a journal in an exercise book of the daily happenings. Marks would be given for the best one. Our patrol was Heather - there were also Poppy, Lupin, and Harebell. I was patrol leader and my second in command was a jolly tomboy of a girl called Marjorie McKay. She was very good at drawing, so we decided

between us that our journal was to be illustrated with Marjorie doing the illustrations. Everyone would provide some information. I would write it all in and Marjorie would do her part. I must admit we were rather proud of it because no one else had thought to enter any drawings. We then learnt that the winning patrol would be taken to visit a cinema. Rivalry ran very high. It got out that Heather patrol's journal was very good. Imagine our dismay when, returning to our tent the day prior to our return to school, we found our book torn into four pieces. Marjorie and I were almost in tears; we had worked so lovingly on it. We vented our wrath on all our rivals but, of course, guilt was denied. That was the only black spot in two idyllic weeks.

When Captain Hicks announced that she would be judging the journals at the next meeting, we felt that we had time to do some repair work. Marjorie and I did some patching up. When we presented our efforts at the adjudication meeting, we explained why it was not in pristine condition. We were listened to seriously but no word was said. Whether our book was really the best or because an example was being set for the culprit, I'm not sure, but the Heather patrol won and we were taken to see Ivor Novello in *The Lodger*.

There were two more occasions during my 'Guide life' which stand out as red-letter days for me and about which I must write. The first was the opening of the Great West Road. King George V and Queen Mary were to cut the tape at the opening and a huge Guard of Honour was to be formed from various clubs and associations. Because we were the leading Guide company in the district, we were chosen to be part of it. Again excitement was at fever pitch as we were taken in a char-a-banc to take up our positions. I remember it was a hot day and we stood for a long, long time in our thick serge uniforms not noticing the discomfort because of the delight at being part of the great occasion. At last cheering was heard and cars could be seen in the distance. We were lucky because we were positioned near the tape which was to be cut. So we held our breath as the cars approached. They stopped a little distance from us and the King and Queen made their way on foot towards the tape, speaking to various individuals as they progressed. Our Company was close to the tape so we knew we would have a good view of the Royal couple. I can't remember which one did the actual cutting because they stood close together but a great cheer went up to announce that the Great West Road was open.

My remembrance of the Queen is of a rather stiff, stately figure in cream with a fairly high lace collar in spite of the warm day. A hat which sat on the elegantly dressed hair was also in cream. Apart from a brief smile to one of the officials, her face was rather austere, but to us from Central London District Schools, she was magic. Strangely, King George V is much vaguer in my memory, probably because he was on the opposite side of the road and I was more taken with the Queen.

The next event was a especially proud one for me. Princess Mary, the Princess Royal, was to open a nursing home in Haling and the Governors of the school had been approached to allow ten of the smartest Guides to take part in the Guard of Honour.

My pride reached dizzying heights when I was one of the chosen ten. We had our uniforms brushed and pressed. Our ties, which were a bright orange, washed and ironed. Our large wide-brimmed hats brushed and put into shape. Our lanyards also, were washed. Boots were polished until they looked like mirrors and our brass badges received so much rubbing they looked almost like silver.

The weather on this occasion was dull and rather chilly. The brightest spark was the look of expectancy on our faces. The Princess Royal arrived looking cosy in a toque hat and rolled fur collar on her coat. She walked along the Guard of Honour and my heart did a little jump as she stopped in front of me and, pointing to my tie, said, "what a lovely bright colour." Then noticing the rest of our group, added "They really brighten the day." I assume she meant the ties, but nevertheless our faces too were bright on a dull, misty day.

This little incident may seem nothing to someone today because it is happening all the time, but it meant a whole lot to us in the 20's, especially from a school such as ours.

While the Guides revelled in their camp in Bedfordshire, many of the boys were taken for two weeks' camp at Dymchurch. I don't know if they enjoyed it as much as we did ours, but to have two weeks of comparative freedom was enough happiness. Those who were left at school were taken occasionally for day outings and, I believe, after I left in 1927 some were even taken to the zoo; but of that, of course, I cannot write. So all in all summertime was a time to look forward to.

11 A NOTABLE VISIT - CHARLES CHAPLIN

There were two particularly exciting events at the school which stand out in my memory. One which took place during my stay and the other a year after I had left. For the latter I rely on first-hand knowledge of those who were there.

I mentioned earlier that Charlie Chaplin and his brother Sidney spent about two years of their childhood at the school - in Blocks B and A respectively. One memorable week the rumour went round that Charlie Chaplin was to pay us a visit. Every one of us had heard of him and those who, like myself, had entered the school when they were older, remembered seeing him in films. So the news was received with great excitement

At first we were inclined to treat it as we did the egg rumour - that it would never happen - but happen it did, and I was there. We felt the excitement rippling through the staff as the day arrived. We tried every wile we could think of to get a glimpse of his arrival but it was impossible. The staff used every bit of their authority to keep us in check, some even resorting to heavy handed methods on those breaching the rules. However, it didn't dim our ardour and when we were told he would appear on the stage after our dinner, a big cheer went up.

Although we were excited, it didn't diminish our appetites. When the meal was over, we were told to sit quietly while everything was cleared away, this task being performed by the older girls and boys.

It seemed a lifetime that we sat waiting. Apparently he had asked to see the dormitory in which he had slept and explained to the staff how different it was from when he was there. The Superintendent at last appeared to announce that Mr. Chaplin would speak to us. All eyes were riveted on the stage. I don't really know how I was expecting Charlie to appear but I thought and hoped that he would wear his baggy trousers. Of course he didn't. His whole appearance was neat and dapper. He wore a grey suit and somewhere in my memory I see a buttonhole with a flower, but of that I am only vague. When he smiled, the hearts of all the females turned over. He had a lovely smile.

I cannot remember all he said but he implied that he hoped we were being well looked after and that he had arranged for each of us to have a shilling (a fortune to us) and a bag of sweets. The school band would also benefit by two new instruments.

We wouldn't let him go until he had demonstrated his funny walk to shrieks of delight from several hundred young throats. He then visited the Infirmary where he performed once again for the benefit of the sick children. What a day! What a man!

The second time he visited the school was a year after I had left. On that occasion he had more contact with the children. After he had announced that he was presenting the school with its own cinematograph, trolleys full of gifts were wheeled into the dining hall and he helped distribute them to the children. A friend, with whom I have kept in close contact since the school closed, received a toy piano which she treasured like a bar of gold until she lost her home during a bombing raid in 1941.

So much has been written about Charlie Chaplin and his exploits - and not all of it kindly - but to the children who shared his memories, he was a great man.

12 P.E. - TO ENJOY

Our physical education was in the hands of a very remarkable lady. Her name was Miss Dawes. She was the organiser and coach for all sports and physical activities. She commanded great respect from us.

She was probably in her early forties but, of course, to us she appeared quite elderly. Because of an injury in sport in earlier years, she had a twisted leg and walked slowly with a limp. Nevertheless, with her dark twinkling eyes and her ability, in spite of her handicap, to show us just what she wanted, she got the best out of her pupils.

We had our own swimming pool and during the summer Miss Dawes would spend many hours under its roof teaching her charges to swim. In addition, she would choose a team to swim for the school in galas. I was never one of the elite who formed the team; I could swim fairly well but not up to the standard demanded by Miss Dawes. However, we were very proud of our team and would spur them on during practice with screeching yells of support. Because of this dedication, the team carried off the swimming trophy several years in succession. We all loved using the swimming pool but we were only allowed to swim there twice a week, each class taking a turn. The team were permitted to use it every day and many of us were allowed to watch. To the credit of the school, I think every child knew how to swim when he or she left.

On the running track, a cinder path which ran from our school playground past Park Schools, Miss Dawes was just as fervent in her coaching. I did better on the running track and became part of the relay team during my last year, running against several other Poor Law schools and returning triumphantly with the team after winning the cup.

Included in our physical education was Swedish drill, which I loved, and Indian club swinging. Those clubs were a sight to see when a squad of a hundred got swinging. The clubs were painted black and were very shiny. The exercises were quite intricate. Once the art of swinging the club while holding it between thumb and forefinger was mastered, the exercises were easy, but there were many who never did manage the effortless swing. The last exercise in particular - there were eight in all - was well worth watching. It was called the windmill and was achieved by hold the arms high above the head with the wrists together and twirling the clubs so that it reminded one of a very fast windmill.

When we were rehearsing the exercises to be performed at our annual fete, the school brass band - composed of boys from the home - would be allowed on to the girls' yard and would accompany us with our exercises.

Have you ever wished for something and found it came true? On one particular occasion it happened to me. We were rehearsing our Swedish drill for the great event. There were ten rows of ten girls and I was in the eighth row on the outside nearest the band. I loved the exercises and always tried to be as smart as I could. With the music from the band I was in a world of my own. I thought to myself how wonderful it would be if Miss Dawes noticed my diligence and remarked on it in front of the band. Of course it was absolute vanity on my part, I am ashamed to say, but happen it did.

Miss Dawes would stroll by each outside row with her sharp eyes looking along each row. On this particular occasion, when the band had finished their piece and we were awaiting instructions for the next set of exercises, she stood beside me and turned to the bandmaster and said, "I wish they would all perform like Sylvia Thomson." Although it was what I had been dreaming about, I blushed to the roots of my hair, hoping against hope that the rest of the squad would not think I was "teacher's pet." However, Miss Dawes spoke to me saying, "I'm putting you in the front of the squad and they can follow you. I'll fill your row with someone else."

In my wildest dreams I hadn't expected such prominence and my pride knew no bounds. I performed those exercises as if Royalty were watching. To my relief, the rest of the squad were not bitchy about it. On the great day in front of the Board of Governors and Sir and Lady Somebody (I forget

their names), I led the squad of a hundred in Swedish drill. Even to this day, as I enter my eighties, I enjoy exercising and I owe it to Cuckoo Schools who gave me the first thirst for physical activities.

That year I received the prize, in the form of a ten shilling note, for physical exercises. To me it was a fortune. I, with the top boy, was taken by one of the staff to the local post office to open an account. My feelings that night as I lay in bed were very mixed. I felt happy because of my success yet a little sad that all the others had not received the same amount to experience the joy of having some money of one's own. I would like to have given little Georgina a present out of it but I was not allowed to withdraw any until I had left the school which, of course, made a lot of sense. So, in spite of the gruesome tales one hears about those "dreadful orphanages" of yesteryear, the Guardians really did have our welfare at heart.

13 AMBITION CREATED - BUT UNFULFILLED

Wintertime brought a different activity - entertainment on our school stage. Each year the girls presented a three-act play or a revue. Miss Dawes took on a new role - that of producer and director of our theatricals. There seemed no end to her talents. We held her in such respect that it was like receiving a prize to get a word of praise from her.

The stage was at the end of the dining hall and had proper footlights and other lighting equipment which were in the capable hands of Mr. Abbott, our electrical engineer. He was a man of few words but great ability. Whatever Miss Dawes asked of him it was done without fuss or argument. The stage was used for rehearsals, so we were very lucky to practise our positions and movements right from the start.

It was during the theatricals that I realised how at home I was on the stage. I loved it. Whatever the role - singing, dancing or straight acting - I would fling my whole self into it. I would feel very downhearted when each show came to an end and became once more just another child in a children's home.

We put on some very good shows and I remember one in particular called Spirit of the Wood. I was given the role of the witch and an angelic golden-haired girl was the "Spirit." Her role required her to sing. Rehearsals went ahead and the producer soon realised our golden-haired cherub could not act. No amount of coaching produced the desired effect, although her singing was acceptable. In despair Miss Dawes looked at me and said, "What a pity you can't sing." Well, I must admit my only experience was singing the school songs, in the chorus of other plays and rather lustily the church hymns, but I felt a little affronted that it had been taken for granted, without even a trial run, that I couldn't sing. Feeling a little peeved, I said rather bravely, "You haven't tried me."

A little taken aback she surveyed me with her dark eyes, probably wishing I had the cherubic looks of the about-to-be-demoted Spirit, then said, "All right, we will hear what you can do." She then waved to the pianist to start again.

I knew the words of the song by heart but, because I was so surprised at being given a chance to sing solo, I not only stumbled over the words in the first line but got the notes wrong. In my humiliation I saw Miss Dawes gesture to the pianist to stop. I was hoping that the trapdoor in the stage would open and swallow me. Worst of all, the golden-haired cherub was smiling a smug little smile.

I looked down at Miss Dawes as she approached the stage, expecting my dismissal as a would-be Spirit and assuming once more the less glamorous witch's role.

"Speak the first two lines of the song," said she.

I obliged - without a tremor.

"Without the piano, sing the first two lines," she ordered.

Surprisingly it seemed easy; I shall never know why.

"Now," said Miss Dawes, "with the piano."

By the time the pianist had given me the opening bars my confidence had returned and I sang the number with feeling and without a hitch. I was no Maria Callas but I felt like a prima-donna when I heard Miss Dawes say, "Well done, Sylvia. Whatever made me think you couldn't sing?"

The play went well and the golden-haired cherub was given the role of a tree fairy. She was much too dainty to become a witch and the tree fairy role was less demanding. Surprisingly we became the best of friends and remained so even after the school had closed. She stayed with me on several occasions after I had married until eventually she married and moved to Canada. I haven't heard from her since.

It was from the school theatricals I nursed the ambition to become an actress. I had even given myself a stage name - Pansy Bellairs! A name which sends people into peels of laughter when I relate this to them. Alas, it was not to be. Too many babies, the war, and too little money was a handicap to such an ambition.

Nevertheless during the ensuing years I found an outlet for my bottled ambition by joining in amateur dramatics. I have taken part in and produced amateur productions which have given me a great deal of pleasure, plus a warm relationship with many of my fellow Thespians.

Miss Dawes had a particular whim, which was playing draughts. She was a good player - at least in our eyes - and she derived a great deal of pleasure in finding a willing partner and playing or teaching a newcomer to the game. I use the word 'willing' but in actual fact she would hobble across the yard and any girl in her sights would have a finger pointed at her and hear Miss Dawes' voice saying, "Come with me to the Rec. I want a game of draughts."

The 'Rec' was the staff's recreation room which they used in their off-duty hours and it was a forbidden sanctum to the likes of us inferior mortals. To get a bidding to follow the leader to the holy-of-holies, automatically made the chosen one a willing follower. The Rec was warm and cosy after our austere quarters, so whoever was a partner to Miss Dawes at draughts did her best to play well in the hope of being asked again. Several of us went back. One day she decided to give out a bigger challenge and offered sixpence to whoever could beat her. There were many of us who took up the challenge and I almost made the grade but it was left to the most unpopular girl in the school to win the coveted sixpence. We were all so surprised because she was not too bright in class, but she must have had a certain flair for the game. She earned her win in spite of our envy.

14 THE WONDER OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas in the home was an occasion of mixed delight. For those who had relatives who cared to visit them now and then was the added joy of an extra gift. The others, who were either orphaned or whose relatives didn't care, had to be satisfied with what the management had to offer. Nevertheless it was a time to look forward to.

During the course of the year each child had accumulated a store of treasured possessions - a special book, and old doll, a brooch, a box of paints, empty perfume bottles discarded by some of the staff, pieces of ribbon, empty chocolate boxes with wonderful pictures on the lids - these things to a child deprived of more expensive toys were treasures indeed. So it required a lot of heart searching to decide which of these treasures was to be given as a Christmas gift to one's best friend.

I felt rather sad for the little ones who never had the joy of expecting Santa Claus to come down the chimney, but to the older ones, Christmas Eve was quite a ritual. Once in bed we would wait until lights were out and staff had gone to supper, then the excitement would begin. We did not hang up our stockings because the gift from the management was issued at the end of dinner on Christmas Day; however, ghostly figures rose from the narrow beds, bare feet pattered on the polished boards, hands

groped for pillows under which to put the gift, and then a weaving of white clad forms as in a Maypole, each one trying to get back to her bed before the night staff looked in. Once the night nurse had made her detour, rustlings were heard the whole length of the dormitories as gifts were felt and unwrapped. As we couldn't get proper wrapping paper, toilet rolls were used. The rolls were of the rough variety. You can imagine, therefore, the sounds that were made as each gift was unwrapped. It was not until morning that we were able to know exactly what we had received, but it all added a little spice to the day.

As the morning wore on the excitement was infectious. Speculation as to whether there would be turkey for dinner instead of the usual pork - but, as with the eggs, it was just speculation.

We were allowed to wear our Sunday dresses and the boys their Sunday suits when we attended a service in the school chapel. Little sinners that we were, our ears and minds were not on the words spoken by our handsome chaplain but wondering what gift we were likely to get at the end of dinner.

At last the moment arrived for us to troop into the dining hall and, in an orderly manner, we took our places, exchanging smiles with the boys if we got the chance. There was a great clanger as the wooden forms were restored to seating positions and our hands were ready with the cutlery to make short work of our meal. The meal consisted of roast pork, roast and boiled potatoes and cabbage - never sprouts. We couldn't get through that fast enough in preparation for the next course - the famous puddings.

To a call on the bugle from one of the band boys, the doors to the large kitchen opened and in came several of the kitchen staff - their chefs' hats standing high - holding aloft on trays several immense round Christmas puddings pierced with sprigs of holly. I've never seen puddings of that shape or size since. They were enormous. Bringing up the rear, as if they had walk-on parts to the great prima donna, were more staff carrying huge metal bowls of custard.

A great cheer would go up and we would bang our spoons and for once were not reprimanded. The din was deafening until we were served our portion and a subdued chattering followed. Our hunger appeased, the moment we had been waiting for arrived.

During the meal members of the Board of Guardians, who had arrived earlier, walked about speaking here and there to some of the children. We were quite indifferent to their presence but I realise on reflection what a very kind gesture it was on their part to take time on Christmas Day to look in on their young charges.

Finally, big laundry baskets were wheeled in full of gifts and placed at the end of the long tables. There the Governors would help the staff to distribute a gift to each child. They were not large gifts and in some cases not even appropriate; however, it was something we did not already have and, because it was given to us, we loved it

Brothers and sisters were allowed to meet on Christmas Day in the girls' dayrooms. Knowing that members of the opposite sex were to be present in our quarters added excitement to an already exciting day.

My penultimate Christmas at the home was a particularly memorable one for me, although not to my credit

My young brother was so very shy among so many maidens that we didn't have a lot to say to each other until he took a fancy to a pretty ten year old blonde. I became the go-between carrying messages to and fro. Unfortunately his afternoon ended in unrequited love. I, in the meantime, had attracted the attention of another girl's brother. He promised to give me an apple and an orange which was to be his share of the fruit we were to be issued on Boxing Day. This indeed I felt was true love. I felt like Cleopatra to know that I had this power over a good-looking fair haired lad of thirteen!

The promise given, the problem was then how to receive the gift without meeting at the railings. However, love will always find a way, and we did with punishing consequences.

Because I was a Guide and he was a Scout, it was arranged that we should meet behind the Scout hut just before tea on Boxing Day. We were each to bring two friends who were Guides and Scouts to allay suspicions, because it would look as if we were going to our respective huts.

Our plan worked well to start with. We met and I received the forbidden fruit in return for a quick peck on the cheek of my young lover, our friends behaving in like manner, when our bliss was shattered by the parade-ground voice of the school's bandmaster.

It is an understatement to say we were scared. Although our behaviour was quite innocent, we had broken rules and had to bear the consequences. We were marched through corridors until we reached the Superintendent's quarters and made to wait under the enquiring eyes of a staff member. The Superintendent and the Matron duly appeared and questioned us as to our reason for being where we were. Strangely we all remained tongue-tied, but what could we say without looking rather silly.

The outcome of our episode resulted in the boys receiving "six of the best" on their rear ends, and we girls were given the task of darning all the stockings for the whole of the girls section. It was a mammoth task and took us days, watched over by a nurse who took great pleasure in making us re-darn if it wasn't to her satisfaction.

We had learned our lesson, but I think I would rather have had "six of the best"!

I have kept in touch with one of the lads who is now married with two sons. On the rare occasions when we meet we talk about that Christmas experience and have a jolly good laugh.

15 THE STAFF

With so many staff required to run a home as large as ours, there were bound to be many different types of characters. There were those who thought a good sharp slap would make the naughty one see sense. Others would talk severely and threaten what would happen if the misdemeanour was repeated and there were those who tried to reason and make the guilty one feel ashamed. Of the three, as much as I hate to admit it, the 'slappers' appeared to achieve the most discipline. Of course, they were very unpopular - and fortunately in the minority - but we tried not to incur their wrath for fear of being slapped, although slapping did occur sometimes for such trivial things.

I remember a time when our dining hall was being re-decorated and one of our dayrooms was used to accommodate us for our meals. The boys used their own dayroom and we ours. On this particular day, one of the slappers was in complete charge and she was definitely on the warpath for misbehaviour. She had taken a dislike to a certain child who had been having difficulty getting through her dinner because she wasn't feeling well, so she left a lot on her plate. Nurse Doling pounced on her like a bird of prey and told her she would have to eat it if it meant that she had to sit there all day.

"I can't," said the child, "It makes me feel sick."

"Sick or not, you are going to eat it, or you will be punished."

I could see the talons were out.

"I'm not going to eat it," said the tearful little voice, and without any more ado the bird of prey descended with a resounding slap to the child's face. My table was two rows back, but I couldn't bear to see such injustice, which the nurse would not have tried had we been in our proper dining hall. Up I jumped and in my loudest voice shouted, "We have been sent here to be educated and cared for, not to be slapped. Can't you see Charlotte isn't well?"

In a few strides an apoplectic nurse had reached my table, grabbed me by the arm, saying "You'll come with me, Sylvia Thomson, to see the Matron." I managed to shake her arm off, I was feeling so angry myself, and she cuffed me round the head. Grabbing hold of my long plait, she tugged me along, shouting instructions to her staring second-in-command. Outside she let go; I suppose she thought she had humiliated me enough in front of the others. She marched me to our washroom where she told me to wait. It seemed ages that I stood there but I don't suppose it was more than fifteen minutes. At last the assistant matron appeared. I realised then why I hadn't been marched straight to the holy sanctum, of which I had no fears after my previous encounter with Matron over Georgina. Superintendent and Matron were on holiday and her assistant was now in charge. I hadn't had any previous dealings with her and I was a bit apprehensive.

She was younger than Matron and much more austere in her dress, wearing a brown uniform with starched white collars and cuffs, and giving a look of efficiency. She just said, "Follow me." We went to the Rec room and I felt a little more at ease. We didn't sit down. She gazed at me through her glasses and said, "I have just heard a very disturbing tale from Nurse Doling. You openly defied her and questioned her authority. Going as far as pushing her arm away when she attempted to bring you to me. I cannot allow any child to dispute the authority of those in charge. You have a good report from other sources, what made you do it?"

I admitted that I had been defiant and had pushed the nurse's arm away, but I also said how she had tugged me along by my plait, and that I was only trying to help Charlotte.

"You would have helped Charlotte more by encouraging her to eat her meal," was the sharp retort, "The food is nutritious and is mainly to give you healthy bodies. It is wicked to refuse it."

"But Charlotte isn't feeling well," I said. "She would have been dreadfully sick if she had eaten it"

"Nothing was said about her feeling unwell," the assistant matron replied. "I shall have to look into this. In the meantime I shall expect you to go to Nurse Doling and apologise. I shall know whether you do because she will report back to me. You may go now but in future remember your place and curb your temper."

That last shot was, I thought, unfair because I have a very placid nature and only get aroused at injustice to others, but I suppose in the eyes of the assistant matron, I appeared headstrong. She had only been at the school six months before her confrontation with me and had not yet got to know her charges. However, Charlotte was sent to the Infirmary for several days with diarrhoea and sickness. Anyway, I had to face the humiliation of apologising to Nurse Doling. She accepted it with ill grace, annoyed, I suppose, that I had got off so lightly.

I am pleased to say that most of the other nurses were more approachable. One, Nurse King, was a delightful elderly soul, who retired during my last year there. She was a real character. She would walk about with her hands behind her clutching her bunch of keys and if she saw a group whom she thought might be up to mischief she would jingle her keys to let them know she was about. If she had some problem on her mind, her keys would come into play as she tapped them against her false teeth. She must have loved us all because during the very hard frosty winters, she would allow those of us in Block F to make a slide. This was achieved by pouring water on a slight incline, which lay between our boot room and our dayrooms, and letting it freeze. We would then stand sideways on it and away we went to the bottom. It was tremendous fun and Nurse King would stand and watch to see we didn't get hurt. Alas, when she retired and Nurse Doling took over, the slides were forbidden. Another time, when she had sent for me for some reason, she watched me as I approached and finally said, "Come on Sylvia, you can do better than that. You are waddling like a duck." To this day that phrase keeps returning if I am walking in front of anyone and I think to myself, "Am I waddling like a duck?"

Another of the staff from the boys section who had been at the school for years, Nurse Radband, was also loved by the boys in her care and one year she took about eight of them to a pantomime, paid

for out of her own pocket So you can see, we had a very mixed bag. Even Mr. Sutton who used to come and clear out all the drains was held in a certain esteem. We would gather round him and he would tell us funny little stories about things that had happened to him. Then he would suddenly get up from what he was doing and say, "Get out of my way all of you, you're wasting my time. I've got other things to do." He would gather his rods and bucket and stride off as if he had never spoken to us.

Of course, there were the staff for the tailors shop but the boys knew more about them because they had some training there. We girls never saw inside the laundry, the cobblers' shop, the kitchens, boiler rooms - where some of the lads learnt engineering - or the carpenters' shop. Matron's quarters were staffed by girls almost ready for leaving who would stay until they were primed in the ways of a domestic servant. Most of them enjoyed being there because they had more privileges.

It really is amazing, in retrospect, the number of people who had employment because of the likes of us and we just took it for granted.

16 FETE DAY

Although the official name of the school was Central London District Schools, it was known by us and locally as Cuckoo Schools. From the main building to the school farmhouse was a mile-long avenue of beautiful horse-chestnut trees. The saying was that the school derived its nickname because the first cuckoo of spring was heard there each year. True or not, it was a lovely idea.

The trees when in bloom alternated in colours pink and white and when one looked down the avenue from the main building, there was a picture not to be forgotten.

The nickname was a term of affection for the school. The organist and choir master, Mr. Van Stratton, had written a song around the name. This song was sung lustily by all the scholars on occasions of celebration and was considered to be the school song. There were two verses followed by a rousing chorus. I remember the first verse so clearly:

We are London girls; we are London boys Proud of city and our race.
We envy not the rich their joys; Envy not the great their place.
'Mid scenes as fair as nature knows, Playing games or plying tasks,
From dawn of day, till evening's close
A happier lot you could not ask.

Chorus:

Raise a cheer, raise a cheer boys
Hoorah, hoorah, hoorah, hoorah, hooroo.
Pass the word, pass the word girls,
Cuck-coo, cuck-oo, cuck-oo, cuck-coo-coo.
Raise a cheer loud and clear boys,
Hoorah, hoorah, hoorah, hoorah, hooroo.
Pass the word one and all now,
Hoorah, hoorah, hoorah, hoorah-cuck-o-, cuck-oo.

As I read those words again I am filled with sadness that there are no longer schools of that type where we were all brothers and sisters; subject to discipline, yes, which at times irked us, but nevertheless it didn't do us any harm and we became better citizens because of it.

At the end of the long avenue was the farm and it was there that so many of the boys received their first training in agriculture and pig farming. There were cows, pigs, and poultry. The swill from the kitchens helped in feeding the pigs and in due course the pigs helped in feeding us! A lot of our milk came from the cows, but the eggs from the poultry, I believe, went to the staff.

On the right and left of the avenue were fields and in one of these, the largest, we spent most of our summer happiness. As soon as weather permitted we were allowed on the fields out of school time, alternating with the boys so that we were not together. We played all sorts of games, made up by ourselves. The more reticent would sit and read. Those who had dolls would play at being nursemaids, taking their charges for an airing; or, if they remembered their home life, some would play at "families" as if deep rooted in their minds that was as it ought to be. However, games were the order of the day amongst the older ones.

The boys practiced their cricket and played so well that in matches against other orphanages they usually won. There was one occasion when they played the Mercers' school and won; the whole school was 'cock-a-hoop' to think that a Poor Law school had beaten a Public school.

The field was the centre point for any large celebration and it was there we held our annual fete. In fact Fete Day was the topic of conversation for weeks and weeks prior to the event. It was held the first Friday in June and made a wonderful springboard for the rest of the summer. I was there for three of them and I can truthfully say that we had dry, sunny weather for each occasion. I cannot say what would have happened had it rained, but I cannot remember any of the staff who had been there for years mention anything about a rainy fete, so I can only assume it was unheard of.

We looked forward to the occasion the whole year. A few days before the great day William Beech's fair would arrive with the swings and roundabouts and all the equipment that made up a fair. From our dormitory windows we girls could see the workers erect the apparatus and our stomachs would quiver with excitement

There were stalls for displaying work done by pupils throughout the year and a covered platform was provided for all the attending dignitaries. In front of the platform was a large area where the scholars gave exhibitions of their physical activities. The boys provided the gymnastics and the girls Indian club swinging, Swedish drill, and counter marching. I think the club swinging was the most popular with the spectators; to see a hundred shiny black clubs swinging in time to music must have been quite spectacular. We were so well trained that no one ever dropped a club.

After speeches were made, praise given where due and all hand clapping ceased, the signal was given for us to be free. Then, as if all were let off leashes, we made straight for the swings and roundabouts. We had each been given sixpence. I believe the money had been donated by one or two of the attending Governors, but we were never sure. The swings and roundabouts were free but at the other stalls and coconut shies we had to pay. What a day we had; boys mixed with girls but we were more interested in all the things that were going on to care whether they were there or not. Some of us were sick from the many swings mixed with roundabouts mixed with sweets mixed with excitement - but it was a great day. Staff were very lenient at that time because they couldn't watch every little Jack and Jill, so they joined in the fun as well.

Also on the field as a permanent structure was a round building - or it could have been octagonal - which the school band used for practice. The band was a very important asset to the school; any boy who showed any enthusiasm to join was given a chance to prove any hidden talent for music. In other words, if they learned quickly they were accepted and taught to play an instrument. Those who didn't make the first grade were kept in reserve and continued practising. They had a very strict bandmaster who had come from the Warwickshire Regiment and he worked those lads really hard, but it was to his credit that he turned out a very smart and talented band.

I sometimes envied those band boys because very often they were asked to play at various functions and in some instances were given a shilling for their efforts. They had played at Brentford and Chiswick football grounds, Brentford Cottage Hospital (as it was then), several children's outings and, of course, our own special occasions. When the bandmaster first took over his band of musicians their uniform was navy blue with brass buttons and cute little pill-box hats, but he changed the pill-boxes to

smart caps with a peak which made the boys look more adult

Another asset for those who learned to play an instrument was the choice, when the time came for them to leave school, to join a regimental band. The majority did and in some cases of special talent, went on from there to Knellar Hall. One lad I remember joined the band of the Life Guards and in time became one of the State Trumpeters. So, in retrospect, the boys who joined the band had a better chance in life than, for instance, some of those who went into fanning.

It is only since I have attended the school reunions after the closure of the school that I learned from some of the ex-farmboys what a terrible time they had with some farmers. It was not so in every case but those unlucky ones had heart-rending stories to tell, and came out of fanning as soon as they were able. So much had been said about the "dreadful" Poor Law schools but, in contrast to the lives some of those boys led on the farms, Cuckoo Schools was a happy place to be.

17 OTHER THINGS

There is one thing I have not yet mentioned but people are intrigued when I speak of it today because so many have never heard of it. However, we used and accepted tow as a natural thing. Tow is like matted tawny hair and we used it in place of face cloths for bathing and washing. When wetted it is very soft. Because of a shortage of paper, it was used in some hospitals during the war in place of toilet rolls.

One nurse I know tells a funny story of a busy morning in hospital. She was struggling along a men's ward with her arms full of the old type bedpans up to her chin when she was stopped by an overnight admittance who was sitting on a bedpan and who asked for some toilet paper. She just said, "Use your tow." She still chuckles over the look of horrified amazement the poor man gave her! But tow was used extensively in the school and we knew no better.

During the early autumn some of us would be taken for a walk along the beautiful chestnut tree avenue to gather conkers. We would lift our pinafores for others to fill and on returning to our day-rooms, we would thread them. We used a knitting needle to make a hole and begged some string from one of the staff. Some of us had very long rows of them and battles royal would ensue to find the victor. The conkers had names. The flat ones were 'sailors' and the fat round ones were 'soldiers.' The object of the game was to hit the opponent's conkers and try to split them until they were reduced to one. Some of us soon found out that it wasn't good policy to have too many on a string since we couldn't hit with much force. Those with only a few could wield a very forceful crack because, having a long length of string to play with, one could manipulate it better. We derived a great deal of fun from the game.

Conkers also meant that the dark evenings were upon us and bedtime was at six o'clock. We were allowed to take a favourite toy into the dormitory and play with it in bed. Dolls seemed the most popular, especially if they had a cardboard box for the bed. We would make our own bedclothes and pillows from scraps given to us by the staff. Some of the girls did marvellous needlework jobs on the scraps and some very attractive beds with bedclothes were made. Books were the next most popular and my favourite. I would lie reading until lights out at seven o'clock.

The nurse in charge had a cubicle at the end of the dormitory and, as soon as she had gone, those who were still awake would call on me to tell them a story. I would lie there and make it up as I went along. Of course, some would drift off into sleep, but those who stayed awake wanted my story to continue the next night if we heard the staff returning. I could usually tell if my story was interesting by the number who were still awake. I cherished that feeling of being needed, even if only as an entertainer.

There was a night when I got rather a nasty shock but it gave me an insight into another side of sex. Apart from some of us getting crushes on a few of the boys, we never thought about sex. At least, I didn't. However, in the bed opposite to me was a well developed girl named Lucy Brown (that was not

her real name) and for some time she had shown a lot of interest in me. I had never cared much for her as she had such a condescending manner. She was soon to leave the home to go into domestic service so she was older than I was. If I went to the toilets she would often go too. One day I caught her looking at me over the top of the dividing wall. I felt embarrassed and told her I would report her. She said if I did she would tell about the story telling at night. I didn't want that to happen because it was so popular, so I didn't do anything about it. During ablutions she would try to get close to me, but at the time I didn't think there was anything sinister in it

On the night in question I had finished my story telling and the nurse was back in her cubicle. Everyone seemed settled. I had just drifted off when I was awakened by someone trying to get into my bed and a hand pulling my nightdress up. I didn't dare shout because it would have woken the nurse and the other children. I knew it was Lucy Brown from the way she hissed "move over." Trying desperately to push her out of the bed and not succeeding, I could only think of biting her shoulder, which I did very hard. She punched the side of my face but she did get out and went across to her own bed. I lay there trembling because I knew what happened seemed wrong. I also knew I would have to tell the nurse in charge in the morning, and was dreading the moment. I didn't sleep any more that night and at ablutions I kept well away from Lucy Brown. I took my time over washing and cleaning my teeth. In fact I was pulled up sharply by the nurse for dawdling. Eventually I was the last one and Nurse Doling - who was not my favourite person - yelled, "Get a move on, Sylvia Thomson, or you can clean all the boots after school."

I was full of embarrassment as I approached her, but managed to say, "May I speak to you, nurse?" "You are speaking to me, girl. What is it you have to say?"

If it had been Nurse King or Miss Dawes, I would have had no problem, but this monument of spitefulness made me feel more embarrassed than ever. With flaming cheeks I at last managed to tell my woeful little tale, expecting fireworks to go up. Instead, "Has this happened at any other time?" she asked. I told her no, but I mentioned the incident in the toilet. To my utmost amazement, she touched my head saying, "Don't worry any more about it. Til see that Lucy Brown is moved. So get on with your jobs and try and forget it. By the way, I wouldn't mention this to the other girls." She needn't have worried as I wasn't going to, I felt so ashamed.

Lucy Brown was moved to the far end of another dormitory with her bed opposite the nurse's cubicle. It was not long after that she went into domestic service. The incident had left me rather bemused but it was a relief to know she was no longer at the school. Gradually my bemused state disappeared and I was once again a happy girl of thirteen. The episode may seem trifling to the reader of today but in 1926 to an innocent girl just reaching puberty, it loomed very large.

18 PRIZE-GIVING DAY

Our annual prize-giving day was another event we looked forward to - particularly those in line for a prize - because it meant another form of entertainment in which both girls and boys took part. There would be recitations (poems learned during the year), monologues from the boys, singing from the girls and a dialogue with a boy and girl sharing the roles. The Governors would be there to present the prizes, all the teachers would be present, and the whole day was different from any other in the year. Probably not as exciting as some other events, but there was a feeling of finality about it, as if this was the end result of all our hard work through the year - which, of course, it was.

To those whose achievement brought a prize, it was a happy day, and for those less able to make the grade, the feeling that 'I may do better next year' helped them not to feel too downhearted.

For me, my last year at the school was a very successful one. I received three prizes. One for coming top of the class, one for religious knowledge and, believe it or not, a prize for laundry work! I don't know how I managed that one because I didn't even enjoy the class.

My accolade that year was from an unexpected source. After scholars had left the school they were allowed to return on "Old Scholars' Day" - a day set aside for them to meet their old friends and staff members, and to show off their progress in the big world outside. In 1926 the Old Scholars subscribed to a prize of ten shillings each to be awarded to the most deserving boy and the most deserving girl chosen in a ballot by the pupils in standards five, six, and seven. It was to be called the Old Scholars' Memorial Prize and was to be presented annually - 1926 being the first year of the award.

Speculation as to who would win ran rife prior to the ballot day and several names were bandied about. On the eve of the voting it became obvious that it was a choice of five names, my own being one of them. Came the dawn and I think I must have felt like a prospective politician on election day. However, lessons had to go on until 10:30 a.m. when the voting was to take place in each class. I put my chosen name to paper and sat back and waited. Voting over, we were sent outside for our break and the babble that took place sounded like chattering monkeys. Each girl asking the other who she had voted for. From this chorus of voices, I gathered I had some supporters. On returning to the class we were told to sit with arms folded. Mrs. Finn, our beloved headmistress, then entered the room. We were so quiet you could have heard a pin drop. Then looking up from the paper in her hand she said, "Sylvia, will you stand up." Hardly daring to breathe, I stood up. She went on to say, "From the number of votes given, you have been chosen to receive this year's Old Scholars' Memorial Prize. Congratulations." The class cheered and were then silenced by Mrs. Finn who said she was very pleased with the way everyone had worked that year; it made the teachers' job worthwhile and we could now go out and play. We didn't need a second telling. This was a bonus and we were out of our classrooms in record time.

So in my last happy year I had received my biggest surprise. Another surprise awaited me on prize-giving day. The lad who had received the ten shillings prize for P.E. at the same time as I had, was that day receiving the Old Scholars' Memorial Prize for the boys. So we both went up together to receive them, just as we did for the P.E. This must have been an omen because we have kept in touch since leaving the school. We have visited each other's home, we became chairman and secretary respectively on the Old Scholars' Reunion Committee and to this day we exchange Christmas cards.

19 THE AFTERMATH

It was with mixed feelings I learned that I would be leaving the school in March, 1927 to be boarded out and to attend daily at the Borough Polytechnic in Borough Road, Southwark. I was happy to have passed the examination but, as I have already remarked, the trade I was taking up was not appealing to me at that time. Also, I had made so many friends, I was sad at the thought of having to leave them. Two, in particular, were very dear to me. The golden-haired cherub of my theatrical debut and another scholarship girl who was going to Hammersmith Trade School. I remember getting together with them in a corner of our day-room and having a snivel - the only time I had cried during my three years - and we vowed to keep in touch, which we did for many, many years. I still get Christmas cards from the other scholarship girl, but the cherub lost touch after going to Canada.

Any other feelings of sadness were put in abeyance during the excitement of being "rigged out" for my new school. Almost everything was in threes: Flannel vests, liberty bodices, those ghastly combinations, navy knickers, nightdresses; stockings, and shoes. Shoes, at last! How my face beamed when I saw those. There were two navy-blue gym slips and four beautiful cream blouses. It says a lot for the thought that went into the "rigging out" for I had two lovely blue day dresses with white collars and cuffs which were very popular at that time; a pretty little hat in addition to my wide-brimmed school hat with hat band. A very good navy rain coat, gloves, handkerchiefs and, to carry my school books in, a small attaché case. Last, but not least, a bible. To put all these clothes in, plus my own few personal belongings, I was given a cabin trunk which proved the most useful of all and went everywhere I did until my daughter of nineteen used it when she emigrated to Canada, and that is where it is to this day.

Those trunks full of clothes were given to each child on leaving the home, but the gym-slips, blouses and attaché case were replaced with domestic uniforms, with big white aprons if domestic service was the ultimate. What the boys had in the way of clothes, I can only guess, but, needless to

say, they were also well equipped to start their new jobs.

My other feelings were of apprehension as to what sort of home I was being boarded out to. I was looking forward to the school work, but worried about the foster home. As it happened my fears were groundless and I was welcomed into a family who already had two other male lodgers from the school and who had been with them for three years. We had a lot to talk about in a very friendly atmosphere.

As my narrative is about Cuckoo Schools and later connections with it, I will not go into details of my two years at the Borough Polytechnic. Suffice for me to say I had two very enjoyable years there with my eyes opened to some of the habits of the "big wicked world" outside the school.

In 1930 Central London District Schools among others under the London Board of Guardians, was transferred to the London County Council who promptly changed the name to Harwell Residential School, a name which was not liked amongst those who knew it under its former one.

In the next three years changes were made. Some welcomed, others not. One improvement which brought pleasure to some of the children was being allowed out in small groups on Saturday afternoons to go to the cinema. Finally, in 1933 the school closed and the remaining children were transferred to other homes under the jurisdiction of the London County Council. But the spirit of the old school lived on in the annual reunion of old scholars.

20 MISS BARLOW

No book concerning the school is complete without paying respect to a very great and remarkable lady who, as a Governor of the Board of Guardians, did so much for the boys when they left the home. Her name was Helen Barlow, and she remained unmarried until she died at the age of eighty-seven. Her father, Sir Thomas Barlow, had been Physician Extraordinary to Queen Victoria and King Edward VII, and was with the old Queen when she died. His remarkable daughter, who numbered among her friends people in high society, could have lived a very comfortable and easy life, had she so wished. Instead she devoted her life to helping and caring for the less privileged children of Southwark.

All children in Cuckoo Schools were from either the City of London or Southwark and, from her status as Governor, Miss Barlow took a great interest in those districts. She founded the Southwark Boys Aid Association which, as the name implies, gave help to any boy who had fallen on hard times. When a boy left the school (unless he went into the Army or Navy) she would record his address and from time to time contact him to make sure all was well. She found jobs and homes for hundreds of the lads and kept in touch with them until they no longer needed her help.

The girls had very little contact with her and, except for those girls who had passed exams to attend a higher school, she did not pursue their whereabouts after they had left. I can only assume it was because girls went into domestic service and had a roof over their heads, but boys and scholarship girls had to be boarded out and needed a caring eye. Also, in the case of the girls who were boarded out, she had control of their scholarship grant, supplemented by money from the Poor Law Governors. My grant was £21 a year which kept me in books, fares, etc. When it was time for me to start work, Miss Barlow took me under her wing and helped me choose my clothes for my first situation. She really was a pillar of strength.

When she visited the school she was a prominent figure with her bright red hair and tweed suits. She would stride purposefully across the yard looking very determined. Some of us were a little in awe of her and it wasn't until I had left and had dealings with her, that I came to know her as she really was a dedicated and caring woman.

She had offices in Lambeth and during my summer vacation, she would enlist my help for minor office duties, presumably to keep me from boredom - or mischief! There was one occasion when she

entrusted me with a large bulky envelope and gave instructions for me to deliver it to Childes Bank in the Strand. It was a lovely day and I walked from Lambeth Road over Waterloo Bridge looking very much a school girl in my smart gym slip and swinging the package as I walked. Presenting it at the counter in the bank, I waited for a reply and, to my amazement, from the package they counted out £150 in one pound notes. That may not sound like much today but in 1928 it was a small fortune. When I realised how nonchalantly I had swung the parcel as I walked over the bridge, my hair almost stood on end! I suppose Miss Barlow had thought I would have been in a blue funk had I known what I was carrying.

This gracious lady was responsible for old scholars being able to continue their annual reunion after the old school had closed. With six of us she formed a committee and we met four times a year in her house at 10 Wimpole Street. There, in the comfort of her lovely home with coffee, sandwiches and cake brought to us by her maid, we made arrangements for the annual meeting of old scholars and staff - yes, even ex-staff used to attend and enjoy the reunions.

21 THE OLD SCHOLARS

The Old Scholars' Reunion usually took place in May or June and for many years was held at Paragon Road School, off the New Kent Road in Walworth. Prior to the gathering at the school, we would meet at the Church of St George the Martyr in Southwark for a service given by the Reverend Canon Bowkett. The church is affectionately known as Little Dorrit's Church because it features in Charles Dicken's novel of that name. Thus it seemed a fitting place for us to kneel in prayer and give thanks for the joy of life which enabled us still to meet

The lessons would be read by two of the old scholars and I feel very proud to have had that privilege on three occasions. From the church we would proceed to the school where tea was prepared by the committee and Miss Barlow. It was paid for by donations collected at the end of each annual meeting. Some gave very generously and this collection kept us going until the very last meeting. Miss Barlow would move graciously amongst the gathering enquiring after someone's welfare and giving advice where needed. It was an exciting time for us for there was so much to ask and tell and laugh at remembrances of past misdemeanours. Some would bring their offspring to be proudly shown; but it was a boring time for youngsters listening to stories they hadn't any idea about. It was not surprising then that those parents would turn up the following year without children in attendance. Many old scholars came from miles away just to be there and, because both sexes were at the reunion, several romances blossomed and came to fulfilment in marriage.

With the exception of the war years, this annual event took place until 1980. In 1957 it was the centenary of the old school and special arrangements were made for the reunion to be held in what was left of the old buildings. Since 1933 our wonderful playing fields, farm, and orchard had given way to a large council estate. The main building with the clock-tower, which had housed the chapel, Matron's and superintendent's quarters and administrative offices, was still standing. Also the dining hall. They now act as a community centre for the Hanwell council estate. Disco music now fills the area where fresh young voices once sang praises to the Lord.

It was in these nostalgic surroundings we commemorated the centenary of the old building. A special service was held and in the dining hall the glass case holding the trophies of sporting events was just as it had been. I thought it a wonderful gesture. Someone had unearthed all those cups and shields of past triumphs - someone with a caring heart.

Someone, too, in the planning of the estate had shown some sensitivity, for the beautiful avenue of horse chestnut trees had been kept and is named Cuckoo Avenue. It made up for a lot

We continued meeting at Paragon Road School until the G.L.C. took over and decided to charge us for the use of the school hall and kitchen, which had hitherto, under the L.C.C., been free. It was an exorbitant fee and we just could not manage it. However, Miss Barlow, who knew all the people worth knowing in Southwark, did some scouting around and it so happened that the crypt at St. George the

Martyr had had a face lift and was newly decorated by the young folk who attended the church. There was a games room, meeting hall, and tea bar, and Canon Bowkett told us that if it met with our requirements, we could use it free of charge. It was just what we wanted with the added advantage of not having to leave the church after the service to proceed to another part of the district

By 1972 the numbers had dwindled, some old scholars having gone abroad to live, and many to their Maker. However, we continued to meet until dear Miss Barlow was no longer able to do so and in 1975 she died. We had lost a very dear friend and great lady.

Apart from the great work she did, the committee will remember her for her role as hostess at her beautiful cottage at Idstone, in the Vale of the White Horse. As a thank you for our efforts in arranging the reunion, she invited us and our spouses each year in September to lunch and tea. A visit we always looked forward to. The cottage had a preservation order on it and was called "Trip the Daisy." The name, I am told, referred to a whippet who used to win races for its owner when the cottage was an inn.

After lunch, Miss Barlow would walk with us to Waylands Smithy and up to White Horse hill, returning in time for tea to be served by her housekeeper. They are very happy memories.

We soldiered on with the reunion but the heart had gone from it. Our last reunion was held in 1977 when we decided to close our account and use the money for a memorial for Miss Barlow. Canon Bowkett was a great help in this and suggested some display panels in the church. It was agreed and they can be seen by visitors to St. George the Martyr in Southwark. One stained-glass window is also a reminder of Central London District Schools or, more affectionately, Cuckoo Schools, because it once graced the wall in our chapel before the school closed.

However, we were wrong to think the annual meeting of the old scholars was over. In 1979 Mrs. Susan Stewart, who helped run the Hanwell Community Centre and Association, and who is the wife of the Reverend Stewart of Hanwell, sent out invitations to those of us whose addresses she had managed to obtain. She invited us to attend a reunion of the old scholars at the Hanwell Community Centre. It was a very generous and unexpected gesture, and many of us attended.

We were greeted with sherry or coffee. Along the walls of the corridor - which had been scrubbed spotless by many different hands in the past - were displayed photographs of past pupils taken in different parts of the school. There was one of Charlie Chaplin standing with all the others in the dining hall. Although he had been "ringed" one couldn't mistake him because of his thick mop of black curly hair.

Mrs. Stewart had written a small book called Hanwell Remembered. It was made up of reminiscences sent in by several of the old scholars, and also a short history of the school. The book was on sale and, needless to say, each of us was delighted to buy one. Our great moment came when we all went into lunch in the old dining hall. There were not enough of us to fill the place, of course, and only a small area was laid out for lunch.

We carefully took our places. As we quietly moved our chairs, I am sure we all recalled with nostalgia the noisy banging of the old hinged forms. However, perhaps we reached the same noisy level with our animated chattering as we recalled some of the past incidents which took place in the old dining hall.

After lunch we were treated to an entertainment by the pupils of Drayton Manor High School, in what was once our chapel. It was strange to see a stage where the pulpit and choir pews used to be. Later we were given tea, after which we expressed our thanks and said our goodbyes.

One further reunion was held in 1980, but there was only an attendance of thirty-four. We couldn't have been better treated if we had been visiting V.I.P.s but somehow the romance had been

lost. In 1981, after the invitations had been sent out, Mrs. Stewart had to notify us that through lack of response she would have to cancel. She had done us a great service in trying to keep us together, for which those who are left are very grateful. Alas, it had to end sometime. I would also like to pay tribute to all Mrs. Stewart's helpers in the Hanwell Community Association for all their hard work and for going out of their way to make us feel welcome.

In coming to the end of my story I realise there is a lot more that could be written from the male point of view. There must be many things and instances of which the girls were unaware. I have written simply of the feelings I have regarding my three happy years and three months in dear old Cuckoo Schools. In so doing, I hope I have dispelled some of the gloomy impressions that are associated with children's homes of yesteryear.

The very fact that we continued to meet and talk over old times right up to 1980 proves that we had no grudge against our way of life in the home, or the discipline which was necessary. When we met we were like brothers and sister, which in a way we were.

I truly believe that there was great value in institutions run as well as the old Cuckoo Schools, where all the children were equal and discipline was such that no ill-effects were suffered.

Each child left the home being able to read, write, and do mental arithmetic. The handwriting, in particular, shows up well in any letter written by a former pupil. Even our teeth, which I failed to mention, were looked at regularly and stand several of us in good stead even now - sixty years and more later!

Today the Government, of any Party, is all for foster homes. It is regarded as a terrible sin to place a child in an institutionalised home. But, providing they are run as our old school, I say, not so. We may have been deprived of material things, but the companionship and the respect we had for staff and teachers made up for a lot. We learned to value things and care for them. I think when the children left the home - the only home some of them could remember - they proved, as young citizens, to be the equal to any of those emerging today.

EPILOGUE

How wrong I was when I thought that our reunions had finished. Imagine my delight to get a telephone call in May, 1989 from an old scholar who had been a member of our Reunion Committee. He wished to round up any remaining former pupils with a view to holding a reunion at the old main building which is now used as a Community Centre for the Hanwell residents.

"Chic" Tyson had managed to contact sixteen who would be able to attend. Now sixteen doesn't sound very many, but bear in mind most of us were in our seventies. At that age to have the will and desire to reunite and talk over old times about our childhood in a home that so many organizations condemn today, says something for the way we had been looked after.

"Chic" then contacted the head of the Community Centre who appeared pleased to be able to help. It was arranged that we would meet on May 22 and a luncheon would be provided.

It was a lovely sunny day when I and my husband set out. My husband had been invited because he had helped out in former reunions and he was also my means of transport. As we got near to Greenford Avenue in Hanwell, where the school was situated, it became apparent that the so-called progress in development might rob me of the feeling of nostalgia that I had been anticipating. So with a sinking heart I was wondering what else I would find. I knew the grounds had been made into a council estate, which I had already seen, but it bothered me that maybe part of the main building had suffered the formidable bulldozer. I needn't have worried. As we turned the corner of one of the roads, there it stood - its dear, grubby old face causing a tug at the heart and I was transported back to December, 1923, when I first entered its portals as a skinny child of eleven.

Some of the others were already there and we were greeted by Mr. and Mrs. Mills, the lady and gentleman in charge of the Community Centre. We were made so welcome and I cannot speak too highly of those responsible for the arrangements.

Photographs had been dug out of archives, plus newspaper cuttings. All these were displayed along a wall in the corridor. After exclamations of "You must be so-and-so" and "I remember you" we gathered round the photographs, some of which were of old scholars and the rest of various sections of the old school. We each had some focal point to remember and point to and laugh about.

Later in the course of discussion with those in charge, we learned that the old building has been made a "listed" building which gave rise to a cheer from us who knew her in her prime.

We made a tour of the old place to see how it had been put to use and here I must pay tribute to the Haling Council and Hanwell Community Association for the manner in which it has been adapted. I mentioned earlier that the chapel was used for dancing and theatricals, it has now added badminton to its activities. Going below to what we used to call the dungeons, where all the stores were kept, we were astounded to find each storeroom which is large, is now used for adult education, such as ceramics, art, handicrafts, carpentry and other educational activities.

Isn't it gratifying to know that a little bit of history is to stay instead of being razed to the ground to make way for office glasshouses.

After our tour we were given a delicious lunch, laid out in one of Matron's old offices. The addition of wine loosened our tongues and we talked nonstop. I am sure that to the ladies serving us it must have sounded like a parrot house!

Sitting opposite me, now in his seventy-first year, was the lad I used to bath when I was thirteen. How we laughed about it. Next to him was one of the champion swimmers of our day, and we recalled how we used to cheer her on during a gala. "Chic," who had brought all this about, just sat savouring it all and sharing the enjoyment we were all experiencing. The highlight of the day came after lunch when we decided to walk down Cuckoo Avenue, which is a mile long. The chestnut trees are still

there and the path between them.

Set back on either side are council houses but we didn't see them as we took our walk. So many memories came flooding back. Not all of us made the complete journey, but to the few who did it was something to have achieved after all these years.

Some of those present had come from as far as a hundred and fifty miles away just to recall childhood memories of one of those "dreadful" Poor Law institutions.

There must be a lesson from this.

Sylvia (Thomson) Wilson