

St George's Terrace Remembered

Wendy Moulds

In this issue we welcome Wendy Moulds' first contribution to *Now and Then*. Born Wendy Bird when her parents were living in St George's Terrace, she spent her childhood there. She left Swannington to pursue what proved to be a distinguished career in nursing; finally as Senior Nurse Advisor to the Glenfield NIIS Trust. She combined her career with marriage and bringing up a family. On retirement she and Cedric returned to Swannington and now live in Station Hill.

St George's Terrace is the row of nine cottages at the bottom of St George's Hill and adjacent to Jeffcoats Lane. It was first documented in the 1891 census when eight families were named as living there, Irons, Watson, Sibson, Smith, Wardle, Hipwell, Johnson, and, most interesting for me, a coal miner named Joseph Bird with his wife Louisa and son Joseph, though I have been unable to trace a family connection.

I imagine that the accommodation had changed little from then to the time when my parents and my elder brother, Michael, moved there in March 1939. My father had worked as a gamekeeper and gardener at Coleorton Hall but a change of job meant that the family's tied cottage had to be vacated and new accommodation found.

Even by contemporary standards 'The Terrace' was poorly provided, though not so different I imagine from much of the housing in Swannington at that time. The row had neither gas nor electricity, and the water supply for the nine houses came from a well in the gardens and a drainage water cistern between numbers six and seven (thirteen and fourteen in the current numbering system). The first mains water system was installed during the early 1940s, as a single tap at the top of the row to serve all nine houses.

The nine families shared four privies; ours was of a fairly unusual design, the scrubbed wooden bench seat had two holes, the larger one for an adult with a second smaller one for children. The containers were emptied weekly into a horse-drawn 'night soil' collection cart, the effluent being dumped in an open reservoir in the rubbish tip sited in a field beside the roadway to Calcutta, at the far end of Jeffcoats Lane. Household refuse was placed in two ashpits - no dustbins in those days. The ashpits were shovelled out and carted away to the tip every month or so.

There was a great atmosphere of camaraderie, in part brought about by the uncertainty of wartime and, I'm sure, by the openness and shared living. The back of the row had a continuous causeway (the corsey). The doors were rarely closed, and I think I can safely say, never locked - ours certainly wasn't. Of course close living lent itself to the odd skirmish, usually between, or about, the children.

The accommodation comprised two bedrooms, a kitchen and a front parlour. Most people lived in the kitchen, keeping the front room for high days and holidays, the kitchen range being the focus of the house. Every morning the grate had to be cleaned out before the fire could be kindled to get the kettle boiling for a cup of tea. On the coldest nights and if there was enough coal, the fire might be banked up for the night, then you would come down to a nice warm kitchen. The 'black lead' range provided heat for cooking, washing, cleaning and keeping warm; there was a reservoir for hot water on one side of the fire and on the other side was a hob over the oven. There was a hook in the chimney on which to suspend the kettle, and at the front a barred section provided a rosy glow for toasting bread or toes.

On a Friday night the fire was stoked in readiness for the weekly bath, a large oval galvanised tub, which was placed in front of the fire, filled with hot water and commonly used by the whole family. If you were lucky Mrs. Irons, the shopkeeper in Piano Row, would have had some nice toilet soap, - usually Pears or Lifebuoy - otherwise you used whatever was available. Jars of soft soap were difficult to manage but made very nice shampoo when boiled down with water into a more liquid form. (In my early days of nursing we used this formula for an altogether different purpose!!)

Without electricity we relied for illumination on candles or paraffin lamps, which burned with thick black smoke if the wicks were not regularly trimmed. Electricity was installed piecemeal by each householder, most only choosing, or affording, to light the downstairs rooms. I wonder how our parents managed without the trappings of modern living; washing with only a dolly peg, a tub and a cast-iron cauldron suspended over the fire in which all the white cotton bedding, towels and shirts were boiled. When there was no washing powder available, block soap would be grated to make a substitute.





Weather permitting, my mother would peg out a line of impeccable whites on a Monday morning, vying with the neighbours in the unstated competition for the whitest wash.

Ironing was another feat of endurance. Compared with modern electrically controlled steam and spray irons the old flat iron seems almost antediluvian. It was heated on a trivet in front of the fire, the hot iron being clipped on to the new 'easy use convenience', a shiny metal plate which did away with the need for soap and cloth to clean the face every time the iron had to be reheated. I can only imagine with what wonder and envy our grandmothers would view today's wash day with modern equipment, fabrics, biological washing powder and spray starch.

There was never a shortage of friends in 'The Terrace'. In my earliest memories I recall four of the houses being occupied by older residents, our next door neighbour, Mrs. Hannah Glover, and her lodger, Bernard Lord, being particular favourites of mine. Mrs. Glover was a kind lady and a good cook and could always be depended upon to find a piece of fruit cake or old fashioned spiced bread pudding. Other families I remember were:

Mr. and Mrs. Smith, with their children Trevor and Ursula.

Mr. and Mrs. Hurst, with Sheila, Bowley, Ernest, Hilda,
Christine, Noel and David.

Mr. and Mrs. Fern, Fred and Colin.

Mr. and Mrs. Walker, and Brenda, Cedric, Melvin and Alwyn.

In this circle was a diverse age range, with the older children often acting as minders to the youngsters to give the hard pressed mothers a break, it was a great source of delight to be entrusted with the care of a baby in a pram.

As is nature's way, sadly, first Mr. Lord, then Mrs. Glover, died and we acquired new young neighbours, Joan and Gordon Morley and their little daughter Pamela. Joan and Gordon still live in the same house fifty years later and kindly contributed some of their memories to this article.

Towards the end of the 1940s, the Terrace was sold by the then owner, Mr. Fewkes, I am reliably informed for £100 per house. Mr. Potter, the new landlord, set about modernising the properties. A kitchen, coal-house, and W.C were built onto the back, and the brickwork rendered and part pebble-dashed to give it a face lift. As children we watched the developments with fascination. I vividly remember one of the workmen writing "St George's Terrace" in freehand in the damp cement using what looked like a two-pronged kitchen fork. We all felt very pleased with the finished result. At last we had our own water supply, albeit cold water, and no more treks up the garden on cold, wet, dark nights. As yet, the pavement and drains in front of the houses had not been upgraded, consequently, when it rained, water would still course in through the front door to be swept out through the back. I suppose one might also describe that as 'running water'.

For our parents there was little opportunity for recreation and leisure. There was always something to do. In addition to the day-to-day labour of keeping a clean house,

and washing and ironing, there would be the seasonal making of jams and pickles, the salting of beans and bottling of fruit, to supplement the wartime rations. In the long winter evenings I remember cutting up strips of whatever material might be available to make hessian backed pegged rugs, a fashion that is enjoying a revival, although I guess that today's fabrics are unlikely to be salvaged clothing. Some of the rugs were worked into colour and design symmetry, the cloth strips being cut up and bagged according to shade ready for pegging, the convention seeming to be dark colours on the outer edge and brighter, lighter shades inside. Some pegged rugs were quite attractive but they all collected masses of dust and were very heavy to shake clean.

The wireless was a wonderful source of entertainment and diversion in those days. The old sets were powered by large acid filled accumulators which needed to be regularly topped up and recharged. It was quite an advance when we bought our first mains set, which was plugged into the central light socket via a two-way adaptor. Now we would always have a good reception for our favourite broadcasters, Tommy Handley, Charlie Chester, Wilfred Pickles, Arthur Askey and many many others. As children we loved to chant their catch phrases, but best of all at 6.45pm Monday to Friday the streets would clear of children and it was time for the adventures of "Dick Barton Special Agent". I wonder how many readers (over a certain age) are now remembering the catchy theme music that set the adrenaline running at the beginning and end of every cliff-hanger episode. Dick Barton, Jock and Snowy always did the decent thing and the goodies always won.

'The Terrace' was a good site for play. The wide expanse of smooth pavement at the front and side being ideal for skipping and whip and top, and the wall at the bottom end excellent for ball games. Generally we were well tolerated by the householders but soon chased off if the ball or top hit the windows too often.

Close by were the reccy, the defunct railway embankments (the banks), and, best of all, the meadows, where we might spend the better part of the day fishing for minnows, with a jam jar and home-made net, jumping the brook until we finished up with wet shoes and socks, or paddling with or without wellies. The 'spoor' (spring) in the field next to Mr. Tom Turner's house was a good picnic spot, and even more disastrous for our shoes and socks, when we attempted to pick the mayblobs (marsh marigolds) that grew in the rusty boggy area fed by the spring. However a bunch of flowers was always good for diverting the possible anger of our mothers.

Great excitement! Mr. and Mrs. Fern next door had bought a television. Along with other neighbours we were thrilled to watch. Curtains drawn we crowded round the nine inch screen entranced by the flickering black and white picture. Compared with to-day's programmes the broadcasts were very limited both in frequency and sophistication - but we loved every minute. At any time there might be ten or a dozen sitting around that tiny room, vying for the best position and hoping that a certain short-sighted lady wouldn't be so close that we couldn't see a thing. I guess that that lady's son might read this and also remember.



And whilst we are on the subject of memories do any of our readers recall:

The Sikh door-to-door salesman, who never seemed to mind our childish fascination with his dark skin and turban?

'Sooty' Hall the chimney sweep said, possibly unkindly by us children, to be deaf because his ears were full of soot?

The travelling singer who sang unaccompanied on the corner of Limby Hall Lane?

P.C. 'Bobby' Grant, the local policeman, dispensing his own authority to the village miscreants?

Equally real, though we never actually saw them were:

The mad parson who always seemed to escape incarceration at the most inconvenient time for us children but at surprisingly opportune moments for our parents.

Finally those terrifying 'eight o'clock horses' that galloped through the village making sure we all went to bed on time?

In Memoriam The Embraced Eight

Banded together when they were alive,
Banded together in their treach'rous hive,
Banded together when earning their bread,
Banded together e'en when they were dead,
Banded together in pleasures of life,
Banded together in disaster so rife,
Banded together to accept their death,
Banded together in their last breath.

Banded together escape to devise,
Seated together no more to rise.
Linked together when they'd ceased to move,
We'll trust they're together at Home above.
Gathered together in painful array,
Buried together till th'eternal day,
Together may they triumph o'er the grave,
Through the grace of Him who is "mighty to save".

From verses by J.E. of Church Gresley

This is one of a number of verses that were composed and sold in aid of the Whitwick Disaster relief fund. It is reported to have made £20 at 1d per copy. It refers to the eight victims whose bodies were found seated together in a circle. J E is Joseph Elson.