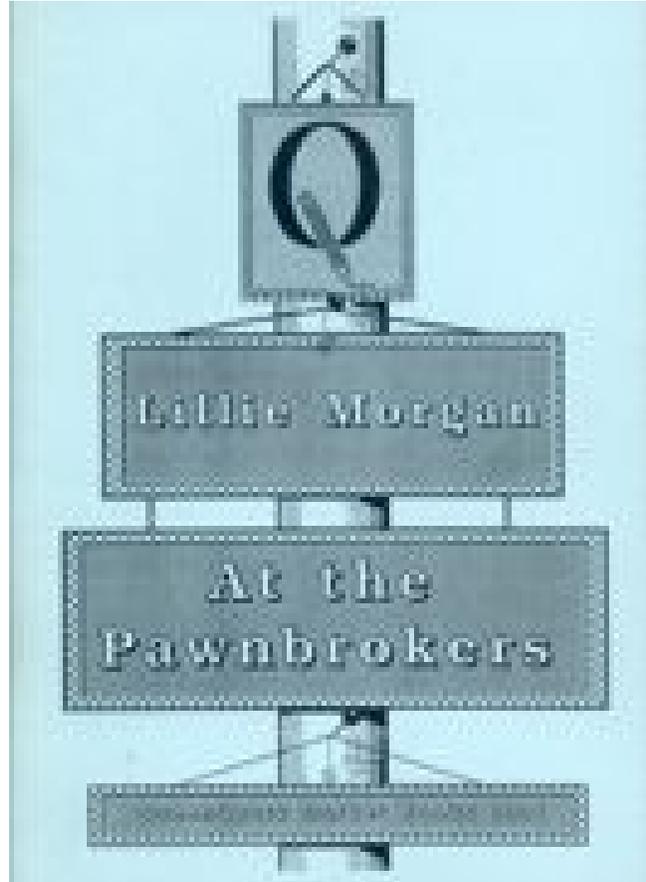


## About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

We thank you for choosing this book, and if you can make a donation to QueenSpark Books, please click on the "donate" button on the book page on our website. This book remains the copyright of QueenSpark Books, so if reproducing any part of it, please ensure you credit QueenSpark Books as publisher.



## About this book

This 1991 memoir by Lillie Morgan tells an often shocking story of the grinding poverty faced by working people in Brighton during the First World War. As a teenager she was working at a pawnbroker's in Edward Street and witnessed first-hand the desperate lengths people went to to find the price of a loaf of bread simply to feed their family. Women pawned their wedding rings and husbands' suits whilst they were away at war, or flea-ridden blankets and bedsheets.

*At the Pawnbrokers* tells of police collusion in black marketeering, the long hours worked in inhospitable conditions, and offers a snapshot of everyday life in Brighton at the time. Lillie told her story to her granddaughter, Jane Russell, who transcribed it, using her grandmother's own words as much as possible.

## 1991 Introduction

Since I was a child my grandmother, Lillie Morgan, has told me stories about our family and her early life. What had always interested me was when at the age of 15, during the First World War, she had worked at a pawnbrokers shop in Brighton.

When I was in my early twenties my grandmother gave me two pieces of jewellery that she had bought from the pawnbrokers whilst she had worked there, one being the pendant that she was wearing when the photograph was taken when she was 18.

Years later whilst reading the QueenSpark Book, *Backyard Brighton*, I came across a short description of "Uncles", a pawn shop in Edward Street and thought that this could possibly have been the same shop where my grandmother had worked. I gave her the book to read and this brought forth many more recollections of that period, which I found both sad and amusing, yet very fascinating. I felt that these memories of life in the pawnbrokers from "the other side of the counter" should be recorded, as many people have no idea of just how hard life was for the poor in Brighton during the first World War and how terrible the economic and housing conditions were for many of the families with their men away at the War.

Over a few visits to my grandmother, I took notes while she recounted her years at "Uncles" and then compiled the notes in order but kept them as much as possible in her own words, so that it is her story and not my interpretation that I have presented. I then sent the script to QueenSpark in the hope that they might find it interesting enough to publish or at least keep as an archive as reference to the social history of Brighton.

My grandmother could not understand at first why anyone should be interested in her work or the conditions of that period, but seeing the finished script she is now amused and pleased by the fact that it is to be published. Lillie is about to celebrate her 92nd birthday this December.

Jane Russell, November 1991.

## AT THE PAWNBROKERS

My family lived in a house in Ilford during the early stages of the First World War, and it was not long before my father was called up to serve in the Army. When the Zeppelin air raids started nearby, and one bomb fell on Wanstead Flats Recreation Ground, my mother moved me, my younger brother Ted, and two sisters, Ruby and Doris, to Brighton for safety, to share a rented house in Upper Russell Street with my Aunt Flo and her two daughters. Ted and Ruby, being the younger two children, were sent to the Central School in Church Street, whilst Doris, (although only 12 years old), never attended school again after moving to Brighton.

I had finished my formal education in Wanstead at the age of 14 so by the time we had settled down in Brighton I was 15 when I started looking for my first job. I applied for a job in the pawnbrokers after seeing the post advertised in the Evening Argus. My father joined us in Brighton later in the War after he was discharged from the Army through injury to his leg from flying shrapnel. My mother found work as an auxiliary nurse to the wounded Indian soldiers who were using the Pavilion as a hospital. She wanted me to find a job that involved food in some way, hoping that I would be fed at work and be one less to feed at home.

Mr. T.P. Lucas, the owner of the pawnbrokers at 17-18 Edward Street, wanted a general assistant to whom he could teach the business. During the interview I had to give a sample of my handwriting, but this involved a special machine used to duplicate information onto pawn tickets. Whilst writing with a pen attached to the machine onto one pawn ticket a second pen would duplicate the details onto a second ticket. This saved time when filling out the tickets as one was kept by the shop and the other by the customer as proof of ownership of the pawned item. Evidently my handwriting was good enough as I was offered the job.

My wages were five shillings a week with the working week consisting of six days, although a couple of years later shops decided to close one afternoon a week and we chose to have early closing on Thursday afternoons. I remember spending many of my half days accompanying my Auntie Mabel to the band concerts on the Palace Pier when weather permitted. These expeditions were the highlight of my week for we used to hire a deckchair, buy a cup of tea, and spend about three hours enjoying the music. Unfortunately this came to an end later in the War when the pier and the seafront became off-bounds and guns were positioned on the seafront in preparation for any likely invasion by the Germans. I don't remember ever having any holiday allowance.

The days were long, starting at 7.30 am and we stayed open until there were no more customers, which could be as late as 8.30 to 9.30 pm, and even later on a Saturday. Mrs. Jones, the manager's wife, ran a boarding house between the seafront and St. James' Street and most mornings about 11 o'clock she would send her young son round carrying a large jug of hot soup, which we all looked forward to as the shop was extremely cold in winter. I don't remember having breakfast at home, as both my mother

and I had to leave for work early in the morning, so I looked forward to the lovely thick soup. For a snack during the day I often used to buy a pound of delicious long tomatoes at Lilleywhites, the greengrocers, opposite the pawnbrokers in Edward Street. At lunch time we closed the shop for one hour and would all go to a cafe across the road and have a meal in a private room at the back of the building because the front room was always full of working men eating their lunch. Mr. Lucas paid for the meals, which of course pleased my mother as she didn't have to feed me at the end of the day.

The business was run by Mr. Lucas, who was in his 50's and therefore too old to be called up, and his manager, Mr. Jones. There had been two other men working in the shop but they had enlisted in the Army leaving the shop short-staffed, this being the reason for my employment. Mr. Lucas was a handsome man with silver grey hair and a moustache and he certainly charmed the ladies. He was very well dressed and would match a yellow tie with a yellow rose in his buttonhole which he grew in his garden. Although a very kind and generous man he was very exact when it came to his business. Mr. Lucas had never employed women before and asked me to do all sorts of jobs, some of which were not always suitable for a young girl. My training consisted of working alongside Mr. Lucas and Mr. Jones to learn how to value items and I was soon allowed to take in household items like blankets and sheets by myself. Mr. Jones was also very kind and patient and really taught me most about the business. He was a short, fat Welshman with dark hair and the ubiquitous moustache.

I remember right at the beginning one of the first things that I ever had to handle were some rather dirty looking sheets and my face must have registered disgust at this, whereupon Mr. Jones said that if I was squeamish about handling certain goods I might as well leave immediately! I had to get used to fleas, which might have been brought into the shop on clothing and in bedding. They seemed to be everywhere in the shop and I would see them walking over Mr. Lucas' and Mr. Jones' shirt collars.

Jewellery was handled by the two men, with gold and silver pieces being weighed carefully on the brass scales in the men's office. When I first started the shop was extremely dusty and the brass work had not been polished in years, so I set to work when we were quiet to smarten up the place, which surprised the men who were very pleased with the results. I don't think that they had ever thought of paying a cleaner to do the work.

Lucas' was the only pawnbrokers in Brighton willing to lend money against household goods as well as precious items. The shop was made up of a long narrow building on the corner of Edward Street and Henry Street, situated in what was then an extremely poor part of Brighton. The shop fronting Edward Street was where goods were sold that had not been redeemed after a year in pawn. This resembled a normal type of shop, with windows covered by security bars displaying jewellery to the street, and inside household goods were displayed on shelves, with clothes and other items hanging from the ceiling.

Christmas Eve was probably one of our busiest days for Mr. Lucas always hoped to clear the shop by selling as many of the non-redeemed items as was possible, which meant that we would have to stay open until at least midnight in the hope of achieving this goal. At night all the jewellery was removed.

The only things that were sold in the back room were men's tools, such as hammers and chisels, ranging in price from 6d to 9d. The back shop had an entrance from Henry Street and this was where people brought their belongings in to pawn; many people did not want to be seen entering the shop and would hover about in the street and dive in when no-one was looking. (One of our regular customers ran a stall in the Open Market but she would never acknowledge me if I shopped at her stall. I bumped into her after she had retired, and it was only then when there was no-one else around, that she mentioned where she had met me before, showing that some people regarded having to pawn belongings as a form of degradation). This back room had an extremely high counter, at chest level, so that you could only ever see the head and shoulders of the customers, being built this way for security. The shop was very dim inside, made worse by the amount of dark wood making up the high counters and bare floors.

Every pledged item was labelled with the customer's name and the amount of money given for the transaction, and was secured to the item by a special pin, about one and a half to two inches long, with a large head that did not tear through the ticket. I found it difficult sometimes to push the pin into fabric because I was left-handed, and Mr. Lucas was always asking us to pick up pins that we dropped on the floor so as not to waste any, as they were expensive to buy. Men's suits were folded carefully and placed in drawers in the shop, and a flat rate charge was made for the hire of these drawers, again something that made placing things in pawn an expensive business for those who needed the money most.

At the end of the day everything else had to be carried upstairs to the storage rooms which had shelving round them, with certain categories of objects placed in special areas for ease of location when the customer came to collect their belongings. This room was very dark so we used to have to take a torch to help find each item. All women's clothing was kept in the upstairs room. The ledger also had to balance with the takings when the shop closed and we weren't allowed home until it did.

We would arrive at work 7.30 am on a Monday morning to find about 50 to 60 women, many with their heads covered by black shawls, waiting for us to open up. The War really hit the women hardest, especially those with young children. With their husbands away in the forces they only received a small pittance as an allowance, which was not enough to live on. They would have to wait for their husbands to return on leave to bring any extras into the home. Sometimes there simply was not enough money even to buy their children breakfast before they went to school, so they pawned their sheets and blankets (you could get 9d for a decent sheet), probably owning nothing of higher value, and then they would cross the road to the bakers and buy buns for their children. I remember plenty of barefoot children in those days and we were told never to take

children's shoes into pawn, but then these sorts of people probably couldn't have afforded to buy their children shoes in the first place.

The pawnbroker was a lifeline to many families in the Edward Street area and was often referred to as the "Poor Man's Friend", but in reality was a vicious circle of poverty which few could break away from. The nickname given to our establishment was "Uncles", as was given to many pawnbrokers, probably because Mr. Lucas was considered a friend to get money from, but then the interest had to be paid on all loans, so Mr. Lucas was in a profitable business. The interest on a 2/6d loan was 3d (10%) per week and obviously would mount up considerably if the item was not redeemed promptly.

The arrival of the rent man on a Monday would increase the number of people rushing to pawn possessions. Women very rarely held onto their wedding rings for very long and when times got hard, they would wear them into the shop, take them off and place them on the counter and then the haggling would begin. We did have a young lady who tried to pawn her engagement ring not long after her fiancé returned to the war front. She had been told that it was a family heirloom, and was obviously expecting to get a good amount of money for it. We had to inform her that it was only a Woolworth's ring and of no value at all. Other popular items were women's boots, especially when they were the fashionably black leather patent type with white kid uppers, which could raise a good price when new, the price decreasing with the amount of visible wear.

When the men came home on leave from the War, so the family rows would begin. He would find that his suits had been pawned and he had nothing to wear except what he returned home wearing, and that probably was his uniform. Many men left their rings and watches at home for safety when they joined the forces and these too would have been pawned. We would have angry men with handfuls of pawn tickets using much of their pay to redeem their belongings (which of course would be back again as soon as they went away). Many men demanded that we must not do business with their wives again and in future must not allow them into the shop.

The older men who were not called up to serve in the War also pawned their suits during the week and then when payday came they would rush round to get the suit out for Sunday, this meant that we would have to work late on a Saturday, sometimes up to 10 or 11pm.

There were certain rules about what we could or couldn't take in, for example anything that looked too dirty or too worn, but most of the time we had to use our own initiative. The police also kept us well informed about stolen goods, and we would have to check all the jewellery that we took in against the police lists. If we suspected that the goods were stolen then we would tell the customer that the manager needed to value it, and whilst they waited in the shop the manager would phone the police and we would have to stall for time while the police ran round to Edward Street from the Town Hall.

Once a Canadian soldier came in and tried to pawn his boots (because of the high counter we couldn't see if he was barefoot at the time!). Luckily I noticed the War Department stamp on them and had to refuse them. It was illegal to take in anything with this stamp, for if we did and were found out, the shop could have been heavily fined.

Although we didn't take in furniture we did accept most other household items such as vases, silver photo-frames, tea-sets (which could raise a considerable amount if complete and in perfect condition), cutlery, bedding (which often came straight off the bed), babies coach-built prams, and Singer sewing machines.

It was not just the very poor who pawned things, people who I considered to be middle class were also regular customers, putting possessions into pawn so that they could have a holiday in Scotland. I remember some people who ran Bed and Breakfast Houses just off the seafront bringing in their visitors' bedding at the end of September to raise money for the rates, and often the bedding would stay until the first booking of the next season.

There were certain things that we would have to ask someone more specialised to value, like paintings, which even Mr. Lucas had no idea about. Towards the end of the war we even took in 2-stroke motor-cycles and had to call on Mr. Field from Francis Street to assess the value. These were a nuisance for they took up a lot of room in the front shop, balancing on special stands, and creating more mess with the oil dripping onto the floor.

Life was never dull working in a pawnbrokers. I can remember going out with Mr. Lucas and Mr. Jones to the Pavilion Shades Public House on a fairly regular basis. Entering by the front door we would wait in a private room to meet some police officers who came in through the back entrance, so that no-one guessed that we would be meeting them. Once the door of the room was closed and we had some privacy we would get down to the business of selling them gold sovereigns for 12/6d each [62.5p] (2/6d premium above the official exchange rate premium of paper money). Sovereigns were no longer legal tender and being made of solid gold their value obviously increased greatly. There was a fashion at the time of making sovereigns into men's Alberts (fobs hanging from watch chains), or mounted in rings or bracelets. As you couldn't pawn sovereigns, and there was obviously an unofficial market for them, the police probably sold them to other dealers at a higher rate.

At other times Mr. Jones would wait until the shop had collected about 10 sovereigns and when my mother came to collect me after work he would suggest that we three went for a drink in a Public House in New Road. Mr. Jones would always buy us both a whisky, this being my introduction to the "hard stuff" at a very tender age, whilst he sold the sovereigns. I never took part in these transactions and have since wondered if I was taken along to add a sort of respectability to the proceedings.

One morning when the shop was empty we heard a baby crying and when we looked over the high counter we saw a baby in a pushchair. We did not know who the baby belonged to as we had not been aware that any of our earlier customers had pushed it into the shop because the high counter obscured anything this low. We kept the baby happy until the mother appeared a couple of hours later saying that she could not remember where she had left it. None of us could imagine what she'd been up to in the meantime that had made her forget where she had left her baby.

I remember feeling very sorry for a young woman who came into the shop almost begging for some clothes. She said that she had just had a baby and had no money to buy anything for herself. I said that I had a suit that I hardly wore anymore and would bring it in the next day as she looked about the same size as me. When she collected the suit she seemed very pleased with it, but the next day as I was passing second-hand clothes shop I noticed it hanging up for sale. The woman had obviously sold it immediately - but I suppose if you were starving and had a young baby then money to buy food was more important than clothes.

After I had been working for about two years, Mr. Lucas employed a young lad of 14 to sell items from the front shop.

He felt sorry for the family as the boy's father had recently been killed and his mother needed to bring up the rest of the family. One day on totalling up the day's takings we found that the till was 7/6d short and suspected that the boy had pocketed the money himself. Mr. Jones suggested that we left 2/6d in the till and kept an eye on him, but unfortunately the next day the money had disappeared. Mr. Lucas immediately sacked the boy and had to explain to the boy's mother what had happened and obviously she was very upset at his behaviour and the loss of his wages.

It was my job most afternoons to walk unescorted to the bank in North Street with the daily takings carried in a battered old briefcase. The amount of money was sometimes considerable but no-one gave it a second thought that I could be attacked and robbed (and I was only 16 at the time!) I had to walk round the Pavilion, where there were always lots of soldiers hanging about, and when you think how desperately poor many people were in the Edward Street area, it really is a wonder that I arrived with the money.

This is quite amusing to look back on because my mother insisted on meeting me from work every day to make sure that nothing happened to me on the walk back home as there were no street lights. Mother used to wait outside at 9 o'clock for me, but once Mr. Lucas knew who she was, she was allowed to come into the shop and sit down until I had finished my duties.

Before we left the premises at night we would take it in turns to go upstairs to the toilet, which was situated in a largish room, and gradually take each item of clothing off down to our undies, shaking them carefully over a tin bath full of cold water. This was done in

the hope that any fleas that one picked up at work were not taken home at the end of the day.

In the early days, not long after I had started work, another job was found for me to do that I did not enjoy, this was to get 5 shillings worth of change from the Rising Sun public house on the corner of Sun Street. I remember how I hated the terrible smell of this pub and refused to go, but no-one seemed at all sensitive as to what was a suitable job for a young girl to do, as previously only men had been employed in the pawn trade, so unfortunately, it remained my job.

Because so many men had been conscripted into the forces certain tradesmen were no longer available. People appeared to have difficulties in getting watches repaired, so they used to bring them in to us. We would charge them 3/6d for the repair, which usually consisted of one of us opening the watch and dropping a little oil on the mechanism, and strangely enough in most cases it seemed to make the watch work again.

Mr. Lucas was considered to be a wealthy man, and he lived in a large house in Tongdean Lane, and after his first wife died he married a young woman in her early twenties. She was a very well dressed woman and obviously had a large wardrobe for we used to sell her old clothes in the shop. She was quite an unusual woman and probably one of the first women to drive a car in Brighton. As Mr. Lucas did not drive she would collect him from work, sitting in a yellow and white car outside the shop, pressing the horn until he appeared. When I first met her I could not understand why, when she walked through the shop to the back office, a strange creaking noise accompanied her. I put it down to the fact that she must have new "stays" on, but I later found out that the creaking was due to the fact that she had a wooden leg, which her long fashionable skirts hid so well. She later went off with another man, so Mr. Lucas sold the Withdean house and moved into the rooms over the shop.

Towards the end of the War Mr. Lucas opened another pawnbrokers shop, 73-74 Lewes Road, on the corner of Inverness Road, and I went to work there with Miss Tidy, who was about four years older than me. Together we ran the shop although Mr. Lucas would visit us every day. This shop did not have such a good turnover as the Edward Street shop, probably because the Lewes Road was a better area, although we took in more jewellery and less household goods.

By this time conditions had improved slightly. I was earning considerably more than my starting wage of 5s per week, and the shop opening hours were now 8.30 am to 7 pm. I do remember a young well-dressed woman bringing in her lovely silk and lace underwear to this shop every Monday and collecting it every Friday. When I ventured to ask why she was doing this on a regular basis, she answered that she had a special gentleman friend who came to visit her every weekend.

When the War ended business really dropped off. Perhaps people had run out of things

to pawn. Gradually as the men returned home from the forces and managed to get permanent jobs, there was not the need to pawn possessions because regular money was coming into the homes.

Mr. Lucas, seeing that the business was dropping, thought that he'd like to expand by opening a corner shop in Baker Street selling gramophone records, with me as his assistant. I had to refuse his offer because I had married my soldier boyfriend towards the end of the War, and had continued working whilst he was serving in the army. But when he was eventually demobbed I had to give up my job after working for 5 years in the pawnbrokers. Like many women who had worked through the War, once the hostilities were over, we were expected to return to the home as it was not considered right for wives to go out to work if there was a man in the house capable of providing for them and the family.

Copyright QueenSpark Books 1991  
[www.queensparkbooks.org.uk](http://www.queensparkbooks.org.uk)