



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.

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About this book

Joan Parsons writes with enthusiasm about her working life in Brighton, where she was employed for many years as a toilet attendant. She worked in many different areas of Brighton, including The Steine, Clock Tower and the Aquarium, and during the course of her working day she would meet many characters, including homeless people who had made a public toilet their home.

Joan also recalls her childhood, born in Franklin Road and growing up in Brighton in the 1930s, leaving school at the age of 14 and going straight into work. She also remembers local cinemas such as the Savoy, the Arcadia and the Astoria, and theatres such as the Court and the Hippodrome.

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Jobs for Life

Joan Parsons

1995 FOREWORD

These are the words of Joan Parsons and no other. Whenever we met I switched on my tape recorder and asked the questions - of the kickstart, not the deep, probing kind - and listened. Eventually, after nine meetings I had fourteen hours of recording which I then transcribed - every word. I found that after the face-to-face experience I needed to sit back and consider her statement in full. Could I recall the things said which had impressed me? I could. What, possibly, had I missed first time round?

The answer is 'Not much.' In checking my copy I discovered the truth of 'First impressions count' and my task was simple and straightforward. So, with very little editorial sweat - here is my impression of Joan, using only her words. This is how she came over to me.

The marks of my editing are here. The transcript was reduced to about one third of its original length, with Joan involved at every stage. Obviously, another person might take the same transcript and produce a very different story. But this is to speak of experiment, and here is the Mrs Joan Parsons I was privileged to take coffee with and be told the story of her life.

I would like to think that this text speaks of a friendly interaction rather than a media rip-off. Collaboration must be the touch-stone of this form of book-making. Therefore, let friend speak unto friend. Enrich your life with purposeful conversation. Make a book. After all, everyone has a tale to tell, and each tale must possess a unique pattern of light and shade.

Keith Kennedy
18 October 1995

PART ONE

AT YOUR CONVENIENCE

At the right time

I was working at the catering unit at Sussex University, the special Afro-Asian section. They gave up because they hadn't any money. I came home and one of my neighbours said, 'Are you working?'

I said, 'No.'

'We need an assistant.'

'What for?'

The loos. We just need somebody to clean up. One of the girls has left.'

So, I said, 'Oh, alright, I can start when you like.'

I went down the Corporation office and had an interview. On Wednesday I had a note put through my door: 'Would I go down to Churchill Square on Monday morning for 8.00 o'clock.'

Churchill Square is one of the big places. A long row of cubicles. The Wash-and-Brush-up room is massive. Along the other side is a beautiful baby-changing room with tables and mats for changing the babies. The Corporation used to give you nappies and baby wipes and we had a little training seat for toddlers. They disappeared when the Corporation handed over to FOCSA.

When I started over six years ago my son, Chris, was working for the DHSS, and my daughter, Carol, had been married for over twenty years. Charles had just finished work because his back was so bad. That was the reason I went out to work full time. And the University unit closing up - I had been working full time in the canteen.

I said to the family, 'Well, the only thing if I take it full time, you've got to pull your own weight.' They did. They knew I meant it. It made a great deal of difference, you know, when you are trying to make ends meet, because we had to pay for all of Charles' prescriptions. It was one of those things that came at the right time, if you know what I mean.

At your convenience

The first thing you do in the ladies' toilet is get all your sanitary bins and empty them. If they haven't got bags you wash them. If they have, you replace them. You sweep up

and then you get your hot water. You wipe your walls down, all the pipes, wash your seats and the fronts of the pans and wipe your doors - not with the same water, of course! You wipe all your paint work and if you have any windows in your toilet you wipe them over. Then your floors - if it needs it you scrub it, otherwise you use the mop. You mop the floor and then you have to dry it. That's where the deck scrubber comes in handy. You can use it with your cloth to dry the floor. It's got to be dry in case people slip. You're not allowed to put cardboard down because anyone with walking sticks or a Zimmer frame might fall over. Then, you make sure you have got paper in all the holders and that all your chains are working.

At the Steine you've got a Men's and Women's Disabled at the top of the stairs. Most of their toilets are by the entrances so that there is easy access. We've always had Disabled, and they've always had their own RADAR keys. If they haven't they come and ask. You open it and all they've got to do is slam it behind them because there are arms for them to pull themselves up on. They're quite big, bigger than an ordinary cubicle, to fit wheel-chairs.

Then there are the baby-changing rooms. Quite a few of the toilets have got baby rooms. Most have a table and changing mats and large sinks, so they can wash baby. And if the mother's got to feed, there is a chair. But, in some you only have a shelf for changing and you use the ordinary sinks.

The Corporation used to have free nappies and wipes and training seats for toddlers, but they disappeared with FOCSA. We had the changing rooms, but no nappies or wipes. Some of us used to keep a bit of talcum powder in case mums needed it. The rooms - it was twenty pence from the Corporation for their use. First, FOCSA didn't charge, and then it was twenty-five pence. Now, it has gone back to twenty because they weren't being used. It would make me cross sometimes, you had rooms there and they would change baby on the floor. If they hadn't got the money they'd only to ask and the majority of us would let them use the rooms. That is one thing I can't bear - to see a baby lying on a floor.

Workmates

You always had somebody running around to make sure you were where you should be. Andreas was my first supervisor. He used to come round in the morning to see that everyone was in, and then again in the afternoons, but he never used to make any bones about anything I'd done. He would come and help you. Then, Mr Bamber came and was just the same. If you needed help he was there.

Otherwise, you are on your own. Everything which happens in there is your responsibility. You get so many different types of people coming in, and they all want something different. But, you don't meet other attendants, unless you've got a man next door in the Gents. Then, you can call upon him if you need help. But, you aren't allowed to go into each other's loos. If you want anything you have to push their door open and call out, or if you see anybody going in, send a message. I'm terrified of spiders, so it's a

case of either steeling yourself or calling a man to get rid of it. Bill used to work at Churchill Square and he loves spiders. He picks them up in his hand.

Of course, in other ways, you are all friends. There was Katie, I worked with her, on and off. She was a very good friend. She had to leave for a while because she lost her daughter. She was looking after her granddaughter, and then she died. The woman who replaced her, Rose - we're still very good friends. There are quite a few of us who live in the same area, so we see each other.

We were a very happy crowd. We were our own little bosses. We had our own little places of work. And you make friends because you have got to be ready to relieve others. If it's been a very heavy week in the middle of the season: 'Oh, can you go down and help so-and-so' - and you go and quite naturally enough get talking and have a cup of tea together.

And there are the mobile units. A man and a woman. He would do the Men's and I'd do the Women's. We'd call at the toilets on the main roads, and then we'd deal with the ones that were further out. There was the one at the end of the Lewes Road, then up Bear Road to the top, and over to the Grove and down as far as Egremont Gate. Then back to the Pepperpot and through to Rottingdean and back along the seafront. He used to drop me at The Aquarium and I would go along to the Colonnade or Churchill Square.

The Public House

To be perfectly honest, I don't think anybody goes out to work unless they've got to. But, I wouldn't take a job I'd didn't like. If I didn't like a job I wouldn't stop there. Best of all, the job is meeting people. If anybody needs anything you're there. There are some you'd like to be rude to, but you know very well you can't. But, it is satisfying, really.

You get people knocking on the door. They come up and poke their heads against the window to see who's there. In a woman's place it's mostly for towels - or asking directions. You get a lot of 'can you tell me where The Lanes are?'

One dear old lady used to come into the Market quite a lot. She had to take tablets every morning. She would follow me round as I was working. One day, she said to me, 'You don't mind me coming in, do you?' I thought, 'Well I can't say "Yes" because it would sound rude.' She said, 'It's just that talking to somebody takes it off.' Apparently, she had a nervous disorder. She used to get frightened when she was with people. She'd take tablets, little tiny things. She was a dear old soul - a nice, tiny, lady and she looked as though she'd seen better days.

We had the police come in one morning. I'd just got the floor wet and in came these blooming great big policemen and - 'The Men's next door - sorry!'

'Oh no, love - we're police.' They showed me their warrant cards.

'What've I done?'

'Oh, it's alright - is there anybody in there?'

'Yes,' I said, two ladies down the end.'

'Oh well, we won't disturb them. You haven't had anyone run in here?'

They were looking for an escaped prisoner. They caught him in the Pavilion grounds. That was a big laugh - 'Oh well, we won't disturb them!'

At another time, a young lady came in. A postman and two girls brought her in. She'd got handkerchiefs and tissues, and she was trying to hold her face together. She said 'Can I sit down?' and we gave her a chair. She was in such a state. She had been walking down North Street and this fellow came up and stuck a bottle in her face. I said, 'I think you'd better go up to the hospital', and I gave her the money for a taxi. Next day her mother came and gave me the money back. Her daughter had needed stitches under her eyes and all down her cheek.

Then, there are the winos - the people who are always on the booze. They sit around the Steine and the Level. Some of them are very, very nice - they're inoffensive - but others are very aggressive. Some of them are a big laugh. You can't help laughing at them because they are so silly.

I had a fellow come into Prince's Place one day. It was Sunday and the band was playing and he was undoing his trousers as he came through the door, and I said, 'Excuse me, this is a ladies - the gents' is next door.'

And he just stood there and looked at me and said 'Oh - I was just gonna have a pee.'

I thought, Well, there's no answer to that.'

A wino lady, she came in and said, 'You live here?'

I said, 'Yes.'

So, she said, 'You know, this country owes me a lot of money.'

'Oh, does it? I think they do all of us, dear.'

'No - I mean it.'

'So, I said, 'Oh? Why?'

'I'm Napoleon Bonaparte's great-great-great-great granddaughter.'

'Oh, well that's something, isn't it?'

'They've got all my money.'

I thought, 'Oh dear!'

Once, somebody came and locked herself in. We heard all this screaming. She couldn't get the door open. I called for Bill because I couldn't persuade her to turn the key back. You know, if they do jam you just turn the other way and they automatically open, but I couldn't get her to try. Bill did - but he had to climb onto the top of the wall. She was elderly. She just wouldn't listen. A lot of them do that. At the first instance they can't get the door open, and instead of thinking they start pushing at the door. A young Italian student had been playing about and ran into the loo, hiding from the others. She locked the door and then panicked because she couldn't get it open. Finally, her friend climbed over and she was in hysterics. The other girl just touched the door and it flew open.

That happened, too, at the Market. A woman got herself into such a panic that she couldn't open the door. She was screaming. They sent for the police and the ambulance. The man just put his boot to the door and grabbed her. She was in a state. She'd cut all her face by banging against the door. It was sheer panic. She came in afterwards and apologised.

She said to me, 'I'm sorry I had to have the door knocked down, but I was frightened.'

I said, 'Well, if you'd just stood still a minute, and turned the other way.'

'I never thought of that. I couldn't get the door open.'

It was fear. I suppose it's a horrible feeling. Fear is a killer isn't it?

Bless this house

Before Bill took over at The Steine, we had one chap who went down one morning and wondered where all the water was coming from. He found that somebody had stuck a scaffolding pole through the cistern.

It is surprising what you find. It's a big laugh, it really is. You've got to laugh because, otherwise, you'd be moaning all day long. It is really hilarious some of the things that people do.

I went over to The Steine on Good Friday and I found I only had one toilet working. The others hadn't got chains. So I rang the Office and said 'One toilet working - five chains missing.' But, nobody came. It was a Bank holiday weekend. On Monday Mr Bamber came round, had a look, and said, 'I know it's a holiday, but no good keeping it open with only one toilet.'

Next day, I got a telling off from the town inspector because it was locked. I went in on Wednesday and found I'd got two chains. I saw the inspector and he said, 'Yes, I found one up the yard.' Later that day, a plumber arrived and he was there until Thursday lunchtime. He put in a cistern and replaced all the chains.

I went in on Friday and - nothing. Five new chains, and they had all gone. I just stood there and looked. Alright, the WCs were us-able. People do use them, anyway, and you have to throw water down. But, with nothing to get hold of they wrench them and pull the whole arm out.

Anything that's moveable! We were very short of liquid soap. So I went to Body Shop, nearby, and bought three tablets and put them on the sinks and went to lunch. When I came back I was looking round and I asked a lady who often comes in:

'Have you seen my soap anywhere?'

'Did you see those three schoolgirls, just now?'

'No.'

They put them in their bags.'

You find umbrellas - by the dozen. And sometimes you find handbags or shopping bags. One morning I had a lovely coat somebody had hung up and forgotten. This lady came out and said, 'Excuse me, dear, somebody's left this behind.' A beautiful coat. I hung it up in my room and about mid-afternoon she came back.

'Oh, I didn't know whether you had it or not, but - I left my coat hanging up ...'

'What was it like?'

She told me, and when I showed it to her, she said, 'You know, I only bought it yesterday.'

It was a beautiful thing. She never even said, 'Thank you,' You find things, often, for people and put them on the shelf, and most say 'Oh thanks - I'd wondered if I'd get it back.' But, others just take them and walk out.

In the Market you often find these little coat hangers and you think 'Where have these come from?' They're either from a charity shop or one of the stores along London Road. People change their children and they've left everything. You open the bin and find dirty knickers and socks. I suppose it's the easiest place to go. A lot of the shops haven't got changing rooms, have they?

Youngsters come off the beach, change in the toilets, and you get puddles of water on your floor. They rinse their costumes under the tap and you get sand blocking the sinks. At the Colonnade, the Savoy - they used to come across the main road - you would go in and find pebbles everywhere.

Graffiti - that was everywhere. We used to have lovely little messages left. I won't use the language, because it doesn't come in my vocabulary. I went over to the Steine and saw a red blob on the wall and - 'What the devil's that?' It was a lovely poem which went sideways down the wall, three verses long, and when I got round the corner I had a beautiful drawing. Very explicit! It took me two and a half hours to get it off. It was only lipstick. I think they must have used a whole tube. I wasn't very happy at the end of the day. I had to keep going backwards and forwards - 'Oh, I've been over this. Have another go! Oh, have another go ...'

In some cases you can get it off and in some cases you can't. If it's on tiles you can, to a certain degree, but it takes ages. We used to have cream for tiles, but you can't use that for the doors, but when they started using oil based pens - you can't get it off. And then they started using spray paint. More often than not, it was a case of 'Leave it.' You can't get it off. The more you try, the more you rub off the original paint.

Hidden cameras in loos would be very interesting. If you could stand it! I mean, really and truly, I'm not being funny, but it amazes me why people have to go into a loo and drop paper on the floor. I was helping out one Sunday at the Colonnade on the seafront. I had to wait for the actual attendant to come, and when we got inside we just looked and - 'What the hell's happened?'

There was paper everywhere, even hanging from the light fittings. Somebody had been in there before they'd locked up the previous night and emptied every holder. It was just like paper decorations. They were loose leaves, from the little packs. When we saw it we just stood and looked at each other. I think they must have wet them and they'd stuck to the light bulbs. I don't think they'd missed anywhere.

The Corporation paid a lot of money to redo the Gents by the Bandstand. The following week someone set fire to it. All the wiring was burnt and congealed. they couldn't afford to strip it out again. So, they had to close it.

The Extra-terrestrials

They've got a Disabled Men's and Women's at the Steine at the top of the stairs, and if it was raining they used to shelter there. It's a terrible place, really, because it has a bottle-top roof and they used to knock them out. When it was raining it used to pour through. I didn't need water half the time to wash the floor because you could use what was lying there. If it was fine they used to sit up there and look down through the holes they'd made in the roof.

Yes, male, female, they used to sleep in the Gardens. They'd come down and I'd be sweeping up and they'd just look at me and say, 'What are you doing?' They didn't know what time of day it was. They used to come in and sit in the toilets and drink their cans and bottles and they either left them on the floor or put them in the bins. Some of them were very nice. Like everybody else who had a drink, some would just laugh, but others would get jumpy. I think half the time those that do turn nasty haven't got the money to buy any more to top themselves up. It's no good shouting at them, because if they're that far gone they just don't know what you're saying. It's no good telling a man who's three parts to the wind to sober up. He just looks at you as if to say, 'What's she talking about? - and, yes, I'll have another bottle.'

At night, if they could get in when no one was around, they'd sleep there. There were one or two who did that at the Clocktower. At Rock Gardens there was one lady, that was her home. She more or less moved in. But, she died, poor soul. I only saw her once or twice. She used to keep herself in the one loo, and if you hadn't got the key with you, you couldn't open it. She slept in there; she had everything in there; all her goods and chattels.

Two or three used to sleep at Norfolk Square, and you had to get them out to clean. Some of them got quite nasty if you woke them up. I used to say, 'If you don't move you'll have to sleep in the dirt.' Some would move because they wanted the place cleaned up, but others used to get quite nasty about being moved on. I would say, 'Well, I'm not chucking you out. You can come back when I've finished.'

We had one, she used to have a great big shopping trolley with all her goods in and, oh, she used to get very annoyed. At times, she was very, very aggressive. I was cleaning the floor, and went to push the door open, and she told me to so-and-so off. I swept the stairs down and came back and she was still there, so I said, 'Well just let me clean up in there...' and Oh! She came out with a mouthful of vile words. I went and got some water and when I came back she had gone. But, when I went to wash the steps, her trolley was still up there. And she swore black was white that I'd pinched her stuff out of her trolley - her fur coat and everything. At that moment Mr Lee, our inspector, came along and he said, 'Having trouble?'

'No, she's just having her say.'

She said to him, 'I suppose you're going to call the police.'

He said, 'No,' but he had to go back to his car and take a call on his walkie-talkie, and she swore I'd told him to call the police. She was going to push me down the steps. There were men drinking there on seats and they said, 'Leave the poor girl alone' and she rounded on them.

One said, 'If you push her down the steps I'll push you on top of her.' She must have been drinking nearly all night, I imagine, because she could hardly stand.

You can't shout at them and you can't swear at them, because if you do you're in the wrong. The Corporation would say 'If they cause trouble get help - but, otherwise, kid gloves.' And that's what you had to do.

On the Corporation, we had phones. We had a little key to unlock them so that only we could ring the office or the police. They took them out in the first summer that FOCSA had the contract. One morning, a man came and put it in, we went to lunch, and when we came back it had gone. I said, 'Where's the phone gone? It was only put in this morning.' And the office said 'Oh, not having those. They've gone.' And that was it. We didn't have a phone and if you wanted to ring the office you had to go to a box - and you couldn't get your money back.

It's an easy job, but... I wasn't enamoured of going to Norfolk Square because they have a seat between the toilets, you know, and all the winos sit there, men and women, and sometimes you had really nasty things said to you. And some things are hard to ignore - especially when you get insulted right, left and centre and you can't answer back. That always gave me the willies. I used to go there and think 'I wonder if I can get in and out before they come round.'

On tour

They come by the coachloads. At the Colonnade, Sunday was the worst day because if the coaches weren't parked in Brighton, they used to stop for a break. They'd pull up outside, and straight inside! You can't lock the door. Once you're open you've got to stay open. If you were washing the floor, they'd be walking all over it. And as fast as you were putting paper in the holders you were picking it off the floor.

They would ask for directions. They'd come in and say, 'I knew I'd find somebody in here. Can you tell me where so-and-so is?' When I was relieving down on the seafront, one weekend, a crowd of Germans came in, and the men just walked in with the women. As fast as we were telling them to go, they were coming back in.

You have to make clear to the children from the language schools that they are single-sex toilets. You get boys coming in, and you say 'Gents is next door' - if you're quick enough to catch them. Last summer I found some girls washing a boy's hair. I just looked and said, 'You don't wash hair in my sink. I've got no plugs. I've got nothing to get the hair out with.' So, one said, 'He's got sand in it.' They looked at me, so old fashioned. They were French or Italian, but they knew enough English to know they shouldn't be in there. Some of their students used to annoy me because they could see you were busy but keep stopping you for silly things - 'Can you tell me about this and can you tell me about that?' But, there again, once you're used to children you expect that.

We were in Italy, the first time I'd been abroad, and we all congregated at this little cafe, and I asked if there was a toilet. She said it was at the top of the stairs, so I went up - only half a door! And inside, one set of footprints pointing this way and one set pointing

that way with a hole between each. One set for the men and one set for the ladies. And the paper on a string! I couldn't get over it for ages.

When I told Bill he roared. He'd been in France, and under the little half doors all you could see was feet and if a woman was wearing trousers you didn't know which was which.

People are lucky in this country because they don't have to pay. This year my husband and I went to Czechoslovakia, and we had to pay there. When we got in, a woman was sitting with this paper all over the table and I thought it was paper towels. But, when I went into the loo - no paper, so I came out. And that's what I paid for, and when I got it it was one sheet, divided into three. People here are lucky.

A job is a job is a job

I mean, it's a fact - it's just a job. Even if toilet cleaning is not everybody's idea of a job, it is an essential occupation. Someone has to do it, and it is not as bad as people think. It can be mucky when the public leave the toilet dirty. But, it has its funny side.

There is no bye law that says they have to provide toilets. When there was talk recently about closing some of them the Corporation pointed out that they can close every one of them tomorrow and nobody could do anything about it. They don't have to provide them.

If they closed the ordinary toilets they'd put up those superloos. Whatever firm provides them will have to make sure they are in working order. I said, 'What if anything goes wrong and they have to be repaired?'

'Oh, the people who put them up have to maintain them.'

I had a lady come in to the Market one morning, and she said, 'They're going to put those metal things up, aren't they?'

'So they tell me.'

'Have you ever been in one?'

'No.'

'Well, if you have those which wash out you'll have to watch yourself. If you're a bit long before you come out, the water comes on and you get a scalded bum.'

They're coin-operated and there's no Men or Women - it's one shout, you might say. They wash themselves, see to themselves, but... They're twenty pence a time in London. That's a lot of money. And if you're a woman with a couple of little kiddies, and you've got to get the door open to get out, well... .

FOCSA were talking of only having those toilets open along the seafront. Those in the immediate area from West Street to the Colonnade - only these and Prince's Place. So, that would have made five toilets, and nothing in town. But, again, the money has to come from somewhere. People don't pay for most services, so they have little coming in. We all said it would be better if everybody paid to go to the loo. They used to have old slot machines, I know, but now they don't have to pay to use the loo. I think, myself, it would save a lot of destruction, because to be paying and knowing that it belonged to you would make you think twice. But, that's only my opinion.

Victoria Gardens was a beautiful toilet. I don't know why they closed that. There was a Men's one side and a Women's the other. It was down steps. Beautiful blue tiles and everything. It had just been refurbished. It was a really lovely place. And so was the Market. It was an old type and widely used by the shoppers. Norfolk Square was underground and very old fashioned but, mind you, always clean. So, you used to get people sleeping in there at times. The Clock Tower, an underground toilet, was marvellous. It was a lovely place even though it was old. You got one or two of the old dossers down there - the ones that wanted to sleep all night - but, you rarely found anything out of place.

At their convenience

I picked up the phone and a little voice said, 'I'll pick you up in half an hour.' I got down stairs and he's sitting there in the car, with the others in the back, and he said, 'You've got to go to the office.'

So, I said, 'What for?'

One of the others said, 'We're on our way back - we've just been - we haven't got a job.'

I looked at her and said, 'What do you mean?'

'Well, when we finish tonight - we've got no job.'

He dropped them off, and then picked up others to take in with me. We sat there waiting, and then we went in - and we were finished by four o'clock that day - 'No more work - don't come in - three weeks' pay.'

All the toilet cleaners, apart from Bill and Joan, were given notice. Yvonne, Eileen, Wyn, and me, and I don't know how many of the men - I suppose there was about thirty of us all told. Mrs Hawley - Wyn - had been on The Corporation for thirty odd years, and she was annoyed.

All of us who were over sixty had been told that if they were going to change things they'd give us enough notice. We knew that we'd have to go - that we'd get the push, as you might say. But all of us - the young ones as well - this is what happened. We were

all told the same thing. That when we went home that night - that was it. We didn't have to go in next day. And they gave us three weeks money.

PART TWO

A WORKING LIFE

At home

We lived at 63 Franklin Road. My mum was always there. I can't remember her not being there, until I was older and she went out in the mornings, cleaning for the Scott-Maidens in Hove. They ran Windlesham House School in Hove and she was house head parlourmaid there.

I don't even remember her having the babies, but there were eight of us, and she only saved two. These days, they'd probably all be alive. Kathleen I remember best. She was thirteen months when she died. The one between Fred and I was Willie who lived six days. I did have all their names down in my mum's prayer book, but I can't find it now. There was Ronnie - Flora - I can't remember the other two.

Kathleen was born four years after me and she was what they called 'a blue baby'. I can remember her playing with me, a few days before she died, rolling a ball along the floor. It was one of those big, coloured wool ones. Next thing I can remember, my dad coming out of our home with a tiny white coffin, and my mum jamming a black hat on my head and telling me to leave it alone. The funeral is my earliest recollection. I can't remember going at all, but - 'I don't want it - I don't want to wear a hat!' But, she jammed it on my head - 'You've got to wear it!'

She used to take me up to Windlesham House in my school holidays. She'd started as a parlourmaid and became head when she married. That was her first husband, who died in the First World War. The Scott-Maidens were lovely people. They always made me welcome and used to say, 'Come and sit with us while mum does her work.' There was a lot of them. One sister was a missionary in China and Mr Scott-Malden was a schoolmaster - a headmaster, I think - before they started their school in Old Portslade. You can find the family's tombstones in the graveyard of St Andrews Church at Hove.

She was always singing. Oh, she was a lovely person, in her own fashion. She used to get het up sometimes. But most people do, and we thought Mummy was being cross, but, I suppose, it was just that money was short, as it is for a lot of people these days.

My father was strict. He never struck us. We never had a slap off him. All he had to do was say 'That's enough!' and that was it. He always saw that we sat at table to eat and you didn't talk with your mouth full. My mum used to do the slapping. If ever there was a need for a smacked bottom she didn't care where you were, if you misbehaved you got it. I can remember her taking my knickers down in the street and smacking my backside. But she wasn't a strict disciplinarian like my father. He was brought up strictly.

His mother was from Southern Ireland and she ruled the roost. She died before I was born. But, he was never afraid to take us out, because he knew we wouldn't show him up.

My mother used to make sure that my brother and I went to school first thing in the morning and she was nearly always there when we got home at night. Often, we went to our gran's for lunch. We never ever went without anything. She was marvellous really, because when my dad came out of the Army - the Kings Royal Rifles - he had a vascular disease of the heart and he was in Netley Hospital in Southampton for a long, long time, and she went out scrubbing, cleaning to keep the family going.

I can remember a cake my father bought for me, the shape of a beautiful yellow rose, in Shoreham. Honestly, he was a better cook than she was. If my mum was alive she'd tell you. He worked - he was in the auxiliary fire service - but he used to do quite a lot of the cooking.

I nearly always got clothes for my birthday. I always got shoes from my gran. My aunts always made me jumpers and skirts, and a coat. They used to buy the material. My uncle Tom was a tailor in the Navy and made coats and skirts for me, and my cousin as well. We always had new clothes, never second hand. Which was rare, for most of the children in the area came from poorish families.

Christmas - I remember being given a doll. I had measles and I had a beautiful doll with long golden curls and a velvet dress given to me. But, I found a pair of scissors, and when my mum came to give me tea I'd cut off all its hair. That was the end of the doll, I never saw it again. And, oh dear, she had to strip the bed and shake out all the hair.

School days

I went to St Martins School. I can remember my mum taking me and leaving me at the top of the steps and this little lady came along and took me by the hand and said, 'Come with me' and I looked round for her and she had gone. And nobody took any notice of you if you screamed your head off.

I loved St Martins. It was only a little school at the top of St Martins Street. Now, the building's been made into flats and the school is in a new building in Hartington Road. There was a big room with a big shutter which divided it into two classrooms. I can remember the caretaker coming in and making up the fires because we had open grates with great big guards round. If you got a chance to sit by the fire in the winter you were lucky.

There was about twenty of us. Eileen Burville was my special friend, and there was Lily Brown. She lives over Whitehawk now. And Joyce and Lily Pratt who lived opposite us, and the Herridge family (all boys), the Herriots (Gladys and Irene), the Inkpens, and the Stones. We all lived in the same street.

History, Geography, English were my best subjects. In the juniors I had to teach some of the others who couldn't read. I used to have a little reading class of my own. Miss Wingrove, our teacher, was very good, and Mrs Thomas came after her. When I first started Miss Cattermole was our headmistress and quite a few people in Brighton will remember her. When she retired we had Miss Holland and she was a really lovely lady. She didn't mind sitting down with children who were ill and nursing them.

I was there until I was eleven. At ten I had sat what was called 'The Scholarship Exam'. I could have gone to the Intermediate School in York Place, but because my dad was in hospital they thought my mum couldn't afford the uniform, so I didn't go. I went to Lewes Road Senior School.

The headmistress was Miss Blackman. A tall, stately woman with an Eton crop - but very approachable. She was a very nice woman. If there was anything wrong you could always go to her. Our English teacher was Mrs Hoeman. I remember her because like my mum she was a tiny, tubby lady with white hair. Her son used to come down and pick her up. He was just about the only person that I knew then that had a car. Everyone used to stand there waiting for the car to move off with her in it. I can see it standing outside the school and out we'd all come into the playground to see the car. 'Mrs Hoeman's son has arrived!'

I loved cookery. Mrs Lee was our teacher. I made my fourteenth birthday cake and she forgot it was in the oven and turned it off and it collapsed in the middle. She had to make me another one.

The school was evacuated just after I left. All the children whose parents would let them go, they went up North. The whole school went and they were up there for so long that some of them stayed. Some never came back to Brighton.

Out of school

I can remember going with the school, winking out at Black Rock, all over the rocks with little nets. And blackberrying - my mum used to load up the pram with food and we used to go to St Mary's Farm at Falmer, pick blackberries, and she used to make jams, puddings and pies.

I went scrumping apples with Fred and got caught. I know I screamed because he was supposed to be taking me to the park, but he said he wasn't going to. And I screamed and in the end he and his pals took me scrumping. They gave me a bag to hold and I was supposed to pick the apples up as they dropped off the tree. All of a sudden there were no more apples coming and I was standing there and Mr Baker, who owned the orchard, appeared and looked at me and said, 'What are you doing here?' I said I was looking for my brother.

'What have you got in that bag?'

'Apples.'

'Where do you live?'

I told him and he took me home and gave my mum the apples and said, 'I don't know where your son is, but he's not at my place - but she was.'

I got a slap for going.

The nearest park was the Level and there was Saunders Park which was by Preston Barracks (now the site of the superstores in Lewes Road, opposite Coombe Road). We didn't have anywhere else to play but in the street. Of course, there weren't any cars parked there, and not the traffic there is now.

Around Easter time we played skips, hot cross buns, tag - and if you were up to mischief you got 'the dares', which was tying door knockers together. Hot chocolate we called it. We used to get in a circle with your marbles or alleys in the middle and then one child used to knock them out.

We used to pinch people's doormats and place them in the middle of the street. That was a good game. You all started in a ring and somebody stood in the middle with a stick, and they'd twist round until they could twist no further and touch whoever was opposite with the stick. That person had to pinch all the doormats off the doorsteps and pile them up in the middle of the street, and then we'd all go and hide. And when one mother came out - there was the pile of mats and every mother had to come out and sort out her mat.

There is one thing I can recall. They had a jazz band in the street where I lived. The family opposite had five boys and they fancied themselves as musicians and, in the summertime, they used to open the window of their front room and sit playing their instruments and we would dance in the street.

Most of us left school at fourteen. It was the general school leaving age then. I left in the week before Easter, 1939. On the last day we hardly did any lessons, it was just turning out desks and books. And we went round in one group to see each teacher. So, I left school the day they broke up for the Easter holiday. The War broke out in September.

First job: The Bakery

I had two or three days before I started work. It was a Wednesday, I'm positive it was. It was a little bakery. They did all their own baking, and what they baked they sold.

At school, they had tried to get me a job in service as a cook's assistant, but my mum wouldn't let me go. She said she wouldn't know where I was if I was in service and war broke out.

They were a nice couple and I had to call her Mrs Joe. I had to clean the shop window, the tiles and glass cabinets, and serve in the shop. And when the cook had finished I had to wash all the tins and clean up the kitchen.

I was there for a year. I learned how to cook pies and cakes. But, because the shop was near the seafront she gave up. She was only tiny, very dainty. He was a soldier in the War Office. The seafront was all army, and she was frightened of air raids.

Job 2: Railway Canteen

So I went to work at the Railway Works and was there until they closed the canteen. I made the tea, in great big urns. They were massive. We used to push them round the workshops on a great big trolley. Men used to work shifts and come for tea all the time. Then, they started bombing the line and they stopped the tea breaks in the works. I had to go down a slope to a shelter and - I left. I didn't fancy pushing those great trolleys if bombs were dropping.

Job 3: Standard Tablet Company

I went to work for the Standard Tablet Company in Hove. We made medical supplies, and I worked in the office for quite a long time. It belonged to Pears - Dubarrys - and the factory is still there. A lot of our work was for the Navy, but when that came to an end they decided to close down. Mr Pears had died.

Job 4: Allen West

I got a job at Allen Wests, as a machinist. The work was with steel, mainly, using drills and presses. I started in their small factory at the bottom of Coombe Road. When they opened the Moulsecoomb workshops we moved.

There was a girl who had a wonderful voice. She went in for Carroll Levis's Discoveries when he was at the Dome. Another girl, Irene, had a nice voice too - we used to have little singsongs together, but they had no radio in the works then. When they put in radio, everybody had to keep quiet.

Then, came the slump. They couldn't get steel and most of us were paid off. I was with them for almost seven years.

Job 5: Findlater Mackie

I went to work for Findlater Mackie, a brewery in Waterloo Street, Hove. That was the only job that was going at the time. It was everything. You made yourself useful. Bottling beer, wine, labelling, stacking - whatever was going, if you were there, you did it. I learned how to wash bottles and make sure they were clean. It was good fun. There were good sing-songs among the girls. Quite a happy-go-lucky crowd. We sang anything that was going. If anyone started singing and you knew it, you joined in. I'll tell

you one funny thing. We had a rest room and they had a radio in there. You would go up in the morning, sometimes, and you would find it on. You'd listen and - What the devil's this?' - and it would suddenly dawn on you. Somebody had been up there and turned on the Morning Service.

Fun

We went to 'the pictures'. Along the Lewes Road we had 'the fleapit', the Arcadia. The Gaiety. The Duke of Yorks, by the fire station - it's still there. It showed second releases - films which had already been shown in town. There was the Academy at the top of West Street and the Savoy on the seafront. I can tell you most of the cinemas we had in Brighton in those days. There was the Astoria, which is now a bingo hall. It was bombed during the Second World War, and so was the Odeon in Kemp Town. That was a daylight raid, and it was a Saturday matinee, and it was full of children. All of them were killed.

I liked musicals - Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers - otherwise, anything for a good laugh - Bud Abbott and Lou Costello. And cowboy films - Roy Rogers, Gene Autry...

I saw Gene Autry once. My friend Eileen and I had been to the pictures and we were coming back along Marlborough Place and - all these crowds and policemen. I said, 'What's going on?' and she said, 'I don't know but we had better hurry, we're going to be late.' At that time, in the War, most films finished early, and we had strict orders to get home on time. But, by the Astoria - thousands of people - and you couldn't move. I grabbed her and pulled her up the little road at the side, and - he came out. Everyone was watching the front entrance, and there is the side entrance, and he came out and we saw him, and he just rode off. On Champion, the big black and white horse - he was massive. I reckon he was fifteen to sixteen hands high, and he was wide. They always said he was a big horse, but I didn't realise he was that big. I've seen quite a few horses because my grandfather and dad would drive them.

I loved any plays that were going. We had several theatres and used to go often. The Court, the Theatre Royal, the Hippodrome - I loved 'Blythe Spirit'. It's a gorgeous play. I loved anything musical. At the Hippodrome I saw 'Perchance to Dream' and 'White Horse Inn', with Joseph Locke - a marvellous voice. I liked George Formby, his chuckle was so catching.

At the Grand at the top of North Street it was much more old-time music hall with artistes and special acts. Both Julie Andrews and Petula Clarke started their careers there. The mother and father of Julie appeared there, too, and had beautiful voices, but they were not as good as her.

Max Miller only lived down in St James Street. I had known him since childhood because he used to come to our church hall. His niece Jill Page - Vera Day as they called her - belonged to a dance group which rehearsed at our hall and he came along quite often, and he would always give a turn at Christmas for the children. When I was eight

or nine he used to play in the Pierrot Show at Jack Shepherds, by the Aquarium, and on Sunday afternoons my mum would pay sixpence a deckchair and we would see the show.

Ballroom, jive- we used to have the big bands. Glen Miller and all such, very often, at the Dome, for the soldiers. Straight from work we used to go, just to get in there. We never thought about picking up boys, at the time, we just knew there were people to have a good laugh with. In a dance hall, usually, if you were with a serviceman you got in cheaper. And we used to get a good laugh, too.

Firstly, there were the Canadians. They had a barracks by the Gyro (near Lewes Road Sainsburys) and another at Hollingbury. And along the London Road they had their big ack-ack guns. So, wherever you went you bumped into Canadian soldiers.

You couldn't move. We had the Royal Navy along the seafront at Black Rock and a Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve base by the Lagoon. And most of the hotels along the seafront had the airmen - Polish, New Zealand, Australian - all sorts. A few Americans would appear, but we didn't have any based here. And there was the Canadian Highland Regiment based in Ashdown Forest - quite a lot of them came down. They were really nice fellows.

We did enjoy life. It was no good being miserable. You can't live, and cut yourself off. If you've got friends, you've got to join in - so, we all had a good laugh. It was all we could do really. We had nothing else to enjoy, so we used to go out and enjoy ourselves.

But, you couldn't go out every night because the money wouldn't run to it. And the point was you couldn't go out for a long time because the buses stopped running at nine o'clock. So, if you didn't catch the bus home you had to walk, and more often than not it was dark. We would start out - four or five of us - and gradually, one left, then another, and finally you were on your own - we used to have some laughs, and things happened that made you laugh.

I was an ARP messenger, to start off with. I ran between the Air Raid Posts. There were three bases to serve. One under our vicarage in Franklin Road, and from there I had to go to Devonia Court, and then to Elm Grove. I had a navy blue skirt and a little top and a beret, and you had to run as fast as you could. I think you got tuppence if you had a bike. I didn't have a bike, so I had to run. They would give you the message, and once it was in your hand you had to go as quickly as possible. We had little tin hats.

The Lewes Road Inn, at the bottom of Franklin Road, was bombed and one of the barmaids was killed. And part of our roof came down. My mother had been to the shop, came back, and just managed to get under the steps. The top of our roof came down and just missed her. There was another hit on a house at the top of Caledonian Road and everyone died including a new-born baby. These were day-light raids. Whether we were hit by a bomb or a shell from a gun we didn't know. But, a pilot may have been on his way back and dropped his bombs to lose weight.

Several of my friends married Canadians. Margie went to Toronto. And Jean went to Winnipeg, though her fiancé was a POW so she to wait until he was released before they could marry. Betty married an Australian airman. She went to Australia, didn't like it, and came back. 'Couldn't stand the heat,' she said. She was only there for a month.

Marriage

I met my husband when I was working at the brewery. He was a drayman, on the lorries. The first time I ever saw him I was going to the Grand to see Julie Andrews, who was no more than nine or ten. He nearly knocked me over.

When I saw him next day he said, 'Where were you going?' I said, 'Oh, I was going to the Grand. ' 'Oh, I go there, Saturday nights.' So, we used to go there with his friends, Vera and Ron, and to the Court in New Road, or to the Hippodrome, or to the Palladium, a cinema on the seafront. Or we'd go to the ice rink.

Up to then, it had been a gang of girls from work, going out. We used to take something to change into when we finished work and go straight out. But then, to go out with a boy, it was entirely different. You know, well, you had to be on your best behaviour.

Gradually, we went out on our own. We got married on New Year's Day, and it was snowing hard, it was raining and it was icy. It was everything but the kitchen sink, you might say. My brother, who was on leave from the Navy, and his wife and little boy were expected, but their bus skidded off Norfolk Bridge. It was in all the papers. They turned up just as we were coming out of the church, St Martins, in the Lewes Road. They had been lucky enough to get off unhurt and catch a taxi from Shoreham. It was snowing, it was gales, and Charles was kneeling behind me holding onto my veil so it wouldn't go sky high, and every-body was saying, 'Oh, it's so nice to see you Fred.' It didn't matter about me. I was standing there shivering and everybody was talking to him.

I had to go back up the hill to change and it was so icy we couldn't get up there. We had to go the long way round. Our reception was held in the hall next to the church, and we were all there except my gran. She couldn't get down the hill. She was eighty. So, we had to go up to her.

Her sister was in Brighton General. She'd had a stroke, and we went up to see her - me all in my gown and everything - and I gave her my bouquet and, oh, she was thrilled to see us. She couldn't remember my name. She was really a lovely old lady, like Nan. In those days, elderly people lived their own lives. There was no help - no social services - going round to see them, as they do now, but they all seemed to survive on their own. She was really lovely. She was about eighty-six. She didn't last long afterwards, bless her old face.

We went down to Maidstone, but only for a weekend because Charles had to work on Monday. It was a beautiful place.

Once you're married, you're on your own. 'You've made your bed, you lie on it.' But, my mum was very good really, if I wanted help she was always there. But, just after the wedding I had a bout of pneumonia, and then she was taken ill - she had a kind of breakdown. So, I couldn't go back to work. I was looking after her, there was nobody else because my dad was at work. Then, I found I was expecting.

Coral was born on 13 October 1949 and weighed about five pounds. She was premature. She used to cry all hours. I had to keep feeding her, little drops at a time. She would wake up in the middle of the night, or at six o'clock when I'd just got off to sleep. These were things I hadn't been told about. Things you had to find out for yourself.

In 1949 my husband was earning just over three pounds a week and that was good money in those days. At the time, my father didn't earn as much. You didn't pay a lot of rent, but, then, we had the baby to think of and we had nobody to give us anything. A pram was fifteen pounds and a cot seven and we had to start from scratch. Now, they have credit cards, but then, if you hadn't got the money you couldn't have the goods, unless you used such things as Co-op cheques. So to build up our living wage, as you might say, I went back to work after the baby arrived. It wasn't a recognised thing in those days for a woman to go out to work. But, I did go back.

Job 6 & 7: Metropole & Ice-rink

In the mornings it was work at the Metropole as a chambermaid. Evenings, I was an usherette at the Ice Rink. There was the Brighton Tigers, there were ice shows, and I was selling programmes, ice creams and showing people to their seats. They were great people to work for. You got paid on commission. Whatever you sold you got a percentage of. We had uniforms. Firstly only black skirt and blouses, then they gave us satin skirts with yellow waistcoats - the Tigers colours. That was a great laugh - it was. Everyone all different shapes and sizes, looking for one to fit. You had a little hat, with a bow at the back, and we had one girl, she could never get it to sit properly. It always hung over her face and - Crash! she fell down the stairs. All we heard was the noise and someone screaming 'Get me up!' You should have seen people run to pick her up, and she said - 'Somebody pushed me!' We just laughed, we couldn't help it. It was so comical. On another occasion, one of the girls was crossing the ice to present a bouquet to a skater and she slipped and landed on her backside.

But, the Metropole - a top notch hotel, they were so straight-laced. Major Till was the manager there. He was a representative of Monaco, and always had the flag flying outside.

The main part of the first floor were old suites and very hard work. Victorian furniture, thick pile carpets - if you found a mark you had to ring the housekeeper and someone came to French polish it. Everything had to be just so, or at least it had to be then.

One day I was doing the rooms on the first floor, helping my friend Mo, and she said 'Don't go in there until I tell you. We've got Billy Eckstine.' He sang 'That Old Black Magic,' a big hit of the time. Eventually we went in and he had all his stuff on the dresser, and we had to move it and dust. There was a little tin with 'Blackcurrant Throat Pastilles' on the lid. Mo said, 'I've got a sore throat. I think I'll have one' She opened the tin and found that it was full of French letters, and she just looked and said, 'What are they?' and put the lid back on.

Hotel life is fascinating. You are seeing the side of life you know you could never afford. You get all the stars, but some are only stars on the outside, not on the inside. But, we had some good laughs, though we were always having to be straight-faced, and no noise, no talking in the corridors in case anybody was resting.

I left the Metropole in 1953, just before the Coronation. I believe Coral was ill and, of course, they didn't allow you time off in the main season from June onwards. I was home for only a few months. I got into the habit of just managing. There was never anything to spare. It was a rut really.

Job 8: Helliman Bowthorpe

Then, I went to work for Helliman Bowthorpe who made plastic identification tags for electric wiring. I started at Gatwick, but then they moved into Frederick Street in Brighton. As I lived in Franklin Road it was only a short walk to work. But, suddenly, they closed down the factory without warning.

Job 9: Pullars

I moved to Pullars and they made clocks. That was assembly work. I was there for a long time. Firstly, I was on face painting. I had to make sure that all the numbers were visible - they were printed on - and paint in mistakes. When the firm was bought out by Smith's I was moved to face inspection. I had to check that all the dials were correct. Then, it was back to the assembly line.

By now Coral was ten. And after spending a holiday with my sister-in-law in Bucks, we returned and I found I was expecting Chris. He was born on 14th August 1960. Since '59 Charles had been working for the Kemptown Brewery. Then, he went on to the Schools Service as a window cleaner. First, it was window cleaning, then relief assistant, and that was how he started in schools. And where he went, we went. But, after leaving Smith's I went to work as a home help.

Job 10: Home Help

The majority of people I worked for were disabled. They couldn't do their housework or shopping. But, if I did shopping I couldn't do any cleaning, if I cleaned their living quarters, I did nothing else. I could only change curtains if they were low windows. If they had family I wasn't allowed to touch their rooms.

There was an old lady who lived in Appledore Road in an upstairs flat. She used to keep coal in her bath. The coal man came once a fortnight and she used to say to him, 'Come up'. And he dumped the coal in the bath. There was nowhere else to put it. She had a fire night and day, and her flat was always full of smoke.

Mrs Robinson lived in Dartford Avenue and she walked on crutches and lived in an upstairs flat. She didn't like you Hoovering her carpets, you had to scrub them on your hands and knees. I had another old lady from Moulescoomb I visited, and one day I went in and she got all these curtains down - she had big French windows in her flat - and said

'Can you wash my curtains?'

'Do you want me to take them to the launderette'

'No, do them in the bath'

I stood there washing these curtains, great big things, leaning over the bath. I could have taken them to the launderette and done them in about a quarter of an hour. But, she wouldn't have that. I had to wash them by hand in her bath. This lady, when it came to her cleaning day, always had an invisible friend who moved all her furniture. She would say, 'I want you to do the sitting room today - my friend came in last night and moved all the furniture'. She would never say who it was or where they came from. And she was supposed to have emphysema. And I would have to push it all back.

Guys Hospital

I left the home help service when my son went into Guys Hospital. He was nearly ten. It was a very serious operation - to have his lung removed. Of course, he had to have someone with him all the time. I told the Home Help I was going and they wouldn't give me time off. So, I just took it.

I slept in the hospital. I had a lovely room and I helped the children. It was the Christopher Block, and I was just down the corridor from his ward. It was a beautiful room. And I had the same food as the children. Gorgeous.

They told him that when he had the operation he'd have to go down on the lift and through the tunnel to the new block, and he asked the nurse, 'Will you come with me?'

She was a black girl and she was a darling to him. He absolutely idolised her. And she held his hand all the way there, and then had to go down and bring him back. The operation took seven and a half hours and then he was moved to an isolation ward. He was in a pneumonia tent with big blocks of ice behind him and there was a porter just to look after him.

When they were changing his tubes I had to go out. So, I used to walk to Southwark. I think I knew every square inch before I left. I knew where the churches were, where everything was. I used to disappear into a church and sit and pray for hours that he would be alright. Every time I went in: 'Oh God, let him be alright'.

The doctors, the nurses - they were wonderful people, really wonderful. You couldn't wish for better attention. And the children there - oh, they were noisy - those that could run about or go round and round on the bikes. There was a little boy called Harry who became very friendly with my son. He asked me

'What's wrong with Chris? Why can't he run about?'

'Because he's got tubes attached to him.'

'Oh I had those when they took the arrow out of my eye.'

So I asked the nurse, 'What's the matter with Harry?'

'Oh, he was playing cowboys and Indians and an arrow went through his eye.'

I said to him, 'What were you doing?'

He said, 'Nuffink. I just stood there.'

Chris went into hospital on my birthday, 6 April, and came out at the beginning of June. When I came back I went and saw the Home Help people and they told me that I shouldn't have taken time off, and that was it. I lost my job.

Jobs as they came

I was at the catering unit at Sussex University for a while, but for evenings only. I couldn't work during the day because my son need looking after.

By now my husband was caretaker at Stanmer School, so we lived in the house on site, and I went to work in the school. It was the known thing that the wife helped the husband. I had my own work to do - to clean the headmaster's and secretaries' offices, and the corridor, and the main polished staircase. And then to help clean the hall. Every night something different to do - so many class-rooms and corridors.

Charles was caretaker there for 14 years. But, when my father died we moved back to Brighton.

Turning points

Christopher started Westlain Grammar School in September 1971. Coral was to be married on the 18th - but, on the 12th my father died. It was too late to cancel the

wedding, so he was buried on the Thursday and she got married on the Saturday.

Some ten years earlier, my father had been working on the police house being built at Craven Vale. He was painting the under part of the roof - the eaves - and the ladder broke and threw him backwards. The garden was all rubble and, oh - he was in a state. His back was like the map of the world.

He was about fifty-six. A solicitor tried to get him compensation, but he didn't get a penny. Apparently the owner of the firm had died, and the son was in the process of selling up, and the people who were going to take over hadn't signed anything, and - there was no insurance. He was in hospital for quite a time. Both his legs were damaged, and when he started to get about he found his sight was blurred. Then, gradually, it went, and he was registered blind. But, it's surprising what a blind person can do. I think a disabled person can often do more than an able bodied one - it's will power. My father walked with a stick, and he used to go to the Langton Club, run by the National Association for the Blind, along Preston Road. They were very good to him there.

They had been married for nearly fifty years. It's a lifetime, and she never grumbled about anything - 'I'm here, and I've got to get on with it' - and that's all there was to it. She came to stay for a few weeks after he died and then I came home one day and here's her bags packed in the hall.

'I'm going home,' she said, 'I'm not being a burden to you. I've got my own home,' and she went. But, she was taken ill and was with us for quite a time, and went home and was taken ill again, and went into hospital at Hove. It was a strain getting to Hove, so Charles got a transfer to the annexe of Patcham Fawcett School, the old Hanover School, in Coleman Street.

I used to get her a bit of shopping on the way home and on this day I arrived and her neighbour, Nora, called across the road, 'Your mother's curtains aren't drawn.' I went cold. 'Mum should be up by now, surely she should?' And I opened the door. 'She's got no fire on - what the devil's she doing? She's not overslept this late?' And I went upstairs - and she was dead in her bed.

I think she'd been trying to get out of bed and just died. It was a shock. I don't remember going from the house and across the road to a friend's. But, I rang everybody I could think of. My daughter turned up with the baby, and my son turned up, and my husband - in the space of a few minutes, I phoned everybody I could think of.

My friend said, The first person you spoke to, you shouted, 'If you don't think she's dead you'd better come and have a look'. Then you just went back - and the next thing I knew you had opened all the curtains.

I suppose in my own mind, I was thinking, 'If I pull the curtains back, she'll be here.'

I had a bag of shopping - weekend bits and pieces - and - 'What am I going to do with it?' My husband said that all I could say was, 'What did she want to die for?'

Chris took the shopping home and my daughter stayed with me until the doctor came. Then, she said, 'You're not stopping here any longer,' and she almost pushed me out the door. She gave me the baby to push home. As if 'If you'll push her, you'll go.'

Personally speaking

I'm not one for dressing up. As long as I look nice when I go out, that's as much as I bother. I've got some nice clothes but since my husband had to give up work we don't go out anywhere much. I've got a lot of jewellery, but I rarely wear it. I've got a beautiful set of pearls which a friend bought me for my pearl wedding, but I rarely wear them.

Any sort of book- if it's interesting, I'll read it. It's a PD James at the moment. I get them from the library - I belong - we all do. My children love reading.

Sometimes television can go over my head while I'm reading. But, I do like a lot of the travel programmes. I like Coronation Street and Eastenders, but the Australian and American soaps, I can't stand. Last year, my son took me to London to see Miss Saigon. I loved it. He took me to see Joseph and his Amazing Technicolour Dreamcoat and I loved that too. And Evita. He knows I like the theatre.

I couldn't judge people. I mean, the colour of a person's skin couldn't worry me. My Mum always said when we were small, 'Never laugh at anyone's shortcomings, because you never know what's going to happen to yourself.'

I have a very good friend, who's coloured, who used to come up the road with her beautiful, young daughter, who is white-skinned - and she used to get so cross. People would talk to the child as though she wasn't there. They'd say, 'Oh, are you taking her home then?' She would answer, 'Yes - we're going home to have our tea.'

I don't quarrel with people if I can help it. But I have got a very bad temper. I used to throw things once upon a time, but I don't do that now. My son, when he was young, used to make us laugh. He would say to everybody, 'Don't say anything to Mammy, she's got her cross face on'.

My dad was in the Labour Party. On voting days they used my mum's front room as a committee room, and she would supply the tea and cakes. Dad used to do the counting for them, until he lost his sight. My mother's family were all Liberal. My grandad was a rank Liberal, they could do no wrong. But, it washes over me like water. It would take a lot to get me to join a political party. I can't stand listening to them.

Andrew Bowden - he's a Conservative - he comes to our church, if we've got anything on. He's a very nice man and his wife's a lovely lady. When he walks in, he always says, 'Oh not you again!' - because my son Charles is a verger, you see? And Mr Lepper, the Mayor, he was my son's teacher at the Grammar School - we met him the other day and he said 'We can't keep on meeting like this'. A very nice man.

St Martins with St Wilfrids - I've belonged to all my life, near enough. In the women's group we do flower arranging for the church and make things for our fetes. Last year, I made little fans decorated with artificial flowers, and needle cases, and some pot pourri hats. I sit with the rest of the girls and we make our own Christmas cards.

My husband and I used to go folk dancing. We belonged to the English Folk Dance and Song society. We would go with friends of ours - they did barn dances - John and Gwen, who used to call. And Charles set up the equipment. We had real good fun there.

In the summer the Folk Dance Society would take over the whole of Sidmouth in Devon and run workshops. We would have a really good time. There's a beautiful garden - it belonged to the Duke of Cambridge - all along the cliff tops - beautiful rose gardens - and when we weren't dancing we would go there to rest.

We've been abroad for quite a few holidays. We went to Oberammagau and saw the play - 1990, the last time it was on. We were on a tour and the tickets were included, and it was absolutely fantastic. We stayed in a farm-house in Unter - Unter - ammagau. Oberammagau is a little village, and everybody in the village has a part in the play except the very old and the very young.

It's a purpose-built theatre, for this one play. Your ticket has your row and door - there's doors all around - and when you enter the stage is filled with people - the choir - all the villagers apart from the actors.

It moves right from the Christ's birth to his death, and they give you little tableaux - they act it out. We were sitting in the front row, and there's sunshine, birds flying and planes going overhead - and we come to the Garden of Gethsemane, and on the stage there is only one tree. And Judas condemns Jesus Christ and they give him his bag of silver. He hooks his scarf around the tree and hangs himself. And then they bring in Christ for Pilate to condemn - and the birds stop. There's just a little bit of sunshine. And I said to Charles, 'Hasn't it gone cold?' and he said, 'Yes, it has'. I felt I was getting the shivers. And as they bring him in with the cross, the sun went in. They tied him to the cross and as they did it went absolutely black. All the lights were on - you couldn't see a bit of sky - and there wasn't a bird or a plane to be heard. And then, as soon as they said the words of the Resurrection, the sun came out and the birds started singing and a plane went over. It seemed as if everything were made to order. I've never seen anything like it. It was fantastic.

Afterwards we were waiting for our coach, and there was this ordinary little bike propped against a lamp post, and Joseph came walking across the road and said 'Bus?' and we

said 'Yes' and he said 'Bye' and rode off. Those villagers who have jobs have time off to do their stint on the stage and then it's back to work.

PART THREE

ONCE UPON A TIME

Some you win, some you loos

Once upon a time we used to win the Loo of the Year Awards. We've won it twice. I was told, the other day, there is only a staff of forty sweeping the streets, picking up the rubbish, and also keeping the toilets clean. Forty people to cover the whole town!

With the old Corporation, there was some-body in every toilet. Now the Disableds at The Steine is still open, but the public side is closed. The Savoy's closed... The Bastion is closed... The Level... Churchill Square... .

My husband and I were near the Market loo recently and he went in, and when he came out he said, 'It's absolutely filthy!' Then a lady came across the road and said, 'You work in there, don't you?'

'No - I used to'

'It's filthy!'

She was really annoyed. I said ' Well don't complain to me.'

Goodbye to all that

We never got anywhere with FOCSA. Because we were over sixty they wouldn't pay us redundancy money. They said they didn't pay it to over sixties. In fact, quite a few of us were over age.

The Union tried, but the bosses didn't want to know. They were ready to take it to ACAS but, apparently, it wouldn't have done any good. The firm were perfectly in their rights not to pay. Of course they did know our ages when they took us on, so they should have paid us. But they didn't. They got away with it.

Re-employment

FOCSA have gone now, completely. I don't know whether the Council cancelled the contract or they went broke. There's a new firm, Ecovert South. They advertised in July 1995. I was told they had taken on people and I just asked. Next thing I knew, I was working again.

The Union never helped me at all. I asked if they would help us by trying to get us money, because we'd been working for FOCSA all that length of time, and all they told me was they couldn't do anything because I was over age. So, that was the end of that.

I rang the man here, and he gave me the number of somebody in London, and I rang them. And then the collector of our money, he came to see me with this long paper to fill in. I filled it in, and I never heard any more. And I kept following up, used to ring the chappie from here practically every week and all I got was, 'Well, we're doing our best, we're doing our best.' And that was it. That was all I got. I never got any satisfaction at all.

FOOTNOTE

Brighton Council's point of view

Under the 1988 Local Government Act councils were forced to put many of their services out to tender. The process, known as Compulsive Competitive Tendering or CCT, means that private companies can bid to run local council services, and the council is basically obliged to take the lowest bid.

One of the first services to be privatised in this way was street and public toilet cleansing. This was won by the Spanish company FOCSA, who took over the contract in 1990.

In 1994 the council, in an imaginative response to tendering legislation, began putting together a large partnership deal to keep all the town's 'Contract Services' together as a single partnership with a large private company.

This was done to achieve lower costs, to integrate services to residents (for instance street sweepers working with refuse collectors), to secure the best possible terms of employment for council staff and to provide extra investment for the town.

This process, known as 'Hosting', went to open competition. It was won by the company Ecovert South, who between April and June 1995 took over a range of council services, including the street and toilet cleaning contract from FOCSA.

1994 was also the year in which the council was forced to close a number of public toilets and replace some of them with 'superloos.' The combination of cuts to local spending forced on councils by central government, the unsuitability of some old buildings and their terrible vandalism made this controversial proposal inevitable. The bill for vandalism, repairs and maintenance was running at close on a third of a million pounds a year.

However, the council has managed to upgrade many of its loos and put attendants into five of our busiest conveniences, as well as introducing seven vandal-proof automatic

superloos at strategic locations around the town. All this has been achieved at a considerable saving to local tax payers.

Could I just take this opportunity to add how delighted I am that Joan Parsons has got back the job she lost when FOCSA ran the contract.

Steve Bassam
Leader of Brighton Council
10 November 1995