

08/03/06

NOSTALGIA

HOLMELEIGH

"WISH ME LUCK AS YOU WAVE ME GOODBYE"

AS I turned the corner into the long drive I saw my mother give a last wave as she disappeared into the distance.

I felt very vulnerable and young in my new-look candy-striped dress, very lost too, as the buildings of the children's homes loomed up in front of me, rows of cottages on either side, and then the main block with its day nursery and dormitories.

Everyone around me seemed too busy and too occupied to notice a gauche young girl.

I swallowed nervously and knocked at the main entrance door.

To my relief the face of the girl who opened it was familiar.

Joyce, my friend, had worked at the homes for quite a long time.

She was older than me by three years and came from the same Lincolnshire village.

We walked up the passage into the heart of the building.

There I was introduced to Miss Blackburn, and Miss Scott, her assistant.

Miss Blackburn was a blustery, red-faced, mannish person with a forceful manner and mien.

Miss Scott was a quiet mouse-like character, quite under Miss Blackburn's dominance.

I felt in awe of both of them.

At that moment I was very conscious of only being 16 and very na?.

Miss Blackburn gave a command, and a thin willowy girl placed my uniform into my arms.

Joyce escorted me to my bedroom, which was upstairs in the top storey, and opened off a long corridor.

It was plainly furnished with just a dressing table, wardrobe, bed and chair.

It was to become very familiar over the next two years, the place where I sobbed for many nights with homesickness, where I met with hopes and aspirations; the place that saw the change of a young, shy country girl into a more worldly-wise young woman.

I went downstairs and joined 15 or so members of staff for tea.

Miss Blackburn, as 'mother', poured it out.

Joyce had the evening off and she persuaded me to go to the pictures, I think it was a cowboy film, but we never saw the end as we had to be in by ten o'clock, Miss Blackburn saw to that.

No boyfriend was allowed within hailing distance of the homes, time was strictly kept!

They deposited you at the end of the drive after a farewell hurried kiss.

It was a regular thing to see couples separating and becoming disentangled and racing off at the last minute!

The next day, after breakfast, I donned my uniform, a yellow dress with frilled cuffs and apron, and a stiff starched cap.

I followed instructions and went round the dormitory waking up sleepy toddlers.

They all had to be dressed, and then potted in the downstairs toilet.

There were little rows of tin chambers on a cold concrete floor, several were howling and some were inert and sleepy.

Breakfast mostly comprised of porridge and some bread and butter.

After breakfast, if it was inclement weather, the children were swept off to the playroom where a large fire would be burning, some not quite walking, others making unsteady progress round the room.

In the summer-time the toddlers played outside with toys, or were taken in huge prams seating eight, for country walks.

I soon learned what an ordeal this was.

Little mites had to have their own coats, hats, gloves etc on.

Often these were missing(!) although named.

En route, frequent stops were made to wipe eight pairs of noses and to adjust leggings and pulled-off shoes.

Finally, there was a thankful rest on a convenient roadside seat.

After lunch rest beds were placed in the sun room and the children were coaxed to go to sleep.

Some of the livelier ones refused to succumb and it seemed a long hour to the girl on duty.

Then it was toilet time again and further play, followed by tea, more day room play, and finally bath night and bedtime, which involved going upstairs.

One summer the water pressure was extremely low and this meant carrying buckets of hot water to the bathroom.

It was extremely hard work, particularly if there was a staff shortage and it was hot weather.

One of the most onerous duties was standing in the sluice room with a mask on dealing with soiled nappies!

The nappies were then collected in bags and taken to the laundry on the premises.

The children's home at Horncastle was self-supporting.

Beside the above mentioned laundry, there was a cobbler's store, meat and groceries, and a hospital.

The hospital took in the children who needed extra nursing, and had a matron and nurses.

Many people were employed in various forms of work.

There were electricians, joiners, a butcher, a cobbler, house mothers and fathers, and storemen etc.

These were all presided over by a matron and superintendent, who lived in a house on the drive.

There were about 12 cottages containing children from five years upwards.

The nursery held a further 30, and there were about 12 babies.

It was a hive of industry and I was conscious of being only one small cog in a large machine!

And I was always conscious of this in my work.

There was an hierarchy.

Miss Blackburn and Miss Scott were at the top, and then the senior girls, and finally the beginners, like myself, about 20 of us in all!

We worked different shifts, also night shifts which I hated, as I couldn't sleep in

the daytime.

I shared a bedroom for a time and my companions were noisy and inconsiderate.

How I loved my days off!

I couldn't wait to get into the bus that meandered through the Lincolnshire Wolds.

It was a whole day without any 'clocking in', a whole day to renew family ties and friendships.

It always went so quickly.

We went home the night before and came back on the morning after.

Sometimes, however, we had to do overtime and then our leave was shortened.

I learned so much in my time there.

I grew up realising that people weren't always very nice, that children could be terribly abused and unwanted.

The first painful recollection was seeing the pathetic little bundle of clothing that accompanied each new admission.

On the day of departure these few possessions had to go with them, what a story they told!

There was the little boy with severe abdominal burns whose step-mother had held him against a red hot fireguard!

There was the tiny mites suffering from malnutrition and near starvation, one locked up in a cupboard for hours!

Many were bruised and covered in sores.

There was the little family whose sister had been starved, beaten to death and buried in the garden.

Then there were the abandoned babies - little Gussy Beach, so named because he had been found in the sands at Skegness in August.

Johnny Sands was an alternative name suggested for him.

He got adopted.

I wonder what his present name is?

Elizabeth, put in a sanitary bin at a cinema in Grimsby, was only discovered when a cleaner heard her faint cries.

She was luckier than some, her mother was traced and confessed that her husband was at sea and she had had an affair with another man.

Her husband agreed to keep Elizabeth and she came to fetch her home, a slim pretty girl accompanied by her mother.

Then there was baby Ruth, brought in by her mother, a single parent, a German Jewess who'd lost many of her family in Germany, due to the holocaust.

Ruth was a blonde, lovely baby.

It was so hard for her mother to part with her.

But there was no future, she had to work, and already adoptive parents had been found, also Jews.

She begged to hold her one last time and a drama unfolded in that nursery that day.

Ruth's mother went out to Canada to a new life and Ruth became Judith and lived in London.

So many stories, so many lessons to be learned by a na? little country girl.

There were babies who had to be nursed and ministered to when different

illnesses swept through the nursery, babies that died.  
The first person I saw dead was a six month old baby.  
We took him on his last journey home to his birth town.  
The sight of him laid in that little white coffin haunted me for days.  
But we had laughs too.

Twenty teenage girls going out to our first dances, to the cinema and other meeting places; twenty girls generally having fun in spite of the strict discipline that ensued; feeding, caring, nursing, sick children through epidemics of whooping cough, measles etc, and gastro enteritis amongst the babies bottle fed, some of whom we lost; twenty girls learning all the time about the challenges of life.

I was seeing and hearing things that, as a quiet country girl and an only child, I had never experienced; making friends and meeting boys. The boy I met eventually became my husband.

I was at the home for two years, but during that time I had made the transition from girlhood to womanhood.

I walked up that long drive for the last time, under the row of lime trees.

I didn't look back until the end when I turned and waved goodbye to my closest friend and to all the many memories I had forged.

She blew me a kiss and wished me luck on the next stage of my journey into life.

MAVIS ATKIN