

Aged 96 in
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LIFE IN A SUFFOLK VILLAGE 1920'S & 30'S

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My earliest memories are probably from about three years old when Grandma Eves came to live with us I remember her very well, she died when I was six.

I was the eldest of four girls and started school when I was five years old; this was the normal age in the 1920's. I can vividly remember being in the infants, we wrote on slates with a slate pencil and I must say I can't remember a time when I couldn't read or write.

We lived in a two-bedroom cottage in a lane with a brook running past. Mum and Dad had the big bedroom along with my two youngest sisters in single beds; my other sister and I were in the back room (some people with bigger families used to sleep three at the top and three at the bottom). When my Auntie came to stay she slept in a single in our room, I can't remember how we slept when our other Grandma came to live with us I know she was in the double bed so either I or my sister must have slept with her. She was bedridden for three years an unheard of thing today, she died when I was eleven.

Toilet facilities were very primitive of course as all were in villages before the war; the lavatory was down the garden in a wooden shed and consisted of a wooden seat with a hole in the middle and bucket beneath - even the school toilets were buckets. These were emptied weekly mainly during the night and were known as night soil collectors. Of course there were no toilet rolls in those days only newspaper and our weekend job was to cut the paper into squares and put them on a string; it would be the late 1950's before my parents had a flush toilet but it was still outside though a lot nearer to the house.

The games we used to play don't exist today the traffic is too great, there was whip & top, marbles, hoops that were either metal or wood and would be bowled along with a stick and everybody had a skipping rope, it's a pity they don't today as it is such good exercise. We also had a thick rope that would stretch across the road and several could skip at once. We all had balls which were played up against a wall.

We didn't have many clothes - three of most things, one at the wash and two to wear during the week and we always had to put our pinafores on when we came in.

School was alright, most things I was average at but not arithmetic, I was always having to write a hundred lines 'I must not talk in arithmetic'. I was threatened with the cane a few times. There is no comparison with school today, but at least we could all read, write and spell.

We didn't have a kitchen or electricity until I was twelve. The copper was in what became the living room, we then had a sink and tap - which was great and the copper was then moved into the new kitchen, this was going all day on wash days. As most things were white and made of cotton they all had to be boiled (no man made fibres). At one stage when Dad was out of work Mum had to take in washing to make ends meet, this came from one of the 'big' houses and included all the

sheets, the maids morning & afternoon caps & aprons that all had to be starched and ironed, of course. Mum would put down the cost of each item that would add up to less than 50p in today's money.

We all used to hate wash days as everywhere was upset, we had a fire in the front room on wash days. When I came in from school I used to have to scrub the kitchen floor which was all bricks, but I really didn't mind doing it.

We didn't have homework in those days so most of our time was free. My Saturday job was to clean all the shoes, which I liked doing, clean the front room, polish the lino and whiten the steps outside. We also had all of the cutlery to clean, using a board with emery powder on which you had to rub the knives up and down, as they were all steel they soon discoloured - not like today's stainless steel cutlery; forks and spoons were cleaned with a pink powder called 'plate powder'.

Our leisure time was spent mainly playing with the rest of the children in the lane. In the spring we would gather primroses and when we got home we would bunch them up and take them round to the neighbours. In summer it was blackberrying, we would stay out all day with a sandwich and a bottle of cold tea for our dinner, the owner of the local pub would give us about 1p a pound and they would be off to London on the evening train.

Before we had a tap put in we had to fetch our water from the pump up the lane, in hot weather it often dried up and we had to go to the pub for our water. We got water for general use from the brook that ran past our house and we also had water butts to catch rainwater.

During World War One my mother was in service with a Colchester family called Eardley-Russell who had a daughter, the 'Honourable Cynthia' who I was named after. When the Ladies Maid was unable to go with the family to the British Embassy in Stockholm my mother went instead, I don't know how long they were there but when she came back the Lady lent her a fur coat and they thought she was a spy.

When we were children we used to get on Mum's bed and she would teach us Swedish words.

We were lucky living in the country we always had good food; most people had allotments and their own gardens so there was always plenty of vegetables and different fruits. In the winter chickens didn't lay, or very little, so when there was plenty in the summer they were put in a bucket in a solution called 'water glass' and this would preserve the eggs, but they were only suitable for cooking. As they were so scarce in the winter when Mum did get any fresh eggs she used to cut them in halves so that we got half a boiled egg each. We kept chickens but of course they didn't lay in winter either.

In winter we used to do toast by the fire and tasted far nicer than under the grill today, it was then covered with dripping - it was lovely, no nice dripping today as there is no fat on the meat. We had lovely suet puddings of all sorts - jam roly-poly, treacle, spotted dick and apple puddings & pies. Today suet puddings are frowned upon, but they never did us any harm we thrived on it, as did other families. Mum used to make lovely Yorkshire Puddings, she made all kinds of jam to last through the year also bottled fruit that were sealed in 'Kilner' jars.

We also had a dog and cats, no tinned food for them just the scraps and leftovers.

One thing I always wanted was a pair of black patent leather ankle strap shoes but it was only better off children or where there was an only child who had them. Some of our clothes came from jumble sales or better off families.

Christmas was a lovely time we had a real tree with real candles! What a fire hazard it was. The Christmas pudding always had brandy poured over it and then it was set alight, chestnuts were roasted by the front room fire and of course we always listened to the King's speech (George V).

We all went to Sunday school in our best clothes and did not play out in the lane on a Sunday, no needlework was done, but you could knit and you weren't allowed to cut your nails, I have to admit to this day I still do not file my nails on a Sunday, I don't know why.

We had a very good shopping centre with about 20 shops which of course sold everything you needed (sorry to say, today there is only one now - it's very sad). It was nothing to weigh out a pound of butter and then fill your paraffin can - no hand washing in those days. Friday and Saturday nights were very busy, people would come in from the surrounding smaller villages it was the days you went to pay your bill at the butchers, the errand boy would come round each morning for your order it was then delivered soon after or could be the next morning. The Co-op vans from Colchester (nine miles away) came round three times a week with bread and on Monday's the oil man, as we had oil lamps in those days, in summer most cooking was done using oil ovens and stoves, in winter the kitchen range was used. Milk was delivered twice a day, straight out of the can and ladled into the jug or basin you had left on the step.

All personal washing was done in the kitchen but when I started work, at 14, in the local silk factory Mum used to bring me a jug of water upstairs (all bedrooms had a wash stand with jug and bowl). Getting a bath was quite a big job, first the copper had to be lit to boil the water then ladled into the tin bath which was long and rounded at each end, it then had to be emptied in the same way. When we were little we had a small bath in front of the fire and we all took turns, as I was the eldest I went first.

In winter Dad would warm our beds with the warming pan, hot coals were taken from the fire and put in the pan it was then moved up and down in the bed. We also put bricks in the oven when we came home from school and later they would be taken to bed wrapped in a piece of blanket and would stay warm most of the night.

My Dad was an apprenticed trained carpenter who worked for the local builder in the village; it was a high-class firm and did work in the surrounding area. Dad used to do jobs for the Conservative M.P. for our area who at that time was the well-known Mr R A Butler.

Our house was owned by the firm my Dad worked for and the rent paid during the 1930's was about 5 shillings (25p) a week and was paid quarterly on quarter days - Lady Day 25 March; Midsummer 21 June; Michaelmas 29 September and Christmas Day.

Coal was delivered weekly costing about 2 shillings (10p) a hundredweight (50K), usually by horse and cart.

People didn't have holidays in those days, at least not in our area. The men had Bank Holiday Monday off, for which they lost a days pay, they were really leisure days as all shops were closed with the exception of Good Friday when the Baker's opened until 10.00am just to sell Hot X Buns.

The only time we went to the seaside was on the Sunday school outing that went either to Walton on the Naze or Dovercourt, near Harwich, being the nearest to us. Even though we lived in a village we had plenty to occupy us during the later 1930's we went to Keep Fit classes, Country Dancing, the 'village hop' on a Saturday, Ladies Cricket team, Girl Guides and I had been in the Church Choir for many years so of course one evening was choir practice (when I came to York I was in St Paul's, Holgate for over 30 years). When we were younger we belonged to the Girls Friendly Society run by the church, the Young Peoples Fellowship run by the chapel and the Band of Hope run by the Free church.

The period in the late 30's seemed to be so peaceful; everything seemed to be running smoothly, the price of things seemed to be stable at that time. I would say most people were in work, at least in our area. By 1938 war was looming and this year we were issued with gas masks - or maybe we just went to try them on - can't quite remember.

Our village is partly in Suffolk and Essex separated by the River Stour that runs through the village and so we had a policeman on each side of the river. They either walked or rode their bikes on their rounds; people treated them with respect, as they really were the law. They were fathers of our friends so we knew them very well; they would give kids a clout if they thought it necessary and when they got home the fathers would give them another.

I have to say during this primitive period none of us ever caught any disease, apart from the usual children's ailments, and I can't remember much 'hand washing' when all the water had to be carried from up the lane.

I think we were very lucky to have been young in the 1920's & 30's, maybe our parents might have thought differently but even for them it was a far better life than they had at the turn of the century.

We had a very carefree life with no worries, always plenty of food. We were lucky living in the country; people living in mining areas and the slums in many areas would have a different story to tell.

This is just an insight into the way we lived during that period, today's children will think it was not a good time, but we knew no different and had a happy life. The main thing was your mother was always at home and be there for you. It must be very sad for some children today to come home to an empty house; we would have been most upset.

I have now lived in York for sixty years having met a York boy during the war and later marrying him.