

Winnie Jeffs



**Fleetville Diaries**  
the local history people

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Fleetville Diaries Oral History Project

**Winnie Jeffs**

**Born December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1917 in St Albans**

**Interviewed by Liz Bloom, July 2015**

My maiden name was Winnifred Mary Ware and I was born in St Albans while the family was living at 14, Arthur Road. Unfortunately, my mother died in 1918 and I was brought up until I was 7 by my maternal grandmother who lived in the Vauxhall/Lambeth area in London. My two sisters, who were older than me by 2 and 4 years, were also with relations in London until they were school age. We were named Phyllis May, Elsie Maud and Winifred Mary – all Ms!

My sisters returned to Arthur Road before me – that was before my father remarried - and the neighbours would look out for them. One of them would go round and cut the bread and light the gas mantles before they came home from school. One neighbour did the laundry and another would have them down to tea (Mrs Cole, next to Vernon's,). If anyone was ill in Arthur Road, you'd see one neighbour going across with a tray to their house.

When my father remarried in 1924, he got us all back together again in Arthur Road. For me it was very hard because I had been an only child in London, with 3 uncles and aunts and Grandma and Grandad, so I'd been spoiled. Anyway, in those days there was no choice; you just got on with life.

My dad was a Londoner and when he was a child he had TB so he was admitted to St Thomas's Hospital. When he left hospital at the age of 12, he had to go down to his grandmother's in Dorset so she could build him up. When he returned to London, he went to night school and joined a printing firm as a runner. I know that he worked in Luton before he joined Smith's Printing Works where he stayed until the 1914-18 War. He later went to the Campfield Press. He was first a Compositor, later becoming a Reader. He was a crippled man and had to wear high boots and as he got older; it must have been more difficult for him to stay on his feet all day so that's probably why he became a Reader.

Most of the people who lived in Arthur Road were 'in the print'; that's how they got their houses, presumably. The houses that we lived in on the 'even number' side were a little bit bigger than the ones on the other side. There were two steps up to the front door; straight into the first room; through the door into the kitchen; through the next door into the scullery. Round the back, the outside toilet was on the corner and then there was the coal cellar (bunker). We had gas downstairs but we didn't have gas upstairs so we children would take a candle upstairs at bedtime and the last one to get undressed would have to blow the candle out! We had a tin bath hanging outside the back door and we had a copper on the stove for heating the water. We burned all the rubbish in that stove; old plimsolls, you name it! It was usually Fridays when we filled the copper with a bailer and we all bathed in the scullery. We took turns and I was quite often the first one; my sister Phyllis used to take charge of the bailing and re-filling and so on. We all had long hair so we had a hair wash too. We would sit around the fire with our backs to it to dry our hair.

Because Arthur Road was a cul-de-sac, we all played out there and sometimes sat on the curb. There was nearly always a mum sitting at the front door so if anybody got hurt or anything there was always a mum there. We did all sorts of things; hoops, whips and tops, skipping, of course, and fag cards... all sorts. We never went on a bus or anything; we'd walk. But I had a bike even before I moved from Arthur Road because one of the ladies that lived down the road, her daughter grew out of hers, and so she handed it on to me. I must have been about 10 then.

We kept chickens in the back garden until the rats got them! It was one of my jobs when I came home from school if my stepmother wasn't there; we had to prepare the mash potato peelings and feed the chickens and get the eggs. Most people in Arthur Road kept chickens; I can't even remember anyone keeping rabbits, funnily enough.

We had a lamplighter to light the gas street lamps. Everybody came with a horse and cart; the milkman from Oakley's, the baker (Bush's), Field's the oil people who delivered paraffin, soap and soda, and the vegetable man. We even had a muffin man! As soon as the horses dropped their dung, there was a fight because everybody wanted it for their gardens; it would be boys or men with their shovels.

We never had any food at school in those days and at home we mostly ate stuff that people grew in their gardens. My father had an allotment which was up at the Ash Path, which is now Ashley Road, so he grew most of the food we ate. Also, if one of the neighbours had a lot of cabbages, they'd sell you one for a small fee – tuppence or something like that. I remember going round to houses before I went to school to buy a cabbage or whatever they were selling. So we were really quite self-supporting; generally, I mean, not just our family. Everybody in Arthur Road helped one another. We were pretty well fed; my father had a good job and my stepmother was a very good manager. No, we didn't have a lot to complain about really.

At the end of Arthur Road is Bycullah Terrace. On the corner of Arthur Road was a shop that sold shoes and also took in repairs; next to that was the butchers; next to that was Sarridges, the restaurant; next was a Dr Davies (I don't ever remember going there although I can remember him calling at home. He died quite suddenly); then there was the Post Office; then Blakeley's the sweet shop and tobacconist; then there was Bennington's on the end of Tess Road (now Lower Woodstock Road). Opposite Bennington's, where the Post Office is now, was a piece of grass. Later Dr Smythe had a house built on the corner of Royal Road. We would pop over to the Co-op Bakery on Hatfield Road for our bread; it was next to Mr Tuck's bicycle shop.

I can remember Ballito coming. I was at school and this pretty girl, very nicely dressed – not wearing boots like us; she was the daughter of this person, I presume from America, and she only came to school for about a fortnight. That was when the factory opened in Fleetville. It was a dead sort of place before that.

My father rented the house and I think it was a Mr Bastin who came round to collect the rent. Whether he owned the house, I don't know. They (the owners) used to do some decorating, you know, papering or whatever.

I went to Fleetville School where Miss Lewis was the headmistress in the Junior School. Of course, in those days you went on to 14. That was the year they altered schools and made secondary schools. There were about 40 girls from Camp School and Fleetville who didn't 'come into' any of it because we were nearly 14 and due to leave at Christmas. So we went to the newly-built Central School for just one term; it later became Sandfield School. I had a happy time at school and I didn't want to leave. I enjoyed sports such as netball and so on, and I enjoyed being taught anything.

I remember the day we moved to Castle Road. I remember the day because I had to take my brother to the playing field near Fleetville School and I was told that at 6 o'clock I could go back to 79 Castle Road. My father bought that house which was newly-built when we went in. Next door at number 81 was Mr George and he was the local decorator. It had a bathroom and three bedrooms; it was wonderful!

On the corner of Cape Road and Castle Road was Crouches which was a general store that sold everything. Then there was a shop on the corner of Sutton Road, on the other side, and that was Stanford's and he was a shoe mender but they also had a general store and sweetshop; you name it, they sold it. On the corner of Burleigh Road was Stanton's, the coal merchants. While I was living in Castle Road, the Co-op must have bought a house in Castle Road which I imagine they enlarged to build a garage for their vehicles. The Jew's shop was on the corner of Sutton Road and Castle Road opposite Stanford's; she sold clothes. Her son played in quite a famous band and I think he was called Joe.

In later life, when I ran a girls' club at St Julien's, I took them for a trip to the Co-op Dairy on Burleigh Road. It was very good even in those days. They showed us how they sterilised all the bottles. It was quite a place, really.

My sister Elsie was friendly with Joan Ryder because they were both Sunday School teachers at Trinity Church. When I left school, Joan encouraged me to apply to Heath and Heather for a job and my father encouraged me to write a letter to the Campfield Press where he worked. The job interviews were both for the same day! Anyway, on my way home from seeing both of these employers, I came down Stanhope Road and I saw a notice on W O Peake advertising jobs and I thought, "Well, I'll go in there!" That's the sort of child I was! So I went in there and the lady said, "Do you know anyone who works here?" and I said, "Yes, a friend of mine works here." So I got a job on January 5<sup>th</sup>, I think it was. I went home and said, "You needn't worry about me any more because I'm starting work at W O Peake's on Monday!" So, of course, my dad and my sister both had to send their apologies to the other firms. And that's where I worked until 1940.

At Peake's I was a Progress Chaser. I would have a heap of cards in my hand and a pencil. When the companies wanted to know how their orders were getting on, you had to find the coats and make sure you got them through. We had big ledgers and it was a girl's job to fill in the ledger. You could trace where your coats were in the factory if you looked at these ledgers. The railway man used to come at about 6.30pm for the last coats for the London train so we'd be dashing about collecting them up for him. Our customers were Peter Robinson, Marshall and Snelgrove, Selfridges, Dunns and so on; they were high class coats.

It was a very good place to work for. The factory was very clean and it was swept every day when we were out to lunch. It was sprayed too because, you see, there was a lot of dust because of the materials we used.

I hadn't been there long when we had to have a meeting to decide what they were going to do. At one point in the 1903s, trade was so bad that we had to vote whether we they would lay off half the staff or whether we should all take half a day off our agreed hours. Of course, we voted to keep everybody working. Peake's was very good; they were always a step in advance of the unions. We never had to ask for a pay rise; we always got the wage first. Nobody was in a union there, you see. It was a very good place to work for.

When the War started, Miss Washington, who was in charge, wanted to keep me so I went onto the machines to do padding and I did hand sewing on jackets. But it was no good, I still got called up!

I went to work at Hatfield Aerodrome at DeHavilland in the sheet metal store, right at the beginning of Mosquito manufacture. I had to learn about gauges and materials of different sorts, you know, bomb proof metal and so on. The secret part of the Mosquito was done at Salisbury Hall and the only thing I had

to do with Salisbury Hall when we would take the metal over there on lorries. We were only allowed to go as far as the door to deliver the metal; we weren't allowed beyond that. Various parts of the Mosquito were made in various parts of England. When we got in the orders for metal sheet we just sent it out to these places. But even our materials were dispersed; you got some stored at Lady Yule's stables at Hanstead and some at a nearby garden nursery, and so on.

We weren't bombed at all while I worked there although they reckon there was a bombing before I went there.

During the war, I stayed with my sister Elsie in Bernard Street because she was on her own. I didn't really leave Castle Road but my father wanted me to be with her.

When I went to work at Peake's, I got friendly with a girl who lived in Lancaster Road and I started to go out with her. She went to St Peter's Church where she belonged to the Girls' Fellowship and she asked me to go. My future husband was in The Boys' Fellowship so we met at St Peter's and we began courting. I was 17 when I first went out with him and it was some time before we got married. My future father-in-law said, "You can't get married when there's a war on!" but, of course, we did in the end. My address was still at Castle Road until I married him in 1943 and then I went to live at Bernard Street officially; my husband was sent to Burma so I didn't see him for two years. Elsie and I both lived together until the war ended because both our husbands were in the forces.

My husband joined up in 1940 and he was manning search lights on the East Coast – Norwich, Lowestoft - and after D Day, he was moved to the Hampshire Regiment and they were trained to cross the Rhine. But while he was home on leave, they crossed the Rhine, so the next thing he knew, he was given tropical kit and sent to Burma. While he was crossing India, the Japanese war ended. So he ended up in Burma rounding up what they called dacoits (people outside the law). He really was lucky!