

## Memories of the Acton Laundry Trade

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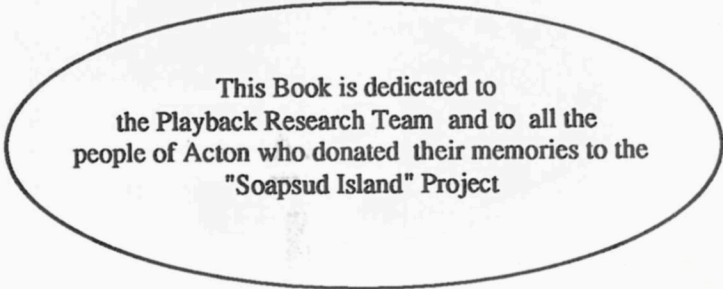
*We are the laundry girls  
The laundry girls are we.  
Washing powder round our faces,  
that's how it should be.  
Some say we're common,  
Common we may be,  
If it wasn't for us laundry girls,  
where would the rich men be ?*



**MATTOCK**  
P R E S S

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This Book is dedicated to  
the Playback Research Team and to all the  
people of Acton who donated their memories to the  
"Soapsud Island" Project

*The cover reproduces a view of the interior of the Thistle Laundry c. 1924.  
Photo by kind permission of Gunnersbury Park Museum.*

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## PLAYBACK AND REMINISCENCE

The Playback Company is part of a special community initiative of The Questors Theatre Ealing. It is concerned with the search for and sharing of Living Memory amongst local people.

Its first project focussed on the Acton Laundry Industry and, in the course of its researches, collected a large number of Reminiscence interviews. These were developed into the script for a play, "Soapsud Island", which was performed both at The Questors and at a number of old peoples' clubs, hospitals and centres.

The collection of reminiscences seemed to provide so unique a resource of local and oral history that Playback decided to publish it in book form rather than file it away when the play was over.

Space has made it impossible to include every single memory but hopefully this will be a representative selection. Whether these recollections are happy, nostalgic, grim or sad, they all recreate, with the freshness and frankness of first-hand experience, the world of Acton Laundry workers between the wars.

## WHY THE ACTON LAUNDRIES?

There were both historical and theatrical reasons for Playback deciding on Soapsud Island as its first project.

For people living in Acton today, there is little physical evidence of the laundry industry that once dominated the area. Indeed, the number of people who can remember what it was like is decreasing fast! A reminiscence project could help to preserve an important part of the borough's history before it was too late.

It was clear from our initial investigations that the presence of the industry had had a dramatic effect on the area. In their heyday, the laundries of Soapsud Island played a major role in the lives of the people living there. Not only did it provide many with their livelihood, but, because most of the employees were women, it affected their family lives, their social lives and, for some, it actually took over their homes.

## SOAPSUD ISLAND

Long-term residents of Acton may well have heard of "Soapsud Island". However, not all recent arrivals will know that this nickname for South Acton existed because the area was once the home of a large and thriving laundry industry. It was also called, at various times, "Starch Green", "London's Washtub" and as a reference to its imagined prosperity, "The Klondike".

The industry began to develop some time in the 1860s when Acton changed from a country village into a London suburb. Rows of little houses were built on what had been common farm land (including the Church Field - hence the road of that name ).Many of the first laundresses mentioned in Acton records for the 1860s lived in Bollo Bridge Road - a road which was, in time, to become the home of more laundries than any other in Soapsud Island.

In 1871, according to the census, there were some 53 laundries employing 364 people, the majority of whom were women.

Women had also been responsible for starting most of the laundries.They usually began by taking in washing at home. As businesses grew there was a need for increased space, so more and more of the houses and backyards were taken over for the purpose.Most members of the family became involved.

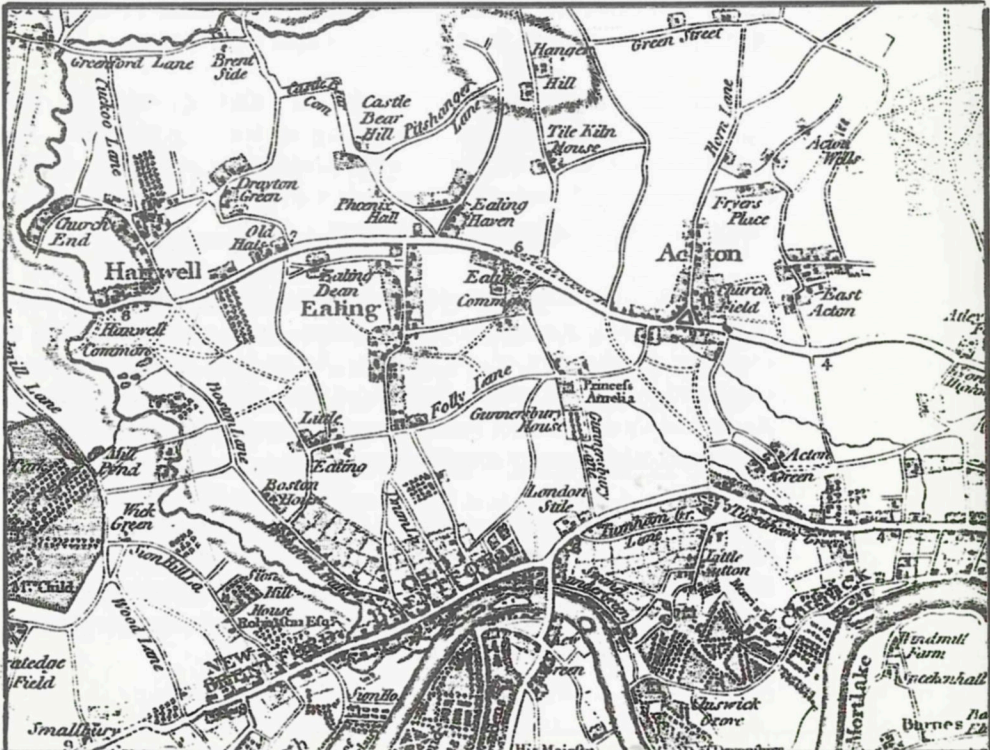
The number of laundries continued to grow as more people came to live in the spreading suburbs of West London: there were some 200 in existence by the turn of the century. At its peak, Soapsud Island employed over 3,000 people. Even more worked in related businesses: Acton had its own basket makers, soapmakers and suppliers of soda, starch and other laundry requirements.

The use of machines increased when Fred Townend and Co., a manufacturer of laundry machinery, opened its Bollo Road factory in 1902. By the 1920s, many laundries had coal- or gas-fired boilers driving their calenders, washing machines and hydros. Many also had gas or electric irons (electricity came to Soapsud Island in 1904).

However, life wasn't so good for the laundries during the First World War. Soap was in short supply, men were called up and women were needed to work in munitions factories.

At the same time, more regulations were introduced governing wages and conditions. By 1920, the number of laundries had started to decline as smaller businesses were unable to compete with the larger, more efficient ones.

Fig. 1a Acton 1786.



This decline intensified during the Second World War with the rationing of essential materials and a shortage of workers. Only 60 laundries were left when the war ended. Even then, the problems continued. Starch restrictions , for example , remained in force until 1952.

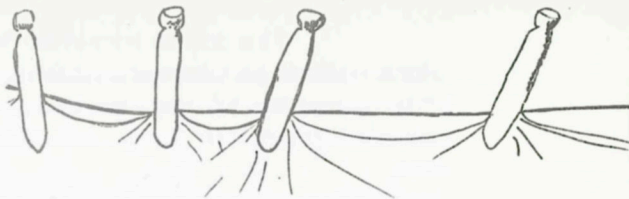
More importantly, the first laundrettes started appearing and domestic washing machines became available. The final blow was the Council's slum clearance programme which began around the same time. By 1970 the majority of Soapsud Island's terraced houses and laundries had been demolished.

Today, only a mere handful survive as going concerns.

Acton c.1924

Fig. 1b





INTRODUCTION :  
ACTON AND THE LAUNDRY INDUSTRY

“ There were fields all round Acton. Cows and lambs came through our turning because we lived off the main road.

It was an island of houses in green fields. We had a lot of fields down Acton Lane.”

\*

“ Acton had scores of laundries, all in the south of the town. There was hardly a street that had not got two or three of them. Most of the laundries were reached through an entrance with wooden doors between a row of houses. These gates had the name of the laundry painted on them.

At the bottom of my road, (Berrymead Gardens), was one of the biggest, the Curzon, which stretched to Winchester Street. On my way to school, I looked through the windows and could see the women and girls folding and ironing clothes. When the hooter sounded, they would all troop out, all wearing white pinafores.

I remember one named Mrs. Woodcock's Hand Laundry in Palmerston Road because she had a daughter, Barbara, who was the idol of the boys.

My first job, when I left school at fourteen, was to work for Eastmans, the country's biggest dyers and cleaners. One section was a better class of laundry. I worked in the curtain cleaning department. My job was to sort them out into different types, ready to be washed. Most were filthy, and, as I moved them, black dust flew everywhere.”

\*

“ I happened to be passing the Swan Public House when I heard an uproar. I thought, “What is going on there?”

Shouting and then the barman came, propelling this lady out. She was a rather short woman, but very broad-shouldered - I presume she was an ironer - and she was protesting loudly. She turned round and grabbed him by the legs, lifted him up and threw him back into the pub. Then she grabbed glasses and threw them at the mirrors. The landlord blew a whistle, then the police arrived and took her away.”



“ A Quick Walk Round the Mayfair Laundry..... we come in the back entrance, on the left-hand side. That’s where they deliver. There’s the sorting and the storage for the newly-delivered cases. The sorting was in four or five berths. Then they used to throw things off onto a conveyor belt.

If you keep on going down the side of the room there was this lady who put Cash marks on. At the end someone used to take the stuff off and sort it into bins by colour and material. Round the other side of that you could undo them and put them into a trolley. Then they’d take them across to the right-hand side and put them into the machines. There were a couple of hydros down that side.

On the left at the end was the Collar Unit, between that and the washroom proper, sinks. On the other side of the wash-house was the calender, beyond that, some presses and the packing-room.

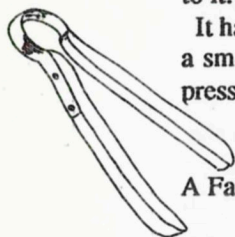
Upstairs was the ironing-room, conveyors took things up and down.

Under the ironing-room was the drying-room and at the end of the wash-room a boiler, toilets, the front office, the canteen and the Board Room.”

\*

“ What was it like ? Very, very hot. But you just became acclimatised to it. Like someone working in a kitchen. You just got on with it.

It had a lovely smell, as regards the steam. A smell of washing. Just a smell of washing. Nothing else. Just the steam coming off all the presses and calenders.”



A Family Concern

LIFETIMES IN THE LAUNDRY

“ I started work when I was fourteen at the New Grosvenor Laundry. Left school on the Friday and went there and got the job on the Monday. My mother had always worked in the laundry and all my sisters and brothers as well. Mum was a best silk washer and my sisters were ironers. I’ve done everything in the laundry, even to ironing pure silk stockings and the raising of the initials on the pillow-slips and sheets. For the ladies, you know.

When I first went there I was shaking out at the calender. There were just us two girls. We had to shake things out and put them across the trolley and they would take them as they wanted them. From there we went upstairs to the ironing-room and I would shake the collars out and use the collar machines. I used to do the starching for the collars. You had to make the starch up, mix it up. When it was all right you put your collars in - all tied up - and when it was done you could take them out and brush them in cold water. Brush all the starch off. When you ironed the collars, you had to steam them all, put them on the back and shake

them. Then you would put a cloth over the top and polish them off. They'd come up like a glass, stiff."

\*

"My mother always referred to the laundry area as Starch Green and she always worked in a laundry. She worked as a collar and shirt machinist. She considered herself to be a bit of an aristocrat in the laundry. There was a sort of protocol, or pecking order, even in the laundry. She used to refer to the rough and tumble people as "those calender hands". The next people up would be the people who did the ironing. Ladies would send their blouses and their underwear and it was a special process. You had no machinery to help you; in those days it was all hand-ironed. Then the next people up would be like my mother's work with the polishing of the fronts and the collars and the cuffs."

\*

The Boss was my husband's mother. She'd had five boys to bring up when her husband died. My husband was the middle one. They all helped. My husband stuck right through and the eldest one always drove the van. My mother-in-law's sisters worked there as well,

so it was really a family concern."



"When I worked at the laundries, in order to have me work there longer hours, the Boss would let my children come in after school. He gave them bread and jam and let them run around barefoot in the laundry."

Fig.2



Everything Just So

## THE LAUNDRY MISSUS

“ This laundry was owned by Mrs. Kirk; she had a son who ran it with her. She was a real Trojan, she used to sit there like some matriarch. We daren't speak, you know. She used to sit there by the clocking-in machine and really keep her eyes on you. It was her way of life. She was quite a fat lady, her breasts drooped. You never got sacked, oh no no! They'd reprimand and have it in for you for a bit. A reputation would stick. If you were a natterer, which I was, her beady eyes would be on you!”

\*

“ The Missus and her husband, Mr. and Mrs. Hogg , were.. *...rank Scotch* ( well, I don't know if she was but *he* was ). They had one girl, Gladys. She was a skating instructress.

Mind you, Mrs. Hogg herself, she was a big woman but light as a feather on her feet.

You had to work hard. My mother used to say, “Don't tire yourself out. I can't afford to keep you without work.” You had to earn your money but the Missus was kind. I wasn't a very healthy child and she'd add on the little luxuries. Dinner on a tray there was, and jelly and toast. Yes, as I say, she was very good to me. ”

\*

“ We were really just a house, just a house. The Kingsland Laundry. I used to go to school and come home to this laundry. My Mum was a war widow and she married again and I didn't like my stepfather. So my aunt, Mum's sister, said, ‘ You come and live with me.’ So I was in her laundry when I left school and that's where I stayed.

It was all family, you see. She had five sons. Not a lot, really. It was her laundry and she made it.

I was afraid of her, yes I was. I was afraid of Mrs. Simpson [the Missus of the Sherborne Laundry]. They didn't just tell you off, they used to grumble at you. They wouldn't hurt you or anything...nothing like that... but they hurt your *feelings* . You got told off in front of people, yes, that was us! You had to be very alert.

My aunt was a fussy woman, very fussy. Her and Mrs. Simpson, both the same kind of person. When I went out to this Mrs. Simpson, I could

see my aunt in her. Everything just so. They were two of a kind. If she saw you (this was Mrs Simpson) if she saw you wasting time, she'd say, 'Haven't you anything to do?' So fussy. She was strict.

Say she saw us talking. That was wasting time. Say she saw me going over to Winnie, she'd say, 'Do you want something?'

Ooh, she was strict! And my aunt was the same. I think it was the olden days coming up in them. "



*Fig. 3*

"...We had an hour for lunch-break and if you worked till 8 o'clock at night you had a tea-break. But you never knew...you'd be courting and all ready to meet your boyfriend when...

' 8 o'clock tonight, ladies!'

I said, ' I've got a date with a boyfriend.'

The Missus said, 'Well, you'll have to break it then,'(and she gave me my full name there), ' Evelyn,' she said, 'You'll have to break it. Eh, Evelyn?'

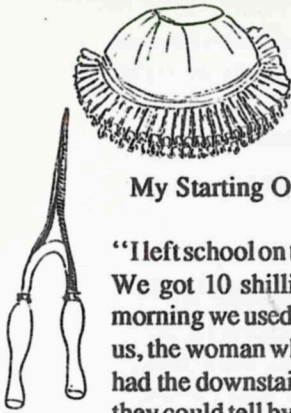
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".....at Park Royal, I was about 17 and I had a big abscess between my shoulder-blades. The manageress saw to it for me. Then it was waiting to burst and she said, 'You can go along to the doctor now.' The doctor said, 'Who's been dressing this?' and I said, 'The Manageress of the laundry.' He said, ' She's made a fine job of it.'"

\*

" The [Missus's] husband had a horse and cart and she thought he was going out and spending too long, so she went out with him. The horse used to stop because he knew the journey perfectly. And of course he used to stop at the odd public house.

So she said, 'What's he stopping for?'



### My Starting Out

### FIRST JOBS IN THE LAUNDRY

“I left school on the Friday and on the Monday I was in the laundry...14. We got 10 shillings a week from Monday to Friday, then Saturday morning we used to go and clean the house of the woman who employed us, the woman who kept the laundry. She didn't pay us for that. One girl had the downstairs and I did the bedrooms and stairs. They told me that they could tell by your appearance how you would do the work. I never, ever went to work untidy. Never.”

\*

“My first day at work , the Manageress came up to me , ' I want you to do me a favour,' she said,  
' Will you go over to Chiswick and get me some food? A pig's head.' She used to like pigs' heads. 'And one or two other things.’

And I brought it back to her and she said, ' I want you to do that again when I run out of things.’”

\*

“...First part of my starting out, it was eight to eight. When it came to about half-past seven, us younger ones had to scrub the ironing-room floor. All fours, scrub 'em all! That's the truth!”

\*

“I went part-time in the 1914-18 War. The Missus said to my mother (she was Em to them all then, you know) 'Em, what's that young Doll of yours doing with all these holidays? Bring her here. I can use her.’

12 years old. Of course that was in the school holidays, And when they finished, I went after school hours. Half a crown a week. We used to do the aprons on what they called a box mangle...and sometimes the roller slipped.

And I went out on the back of the van if they couldn't get a boy. I had to sit in the van while the driver picked the washing up. The police would come along and say to me, 'What are you doing?' and I said, ' Waiting for my carman.’”

" I was only getting eight shillings at the New Grosvenor when I started and we used to work from eight in the mornings to six at night. Saturdays we used to go in cleaning..cleaning all the ironing room, toilets, everything. On hands and knees. All on the bare boards. Only two shillings for that. "

\*

" I can always remember my first morning at work because my Dad used to come home on his bike to lunch and he was looking for me as I came straight down the road. It was a long, long road, Bollo Bridge Road. I had to run all the way because we only got an hour for lunch. My very first day. I had to run all up the street. Oh, it was a long road and we lived right down the bottom and my Dad saw me coming. He was standing at the gate. We used to have a string on the door then, a string to pull indoors. We had just three rooms with all those children. That was all, only two bedrooms and a tiny little kitchen.

But anyway, Daddy was at the gate and met me. He took hold of my hand and we both went in together. He got his cap and he polished the chair for me to sit down, my first morning at work.

Then he sat me down - his little first daughter out to work."

\*

" I had to go to work. The schoolmaster sent for my father and he told him, ' You've taken your boy away to go to work.' He said, ' Yes, I need the money.'

' That's a pity. Shall I tell you something? Your boy should go to another school. He's won a scholarship.'

I said, 'I don't think I've done that, have I?' He showed me the letter.

My father said, ' I'm sorry about that. I don't want to take him away but our times are hard. I want the money so I can carry on.'

My two sisters worked in the laundries, so I went too."

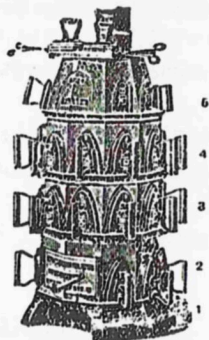


Fig. 4

## HORSE-DRAWN DELIVERY VANS

“...My father owned the laundry down here, next to the Boys’ School. I was a little girl then, I remember it. About 5 , I must have been. I’m 89 now.

He had a horse and cart. I know, because I was run over by it...the cart...and I got a wheel mark on my leg! Everytime I went to his sister, she used to say, “ Show ‘em where you were run over. Show ‘em where you were run over, Lil.” And I had that wheel mark right up here.

I remember going in his horse and cart and the horses going in Baronsmede Pond. They always used to go in there...wet their feet, you know, and then they used to go up Gunnersbury Lane and all up Ealing. Sometimes they went up the City.

My Dad had a field for the horses and the stables right up in the yard. The old horses used to come into the coach house. We had a long window up in the kitchen and we’d know they were there, looking for something to eat.

I remember going to the stables . You know those chains they had to partition the horses? I remember sitting on that and singing :-

“ Skylark, skylark,  
Swing me ever so high  
Swing me up in the sky  
Ever so high,  
So only the angels can see me.”

\*

“ I was a young lad in the 1920s. I lived in Osborne Road, South Acton, next to the Royal Laundry.

I had a Saturday morning job with them. I was the vanboy on the delivery van. This was, of course, a horse-drawn van. I sat on the hampers at the back of the van to see they didn’t fall off. I had to guard the van while George was delivering.

We drove from South Acton to the Chelsea area. We took large hampers of clean laundry: our route went down the Cromwell Road. When the van was nearly empty, George let me drive it. Just past the old skating rink at Holland Park there was a coffee stall. We stopped here and George used to treat me to a cheesecake. I can still taste these..about six inches in diameter, hot , with lashings of shredded coconut on top.

Then home!”

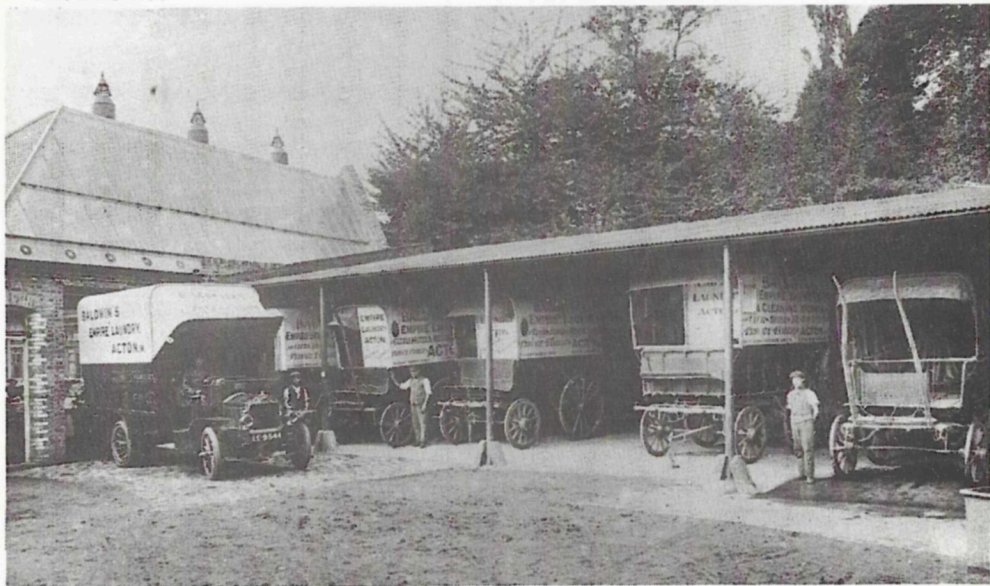


Fig. 5

#### No Licence Required : THE LAUNDRY DRIVER

“ Me and another fellow went out on this van. They were old-fashioned, one of those model-Ts. he bloke beside me said, ‘ All right , you can drive it now!’ I said, ‘ I don’t think I’ll be able to do it. I can push on the pedals and all that, but I’ll forget to take them off..the ones that matter!’

I drove so far, then he said, ‘ I think you’ve had enough now. I’ll take it in case anyone follows us!’”

\*

“I learned to drive when I was in the Cadogan laundry at the age of 19. You taught yourself. As a vanboy , I went out with the driver, no licence required (I still had to be a Vanboy even though I was 19.)

The carman, he was quite a young fellow. Two young fellas together!



And on the way I said, 'How about teaching me to drive ?'  
He said, ' Oh, we can take it when we're not busy.'

It was pretty easy. Coming home he said, 'Right, you can take the van home.'

The worst part was going out on your own for the first time. The Manager said, 'How do you feel ? Can you go out on your own?' I said 'Yes.'.

Even going past the first turning in my road was a thrill. Then I went right up opposite the Mansion House. Right through the City. I must have looked nervous: there were fellas working on the L.M.S. Railway and they said, 'First day out, son ?' But I came back experienced, like being thrown in the deep end."

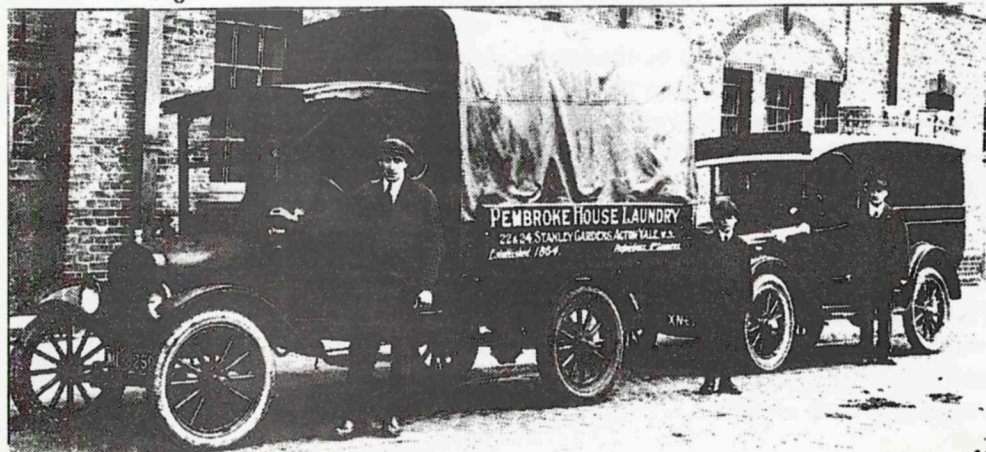


**Fig.6** " Out collecting , I'd say, 'I've come for your laundry' and if they paid the bill I'd write out the receipt...the amount that was on the parcel or the hamper.

And once this hot day, very hot, the butler comes out. I said, 'I couldn't half do with a drink.' I don't know if the butler heard it but he said, 'Wait there.' And he comes out with two nice drinks, Watney's Bass. It was lovely! I said, 'I enjoyed that!' He said, 'I thought you would!'

\*

**Fig.7** " When you're on the rounds, you do see the people! I used to go as far as Cheam and I was always the early bird. Now, whenever I went to this

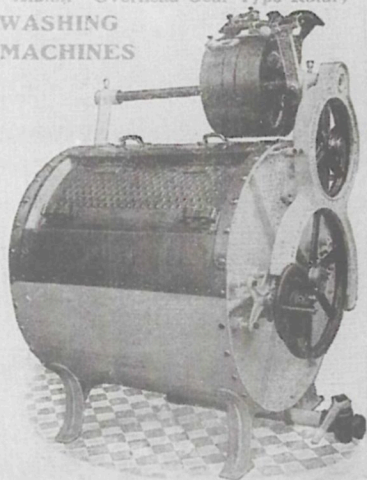


particular address, I used to dash in, push open the bathroom door and the laundry was there. Well, I must have been a quarter of an hour earlier than usual, not by design, perhaps I was going to a football match in the afternoon. I pushed open the door and.....ooh! A lovely statue!! (Well, it was a stand-up bath!) What do I do? Transfixed, of course. 'Get out!' she said, 'Get out!'

She was all right afterwards, you know, but in future I had to go very careful whenever I opened that door.

But you got that all the time on the delivery. Very enjoyable job! "

The "Albion" Overhead Gear Type Rotary  
WASHING  
MACHINES



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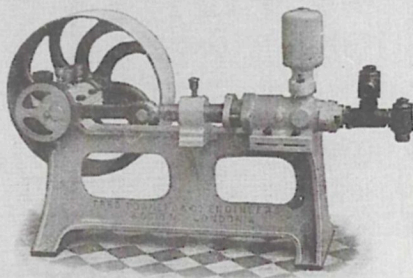
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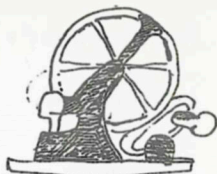
Steam Everywhere LAUNDRY BOILERS

Fig.8

" I suppose what I liked best was coming in in the morning and I had to see to the boiler. At first I was frightened of it. I thought to myself, ' I hope I don't do it wrong.' Anyway, it was all right, I managed to light it and get it all ready. At night they'd put the boilers down. It's a sort of slack they put on and the boilers would die down."

\*

" It was very hard work. Very hard. In the winter when the tanks were iced over, my husband got up at six in the morning and I'd hand him kettles of boiling water to thaw the joints. Thaw the parts. It was really hard work. "



You Never Know What You'll Find      SORTING AND MARKING

“ The only thing that worried me was the black beetles. You put your hand in the sheets and you get a few black beetles...cockroaches...they used to come out to get into the warmth. They loved white sheets, anything white.

Once we picked up some laundry in a big basket that had all black beetles in it; it frightened me to death! They moved! They were just like racehorses! I used to run away from them to tell you the truth. I shook my coat before I went home in case there was anything in the sleeves. I didn't like to tread on them . They go crack, they don't half crack!

The others used to say to me, 'What's the matter with you?' and I'd say, 'Check my coat for me before I get out of here, will you? I'm not putting it on yet!' ”

\*

“ You had to learn to mark with cotton. You brought the red cotton and the needle and you had to practise all the numbers and get them as small as you could. You had to learn how to do it before you were allowed to sew on each garment. Handkerchiefs, everything, if it wasn't marked you had to mark it with cotton.”

\*

“...You had netted-up handkerchiefs. That was easier than going through hundreds of handkerchiefs afterwards. You would put one customer's handkerchiefs in one net- although they would be marked- and that net would be shaken out. There were special ways of doing that. When I was a child I was shown how to do that. 'Go and help Nan shake a few nets.'”

\*

“ The smells weren't bad, not bad. Only if you get a really dirty customer in the sorting room. That was the smelly room. ”

## A Great Big Patch Of White      BLEACHING

“ I had a funny little experience. They used to have bleach in a big tub, you know , to bleach the work in. A very big tub. And they had this hand-wringer.

One day, my aunt said to me , would I do some hand-wringing? And I fell in the tub of bleach !

I used to go to school then and I had a blue checked gingham dress on and when I came out it was all white! A great big patch of white! I wasn't in it long enough to hurt. Only my clothes. That was a really funny experience. We always laugh about when I fell in the bleach tub!

\*

## Those Hydros weren't Half Big      THE WASHROOM

“[The clothes] were then put into huge rotating washing-machines by men wearing big rubber aprons and clogs. The machines turned one way and then the other, throwing soapsuds everywhere. Then they were rinsed and put into a large hydro which was a big form of spin dryer. They were then put into a large wicker trolley to be ironed and finished as new. The bleach was made by us lads; we had to carry pails of salt up a ladder and tip it in to a tank of water at the top.”

\*

“ I worked the washing-machines and the Hydro. Oh! Those Hydros weren't half big! Cylinder things. And you have to pack them a certain way with all the clothing. If you don't, they won't blinkin' run! That's what they keep on telling you when you're doing the Hydro-ing.

‘ Don't let it go across, it splits and tears it! ‘

I said, ‘Don't worry, I know what I'm doing’. They'd come up when I'd done and have a look at the stuff. Not one was shredded. They said, ‘That's marvellous!’

But one day there was a terrible accident on the Hydro. There was a shout and a scream. I think it was the man that put the belts on and he went

to put this belt on without shutting down. He put his hand on the belt to swing it round and got caught up in it.

Made me go cold. I said, ' Why did he do it like that? Why didn't he shut it down ?'

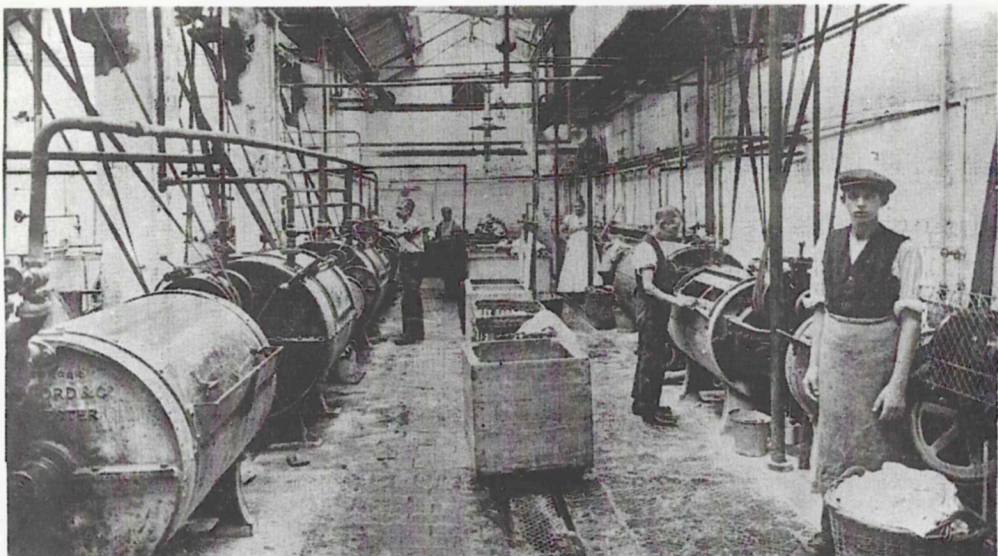


Fig.9

## Second Class Work

## BAGWASH

“...Then there was the bagwash, a system where you were issued with a bag like a soldier's kitbag . You stuffed all the washing you possibly could into it. It was taken away Monday morning and was brought back round about Thursday. It cost half a crown, and if you didn't have it - they took your washing away again until the following Monday! Possibly then you'd have half a crown. When the washing came back it was still wet, so you still had the problem of drying and ironing it.”

\*

“ Mother normally did her own washing, but I remember there being a period when I took the bagwash round. Things got a bit too much for her. My father was a war invalid and he had virtually little or no income, so she had to go out and earn the money. Also she had to do all the housework, and particularly after my grandmother died she just didn't have time to do the washing.”



No Diamonds!

## CALENDERING

“You had an overseer in those days to look at every bit of work that was done, and if it wasn't done properly, it had to go back. Serviettes had to be folded absolutely straight - not crooked. And the sheets - with no *diamonds* in. You get diamonds in the sheets now, but you never used to have them then. ”



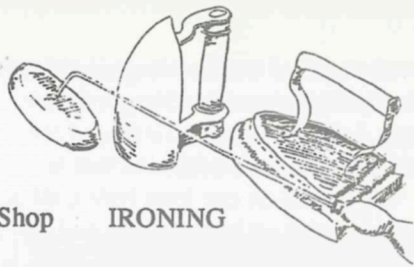
Fig 10

“ One morning we refused to start the calender because we heard that girls in other laundries were getting sixpence an hour, while we were earning a ha'penny less. 'We're not going to work that calender till we get that other ha'penny. *We want 6d an hour!*'

The Missus said, ' Never heard of such a thing . *Sixpence an hour!*'  
' *Curzon's giving it. Mayfair's giving it!*' We stood our ground and saw that the calender wouldn't roll until we reached agreement.

' I'll give you sixpence an hour - but I don't want no breaks for a cup of tea. Just stop and drink it and - no eating! '

But when we went to start up the calender..it wouldn't go!"



## Like They've Come Out The Shop      IRONING

“ When I started it was the only work there was and we used to have a coke stove. We worked with flat irons and we used to take our turn in putting the coke in the stove and at night seeing that it was all closed in so there wasn't a fire.

We used to hold the irons up to feel the heat. One day it turned over and burned my jaw. Luckily the Missus there was a trained nurse. That was when I first started, then there were gas irons and then, of course, electric irons.”

\*

“ I didn't do ironing. I didn't get on - well, we had gas irons. I'd never used a gas iron. The Missus said, 'Can you iron?' so I said, 'Yes.' I didn't know it was a gas iron - all I could think of was there was a nasty smell of gas!

Of course there was. I'd got the damn gas on and not the iron alight. That was at the Lavender Laundry.”

\*

“ Nearly all my family worked in laundries. My mother was an ironer, my cousin was a best *baby-pleater*. They were called that because they were baby clothes. She worked there for years.”

\*

“ The ironing went up to the inspector, Ella Tomes, from Leith Road. I used to have a kind of admiration for her. She was such a nice person. She'd take everything you'd done. Everything you'd ironed and folded, she would unfold and look at. Everything was examined. She was very very fair. We all had our own little notebook and she'd write in it what we'd had and how much we earned. Everything had a price; each day and on each page. But it was taboo to try and find out how much you'd earned for the week. Say it came to Thursday (Friday we were going to get paid ) -

'I wonder how I've done this week?'

But you didn't dare look at your book. It was never our property. Some of the elderly ladies sniffed at her and looked anyway, but in those days most people were in awe of their bosses. ”

“ My brother was courting and his lady friend worked as an ironer in St. George’s Laundry. She got me this job. I was very, very tiny and very thin. I was the tiniest little thing. I couldn’t reach the ironing board; I had three duckboards because I was so tiny.

We ironed on one long board, all padded with felt and white cloths on top which we had to secure with pins. They were changed every week because they used to get slightly scorched where you left your iron if you were folding .

The iron encased a gas flame...not a flat iron but a gas iron with a jet in that you lit with a taper.”

\*

“*Goffering* was done on pinafores - the way you did the Marcel wave in your hair with the curling tongs. You went round the edge and the heat that was in the prong would make a little pleat.”

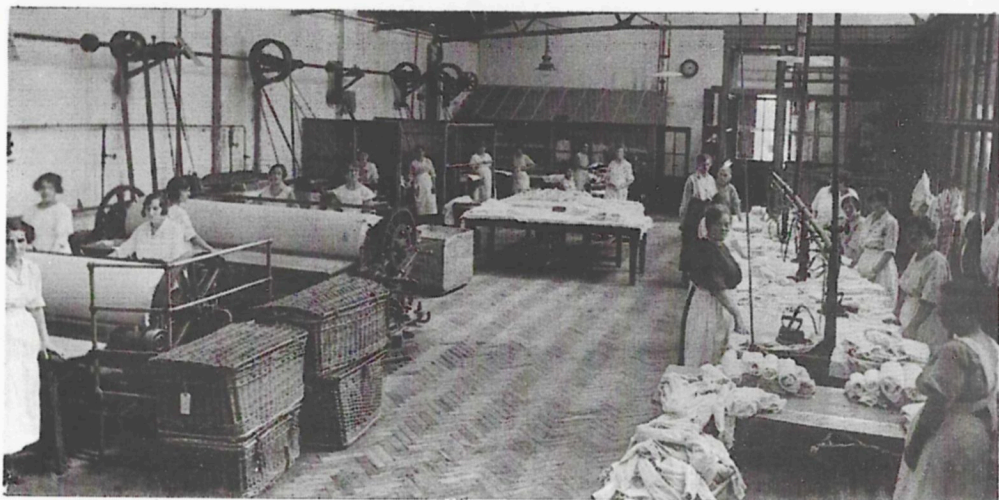


Fig.11

“I was a shirt ironer, I wasn’t piece work, you see. I was a perfect folder, straight, sleeves all in, cuffs up to the neck and everything.

Of course, the very, very correct way to start ironing a shirt is to iron the back of the collar. Then down the insides of the buttons, the insides of the button-holes.

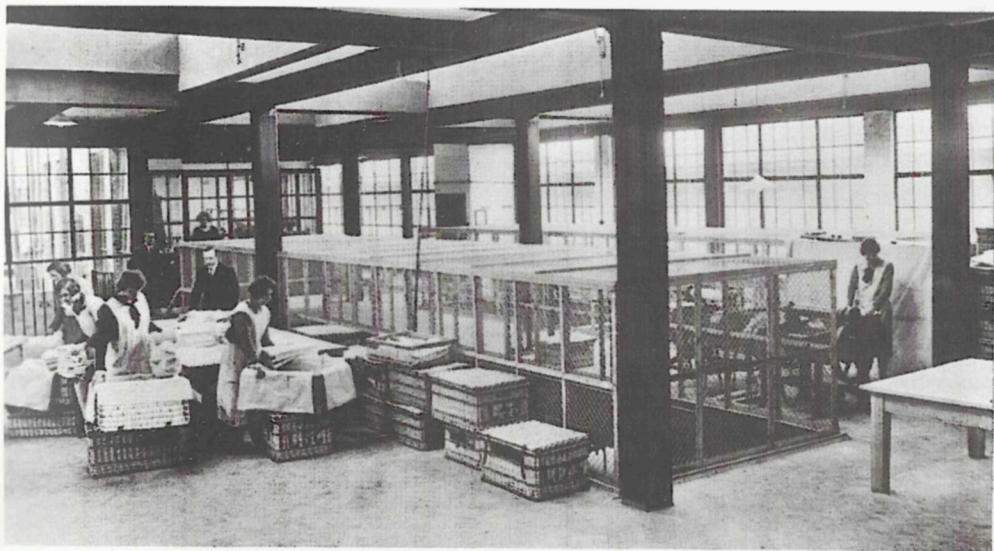
Then the yoke. You put your hand in and lay the yoke flat. Then you get hold of your back, right in the middle where there’s sometimes a pleat. Get hold of that and shake so that the sleeves flow. The back doesn’t matter all that much because it will go out nice and smooth when you iron the front on top of it.

Then the sleeves, the cuffs - inside the cuffs first. Eliminate all the



creases. When there's anything double like collar or cuffs, if you iron the inside first, you eliminate all the creases that can occur on the good side. That's the way it's done.

And of course the folding was most important with shirts. They've got to look like they've come out the shop."



*Fig.12*

### Blue Tissue Paper

### RACKING AND PACKING

" Years ago it was all ladies' work. And they had maids. And all the maids' work had marks that had to be packed separately in parcels and go on the top of the hamper. Or it might be a separate hamper for that maid. All the maid's laundry, their aprons and their caps and their muslin aprons."

\*

" I really did like packing. When you pack you see the beauty of the work, when it's all finished. That's what I really liked. That was my best choice.

They found there was a vacancy in the packing room and said to me, "Would you like to go there?" And I said, "Yes, please!" Because that's what I really wanted. Then I stayed there the whole time.

You stood all the time. First of all you had to make your racks - there were racks round the room and all the numbers on the racks. Then you

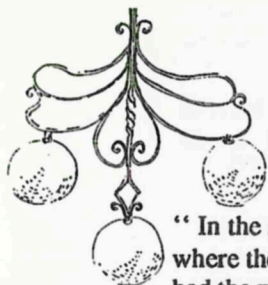
get all the work. You start off with the bath-towels: you go all round your racks with them. Then you have your trolley-load of sheets, do them because they're big.

The next part is the small work, like pillow-slips and tea-towels. Then the table-linen comes in - that's the tablecloths. That was all flat, you see.

After that you have what we call the body-linen, like vests and pants, come from upstairs. They're ironed up there. The last thing to pack would be your shirts on the top. Oh, and if you've got a little hole, you put your hankies in. Tuck them in.

You had to line the boxes with blue paper ( because it was nice and Mrs Simpson liked blue. When we couldn't get any more blue we had to have white, but blue was our favourite). Tissue paper.

You covered it all in and then you put your laundry book on top of the blue paper. You put your box down and put the name and address on it - we used to have labels to tie on. We tied them on the box, did up the strap and then they were ready to go on the van. "



## HARD TIMES

“ In the summer it was hot, very hot. Specially in that calender room where the sheets went through, that was the hottest part. Upstairs they had the presses, that was a very hot room too. If you went upstairs into that room it sort of knocked you back.”

\*

“ We had to wear a uniform in some of the laundries. When I worked in the laundry next to where we lived, I wore a white overall, a white starched overall. It was so hot in there. We've stood in the laundry and wrung our clothes out because they were so wet.”

\*

“ I wore steel stays. It got so hot, the girls said, 'Oh, Doris!' The top folder [ calender-hand ] made me put them on the side. I was only nine stone but I liked my stays!”

\*

My mother was drawing 6s 6d a week. Didn't even pay the rent. She couldn't earn enough at the laundry so she took a job in a cattle-cake factory in Fulham. She worked nights because it paid more.

In the laundry, she worked almost up to the time she was having her baby - she was standing all the time at the machine. Then as soon as the ten days, or fortnight were up, she'd go back to work again. She got dreadful varicose veins through the standing, and, of course, the pregnancies added to it. "

\*

“Then I got married and then I fell for my boy. All those years ago, when you were seven months you were *supposed* to pack up but, of

course in 1937 they were very hard times . My husband was out of work so I worked to the last minute - the Friday, and I had him on the Saturday.

When the Inspectors came round ,to check everything, I went into the house. They hid me away, because I wasn't supposed to be working. When they'd gone I used to come out."

\*

"When I was fifteen or sixteen, I lived down Bollo Bridge Road when my mother was only in these two rooms. I can remember that she could never afford to go out and buy me anything in the shop...coat or anything. I can remember standing in the dark passage with my face against the street door, crying because I hadn't got a coat."

" At the laundry they ran a shoe club. You'd pay a shilling a week - you'd pick your numbers out of a hat. People couldn't afford a lot, you see."

\*

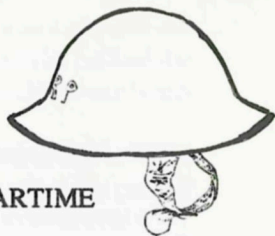
"They had what they called "Diddle 'Em Clubs", and they did diddle them as well! You paid a farthing the first week, a ha'penny the next week, a penny the next week and then tuppence, fourpence and eightpence. Gradually it doubled itself, and as time got on , people couldn't afford to pay, so they lost what they *had* paid. That was how it came to be called the "Diddle 'Em Club!"

\*

" Don't forget, in those times suits used to go into the pawnshop...every Monday morning Boshers used to be full up with people pawning their suits. Yes, old Boshers on Hampton Lane.

There was a woman who had a pram with all the bundles in. She used to go round collecting clothes to pawn."

We Just Carried On THE LAUNDRIES IN WARTIME



“ My husband always worked in the laundry, all his life, with two of his brothers. I married into it and lived there when I married him. I was 21-22.

We were bombed out in 1940. I knew when the bombs were dropping: Rose and I were scrubbing the laundry floor. Every week that had to be done. We had to scrub the floor and we were still doing it when the air-raid was on. It had to be scrubbed and that was it. We just carried on.

I remember coming down one Saturday, after we'd been bombed out. My mother-in-law was on her hands and knees scrubbing outside - with her tin hat on. She scrubbed the pavement outside the doors : everything was done so clean. Yes, she was scrubbing outside. We used just soap and water and scrubbing brushes.

We had blackouts going up and all that sort of thing. We still had our moments, though. We used to go down to the cellars to sleep underneath. We'd go down the stairs and into the front part, and in the back would be the coal. While the doodlebugs came we had to sleep down there. ”

\*

“ .....the younger ones had to scrub the ironing -room floor on Saturdays and that's where I was when the war ended.

I lost two brothers in the war, and people all kept saying the war was going to end, the war was going to end, you'll hear the church bells ringing and that.....

We didn't believe it . I said to my friend, 'Let's hurry and go to work'. We got down and all of a sudden the bells were ringing out. I flew up the stairs , put my coat on and ran home to my mother. Everybody was going mad in the streets, kissing one another.

I went to my mother and said, ' Mum, are you going to buy any flags round the corner ?' (I lived at the bottom of Church Road.)

'What do I want flags for ? ' she said "They won't bring my boys back.' ”

“We used to have the baker come round and we’d get the cakes off him. We made the tea and took it round the laundry. You were allowed ten minutes but you had to eat and drink while you were working. At first when I was in the laundry you couldn’t stop but later you had to sit down for so long to have your lunch.”

\*

“....we never had a morning break or nothing. You just imagine going at 14 and standing at the back of a calender - you had to do it.

You could go to the toilet but my sister could tell you where she first worked , the old lady sat on the desk and you had to go and get a key from her to go to the toilet. She worked at the Four Winds Laundry in Acton.”

\*

“We didn’t get a mid-morning break. Whatever we had we ate at our board. You stood idle, turned your irons out. But the best thing was to take in ordinary bread and butter and toast it with your iron. It was lovely! It was beautiful - and it didn’t mess up the iron! Oh, a lot of us used to toast our bread. Someone would make a cup of tea: we took it in turns to make us a cup of tea.

The hooter would go again at one. So you packed up, had your hour’s lunch and the hooter would go again at two to start. We had a cup of tea in the afternoon, but we weren’t allowed to leave our board. Again we took it in turns to make the tea.”

\*

“In the summer, when it was hot, they used to bring round a big pail of lemonade. So if you were thirsty you’d be all right. Two or three times they brought it round. We was *bleedin’* thirsty!”

\*

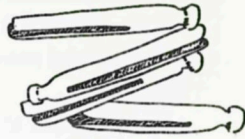
“At midday we went to the pub. (They have all been pulled down since the laundries have gone.) We would sing many songs. Some were a laugh, some were rude. When you’re young, you’re all ears.”

“ We walked about a mile in our lunch-hour. There was a pie-and-eel shop in Church Road and opposite was a fish shop .I couldn't afford the eels, pie and mash was sixpence-halfpenny. That would be our lunch that day.

It was too far to go home, besides I enjoyed going with the girls. Then we'd have plaice and chips, which was the same money. One day pie and mash and the next plaice and chips.”



*Fig.13*



## Let's Have A Cuddle

## ROMANCE IN THE LAUNDRY

I might go round to the boiler house with rubbish and you'd find one of them dodging after you. 'Wandering Charlie' I used to call one. He was 'handy'. There was another chap there I liked very much - very shy - that's what I liked him for. But the old lady on the wash - he was hers. At that age, I know it sounds silly..... seventy odd she was but he was hers. She used to bring him lunch.

There was this one chap who was going to get married. Now he had fondled all of us and we couldn't get our own back. So what did we do? His wife he was marrying was a very prudish girl. All over the weekend we'd cut out bits in the papers: 'Big Three Foot Chap', caricatures and everything. We packed it up inside the sheets with different things like pins and that and folded the blue paper.

He got married and on the Monday we were told, 'Mr. Doyle wants to see you, he'll be coming up in a quarter of an hour's time.' We all said, 'We're for it. Get ready, girls!'

He lined us up and he said, 'Who's responsible for these paper cut-outs and damaged washing?'

I asked him, 'Was there any harm done, Mr. Doyle?'

'I think so. What did you want to do it for, Doris?'

'A bit of fun.'

'I don't call that fun.'

('Well, you wouldn't know fun.')

'Anyway, Jack's annoyed about it.'

I said, 'He ought to be where his wife is, so she can keep an eye on him.'

'Before you start that calender, you'll write a note of apology.'

But I wasn't going to do anything like that!"

\*

"The fellas used to tease the girls. They'd put a sheet on the floor and say, 'Come on, let's have a cuddle' or, 'I'm going to show you lessons in love!'

I'd say, 'I'll swap you one if you don't stop!'

One calender hand dared Jack but the others stopped it. 'The Guv'nor's coming!'



“We got engaged up there [on the laundry platform]. It was a Wednesday afternoon. So I said to him, ‘Anything wrong?’ He looked at me, ‘No, do you think there’s anything wrong?’

I said, ‘Well, your face is...somehow..’

(‘Cos I didn’t know he was all worked up.)

And he said, ‘Would you like to see what I’ve bought? Tell me what you think of it.’ And he got out this solitaire ring.

I said, ‘Who’s that for? What kind of a ring is that?’

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it’s an engagement ring.’

‘Oh, gosh,’ I said, ‘who are you going to get engaged to?’

‘You,’ he said.

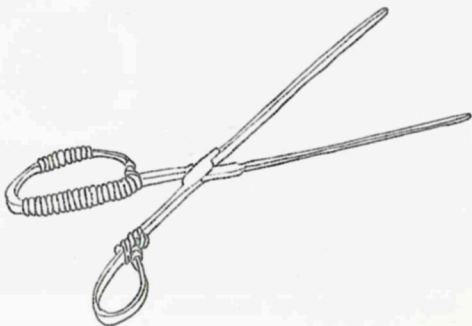
I said, ‘You’re joking.’

‘Don’t you like the idea?’ he said .

‘Well,’ I said, ‘I’ve not long lost Bill, and you’ve packed up with your Dorothy.....’

‘..... So ,what about it?’

I said, ‘Well, if you like, I don’t mind.’ ”



“ We went to Southend .It was really marvellous.You used to pull in at a pub when you'd got half-way there and they had a job to get us out. You know, we had a knees-up and all that. We went to a pub called 'The Hole in the Wall' and of course the blokes came along and bought you drinks. We had a good time on those outings.

Because that's the thing they always did, have an outing. Every laundry had an outing - on a Saturday, at a certain part of the year when we weren't quite so busy.

It's a tradition, you see. I suppose around Soapsud Island ,they all had their outings.Perhaps they'd say, if they knew you and they'd got a couple of seats, 'There's an outing going, do you want to come ?' So of course you just went.

A lot of people went there. It was the cheapest, the nearest place to go - to Southend for a holiday. Most people in those days always went to Southend.

Londoners used to go down there for the cockles and the whelks and all that. It was really good, an outing.”

\*

“We went to an outing, my husband and I, with the Zion House. It was a funfair, Margate. And, poor me, I never had a drink! Someone said, 'Come on the Caterpillar with me.' I said, 'No, I'm not going on there - it blows your clothes up !' She said, 'Come on, come on with me.' I thought, 'Oh dear, hold your clothes down, girl,' and I just stepped on it and my leg went straight through.

I hadn't had a drink. I *hadn't* had a drink. That's what was worrying me. If I was drunk I'd have said to myself, 'Serve you right!' But I hadn't!

You know, honestly, my foot went straight through it. I had all new shoes, all spoilt stockings.We were there to enjoy ourselves. I had to sit all day watching the others.”

\*

“ We used to get a day out. We'd look forward to that, the only time we'd get a bit of freedom.

We used to get the Guv'nors of the laundry really going strong. They used to take a concertina.

All those years ago ,with all the women, that little day out to Southend! That was a real humdinger! We used to sing down there. All the old songs :-

*'We are the laundry girls  
The laundry girls are we.  
Washing powder round our faces,  
That's how it should be.  
Some say we're common  
Common we may be,  
If it wasn't for us laundry girls  
Where would the rich men be?' "*

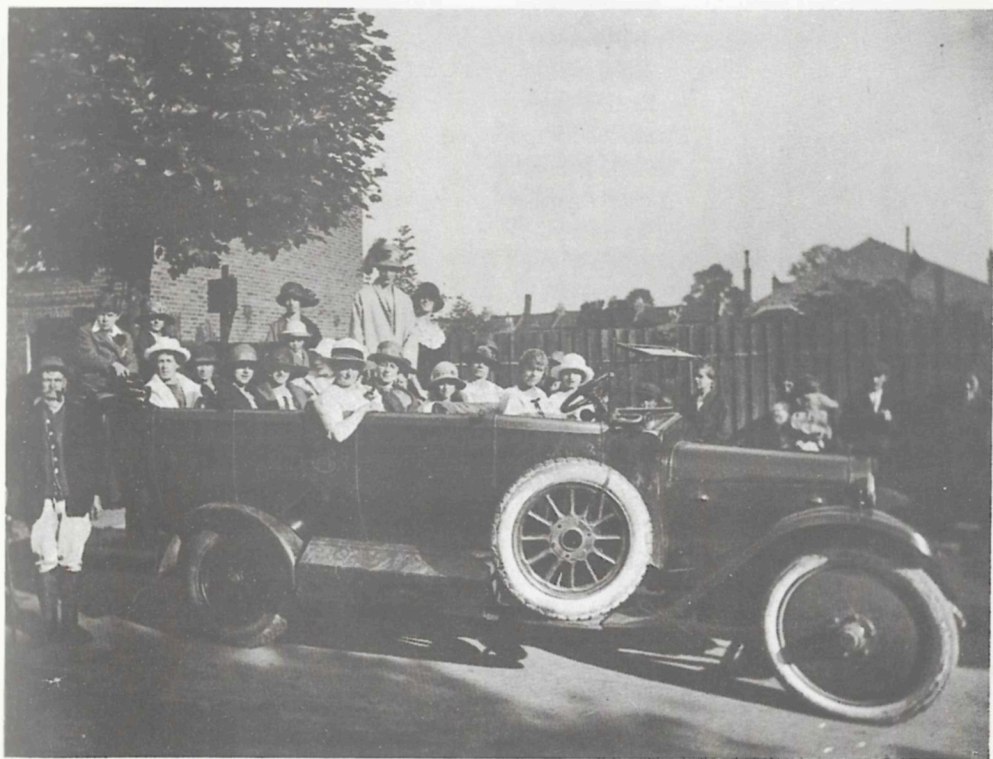


Fig.14

*Names of those contributors whose memories have been featured:*

George Atkinson  
Rose Beattie  
Mrs. Bray  
Mr. Bray  
Daisy Butler  
Dolly Chappell  
Mabel Clarke  
Jim Colvin  
Mrs. Harold  
Mr. Harold  
Jessie Harris  
Tommy Harwood  
Beattie King  
Bill Minter  
Rose Nettle  
Rosie Popay  
Elizabeth Simpson  
Mr. H. Shearing  
Lilian Sneaden  
Florrie Symes  
Ellen Trent  
Mrs Tunks  
Elizabeth Wilkinson

*Names of Laundries mentioned by the contributors in their full reminiscences :-*

Acton Model  
Advance  
Bosworth House  
Burnaby  
Camden Town Steam  
Cadogan  
Century  
Crown  
Curzon  
Eastmans ( Dyers and Cleaners )  
Four Winds  
Greenhams  
Hillside  
Kingsland  
Lavender  
Mayfair  
Merton House  
Monmouth House  
National United  
New Grosvenor  
Park Royal  
Pembroke  
Poplar House  
Prince of Wales  
Reynolds House  
Royal  
St. Georges  
Sherbourne  
Standard  
Sunlight  
Syon House (later Randalls)  
Whiteheads  
Woodstock

### *Details of Illustrations*

- Fig. 1a* Acton and its environs: Carey's Survey of Middlesex, 1786.  
*1b* Acton: Bacon's Atlas of London and Suburbs. 1924 Two maps which indicate the 1860s development of small terraced-houses in South Acton. The majority of these disappeared in slum-clearances 100 years later.
- Fig. 2* Exterior, the Cambrian Hand Laundry, the home and business of Thomas and Julia Davey, 1906.
- Fig. 3* Mrs. Grace Simpson, who founded and ran the Sherborne Laundry for over 70 years, (1952).
- Fig. 4* An Ironing Tree. (Flat irons). Detail from Bradford's catalogue, early 20th century.
- Fig. 5* Baldwin's Empire Steam Laundry, van sheds, c.1912. Motor vehicles have joined the older horse-drawn vans.
- Fig. 6* Sherborne laundry van, 1952.
- Fig. 7* Pembroke laundry vans, 1919. Laundry was collected and returned on regular 'journeys' by the carmen.
- Fig. 8* Laundry Equipment, from the catalogue of Townend Engineering Works, (Acton).
- Fig. 9* Wash Room. When washed the wet laundry was taken in wooden trucks or baskets to the calender or drying rooms.
- Fig. 10* The Spring Grove Laundry c.1924. In the background, the calenders (heavy rollers to dry and press 'flat work') and the four-girl team of 'feeders' and 'folders'.
- Fig. 11* The Thistle Laundry, showing the ironing-table.
- Fig. 12* The Packing Room, Spring Grove Laundry, c.1924.
- Fig. 13* The Thistle Laundry Staff, 1924/25.
- Fig. 14* The Thistle Laundry staff setting off on an outing to Margate, 1924/5.

*Our thanks to Miss E Simpson for permission to reproduce Figs. 3 and 6 and to Gunnersbury Park Museum for Figs. 1,2,4,5,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14.*