

EXTRACTS FROM “VOICES OF STEPNEY”

CHARLIE BORG:

The pawn-broker was a regular port of call – Fish’s in Commercial Road. Even Gary’s suit would be pawned on occasion if funds were that short. The family also borrowed money from the loan clubs which were run at the local pubs. They managed to find the few pence necessary for the occasional use of the public baths in Bett Street, and Gary also enjoyed a few visits to St. George’s Baths in the Highway, swimming being the only sport he really felt confident with.

It seems that the rag-and-bone man would take old china in exchange instead of hard cash, so when a whole stash of plates was found on a bomb site near to Dr. Barnardo’s in The Highway, it is not surprising that he and his sister loaded up a push-chair with the crockery, which came in very handy.

At least Charlie did not have to worry too much where his next pair of trousers were coming from - his grand-dad had a tailor’s shop in Leman Street on the edge of the City.

DOREEN FRANKS:

On Fridays, Hessel Street Market (near Watney Street) specialised in supplying the local Jewish immigrants, and it was rare to hear any language other than Yiddish spoken there. There was a stall with kosher chickens complete with heads and feathers hanging on butcher’s hooks. After choosing your chicken and haggling over the price, it would be hooked down with a pole and the head cut off. For 2d extra, you could hand your chicken to the “flicker” and this very well-muscled lady who sat on an up-turned orange-box with sacking on her lap would de-feather your bird.

Doreen, as a teenager from the end of the 50s, did think about other things than food, of course. There were dances at weekends at Stepney Youth Club in Beaumont Grove, usually with live music or sometimes a disco. Doreen recalls making coffee at the club for Bert Weedon – before he became a big name. Such starry memories! This club also organised evening classes after school for art and drama, with the addition of table tennis and similar indoor activities for local Jewish teenagers. One particular painting in art class involved stamping your feet in paint before transferring it to the canvas. However, Doreen has a certificate (1961) for one of her more sedate artistic efforts – a vista of trees.

Around 1955, there was a bit of excitement in Whitechapel Road when Wally for Wireless opened – because Wally had invited Frankie Vaughan to do the honours. Doreen went along with her mother (Annie) and her friend Janet, along with hundreds of other screaming fans, but the shop was so crowded it was difficult to get more than a glimpse of their hero. Janet missed him altogether because she fainted in all the excitement, narrowly escaping being badly injured in the crush, and ended up in the London Hospital over the road. Annie Franks recalls that he “was much smaller than he looks on the television”!

PAM JENKIN:

An early memory of her first school in Caley Street is of the school hall, which the children had to cross if summoned to see the head-mistress, Mrs McHarrie. The summons need not be for a reprimand; it could be to demonstrate your reading skills, for which – if satisfactory - you received a jelly baby. The sound of Pam’s shoes crossing the hall and climbing the staircase to the head’s office is still clear in her memory. The hall was also the place for an annual celebration of Empire Day in the

50s – on the 24th May – when children turned up at school in their brownie or cub uniform.

School, however, does not hold generally fond memories for Pam. She was a shy child, someone who didn't speak up for herself. This meant that her form teacher grew somewhat frustrated by her unwillingness to raise her hand when she knew an answer, and complained to her mother. She was also punished for confusing the spelling of "their" and "there" with a ruler across the knuckles and 100 lines – but it worked, because she didn't confuse them any longer. There was also the embarrassment of having to stand (in front of your classmates) if you scored less than six out of ten in a mental arithmetic test, or, if you scored less than four, standing on the chair, emphasising your lack of prowess.

After school was far more pleasant. There were a lot of children in the surrounding flats and cottages, and they played outside in the traffic free grounds – rounders, skipping, tin tan tommy (a bit like hide-and-seek where you had to hide while the person that was 'it' caught a tin can that had been thrown) and ball games. Some had roller skates which Pam remembers borrowing, and she also recalls a scooter which you propelled with one foot and which took you at some speed along the balconies. A favoured occupation was putting on 'shows' on the stairs of the flats for other children, charging a halfpenny for them to watch, which was spent on sweets (for the audience). Although shy, Pam rather enjoyed 'directing' the singing and dancing children, and she also enjoyed taking others to the local park known as Old Road Park (next to St. Dunstan's church) or for a picnic on the adjacent hump of grassland known as Dead Man's Belly.