

Beckie Walker

Life story transcript

Hello Kate. You want to know a little bit about what we did and when we did it. Well, I can tell you more or less from the start really.

I think about the first thing I can remember was my mother taking me to see one of her uncles, who would of course be my great uncle, and lived somewhere in London and he had a white Pomeranian dog and this dog greatly impressed me. I must have been about two then, I suppose - it was about the first thing I can remember.

Well then we went to live in a place called Sidcup in Kent when I was about two, I suppose. That was towards the end of the ... that was during the first World War and we had two soldiers billeted on to us. And I was only a little tot at the time and one of them, he ... they were both alright up to a certain point, but he used to do silly things like put his spoon in the cup and get it nice and hot and then put it on my hand and make me cry. And of course my mother was annoyed about that!

That was of course the 1914-18 war, and after Sidcup, we went to live in a place called Hockenden. That's in Kent, between St Mary Cray and Swanley. There were only fourteen houses there and they were all scattered - farms and farm cottages, and we lived there for four years. It was very pleasant, but I remember the awful winters we had, and I used to have bad chilblains and I wore boots in those days because the weather was horrible and snowy, and I couldn't get these boots on so of course I couldn't go to school.

We lived there for four years and I got very friendly with a girl called {Rae Chaplin}. She lived in a farm just down the road. Well, her name really wasn't Chaplin, it was Walters - her mother had married twice - and the second man was Chaplin. But her name was really Walters and her aunts, I don't suppose you'd remember them, because they were Elsie and Doris Walters - they were comediennes... ooh, about 20 years ago or so - more than that now. You might remember them.

Anyhow, we lived there for four years and we went to Hextable School - we had about a mile and a half to walk each way, and there were quite a few children. There were fourteen scattered houses where we lived, and I suppose about half a dozen children who all walked to school together each day. But we didn't go home to dinner - it was much too far. They did sell school dinners of a sort at those times, which cost us the princely sum of fourpence - old money - and we usually took sandwiches.

Anyhow, there was one time we were short of a teacher at school and one of the teachers said "I don't suppose any of you know a teacher who would come and teach [for] us?" I went over and told my mother, and she said "Oh yes, I'll come" in a jokey fashion and I took it literally and went back and said "Oh yes, my mother said she'd come." And so they wrote to her and asked her to go and teach, and so she did. So she did a few months there supply work, never done any teaching before, but I think she got on alright.

Anyhow, we lived at Hockenden for four years, and {...} Rae Chaplin down the road, and we used to play in the barns during the winter and slide down the haystacks. And

they had a nice meadow next to the farmhouse, with a pond, and a hammock {swing} beside it and it was very pleasant there. And occasionally we'd get to go out in a pony and trap. We didn't have a car in those days - that was before many people had cars. And we used to go to Bexleyheath to see Elsie and Doris Walters and it was very pleasant.

The winters seemed to be colder than everywhere else. I don't know why - perhaps it was because we were sort of rather isolated. At the bottom of the fields by our garden there were a lot of huts and at fruit picking time, eastenders - eastenders of London I assume - used to come out and live in these huts and pick the fruit. That happened for three or four weeks, August - September time, and in the October they'd have hop-picking time and they'd come again and live in these huts and pick the hops and then go back to London of course, afterwards. My mother always said "Now don't you go near those huts - they're full of fleas!". We did catch one or two once or twice.

Now, what else did we do? Bill and I went to different schools. We started off by going to Hextable Wilmington School but my father took him away because he didn't think it was such a good school and they sent him to {...} at Wilmington, because he particularly wanted him to pass the scholarship, which he did. And he went to Beckenham Grammar School and I stayed on at the same school and didn't pass the scholarship. So I didn't go to the Grammar School.

However, we lived at Hockenden for about four years, I suppose it was, and then we went to live at St. Paul's Cray. Now, we lived in... there were eighteen... no.. no there were not... a row of about thirty cottages - terraced cottages, they were - and we lived at number 18 and when your grandad came, he lodged at number 1 with a Mrs Smith. And he only lived just down the road.

And I went to the Temple Congregational Church - I went there for many years, and when I got older I used to teach in Sunday School class and we had lots of things going on in the church - I think there was something on nearly every night in the week. There was Girls' Gym one night, and Boys' Gym another night, then we had a devotional evening on one evening and drama night another night, and then they had a billiards table so they had billiards another night - there was always something going on. It was a very lively church and I quite enjoyed it.

And when I was older, I used to teach in Sunday School class there. It was quite pleasant. I had a class of fourteen at one time, which was rather big - they usually had classes of no more than six or eight. And we had a billiard table in the room at the back and my girls and I used to sit all round this billiard table - it was quite pleasant.

Anyhow, I belonged to the Drama group there and we always did a play every year, and the first one I think I was in was 'The Farmer's Wife'. I don't know how old I would have been - about sixteen or eighteen perhaps, something like that. And they put on a play every year, and the last one they did was 'The Barretts of Wimpole Street' and that was the year before war broke out, and after that, of course, it all finished up and closed down because the war sort of knocked everything out.

Now, the war started on September the third. Great day, isn't it - your birthday! We'd been expecting things to happen because it was Sunday morning, and I didn't go to church, which I normally did and your grandad came along and we were expecting some sort of declaration to be made over the radio, and it was. And at eleven o'clock, they said war had broken out. Panic all round! My mother promptly turned the oven off, because she thought 'Well, if there's a war on, we shaln't eat our joint', and poor old Mrs Smith with whom your grandad lodged, she in a panic took her joint out of the oven and put it in the ashes!

Everybody thought bombs were going to be dropped any minute, and of course nothing happened. Nothing happened for about a year. And then of course, after that, the war really did start and bombs were dropping on London and south-east London. And your grandad had been called up - July the twelfth, nineteen... whatever it was... forty... forty-one, I suppose it was, and he had gone abroad and so I was left on my own, and whilst he was abroad, Geoffrey was born, and grandma and grandad had gone to live at Shotgate for grandad's health, because he had asthma, and the doctor said "You want to get near Southend - that's about the best place for asthma sufferers".

And so they got to Shotgate, which was reasonably near, and they said "Well, you'd better come to live with us", which I did. So I packed up our furniture and stored it, and went to live with them at Shotgate.

Well then Geoffrey was born in 1941, and he was a lovely baby. There was only one thing wrong with him - he didn't develop as he should have done, and the doctor... I took him to doctors and specialists, they said "There's nothing wrong with him, mother, nothing wrong at all - he's just backward," and of course, he wasn't just backward - he didn't develop as he should, and of course he had muscular dystrophy.

Now let me see... Shotgate... Yes, I lived with grandma and grandad for about a year, and then I got a part of a bungalow on my own - the people had stored their furniture into one room, and they'd been evacuated to the Lake District and the man had gone there with his job, and so I took their bungalow for the rest of the war years, and I got my furniture moved, and it was quite pleasant there, with this bungalow to myself and Geoffrey. I used to dig the garden and grow vegetables and do the usual things that housewives do, and I used to belong to a WI at Rawreth, which is about a mile or so away. I used to walk there to the WI once a month - that was very pleasant - and grandma used to go too.

Err... what else did we do? Oh, we went to Wickford to church - usually to the Methodist church, and it's still there, but of course we didn't go afterwards when they moved down to {...} wherever they were ... let me see, I've lost myself ... ah yes ... I lived with them for a while, then I got a bungalow of my own where the people had gone away - I told you - and I lived there for the rest of the war years.

And then grandad came home - that was 1945, I suppose, and he hadn't seen Geoffrey until he was about three and a half. Then he went to Bognor Regis for a year - teacher training. It was a kind of a very quick training - they wanted teachers badly and they wanted them quickly, so they gave them just a year training and grandad went on that to Bognor for a year, so I was on my own again just with Geoffrey, and then of course after that, we went to live in Wickford - we got a prefab - and after that we went to

live in Billericay, and we lived there a few years, and then finally we bought the house that you knew in Ramsden Heath and lived there for forty-two years.

The poor old house has been knocked down now - and they're going to build a lot of flats on it, they haven't started yet. *Yes they have.* They have started, oh. They've laid the foundations, I think and I think there are going to be about twenty-one flats on our garden and the plot next door.

Let me see... where are we now? Now we came to live with Uncle Peter and Aunt Janet, I suppose it must be two years ago last February. They took the two poor old souls in! And we've been here quite happily ever since. It was a bit of a wrench leaving all our belongings, because we couldn't bring much here, and we got rid of a few things round the family, and I don't know what happened to the rest of the things - I think we left them in the house and I suppose when the people came to demolish it, they just threw the furniture on the bonfire or whatever. And here we are - we've been here two years last February I think it is. I don't know what grandad has been telling you, but he's probably told you all about living here, has he? *No, he didn't actually mention that.*

Ah, anyhow. You know the family here - Uncle Peter and Aunt Janet and then there are the four youngsters, though Ellen doesn't live here any more - she's got a flat in London and she works up there. Denis - he's got a flat, and he sleeps - he has bed and breakfast at home - the rest of the time, he seems to spend here - reasonably happily, I think. It's nice having him here. And Graham's at school and he finishes this year and hopes to go to University in September/October. *No, he's taking a year out.* Oh, he's taking a year out - ah, I'm not up to date, and Heather, of course, is still at school. I think that just about disposes of it.

Grandad and I keep reasonably well. We are both getting older and more feeble, unfortunately. We'll leave it there at the moment. Perhaps I'll think of something else to say later.

Hello Kate. Another installment.

You didn't ask anything about Jack. Well, I'll tell you a little bit of what I know about him. We don't see him very often, but your mum brought him over here the last time we saw him but we do see Daniel occasionally. He brings him over, ooh, a couple of times a year I suppose, something like that. But he's a devoted father - good thing he is - and Jack's a lovely little boy.

Of course, he's speaking a bit now - not as well as he would do if he could hear properly, but he's a very bright child. Rather on the aggressive side, I found him, but a nice little boy and the few times he's been here he's dashed around the house like mad and I think he thoroughly enjoyed himself.

We haven't seen him lately - your mum brought him over the last time he came. We hope to see him during the August holidays, you know, when the children are home from school. Daniel will be able to bring him over, I expect.

He's getting on alright at school. I think he goes to the ordinary school now, which has a special section for his type of child and I think he's getting on alright from what I

have heard. We'll leave it there for a moment and I'll think of something else to say later.

I want to say a little bit about the family.

Ellen, I think, is going to go in for teaching and she's certainly doing a certain amount of it at the moment. Denis is err... he works locally - some sort of computing job. Graham's going to have a year out before he goes to University, wherever that is - I don't think he yet knows. Meanwhile, he's very busy - he plays the keyboards in a band and they have quite a few engagements. Heather, of course, is still at school. I was asking her one day what she wanted to do and she said hadn't any idea. I don't think many people have at her age. Peter, of course, is a chess coach - I expect you know all that - and Janet helps Peter and she does a lot of knitting and crochet and handiwork - she's very good at that sort of thing.

On with the other family. Now, Tom, he's going to be something or other in the city - heaven knows what - whatever people do in the city. William's going in for being a doctor so he's got to have several years' training. Now, Nick's at Sheffield University. I think it's the end of his second year there - I don't know what he's going to do afterwards.

Now Phyllis fell down the stairs and broke her ankle... ooh, must be about a year ago now and she decided she... well she couldn't go upstairs to bed... so her bed was brought downstairs and then she decided she'd have to move which she has done and she's got a bungalow near here in Southend so she's reasonably handy - not within walking distance, but a short car ride from here. And she's moved in quite recently. I think she'll be quite happy here. She's not exactly straight yet, but I think getting there. And quite a nice sized garden. She'll have to have a gardener, I expect, to keep it tidy for her, but it's mostly grass with beds all round the edge.

That's all for that at the moment.

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