

LEA WOOD & LEA BRIDGE
CHILDHOOD REMINISCENCES III

Edited by George Wigglesworth

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Childhood reminiscences III

Roses in December by Mrs Violet Marchant (1970)

"God gave us memories that we might have roses in December."

The hosiery mill was situated in the valley a few miles from the edge of the coal mining areas, so much of the female labour came from the mining villages, as well as from the immediate vicinity. I was born just before the Great War and now, just after it, we lived in a cottage directly opposite the mill, and as children we knew the faces of everyone there. Memories of childhood days are, therefore, always intermingled with the mill and everything connected with it.

The cloth cap and shawl image was slowly changing but I still recall a few of the 'oldtimers' clogged and shawled. In winter the men would wear black leather leggings and well dubbined boots, for trekking along the snow-covered lanes, and swinging in their hands would be the lidded wicker basket containing 'snap' for the day. The 'Tommy-shantered' women and girls from the most distant colliery areas would walk many miles on Monday morning, and for a shilling or so a week would be given lodgings in the small but solid stone built cottages on the hillside. They would bring their own food and keep themselves, then on Saturday, around noon, they would walk the long distance back home for the weekend.

Although they lived within walking distance of our village, they were different - an alien race - we thought. They were very hard working - lived every minute to the full, had coarse harsh 'gostering' laughs but they were generous to their friends. They would walk round the villages in the evening, eyeing the boys and always their hands were busy, fingers flying at sock knitting, crotchetting or tatting, with the ball of wool or cotton tucked firmly under one arm, and tongues were busy as fingers.

In the mill gaslights flicked and popped and burst many a gas mantle. The gashouse was at the end of the village. We would watch the silhouettes of the workers through the heavy ribbed glass windows as they held up the garments to the individual gas lights- these girls were 'menders'. They would often start singing; first one and then another would join, and in harmony their voices would ring out, melodies and choruses. A little way off came the roar and whine of the heavy spinning rooms, and here the girls would mime and mouth their words to one another, through, and across the alleyways of the machines.

At six o'clock the harsh bell would ring out its strident note, the doors would clash back on their catches, and with one rush the mob would hurl itself out into the roadway; we would grab the little children off the road and push them back to the wall, well out of the way. First there were the younger workers, who would be off & away, shucking, laughing, jostling and joking. We loved to run behind them, mocking and mimicking, "Goodnight Jessee"- "Taraar Shoody"- "Cum on Fanny," until they would turn and offer to "belt us round the earhole," but we would quickly turn on our heels and go back to the lights now dimming in each department.

Next, dragging along, would come the older workers, tired out after the long day. We watched them turn for the long hill in front of them, saw them re-adjust their bodies for the climb, and off they would go at a steady gate, leaning forward, knees sagging to take the pull, the men with thumbs stuck in their waistcoat armholes, and with the bent shoulder stoop of the frame worker.

"Come on, t' mill'an's have all gone, what shall we play at now?" and we would be away, into the now dark lanes and byways for 'Whipty-Whipty-Waller,' and 'Lurky,' and all those gang games we played in those far off days. In the summer time we followed the laden hay-carts to the barnyard, waited while the hay was unloaded, then rode gaily back to the fields again in the empty creaking cart; we paddled in the brook where the little eels and trout dart amongst the wild forget-me-nots and monkey musks; we picnicked under the big elm tree, near the farm yard. Then we went back home for another tea, stopping by the steep waterfall to watch for the brilliant flash of the kingfisher's wings. The farmer's wife would shoo us away as we leaned too far out over the bridge that spanned the waterfall, and we would rudely stick out our tongue, and then run away.

One never-to-be forgotten day in midsummer, the local music teacher who gave piano lessons asked if I would join her group to make up a may-pole team. I wasn't a pupil of hers like all the others, so I did my very best as a dancer. We practised every evening for hours, plaiting and unplaiting the maze of ribbons, and finally, out of the chaos came perfection. Parents were invited to watch on The Night, and I have vivid memories of the sweet violin music, the colours of the ribbons and summer dresses, the scent of the bruised, trodden grass; I felt I was walking on air, when I was chosen as the best dancer it didn't matter any more that I never 'play t'pianner,' I could dance!

In October, Wakes Week was celebrated in the village by a concert each night, and the big dinner-room at the mill was transformed into a concert hall. All would be cleared away; the piles of twists of tea, eggshells and banana skins disappeared; the rough tables were stacked at the back of the room- the big tea-mashing place would be cleared, and the solid mass of wet tea-leaves cleared from the heavy tray. A platform would be erected, and the villagers would stream in, to take their places on the hard forms.

Choirs would give of their best and sing 'Calicoes and laces, sheets and pillowcases, caps for pretty faces, soap and scrub'; there were monologues, dialogues, and then the Mill Band would render its party pieces. What a week it was for us to talk about during the long winter evenings!

Now Wakes Week is a thing of the past. The Mill is powered by electricity, buses- single deckers and double deckers- queue up outside. At half past four the buzzers buzz- the buses fill up and away they all go. Music still pours out, but it is modern music on the 'tannoy' for entertainment as they work. They aren't Millhands or Milljigs, as we called the girls, any longer - but production workers, with cooked dinners laid on at minimal charge. If the children dance now, it is not may-pole dancing to a violin - it's jogging around, on your own with just a small transistor radio pressed to one ear. I suppose they enjoy it all but... We had fun of our own making in the 'bad old days.'



Mrs Seedhouse's Reminiscences in 1987
(Record of a conversation edited by G W)

We went to live down at Hat Factory Row in about 1912 when I was seven. My mother and I lived in number 3, Mrs Yeomans next door. After I was married we lived at number one, it had a kitchen to, out at the back. It had been a shop, but that was before my time there, Mrs Else and her son, sweets and bits and bobs.

The cottages were three stories high, it was just accommodation, there was no weaving done like at Cromford. There was an iron fireplace in the room with a little oven and a little boiler. Downstairs there was no sink, you had to have a bowl on the table, we got the water from a big brass tap by the works gate, it's still there. They were beautifully made high wooden gates with a little door to get to the back of Brook Cottage. There were high walls down both sides of the lane. For a toilet there was a stone shed that still stands. It had two in it, I see they've got a door fitted now. On the other side at the bottom of the lane was a barn and pigsty, the barn had an ash pit in to take the fire ashes. There was a door into two toilets in that as well. The pig sty had big heavy pavers on it. It was Mr Waud's. Across the front of the cottages there was a soil path and we had gardens to both sides, it were lovely. There were vegetable gardens up towards the back of wharf cottage for the folk in the row.

When I was there the factory was finished, the top was just used for dances. The Elses had a mineral water factory when I was a girl. They made it in wooden troughs stood on concrete floors with diamond pattern to take the wet away and they put it in glass bottles with a marble in. They had a big wheel with a leather belt running over it 6 inches wide. The water came from a reservoir in Lea Wood. It was the Elses made it, one brother, Robert, lived in Lea Brook House and William in Lea Wood Cottage. Robert had one of the first cars that were about. They delivered lemonade in a steam lorry with solid tyres. There was a mounting stone at the front door for horse riders, I see that has gone.

I used to play with the Else's little girl she was only a tot. There was a little bridge across the stream above Lea Wood Cottage where William and Evelyn Else lived, we used to play on it and I fell in. The brook's a lot cleaner now, it had all the sewage in from up there and stuff from the mill and it used to smell. The Elses moved to New Street, Matlock and the little girl, Hetty, died of diphtheria, she was but five. When I was a girl we used to go on a Sunday School outing to Ripley on the canal in a coal boat.

Later we lived in Wharf Cottage and my husband worked at the lead works. Mill Close had mines in Ashanti in Africa and they asked my husband if he would like to go as foreman, but war broke out so we didn't go. It would have been different. There was a weighing machine where they've got an extension on the cottage, to weigh the carts. They have a door out of the cellar now. Further along is a hovel where they kept the horse, at the end of the garden by the tow path and a big gate across the tow path. It was lovely here, I never thought I would leave, we were never short of company, the house were never empty and the tea pot were never empty. Mr Shore Nightingale used to walk down here often and always took care to see it were trim. I could look from my kitchen window all the way to Smedleys to see for the children coming home from school. Mr Nightingale told Joseph my husband we must tap into the water of his from the reservoir. He said have it Joseph, it's my land, it's my water. I used to fetch it as we all fetched it from the factory gate, we was willing to pay. Then Swindell kicked up a row, he said it was his but he never brought the deeds, it was just deed done.



In the summer gentlemen fishermen came from Sheffield and all around in their cars and parked on the wharf to fish in the river along with Louis Nightingale. Joseph were water bailiff one bit in his spare time. Their ladies would come up to see if I would make them a pot of tea, or if I had an aspirin. They were always very friendly. They would stay here till dusk.

Lea Brook, by Mr Bert Yeomans

'This our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in everything,'
Shakespeare's, 'As You Like It.'

Lea, Lea Bridge and Lea Wood were blessed, and maybe even created by the stream which rises on Lea Moor, Littlemoor and High Lees and finds its way into the Derwent at Lea Wood.

A happy stream even in its early stages, one tributary chuckling and gurgling amongst the stones as it travels hidden under grassy banks, along the Littlemoor roadside. The main flow from Lea Moor is a little more sedate as it proceeds by the parklike fields fronting Lea Hall, down through Paddock Woods, on behind the Jug and Glass and through Swine Park, before it reaches the beautiful, mis-named Sodom hamlet as a dignified brook. Stonework here suggests the harnessing of its waters and its power before it escapes into the River Derwent eventually.

What a shame it was that we were not permitted to traverse its banks along the whole length! But it was still 'our' brook as children, just as much as the Thames belongs to the folk of London town, and surreptitiously we did explore its banks for fun and adventure.

As many of you will know, after leaving the old lead works and the waterfall, the water soon disappears and goes 'reight under t'mill' at Lea Mills (and who knows what might also have disappeared into it there!) before it emerges by the boiler house at the bottom end of the mills - or it did 70 years ago!

My Dad was then a most conscientious fireman at those boilers whose power from the waters of Lea Brook drove the whole factory. Steam pressure checked, 120; water above the safety level; fires burning clean and bright; clinker and ash removed regularly and dumped...where? into t'brook mostly with a mighty hiss and a cloud of steam as the red hot contents of the barrow hit the cold water.

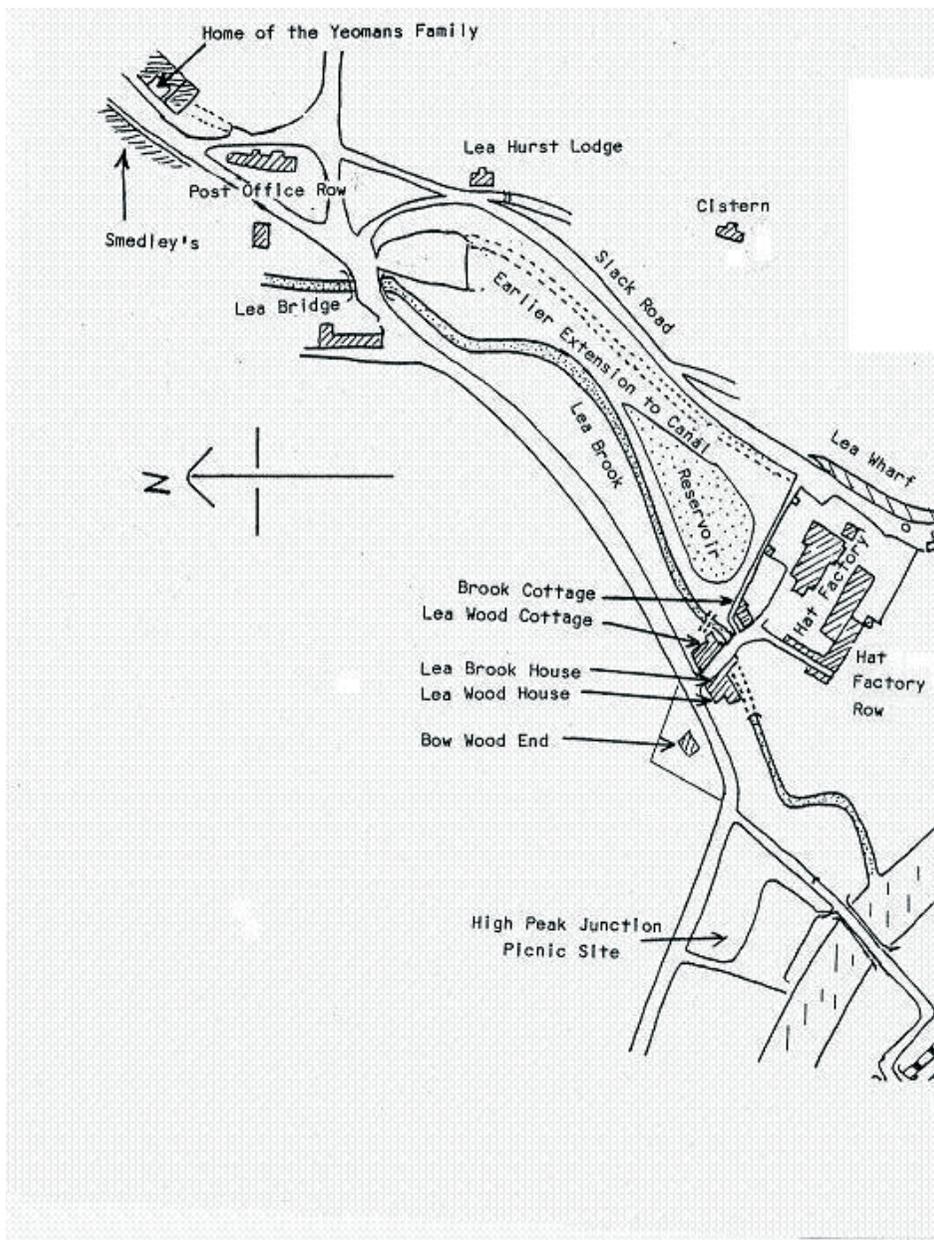
But the story I want to tell is of a strange but lovely yarn knitted into a complete tale of a different kind. One off my six sisters, Esther, was desperately ill with pneumonia - the 'nine days' critical point had arrived and the wan little face with burning eyes was being watched anxiously by all of us. Then she quietly whispered that she could just fancy a bit of fish. Fish! On a Tuesday! At Lea Bridge! Never!! The one armed fishmonger from Cromford only cried his wares every Thursday. There was not a hope of fish for Esther.

My mother did, as always, take Dad his dinner basket down to the boilers - he didn't like to leave his post even for a meal. His heart was heavy, so were ours, and Dad was anxious for news. Mother didn't mention the fish. She prepared to go back home - past the awkward big gate and 'Boxy' Knowles, and over the road to our home which was just opposite.

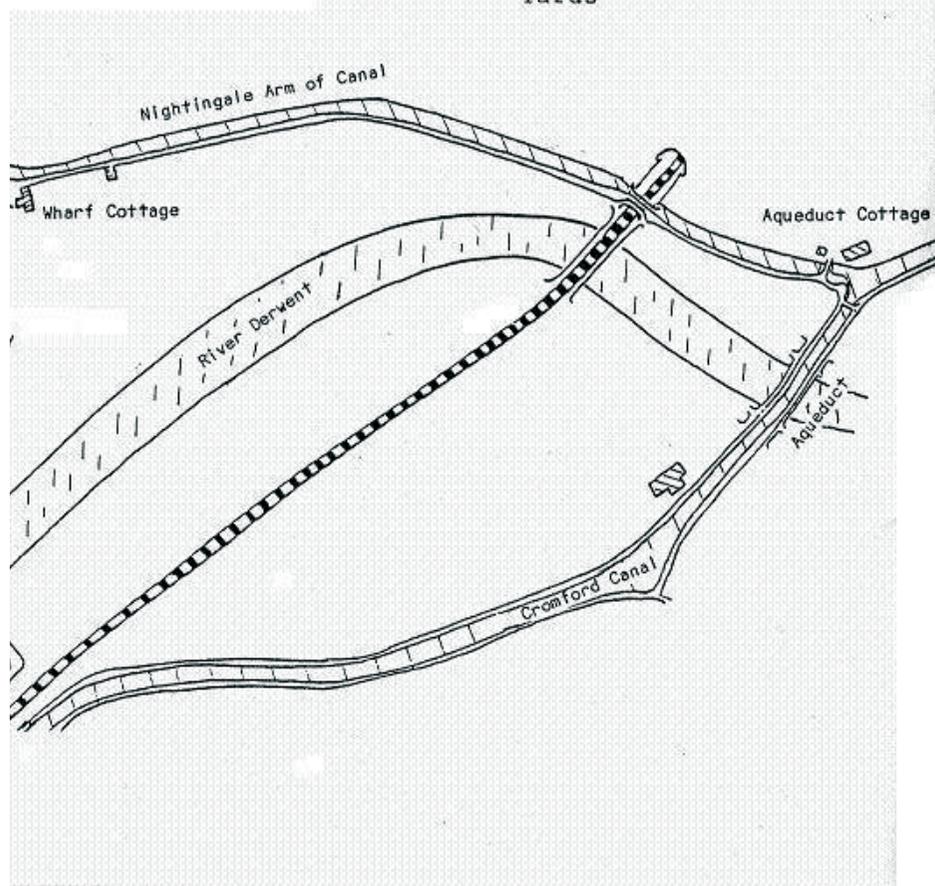
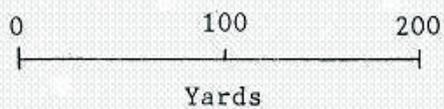
"Oh! 'Owd on a minute mother," said Dad. "Before tha goes back tek this as I tickled out o't brook when I went to tip t'ashes." And he brought forth a shining, gleaming red-speckled trout which had strayed too far downstream.

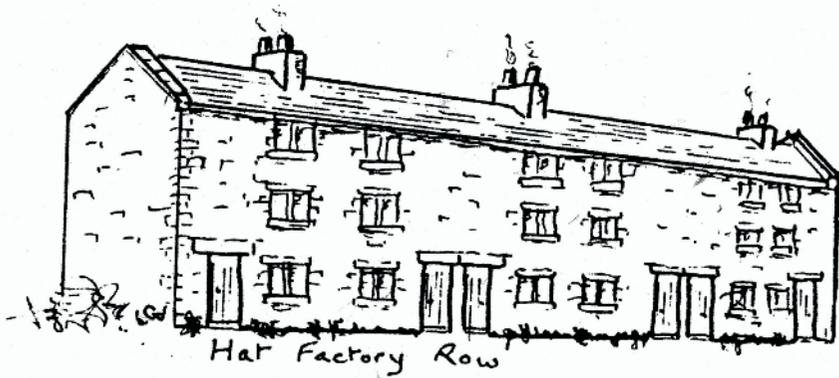
No need to go on is there? Esther recovered, later worked in Lea Mills some 50 years or so and we children - eight of us in all - believed in miracles ever after.

You see that was the only trout Dad ever had caught, or did catch, in Lea Brook.



Sketch Map
of
Lea Bridge, Lea Wood,
and
High Peak Junction





The Hat Factory and Lea Wood Row,
all now disappeared by Mrs Alice Potter

I remember staying with Grandma Yeomans about 1904 and think now of her little cottage in the Lea Wood Row (or Hat Factory Row) facing the meadow and the river beyond. The pig sty and the old cowsheds were at the corner and here I once dropped a delicious rosy apple granny had given me into the pig manure. What a waste!

Those living in the row of factory cottages at that time were Mrs Else, Mrs Roberts and Miss Bent at 1,3 and 4. Mrs Jacob Yeomans (Granny) at 2, Mr Tom Marsh, granny's brother - our uncle Tom - at 5. At 6 was Mrs Walker - our aunty Jinny - by then widowed and returned from Australia, with four children, to work in Lea Mills, (she later became Mrs Sam Sellers).

The ruined Hat Factory had a tap by the entrance which was the water supply for the cottages thirty yards down the lane. The tap is still there although the cottages and the factory have gone. We used to explore the ruins secretly and in one room were the dusty garlands from the 'good old days' of dancing and festivities. The man who bought the ruins redressed the stones to build a modern house on Lea Wood Corner (Bow Wood End).

Mrs Else had a little shop where we spent our Saturday half-pennies sometimes on butter scotch from a tin tray. When we gathered wild flowers we would take a bunch for Mrs Else and she would often give us a small piece of toffee.

Some cottages provided sleeping places for Danesmoor or Clay Cross girls who worked at Lea Mills. These girls came with their own food for a week and walked back home at weekends. In the summer evenings they walked round the village or sat by the meadow knitting, crocheting or reading. Some of them married village boys.

When the canal was emptied and dredged Grandma would take me with a little bucket and rake to salvage small pieces of coal from the sludge. This helped her very limited means. At Christmas a charity provided her with two bags of coal.

Together we went into the fields and woods to gather firewood or blackberries or crab apples. When the Old Age Pension of five shillings a week came into force she thought she was a wealthy woman and would say to my mother, "Look! I have my own bank book."

She lived frugally but taught me much and I still feel we Yeomans must have something of the gipsy in our blood as we so enjoy the gifts of nature. She was happy, although with no possessions and passed on this little saying to us all "it's people that matters, not things."

I left school at the age of 13 and started work straight away at the mills of John Smedley Ltd. Very shortly afterwards World War I (1914 - 1918) started.

The factory received huge orders for the troops for their pants, vests and cardigans. Our working day was normally from 8 am to 6 pm but to get orders out quickly employees living in the local village worked two hours longer in the evenings. Most employees lived in outlying villages and they walked or cycled to work every day. The mill hooter sounded and re-echoed from the hills warning the workers that it was nearly time to be inside and little groups would break into a run as they converged towards Lea Mills.

I well remember our cousin (Aunt Jinny's son) Arthur Walker who, before that time had emigrated to Canada. He joined the army there and was soon in England, in uniform, to fight in the war and ready to go to France. Aunt Jinny used to make up parcels to send him in the trenches (hand knitted socks, fruit cakes and many other items) sewn up in a sacking cover. But it wasn't very much later when word came that he had been killed in action.

Another memory I have of that time was of a young man named Hodgkinson who lived in Holloway. He was awarded the Military Medal for bravery in action. The ceremony of presentation was held in the Chapel Sunday School in Holloway and was conducted by Mrs Marsden Smedley, the wife of the factory owner, with the village folk all being there. Our Grandma, Mrs Yeomans, of Lea Wood wanted to be there and I walked with her, dressed in her Sunday best, black bonnet and cape.

We started the steep journey up the hill when the local butcher came by with his horse and trap and asked Grandma if she wanted to ride up the Holloway lane (Mill Lane). The step up to the trap was high and springy and she had great difficulty in getting up besides him.

I also vividly remember the day of the two minutes silence when I had gone to visit Auntie Jinny, Arthur Walker's mother. The mill hooter went at 11 o'clock and she stood up straight to respect his memory, not shedding any tears.

And the rest of her family, my cousins George and Polly, she never saw again as they never returned from Canada to England. Frank, her youngest son, stayed home for many years, coming to our house every day but eventually he too went to Canada never to return.

Belgian refugees came to Holloway and the villagers gave up some of their belongings to furnish a home for them in the village. Their family name was Gunst and the two youngest, named Christine and Gustave, came to Lea School. They were not speaking much English but the children soon learned to understand each other.

After all the hard work, the sadness and dark days of war (we had blackout then and sometimes we heard what we thought were zeppelins) the happy day came when the Armistice was signed. People in the village went to the school and all the scholars joined them in a march down to the mills where everyone had a happy day of celebration. But even this was also a sad time too because an influenza epidemic struck and there was a lot of illness and some died. My sister and I walked to the next village one day and a girl who had only been ill the previous week was being buried that day.

"T'Cut at Lea Wood" by Mr Bert Yeomans

The Navvies who built the Lea Wood branch of Cromford Canal must have found it a bit tricky to wedge it between the River Derwent, the hillside of Mr Nightingale's Lea Hurst Park, over the railway and along the ledge by Lea Wood Meadow. No wonder it never quite reached Lea Bridge! But the traces are still there and I have childhood memories of a brown squirrel in the branches of the tall trees above the course it would have taken there.

So the 'Slack Road' from Lea Hurst Lodge down to the Wharf at Lea Wood, like topsy, 'just growed'. It was deeply rutted, wet and muddy and a horse-manured and churned-up mess of a road. But there was black treasure to be found in the bits of coal joggled out of the carts using it and we gathered these and the manure in our little handcarts to take home.

My uncle, Sammy Sellers (a rhymster and a ready wit) lived at the lodge. We would say "Hello Mr Sellers, have you anything to tell us?" and he would reply cheerfully, "yes, if it rains you'll all want umbrellers" He was very bowlegged and so my Dad said, "Ay couldna' stop a pig in a jennel."

Another Uncle and my Grandmother lived in Lea Wood Row. Uncle Fred was blinded. He had been hit on the head by part of a stone lifting crane on Sim's Wharf by the canal at Whatstandwell.

We used to link little fingers as we walked to be, as he said, "like Oddfellows Club men." At home in his stone flagged living room he could cut spills for tapers and tie them into a bundle to be sold at a penny each. He could chop sticks and polish brasses, but how he and granny survived is a mystery.

But to return to the Slack Road. Halfway down on the left hand side was a drinking trough fed from a spring in the park. The same water supplied Else's mineral water works at Lea Wood and it was the sweetest you can imagine. We dipped our faces in it like horses and drank from its crystal clear coolness. I have other memories; of a profusion of that ancient weed horse's tail and mare's tail in the ditches there. The joints in the stems fascinated us. And it was here that I had my first taste of beer! Some benevolent friend had presented Uncle Fred with two bottles - one weighting down each jacket pocket, When we reached the comparative privacy of Slack Road, uncle decided that it was time to sample one, and he gave me a swig. I thought it was awful stuff- and perhaps that is why I became a teetotaller!

The wharf was often a hive of activity. The Co-op barge moored there regularly. Harry Bonser (or Bonsall) would have his head and shoulders protruding above his little cabin roof. His coloured neckerchief vied with the paintings on his boat in gait, but his broken clay pipe generally upside down if he had no baccy, gave him a saddened look. He relieved his lonely life, when he had money, by an occasional visit to the Yew Tree in Holloway, and we watched his unsteady journey home with anxiety lest he should fall into 't cut.

Once I remember P.C. Woodward had perforce to take him into custody, whereupon he kicked the P.C. on the shins and became 'drunk and disorderly etc'. At a later time I heard him remonstrating with P.C. Woodward for such drastic action against a friend.

As I grew older and stronger I often helped to shovel coal out of the barges on to the wharf. Sometimes we heaved it to a greater height into Frank Else's carts for Lea Mills and even into Bert and Arthur Thorpe's lorries. I was proud to earn a few shillings - I think it was about tenpence an hour!

The pigs of lead brought down from the Lead Works were a fascination to us too. They were about a yard long and impressed with the Mill Close name and weighed a hundredweight (50 Kilos). Handled carelessly they bent in the middle but we boys weren't satisfied until we could lift them, regardless of hernias or any other danger.

The barges took them the short journey via the Aqueduct (Ackerdock) to High Peak Junction from whence they disappeared from our view into the great unknown world beyond the confines of Lea Wood, the Slack Road and 't cut which were our childhood home and playground.

Childhood by the Canal by Mrs Ivy Turberville

The things I remember most clearly about my childhood and perhaps what is most interesting to others is the time we spent in the cottage by the Aqueduct. Ackerdock Cottage we knew it as. It is where the Lea Canal joins the Cromford Canal.

I was born up in Riber but when my father was taken ill with rheumatism he couldn't work farming and in 1919 we went to live with grandma by the canal. I was about six or seven. My mother, called Selina, and her two brothers and five sisters were brought up by Grandma Eaton at that cottage and so we were going back to her childhood home. A few years later our family, the Fletchers, moved to Post Office Row. Even then we used to move back to Grandma's house when she went away to stay with her relatives for a month or two.

There were only two bedrooms and a best room down stairs with two windows and a kitchen with its little window. When Grandma moved there, outside there was a yard with lean-to shed, divided in two, one part used as wash house. The back section was entered from the kitchen. The last people had kept chickens in the bit that opened into the kitchen. When Grandma tried to clean it up with whitewash it wouldn't stay on the dirty walls. They had to wash the walls with cow dung, diluted and brushed over so the whitewash would take.

In the yard at the front by the canal we kept the coal. The barge men would throw us a few lumps of coal as they went past in their boats, we never bought coal. Harry Bonsall was one of the boat men. He didn't have a horse, he pulled the barge himself. We used to open the swing bridges for him, the one to our cottage and the one over the Cromford Canal that is still there. It was sad in the end, one night he was in his bunk, he lived on the boat, and the boat started sinking and he was on the top bunk up to his waist. The people who lived on the wharf had had some idea there was something wrong and got out of bed to go and see. They had to get him out, he was paralysed with fright. He didn't use his barge again. There is a photograph of it where it was, sunk in the Lea Cut.

In the kitchen under the window stood a pot sink which drained into the canal but no water laid on. We had to be careful what we poured away in order not to pollute the canal because we took our laundry water out of the canal from two stone platforms just outside the gate at the canal edge. We got our cooking water most times from springs on our side of the canal. The water for the drinking came out under the canal on the far bank. It didn't come from the canal itself, it had soaked down the hillside and right under the level of the canal and it was quite clear. It had 'water clearer beetles' swimming about in it as we called them. We had a pot to purify the water with sand in for the water to drain through to clear it for drinking.

Grandma was very strict and we all had to work. Just by the back door were nails that our yokes hung on ready to help us carry the pails of water. There was a small one for me and I had two quart milk cans to fetch water from below the canal, down the wooden steps, that was my task.

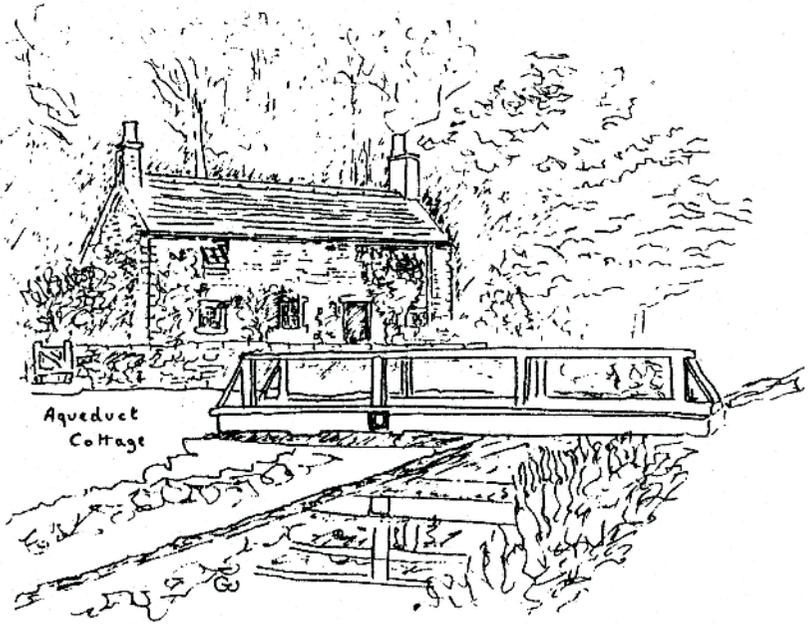
When I was a bit older and going across the other side of the river for water I used to walk back on the parapet. I think I walked on the parapet more often than on the tow path when going over the river. I couldn't do it now, it made my father swear no end.

At the Lea Bridge end of the cottage was a high stone building with our earth closets on the upper floor and a pig sty below. When mother was a girl they had a cow or two behind. Grandfather used to graze them down the river bank, through under the aqueduct. They were by the fire one stormy night when he rushed in saying they shouldn't be sitting there when his cow was floating down the river on the floods. They all had to rush down to where the railway crosses the river and help get it out on the shallower banks.

It was him that was in trouble when Grandma was bemoaning the fact he hadn't swept the chimney. He went out in a temper, tied a heavy stone and a big bunch of holly on a rope and dropped it all down the chimney. It would have been better if he had told Grandma what he was going to do. After that we always had 'Pedley Push Cart,' our village sweep from Crich.

I didn't like sleeping at Grandma's. I can only remember two beds, big high four posters. There was only one bedroom that was private. The stairs went straight up from the kitchen into one bedroom, the other room was off that one through a door. A strange room was always a fright. The bed was so high I could hardly scramble up into it. The oven door in the kitchen below groaned every time it was opened, as the grown ups had there meal after I was in bed and it was a frightening noise to a little one like me alone up there in the dark. Helping to make the beds was hard work for my little arms and trying to turn the feather mattress every week was exhausting.

There was even less privacy for a bath. You might wait until everyone else went out or else draped some cloths on the clothes horse round the bath for a bit of privacy in the kitchen near to the little fireside boiler for a bit of hot water. If we complained and tried to miss having one we were always told that 'Miss Nightingale always said anyone could have a bath if they had a pint of boiling water, a walnut of soap and a small square of flannel.' Grandmother was a great admirer of Florence and I think would have wanted to be a nurse. In fact she helped in the village as a kind of midwife and with the old people.



Aqueduct
Cottage

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