

Extracts from the Elizabeth Roberts Archive

Childbirth

1. Mrs H.2.L. - born 1889

R Oh I think we managed. Martha used to come, the midwife, and they used to stop in bed a week in them days. She wasn't certified or anything but she was one of the good old midwives and it was only a few shillings for a confinement. I've heard m'mother say that she used to give her 6d a week until she got it paid off. She was a grand old lass. In George Street that was.

2. Mrs W.1.B. - born 1900

ER Did she ever tell you when she was having a baby or were you expected not to know?

R I wasn't expected to know. I do remember this when Mary was born and, of course, I'm 9 years older. I must have been about 9 at the time. She was very, very poorly at the time Mary was born. It was in the middle of the night, of course, and Dr Sanson got us all out of bed to shout, 'Mamma', at the bedroom door. We were all shouting 'Mamma', in the middle of the night.

ER This was because she'd had anaesthetic?

R Anaesthetic and he couldn't get her round.

ER Were you frightened or did you just take it as a matter of course?

R Yes, I think we took it as a matter of course. I don't think we were frightened. You see, we didn't understand really what was going on. We knew m'father was in the room and m'mother and the doctor was there and the nurse there, and we'd to stand and shout, 'Mamma.' I don't think any of us realised. In fact, I think I got a shock the next day when I got up and we'd got another sister. I seem to remember getting a shock.

ER Did you notice she was getting fatter?

R This is what I'm going to say. When she got up I remember saying to her, 'Oh mother, you must have been poorly.' She looked at me. I said, 'Well you've gone so thin.' Well I didn't know it was the baby, I honestly didn't know. She said, 'You know far too much, get yourself out.'

3. Mrs P.1.P. - born 1898

ER They gave you chloroform at home, did they?

R Yes. Well, it were a breech. They did turn me. She said that she had never seen anything like it in her life. The nurse and doctor had both their sleeves rolled right up here. They were sweating. I was in bed about a fortnight and she looked after me while I was in bed. Because we couldn't afford to pay anybody else. It was her home and she didn't want anybody else to come in. Although we didn't get on very well together. I hadn't a lot of money to buy a lot of sanitary towels, we had all sorts of bits of rags and things like that. Even when babies were born we had shirt laps, pieces of sheets and all sorts. Now they are paying pounds and pounds and they have the real thing right away. After that he said it was a finisher. He said it was my work that had done a lot of that.

ER Was this your husband or the doctor?

R My husband. He said, 'We're not having any more of that. You are going away. I'm not having you messed about like that.' So after that, with the other ones, I went away. My sister was frightened to death of hospitals. I thought, if she had gone through what I did at first, then she would want to go in hospital.

4. Mrs B.1.P. - born 1900

R I was as green as grass when I got married and I don't think me husband were much ... brighter. No they just came. Mind you, after my first, that was a terrific shock. I would never like my children to be brought up in such ignorance. It was a terrific

shock, it took me a long time and I said never again, I would drown myself and he said, 'And I'd go with you.' You know, it was a very traumatic experience. So ignorant. Well, my first baby was born on a Tuesday and on the Saturday I said to my husband, 'I am bothered', and he said 'what's the matter?' and I said, 'How can a baby come out?', you know you had a brown mark there and I thought how can a baby come out there, how will it? I was terrified of this bursting, you know. He said, 'Well what do you mean?' and I wasn't big really, 'cause I wore my corsets up to the end. He said, 'but they don't come out there.' I said, 'where do they come out?', and he said, 'where it goes in', and do you know, I nearly died. Well I was more het up than ever. How could it... and I really think I suffered more through ignorance, you do!

ER I'm sure.

5. Mrs H.8.P - born 1903

R When Evelyn was born the doctor said to Dad (i.e her husband) 'No more, there hasn't to be anymore.' It was very difficult, it wouldn't have been today love.

R1 He said that if I wanted to keep my wife there would have to be no more.

R I was worried about that because I came from a big family, my mother and father were tall - my mother was just my build - and two of my sisters were tall and they had had four children each without any difficulty. I thought it would be just nothing.

ER Did you go to the doctor beforehand?

R You didn't do in them days, you just booked a midwife, that's all you did. I went straight away for a midwife at the bottom. She was a lovely woman.

ER Was she qualified, do you know?

R Oh yes. Oh yes. But you didn't go to a doctor like they do now. If I had had a doctor I might have been better but it would have meant hospital and you didn't go there unless you were seriously ill.

ER So did she have to send for the doctor?

R Yes. She wanted to send for the doctor before but I said I'd manage. She said 'Fanny you won't', I said 'I will', but I didn't. In the end, I was living with father then, she went downstairs and said 'you're going to lose both of them - she'll not have a doctor'. Father said, 'You send for the doctor, never mind her!' Afterwards she asked me 'why did you hold out on me?' I said 'Well, none of my sisters and my brother's wife had needed a doctor' but she said, 'that was nothing to do with you'. She said, 'Good Lord, look at her!' She was navy-blue was Evelyn when she was born. Anyhow, she didn't take any harm. They phoned three doctors and they were all out. She sent for Doctor Harrington and as soon as he came he just turned my head round and said, 'Oh my god!' I was just beyond anything. I must have been too far gone to take chloroform and I had to have a proper mask on. I had to be stitched up. In them days you didn't move for ten days and I had to lie in bed. She told me that if I was going to be silly she would have to tie my feet together. She made me promise that I wouldn't move. My sister looked after me as she lived at home as well.

6. Mrs M.3.P. - born 1898

ER Did she have any care before they were born?

R No. Neither did I! I was never examined until I had my last baby, and then not inwardly. I never went to hospital. The doctor came and measured me with the midwife. I wouldn't say I had any trouble. They used to tell me I ought to have them and given them away!

ER You had them all at home did you?

R Yes.

ER Did you have a midwife and a doctor?

R No. I had a doctor and my mother for the first one and after that I had a midwife. The last one the midwife left me and it came very quickly and I just had the doctor.

ER Do you know if the midwife was a qualified one?

R She was.

ER What about your mother?

R What did the doctor say about my mother? He said, 'I wish all my patients were looked after like this one.' But she'd been used to going out to women, like her mother.

ER Had your mother ever qualified or had she just practised?

R Oh no. She went when anybody wanted her.

ER What did you have to provide for when you had the baby at home?

R Plenty of newspapers and a draw-sheet, there was nothing else. We never had packs brought. I never had a baby basket. I had a big tin box and I used to put all my powder and sponge and all that sort of thing in there and keep it clean that way.

ER I think most people seem to have put newspapers on the bed with a sheet over the top?

R Yes. That is what I did and I don't remember there ever being a mess! I can't remember nurses making a mess! I had a wonderful old nurse, Nurse King. I had her for all the four until the last one. She walked out at half past one and it was born at quarter to two. She said it wouldn't be there till 4 o'clock. 'You must get the other nurse.'

ER And what would Nurse King charge for coming?

R I think the last one was £3.

ER That was quite a lot of money.