

Extracts from the Elizabeth Roberts Archive

The Lancashire Way of Death

1. Mrs A.3.B. (born 1892)

R No, when the baby was born we could hear we used to know how fat mam was getting but we didn't know anything. Then I heard a noise one night and I got up and I thought m'mamma must be bad and I went in the room and said, "Is m'mamma bad?" Dad said, "No, go and get yourselves back into bed m'lass she'll be alright till morning." When I got up in the morning and I went in she'd had this little baby and it was stillborn. She said, "You're not going to school today Rose." I said, "Aren't I?" She said, "No, you'll have to stay at home, I want you to do something for me." I said, "What's been the matter with you mamma?" She said, "Well, I've got a baby." I said "Where is it?" She said, "It's just over there", and it was on a wash stand, on a pillow with a cover over it. When I looked at it, it was like a little doll, very small. She said, "I want you to go to a shop and ask for a soap box." I said, "A soap box Mam?" She said, "Yes." I said, "What's it for?" She said, "To put that baby in." I brought this soap box back and I called on the road to my friend, a young girl I went with, so I told her and she went with me. She said, "I'll come down to your house with you." She came and we had a look at this little doll and my friend said, "Let us line this little box with wadding." We lined this box with this bit of wadding and then m'mamma put this wee baby in it and the lid fastened down like the boxes do today, no nails. She said, "There's a letter here" They didn't call them midwives then, just ladies and it used to be half a crown or five shillings to come and deliver a baby. She gave me a letter. "Now you've got to go up the cemetery and give this letter to the grave digger, any grave digger you see in." I said, "I can't take it wrapped up in paper", so I went in the back and saw an old of m'dads. I ripped the black lining out of this coat and we wrapped this little box in this lining and put some string round it, put it under our arms and off we went to the grave digger. I give him this letter and he read it. He said, "Oh yes, just take it over in the church porch love. You'll see a few parcels in that corner just leave it there." Me being inquisitive said, "What are you going to do with it?" He said, "Well we have public graves, everybody don't buy graves, they haven't the money, when the public graves get nearly full up we put one in each grave." "Oh that's what you do?", I said, he said, "Yes". Tell your mammy it'll be alright", and we turned back home.

ER Did it upset you at the time?

R Yes, because we thought it was like a little doll. It wasn't really developed, just small.

ER How old would you be then?

R I'd be about twelve.

2. Miss T.2.B. (born 1888)

R Dad was only fifty-six when he died but it was the mill flour got on his chest. He got angina pectoris. He died a very good death and when he was dying he called them all around, all of them, all of us and said that if he'd ever done anything to hurt us or anything that was wrong would we forgive him and ask God to forgive him and pray for him when he was dead. I remember dadda.

3. Mrs M.3.P. (born 1898)

ER Did she ever lay people out when they were dead?

R Oh yes. So did I. Not many but I have. I've laid two out. I was with one and then I did the other myself. Oh I did another one.

ER How did you know what to do? Did your mother tell you?

R My mother didn't tell me how to lay anyone out. But an old lady across the way used to go to lay people out and I was asked to go. I said "Well I can't. I don't know anything about it" and they said "Well Mrs B. will go if you'll go and help her." So

she showed me what to do. When it came that I had to do, I could do it. I would do it if I had to, but I don't think they do.

ER Did you used to put pennies on their eyes?

R Yes. And cotton wool up their noses and back-passage and a nappy on and a pair of stockings. There's many a man gone with a pair of silk stockings on when we couldn't find anything else.

ER And a night-shirt?

R A night-shirt or shirt or whatever they had. My husband was in pyjamas. We would generally put them a clean one on. Because my husband, the nurse changed him and just laid him ready. I said "Do you want anything?" and he said, "No love, his clean clothes are here. I'll just put them on. He's just right for taking away."

ER And did you used to tie a cotton round the chin?

R Or put a book, a prayer-book, under their chin to hold it. And if they had any teeth, get them back in if you could.

ER When babies used to be born do you ever remember them putting pennies on their tummy-buttons?

R Yes. And a binder round and a binder round you! They don't do that today?

ER No, they don't. Where did your mother learn about laying people out?

R I wouldn't know! Unless her mother?

ER Did her mother used to do it as well?

R Grandma used to do it oh yes, she was the old woman of the village. The doctor always came for her whenever anything wanted doing.

4. Mrs A.3.B. (born 1892)

R Really they were better friends than what they are. They're good friends today but they're more for themselves. In the olden days it was sisterly love and more motherly love. I used to be knocked up time out of time when anybody died. They used to come and knock at the door at midnight and say, "Will you come and lay so-and-so out?" I used to go and lay them out.

ER Do you remember how old you were when you first laid somebody out?

R Oh, I'd be about twenty. I would have loved to have been a nurse but my mother made me go as a cook. One night I had a knock at midnight and I'd three little girls and I go up and an old lady up the street had passed out and they asked me if I'd go and lay her out. I said, "Just give me time to get dressed". I got dressed and when the children got up in the morning to go to school they said, "Who was that man knocking the door again through the night?" "It was only Grandma Houldsworth had passed away and they asked if I'd go and lay her out." Mabel turns round and said, "Why don't you put a blinkin' card in the window: 'Laying-out taken in'?" Not 'Washing taken in', 'Laying-out taken in'! We never used to take anything off them, never bothered, but now today everything is altered and the undertaker does all that.

ER Would people give you a present, were they grateful for what you did, or just take it for granted?

R No, they would ask you and try to offer you summat or buy you summat. They hadn't the money and we used to say "No". I never took nothing off them and it used to be our good deed for them, we were good neighbours.

5. Mr F.1.P. (born 1906)

ER What about funerals when you were young?

R Well, in Cleator Moor, of course, funerals were a big thing because they had the wake beforehand, you know. The wake went on until corpse was nearly smelling.

ER Did you ever go to a wake?

R Yes. Once or twice.

ER And what happened?

R I mean, I didn't realise that they were wakes, I thought they were having a party or something.

ER This was when you were very small, when you went back on holidays?

R I would be about six or seven.
ER And what happened at them?
R They would all be sat down telling tales and laughing like Hell. Poor corpse was lying in the coffin there with his Rosary beads round his hands. I remember, it was an uncle of mine that were dead and I remember looking at him and I said, "By God, they've washed him!" It was the first time that I had ever seen him clean!
ER Was he a miner, as well?
R I had never seen him clean.

6. Mrs C.5.P. (born 1919)

ER You are younger than a lot of the people I talk to but when you were a little girl had the habit died out of going to see dead people?
R Yes, we used to go. Me and my mate used to go and we would knock on the door and say, "Please, can we have a look at 'em?" They would open the door and let you in you see. We would go in and have a look and then we would go out and then we would be there for the funeral because they always gave you a bit of cake. Even now I say, "Isn't that funeral cake good?" We used to go that often and once me and m'mate went and we knocked at the door and when they opened the door we asked if we could have a look at 'em and they said, "Who?" We said, "Them that's dead!" They said, "There's nobody dead at all." We just said, "Well, your curtains is drawn." She just said that we're washing our lace curtains. After that m'mother got to know and I never went again.
ER How old would you be?
R Happen about 11 or 12.
ER When you saw the bodies did you touch them, did they expect you to touch them?
R Now I would touch them as it wouldn't trouble me now, but then I would never touch them, but yet ... I never dreamt about them.
ER It wasn't just young people, it was anybody?
R It was anybody, all round our neighbourhood and people we knew would tell us that suchabody was dead. If I thought it was near enough I used to say, "Nellie, suchabody is dead, can we go?" We would go and that were it.
ER Why did you like going?
R I don't know why I like going. Unless they are a relation now I won't go and see anybody dead.
ER Quite a lot of people used to go and look at bodies.
R Yes. And yet my daughter today, she'll not go and see anybody dead, yet she works at the Infirmary.

7. Mrs M.1.P. (born 1913)

R But still they had a funeral. They probably wouldn't have new clothes but they were always dressed in sombre black. For twelve months afterwards you didn't wear anything only black. When my father died I was 10 and we were all in deep black for at least 12 months afterwards for respect.
ER Did people used to come and see the body?
R That was a thing. They would come and ask "Please may I see them?" Then the day of the funeral they would stand each side of the doorway in a line, especially the children and they would be at the front. The undertaker would go out and they always had this currant fruit cake and it was cut in pieces and the undertaker would go out and give everyone a piece of this cake outside the door before the funeral. Of course, it was something for the children. When father died it was 1923. I remember going in a carriage and pair, the funeral. It was the old fashioned glass coach for the coffin, like the hansom cab and the horses were black with big white plumes and the driver had his tails on and his black hat with this black ribbon streamers down the back and the whip in his hand.

8. Mrs A.2.B. (born 1904)

ER What about funerals when you were a child?

R I remember m'dad's very well. He was an old army man so they had him on a gun carriage. He was a member of British Legion you see and they had a gun carriage and they fired over his grave. They sounded the Last Post and fired over his grave and I remember that very, very vividly, it was on a Whit Monday and it was a blazing hot day and we were all in deep black. We had to have black. They had the horses of course then, cabs, no coaches, no cars.

9. Mr B.9.P. (born 1927)

R The dead were a very important aspect of life. They were talked about a great deal, almost as though they were still living. There were little prayer cards in the prayer books of your mercy pray for the soul of so and so. We went to the cemetery, what seemed like every Sunday afternoon and that seemed my only link with the countryside. My first memory of roses was the magnificent roses in the cemetery at Preston. The graves were tended and it was what seemed like a weekly ritual. And they went on living, so to speak, in conversation and memory for some considerable time. So there was that sense of continuity.