

Extracts from the Elizabeth Roberts Archive

Working Class Marriages 1890-1940

1. Mrs H.3.L. (born 1903)

No, there was one or two. My dad used to like a drink but he never touched m'mother's money. He worked at the matting mill and he used to work after the mill had closed on his loom making extra money for his pocket. He used to give m'mother her wages and the other was his and he used to start at Friday night at Saturday night he used to come home happen about eight o'clock, he hadn't a ha'penny left, just enough for church collection on Sunday. Because he never went on Sunday, he always went to the church on Sunday but he drank at Friday night and Saturday night. He would come home with either a paper full of bones or sheep's heads and my mother used to have to make him broth for his supper.

2. Mrs W.2.L. (born 1910)

It used to be mothers that sort of dominated the home, you know?

Oh yes, I think so and I think in those days that the man passed over the money, much more than he does today. I mean today they sit down and talk it out and there's so much for him and so much for the house. But in those days the wages were so poor that really the man didn't get a right lot out of it unless he was

(Mr J.) His job was to provide for the family.

Yes, and it was handed over and the wife did the allotting where it went.

I think they perhaps gave the husband something back didn't they?

Yes, but well in some cases I don't think they got an awful lot. I mean some of these that were always drunk must have got a lot back. I think they perhaps didn't treat the wives fairly. I mean I can remember when I was smaller when my father was at Williamsons in the Warehouse Office he got a shilling a week to spend, and he only smoked half an ounce of twist, and it was fourpence. And of course he never went to work on a bus or anything, he walked both ways.

3. Mrs A.2.L (born 1907)

Was it your mother who wanted to move to Newsham Road or was it your father's choice, do you know?

Oh, I think m'mother's, oh yes m'mother. I don't think he would object but m'mother had all the push, definitely, hadn't she Tom? You know she took the initiative in that sort of way.

What about moving to Palatine Avenue?

Well we had to go there because m'brother and I wanted a separate room you see. M'brother was sleeping, latterly m'brother had to sleep in the same room as m'mother and father, and I slept in the back bedroom. Me being the eldest I got the preference, and that's how we got the house through wanting an extra bedroom, you see.

But she perhaps chose it as well?

Oh, she had to push m'father to get him going you know to get one. He was he was a very contented man really, he could be too contented really. You know he hadn't enough push.

4. Mr P.1.B. (born 1900)

Who decided to come here, was it your mother or your dad to this house?

M'mother. M'father wouldn't put his name to anything. He was one of them fellows that said he didn't like anything round his neck.

A debt you mean?

A debt, yes. No, the house was never in m'father's name. When m'mother died she left the house for him to live in as long as he did but when he died it had to be divided between the children.

5. Mrs H.2.B. (born 1885)

She wasn't bossy, but she was the prevailing spirit in the house you know. We knew that and we were brought up that way, if mother said it you did it, and it wasn't a case of I'll ask m'dad, and he would say ask your mother. And if he said anything to us m'mother never interfered, and if she said anything he never interfered, but if they didn't agree on that matter they talked about it when we weren't there, but not in front of us, never. I dare say they had their ups and downs you know, because m'father did some things, he liked a drink now and again which m'mother didn't agree. And once they were going to move house. She wanted to move house anyway, and they were living in a house belonging to a friend of his and he didn't want to move. And he said, well all that upheaval and so on and so on, and made a thing about it and mother said, "Well that extra ninepence a week would shoe the children." We went!

6. Mrs W.1.B. (born 1900)

Who was the strictest in the family your mum or your dad?

M'mother. Father had his strict ways, we'd to be in at certain times. He wanted to know the reason why if we weren't. He was strict in a way but m'mother was far more strict, far more strict.

You felt she ran the house do you?

"Yes." Oh, she did, because father used to go to church greatly against his grain because she made him go. I never heard her swear m'mother, never, neither damn nor nothing. And she used to go to church and she used to make m'dad go and she got him to join the Church of England Men's Society and the poor old soul must have been in agony, I don't know. But anyway, he went to church, took us to church.

7. Mr G.3.P. (born 1913)

When you say your mother went, does that mean it was your mother that decided to move?

When he came back. Yes, I should say so. Yes, I should say so, that was quite true. Mother was the one who motivated. It would never have occurred to my father that this was not going to be very convenient when a young fellow had gone away at 17 and come back 23 (well, not so old, 21, 22), it wouldn't be very convenient. Yes, I think mother did the motivation definitely.

Was she the boss in the family?

My goodness, yes. She was the one who held the purse strings, there's no question about it, and sort of took care of everything on the financial side.

Was your mother stricter in the house than your father, with the children?

Discipline again was left to mother to a great extent. I must admit that I have more or less carried on in the same fashion. When our kids were small I only remember hitting the little boy once and the rest of the time my wife was pretty heavy handed, especially with a little strap.

8. Mrs B.2.P. (born 1916)

He would get on his hands and knees and wash all the floors or he would d the back-yard and the toilets or the back-kitchen floor and round the fireplace. Me and my mother had to do our steps, we had them donkey-stoned, white-stoned. They would do them with red rock as well because you had to wash round your cobble stones until at the finish, they came and tarmaced it. We used to have our own jobs to do and that. In the morning we never used to talk to one another. We would get up, my dad would put his own baggin up the night before and my mother would see to herself, and I would put my lunch up for the morning because I worked in the weaving shed.

9. Mr G.1.P. (born 1903)

Did he ever do any cooking before she died?

Yes. He seemed to always do the Sunday dinner. More so in winter. He always had a garden and he had an interest in that. Later, Sunday morning was a gardening morning. But as we were little, he did cook Sunday dinner.

Do you ever remember him cleaning at all?

He would clean up and wash and do all. Even after my mother died, if we had a party and we were all courting, we would go and we would leave my father it'd happen be 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning, he'd do all the washing up, the tidying up and everything. He was quite good that way.

10. Mrs H.4.P. (born 1903)

And it was all the same pattern. Getting drunk coming home from work and giving her what was left. This was a more intimate life which was told to us by my mother's friends, the ones that used to come in and help her. One of them said many a night she's sat in their lavatory all night. I've known the second wife had to do the same - I don't say sat on the toilet but had to go out to a neighbour's house. He used to get the blues or something when he was drunk and he was always threatening her with a knife or the axe. This is God's truth, every time she was pregnant she daren't tell him because he would start all over again, and naturally it were his child. She never got out and she wasn't even a drinker. She didn't know what it was to go and sit in a pub but he accused her all the time and it led from one thing to another. It hurts me to repeat it but nevertheless it's true to think that your mum who's gone through all that. When the confinement happened, he stood over her with a burning lamp threatening her, not doing it, terrifying her, revelling in terrifying her. He is dead, may God rest his soul!

11. Mrs H.1.P. (born 1911)

He used to hit her. My eldest brother came back from the war, he went at 17 and the other brother at 15, and he come back on leave and my dad had my mother in a corner facing the door, kicking her and he just lifted his rifle up to shoot him and he

were only 17. Our Nellie come in and knocked him flying from the women's room door. She said, "Don't Mark, it's not worth it." He said, to him "If you lay another finger on my mother, I'll kill you dead and don't ever forget it." He never hit her any more after that. She used to have her legs permanently elastic bandaged to protect her. Because he used to wear clogs down in the cellar.