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OUT OF SCHOOL INTO WORK

December 1934 was the time I left school in Collyhurst. Having reached the age of fourteen, it was time to move on. I already had a job in a Raincoat and Waterproof Factory opposite Strangeways Prison, and I was to start work at 8.30am on 2nd of January 1935.

Initially my job was to run errands, it wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a machinist but it was a job and that was the main consideration.

Not having a canteen on the premises, the main items I had to go for were lunches and dinners. If anything had to be kept warm, the gas stove was in the mechanics room which resembled a scrap yard.

Next to our workplace in Southall Street was a soup kitchen for the needy, and there were plenty of them. Over the main entrance, engraved in carving, was the name Philanthropic Hall. Daily there would be a queue waiting to go inside for the free bowl of soup, most of them were men and women I recognised, they were dropouts who used a spare piece of ground next to Strangeways Prison. They would sit around small fires drinking their booze, which was methylated spirits.

The old building was still there and now being used as a warehouse for Costume Jewellery. The large Commemorative Plaque in honour of those who opened the soup kitchen and helped with the upkeep is still there at the side of the main entrance.

Through going on errands, I got to know the area well and some of the things that went on. I had heard about a lady called Mrs Van de Else [referring to Violet Van der Elst] who was opposed to hanging and was often seen at Strangeways when a hanging was due. One morning I arrived early for work, seeing crowds of people outside the prison, I was curious to know what it was about. A notice had just been pasted outside the main gate of the prison giving details of the hanging of a Buck Ruxton. If I'm right, I think it would be sometime in March 1935 [referring to May 1936].

This is when I got to see Mrs Van der Else, she had just started the crowd of people singing the hymn 'Abide With Me'. Obviously she was a very wealthy lady who could travel about in a chauffeur-driven limousine, she also looked dressed for the occasion in her black expensive clothing. I also noticed the chauffeur stayed quite close to her in a protective manner.

Having satisfied my curiosity, I headed back to work, being a few minutes late was overlooked.

After a while, another school leaver came and took over the errands. I was then moved onto a buttoning machine which I didn't like one bit. The buttons we then used were made of bone, which seemed to attract the rats.

Saturday morning the buttons would be put away tidily in boxes, come Monday morning all around the machine would be a mess, most of the buttons were chewed through and scattered all about. The mechanic would clean it up then I was back on the dreaded machine.

Eventually I was taken off it, I was breaking too many needles and I also moaned too much, this suited me fine. I then went on a sewing machine only sewing straight seams, which was easy enough.

At that time, teddy bear coats had come into fashion and our workshop received an order for a dozen. The seams were very thick and difficult to sew, before I knew it my finger was caught under the needle. The mechanic had to get the needle out, then I just bathed my finger, a new needle was put in the machine and I carried on sewing as though it had never happened.

After a while I became a fully experienced machinist I had achieved what I set out to do.

Ellen Casey.