

7. Eavesdropping On the Edwardians

Illness In Childhood

Edward Slattery hailed from Bacup, a traditional valley mill town where cotton was still king. It was a world of cloth-capped men. Women wore shawls and wooden clogs with iron on the heels that clattered and sparked on the cobbled streets. Only six of thirteen children survived childhood. Measles, scarlet fever, whooping cough and croup were par for the course as well as diseases prevalent at the time.

Polly Oldham lived in a two-up, two-down in Hannah Street, Blackburn. She was one of eight but a sister died of diphtheria and another from tuberculosis. Her father possessed a wash-boiler and made broth in it, putting in sheep's heads, lumps of beef & vegetables, barley and dumplings. It tasted good Polly recalls.

Born in Grimsargh, Lancashire, Nicholas Swarbrick was just turned four when his mother died from the incurable and rampant tuberculosis and his sister died from consumption too in her late teens or just after. Once established, said Nicholas, the disease then became infectious which meant that from the age of two he had scant contact with his mother.

For Anne Taylor, diphtheria and scarlet fever were feared most and every week the children were given senna pods or brimstone and treacle. If you wanted a doctor you went round to church people, got a form to complete and then took it to the doctor who pleased himself whether to come to the house. If you didn't have a ticket or half a crown do not expect him to visit. An indelible memory for Anne was seeing the starving children of other families, some with rickets who wore tell-tale leg-irons. "Half of them never had dinners" said Anne.

Memories Of Schooldays

The timeline is 1913 and setting Beamish with a village, drift mine, miners' houses, school and shops. It is a large site and other sections have been added: several stores complete with a Co-op transplanted from nearby Anfield Plain, railway station, farm and a manor house. Children could leave school at 12 if they had a Labour Certificate which meant passing a test in the 3R's and having a good attendance record. Parents encouraged their children, lads in particular, as this was the passport to working on the surface at the colliery for 10/- a week until 14 when they could go down the nearby coal mine and double their wages.

Brighter ones, whose parents could afford to let them, continued their education and became pupil teachers. Male teachers earned £179 per year, almost 50% more than female salaries of £126. Long desks, in a series of rows, accommodated up to 90 children aged 7-14 who were taught by a trained teacher, and a trainee pupil-teacher. They received 10/- per week every fortnight so males had an economic decision to make as young miners received twice this.

Girls had limited choices. First was the issue of attendance so vital for a Labour Certificate. Monday was wash day and, often with large families, this meant a huge amount of work as mothers often insisted their daughters stay home for at least part of the day. The 3 R's were taught in the morning with the Empire subjects of history and geography in the afternoon. There might be time too for girls to learn the craft of sewing, useful in making the future home and for domestic service given the limited scope of job types available.

Many children came to school literally starving and went home at lunchtime to minimal food, if any, prompting a School strike in 1906. Later that year free school meals were introduced for the deserving poor, raising an issue of who received meals and who did not. Hunger for learning had real meaning.

From the dark recesses of a cupboard a Punishment Book was extracted. A record was kept of all punishments meted out, usually a caning, and the person administering it. The record makes compelling reading a century later with the abolition of corporal punishment. Two strokes were normally given for misbehaviour and for being late repeatedly, with one stroke for careless dirty work, 'signals in assembly', deliberate indifference, inferring insubordination of some description, and more ominously 'indifference'. This might imply not understanding or remembering, which amounted to the same thing if the child did not comprehend in the first place! Dyslexia and a broader spectrum of barriers to learning were unknown or, if they were, were overlooked. Ignorance and idleness went hand in glove. The vicar was handed a list of all those punished during the week and names were read out at the Sunday service.

The ink pen was designed for right handed children and tended to smudge if left handed. A slate-board was provided for each child. After a while it naturally filled up and so had to be wiped clean. These pit villages had few if any books, let alone the luxury of an exercise book to write in, so memories had to be good. Expect the ritual of times table and spelling tests, virtually every day, and look out if incorrect answers were given. Chalk winged its way across the classroom at a great rate of knots.

Thankfully, many archive stories exist of schooldays in the Edwardian period. What follows is an extract but typical of the times. "Our teacher Mr Rose lived in Chester Le Street" said Jack Geddes. "The slates which we had to buy were bigger than the infants at about twelve inches. A string was fastened so you could put it on your back. You did your homework on that but if it was raining you put the slate under your coat. Whether on your back or in your satchel what you had written got rubbed off, for which you got the cane."

Nicholas excelled at a Jesuit School but his experience was worse. On one occasion, with a lot of homework to do, he struggled in parsing irregular verbs. Father Ellison thumped him extremely hard, hurting him badly. Nicholas refused to return to school, remarking "my education was ruined."

In Choppington, Northumberland, John Dorgan's mother couldn't afford decent clothes so he attended the Colliery School, instead of the preferred Church School. On Monday mornings every child had to pay fourpence, an enormous sum for a poor family. Most times he didn't have it, receiving "four good straps on the hand," a punishment inflicted on about half the class, including girls. For all that he was grateful to the headmaster Mr Alcock who, at the request of John's mother, allowed him to stay on at school at thirteen as she didn't want him to go down the mine.

Don Murray recalls the half-time system which operated at his school. You could work in the morning and go to school in the afternoon and the following week it would be reversed. You couldn't win. If at work in the morning you fell asleep at your desk in the afternoon and a clout from the teacher. If at school in the morning and at work in the afternoon, you fell asleep at work and got a clout from an overlooker.

At fee-paying Tranmere Higher Grade School, Ernest Haire recalls licking out his answers on his slate and copying those of the class swot. Cheating came easily and so did spelling. At the age of six he was allowed out early because he could spell the word yacht and between

six and seven was reading fluently. He could also recite the rivers of England, not knowing where they were but could look them up on a map. In later years he did Geometry, Algebra and Latin before moving to the Liverpool Institute where the headmaster was a brute.

John was enrolled by his father at the teacher-training college, St John's in Battersea in 1908. In the first year he studied English, History, Geography, Science and Maths. Lessons started at 7 am. Ernest passed out in 1910, specialising in History. He also had to sit a paper on the letters and speeches of Oliver Cromwell and do school practice that meant being assessed whilst teaching a class, but in complex Latin grammar. Fortunately he had a kindly assessor who saw little point in over-complicating the training of teachers.

Ernest ended up back on Merseyside, teaching at St Anne's C of E in Birkenhead where, on arrival, the head said, "Right, I want none of your new-fangled ideas here." Four classes were held in one room with no dividing curtain. The deputy took Ernest to one side and said a known trouble-maker was in his class by the name of Harrison. The advice was just clout him if he plays up. Going through the register Ernest was interrupted. "Who the hell do you think you are?" Harrison repeated the question, whereupon Ernest punched him on the jaw. Later his father duly appeared and on being given the details replied, "Well, it's done him good!"

Haileybridge College, in Hertfordshire, another fee-paying school, built its reputation on its association with the East India Company. Normal Dillon spoke of Spartan conditions with primitive food and bare boards in dormitories. Out of bed by 7am, chapel at half-past, first lesson quarter of an hour later and breakfast at 8.30 am was the ritual. Academic studies in the mornings, either classical or modern, were followed by games in the afternoon or a seven miles run until 4 pm, a signal for more lessons with supper at 6.30pm. then prep and in bed by 9.30 pm with lights out at 10 pm.

"Fagging was in full force and an excellent system it was too. During the first three terms you were subject to this tyranny. Coming out from breakfast you might hear a shout from across the quad. "Fag! Fag! Everyone had to run. The last one got the job which might be to go down to the grub shop and buy something, or collect some books, or collect some boots from the bootmakers. Each fag was at the beck and call of anyone senior."

Helen Pease recalls being taught by Miss Cornish, daughter of the headmaster of Eton. Her education was entirely literary, a puzzle for Helen as her father was an engineer, and science and engineering were rooted in the family. "They never took us to see a canal or tunnel but we were taken to see Dr Johnson's house in Lichfield," but not the house of Erasmus Darwin just up the road. "Father took maths sometimes and that was very entertaining. He was a terrific historian and used to ask us questions at dinner."

A Capacity For Hard Work

Britain was fast becoming a 'Pooter' society with middle class aspirations. The expansion of industry, commerce and new local authorities created clerical white-collar jobs galore. Male employment in these positions rose from 144,000 in 1841 to 918,000 by 1911. Status was preserved by identifying with the social strata immediately above. Arnold Bennett in *Anna of the Five Towns* talks of the many aliases and social nuances of Trafalgar Road

In 1909 The National Union of Clerks insisted that "the clerk has to appear like a gentleman, to pretend to live like a gentleman, and to have the manners of a gentleman" which merited a wage of 35/- per week. Author H. G. Wells, a humble apprentice in Southsea back in

1881, acquired a top hat and morning coat. He describes the Edward period as one of symbols and submission and of social acquiescence. Wells and others challenged the rituals and snobbery of a class-ridden system through sheer determination, creativity and hard work.

The inequality of the sexes in professions and trades was marked. A Victorian feminist, Lydia Becker, highlighted the problem of female middle class status and aspiration: "What I most desire is to see married women of the middle classes stand on the same terms of equality as prevail in the working classes and the highest aristocracy." Only very slowly did this change; many may say painfully slowly.

Ray Head went to work for the Post Office in the City with a daily commute from Hounslow, a small rural town in those days. He recalls everything was labour-intensive. Typewriters had not long been introduced and a telephone was a luxury. Ray wore a stiff collar, heavy boots and a bowler and took a customary umbrella. The atmosphere was formal with little contact between men and women, and separate dining too. No friendliness with bosses existed. "We were very humble" but "In spite of all this we were happy. It almost felt like a club."

Shorthand and typing was the chosen career of Mildred Ransom who went to a commercial school in the City. Her first job was in a copying office in Bedford Row where clerks were often kept until 11 pm with payment by results. Starting at 5/- a week her pay rose to 15/- but Mildred thought she deserved £1. Peering down his nose, the junior partner uttered one word: never!

Secretarial schools and colleges began to flourish as firms set up their own offices. Related subjects were taught, enabling girls to acquaint themselves with the subject content of their work. Mildred became a lecturer with the London School Board and taught at three schools. The last had just re-opened after a series of incidents. Staff were chosen for their capacity to keep order and instil discipline, qualities much needed. On the first evening some of the class turned up looking dishevelled, having come from work in a slaughterhouse. Once, all but two pupils walked out, opting instead for the maths class.

Durban Cotton Mill in Hollinwood, Oldham, opened in 1905 and was where Raynor Taylor moved to as a piecer after a stint at the Urban Twist Cotton Mill. His job was at the end of the drawing-out process. The machine drew the thread out and wound it onto the bobbin. "When a thread broke, it used to wrap around the top of the spindle which went round at a terrific speed. You put the thread on your finger until it caught and pieced itself up." The racket was so loud you learned to lip-read. Raynor started work aged twelve, alternating each morning and afternoon with school. The gates shut at 6 am and if not in you waited two hours until after breakfast, losing two hours pay, but no excuse really as you relied on the 'knocker-up' to wake you. Production ceased in 1965 and the mill was demolished in 2015.

Harry Berry started work in 1908 at the London & India Dock Company as a messenger boy. He progressed to tally marker at the Albert Dock, measuring and weighing cases, and then, on promotion, to St Catherine's Dock dealing with imports of tea, chinaware, ostrich feathers, oriental carpets, silks, cigars, spices and perfumes. Goods were placed in locked vans and taken to Cutler Street for storage in bonded warehouses. Trade flourished, none more than ostrich feathers, eagerly snapped up by Italian and French buyers who were prepared to pay up to £100 for a pound of plumes.

After leaving the Colliery School, John Dorgan worked in the local coalmine as a trapper boy. In a mine there were two shafts. One shaft had a pump to push air from the surface down to the working area whilst the other, the upcast, pumped stale air out. John's job was to sit in the dark with a rope in his hand. When anyone approached he pulled a wooden door open to let them through, closing it afterwards. Another boy, a hundred yards away, did the same. When John's door opened, his shut, thus trapping the air to regulate circulation. John was given a candle for use at lunchtime to see to eat his sandwiches, usually bread and dripping.

His next job was a pony driver, pulling tubs which meant dragging heavy tubs a few hundred yards to rope haulage roadways when they transferred to engine power. Empty tubs were returned to putters who brought coal along a short length of rail to a landing for collection after tubs were filled by miners. A piece rate system operated with payment by the number of full tubs but work was arduous as scars and scabs testified in not bending low enough. Said John, "But I was a big strong lad and I always made decent money." Early starts were normal. It was not unusual for miners to get up at 4.30 am to walk to the pit, arriving in time for a 6 am start.

There was no apprenticeship system, for as with most mines job deployment was well-rehearsed with heavier jobs allotted to young, strong lads. The going wage in 1913 at the West Stanley, Colliery, near Beamish, was £2 per week with a rent deduction for the tied cottage. If a miner was injured and couldn't work, and did not have a son working at the mine, eviction could be expected. Fires, explosions and seepage of poisonous gas were not uncommon in mines; nor were injuries, some of which resulted in death.

In 1909 an underground explosion occurred at West Stanley Colliery when 168 miners were killed, of whom 59 were under the age of 20. A BBC archive report stated that many victims were buried in two long trenches. Compensation was minimal. On that Wednesday, Dick Morris was at home having a bath in front of the fire when a neighbour shouted, "The Burns Pit has gone off." On the Sunday, when the bodies were buried, "people came from all over the North of England. There were bands and banners from every colliery and lodge."

The wording of the Workmen's Compensation Act of 1897, replaced in 1905, was a model of vagueness and subject to the interpretation of courts. A Mrs Simpson claimed for the death of her husband, a colliery manager killed in an underground accident. He was judged to be outside the scope of the Act by reason of it being for workmen only, regarded as "either not sufficiently intelligent, or not sufficiently in funds to insure themselves. In no sense can such a principle extend to those who are earning good salaries." Case dismissed!

Making The Most of Life

There was no electricity in the cottage where Gertrude McCracken lived, or indeed any other cottages. An oil lamp and candle sufficed. "After tea things were cleared away and a chenille cloth was placed on the table. The lamp was then lit whilst dad read the papers before he fell asleep. Mum sat with her mending, talking to us or singing. She had a rather nice voice and could whistle too. I think those evenings held a kind of magic for us, with the fire glowing and blinds drawn. It gave us, I think, a feeling of security."

With no money to spare, jumble sales were a great help. "Home would come the jumble to be washed, unpicked and made into garments. She had no patterns and after a garment was tacked one of us stood whilst Mum pinned it. She sheared off unused bits with

scissors." On one occasion, "Mum bought a dark blanket and door curtains for thruppence and made Dad pair of trousers for work. They lasted Dad nearly two years."

"Our house," said Bill Owen, "had a kitchen with a sink in the corner but no tap. We had a slop store and fire with two hobs. A big kettle was on all day. There was one room upstairs and an attic above that. "You were rich if you had two up and two down and if you had a tap you were really rich. The one tap in the court was for all of us."

Albert Marshall grew up in the village of Elstead, near Bromley, where Mrs Page sold sweets, cigarettes and biscuits. A strip of liquorice cost a farthing and bottle of ginger beer a penny. Large round cheeses were sold by the Watkinsons and Mrs Pentner sold tins of bully beef, condensed milk and cake as well as women's overalls, children's dresses and stockings too, for this was the village haberdashery store. The bakery was run by two spinsters who started at 4 am and pony carts delivered the bread to outlying farms. Milk was collected from them in cans, whilst water was obtained from the village pump owned by the pub where you could get beer straight from the barrel for 2d per pint. The blacksmith made metal hoops for wagon wheels, shoed all the horses and repaired anything. The village bobby went rabbit and pigeon shooting. On Boxing Day, villagers gathered for the annual animal race with pigs, goats, donkeys, cats, dogs, ferrets and even a cockerel competing in a race that ended on the village green.

A community spirit also existed in Spitalfields where Betty Reuben lived in the Rothschild Buildings that provided cheap tenement dwellings for Jewish tenants, whilst still ensuring that investors got a 4% return. A Mrs Morris was a neighbour with seven children. One day she broke her leg and was taken to the London Hospital so what to do with the children. All the neighbours rallied round. "One would go in each morning to give them their breakfast and see they got off to school, and in the evening when the husband came home, he'd take a pot of whatever it was and they'd all eat together. This went on until Mrs Morris came home."

An event recalled by William Keate was a bailiff evicting a couple with seven children from their cottage. "Every article they possessed was thrown out into the road. It was really pitiful to see as we went to school with these children and played with them very often. They were left in the road for hours but, as night came, they were given shelter in a stable just outside the village - perhaps the Lord remembered."

The Bigg Market in Newcastle on a Saturday night was something very special. Strong men snapped chains on their chest, a blind concertina player would play any request and a chap would light a cricket ball with paraffin, throw it high in the air and catch it in a leather cup strapped to his head. Kids wondered if he would ever miss but he didn't. "You could easily have a full night's entertainment in the Bigg Market."

West Auckland was just a local team but thanks to Thomas Lipton, the tea merchant, came to play Juventus in Italy in 1909 and again in 1911. The West Auckland team was known as WA that confused the Italians who thought they were Woolwich Arsenal. "We were miners who had never been further than Scarborough, and had one day trip a year." They beat Juventus each time but could not afford a cup that was bought on their behalf by a wealthy lady. The cup was bought off her and put in Sid Outhwaite's pub.

"At Hoxton workhouse in Shoreditch, Ted Harrison used to see me breaking stones in the yard. He used to collect his grandmother's bread ration of four loaves for the week. Ted spoke of one notorious street in Hoxton. He used to steer clear of Screwneck, a terror who

used to wield a belt made of horse irons, wrapping his hand round a huge buckle that was an improvised knuckle-duster. Then there was Dickie Regan who thought it an honour to be arrested, but it would take several policemen to arrest him. Police were known as cossaks, peelers, bluebottles, coppers and flatties, the presumption being they had flat feet. When they came out of Old Street Station they marched one behind the other."

In 1907 the police set up a speed trap along the Bath Road heading west to catch motorists doing more than 20 mph. Ray Head said a team of three police constables went out on a Sunday morning and positioned themselves a furlong apart. "The first policeman pulled out a handkerchief as a signal to the second who estimated the speed of the driver with a stop-watch. He then waved to the third constable who intercepted the speeder. Since many were influential people, quite a few were let off with a warning. Others were charged at Brentford Police Station. After booking a suitable number, the three policemen used to adjourn to a pub called the Travellers' Friend."

"The first time I ever saw an aeroplane was during the competition for which the Daily Mail offered £10,000 to the first man to fly from London to Manchester." An air model enthusiast, Gordon Hyams, said that in 1910 "There were two contestants, Claude White and Louis Polar, a Frenchman. No one believed it was possible as the furthest anyone had ever flown was 200 yards in 1906. One afternoon I looked up and saw an aeroplane far away in the distance. It turned out to be Polar who won the race."

Each year Nina Halliday went to Bournemouth on holiday for a month. Packing meant tin trunks and an immense amount of paraphernalia that included umbrellas, sunshades and walking sticks for her father. Nina enjoyed Bournemouth as it had a sandy beach "and there was the excitement of the so-called bathing, from what seemed like a small house on wheels which had two benches inside, and was pulled down to the sea by an old horse. When the horse stopped you climbed down the three steps into the sea. The 'Bathing Lady' as she was called tied a rope firmly round your middle and proceeded to push you under the water three or four times. Then you'd go back into the machine to get rid of the sand and dry as well as you could. My father took me for trips on the steamer which called at the pier and we both loved it. All too soon the tin boxes appeared and somehow we got packed."