

My earliest memories of social conditions at the beginning of this century include :-

Widespread cases of scarlet fever, where victims were rushed to isolation hospitals and their houses fumigated; diphtheria, rheumatic fever, and large asylums where mentally disturbed people were confined, often for the rest of their lives, in prison-like conditions.

Poor families seldom called in a doctor, except for him to sign a death certificate. My mother had all her six babies at home; my father always kept out of the way at such times, and a warm-hearted neighbour usually acted as midwife.

My parents used to dose me and my brothers and sisters with weekly administrations of licquorice powder solution during the winter, and with brimstone and treacle in the Spring..

On Saturday mornings I was sent to the local council depot for a free issue of disinfectant for our drains.

After dark, I would often be sent to obtain a sackful of old tarred wooden road blocks from the night watchman where road repairs were being carried out. He would be rewarded with a bribe of sixpence. The road blocks burned and spluttered in the open grate, and were cheaper than coal, which was then about two shillings a hundredweight.

Some mornings, I would get up before daylight, and walk two miles to a bakery, and return home with a pillow case filled with stake bread.

All this cost sixpence, and when we were affluent I was lucky enough to get a quantity of stale cakes for threepence. My mother would moisten the bread and put it in the oven, and it would come out as good as new.

A large marrow-bone, stewed with two pennyworth of potherbs, used to make a good dinner for eight of us, with bread pudding for afters.

To get occasional pocket money, I would take jam jars to the local "rag and bone shop", where I was given a ha'penny for a 1 lb. jar, and a penny for a two pound jar. For whisky bottles, which I sometimes collected from the house where my sister worked as a domestic, I received twopence.

My brothers and sisters left school when they were thirteen, to earn their living. I, a younger and more privileged member of the family, obtained a scholarship with a small grant, which took me to one of the first mixed secondary schools, where the education was good, and where the boys learned to treat the girls with respect.

I matriculated before I was seventeen, but had to turn down a scholarship to a university, with a grant, because of the necessity to earn a living. Overstudying caused me to have a bout of neurasthenia, and my father took me to a doctor who prescribed a nerve tonic and recommended that I had as much change as possible. Fortunately, I met a girl who helped me to enlarge my horizons during the sixty years we have been together.

At seventeen I started work in the Dickensian-like offices of the Borneo Company in London, at an initial salary of £70 per annum, paid monthly. Because I could not afford a season ticket, I travelled from Ealing to Fenchurch Street by "Workman's" ticket, which cost half the normal fare provided it was used before 7.30 a.m. I used to walk around London until the offices opened at 9 a.m., and took sandwiches for lunch. I ate these in the grounds of the tower of London when the weather was fine, or in the precincts of the Royal Exchange when it rained.

Reflecting on those early days, I have reached the conclusion that nothing was bad; it was all experience.

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*Reg. Farndon*  
( Reg. Farndon )

17, Browning Road,  
Worthing, Sussex. EN11 4NS

