Memoirs duplicated as Xmas present for family by dtr., Miss H.R Fowler

Grandma had intended to call this

"Look after the Little Ones"

doubtless referring to the time after her father died when she was eight. She was just coming to this, as her final sentence was,

"Then came the dreadful time when Father was brought home from a house where he was fitting some of his wrought iron work - "

It was the end of an era.

Her mother had to go out to work, often nursing at night so that she'd be at home during the day. There was no social security in those days. They were thankful to have a home - but the business went to the eldest son, and the small family - Auntie Violet was only two years old - was dependent on what their mother could earn.

Gilbert also died that same year so Grandma took on quite a responsibility for "the little ones" - Auntie Ethel and Auntie Violet. The gap between them had widened.

Grandma developed into an avid reader - usually doing something else, like knitting with her hands at the same time. Gone were the silk, the velvet and swansdown, and the training began that made her able to conjure things out of scraps and waste - or so it seemed to us, when we were growing up and every available half-penny was vanishing into Grandad's business.

This book came to be written because the last time I took Grandma to Wales to see Bob and Jenny a friend of mine, Miss Penny Protheroe came with us as far as Llangollen. The two of them chatted as I drove, and Penny told Grandma she really should start to write her story, so on 8th June 1976 Grandma did just that. Penny kindly checked it through afterwards, and I have the original in Grandma's handwriting, so if you want to see that you must ask for it when you visit me.

H. R. Fowler

Auntie Hilda

1. BEGINNINGS

One day at the end of the last century, a teacher asked a class of girls the question:

"What would you like to do when you grow up?"

Various were the replies.

"Housekeeper", "shop assistant", "Nurse", "housemaid, "dressmaker". One girl, with her head stuffed full of 'Little Women' and Louisa May Alcott said:

"Authoress".

"Oh," said the teacher "You are ambitious, but I hope you will manage it."

I was that girl and today I am starting to record some of the happenings of my lifetime. I am now within a few days of my 86th birthday and the only time I can remember doing any writing other than school and college essays was once when I entered for a Band of Hope Competition.

Then I felt so unsure about 'a story', that I re-read several short ones in a copy of 'The Children's Friend', partly to see their differences and partly to decide how I should frame mine.

I decided on one which opened with a conversation. So mine too, began with a conversation.

I think it was the only one that did so, and in spite of all its imperfections won First Prize - a proudly treasured copy of 'The Vicar of Wakefield' which I still have.

I was born on June 23rd 1890, my mother's first child but the seventh of my father.

My father was Charles Hancock, a locally well known business man, a wrought iron metal worker and gas fitter whose business premises were in Bennington Street, Cheltenham.

His eldest son, Charles William, had already been taken into the firm which was known as Charles Hancock and Son.

The other boys were due to be taken as partners when they reached maturity, in those days twenty-one years of age.

It was a hot sunny June and my first name - Hilda - had already been chosen and quite unconsciously Father chose the other.

He was very proud of his garden, especially the rose bed. Among the red roses grew white Madonna lilies and the rosebed was covered with blue forget-me-nots.

Father cut a red rose and brought it in to Mother who smiled, looked at him and at me and said "She's just like a rose - let's call her Rose". So I became Hilda Rose Hancock with the initials H.R.H. which I proudly bore until I was married.

My memories are naturally somewhat vague of my very early days. I do remember, however, my third birthday very clearly.

I remember leaning out of the living room window and looking into the greenhouse where Dad was working. So it was probably a Saturday afternoon or Sunday.

It was much more likely to have been a Saturday half day when the Bennington Street Works were closed than a Sunday.

A had a new metal Money box, a bright red pillar box, and was rattling some coins inside it.

Dad produced a silver threepenny piece and gave it to me for my new money box.

I had never seen a threepenny bit before and didn't know what it was, so I showed it to my mother who showed me three pennies and said the tiny silver coin was worth three pennies.

At this reassurance I put the threepenny piece into the tin pillar box and went gaily around the house shouting and rattling.

We lived at 3 Victoria Parade, Cheltenham.

It was one of a row of six small houses, very up to date when built, as there were three separate bedrooms, an outside toilet, a long garden in the front and a small yard at the back.

The house belonged to Dad, and in the yard he had built a workshop, fitted it up with gas for light and power, and there he and the older boys often worked, for they were all proud of the quality of their work.

We also had a gas fire in the front bedroom. This was only lighted in case of illness or extremely cold weather.

Ours was the only house fitted with gas - an incandescent burner in the bedroom, two incandescent lights in the sitting room or parlour, and an open fishtail light in the living room.

In the back bedrooms and scullery we either groped our way in the dark and became quite expert at it, or used lamps or candles.

Lamps were never carried around only candles, in enamelled tin holders.

Eighteen months after I was born, came a son, Gilbert John, and eighteen months later, a sister, Ethel Maude.

Nearly three years later another sister arrived, Violet Victoria Winifred. The name Victoria was put in because she was born in 1896 and the following year was the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria when the nation was all agog with talk of celebrations.

By this time only the two youngest of my stepbrothers, Walter and Reginald - "Reg", were living at home. Charles was married.

My stepsisters Polly (Mary) and Ruth were both nurses and working at "Babies Castle" one of the Barnardo Homes. Ada was teaching in Portsmouth.

I have vague recollections of her wedding. I can remember the whole house being rearranged; a grand meal when I was on my best behaviour; many strange people around; any amount of chattering and clatter. Then comparatively soon the crowd dispersed and Ada didn't come anymore, except at special times like Christmas.

Christmasses were great festivals. I can remember the Christmas Tree alight with real candles, decorated with tinsel and glass ornaments and the table on which it stood covered with lovely parcels.

We children were not allowed to touch the tree; hardly allowed to touch the table, but it lit up like Fairy Land.

Candles burned in the fancy wrought iron candle-stick holder on the wall, and generally no other light was needed as the fire always seemed to burn brightly in the grate, its light reflecting the brightness of the brass fender or fire irons.

One Christmas I remember, we had been "naughty". That didn't necessarily mean we had been disobedient - we might have been in the way or just noisy. Gilbert was told:

> "If you are a naughty boy, Father Christmas will put wood and coal in your stocking instead of sweeties, toys and an orange!"

Not really believing this threat, for touching the fire was absolutely forbidden on any account, Gilbert transgressed again and again.

But, alas! When we opened our stockings on Christmas morning, mine held some little toys, nuts, an orange and apple, and Gilbert's had two parcels wrapped in newspaper - one held wood, the other coal. We could hardly believe our eyes and wondered if Gilbert was really meant to light the fire.

A very subdued Gilbert went down to breakfast. However, the fire was already lighted, and soon we were again enjoying life. Needless to say, the sticks and coal were confiscated by our elders while Gilbert and I happily shared the contents of my stocking.

I think Father Christmas sank a little in our estimation as a result of that episode.

I also remember another occasion when Father Christmas was going to come in person to take the presents from the tree.

Dad was asleep in his armchair. Polly and Ruth, our two nurse stepsisters were there as well as Walter and Reg the youngest stepbrothers, while Gilbert and I waited in almost breathless expectation of the great advent of 'Father Christmas'.

At last he came.

First a knock at the front door, answered by one of the boys. Then a tap on the sitting room door and the great moment had arrived.

Father Christmas entered. He said:

"Merry Christmas Everybody" and then proceeded to take the presents from the tree.

I can only remember two of them. Mine was a beautifully dressed doll in pink and white, a brimmed hat, ornamental dress, petticoat, vest, knickers, socks and shoes.

All the clothes were knitted and would take off and put on easily. I promptly named her "Rosie Pink".

Gilbert's present was a toy fort. He turned the handle at one side, and behold, soldiers appeared on the ramparts and marched around accompanied by a martial tune.

My dolly was unwrapped and shewed off on the tree. No-one else undid a present while Father Christmas was present. His last action before he went was to poke Dad (still pretending to be asleep, for how could he really be asleep on such an important occasion) with his walking stick.

No sooner had he gone than Mother reappeared. We rushed up to her, full of regrets she had missed so much.

"Oh mummy look - Look at my Rosie Pink!" "Oh mam, you've just missed Father Christmas - Look at my soldiers!"

Outside the house near the corner of the Street the Band also played at Christmas time.

Dad always gave them a 'Christmas Box' and they played the tune he asked. It was "The Mistletoe Bough" which somehow I didn't connect with angels and the Manger, and Baby Jesus. The tune imprinted itself on my memory and even now, aged 86, I can sing it.

The mistletoe bough hung in the castle hall
And the holly branch shone on the old oak wall.
The Baron's retainers were blithe and gay
And keeping their Christmas Holiday.
The Baron beheld with a Father's Pride
His beautiful child - young Toval's bride
While she with her bright eyes seemed to be
The star of that goodly company
Oh, the mistletoe bough,
Oh, the mistletoe bough.

Then the next verses tell how they played "Hide and Seek". The lady went to hide and vanished.

At length an old oak chest that had long lain hid
They found in the castle, They raised the lid
And a skeleton form lay mouldering there
In the bridal wreath of the lady fair.
Oh sad was her fate. In a sportive jest
She hid from her Lord in the old oak chest
It closed with a spring and her bridal bloom
Lay withering there in the old oak tomb.
Oh, the mistletoe bough
Oh, the mistletoe bough.

We also sang hymns and carols. We all liked singing. I think the Victorians were really more appreciative of music than are folk: of today. There was so often music in the street as well as in the home. At home we all sang.

Errand boys whistled and bands played. There were band stands in the parks and the Band played on Sundays and Bank Holidays.

My two younger stepbrothers joined the Territorials and had musical instruments - the flute and trumpet as far as I can remember, and I used to follow them around the house before I was old enough to talk properly - saying "Deddy pay de fewsic" which could be translated into "Reggie play the music".

In our sitting room was a small American organ. Ada, the teacher stepsister could play it nicely, but everyone seemed to be able to get tunes out of it even if only played with one finger.

Of course, Sunday evenings the adults went to church, and we sang our childish evening hymns and off we went to bed.

We had been born into a keen Baptist family, but Father and Mother were married in the Parish Church, Cheltenham for the simple reason that in 1889 the Baptist Church was not registered for marriages, and neither parent would consider a Registry Office Wedding.

On the round table in the sitting room was the big Family Bible, Fox's Book of Martyrs and several missionary booklets.

Later on I used to open the pages of The Book of Martyrs, read the gruesome descriptions and gaze at the awesome illustrations with a kind of fascination.

I never talked about it, but I thought and thought and wondered if even I should have the courage to be a martyr. I hoped I never should have that ordeal.

As I have said I was only eighteen months old when my brother Gilbert John, also a delightfully sturdy baby, was born, but I've been told we played about with each other like a pair of puppies for when he could be put on the floor to roll about, he made a lovely playmate.

When I was three my next sister Ethel Maude arrived. She was a bonny baby till she was about six months old. Then something went wrong and for a long time she hovered between life and death.

I remember standing on tiptoe to peep into the pram, not understanding why this baby could not be played with as I had played with Gilbert.

To my surprise and dismay, I saw a doll-like figure, motionless and to my eyes queerly old, not even dressed but covered with a light blanket, for it was summer and beautifully hot.

I never told anyone that I'd had a peep at Baby Ethel. That was another thing I kept to myself.

Gradually she began to recover but her first photograph was not taken till she was over two years old. And she was wearing the same dress as I had worn when my first photograph had been taken when I was only eleven months old.

Gilbert had his photograph taken when he was a year old. He was sitting on a chair wearing only a vest which had slipped down so that one arm was bare.

He looked like a Prizewinner in a Baby Competition with the sauciest grin imaginable.

In my photograph, however, I was dressed up in all my finery, including a tiny pair of leather shoes, an embroidered white frock with short sleeves tied up with blue bows on the shoulders and a blue silk sash.

And didn't I know it was a blue silk sash! No amount of persuasion would make me hold my hands tidily in front of me. Oh No! - Madame knew that the sash was pretty and nice to handle and refused to relinquish one of the ends.

So the photograph was taken with my left arm held out at the side firmly holding the edge of the sash!

Time sped on, and Ethel was nearly three to my six, when Violet Victoria Winifred was born.

She was commonly called Vi, or Babs and was the only curlyhaired one among us. Fortunately she was a strong healthy baby so quite naturally Ethel and Babs paired off, and Gilbert and I played together.

I was in Standard I in the seniors and Gilbert was still in the Infants at the time of the Diamond Jubilee, for which our sister had been named the previous year, and those celebrations remain as one of the highlights in my life. We learned patriotic songs, snatches of which I can still remember, such as 'Three Cheers for the Red, White and Blue' and 'Rule Britannia'.

We wore red, white and blue rosettes and carried and waved little flags. Everybody seemed excited and happy and boys whistled and sang as they delivered their goods. The excitement grew daily.

One fine day the schools paraded to the Montpellier Gardens. There were no trams or buses in those days. We walked; then we stood in our various places - expectant - of what?

We just didn't know. We wore our rosettes, waved our flags, sang 'God Save The Queen', and listened to someone talking in the distance. Then we all cheered at the top of our voices and were then dismissed. The older children could look after themselves, the younger ones had parents waiting.

At some time during the proceedings we each received a Commemorative Medal complete with a safety pin and red, white and blue ribbon, which was carefully pinned on my dress by Mother.

Then we all, that is Mother, the pram, Gilbert and I walking, went to Pittville Park to have a picnic and to see the decorations.

All around were Fairylights - not electric bulbs as there would be in this day, but real glass holders containing candles. They were festooned around the lake and we were told that later on each candle would be lit so that it would look like Fairyland.

I particularly remember the rustic bridge that used to span the lake.

This had been treated with a wood preservative, probably tar and the hot rays of the sun had warmed and melted it so that when I leaned over the top [illegible] imagining I was on a ship, some of the tar marked my bright new medal. It was no worry to me that my dress was also damaged, but of great concern that the medal was.

Moreover, Gilbert was shorter than I and could not lean over the top so his medal was unmarked.

The rest of the day was uneventful until bed-time. Then, much to our great joy and surprise Gilbert and I were dressed in our best clothes and behold! - a carriage drawn by a real live horse appeared at the gate.

We were told we were going for a ride to see the decorations and the bonfires that were on the various hills around Cheltenham - Cleeve Shurdington, Birdlip and many others.

It was a most inspiring sight and later, when I learned that beacons were once lit to give warning of the Armada the sight of those beacons on the hills flashed back, and I was a child again. But on that particular night in Cheltenham I felt as grand as a Princess.

Sure enough the fairylamps were lighted in the Promenade and we saw the bonfires like great balls of fire in the sky. Was that the sort of fire that guided the Israelites? - the pillar of fire by night?

We were too awestricken to even to want to wriggle and I'm not sure that the whole trip did not take on a dream-like quality.

Individual houses too had their celebrations. My father had once more grown his red standard roses intermixed with white arum lilies and forget-me-nots. In an era when gas was quite a novelty, Dad and my stepbrothers had connected a tube to the gas burner in the front bedroom and fixed a jet to the end. This was fastened to the outside wall of the house. Around this was placed the sides of a wooden box, over the open front of which was stretched a flag with the coloured portrait of Queen Victoria. Then the gas jet was lit and the picture brightly illuminated.

To our eyes it looked grand and dozens of people came along the Gloucester Road to see the lit up picture of the Queen. Oh we were most patriotic in those days.

I have only vague memories of my father, for in those days men normally worked from 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. and masters with small businesses worked the same long hours as the employees and often longer.

Father used to be at the works in Bennington Street to unlock the doors for six o'clock in the morning and was often there at six in the evening to lock up and see that all was safe.

As my stepbrothers grew up they took over some of the responsibilities. They were not only gas fitters but specialised in wrought iron work.

In Cheltenham Museum there is a beautiful example of wrought iron work made by C.W. Hancock who was Father's first born, and my eldest stepbrother.

Cheltenham has a tremendous amount of decorative wrought iron. There were the beautiful Pittville Gates, alas removed to aid the war effort, and never replaced as well as house gates and railings and nornamental archways to front doors.

Our little house had wrought iron railings on the windowsills to hold flower boxes and very gay they looked when Father filled them with geraniums and calceolarias. There was also an archway over which grew purple clematis which spread up the house and there was a garden seat where one could sit and watch the horses go by, or just play with toys or books.

As our bedtime was six o'clock we often didn't see Father during the week. He was very much "The man who lives here Sundays" for Saturday was the only half day. Yet I have very clear visions of him working in the greenhouse built outside the living room window and the scullery, or of him sitting in his big armchair with a pipe.

He had a brown velvet jacket which not only felt smooth and delightful to touch but which also had an intriguing smell. I remember climbing on to his knew just to smell him!!

. . .

Years later and even now the smell of a pipe brings back the picture of a little girl on her father's knee just loving the smell of him.

Another of my memories around my father is a rice pudding he made.

Mother was in bed so I conclude this must have been when one of my sisters was born. Mother's rice puddings were always beautifully cooked but inclined to be milky.

Dad's pudding, however, turned out thick and solid. It could be sliced almost like cake and was delicious. Later I asked mother if we couldn't have a "cakey pudding like Dad's" but it never materialised.

As I have said I was born into a fervent Baptist family, so Sundays were very much days of rest except for the cooking of the Sunday dinner.

All the family who could walk went to the Church in Cambray, the centre of the town where father rented a pew.

Afternoons were devoted to a "tidy" walk which mean't just that - no running about, for we would be wearing Sunday clothes.

Clothes were quite important. Gilbert's best suit was a "Little Lord Fauntleroy" suit, complete with a pleated frilled collar and a pleated white shirt front.

The only dress I can remember was of red velvet and over it I wore a tiny pinafore of Indian muslin trimmed with insertion lace threaded with red ribbons and wide Valenciennes lace. I wore white socks and red shoes and I was very smart.

If it rained the afternoon was spent reading. For those who didn't go to church in the evening there was hymn singing - "Jesus bids us shine", "Dare to be a Daniel", "I think when I read that sweet story of old" and "Gentle Jesus meek and mild, Look upon a little child. Pity my simplicity, Suffer me to come to Thee."

What did it matter if we didn't understand the meaning of all the words? We put our own interpretation on them and had the broad outline of the teaching.

Personally I translated simplicity to "stupidity" knowing nothing of the one but being rich in the other!

All my life I remembered some of the hymns Dad taught us and the meanings grew and developed as we did.

Fortunately for us we were never punished, though somehow Dad's word was law and so must Mother's have been. Perhaps the stepbrothers and sisters who were at home kept us in the straight and narrow path.

My nickname was "Meddlesome Mattie", as being naturally inquiring and inquisitive my fingers got into forbidden places. So my stepsisters decided to give my hands something useful to do - knitting. I was thrilled.

They cast on twelve stitches, did a few rows of plain knitting with a chain edge and handing it over to me, patiently guided my fingers till I could knit.

I did about twelve inches, was praised for my efforts which were very uneven and alas! - it was unpicked and I was told to start again.

The knitting cotton was pink and the needles steel. Another twelve inches were accomplished and again it was unpicked, and again and again.

I can't imagine why I kept trying, but I expect that sufficient encouragement was given, as after all I was only three years old.

Today it would be counted cruelty to give such monotonous work to a three year old, but what is important is that I have been grateful to those stepsisters all my life; thankful that I learned to knit so young, and grateful for their patience and insistence on accuracy.

When the work was even enough, I made a long long strip which was made into leading reins for Gilbert. There were no mistakes allowed, and if there was a slipped stitch or badly made one, then the work was unpicked as far as that and the correction made. When the reins were finished I felt as if I'd been crowned.

2. INFANT SCHOOL DAYS

Just around the corner in Malvern Road were Christ Church Schools - Boys, Girls and Infants.

The style of architecture was Ecclesiastical. The buildings were of stone and the windows were like the church windows, high, tall and narrow. The rooms were so high that lighting and ventilation were no great problems.

The Infants and the Girls shared the same playground, but the Boys had a high wall between them and the girls.

The lavatories were at the far end of the playground which once had been covered with gravel which had worn flat and dusty in the summer time and muddy in winter.

The only entrance to the Girls' school was across the playground, but the Infants had an entrance from the road as well as a back entrance to the playground which was shared by both schools at different times.

Each school had a cloakroom but the schools themselves varied. The Infant school had one room only and the classes were arranged all around its walls.

The Girls' school had one large classroom and a small classroom for the use of Standards I and II. In the large classroom was a black stove heated by coal and we secretly envied the position of the Head's Desk which stood in front of it. This meant that while the Head Teacher worked at her desk she was nice and warm, while we unfortunates who sat near the outside walls shivered and waited until we could leave our desks.

Top class in the Infants school was arranged in tiers so that the teacher could see at once what any child was doing. Boys and girls were not segregated and there was unconsciously quite a lot of healthy competition.

Mother took me to school my first day. She was more worried that I should miss my mid morning glass of milk than about learning. I could already knit, knew the alphabet and several simple words as well as the value of numbers up to ten.

So she gave me a kiss, told me to be sure and run home for my milk when we were let out to play; to be a good girl and do as I was told.

I was well prepared to obey her. I knew that school was a place where I should go to learn and work at learning, and I looked forward with great anticipation to learning "new things". I was three and a half. I consider that was a far better preparation for life than going to school to learn by playing without a definite effort.

However, to go back. At playtime I obediently ran home and was drinking my milk when a teacher appeared at the door and I was escorted back to school. So ended my mid morning lunches.

Not that I minded. I had a good healthy appetite and we were expected to "clean up our plates" at mealtimes without fuss. So we ate and drank what was provided and very fortunately we learned to like whatever was set before us.

Our first morning was in the "Baby Class" where we were allowed to do what we liked and play with the toys in the cupboard.

Then came Class III where quite a lot of teaching was done by singing rhymes with appropriate actions.

Cows and horses walk on four legs
Little Children walk on two legs
Fishes swim in water clear
Birds fly high up in the air
1 2 3 4 5
6 7 8 9 10.

We clapped our hands as we said each number and thoroughly enjoyed school.

No such luxuries as paints and crayons were provided. Oh, no! We went to school to learn to read and write and do arithmetic. There were slates with wooden frames and slate pencils and we did our best to copy the letters and figures written on the blackboard.

No scribbling was allowed and anything not satisfying the teacher was wiped off the slate and one just had to try again.

Lines were ruled on the blackboard and on the slates. Letters began on one line, proceeded to the top line, curved around, skimmed the bottom line and the process repeated.

This of course was after a period of practising "pot hooks and hangers" ///// and various strokes at different angles connecting the rules lined on the slates.

Did we find it drudgery? Not so. There was pride in achievement and we all worked to get the word of praise that would follow our "best work".

I had enjoyed a year at school when I was joined by Gilbert. He was only three years old still. The school year started in September, and his birthday fell on 30th December so to prevent him missing a term's work the Head Mistress allowed him to start before his fourth birthday. That was a great day.

Cissy Barnett also began school that day so Sam Barnett and I sat in the "Baby Class" with our smaller brother and sister.

Sam was most daring. He fetched a black stuffed cat from the toy cupboard. Somehow the tail came away from the body of the toy. Such a long curly tail. Sam put it around his neck and ran around the classroom to make the children laugh. We did!! That first day was hilarious.

Next day we went back to work. It so happened that I skipped one class and was in Class I while I was still five years old.

In this class we were promoted to pieces of paper and pencils - no ink nor paint. Many of our activities were "done to number" and a writing lesson would run as follows, the teacher calling:

"One" The class picked up the pencils in their left hands points downwards.

"Two" The class placed their right hands on the desks with the wrists more or less flat.

"Three" The class placed the pencil between the thumb and finger of the right hand, the end of the pencil pointing over the right shoulder.

Then we were ready to begin.

We sat upright, left hand steadying the bottom of the paper; no such thing allowed as slouching or "writing with your nose". We learned to do thin upstrokes and thick downstrokes, very round O's and were taught that d t p had short upstrokes. Looped letters b h k and l had tall loops but f had a short upper loop but a lower loop to match g and y.

To help us with correct lengths and heights of letters the paper was ruled in appropriate convenient lines which we had to touch but not go beyond. There was a great pride in achievement through the school and everyone tried to get a word of praise.

I was lucky. Being able to knit before I started school was a great asset, but I can still remember the lesson.

Teacher stood with her back half turned to the class her needles held for us to copy, and then we chanted after her:

"One Put the needle in
Two Put the wool around
Three Pull it through
Four Slip it off."

and behold a stitch would appear on the right hand needle. Casting on was left until we could do our plain knitting well.

The twelve stitches were always cast on for us and a few rows already knitted to begin with. We used steel needles and pink knitting cotton which was used and re-used as necessary. No luxury or wasting was allowed.

My place for knitting was generally in the front row where the slower pupils sat so that I could help them with their struggles to "put the needle in" etc.

Yes, we did a lot of work by chanting and repetition. There was certainly no unruliness except on one notable occasion.

Being a Church of England School, every year there was a visit by the Scripture Inspector who checked that we knew The Lord's Prayer, the first, second and third Commandments as well as chosen Bible stories.

We all wanted to say these well and the Head Mistress - Miss Harris - took the whole school for the teaching of the memory tests.

This particular morning Miss Harris stood by her desk; the class teachers by their classes and we were all saying the second commandment. To spur our efforts, Miss Harris said:

"Now this time, the child who tries the hardest can come out and stand by me!"

Didn't we crave that honour! I was on the back row of Class I on the dais but Miss Harris did not look my way. She was looking at Class II and called out "Gilbert Hancock". My brother! I was thrilled. Fancy being able to go home and tell Mother that Gilbert had been chosen to say the Second Commandment in front of the whole school. The idea was gorgeous.

However, Gilbert didn't budge. He had no idea why he was being called out. Miss Harris repeated: "Gilbert Hancock".

Gilbert stood still. The third time she said:

"Gilbert Hancock - Come Here."

Still Gilbert stayed put and I began to wonder what would happen.

Miss Harris nodded to the Class Teacher who went to get Gilbert from his place.

Would he budge? Not likely.

He'd been doing his best and to be "called out" was usually a disgrace. So he stuck firmly in his place. This began to look like open disobedience which was most strongly frowned upon.

So a second Class Teacher went to help the first and between them they carried a strong and sturdy five year old, kicking and struggling as hard as he could, and placed him on the floor in front of the Head's desk.

Gilbert's arms and legs were flailing as the sails of a windmill caught in a hurricane.

Then Miss Harris stepped forward, leaned over the child to explain why "he was called out", and ask what was the matter.

But Gilbert was not open to reason. His arms and legs continued to wave around and somehow one hefty little shoe caught her on the nose which promptly started to bleed.

At this the Staff rushed to the rescue and took Miss Harris to the cloakroom to attend to the bleeding.

Gilbert seeing he was unattended got up and ran home.

I gave a sigh of relief and the rest of the school stood still for a few minutes till the staff returned. Presently Miss Harris also returned and school proceeded as usual.

At Playtime Mother appeared with Gilbert. She was mystified for Gilbert could only tell her that he had been "called out" and that he was a good boy.

It seemed he either hadn't heard or understood the honour that was being accorded him by reciting the second Commandment in front of the school.

But all's well that ends well. Miss Harris told Mother not to worry and Gilbert liked school as much as ever.

Miss Harris must have been a very understanding person and was very much liked and appreciated. Everyone was sorry when a year or two later she left to take up the Headship of a missionary school in South Africa.

Another notable day was during the hard winter of 1895. Snow had fallen all through the night and in the morning Reg and Walter were up early shovelling a narrow pathway down the front path, across the pavement to the road.

Snow-sweepers were regularly employed in Cheltenham for there was always snow in winter. On this day, however, the whole landscape had altered. The gardon had vanished and instead was a fairy-tale stretch of snow and snow and snow.

It was wonderful and beautiful like "The Land of The Snow Queen".

The great question that morning was "Should Hilda go to school?" I was just five years old. Finally someone went outside, down the path on to the pavement where snow had been cleared leaving a pathway about two feet wide.

That went past the school, so it was decided that I should go, and well wrapped up in my Red Riding Hood Cape and hood with sturdy shoes and leather gaiters buttoned to the knees I set off.

Gloucester Road had had enough traffic to mar the flatness of the snow but Malvern Road, just around the corner had none, and the snow was shoulder-high. It was thrilling to look over to the houses on the other side of the road and see this wonderful flatness of snow.

When I reached school only nine other pupils had turned up and we all waited around the big black heating stove wondering what to do.

The teachers did likewise and after some deliberation they decided to send us home as there were not enough pupils to form classes. That in itself was exciting so off we went back to our various homes having been told we were good children to have come, and mind to come the next day.

Then Gilbert and I amused ourselves making a snowman in the backyard, helping or hindering in making a pathway to the coalshed with a branch line to the ash pit - no bins in those days, and another shorter branch line to the outside W.C.

We threw snowballs at each other, kicked up the snow, thoroughly enjoyed ourselves and went indoors with rosy cheeks, shining eyes and enormous appetites.

Next day we went to school and as there were about twenty-five children there school was as usual, though the individual teaching seemed a bit odd and we missed the company of the other children.

Playtime was always great fun. The back doors opened and out the children streamed, class by class and immediately Bedlam broke out.

Everyone had to shout to be heard and often we just jumped and yelled for sheer joy without knowing why.

There was always a teacher on duty in case of accidents but an occasional bruised or scraped knee was all that needed attention. Sometimes we played Ring Games or "Here we come Gathering Nuts in May" or Tiggy, but as soon as the bell rang, there was dead silence.

Then came the order "Form Lines", and three tidy lines appeared. Knowing our places in class we applied the same rule in the lines so that there was no undue pushing or shoving. Then into school again.

We sat in desks intended to seat four but often they had to seat five. We didn't mind. It just meant that our elbows were kept close to our waists and it also meant we had to sit upright when using a pencil.

For oral lessons we all sat with our hands loosely clasped behind our backs except when questions were to be answered. Then there was a general competition to see who could raise the right arm first to be asked to answer the question.

Chattering to each other was discouraged except when we were showing the adjacent child how to do something.

When all classes were together in one large room, order had to be maintained so that each teacher had a fair chance to teach and each child had a fair chance to learn.

Singing lessons were a joy and so were the Drill lessons - now called P.E., and two classes often combined while the third did Drawing or Needlework.

For years two little cross-stitch table mats were displayed at home and I still have a coloured cockerel outlined with backstitch in coloured wool with GILBERT HANCOCK written on it by the teacher.

We considered it a reward to be allowed to take home any work, because only that considered to be a credit to the school was allowed to go.

All too quickly Infant school days passed, and when I was six years old I moved into the Senior School.

Children normally moved into the Senior School when seven years of age, but sometimes if work was satisfactory they would move at six, especially if birthdays interfered too much with a complete year's work.

It was for the latter reason that my brother Gilbert started school at three and three-quarters when the usual age was four.

3. GLIMPSES OF HOME LIFE

To go back home. It is time to remember one or two things which stand out clearly.

The fastest thing on the road was a horse and occasionally there was great excitement when a tradesman's horse ran away and was chased by three or four men who somehow caught the reins and brought it to a stop.

There was plenty of room to play hopscotch on the pavement or skip or bounce a ball, and we could play outside the gate after having gained permission, but we were not allowed "to go around the corners" - that is we could play on the pavement between St. George's Road and Malvern Road.

Generally we played on the front path belonging to the house but that wasn't enough for hoops or whips and tops and a ball was a most perverse object that often went on the neighbour's garden instead of our own.

Our backyard was very small as Father and the boys had built the workshop in it where they could do extras concerned with work.

It was both heated and lighted by gas and many hours they spent there for their wrought iron work was not only part of their livelihood, it was their hobby too.

At that time bicycles were a novelty and they were hard and bumpy to ride, having most inadequate springs and hard tyres. My stepbrothers had a "Penny-farthing" and Gilbert and I were only too anxious to grow big enough to possess one.

I didn't realise that being a girl I should never have been allowed to even try.

However, one day Reg came home with what to us was much more wonderful. Between them at the works the boys had made a tricycle. "Would you like a ride?" he asked. Oh, wouldn't we!! "Yes please", we answered dancing up and down at the very thought.

Having got permission, Reg sat on the seat. Gilbert stood on one side of the axle for the back wheels, and I stood on the other side, each of us clutching Reg, and off we set along the Gloucester Road.

Everyone stared at us, but did we care?

We were having an adventure. Reg took us past the Lansdown Castle as far as The Little House in the Tree. Then it was time to return. We would have gone to Gloucester but that ride must have been a bit of an ordeal for Reg with two small children clinging to him and no springs on the "trike", but we arrived home triumphant and safe and sound, full of excitement and hopes for the future.

I have already written of the Christmas when Father Christmas left my brother Gilbert bundles of wood and pieces of coal in his stocking because he had transgressed but a Christmas present of mine comes to mind.

It was a knife, fork and spoon set with the words "For a Good Child" engraved on the knife blade and a bright red spot inserted in the handles of both knife and fork.

As usual the house was full. The knife, fork and spoon were put in a cupboard, but when I looked at the table already laid for dinner my place had its usual spoon and fork.

Would that do for me? Not so likely on such a day as this.

I just went to the cupboard and replaced my spoon and fork with the knife and fork. It was labelled "For a Good Child" and I had been a good child, so of course I should use it.

One of my stepsisters said "Just look at that" - but another said "Oh let her have it - she's got to start some time."

So I did. It was a blessing that my meal was already cut for the knife I had was unable to cut although I went through the motions of cutting. That episode was another step forward in the process of growing up.

It was in 1896 that my youngest sister was born and soon after there was the most terrifying experience of my life and the results have lasted through a long life though with decreasing intensity.

After a day of shopping there arrived home a large cardboard box, and when the tissue paper wrappings were removed there was a charming little winter coat, the colour of a pretty blue pansy, trimmed with white swansdown around a deep collar. It had a bonnet to match, also trimmed with swansdown and fastened with long matching ribbons.

I gazed at it fascinated.

"Is that for me?"

"Yes - try it on!"

I tried it on with delight, but Mother cut off a large ribbon bow at the back saying "It's too fussy." However the swansdown was my delight. The powderpuff for the baby was swansdown. I had never dreamed it could be used to decorate a coat and bonnet. I loved it.

One fine day we were all in the High Street shopping. Mother had the two babes, for Ethel was still very delicate and needed looking after like a baby.

Gilbert was toddling beside her safely harnessed with leather reins and I ws was allowed to trot ahead as long as I stayed on the pavement and was within easy reach of the pram. I was wearing my swansdown outfit and felt very smart.

Quite suddenly, all the hobgoblins and wicked fairies and giants of fairy tales jumped on my shoulder and seized me.

Petrified with fear I stood still and shrieked. People stopped, but I was seized again.

Then Mother appeared and the apparitions vanished, but the fear did not.

It transpired that a fox terrier had jumped on my shoulder probably thinking that the swansdown was alive and fair prey, but the fear of dogs has never completely left me, and I should certainly support the powers that be if a ruling was made "No dogs allowed in streets or public places except on a lead!"

A similar incident happened to my eldest son. He was only a toddler, two years old. He was walking along the pavement and I was pushing the pram a few yards behind him.

Suddenly a fox terrier rushed out of a gate and jumped on his shoulder. He stood stock still and screamed. I left the pram, to comfort him and thought (Oh dear! Oh dear! I hope the fright doesn't last like mine did."

It has. John still dislikes dogs, still partly being afraid of them and he is now sixty years of age. At that time we were giving a home to old "Pat", the faithful old guard dog belonging to my husband's parents. Pat was too old to be useful as a guard dog so they had a new animal. None of them liked "putting down" an old and faithful friend so he came to us.

John would play with him happily, and when trying to reassure the child I said: "There are all kinds of dogs - Look - Pat is a dog."

With a small child's logic, back came the answer. "Dat not dog - dat is Pat".

But to go back. Towns have altered so as to be unrecognisable. Opposite our house was Alstone Lane which led to fields and country over a railway crossing.

We were sometimes taken there to see the trains go by but we never opened the handgate without a grown-up with us.

At one corner of the lane was Alstone Grange surrounded by a brick wall, ten to twelve feet high, over the top of which hung just a few branches of a huge mulberry tree.

On the other corner a new row of houses had been built and behind them was a piece of waste land, rough and uneven with the sort of growth that appears on any waste land. It was called "Hoppy Mills", apparently because it belonged to a cripple named Mills.

Street lighting in the Gloucester Road was by gas and we children used to watch for the lamplighter to come with his long pole, poke it up into the glass shade and light the lamp.

Of course we learnt R.L. Stevenson's "Learie, Learie light the lamps" etc. We were alive in his day - so near and yet so far.

Macadamised roads were then very modern. The roads were very muddy in the winter and very dusty in the summer. Clothes had to be worn to fit conditions. Buttoned up gaiters kept legs warm and dry in the winter and in the summer the street watering cart went along spraying half the road in one direction to keep the dust down, and spraying the other half on its return journey. Nevertheless clouds of dust were blown about on a windy day.

My mother loved the country. She had been reared in Kilmersdon, a tiny hamlet near Radstock, Bath, in Somerset and was used to the freedom of fields through which one could walk and play. When we went out walking with her, it was always towards fields.

Generally we could run and play as we liked in a field, but sometimes we were told: "Not today, this is laid for hay," or still less occasionally, "No. Corn is growing here." Then we followed the narrow space around the field by the hedge.

We soon learned that a closed gate meant NO ROAD, but if the closed gate had a stile next to it, there would be a way over the stile to another in another hedge. When we had the pram with us, stiles were useless and we had to content ourselves with grass verges, jumping over drainage ruts, looking for flowers and listening to the birds.

So we began to grow up enjoying the simple things in life. Picnics were few and far between, for there were still two stepbrothers at home as well as Father and the young family to be cared for.

Housekeeping was no joke either. Every morning the range in the living room had to "have a rub" before the fire was lit. The boiler on one side had to be filled with soft water drawn from the large tank on top of the outside W.C. and any stains on the steel fender, fire irons and fireguard removed. Every Saturday the stove was blackleaded.

Blacklead was a sort of paste spread thinly over the grate, then vigorously polished off with brushes and finally a soft cloth. The burnished steel was rubbed with a damp cloth dipped into emery powder, also vigorously rubbed and polished until it shone.

The hearth stone was "holy stoned". That is it was scrubbed with a slate holy stone which left it white when dry.

The brass tap on the boiler was cleaned with BRASSO. There was also a plate rack over the range with a steel front which also had to be cleaned.

By the time all that was done, one was as warm as toast no matter how cold the weather was outside, and someone must have got up early as I have said that a normal working day was from 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m., and Father was always at the works to open and close the gates although of course as Charlie grew older he took some of the responsibility for this.

Father must have had times off during the day to attend to necessary new orders and it was one of my mother's proud boasts that I walked down Piccadilly when I was ten months old. Father had had to go to London about some wrought iron work. He would not go without Mother and she would not go without me. So that was my first trip to town. Needless to say I remember nothing of this adventure and it is easy to picture a small child toddling along grasping the fingers of each parent.

But to return to domesticity. Wash Day was as hard a day as a Saturday. What a blessing Sunday came between them! At least the afternoons and evenings were restful.

The copper fire was lit in the soullery and two large wooden tubs were lifted onto a trestle. The "whites", those were sheets, pillowslips, handkerchiefs, white pinafores, shirts and aprons were rubbed and scrubbed and then put to boil while the coloured things were washed.

Then the dirty water was disposed of by ladling it out with a handbowl and pouring it down the stone sink.

Clean water was put into the tubs for rinsing. The small room was full of steam and how anyone could see what was being handled is still a mystery, but somehow the clothes were rinsed and blued and starched when necessary.

All tablecloths and the bottoms of white petticoats and pinafores were starched and then hung on the lines in the back yard blowing dry, to be admired by all and sundry.

Next came clearing up. The tubs were emptied, rinsed, dried out and returned to their places under the table which was hinged and hung flat against the wall while the space was needed for the washing.

The sink and copper were scrubbed and the ashes from the copper fire raked out. Then the floor was scrubbed and it was dinner time. No wonder the cold meat from Sunday's joint was useful on Wash Day!

As clothes dried they were brought in and folded down ready for ironing. If drying was impossible out of doors, small items like nappies were placed on a sheet of newspaper on the plate rack and other things were hung on a big clothes horse around the fire till people turned up for meals when the clothes horse had to be removed to make room for people.

I only remember three kinds of soap used in our house, although washing soda was used as well and a little for washing greasy plates and pots and pans. Pears soap was for the babies, Sunlight soap was for cleaning, and Lifebuoy was the ordinary toilet commodity.

Furniture was polished with beeswax and turpentine and plenty of elbowgrease. Floors were covered with linoleum and rugs. In the parlour was a huge sheepskin rug which we loved to sit upon but in the bedrooms and living rooms the rugs were all made from cloth cuttings pegged into hessian.

People spent hours snipping coloured pieces of cloth to make rugs which were not only used for ornament and warmth but on which we children learned colours, picking out reds, blues, blacks and greens. Yellow and white were rarely used. They would look dirty too soon and to look dirty was not permitted.

Home was a lovely warm comfortable place where dirty shoes and gaiters, wet coats and hats became clean and dry during the night. There we were always safe.

Father had made an unusual fastening for the front gate. The postman, milkman and friends all knew how it worked. It was very simple, but strangers had to fiddle about with it before they could open it. So when it was fine we often played on the front path.

Most of the garden was in the front of the house and rhubarb, strawberries and potatoes were grown there as well as the roses, lilies and forget-me-nots that Father liked so well.

Punishments were few and far between. Indeed, there was only one occasion when I was spanked and no-one else ever touched us. Perhaps having the older ones at home meant that they guided us in the way we should go. That often happens.

On this particular morning I had gone from the middle bedroom to which I had been promoted and was prancing about on the big bed. The baby was in the cradle alongside and Gilbert was running up and down the big cot.

What it was I did that I should not have done I don't know. However, Mother came running up the stairs and thinking Gilbert was the culprit she began to spank him. Absolutely horrified I called out:

"It wasn't Gilbert - it was me."

Whereupon Mother spanked me and said:

"That's for being mean enough to let Gilbert take the blame."

It was all over so quickly I didn't even cry. I was too astonished, but I never forgot that it was wrong to let someone else be blamed for something wrong you had done.

This was another lesson learned in growing up. It's uncanny how much real teaching is done unconsciously.

We were very fortunate in having an exceptionally fine Mother and a good Father too, although we saw so little him except on Saturdays and Sundays. However, we were a Baptist family so as soon as we could make the long trip into the centre of the town where the Baptist church was built, off we went on Sunday mornings.

The pews looked to us children rather like large boxes into which we were shut by a door but there were hassocks on which we could stand. No fidgeting was allowed and sometimes the sermons seemed very long. However, we did love singing and joined in all we could. Having learned the alphabet and simple words before going to school, it was surprising how much reading we learned by just joining in the singing with a hymn book opened at the right page.

And then of course every Sunday evening we had hymn singing at home and Father taught us the simple hymns so rarely heard nowadays - "Jesus wants me for a Sunbeam" and "Jesus loves me this I know". I've never forgotten them and used to sing them to my children.