

1936: My last Christmas Down

Dumpling Bridge Lane

By Margaret Marion (Meg Morley)

Little did I know that this was to be our last Christmas in what we all called the Old Bridge Lane. I was almost five years old. I'm sure all the adults knew we'd soon be sent up to that wild and windy Eriswell Road, but that's another story.

Early on the day before Christmas Eve, Mother was busy baking and opening one of the stone jugs of wine in the bottom of the panty. Everyone made wine; you could always smell it working away in its big stone bottles when you went into a house.

If you corked it before it had finished working, then it would burst. Elderberry and parsnip were my mother's two favourites. You could make wine out of any fruit or vegetable you could think of. My mother was a very good pastry cook; she baked by the peat fire, that's what we used all the time. The people in the lane went over the river where we got all our drinking and washing water from and dug the peat out from a place called the Pits. When she cooked, Mother always made me what she called a 'dod' out of a tiny bit of pastry. When it was done she'd break it open and put butter in; it was my special treat! Then came Christmas Eve.....

My mother put the tree up and laid sugar mice around the bottom. We had real tiny candles in little holders that clipped onto the branches. Sometime, during the night, my older sister got up and bit all the heads off the sugar mice - Mother was not at all pleased!

Later in the evening, neighbours would come around, all having wine and mince pies. Then, a startling thing happened; Father Christmas came in - I thought it was really hjim! I hid under the table and wouldn't come out. In actuality, it was Uncle Tom Halls who liven in the corner of our little walled-in yard; four families lived there in the little stone cottages. He had to go home and change before I came out - everyone laughed.

We were all poor but hard-working. My mother worked on the land but what I remember so clearly was the laughter; nothing seemed to get them down.

After Uncle Toe, Mother made cups of tea. We ran out of milk, so Mother told me to take the little milk can and go out the back into Death's Lane to Aunt Fan's. The name of the n=lane came from a man named De'ath who had either lived down there or owned it. Lakenheath people always slurred words together. I read once it was called the "Saxon Slur".

Anyway, Aunt Fan was born with a club foot and walked with one crutch. She and Uncle Vic had a herd of cows. In those days, we received the milk straight from the cow, and I carried the milk back home in an enamel can with a little lid and carrying handle.

Joe, my brother who was eighteen years old when I was born, used the milk first. As soon as he took a sip he swore: "Bloody Fan's been watering the milk down again! She'd lick a farthing out of a turd," he said. Everyone laughed - they all knew how mean Fan was.

Finally, me and my sister went to bed, hanging our stockings up first. When we woke up my sister Nancy rushed to her stocking, but I daren't put my hand in mine, so she grabbed it and did it. We received nuts, an orange and some sweets. When I got downstairs I had a lovely surprise, a doll's pram with a doll in it, though I now cannot remember whet the doll was like

Before dinner time, I discovered that Maggie, who was older than me and also lived in our yard, had also got a doll's pram. So, we both walked up the street to see her great-grandmother who lived in Goward's yard - that's just after The Firs, next to the Lakenheath Hotel which then was a private house. Maggie wore a hat with a brim that turned up all the way round and elastic that went under her chin. Her great-grandmother was a small lady with little black lacy fingerless gloves. That was the furthest I had ever been up the street.

The End.