Canvey Island I921

I first saw Canvey Island in 1920 when my father took my sister and I there one glorious September day. We traveled from Sidcup where we were then living, being joined at Barking by my mothers brother, Jack.

"We are having a "skynops", said my father, in his Essex sing-song voice. This was a saying of his when he went having a look around.

We skynopsed around all day, and my father so liked what he saw of Canvey Island that he hardly noticed the two mile walk to the station in the evening. We walked along Furtherwick Road, which was little more than a lane in those days, being lined on either side with tall elm trees. We walked past Lakeside Corner, over the "duck boards", and through Winter Gardens onto the road to Benfleet station, only to miss the last train home, so we went on to Southend in the evening for the night.

The following year we went back again but this time to live there.

Here my parents lived through war and floods for the next forty-five years.

I was on Canvey Island with my two small sons when the floods came, but this is another story.

So, we shook the dust of Sidcup from our feet on the 15th of June 1921, to start a new life. We were father, mother, my two sisters, my small brother and myself. In spite of our new blue dresses and brown straw hats the journey was somewhat marred by my sister and I having to carry a BROOM. This BROOM had been left behind by the removal men and we had been detailed off to carry it from Sidcup to Canvey. The indignity of it! This exciting, breath- taking trip into the unknown, and we were lumbered!!! With a BROOM! I was by no means mollified when my father said with his whimsical smile,

"You are the mace bearer"

Luckily the tide was out when we arrived at Benfleet so we could continue our journey without delay. At that time before the bridge was built in 1931 one had to walk over the causeway on stepping stones at low tide.

At high tide one had to rely on being ferried over by rowboat. This was a one man affair. Whether he had the sole rights to the ferry I do not know, but he was very independent and if he did not feel like coming out of his little wooden hut he would not come. The charges were 1 penny for a child, and 2 pence for an adult. One such an occasion I recall was when a party of people from Canvey had been to Wembley to see the Search Light Tattoo in the early 1920s, and on arriving at Benfleet at high water they could not arouse the ferry men from his torpor or unwillingness to come out of his hut to ferry them over the creek, where their return bus was waiting. After about twenty minutes of cajoling and pleading, all to no avail, the young man who was the driver of the bus stripped down to his pants, and plunging into the water, swam out for the boat, came back, dressed, rowed all the people over to the Island, tied the boat up on the wrong side of the creek for the ferry man and continued their journey.

Bus journeys in those days were hilarious and precarious, since these buses were often merely half ton vans with "seats" consisting of two planks of wood and four 2 gallon petrol cans for them to rest on.

These buses were owned by happy-go-lucky young men with their eyes on the future of a growing island. There were two sets of brothers who started the

real bus service with an old coach called the Bluebird. These four were Vic and Basil Hiscock, and Bill and Bob Helliker. Other young men who joined in were Freddie Lemon and Bertie Clark, plus two more brothers, Alec and Willie Kemp.

For two vehicles to pass one another was a hazardous business, as the road was raised and very narrow in those days, before it was rebuilt in 1931. One false move, and one or the other would be over the edge, down a seven foot slope into a ditch of water.

Great Fun

So there we were, four of us, waiting for a conveyance to take us to our new home. Our elder sister had gone on ahead on her bicycle. Father hired a pony and trap complete with driver, one Jim Crow, who for some reason my father disliked on sight. However beggers could not be choosers in those days of limited transport. There were four seats in the trap - one for Father, one each for my younger sister and small brother. I sat on the floor of the trap with my legs dangling over the edge.

I remember that journey to this day. The dainty hooves of the pony clip-clopped-clip clopped along the one main road which was built up about seven feet above ground level. Through the gaps in the hedges of sweet may blossom and wild dog roses could be seen a thin, blue line which was the sea. Passing shipping seemed to be riding on top of the sea wall.

We arrived safely at our home in May Avenue, or, Rosewinkle Avenue as it was known as in those far off times, and we children scampered onto the beach as fast as we could run.

In the 1920's odd bungalows were dotted about regardless of order so that many a boundary had to be altered when Town and Country Planning came into force.

Our new HOME was an ex-WD. three-roomed army hut made of weather boarding, and lined with asbestos.

The structure cost £60. Father had bought a plot of land in I920 about sixty feet by forty five feet for £21 ie. for £7 per plot. He had the foundations laid for £10, so in all our new home cost £91. When he died much later, in 1963, it was sold for £700.

There were two bedrooms, and one living room. One bedroom was shared by our mother and father, and little Georgie with us three girls sharing the other bedroom. We slept on bunk beds that had been specially made for us. My two sisters' beds rested on trestles on the floor, but my bunk was hinged to the wall on one side, and supported on the outer edge by strong piano wire hooked up to the ceiling by piano wire. Getting in and out of my bed was quite a feat, and was to be proud of sometimes.

In the one living room was a round, pot-bellied iron stove that had a five inch galvanised pipe for a flue that went up from the stove and out through a hole in the roof. On this stove we made our toast by holding the slice of bread flat against the hot metal. We also ironed our handkerchiefs and smalls around the pipe.

At this time my father was working in Ilford, coming home at weekends, so it was some time before we had any improvements to our way of life. The first thing he did was to make a privy in one corner of the garden. It was a sentry box about three feet square, built of very rough wood holding a galvanised bucket with a wooden seat. Paper was on string on a nail on the wall. Much interesting

information was gleaned as we sat on the Lowly Seat.

But it became a home for spiders; fat-bellied ones lurked in every corner. Some had silvery backs and some were enormous hairy ones; some were long and thin. In the daytime they could be seen, but it was a real test of nerves to venture into the Lavvy at night time. Many a time we girls watered the grass at night, rather than risk the terrors of the spiders.

At that time there was no mains water supply in Canvey. Our water supply was a large 500 gallon rainwater tank fed via a homemade charcoal filter from the roof. Large as this tank was, and economical as we ware forced to be, it was not always sufficient for a family of 6 people, and there were times in the summer when we had to go to nearby unoccupied holiday homes to get water.