

# The First Home



A woman at the gas stove in the kitchen of her home in Barnes in 1942.

Our house was called the halfway house because it was so easy for everyone to reach because of its convenient West End location. It was always full of aunts, uncles and cousins. We were constantly having arguments with one person or another. Whenever there was a family get-together I had to be briefed about who we were or were not talking to.

Many of the homes people describe in their early pre-war lives no longer exist, because they were condemned as slums in the 1940s and 50s, demolished and replaced by modern housing, often in tower blocks. The kitchen would have a coal-fired stove, which was sometimes the only heating available in the whole house, or the only fire the family could afford to heat. A considerable majority of our contributors had no bathroom. Most of them took baths once a week in a portable metal bath in front of the fire, usually on a Friday, some in a public bath house. Good hygiene was often difficult to maintain, although most housewives worked hard at it in difficult circumstances. Our first informant nevertheless waxes lyrical about her early childhood.

‘I remember, I remember the house where I was born.’ Believe me, Thomas Hood’s house was nothing like mine. The first line of his poem is the only one that applies. The address was lovely: 2 Vine Yard, Little Pearl Street. But that’s the nicest thing that you can say about it, other than the wonderful spirit of the people who lived there. Vine Yard was actually a court off Little Pearl Street. It had nine little houses and all its inhabitants were Jewish. It was like a tiny village and everyone was more or less friendly with everyone else and helped each other out when necessary, and delivered each other’s babies, of which there were many.

It was a wonderfully safe place for all us children to play. The houses were all the same, two rooms up and two down. There was no toilet and no running water in the house but there was a small back yard which had a tap low down in the wall. As for the toilets, each family had its own lavatory at the end of the court. Next to the lavatories was the refuse area where all the rubbish was thrown. Surprisingly no one seemed to get any diseases from the close proximity of refuse to the toilets. There was also a pump in the middle of the yard.

Because there were no gardens, people would bring their chairs onto the pavement on a hot summer’s day and talk to each other across the street. Front doors were kept on the latch and so people could wander in without even knocking.

In Aldgate we had two upstairs rooms. Cold water came from a tap downstairs in the yard. Up we came with clean water in a bucket, down we came with dirty. In spite of it I had an extremely happy childhood.

Many readers will have seen slum housing on old grainy black and white film, usually more accurately described as black and grey, in which the humans were not the only occupants.

The walls of our house were just wooden planks with the spaces in between filled with bugs and their carcasses. My mother fought a constant battle and we all suffered from them. Every couple of months she would take our few pieces of furniture out of the house and put them in the courtyard and she would light sulphur candles to smoke the horrid creatures out. We didn’t like the smell of the sulphur when we returned but it was wonderful to be relieved of the bugs for a few precious weeks.

Our flat was situated above the boiler house where the water for the flats was heated. This, apparently, was cockroach heaven and they were fruitful and multiplied like